

Dual Language Learners in Early Childhood Education and the Science of Reading

by Martha Hernández—Executive Director, and
Shelly Spiegel-Coleman—Strategic Advisor, Californians Together

The National Committee for Effective Literacy (NCEL) was formed to uplift research, policies, and practices to ensure that English learner (EL)/ emergent bilingual (EB) students leave school as proficient readers and writers in English, and preferably more languages, and who thrive and succeed in school and their communities. The committee calls for literacy instruction that recognizes, honors, and leverages dual language brains and builds on the considerable research and knowledge base about what constitutes effective literacy instruction for English learners. It calls for federal and state leadership and investment in effective literacy instruction and in the teachers, curriculum, and resources needed to support the instruction that EL/EBs need.

Effective literacy education for EL/EB students is an urgent achievement and equity issue impacting well over five million students in the nation's schools.

Closing the opportunity and achievement gaps for English learner/emergent bilingual who have been left behind should be a high priority. Too often, however, one-size-fits-all literacy approaches designed for English-proficient students are inappropriately applied to English learner/emergent bilingual children with harmful consequences. Amidst an increased focus on early literacy across the nation today, it is essential that we get it right for EL/EB students, avoid foundational skill-centered literacy approaches that have failed them in the past, and heed the specific research on literacy development for second language and dual language learners. Fortunately, we have a strong research base to build upon and know what effective literacy instruction for English learners should be.

The failure of one-size-fits-all “scientific” reading and literacy approaches for EL/EBs in the past

In the 1990s, concerns about a reading crisis in the United States fueled national research and policies aimed at closing achievement gaps by focusing on early literacy. The 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* mistakenly relied upon inappropriate English assessments for EL/EBs, leading to mandated use of a narrow foundational skills literacy curriculum and instructional approaches as the corrective action.

An accompanying curriculum and professional development initiative, Reading First (2002), was instituted seeking to ensure that all students would score at state reading benchmarks by third grade. Reading First required schools to adopt “scientific, research-based reading programs” based in part upon the research of the National Reading Panel (2000), which had identified five components of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Reading First, however, primarily emphasized the phonemic awareness and phonics components—a narrow slice and loose interpretation of the National Reading Panel’s work. An extensive evaluation of the efficacy of Reading First (Gamse., Jacob., Horst, Boulay, & Unlu. 2008) found that while there was an impact on strengthening decoding skills among first-grade students, there was no significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores in subsequent grades and no improvement in student motivation and engagement with literacy. Reading First policies, and the “scientifically based” literacy curricula and approaches that schools adopted, were never designed for EL/EB students. As stated in the introduction to the National Reading Panel’s report (2000) delineating the limitations of their work, “*The Panel did not address issues relevant to second language learning.*” The National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) (2001) confirmed Reading First’s failure to reduce reading gaps for this population.

Literacy instruction for English learners should be based upon the specific research about English learners, which consistently shows that effective literacy instruction for ELs is NOT the same as for monolingual English proficient students.

In a 2006 research report on literacy development of EL/EB students (August & Shanahan, 2006), the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth found that the National Reading Panel’s components of effective literacy instruction were insufficient for EL/EBs. The report laid out the fundamental understanding that the development of language and literacy for students with two or more languages is distinctly different from monolingual literacy development. It critiqued the shortcomings of programs that

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primarily emphasized foundational reading skills, calling instead for a **comprehensive approach** to literacy development. It made clear the ways in which effective literacy instruction for EL/EBs is different in significant ways from instruction for monolingual students.

Furthermore, the past decade has seen a growth of dual language programs nationwide in response to research on the benefits of bilingualism. Strong and consistent research (Lindholm-Leary, 2001), has established that emerging bilingual children have benefited greatly from dual language programs that develop literacy in English and a partner language (usually the EL participants' home language). Research has demonstrated that teaching emerging bilingual students to read in their home language promotes higher reading achievement in English in the long run.

Effective biliteracy instruction and pedagogy involve the strategic and inter-related use of two languages. Biliterate pedagogies provide intentional opportunities for students to make cross-language and cross-cultural connections. Elements of effective literacy instruction in dual language education contexts include the following characteristics:

- ◇ *Active engagement in language production (presentational and interpersonal speaking, writing) in both languages*
- ◇ *Strategically coordinated and aligned literacy instruction in both languages—with a scope and sequence authentic to each language*
- ◇ *Use of both languages for meaningful interaction and academic study*
- ◇ *An affirming climate for linguistic and cultural diversity, including learning about the benefits of bilingualism and explicit efforts to equalize the status of “minoritized” languages (and communities) with English*
- ◇ *Integration of language and culture, intentionally teaching and learning how language reflects culture and way of thinking*
- ◇ *Cross-language connections that build a meta-linguistic understanding of how language works across language systems*
- ◇ *High-quality and equitable instructional materials in both languages*
- ◇ *Exposure to high-level, expressive, and authentic language models*

◇ *Valid and appropriate use of dual language literacy assessments*

◇ *Integration of content with language and literacy development, using content as a bridge across languages.*

A Call to Heed the Research on Effective Literacy for EL/EB students.

Because literacy skills are so foundational and the stakes so high, all students should be taught to read and write in the most effective, appropriate way for them. It means heeding what is known about literacy development and the dual language brain, applying knowledge of second language and biliteracy development, and being guided by asset-oriented, research-based literacy instruction principles.

References

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For more information on the work of NCEL, and to join with a national community advocating for effective literacy practices for ELs/EBs, please visit multilingualliteracy.org.

