



Northwest Education

Fall 2006 / Volume 12, Number 1.

What the Research Says (or Doesn't Say):

Reviewing Research on Literacy Development in Language-Minority Students

By Jennifer Klump

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory receives requests for scientifically based research on a wide range of topics. One popular request has been for research and strategies to help English language learners succeed in school. Although resources abound on this topic, few studies exist that definitely point to the most effective strategies to use. One ongoing debate centers on what language of instruction is most effective for literacy learning of language-minority students. Is it better to immerse students in English language instruction, or are there benefits to teaching students in their first language?

To address such questions, the Institute of Education Sciences selected a panel of experts to review the quantitative and qualitative research on development of literacy in language-minority students. The report of the National Literacy Panel on Minority-Language Children and Youth was recently published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Following are a few of the more definitive findings of the report:

Language of instruction

Language-minority children who are instructed in their first language, as well as English, perform better on English reading measures than students instructed only in English. This is the case at both secondary and elementary levels. Furthermore, “there is no basis in the research findings to suggest that they [bilingual programs] are in any way disadvantageous to English academic outcomes” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 639).

However, recent evaluations of beginning reading programs for non-English speaking students show promising results. This indicates that if children receive effective instruction with appropriate scaffolding, they are able to master early reading skills in English. This is especially important if the school has no capability of providing language instruction in the first language.

Sociocultural contexts and literacy development

Although much has been written about culturally congruent or responsive instruction, the panel found a lack of empirical evidence regarding the impact of sociocultural variables on student achievement. However, the research *does* suggest that understanding and bridging differences in interactions between families and school staff can enhance students' engagement, motivation, and classroom participation.

Factors that influence second language reading comprehension

The panel concluded that oral proficiency in English is linked to English reading comprehension skills. The evidence suggests that English vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, syntactic skills, and the ability to handle metalinguistic aspects of language, such as providing definitions of words, are linked to English reading and writing proficiency. The authors say this means that extensive oral language skills must be incorporated into successful literacy instruction; literacy programs that are reading-only will not be enough.

Effective literacy teaching

There are too few high-quality studies that can provide any definitive conclusions about what works best for ELL students. However, the research does show that key components of reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension) are also effective for ELL students. Adjustments to these approaches may be needed to make learning most effective. Unfortunately the studies lack the descriptions necessary to provide any guidance to practitioners.

Next steps for research

A key finding of the report is that research on acquiring literacy in a second language remains limited. For example, few diagnostic assessments exist for assessing English language learners' reading comprehension. And there is little research on what aspects of instruction are most effective for English language learners. Research suggests that it is important to find appropriate ways to use the students' first language in instruction but the studies rarely have examples on how to do this. Other areas that need more investigation include emergent literacy skills, school readiness, and effective preschool programs for English language learners. Finally, the researchers suggest that impact studies and descriptive studies of what teachers actually do in the classroom should be connected so one can understand best practices and avoid less effective ones.

For more information on this study, the executive summary is available online and the full report is available for purchase from the publisher.

August, D. (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* [Executive summary]. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Available at www.cal.org/natl-lit-panel/reports/Executive_Summary.pdf

August, D., & Shanahan, T. (Eds.) (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Available for purchase at www.erlbaum.com/august

About this article: NWREL's Office of Planning and Service Coordination fields questions about research on a wide array of educational topics. E-mail your questions to info@nwrel.org

This document's URL is: <http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/12-01/research/index.php>

© 2005 Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory