

Toward Comprehensive
Effective Literacy Policy
and Instruction for
English Learner/Emergent
Bilingual Students



Written by Kathy Escamilla, Ph.D., Laurie Olsen, Ph.D., and Jody Slavick, Ph.D.,
National Committee for Effective Literacy for Emergent Bilingual Students

FEBRUARY 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION 1

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 3 |
| A Note on Terminology | 4 |

SECTION 2

| | |
|--|---|
| A History of One-Size-Fits-All Literacy Approaches That Didn't Work..... | 5 |
|--|---|

SECTION 3

| | |
|---|----|
| Literacy Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual (EL/EB) Students..... | 7 |
| Literacy Instruction in Mainstream/English as a Second Language Program Contexts | 8 |
| Literacy Instruction in Dual Language/Bilingual Program Settings | 10 |
| What We Know About Appropriate Assessment for English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals..... | 11 |

SECTION 4

| | |
|--|----|
| One-Size-Fits-All “Science Of Reading” Fails to Address the Unique Needs of EL/EB Students and Does Not Capitalize on Their Strengths..... | 12 |
|--|----|

SECTION 5

| | |
|---|----|
| Establishing Effective Literacy Policy and Practices Aligned to the Research on Emergent Bilingual Students | 13 |
|---|----|

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| RECOMMENDATIONS | 14 |
|------------------------------|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| ABOUT NCEL & THE REPORT AUTHORS | 15 |
|--|----|

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| ENDNOTES | 16 |
|-----------------------|----|



**National Committee
for Effective Literacy**



SECTION 1

Introduction

Literacy—learning to communicate, read, and write as a means of expression to gain knowledge by accessing stories, information, and voices across time and across the world—is at the heart of education. As Frederick Douglas said, *“once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”* We would add, *“once you learn to write, you will forever have a voice.”* For students, becoming proficient readers and writers is the key to academic success. Reading is the skill through which students access much of the educational content. Writing is how students demonstrate knowledge and express ideas—essential acts of participation in an academic community. For these reasons, effective early literacy development is critical for all children. Too often, however, a one-size-fits-all approach leaves some children behind. Too often, children who enter U.S. schools are not provided the instruction designed to address their needs, so they fail to develop essential literacy skills. This is decidedly true for a large number of English learner (EL) or emergent bilingual (EB) children in our nation’s schools.

Almost one quarter of U.S. children (10 million) speak a language other than English at home.¹

These children enter a school system that lacks the capacity to understand and embrace their unique assets and needs.² Closing the opportunity and achievement gaps for EL/EBs should be a high priority in education policy and practice. These students face the challenge of learning a new language while building their skills in core academic subjects. They have enormous potential, but because of policies like one-size-fits-all literacy programs, these students have had limited

opportunities to fulfill their potential. As a result, they often have lower achievement test scores in reading and mathematics and lose the asset of their potential bilingualism. On average, EL/EBs perform below grade level in every subject tested for federal accountability, are twice as likely to drop out as their native English-speaking peers, and are less likely to attend a four-year college.³ Ensuring these students are provided appropriate literacy instruction is a basic equity and civil rights issue.

This paper discusses 1) The failure of the one-size-fits-all reading and literacy approach for EL/EBs tried in the past; 2) How EL/EB students are different from monolingual English speakers and the implications for literacy instruction in mainstream and bilingual program contexts; 3) Why one size does not fit all in literacy approaches and 4) concludes with recommendations.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Bilingual Learners, Emergent Bilinguals, Dual Language Learners, English Learners, Language Minority Children and Youth.

There are multiple terms used throughout the nation to refer to students who enroll in schools with a family language other than English, who are not English proficient, and who face barriers to equal educational opportunity related to attending schools that are still predominantly and overwhelmingly taught only in English.

“**English language learner**” (ELL) is the formal term used for students in K–12 education who have a home language other than English and are learning English as a second language but do not yet have sufficient proficiency to participate in an academic program in English without supports. It is the term used most often in K-12 education policy, and it reflects a particular history of civil rights defined barriers to equal educational opportunity and is officially encoded in federal and state law. The attention to issues of access implied by that term and its history is essential; however, the term is inadequate to embrace an assets-based approach to bilingualism with an equal focus on the value and goal of attaining proficiency in multiple languages.

The field of English learner education is now navigating to more accurate and assets-oriented terms that (1) avoid the deficit view that labels them only in terms of the language they don’t yet know and instead acknowledges the fact that these students enroll in school already with a language, (2) that the process of language and literacy development is a dual language process involving both their home language and their second language regardless of whether they are being instructed just in English or bilingually, and (3) responds to the fact that in increasing schools and districts, the goal is the development of biliteracy and proficiency in multiple languages. These terms include “dual language learners” (preferred by many in the early childhood education field), “multilingual learner,” “emergent bilinguals,” and “bilingual learners.”

This paper uses the combined term “**English learner/ Emergent bilingual**” (EL/EB) to refer to all students who enroll in school with a home language other than English.

OTHER TERMS SOMETIMES USED IN THIS PAPER INCLUDE:

“**Dual language**” when referring to the brain and brain processes that involve and connect across two languages in EL/EB students. In this paper, this term refers to people and not programs of instruction.

“**Language minority children and youth**” has been used in key research publications to embrace both students with a home language other than English who are not yet proficient in English and those who are already bilingual. The “minority” term acknowledges the issue of the unequal societal status of languages other than English and the historical exclusion of those communities based on language.

TERMINOLOGY FOR PROGRAM AND INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES:

Similarly, there are multiple terms used to refer to the language acquisition/development programs for these students. For this reason, clarification of terms follows:

“**Bilingual programs**” is an umbrella term for a variety of bilingual approaches that teach two languages and that instruct content in two languages. There are various models of bilingual programs, including two-way dual language immersion programs, maintenance bilingual programs, transitional bilingual programs, and heritage language programs. All share the goals of biliteracy, mastery of grade-level content in two languages, and cross-cultural competence.

English-instructed programs, ESL programs, and Mainstream English programs are all terms used to describe second language development approaches to support English learner/Emergent bilingual students.

SECTION 2

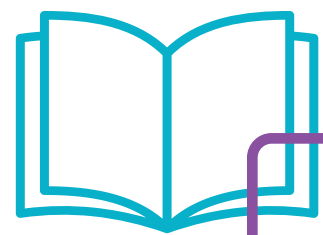
A History of One-Size-Fits-All Literacy Approaches That Didn't Work


In the 1990s, concerns about a reading crisis in the United States fueled national research and policies that were aimed at closing achievement gaps. National policies focused on early literacy, seeking to ensure that all students tested as “proficient” on standardized English reading test. The 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act*—with a strong commitment to equity and closing gaps (including naming English Language Learners as a subgroup for whom schools had to report outcomes)—resulted in a mistaken reliance upon inappropriate English assessments for EL/EBs, leading to mandated uses of unsuccessful one-size-fits-all literacy curriculum and instructional approaches (that weren't designed for second language learners) as the corrective action. The lowest-performing schools—which typically enrolled high concentrations of ELs, among other historically underserved groups—were consigned to this “corrective action and program improvement”. The NCLB Act ushered in a federal \$1 billion-per-year campaign of professional development, school restructuring, and implementation monitoring⁴ known as the Reading First initiative as the means of holding schools accountable for ensuring that all students scored at state reading benchmarks by third grade. Reading First required schools to adopt “scientific, research-based reading programs” based in large part upon the research of the National Reading Panel which had summarized research on literacy instruction as a set of five components of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension).⁵

Reading First enthusiasts primarily emphasized the academic studies showing that phonemic awareness and phonics raised achievement on standardized tests. It was a narrow slice and loose interpretation of the National Reading Panel's work, with harmful consequences for the increasingly large EL/EB student population in the nation's schools. An extensive evaluation of the efficacy of Reading First was conducted by the Institute of Educational Research (2008) to determine its impact on student reading achievement and on classroom instruction.⁶ The report found that there was a significant impact on strengthening decoding skills among first-grade students. However, Reading First did not produce a statistically significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores in grades one, two, or three and there was no substantial improvement in student motivation and engagement with literacy.

Furthermore, Reading First policies—and in turn, the literacy curricula and approaches that schools adopted—were not designed for EL/EB students. By its own admission, the National Reading Panel had not considered research about literacy development for this group.

Effective early literacy development is critical for all children. Too often, however, a one-size-fits-all approach leaves some children behind. This is decidedly true for a large number of English learner (EL) or emergent bilingual (EB) children in our nation's schools.





As stated in the introduction to the National Reading Panel’s report (upon which Reading First was based) delineating the limitations of their work, “*The Panel did not address issues relevant to second language learning.*” In a 2006 report on literacy development research specifically for EL/EB students, the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth came to different conclusions. This new report affirmed the importance of all five of the components of a comprehensive reading approach described by the National Reading Panel but found that these components are not sufficient for EL/EBs.⁷ It described the linguistic, cognitive, socio-cultural, and academic variables that compound the reading challenges for EL/EBs and how these students require additional specific instructional considerations. The report emphasized the role of home language; the uniqueness of the dual language brain; the importance of background knowledge, meaning-making, scaffolds to support

comprehension, and the foundational role of oracy. The report found that efficient reading comprehension depends not only on efficient word recognition skills but also on general language proficiency. In short, it made clear that effective literacy instruction for EL/EBs was different in significant ways from instruction for monolingual students.

For EL/EB students in programs that emphasized foundational reading skills in the absence of meaning making (building background knowledge, integrating language development with learning content, effective expression, and metalanguage awareness), the so-called scientific reading approach embraced by Reading First was particularly problematic. The ability to sound out words in a language a child does not know is simply not sufficient to build literacy skills⁸—and that emphasis likely explains the lag in reading comprehension and writing that was uncovered in the Reading First evaluation. Across the nation, gaps in literacy skills for EL/EBs did not close. Indeed, the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) confirmed Reading First’s failure to reduce reading gaps for this population.⁹

The understanding that meaningful access for EL/EBs requires different instructional approaches and supplemental services for English learners had actually already been encoded in law. In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Lau v. Nichols* decision, stating: “*There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum.... for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education.*” The issue for researchers and educators alike has been to determine what that different treatment and additional approaches and services should be that would address the specific needs of English learners.



SECTION 3

Literacy Instruction for English Learner/ Emergent Bilingual (EL/EB) Students


In this section, we provide a summary of the academic research and literature base that should guide effective literacy approaches for EL/EBs. At the heart of this work is the fundamental understanding that the development of language and literacy for students with two or more languages is distinctly different from monolingual literacy development (whether in mainstream English-taught contexts or in bilingual programs), and the strong research base demonstrating the cognitive, linguistic, social, and academic advantages of being bilingual and biliterate.

Whether EL/EB students have already begun to develop early literacy in their home languages before enrolling in school, or whether they first encounter literacy instruction in the context of English as a new language once they enroll in school, the fact is that the vast majority enter into literacy education that is designed and delivered for monolingual English speakers. This delivery ignores the reality that ELs/EBs already have a language and doesn't address the ways of processing language and learning related to second language development and their dual language brains. This duality has serious implications for what works and what does not work in being taught to read and write. The degree to which the dual language brain is leveraged or ignored spells a major difference between effective and ineffective/exclusionary literacy instruction.

The development of literacy by EL/EBs includes all of the challenges implicit in monolingual English speakers' learning to read and write and is *additionally* compounded by a diversity of linguistic, cognitive, socio-cultural, and academic variables. Neuroscientific and educational research have provided new insights into the dual language brain, and on language and literacy development in multiple languages. These studies continue to underscore that the experiences of bilinguals are unique and different and thus call for a different approach to pedagogical approaches. Bilingualism is not the presence of two wholly separate language systems and identities; it involves the *intersection* of two (or more) languages within the mind and life experiences of an individual.¹⁰

Language processing in the bilingual mind differs from that of the monolingual mind.¹¹ Therefore, learning to read and write in another language than one's primary home language is different. Second language development is decidedly dissimilar to the development of a first language precisely because it occurs on the bedrock of the first. It is in relationship and comparison to knowledge of the first language that the elements of a new language (such as vocabulary, phonological components, grammatical structures, and writing systems) are learned, and the understanding of the different language systems develops.

Effective literacy instruction for EL/EBs is different in significant ways from instruction for monolingual students. The degree to which the dual language brain is leveraged or ignored spells a major difference between effective and ineffective literacy instruction for these students.... Methodologies designed for monolingual English-speaking children are inadequate for EL/EB students who require, in addition, a second language development pedagogy. Instruction for EL/EB students must be modified to scaffold participation and comprehension and to build language skills in the new language. Ideally, it leverages skills and knowledge of the home language through opportunities for cross-language connections.



Therefore, language and literacy development is different for a person living in and across two language worlds than for the monolingual person. Based on consistent, coherent linguistic research on second language and dual language development, the most appropriate and effective approaches to literacy instruction for EL/EB students recognize and acknowledge these literacy development differences and leverage students' bilingualism to support their growth in reading and writing in English. Teaching literacy as if a student is monolingual for a student who lives in and across multiple language worlds undermines the opportunity to draw upon linguistic resources across their languages.

Literacy Instruction in Mainstream/English as a Second Language Program Contexts

There are several key conclusions from linguistic research about second language literacy instruction for EL/EBs in Mainstream/English as a Second Language program contexts:

- A **comprehensive approach** to literacy development for all students teaches foundational skills in context, and integrates meaning-making (learning new concepts), language development (vocabulary and how language works, such as the order of words in a sentence), and foundational skills of reading (phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency).¹² For EL/EB students, such instruction must be modified to scaffold participation and comprehension and to build language skills in the new language. Ideally, it leverages skills and knowledge of the home language through opportunities for cross-language connections.¹³ There are commonalities and areas of overlap in literacy instruction for all students, but methodologies designed for monolingual English-speaking children are inadequate for EL/EB students who require, in addition, a second language development pedagogy.
- Background knowledge helps students become better readers. The words on the page only have meaning if students understand them. Since the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth released their report over a decade ago, it has become increasingly established that EL/EB students benefit significantly from the integration of language development with content, with an emphasis on meaning. **Literacy is strengthened when language development/literacy development is integrated with the development of content knowledge.**
- For EL/EBs, **oral language** plays a crucial foundational role in developing literacy in a second language. As students learn to speak the new language, they are expanding the repertoire of vocabulary that gives literacy meaning and internalizing the sounds of the new language that will be represented in print. However, it is critical that students develop oral language that is connected to and aligned with their reading and writing programs. Specifically, oral language learning, known as oracy, is needed to accelerate literacy acquisition, whether in one or preferably two languages.
- **Writing is an essential literacy skill.** Writing is the sister literacy component to reading. Literacy instruction attends to the close inter-relationship between reading and writing, and focuses on the development of both proficiencies as central.
- Good literacy instruction for EL/EB students **builds on what students already know, including their home language and cultural practices.** Teachers incorporate student experience and develop literacy using a variety of materials and instructional strategies that reflect and engage language and culture to meet student needs, whether learning to read and write in their home language, a new language, or both.
- **Socio-cultural factors** play a major role in the development of literacy for students living in and across cultural worlds. Assets-oriented school climates and the use of socio-culturally

responsive instruction and relevant, inclusive curriculum result in stronger academic outcomes, literacy engagement, and skills.¹⁴ Not all who enter schools as EL/EBs will, however, develop their bilingualism. Those immersed in English instruction and encouraged to leave their home language at the schoolhouse door too often become English dominant through a “subtractive” process in which one language is lost as students gain another. Assets orientation and affirmation support the development of literacy.

• **A focus on comprehension is essential for academic literacy.** A recent large-scale study, “The Reading for Understanding Initiative,”¹⁵ reviewed over 200 scholarly articles in an effort to determine what has been learned about reading comprehension. Their findings included the following:

- *In kindergarten through grade 2, sub-word processes like letter-sound knowledge and phonemic awareness tend to explain most of the variance in reading achievement (with students who have better sub word processing skills being higher achievers). More meaning-based language variables, including receptive and expressive vocabulary, explain increasing proportions of the variance as students move into grades 2 and 3, with students who have developed more vocabulary being higher achievers. This finding raises questions about the long-term benefits of narrow phonics instruction on comprehension, which is so essential for academic success. It suggests meaning-based strategies are crucial to comprehension and literacy attainment.*
- *The most successful interventions for improving reading comprehension—particularly for older students— involves collaborative workgroups that undertake close reading and discussion of challenging, often controversial, texts with the immediate goal of mining the texts for information that students can use to meet the longer-term goal of applying what they learned to new problems or situations.*

The report concluded that comprehension is the primary goal of learning to read, and that reading comprehension requires more than phonics and phonemic awareness instruction even in the early grades. In addition, writing in response to reading and learning from text improves reading comprehension. A critical finding in the study specifically cites the need for more research particularly directed at underserved populations:

“At the top of the list should be emergent bilingual learners, a growing but still underserved population. The particular irony of this population is that, even though they bring rich language experiences to the classroom, we seem unable to exploit their first language or interlingual (first to second language connections) linguistic resources to craft effective programs for deep reading experiences in English as a second language. Developing curriculum, and for that matter, assessments, that exploit their linguistic resources, brought into relief by an increasingly prominent and deeper understanding of the role of translanguageing and interlingual expertise (the special knowledge that accrues to students who work in more than one language),¹⁶ represents a real opportunity for scholars of comprehension to embrace in order to better exploit the special resources of bi- and multilingual students.”¹⁷



Literacy Instruction in Dual Language/Bilingual Program Settings

In Dual Language/Bilingual Education (DL/BE) programs, the emphasis is on the development of bilingualism and biliteracy compared to Mainstream and English as a Second Language programs, where the focus is on the development of English literacy only. Over the past 40 years, strong and consistent research has established that emergent bilingual children have benefited greatly from bilingual and dual language programs that develop literacy in English and a partner language (usually the EL participants' home language).¹⁸

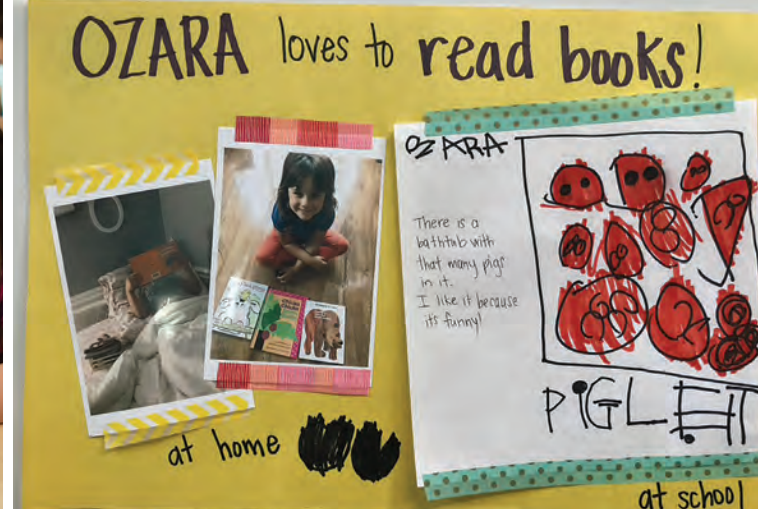
The Continua of Biliteracy (Hornberger, 2008) describes the interrelated and intersecting factors affecting language proficiency for a dual-language person and emphasizes that the more a learning context attends to all the factors, the more fully an individual's bilingualism and biliteracy will develop.¹⁹ The Continua lays the foundation for, and champions holistic learning opportunities that offer expansive, inclusive, and evidence-based opportunities to establish mature bilingualism. The child who arrives in school as a young bilingual is deeply impacted by whether or not the school environment recognizes, welcomes, and leverages their multiple languages and whether or not they embrace bilingual practices. Monolingual pedagogies can result in a subtractive process of language loss of the home language, forfeiting the benefits of biliteracy, while students given the opportunity to develop their bilingualism enjoy more cohesive family relations, more possibilities of attending a four-year college, less likelihood to drop out of school, and healthier bi-cultural and bilingual identities.²⁰

Research has demonstrated that teaching emergent bilingual students to read in their home language promotes higher reading achievement in English in the long run. A research synthesis conducted by Lindholm-Leary²¹ demonstrated that well-implemented dual language programs show more positive student outcomes in English literacy than monolingual English programs,

especially for EL/EB learners. EL/EBs who participate in such programs for 4-7 years close the achievement gap in English literacy with monolingual English learners—and often surpass their monolingual English peers. They also show better school engagement and positive attitudes toward school. In addition, participants in dual language programs achieve biliteracy (literacy in two languages!).

Effective biliteracy instruction and pedagogy involve the strategic and inter-related use of two languages.²² Bilingual teaching is not repeating the same thing in two languages; rather, 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 dual language literacy assessment*
- *Integration of content with language and literacy development, using content as a bridge across languages.*



What We Know About Appropriate Assessment for English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals

Effective literacy instruction is based upon a solid assessment of students' language and literacy skills. For EL/EB students, this requires linguistically valid and reliable assessments. Throughout the history of schooling for language minority children in this country, the tendency to impose English-only literacy and language assessments has inappropriately and unjustly relegated children who do not speak English to inferior schooling. For example, the use of “intelligence tests” (administered in English) in the 1920s resulted in the large-scale assignment of English learner/immigrant children to classes for the “mentally retarded”—where the paradigm of curriculum and instruction assumed fixed, low ability. It wasn't until half a century later that lawsuits struck down the practice of using English intelligence testing and assessment for school placement purposes. However, a widespread belief among educators equating “lack of English” with lesser intelligence still permeates the practices and policies in some locales. Today, despite current federal law requiring valid and reliable assessments for EL/EB students, the use of linguistically/culturally invalid English assessments normed for English speakers continues. This is too often a feature of early literacy assessments.

Appropriate assessment is crucial to good literacy instruction. It must be valid and meaningful—and culturally and linguistically appropriate. For EL/EBs, this requires assessments in which lack of English proficiency is not a barrier to demonstrating what the student knows and can do. The tests should be normed on and validated through a process that includes ELs/EBs. The validity and reliability of assessment is the extent to which a test measures what it claims to measure and does so consistently. For EL/EBs, it is critical to consider the degree to which interpretations of their test scores are valid reflections of the actual knowledge or skill that the assessment is intended to measure.²³ Cultural validity is also an issue. Due to their diverse cultural experiences, EL/EB students' performance should be cautiously evaluated when using traditional assessments created for their English-speaking and U.S.-born peers. “When a bilingual individual confronts a monolingual test... both the test taker and the test are asked to do something they cannot. The bilingual test taker cannot perform like a monolingual. The monolingual test cannot measure the other language.”²⁴

EL/EB students benefit significantly from the integration of language development with content, with an emphasis on meaning. Literacy is strengthened when language development/literacy development is integrated with the development of content knowledge.

SECTION 4

One-Size-Fits-All “Science Of Reading” Fails to Address the Unique Needs of EL/EB Students and Does Not Capitalize on Their Strengths

As discussed in Section II of this paper, the research on teaching reading represented by the National Reading Panel has identified a set of interrelated essential components—but subsequent research on ELs consistently shows that these critical components are not sufficient for ELs.²⁵ It is not an adequate match to what the specific science of reading for EL/EB students recommends. One major gap is the isolation of reading skills from other domains of language and literacy—particularly the lack of adequate focus on the development of oral language skills. I focus on teaching sounds and letters, artificial syntax, inauthentic language, and words *in isolation* rather than connected to discourse, and opportunities to discuss and write about what is being learned. Phonics and learning to decode words have a clear and important place in comprehensive literacy programs but implemented in isolation as is too often currently being proposed, they are woefully inadequate. Additionally, labeling this approach as “the science of reading” misrepresents the actual science of reading as singular. It’s not. There is no one single approach that “science” has shown works across populations.

The development of literacy by EL/EBs indeed includes all of the challenges implicit in monolingual English speakers’ learning to read and write and engages a diversity of linguistic, cognitive, socio-cultural, and academic variables that require connection to oracy and discourse, practices of writing, the integration of literacy development with content and meaning-making, and leveraging of cross-language connections. Throughout the past twenty years, neuroscientific and educational research have built our understanding of the dual language brain, second language and literacy development for EL/EBs, and the impacts of bilingual dual language education. Swimming against what had been a virulent English Only movement and against the now entrenched beliefs about a one-size-fits-all English monolingual approach to literacy instruction, nonetheless, this research is now solidly established.²⁶ The new research includes

guidance on second language development as well as evidence of the effectiveness of well-implemented bilingual approaches for EL/EBs in terms of outcomes in English reading and literacy.

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. Reading instruction must be tailored to the children being served. Given the high stakes of early literacy for academic success, it is imperative that this specific research base informs policy and practice regarding literacy education for ELs. This means rejecting the misguided and harmful imposition of literacy assessments and literacy approaches designed for English-speaking students upon EL/EB students. It means heeding instead what is known about literacy development and the dual language brain, applying knowledge of second language and biliteracy development, and being guided by assets-oriented, research-based literacy instruction principles.

Phonics and learning to decode words have a clear and important place in comprehensive literacy programs but implemented in isolation as is too often currently being proposed, they are woefully inadequate. One major gap is the isolation of reading skills from other domains of language and literacy—particularly the lack of adequate focus on the development of oral language skills.

SECTION 5

Establishing Effective Literacy Policy and Practices Aligned to the Research on Emergent Bilingual Students

Despite this important development of research on language and literacy development for English learner/emergent bilinguals (EL/EBs), a renewed concern about early literacy and a drive to get all children reading at grade level by third grade is tempting many states to limit what should be *robust and informed literacy instruction* to an *uninspired narrow focus* on a few foundational reading skills. We believe that is dangerous. Understanding the relationship between receptive and productive language and between reading, writing, and oracy is falling away. The knowledge about the key role of meaning-making and comprehension and engagement/motivation threatens to be lost. And, absolutely key for EL/EBs, is the tendency to ignore the specific knowledge base about dual language development and the importance of socio-cultural factors. Unfortunately, many policies governing current reading programs and their implementation in the U.S. fail to reflect the scientific research and knowledge base regarding EL/EB learners. When policy and programs do not heed the specific needs and research base related to literacy for EL/EB students, too often, the result is a crucially missed opportunity to provide effective and powerful literacy development for this population that has too often been left behind. This is the danger now in policies driven by the so-called “Science of Reading.” In addition, the issues appear to be arising again in current efforts to address the important concern about dyslexia as a cause of reading difficulty. This is a time to avoid simplistic, out-of-date, and inappropriate responses and to instead build national and state efforts around literacy to attend to what we know works for EL/EBs. We cannot prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching reading when the children who enroll in our schools represent such diversity.

The current policy debate is a test for whether we will fall back on the mistaken patterns of a one-size-fits-all pedagogy of reading designed and based upon research appropriate for English-fluent students, but that sidesteps the needs of EL/EBs. It is a test for whether this may be the time when the considerable knowledge base about the specific approaches most efficacious for dual language learners will be called upon, and whether this is a time when our understanding of the gifts of literacy in multiple languages may be heeded as we weave a new era of early literacy education.



Unfortunately, many policies governing current reading programs and their implementation fail to reflect the scientific research and knowledge base regarding EL/EB learners. When policy and programs do not heed the specific needs and research base related to literacy for EL/EB students, too often, the result is a crucially missed opportunity to provide effective and powerful literacy development for this population that has too often been left behind.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A large number of EL/EB children in this nation need effective literacy instruction that is comprehensive, flexible, research-based, and targeted for them. We must provide literacy instruction that recognizes, honors, and leverages their dual language brains and builds on the considerable research and knowledge based about what constitutes effective literacy instruction for them.

While there are dangers that this era of concern about early literacy may revert to old damaging patterns, the current attention to the importance of early literacy instruction and the awareness of how crucial literacy is for all students is all an imperative for us to do the following:

- 1** Reaffirm the understanding that literacy embraces writing as well as reading, and encompasses all five essential components described in the National Reading Panel as crucial and inter-related. We will build upon those findings and heed the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth and the National Academies of Sciences by:
 - *Embracing the dual language brain;*
 - *Scaffolding and targeting instruction for EL/EBs to bolster comprehension, participation, and language development;*
 - *Supporting oral language development as the foundation for literacy; and*
 - *Emphasizing the development of high levels of biliteracy.*
- 2** Insist that effective literacy instruction is understood not as a one-size-fits-all but should be specific to the needs of various student groups and communities. EL/EBs require attention to their dual language brain and realities—the cross-language imperatives, the hopes and need for biliteracy development.
- 3** Call 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.

This paper has summarized the specific research base we should build upon to provide the literacy development appropriate for EL/EB students. It is the literacy education they deserve yet one that has been insufficiently prioritized to enact—until now.



National Committee for Effective Literacy

The National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL) uplifts research, policies and practices to ensure that English learner/emergent bilingual students leave school as proficient readers and writers in English and preferably more languages and who thrive and succeed in school and their communities. We are researchers, teacher educators, teachers, administrators, school board members and advocates from across the nation with deep expertise in literacy and the education of English learners/emergent bilingual students.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Kathy Escamilla, Ph.D. is Professor of Education in the Division of Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity at University of Colorado at Boulder. She is one of the creators of the Literacy Squared program. Dr. Escamilla's research focuses on issues related to the development of bilingualism and biliteracy for Spanish-speaking emerging bilingual children. Dr. Escamilla has served two terms as the president of the National Association for Bilingual Education, served as co-editor of the *Bilingual Research Journal*, and has served as the Chairperson of the Bilingual SIG for the American Education Research Association (AERA). She has authored three books and over 50 research articles on topics related to (bi)literacy for Spanish-speaking children in the U.S., and is on the Board of Trustees of the Center for Applied Linguistics.

Dr. Laurie Olsen, Ph. D. was the founding Director and now serves as Strategic Advisor to SEAL (Sobrato Early Academic Language) and has designed, demonstrated, evaluated and implemented effective PreK-12th grade English Learner programs and services throughout California over the past four decades. As a researcher, writer and provider of leadership development and technical assistance related to immigrant and English Learner education and language access, Dr. Olsen has published dozens of books, articles, and videos on English Learner education, including the award winning "Made in America: Immigrant Students in U.S. School" and "Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Promise for Long Term English Learners". Dr. Olsen served as Co-Chair of the California Task Force to develop the English Learner Roadmap PreK-12 policy for the state, and currently leads the Design Team of EL RISE! to support statewide implementation of the CA English Learner Roadmap policy PreK-12. She holds a Ph.D. in Social and Cultural Studies in Education from U.C. Berkeley. Dr. Olsen serves as President of Californians Together.

Dr. Jody Slavick, Ph. D. is a Research Associate for the University of Colorado Boulder and is Director of Professional Development for the Literacy Squared® team of the BUENO Center for Multicultural Education. Jody received her Ph.D. in Educational Equity and Cultural Diversity and her MA in Bilingual Special Education, both from University of Colorado.

For input and review of this manuscript, the authors are indebted to Dr. Julie Sugarman (*Ph.D., Senior Policy Analyst for PreK-12 Education at the Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, where she focuses on issues related to immigrant and English Learner (EL) students*) and to Dr. Ester de Jong (*Ed.D., Professor in the School of Teaching and Learning and Director of the Collaborative for Equity in Education at the University of Florida; Board of Trustees Center for Applied Linguistics; Past President of TESOL*)

PHOTO CREDITS: Photos on pages 1, 3, 8, and 13 are by Allison Shelly/The Verbatim Agency for EDU Images. Photos on pages 6 and 8 are by Laurie Olsen.

ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Census figures from 2019 show 12.1 million children age 5 to 17 speak a language other than English at home. Kids Count Data Center. 2020. "Children who speak a language other than English at home in the United States." Updated October 2020. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/81-children-who-speak-a-language-other-than-english-at-home#detailed/1/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/any/396,397>.
- 2 National Center for Education Statistics. 2020. "Table 204.20. English language learner (ELL) students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools, by state: Selected years, fall 2000 through fall 2018." Updated November 2020. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_204.20.asp?current=yes.
- 3 Office of English Language Acquisition (2018). "English Learner Graduation Rates 2017-2018" Fact Sheet. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. Kanno, Y., & Cromley, J. G. (2015). English language learners' pathways to four-year colleges. *Teachers College Record*, 117(120306), 1–46.
- 4 National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008). Reading First impact study: Final report.
- 5 National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction (NIH Publication No. 00-4769). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- 6 National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008). Reading First impact study: Final report.
- 7 August, D. and 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.
- 8 August, D. and 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.
- 9 National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2008). Reading First impact study: Final report.
- 10 Grosjean, F. (1989). Neurolinguists, beware! The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person. *Brain and Language*, 36, 3–15.
- 11 Pierce, L. J., Chen, J., Delcenserie, A., Genesee, F., & Klein, D. (2015). Past experience shapes ongoing neural patterns for language. *Nature Communications*, December, 1–11.
- 12 Pearson, P. D., Palincsar, A. S., Biancarosa, G., & Berman, A. (2020). *Reaping the rewards of the Reading for Understanding initiative*. National Academy of Education.
- 13 Escamilla, K., Hopewell, S., Butvilofsky, S., Sparrow, W., Soltero-Gonzalez, L., Ruiz Figueroa, O., & Escamilla, M. (2014). *Biliteracy from the Start: Literacy Squared in Action*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing.
- 14 Bui, Y.N. & Fagan, Y.M. (2013) The Effects of an Integrated Reading Comprehension Strategy: A Culturally Responsive Teaching Approach for Fifth-Grade Students' Reading Comprehension, Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 57:2, 59-69
- Portes, P.R. & Gonzalez-Canche, M. et.al. (2018) Evaluation Findings from the Instructional Conversation Study: Culturally Responsive Teaching Outcomes for Diverse Learners in Elementary School. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55 (3) 488-531.
- Piazza, S. V., Rao, S., & Protacio, M. S. (2015). Converging Recommendations for Culturally Responsive Literacy Practices: Students with Learning Disabilities, English Language Learners, and Socioculturally Diverse Learners. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(3), 1–20.
- 15 Pearson, P. D., Palincsar, A. S., Biancarosa, G., & Berman, A. (2020). *Reaping the rewards of the Reading for Understanding initiative*. National Academy of Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED608448>
- 16 García, O., Johnson, S. I., Seltzer, K., & Valdés, G. (2017). *The translanguaging classroom: Leveraging student bilingualism for learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon.
- 17 Pearson, P.D. (2007) An Endangered Species Act for Literacy Education. *Journal of Literacy Research*. 39 (2) , pp. 145-162. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- 18 Umansky, I. M., & Reardon, S. F. (2014). Reclassification patterns among Latino English learner students in bilingual, dual immersion, and English immersion classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(5), 879–912.; Valentino, R. A., & Reardon, S. F. (2015). Effectiveness of four instructional programs designed to serve English learners. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(4), 612–637.; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017. Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- 19 Hornberger, N. H. (2008). Continua of Biliteracy. In N. H. Hornberger (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*. Springer.
- 20 Brooks, M. (2020). *Transforming literacy education for long-term English learners: Recognizing brilliance in the undervalued*. Routledge: USA.; Irizarry, J. G. (2011). *The Latinization of U.S. schools: Successful teaching and learning in shifting cultural contexts*. Taylor & Francis.; Portes, A., & Hao, L. (2002). The price of uniformity: Language, family and personality adjustment in the immigrant second generation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25(6), 889–912.; Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2014). *Immigrant America: A portrait* (4th ed.). University of California Press.; Santibañez, L., & Zárate, M. E. (2014). Bilinguals in the U.S. and college enrollment. In R. M. Callahan & P. C. Gándara (Eds.), *The bilingual advantage: Language, literacy, and the labor market* (pp. 211– 233). Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.
- 21 Lindholm-Leary, K. (2020). *Current research findings on two-way bilingual immersion education* (Issue May).
- 22 Olsen, L., Martinez, M., et.al. (2020) "Multilingual Programs & Pedagogy: What Teachers and Administrators Need to Know and Do," *Improving Multilingual and English Learner Education: from Research to Practice*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.
- 23 Solano-Flores, G. (2010). Function and form in research on language and mathematics education. In Moschkovich, J. N. (ed.) *Language and Mathematics Education: Multiple Perspectives and Directions for Research*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 113-150.
- 24 Valdés, G., & Figueroa, R.A. (1994). *Bilingualism and testing: A special case of bias*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex
- 25 August, D. and 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.
- 26 August, D. and 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; National Academies (2017) *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. Washington D.C.: The National Academies Press.



**National Committee
for Effective Literacy**

For more information, email us at: info@MultilingualLiteracy.org

MultilingualLiteracy.org