Essential Understandings for Implementing Effective Literacy Instruction with K–12 English Learners

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K-12 educators strive daily to bridge the academic gap between native English speakers (NES) and English learners (ELs). Although similarities exist between the successful strategies and best practices used with struggling readers and ELs, differences between these populations of learners persist, demanding acknowledgement. Brain research, language interference, and varied discourse structures illustrate some of the differences that exist between NES and ELs. In order for a K-12 educator to thoroughly address the varied needs of ELs sufficiently and effectively, he or she must possess an additional linguistic, metalinguistic, and cultural knowledge base that can be appropriately and meaningfully applied to literacy instruction with K-12 ELs.

The 2005 National Assessment of Education Progress data showed that approximately half of all elementary English Learners and nearly three-quarters of middle school English Learners scored below the basic level in reading and mathematics (as cited in Ong, Aguila, & California, 2010, p. 5). Many educators are aware that differences exist between native English speakers (NES) and English learners (ELs) in their classrooms. Teachers work hard every day to adapt their lessons to meet the needs of their ELs only to be confronted with a sense of frustration when students' performance on a standardized test of reading does not meet the expectations of the government. Reading interventions intended for NES may be beneficial for some ELs while having little effect with others. K-12 educators are continually faced with the dilemma of how to best implement literacy programs and instruction for ELs. I argue that teachers must have additional linguistic, metalinguistic, and cultural knowledge accompanied by an ability to appropriately and meaningfully incorporate this knowledge in instruction in order to provide effective literacy instruction for K-12 ELs.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN EL AND NON-EL LITERACY INSTRUCTION

The similarities between effective literacy instruction for NES and ELs provide a solid foundation for school-wide literacy programs. Schools that have a large population of students receiving free or reduced lunches often notice similarities between these NES and ELs. Some NES come to school lacking a strong vocabulary base and struggling to learn how to read. Mikulecky (2011) stated that "much of what we regard as literate behavior is learned before children ever go to school" (p. 13). When the community's use of the home language and literacy practices do not correspond with the way that language is used in school, students have to learn how to use English appropriately in the school setting (Mikulecky, 2011, p. 13). In this way, certain populations of NES learn the vocabulary and language use of the mainstream school culture for the first time along with ELs. Effective literacy practices that have helped these populations of struggling NES are also effective for ELs.

Teachers often recognize that students enter and progress through school at different levels of literacy development and provide differentiated literacy instruction in the form of small groups. In the same way, ELs should also be grouped according to their language and reading levels, linguistic needs due to first language (L1) interference, and amount of L1 education and background knowledge. ELs are not a homogenous group. The EL population consists of long-term ELs, special education ELs, students reclassified as general education students after passing the district's language test, migrant ELs, transnational ELs, refugee children, and recent immigrants who may be highly educated in the L1 or have an interrupted education (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011, p. 105). Each of these subpopulations of ELs requires different approaches to teaching reading due to the differences in their backgrounds. In the same way that teachers provide NES with differentiated literacy instruction, teachers should group ELs for literacy instruction based on their individual backgrounds and needs.

Many literacy interventions that have been found successful for ELs are beneficial for first-language learners as well, and certain strategies can strengthen a school's overall approach to teaching literacy to diverse student groups (Ong et al., 2009). Best practices

in literacy instruction and one-on-one interventions such as Reading Recovery have proven to be successful with both ELs and struggling readers alike (Calderón et al., 2011, p. 116). Incorporating visuals, Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) strategies, and interactive instruction also benefit both NES and ELs (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Building background and vocabulary knowledge with pre-reading activities is necessary for any student lacking the schemata necessary for comprehension of academic reading passages. Research indicates that a student's cultural schemata could be a greater factor in comprehension than the words and ideas in a text (Mikulecky, 2011, p. 10). Opportunities for interaction such as cooperative learning provide ELs with regular opportunities to practice and improve their oral English that, in turn, affect their ability to read in English (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011; Ong et al., 2009). These cooperative learning opportunities are also used with NES. Adapting lesson plans to include the above strategies will improve literacy instruction for all students, especially ELs.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EL AND NON-EL LITERACY INSTRUCTION

Acknowledging the similarities between literacy instruction for NES and ELs should not diminish the need for understanding the differences that also exist. What is known about effective literacy instruction for NES provides a good foundation for EL literacy instruction. Ong et al. (2011) stated the following:

Although instructional approaches that have worked with native speakers of English can be a good place to start, using these procedures slavishly with no adjustment despite the very real differences that often exist between first- and second-language learners is less effective…the role of background experience and prior knowledge in comprehension and learning has been well documented. Therefore, the differences in the language and background experiences of English learners must be reflected in the instruction designed for them. (p. 222)

In the remainder of this paper, I explore how literacy instruction should differ for ELs due to the linguistic and cultural

differences between ELs and NES. A better understanding of these cultural and linguistic differences allows a teacher to more effectively implement literacy lessons for ELs.

Role of Literacy in Different Cultures

The role of literacy varies from culture to culture. Mikulecky (2011) defined literacy as "a set of attitudes about written language that develops within a specific cultural context" (p. 12). Literacy development encompasses more than simply learning how to read and write in the English script. It also requires knowing how to "apply this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (Hyland, 2009, p. 48). Some cultures place less importance on the academic and spoken language that is typically valued in the classroom (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). Differing cultural values related to literacy may result in students showing disinterest in the literacy being taught in the classroom if it is not purposefully connected with the students' own cultural values. Knowing the role that literacy plays in each EL's culture provides valuable insight as to how to engage students and families in the process of developing literacy within the mainstream American school culture.

Research on the Brain and Literacy

Through the use of Positron Emission Tomography (PET), Wolf found substantial evidence to support the theory that different languages use different parts of the brain based on the writing system of the language (as cited in Mikulecky, 2011, p. 6). Mikulecky (2011) summarized Wolf's findings as follows:

> The brain is altered as it adapts cognitive processes such as shape identification and generalization in order to decode a written language. Learning to read in a second language requires the brain to make adaptations in the "reading circuit" that are specific to the second language, and so reading in a second language also reshapes the brain. (p.6)

The implications of brain research for teaching literacy to ELs who have learned to read in their L1 are that students need to be afforded the time and practice necessary for their brain to make strong connections in areas where reading in English differs from reading in

their L1. It should not be assumed that skills learned for literacy in students' first languages are so similar as to be transferred automatically into English literacy.

Many ELs are not making adaptations to an already established "reading circuit," but are learning to read for the first time in a second language. NES often rely on context clues, sentence structure, and visual cues to learn how to read. These strategies cannot be relied on as heavily if the EL has limited vocabulary and low mastery of English sentence structure. Ong and colleagues (2009) noted, "A meta-analysis of studies that compared English-only instruction with instruction that used some native language found that bilingual programs were significantly better than English-only programs in developing English literacy skills" (p.215). Students who are learning to read for the first time in a second language are at a disadvantage in comparison with students who are able to draw from native language literacy resources in the process of becoming literate in English. For this reason, bilingual programs teach literacy in a students' home language before teaching English literacy. Strategic use of the first language can enhance second language instruction (Ong et al., 2009). Parent support can play a meaningful role in supporting their child's literacy skills in their home language, especially if no bilingual support is available at school (Calderón et al., 2011).

Language Interference

Many teachers recognize distinct differences that exist between their NES students and EL students. For example, teachers realize that ELs' lack of vocabulary knowledge will affect their comprehension of a text. Some EL errors and difficulties are representative of the students' language development and growth. However, a teacher unaware of the student's native language may not realize that there are specific areas of language that will be more difficult for an EL to acquire because of differences between a student's L1 and English. A language learner naturally tries to fit a new language into the framework of what is known to them in their first language. Language interference occurs when a language learner's first language influences the acquisition of their second language. This influence can result in errors caused by language interference. For example, differentiating between English vowels is difficult for native Spanish speakers because length is not a distinctive feature for Spanish vowels like it is for

English vowels (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 91). For this reason, native Spanish speakers sometimes confuse the words *seat* and *sit*. On the other hand, there may be certain aspects of the English language that are similar to a student's native language, making acquisition of sometimes complex forms seem effortless. Being aware of the differences that exist between English and a student's native language enables a teacher to identify the source of some reading problems and errors.

A student will not always be able to identify the similarities and differences between their first and second language. Therefore, it is most helpful to have a teacher who is knowledgeable enough to point out language interference and provide opportunities to overcome particularly problematic areas. A teacher who realizes, for example, that vowels are especially problematic for native Spanish speakers can begin addressing this area with engaging and meaningful auditory perception drills to help students differentiate between the English vowel sounds. Swan and Smith (2001) authored *Learner English,* a text that documents phonological, syntactical, and grammatical differences between the English language and other languages with the goal of equipping teachers to anticipate and understand areas of language interference. When teachers are aware of language interference, they can make minor adjustments in their lessons so as to address sounds or sentence structures that are particularly difficult because they do not appear in a student's L1 (Helfrich & Bosh, 2011). For example, Spanish speakers may need additional intervention with the ch/sh, b/v/, l/ld, and s/st phonemes when reading in English (Ong et al., 2009). While the influence of a student's native language can sometimes be considered an "interference," a student's native language knowledge can also contribute positively to the process of learning another language. Cognates, for example, can be extremely helpful to Spanish speakers if a knowledgeable teacher helps students identify these words while reading.

Discourse Structures

In addition to linguistic differences, discourse structures also vary from language to language and affect how readers comprehend texts. NES may take for granted that stories have a beginning, middle, and end. In other languages, stories may be structured differently with four or five parts. In order to read well and comprehend English texts,

ELs must be taught how to interpret texts in ways intended by the author (Mikulecky, 2011). In comparison to some other languages, English language discourse structures give more responsibility to the writer to achieve clarity through the use of signals that explicitly structure discussions, preview text, and label text segments (Hyland, 2009, p. 57). For example, topic-centered English discourse begins by stating a main idea followed by details that are linked to the main idea with signal phrases such as "for example" or "in addition." Yet, discourse structures in other languages assign the reader with the primary task of making the text comprehensible. English learners who come from a reader-responsible discourse structure need to be made aware of the markers that guide a reader through a text. A teacher who is aware of the different types of discourse structures will be more mindful of the importance of explicitly teaching the English discourse structure to ELs.

Grammar Knowledge

While explicit knowledge of grammar is not viewed as an important prerequisite for literacy teachers of NES, it is essential for literacy teachers of ELs. NES come to school with a growing intrinsic awareness of what language structures are acceptable in their surrounding society. This awareness is fine-tuned at school to reflect academic language. One of the strategies often referred to in the teaching of reading involves using syntax cues to make meaning. As students are struggling to make meaning of the text, teachers will often encourage readers to ask themselves if the text sounds right. Students quickly self-correct to match the language structures that they have internalized previously.

Yet, ELs cannot depend on their intuition to tell them if something sounds right because their knowledge of the English language system is still developing. ELs operate from a systematic and rule-governed interlanguage system that causes them to believe that what they are saying is "logically 'correct' even though, from the standpoint of a native speaker's competence, its use is incorrect" (Brown, 2007, p. 77). Some ELs eventually acquire this intuitive sense of what sounds right if they begin their language learning at a young age. However, the high expectations for young learners do not always allow the time to acquire this intuitive sense. Teachers need to move students forward in their interlanguage so as to give them another tool

to depend on in the process of learning how to read. Older ELs may want more concrete reasons behind why something "sounds right" in English when it does not seem to make sense in the context of their first language rules. A teacher must have an awareness of the English language and the rules that govern it in order to instruct ELs.

Knowledge of the English grammar system equips teachers with the ability to make students aware of the patterns of English. Recognizing patterns is an essential part of learning. As neurons are shaped into networks of patterns through the reoccurrence of experiences, the brain constructs meaning and learning occurs (Mikulecky, 2011). ELs are unable to immediately and accurately recognize the patterns of the English language. So, ELs impose their own patterns from which to operate. These patterns make sense according to the learners' first language patterns and developmental stage of language learning. As students are exposed to the English language more consistently, they may reorganize their patterns to more accurately reflect the English language. However, literacy development should not be dependent on the student's ability to make patterns out of the input that they receive in the classroom. Since EL students do not have the internalized grammar system that NES have, explicit instruction needs to occur to make the patterns of the English language evident and available for use in the process of developing literacy.

Although there are patterns and rules that govern the English language, many teachers lack the strong grammatical base from which to construct meaningful connections for students. In a case study of pre-service teachers done by Hadjioannou and Hutchinson (2010), 94% indicated that they had had formal instruction in grammar. However, 87% of these pre-service teachers ranked their understanding of grammar knowledge as a three or below on a scale from 1-5. Results from a diagnostic assessment of core grammatical concepts confirmed their self-ranking with the average score being 51.6 out of 100 with a range from a low of 35 to a high of 85. Hadjioannou and Hutchinson (2010) used this case study to advocate that "classroom teachers need to have a solid foundation in understanding and applying English grammar in order to buttress their content and pedagogical content knowledge and support their students' literacy development" (p. 90).

Teachers often shy away from teaching grammar because their own experiences with learning grammar in a highly decontextualized

manner conflict with current practices that value meaningful interaction. However, these very traditional approaches to teaching and learning grammar are not what Hadjioannou and Hutchinson were proposing. Teaching grammar to ELs in a way that will improve their language and literacy requires a functionalist approach (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010). The errors that ELs make are embedded in specific contexts and real situations in the classroom. In the same way, these errors should be addressed with grammar instruction embedded in contexts that are applicable to situations the students will encounter. Grammar instruction should be related to meaningful texts used for literacy instruction. A functionalist approach to teaching grammar means that the teacher addresses what the grammar "phenomenon *does* in language," which texts feature it, and how it is used in communication (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 99). A teacher must have a grammatical knowledge base that informs literacy instruction and be able to teach the grammatical patterns in ways that are meaningful to students.

Literacy Assessment

Finally, deeper knowledge of the cultural and linguistic differences of ELs should influence the way that assessment is viewed and utilized with ELs. Teachers and students alike feel the pressure of meeting high standards by achieving certain test scores on reading and writing tests. These tests can provide valuable information about a student's academic growth. However, a teacher also needs to consider the validity of the test based on what they know about the cultural and linguistic differences of their ELs. If a test includes readings in which the author assumes shared knowledge of vocabulary and references that may be unfamiliar to ELs, the test results will not accurately reflect a student's ability to read. The test becomes one of culture rather than reading comprehension for ELs and, thus, does not allow for a valid comparison between the literacy developments of NES and ELs.

Although assessment has many different purposes in education, there should be just one motivation for assessment according to Kornhaber: "assessment should serve as a tool to enhance all students' knowledge skills, and understanding so that they can function at the highest possible level in the wider world" (as cited by Helfrich & Bosh, 2011, p. 267). As teachers give and choose assessments, they should decide first which skill will be assessed. Then, an assessment should

be chosen that will give an accurate and valid reflection of a student's ability in that skill despite language and cultural barriers.

When giving required standardized tests, it is important to remember that ELs need time to fully acquire the English language. Collier (1987) and Collier and Thomas (1989) found that it took at least four to eight years of school for a group of middle-class English learners to reach national norms in all subjects. It is not fair or practical to expect of ELs the same comprehensive knowledge in English that their native peers have had years to acquire.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a concrete knowledge base of the linguistic and cultural complexities of ELs and the ability to incorporate this knowledge meaningfully and appropriately will enable a teacher to be more effective in teaching language skills that promote literacy to English learners. A student is often not aware of the differences that are causing confusion in the process of learning how to read and write in a second language. Effective teachers need to be knowledgeable not only in the cultural and linguistic differences of literacy, but also in English grammar and discourse structures. Then, teachers will be able to create and adapt meaningful lessons that explicitly address the language necessary for the process of learning literacy in a second language.

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