

Preliteracy Skills in Primary-Aged English Language Learners

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Abstract

This paper describes the transition of English language learners acquiring preliteracy skills in *learning to read* and the role of productive and receptive language in the development of phonological awareness. As English language learners transition to *reading to learn*, oral reading fluency becomes an important component of future reading success. Because of the lack of resources, print and language exposure, students acquiring a second language face the challenge of becoming successful readers.

Preliteracy Skills in Primary-Aged English Language Learners

Learning to read is an essential skill for students to be successful in an academic setting. English language learners (ELLs) face the task of acquiring an entirely new phonetic and grapheme systems to be able to read, write, listen, and speak in English. Due to the lack of literacy resources before entering school, many ELLs begin with varying exposures to their new language. The development of productive and receptive language, phonological awareness, and oral reading fluency may require additional time and intervention. Faced with this momentous task, there are sociolinguistic and economic factors this student population must overcome to attain the goal of becoming successful readers.

PRELITERACY SKILLS & ELLS

Productive and Receptive Language

Oral and receptive language proficiency play significant roles in predicting later levels of phonological awareness, reading comprehension, writing and spelling (Dixon, 2011). Some ELL

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kindergartners come to school with no previous experience with English which places them at a disadvantage among their monolingual peers. Research indicates early productive and receptive language instruction is a predictor of reading achievement in later grades.

Kieffer (2012) hypothesized kindergarten levels of early oral language development in both the native language (L1) and the second language (L2) predict later growth in L2 compared to more complex measures such as listening comprehension or retelling. His findings conclude productive vocabulary emerged as the only significant predictor and students should have access to literacy instruction as part of regular classroom instruction. In addition, early productive vocabulary displays a moderate relationship with later reading achievement (Kieffer, 2012).

In Goodwin et. al. (2015), focused on how word reading, listening comprehension, and oral vocabulary support reading comprehension in both L1 and L2. Their findings concluded listening comprehension made a significant contribution in both languages whereas oral vocabulary only contributed to reading comprehension in L1 (Goodwin, August & Calderon, 2015). These results suggest both productive and receptive language support are imperative for ELL students' ability to comprehend text in their second language.

The purpose of Scarpino et. al. (2011) study was to examine the relationship between receptive language skills and later phonological skills during preschool and kindergarten. Their findings were conclusive and add to the existing research stating “receptive vocabulary before kindergarten explained approximately 10% of the variance in phonological awareness at the end of kindergarten. English vocabulary at the end of Head Start is the dominant predictive factor of kindergarten English phonological awareness (PA)” (Scarpino, Lawrence, Davison & Hammer, 2011).

Productive and receptive language skills are equally important to the development of ELL students' PA and reading comprehension. Yesil-Dagli (2011) states, “instructional approaches that are

found to be effective for non-ELL students, such as explicit and systematic code-focused instruction, may also benefit ELL students.”

Understanding how both productive and receptive language contribute to the acquisition of preliteracy skills in L2, educators must provide opportunities for ELLs to develop and practice their newly-acquired skills both in small and whole group settings.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the basic processing skill of an “awareness of sounds in spoken words” (Stahl & Murray, 1994, p. 221) There have been numerous studies conducted on ELL’s acquisition of such skills since they are a strong predictor of later reading development when students are *reading to learn* rather than *learning to read*. Manis et. al. (2004) claim, “print knowledge, phonological awareness, and rapid naming correlated cross-linguistically with later reading achievement.” Their study found the strongest English-language predictor was PA (Manis, Lindsey & Bailey, 2004).

Oral Reading Fluency

When ELL students make the transition in grade 3 to *reading to learn*, oral reading fluency (ORF) is essential for later reading comprehension outcomes. ORF refers to a student’s ability to read with automaticity, speed, accuracy, and prosody. With automaticity, comes their ability to comprehend without having to focus on decoding the text (Rasplica & Cummings, 2013). If possible, practitioners should monitor the development of ORF in both L1 and L2 to ensure ELLs are developing ORF with accuracy.

There are several studies described highlighting the prediction of ORF outcomes in primary grades. The findings of Yesil-Dagli (2011) showed ELL students tested made significant gains in their English ORF measured by DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency test, from the beginning to end of first grade.

Secondly, Solari et. al. (2013) study sought to determine which early literacy measures will predict ORF outcomes in both first and second grade and do these early literacy skills change between kindergarten, first and second grades? Decisively, their findings concluded that levels of English receptive vocabulary, letter knowledge, and PA skills are all important predictors of English ORF outcomes in first grade (Solari, Aceves, Higareda, Richards-Tutor, Filippini, Gerber & Leafstedt, 2013).

SOCIOLINGUISTIC & ECONOMIC FACTORS

Age

There have been numerous studies investigating the relationship between the acquisition of phonological skills and student age and maturity as predictors for later reading achievement. Per Scarpino et. al., “Children often do not demonstrate the phonological awareness skills that are most predictive of later reading abilities until they are 4 or 5 years old” (2011). The results of Morrow et. al. (2013) indicate those children exposed to English at earlier ages tended to have higher accuracy scores on some phonological skills such as affricates and glides. While this study included participants not exposed to English until 3;3 years of age and seven over age 5;0, those exposed to English at a younger age exhibited more advanced phonological skills (Morrow, Goldstein, Gihool & Paradis, 2013). Additionally, Sorenson and Paradis (2016) discovered age had a significant effect on nonword repetition (NWR), a simpler phonological storage task; accuracy with older children having greater accuracy than younger children. While age and language exposure are independent of each other, NWR does improve with age (Sorenson & Paradis, 2016). Phonological awareness requires short-term memory capacity which increases with children’s age and maturity. ELLs must be cognitively ready to acquire phonological awareness skills as well as their initial exposure to English are both contributing factors to future reading success.

Socioeconomic Status

ELL students' socioeconomic status may have an adverse effect on their ability to acquire both English and literacy skills based solely on the unavailability and exposure to language, print, and resources. Many of these students enter kindergarten with measurable gaps in both language and literacy skills which can continue into later grades negatively impacting their reading achievement. Yesil-Dagli (2009) investigated the variance of ELL students' first grade English oral reading fluency with their free or reduced-price lunch eligibility (FRPL). The demographics included 82% of the participants were Hispanic and 88% were eligible for FRPL with 22% higher poverty rate than it was for White students. The average FRPL for the school was 70% (Yesil-Dagli, 2009). These findings indicate ELL students from low-income families showed weaknesses in the following literacy skill areas: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and English vocabulary which are all predictors of oral reading fluency (Yesil-Dagli, 2009). Socioeconomic status can negatively impact ELLs entering kindergarten and by which this impact can have a multiplying effect for those trying to acquire both a second language and skills necessary for reading.

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