

Podcast Part 1: Key Understandings About Literacy Development for Multilingual Learners

Host: Welcome to this two-part podcast hosted by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA). We are here with Melissa Escalante, Lead Management and Program Analyst from OELA. Today we will be listening to a conversation about effective literacy instruction for multilingual learners.

In part I of the podcast Dr. Laurie Olsen, Strategic Advisor from Sobrato Early Academic Language will discuss key understandings about literacy development for multilingual learners, as well as literacy instruction in English only educational contexts. Her portion of the presentation will be followed by a brief Q&A moderated by Grace Delgado and featuring Aloise Miller, Adjunct Professor from Seidlitz Education.

In Part II of the podcast Dr. Kathy Escamilla, Professor Emerita at the University of Colorado will discuss literacy development in bilingual settings. Her presentation will be followed by a brief Q&A moderated by Grace Delgado and featuring Dr. Ana DeGenna, Associate Superintendent of Educational Services at Oxnard School District.

Please note that in this podcast the terms “English learners” and “Multilingual learners” are used interchangeably and refer to the population of students defined as English learners in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act.

Let’s get the conversation started...

Melissa Escalante: Hello and thank you for joining us!

Across the country, students and educators started a new school year full of promise and possibility for students. Educators are still working hard to address the impact that the pandemic has had on all K-12 students, staff, and communities. The pandemic has widened pre-existing achievement and opportunity gaps, hitting historically underserved students, including multilingual learners the hardest. There were deep-rooted challenges that multilingual learners were facing prior to the pandemic and we now have the opportunity to not only help them catch up on interrupted learning, but also tackle longstanding inequities in education. And that will be the focus of our conversation today. Now, I’m going to turn it over to Dr. Laurie Olsen for the discussion of effective literacy instruction for multilingual learners.

Dr. Olsen: Despite intentions and efforts to address achievement gaps, despite reforms to strengthen literacy instruction, the pattern of our English learners being ill served still holds across the nation and English learners, about one in ten students in our schools continue disproportionately to be denied access to the effective literacy education they need. A pattern that's become just more urgent since the pandemic. It would be one thing if we honestly didn't know what to do differently. But the fact is, we have a strong, increasingly coherent research base on what effective literacy instruction looks like for English learners. The problem has been ignoring that research and shaping reforms and continuing to invest in practices that bypass that knowledge base and continuing to rely upon research on reading that is centered on monolingual

English speakers, mistakenly assuming it equally applies to English learners and erroneously concluding that it can adequately inform how we instruct them.

Too often, then, instruction has failed to address what it means to develop literacy in a second language and has failed to leverage the assets of the dual language brain. What we see as a result has been typically a very narrow approach to literacy instruction that cuts out much of what is so essential for English learners. Reducing language development to being primarily about literacy and literacy, primarily as being a matter of reading, and reading reduced to just a few foundational skills, all delivered in English. The same as to monolingual English speakers. Well, back in 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on behalf of Chinese American children in the *Lau versus Nichols* case, and they said, “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 an equal educational effort, from an equal education.” So if we read that in today's context and think of it as if we're just providing the same reading curriculum, the same reading instruction and teaching approach to ELs as if they're the same as English proficient and monolingual and native English speaking students, we're failing to provide equal educational access and failing to adequately teach them to read. Well, since *Lau* we have built an increasingly solid research base describing both the harms of that narrowed and English-centric approach and describing also what it is we need to attend to in effective literacy instruction that is designed for English learners. And it's a research base that's essential for educators of English learners to understand. While theory and research on effective illiteracy practice began to coalesce way back in the 1980s. It wasn't really until 2006 when the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth was established by Congress explicitly to, “extend and adjust” rectify and adapt the findings of the National Reading Panel, which had left out of their meta-analysis the research studies on language minority children.

Well, the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youths report was groundbreaking. It was a comprehensive, evidence based review of the research literature on the development of literacy for this group of students. And their findings were too late to impact the huge investments that had already been made nationally in literacy curriculum and reading first as part of *No Child Left Behind*. But it was also clear that the findings flew in the face of much of what was put in place as literacy education throughout the country. While key to the national literacy panel's findings were things like the crucial role of a child's home language and literacy development. They were clear that the five pillars of teaching reading that were the conclusions of the National Reading Panel were important but not sufficient for English learners. And they clearly stated that bilingual education approaches work equally well or better than English only approaches in terms of English literacy attainment. They pointed out that oral language had all but disappeared from language arts and literacy instruction, but that oral language was essential needed foundation of literacy for English learners. And they underscored the importance of ESL or ELD as a component of language and literacy education for English learners.

Well, in the 20 years since then, there continued to be research on English learners and literacy, echoing some of those themes from the National Literacy Panel, but adding additional understanding about effective dual language approaches about translanguaging, and about the

interaction and intersection of language systems in the dual language brain and providing us with evaluation research on effective literacy practices.

The key message I just want to drive home right now is we know what effective teaching-based, what effective research-based literacy instruction is for English learners and declare that we know better than to allow those patterns to continue. And that means beginning with two key understandings. The first is that literacy development for English learners, for students with two or more languages in the brain is not the same as for monolingual students. It is not the presence of just two separate language systems and identities. Bilingualism involves the intersection of two or more languages. That's a fundamental reality for English learners in developing literacy because their languages are interacting in the process of developing literacy, regardless of which language the instruction is in, and that calls for different pedagogical approaches and instruction.

There are other aspects of the differences between a monolingual English speaking child on the one hand, and the English learner or bilingual child on the other that impact literacy development. Things like the differences related to the prestige and status of one's home language and how that impacts learning and learning to read in English and what it means to develop literacy in a language you already know compared to developing literacy in a language you are just learning. These are not incidental issues. They're central in understanding what effective literacy instruction for English learners needs to be. And the second big difference that I've been understanding, I want to underscore, is in how we think about the goals of literacy instruction, which are different for English learners, for these young ones who come to us and come to developing literacy while facing a language barrier to access who are and who are also participants in multiple language and cultural worlds. The goal of their literacy instruction should be to become proficient as readers and writers in and across their multiple language worlds, which means literacy instruction has to be designed both, to provide access and success in an English speaking world and to support them in becoming biliterate. So with all of that, then what is an effective literacy approach for English learners that's based on the research about them that embraces the dual language brain as a reality and as an asset and has been demonstrated to have positive impacts?

Well, an effective literacy model for them is designed for them. It's comprehensive, multidimensional, interactive, integrated, and responsive. It is not a take sides either or kind of model. It's not phonics and decoding and word work versus meaning making and comprehension. It's not about reading versus writing and oral language. It's not English versus home language. It's not about one side or another. It's a yes model. It is a comprehensive model designed for them. I want to orient you to the four sections of this model before we share what it looks like in action. First, there's the precursors, the skills that are developmentally appropriate as the gateway to and pass into literacy for young children in preschool, not yet full on reading instruction. But setting the groundwork and the basic understandings and readiness. Then there's the essential elements of literacy instruction for students entering into explicit literacy in the primary grades, which includes the systematic development of foundational reading skills and emphasis on building vocabulary and comprehension. It includes writing as well as reading, and

absolutely includes those essentials that are specific to English learners such as cross language connections, ESL and ELD.

And then because literacy doesn't develop in a vacuum, there are essential contexts. We need to pay attention to essential learning environments that facilitate literacy development. Because if these contexts are missing, it hampers literacy development. Things like the integration of literacy in language with content like a language-rich print, rich content, immersive learning environment where language and literacy have both purpose and meaning, like the importance of culturally inclusive and high quality reading material like a safe, affirming learning environment in which children's languages and cultures and experiences are welcomed and built upon as assets. And the last section of the components of the model speak directly to literacy instruction in the context of dual language immersion and biliteracy classrooms, where biliteracy pedagogy leverages the power of children learning in and through two languages with the goals of literacy in both. We have to ensure that all of these elements are part of literacy instruction.

That's why we call it a comprehensive model. It's not just a list of individual components that you get to pick and choose among. Each element is important with a specific role to play in literacy development. If any one is missing, it's a problem. The elements work together and interact, none alone or in isolation or sufficient. And no element has primacy or priority over another. Now, if you think of all these components as wholly separate skill areas you have to instruct, it's pretty overwhelming. But the great gift of it is that we're not talking about a dozen discrete curricula with specific times in the day dedicated to each in isolation. These are interactional. They build upon and support each other. They're integrated with content. So the work and application and practice of literacy and the development of literacy occurs not just during a language arts block, but throughout the entire curriculum and school day.

We also know, though, that the majority of English language learners in the U.S. are being educated in English taught classrooms mostly by monolingual English speaking teachers. And in those cases where bilingual instruction is not possible research has repeatedly affirmed that English only literacy instruction that is comprehensive, that really attends to a strong second language pedagogy that incorporates attention to the dual language brain is also effective in achieving literacy in English. So what does that look like? Well, all of those elements that I discussed earlier as the comprehensive framework of effective literacy apply to English taught settings. I just want to emphasize a few that are particularly important because children are being introduced to literacy in a language they're still learning. And because the instruction is not in their strongest language, effective literacy instruction for English learners in an English taught context requires a second language pedagogy. So the building of the new language — English has to be explicit. The leveraging of the home language has to be intentional, and the language barrier to comprehension and access and participation has to be overcome. That means, first, that literacy instruction has to be partnered with daily, high quality English as a second language or ELD instruction that focuses on how English works. That provides the protected and targeted time and space for oral practice that responds to the linguistic demands that our students are facing in the academic curriculum. Literacy instruction in English for English learners. Targeted ESL simply is not effective. And it's a major contributor to that persistent gap we see.

Second, in order for ELs to understand the instruction and comprehend the content, they need scaffolding. They need teachers to use a whole toolkit of strategies that assist in comprehension, build vocabulary, facilitate participation. So the use of visuals and realia, and modeling, and things like sentence frames and sentence starters and charts and graphic organizers and differentiated supports and tasks that are geared to the English proficiency level of the student. All of that has to be woven into and throughout literacy instruction.

Third, literacy development should be integrated with content throughout the day. The vocabulary and background knowledge that makes those words on the page make sense and have meaning is so important for English learners because they don't have that bank of vocabulary in English that their English speaking peers have. That comes from the learning they're engaged in throughout the rest of the day, science, social studies, etc.

Fourth, particularly because instruction is in English, it's important that the teacher in school be very clear about messaging support for a child's language and the value and potential of bilingualism. If our English learners are not to conclude that literacy is just an English thing, if they're not to conclude that their home language is irrelevant, if they're not to conclude that literacy is only useful in English context, and if we're going to avoid the subtractive patterns of language, loss and rejection that undercut overall language and literacy development as well as exact a human price, then it's particularly important that English learners in English taught programs here explicitly, intentionally, and often hear about the value of their home language, the benefits of bilingualism, and the applicability of literacy to their home language, and the books that they're exposed to, the authors they read, the texts they use for literacy instruction better reflect an inclusiveness of who they are.

And fifth in English taught literacy programs the family becomes especially essential as a partner because the family can support what the teacher cannot, which is applying and practicing and engaging in literacy practices, in their home language, the child's strongest language where they have the most linguistic resources to bring to bear in the task of developing literacy. Well, in conclusion, I just want to say, we have this strong research base behind effective literacy instruction, we know what should happen. But as we pursue implementation, there are some potholes we need to guard against. We need to guard against the invisibility or marginalization of English learners that would lead us to approach literacy instruction as if the fact that they're English learners was not particularly relevant to how we instruct reading. We have to guard against the rush to intervention when those generic literacy instruction approaches don't work so well for our English learners, or when the monolingual, narrow and inadequate assessments don't really measure what they understand and can do. We need to guard against the push down tendency of instituting developmentally inappropriate reading instruction in preschool rather, than focusing on those precursors. We have to guard against pushing out science and social studies in the arts and offering our English learners less content, less access, less learning, because we're increasing our time on isolated reading instruction. We have to guard against an English only or English centric approach that fails to recognize the importance of home language. We have to guard against the narrowing of literacy to just a few discrete reading skills. Cutting out those other important skills of reading and cutting out writing. And we have to guard

against one size fits all paradigms and the resultant deficit perspectives that for too long have looked at our English learners only in terms of the language they haven't yet mastered.

Well, we've been focusing on literacy instruction, but this isn't just a task for teachers, is it? There's an important leadership role to build the infrastructure for effective literacy instruction to take place. It's leaders that have to ensure that curriculum materials focus on all the essential elements and that investments are made in those classroom libraries of high quality, multiple genera, multiple language books and print materials to create print rich and content rich classroom environments. It's leaders who have to ensure that quality ELD and ESL has been implemented and has been understood as a key part of literacy instruction. They need to be monitoring what's happening for English learners in literacy instruction and commit to assessments that are designed for and normed for English learners and dual language learners. So we know how they're doing. It's leaders that have to be sure there's literacy coaches, collaborative planning, time, professional learning for teachers and wherever possible, expand those dual language and biliteracy programs that we know have such incredible gifts for our students. The thing is, we cannot afford to lose another generation to literacy programs that aren't designed or delivered based on what we know is needed for our English learners, or to relegate them to ineffective instructional approaches that once again will leave them behind. The current political, public and media focus on increasing literacy for all children should be an invitation to invest in what we know works for English learners. A robust and informed, comprehensive literacy approach based on research on second language learners and the dual language brain.

Melissa Escalante: A big thank you to Dr. Laurie Olsen for this stimulating discussion on what effective practices in literacy instruction can look like and what benefits they can bring to multilingual learners. We will now turn it over to Grace Delgado, who will moderate a brief Q&A session on planning literacy instruction for multilingual learners with Aloise Miller.

Grace Delgado: Good afternoon. My name is Grace Delgado. I'm the executive director of Multilingual Services involving ISB. And this afternoon I will be facilitating our panel of practitioners on behalf NAELPA. Our panelists are Aloise Miller, who has worked in multilingual education for 35 years. She's has been a dual language teacher for 15 years and has served as a bilingual ESL district specialist for the last nine years. She has been an adjunct presenter for Seidlitz Education since 2019.

Ms. Miller, what are effective ways of planning literacy instruction for multilingual learners that is engaging, builds on oral language and integrates with content?

Aloise Miller: Effective ways to approach literacy instruction is really to develop instructional routines that focus on increasing vocabulary knowledge, teach language structures from simple to more complex, and have many embedded opportunities for dialog. With that said, for literacy lessons to be highly engaging, it is important for teachers to begin by selecting texts that are going to be of interest to the students. As we know, that may not always be the case. Teachers are often expected to use the district provided adoptions, but by tapping into the student's funds of knowledge or by using visuals, music, art, or different types of reality to build prior knowledge, teachers can lay a foundation for literacy lessons that can draw on a student's

strength. Once a text and learning objective is established for a literacy lesson, teachers can determine the essential vocabulary for that particular lesson cycle. The vocabulary can be language specific to the text, language specific to the content standard, and language specific to the processing strand. The thinking needed to achieve the instructional objective. By making the learners aware of the vocabulary they will need to understand to successfully navigate the lessons that places all the learners in a favorable position. Next, teachers need to determine the language structures they want the students to use to demonstrate their understanding of the material. This sentence range should include the targeted vocabulary and become more complex as a lesson progresses. By using the instructional standard vocabulary from the text and language from Bloom's taxonomy, teachers can prepare meaningful questions and response frames to use during the lesson. Now comes my favorite part of all lessons — embedded opportunities for dialog, that rich discourse teachers should strategically plan in several places in every single lesson where students will dialog using the prepared language structures. These dialogs are where students will process the learning using targeted language and the new vocabulary.

All learners need to use and practice academic language after allowing students to process orally, then teachers can ask students to write responses to further process their understanding that oral rehearsal, the dialog is essential. I always say that speaking is a rehearsal for writing. We cannot ask students to write in a way, in ways they do not yet speak. Speaking and writing are mirror processes and learners benefit from seeing their words come alive on paper. So, in effective literacy planning, teachers should insert many opportunities for their students to discuss, followed by writing. I like to say, have the students write a little, a lot. So teach and read a little, talk a little, write a little over and over again.

Host: A big thank you to our panelists for discussing the important topic of literacy instruction for multilingual learners! The information, reflections, and experiences that you shared today will certainly help educators support this population of students. You have given us many useful ideas to think about as we continue to serve multilingual learners across the country. Please listen to the second part of this podcast that features Drs. Kathy Escamilla and Ana Degenna, who will discuss literacy instruction specific to bilingual educational settings. We also encourage you to visit the NCELA website at www.ncela.ed.gov and check out the many educator resources available there.