Cultivating Knowledge, Building Language

Literacy Instruction for English Learners in Elementary School

NONIE K. LESAUX • JULIE RUSS HARRIS

HEINEMANN
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Message from Nell K. Duke

We all know that the number of students in the U.S. whose home language is not English is enormous. These students deserve our very best instruction. But what *is* the very best instruction for English learners? How do we capitalize on and further develop the linguistic knowledge and skill of this segment of our society?

Nonie Lesaux and Julie Harris are exceedingly well qualified to address these questions. They are on the cutting edge of instruction for English learners. Their combination of research knowledge and practical experience makes for guidance that can be trusted, and implemented, in classrooms throughout the country.

The overall approach that Nonie and Julie present can be summarized in two words: *big* and *deep*. They call for structuring the curriculum for English learners around content-rich big ideas—for example, how seasons influence living things, how regions of the United States contribute to our union, effecting change in our school. Then they invite teachers and students to go deep into these ideas, studying a small set of words intensely, developing great facility with a small set of word-learning strategies, and developing projects in which students demonstrate the considerable expertise they have developed.

This approach makes sense for English learners, given what we know about common strengths and needs of this group. But it also makes sense for all learners. My own children's home language is English, and yet I couldn't help but think how wonderful Nonie and Julie's approach would be for them. Indeed, many practices described in this book, while particularly important and well-suited for English learners, can be beneficial for monolingual English speakers as well.

This book fits beautifully in the Research-Informed Classroom series, which aims to bring rigorous classroom-based research to bear on persistent challenges of classroom practice. This series aims to bridge the gap between research and practice by focusing on the most practical, classroom-relevant research and communicating practices based on that research in a way that makes them accessible, appealing, and actionable. The series is founded on the belief that students and teachers are researchers' clients, and serving them should be the highest priority. I cannot thank Nonie and Julie enough for exemplifying the ideals of the series.

Nell K. Duke

University of Michigan

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What We Know About Reading Development Among English Learners

Just after the bell had rung to signal the end of lunch, Ms. Parkin, a third-grade teacher, was entering the building for the first time that day. She had spent the morning in a training session—the second one in a series of three—focused on strengthening daily instruction for English learners (ELs). With almost forty different home languages in the district today, and the population increasing each year, the district had begun to offer trainings for all teachers of ELs, not just English as a second language (ESL) teachers, on how to support language development. In Ms. Parkin's classroom this year, more than half of the students are ELs—some are receiving ESL services, some have been reclassified as fully proficient, but all need language support. Ms. Parkin can think back to a time, not too long ago, when she had just one, maybe two ELs in her classroom per year, and before that, none.

English Learners in Today's Schools

Ms. Parkin's experience in her district is not a unique one. In industrialized countries worldwide, the population of children growing up in linguistically diverse homes is on the rise (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 2009). In fact, over half of the world's population is now bilingual, and in today's globalized economy, the ability to speak more than one language is an enormous asset (Grosjean

2010). In the United States in particular, the past several decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of school-age children from homes where English is not the primary language. Between 1980 and 2009, this population of children, ELs, rose from 4.7 to 11.2 million youth, or from 10 to 21 percent of school-age children (Aud et al. 2011). Approximately 73 percent of ELs come from households in which Spanish is the primary language spoken, but the remainder of the population speaks 150 other languages at home (Batalova and McHugh 2010).

As we think more and more scientifically about the needs of this population, it is important to recognize that although one might hear the term *English learner* and conjure up the notion of a recent immigrant, more than half of school-age ELs are born in the United States. In fact, the two largest and fastest growing subpopulations of U.S. ELs are students who immigrated before kindergarten and U.S.–born children of immigrants (Capps et al. 2005)—they are not newcomers, enrolling as older children and adolescents. Instead, they are in our preschools and kindergarten classrooms, being educated entirely in the United States. These learners are coming up through the system—and their families have high hopes for their children's education. After all, when immigrant adults are asked about their reasons for immigration to the United States, there is one resounding reason that is at the very top, each and every time. What is it? A better education and life—not for them, but for their children. This is at the root of most every immigrant family's plan. They embark on the difficult, even traumatic, process of abandoning their homeland, and they take on the enormous task of learning life in a new country. These undertakings are commenced and continued, not for themselves, but instead, with the next generation(s) in mind (Perreira, Chapman, and Stein 2006). Immigrant parents enroll their young children in early education and care settings and kindergarten classrooms and think favorably about the U.S. public education system. These families often associate the United States with better opportunities and a better life for the next generation, based on education and schooling (Goldenberg et al. 2001; Perreira, Chapman, and Stein 2006).

Yet although many ELs in the United States thrive academically, when compared to their majority-culture peers, this population on average demonstrates lower academic achievement, experiences grade retention, and drops out of school at higher rates (August and Hakuta 1997; August and Shanahan 2006; Fry 2007; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). Large-scale assessment results confirm the troubling demographics of reading difficulties in the United States. For example, according to the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress results, only 7 percent of students classified as English language learners in grade 4 and 3 percent in grade 8 read at or above proficiency levels (National Center for Education

Statistics 2013). And bear in mind that these comparisons do not represent the very large proportion of the population that was never identified as needing language supports or that was reclassified as fully proficient; it is unclear, then, how the overall population of ELs is faring.

Although there are many risk factors associated with academic outcomes, many of which ELs carry with them, one risk factor is unique to this population: Its members are faced with the challenge of simultaneously learning academic content and developing English language proficiency, and they have to learn with enormous efficiency to catch up with their monolingual English peers. Without a doubt, this task is a formidable one. ELs are racing the clock and the calendar, and their teachers are working tirelessly to support them to do so.

We have a long way to go to fully serve this fast-growing group, now populating classrooms across the country. The opportunity gap between ELs and many of their peers is too wide, high school graduation rates are still too low, and

HOW DOES POVERTY FIT INTO THE PICTURE?

At the same time as having to learn to read in a language in which they are not fully proficient, other risk factors associated with the EL population include household incomes at or near poverty levels; low parental education and literacy rates; and enrollment in under-resourced, low-performing schools with high concentrations of students of color and students living in poverty (Aud et al. 2011; Capps et al. 2005; Fry and Gonzales 2008). ELs who grow up in poverty thus face compounding risks, making them especially vulnerable to poor academic outcomes (Fry 2007; Wight, Chau, and Aratani 2010). And it is the case that in the United States, linguistic diversity and poverty are related; many U.S.–born children of immigrants and immigrant children are raised in poverty. The latest government statistics reveal that child poverty rates increased from 16.2 percent in 2000 to 21.6 percent in 2010 (Wight et al. 2010). With immigration rates also on the rise, children of immigrants now make up 24 percent of the school-age population. Strikingly, for example, approximately one in every three Latino children grows up in poverty, and many also enter school with limited proficiency in English (Lopez and Velasco 2011).

linguistic diversity is soon to be characteristic of all classrooms. Unless we further support educators to design instruction to match the demographics of today's students, as the EL population continues to grow and to grow up, so too will the number of students experiencing difficulties.

Defining *English Learner*

It is important for us to state that in this book, we use the term *English learner* to represent *all* students in our elementary school classrooms who come from households where a language other than English is the primary language spoken. Why? Well, the basis for distinguishing between limited versus full English proficiency is poorly defined and highly variable across different states and school districts. Most importantly, for the purposes of a conversation about instruction, many children from homes where English is not the primary language spoken and who are classified as fully English proficient on school entry or reclassified after receiving ESL services or even bilingual services still continue to need language supports. Many ELs with academic challenges in the later grades have been enrolled in U.S. schools since kindergarten, and they no longer have a formal designation justifying support services for language development. Recall that Ms. Parkin doesn't even really make distinctions between her students who are receiving language support services and those who have been reclassified. That is, for educators like Ms. Parkin, the need for language-based literacy support does not always line up with a student's language classification as determined by the district; instead, many ELs, including those who do not qualify to receive ESL services, require instruction that intentionally supports and promotes their continued language development. Consider, too, that what it means to be *proficient* changes as a function of the curriculum—a first grader's ability to meet the language demands of the curriculum is very different from the fourth grader's ability to do so. Being proficient at grade 1 is not the same as being proficient at grade 4—the game changes over time. A learner's language development therefore needs to keep pace with the changing language demands of the curriculum, and the classification system doesn't account for that. Finally, whether classified for support services or not, EL students entering U.S. schools must learn with enormous efficiency if they are to catch up with their monolingual English classmates. They typically score lower than monolingual students during the preschool years on assessments of vocabulary and oral language comprehension in English, and they are likely to have had fewer encounters with book reading and emergent literacy activities in any language (Hammer, Scarpino, and Davison 2011).

ENGLISH LEARNERS ARE NOT STRUGGLING THINKERS!

ELs vary in their English proficiency from beginning to intermediate to advanced levels. Limited proficiency in English should not be considered a sign of limited intelligence. Although this might seem obvious, in fact we know that oftentimes students' hesitancies to speak, errors, or accents are misinterpreted as signs of cognitive deficiencies (Cummins 2000). Yet ELs are just as capable as their peers who speak fluent English to engage in higher-level thinking. There is even a considerable amount of research evidence pointing to the cognitive benefits of bilingualism in both the short and long term (Bialystok, Craik, and Luk 2012). The issue is that as learners are still developing capacities to navigate more than one language, it might take them longer to process language, but processing time should not be confused with capability. Even when they seem fluent in oral English, they still might mentally translate to their first language when grappling with challenging content. Indeed, it is important to remember that second language acquisition is an *uneven* process (Bialystok 1991). ELs' relative proficiency in English can fluctuate for a number of reasons, not the least of which is topic at hand.

So, in this book we use the term *English learner* in the broadest sense, and we focus on the largest and fastest-growing population of ELs—those learners who are coming up through our educational system from the youngest ages.

Reading Development Among English Learners

For all readers, including our ELs, the process of reading development is both cumulative and componential (RAND Reading Study Group 2002). By *cumulative*, we mean that the process of reading development begins at birth and continues through adulthood. By developing skills and knowledge while accumulating reading experiences over time, a reader is able to keep pace with the changing demands of the context and the purpose for reading. This continual development creates a foundation for learning across all school subjects (RAND Reading Study

Group 2002; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008). After all, the school curriculum is conveyed largely through oral and written language. By *componential*, we mean a number of separate, but related, skills go into the process. Next, we spend some time discussing these skills to provide relevant information that helps us understand what it is we're learning about the reading process for ELs.

Distinguishing Between Code-Based and Meaning-Based Skills

When the parent of a first grader hears her child finally work through the pages of a text with ease, successfully reading *Hop on Pop* aloud, for example, there might be a sigh of relief and a feeling that the job of learning to read is done. But that sense of relief might be premature. "Reading" in grade 1 is not the same as "reading" in grade 8. With increasing grade levels, the demands of the texts children must read increase in difficulty, and yet text is the primary way that academic content is delivered to students, especially in middle school and high school (where all students are headed!). In fact, to be successful in all academic content areas, students need to be proficient readers. But what counts as proficient is always changing; to be a proficient reader throughout the years, a learner has to accumulate experiences at home, in her community, and in any formal educational setting that will build up her language and knowledge, to support her literacy development.

The question is—after daily instruction throughout the years, why do many students, including many ELs, struggle to comprehend texts? One major problem lies in whether children acquire both the skills and knowledge needed to read and understand complex texts. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, code-based competencies are those that allow students to master the mechanics of reading—for example, the ability to efficiently, even automatically, map letters onto their respective sounds in combinations, and thus read words. Meaning-based competencies, on the other hand, comprise the range of abilities and knowledge necessary for constructing our understanding of a text. They include the skills related to language development, such as oral language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension skills, as well as the foundational knowledge needed to access and apply a text's message. In fact, vocabulary knowledge, in particular, is so important for literacy development and achievement that the acquisition, use, and interpretation of words and phrases is represented in the College and Career Readiness anchor English language arts standards for: (1) reading literature, (2) reading information text, and (3) language (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010). Also included in this broad group of skills are the cognitive strategies needed to facilitate meaning construction and learning (Alexander and Jetton 2000; Cain,

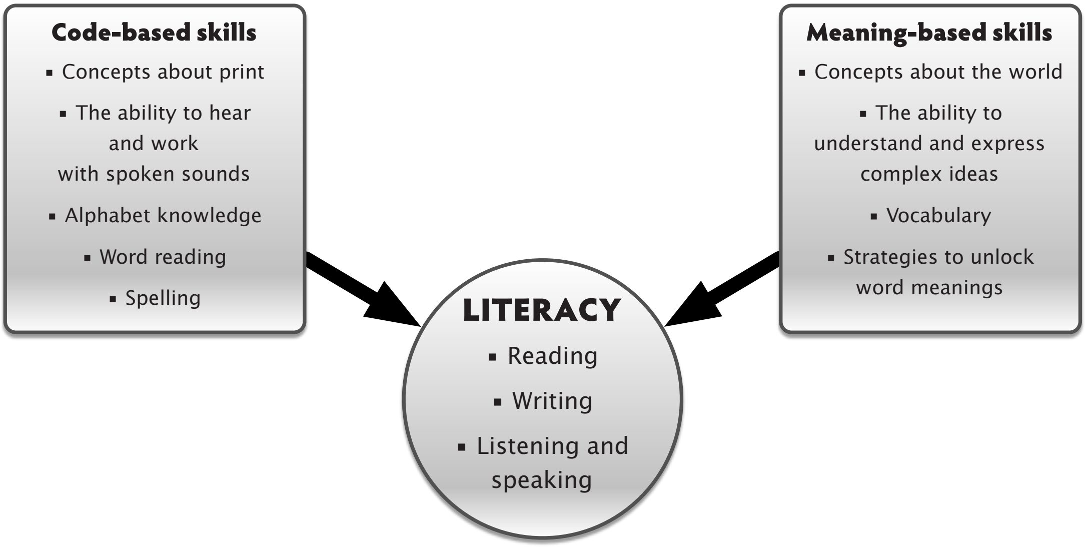
Code-based skills
▪ Concepts about print
▪ The ability to hear and work with spoken sounds
▪ Alphabet knowledge
▪ Word reading
▪ Spelling
Meaning-based skills
▪ Concepts about the world
▪ The ability to understand and express complex ideas
▪ Vocabulary
▪ Strategies to unlock word meanings
LITERACY
▪ Reading
▪ Writing
▪ Listening and speaking

Figure 1.1 Unpacking Literacy Competencies: Examples of Code- and Meaning-Based Skills

Oakhill, and Bryant 2004), such as those focused on comprehension monitoring and making inferences (Cain, Oakhill, and Bryant 2004) as well as those focused on unlocking the meanings of words using knowledge of meaningful word parts, context, and native language connections (Baker et al. 2014). Many researchers also include those skills associated with "prosodic" reading in this category: using appropriate expression, intonation, and phrasing as indicators of reading fluency, and therefore, comprehension supports (Kuhn et al. 2010).

The passage featured in Figure 1.2[1] and the corresponding diagram illustrate the distinction between code-based and meaning-based competencies in reading. To read even this short passage, the reader must be able to map sounds onto letters and recognize common spelling patterns, reading with enough automaticity and efficiency to then spend some time attending to the passage's meaning. If the reader takes too long, or the decoding experience is too laborious, the information from the beginning of the passage is no longer in memory. Although having these code-based competencies is necessary, it is not sufficient to support

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[1] Passage adapted from Good and Kaminski (2002).

High Speed Trains

A type of high-speed train was first introduced in Japan about forty years ago. The train was low to the ground, and its nose looked somewhat like the nose of a jet. These trains provided the first passenger service that moved at a speed of one hundred miles per hour. Today, similar Japanese trains are even faster, traveling at speeds of almost two hundred miles per hour. There are many reasons that high-speed trains are popular.

Code-Based Competencies

- Map sounds onto letters (e.g., /s/ /p/ /ee/ /d/) and blend these to form a word (speed).
- Recognize common spelling patterns, such as the "-igh" family found in the word "high."
- Read words accurately and efficiently—at the fifth-grade level, this means reading at least 115 words correctly per a minute.

Meaning-Based Competencies

- Understand the meanings of words in this context (e.g., "service" has 37 possible definitions!).
- Make meaning of text using relevant background knowledge (e.g., conceptual knowledge about trains and jets and travel).
- Use cognitive strategies (e.g., when reading the second sentence, if the child first pictures a human nose, he must be able to adjust when the comparison to a jet's nose is read).

Figure 1.2 What competencies does a reader need to make sense of this passage?

reading comprehension. Students also need meaning-based competencies, including understanding the meaning of the words in their contexts. In addition, the reader must have and deploy cognitive strategies aimed at monitoring meaning and repairing misunderstandings along the way. Without well-developed meaning-based competencies, having mastered the mechanics of reading becomes less and less valuable with time—for all readers, the core benefit of mastering the mechanics of print is to have the "mental space" to devote to making meaning from what is read.

Just like developing readers who are monolingual English speakers, research demonstrates that both code-based and meaning-related skills contribute to ELs' reading development, and ultimately, to their reading comprehension (Geva and Yaghoub Zadeh 2006; Gottardo and Mueller 2009; Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux 2010; Proctor et al. 2005). Yet there are still important qualifications to this generally similar trend.

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT: BEYOND SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

The model of literacy that we use in this book (Figure 1.1) is useful for framing our discussion of research-based, high-quality instruction in classrooms serving ELs. But it is important to remind ourselves that many other interrelated competencies also influence literacy development. For example, all children's literacy competencies are inextricably linked with social and emotional skills, such that strength or weakness in one domain can facilitate or impede competence and achievement in the other (Raver, Garner, and Smith-Donald 2007; Zigler, Gilliam, and Jones 2006). In fact, Nonie's current research is focused on investigating how the domains of executive functioning and self-regulation are related to ELs' literacy development.

Beyond the social and emotional skills that influence learning and development there are physical and psychological factors that also come into play. When students, including ELs, come to schools hungry or much too tired, without corrective lenses or needed hearing aids, struggling with asthma, untreated health conditions, or without a sense of physical and psychological safety, their literacy development is compromised. And so, although the distinction between the "meaning-based skills" and "code-based skills" that go into literacy is particularly useful when making instructional decisions, even these overarching categories are limited. They are a good starting place for thinking about this broad concept we call "literacy," but there are many factors that come to bear on a child's developmental experience.

English Learners' Code-Based Skills Development

We know that phonological processing skills play a crucial role in children's word-reading development (National Reading Panel 2000), based on research primarily conducted with English-only learners. However, the evidence base now indicates that typically developing ELs perform comparably to their monolingual English-speaking peers on measures of phonological processing skills (Lesaux et al. 2006). Some research even suggests that ELs may outperform monolingual learners on measures of rapid naming speed and phonological awareness (August and Shanahan 2006; Geva and Yaghoub Zadeh 2006; Lesaux and Siegel 2003), but their working memory skills appear similar during the early stages of reading acquisition.

For ELs, like their monolingual English-speaking peers, these phonological processing skills (e.g., the emerging reader's ability to identify the four sounds in the word *speed*: /s/ /p/ /ee/ /d/) support the development of accurate and efficient word reading (August and Shanahan 2006; Gottardo and Mueller 2009; Lipka and Siegel 2007). For both groups, word reading draws on knowledge of letter–sound relationships and knowledge of high-frequency words (August and Shanahan 2006); with sufficient exposure to English reading instruction, both groups on average attain similar levels of word-reading accuracy and efficiency, whether assessed in elementary or middle school (August and Shanahan 2006; Betts et al. 2009; Geva and Yaghoub Zadeh 2006; Jean and Geva 2009; Lesaux, Crosson, et al. 2010; Lesaux, Rupp, and Siegel 2007; Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux 2011). At the same time, we note that although some measures of word-reading fluency focus only on accuracy and efficiency and therefore we see comparable levels across ELs and their monolingual classmates, some research indicates that ELs may be more likely to struggle with bringing the right intonation and expression to text, thus compromising what many refer to as *fluent reading*; such assessment, however, demands the reading of connected text as opposed to word lists. Many suggest this difference may be due to the influence of oral language skills on this element of fluent reading (referred to as *prosody*; Al Otaiba et al. 2009; Geva and Yaghoub Zadeh 2006; Schilling et al. 2007). Together, these research findings indicate that when it comes to mastering the mechanics of reading, typically developing ELs, those not experiencing significant developmental issues and/or early impairments, readily reach skill levels similar to those of their monolingual English-speaking peers.

English Learners' Meaning-Based Skills Development

In contrast to what we've learned about the way in which ELs and their monolingual English-speaking peers tend to develop equivalent code-based skills, as a population, ELs are more likely to demonstrate underdeveloped meaning-based skills, such as their oral language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension skills (Betts et al. 2009; Geva and Yaghoub Zadeh 2006; Jean and Geva 2009; Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux 2011). As a result, as shown in the data presented in Figure 1.3, there is often a disconnect between ELs' ability to read the words on the page and their comprehension of the words they read (Crosson and Lesaux 2010; Lesaux, Crosson et al. 2010; Lesaux et al. 2006; Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux 2011). And ultimately, ELs' reading comprehension is more strongly related to, and more likely to be constrained by, meaning-related skills than by code-based skills (Lesaux et al. 2006; Lesaux, Crosson et al. 2010; Proctor et al. 2005; Swanson et al. 2008).

A longitudinal study that Nonie conducted with Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez illustrates this disconcerting trend: Many ELs are reading words but don't have sufficient word knowledge to support their reading comprehension (2011). This study, conducted with children born to Spanish-speaking immigrants and enrolled in Head Start programs in one of five locations in the Northeast, shows this code-meaning gap widening as participating children go from preschool through to the end of elementary school.

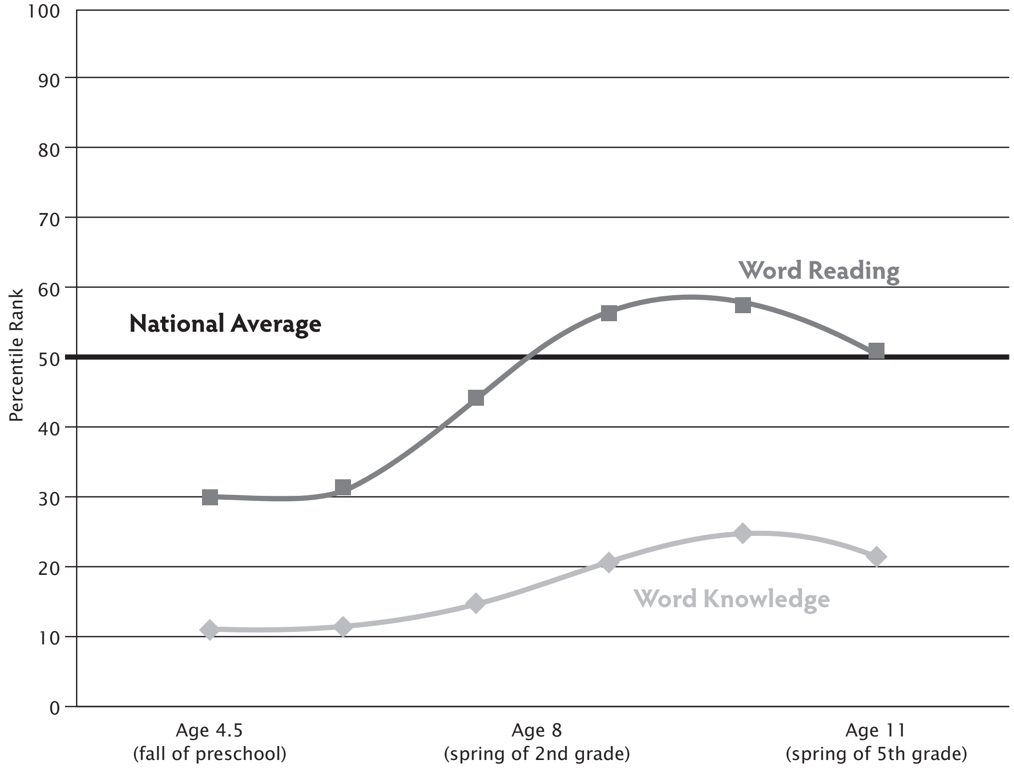

Figure 1.3 The Word Reading–Word Knowledge Gap

The Unique Challenges of Meaning-Based Skills

What is behind these differences in reading development between ELs and their monolingual English-speaking peers? The difference lies primarily in the nature of the skills themselves. Code-based skills are discrete and highly susceptible to instruction in a relatively brief time period (for a discussion see Paris 2005). For example, there are twenty-six letters in the English alphabet. Although they can appear in uppercase and lowercase forms, as well as in various fonts, the task of knowing letters is a constrained one—there are twenty-six! The limited universe of letters, and even their sound correspondences and combinations (forty-four sounds in total, represented by approximately 250 different spellings; Ball and Blachman 1991; Reed 2012), means that we teach for mastery. In contrast, meaning-related skills constitute a much larger problem space. For example, we know that the average reader needs a repertoire of an estimated fifty thousand words to draw on by the end of high school (Nagy and Anderson 1984). And, meaning-based skills are never "mastered." They are not checked off our lists, but instead, they continually expand, deepen, and refine over the course of a lifetime (Duke and Carlisle 2011).

Because most meaning-related skills fundamentally involve language comprehension, language development is inextricably linked to children's growth as readers. This is especially important when we're talking about ELs because their oral language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension skills tend to be underdeveloped compared to those of their monolingual English-speaking peers (Jean and Geva 2009; Lesaux et al. 2006; Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux 2011). In this way, whether reading or participating in a read-aloud, the EL student may not have the relevant word knowledge (and conceptual knowledge underlying it) to support effective comprehension. For example, a young reader may be well versed in the words and phrases associated with a unit of study on neighborhoods, yet be unfamiliar with comparably "common" terms when the next unit of study, one focused on light and sound waves, begins. And although this same EL student may have well-developed language to support comprehension in one social context or when dealing with a particular subject matter, he may not have the language to support comprehension in another social context or subject matter. These different language "registers" are characterized by different features (Snow and Uccelli 2009); we pay particular attention to the register often referred to as *academic language*, the written and spoken language used and valued in school and the workplace (Scarcella 2003; Snow and Uccelli 2009). This register of language is central to all learners' literacy achievement and, therefore, academic success. Importantly, academic language stands in sharp contrast to everyday conversational language, even when the message communicated is similar. Imagine, for example, a sixth grader's description of a science experiment. Depending on the context and audience, the student's description of the experiment might be characterized by language features that are more typical of conversational or academic language. For instance, if the student was sharing the experience with her mother, she might begin the story by saying: "Mom, during science class today we did an activity and the craziest thing happened. Can I tell you about it?" On the other hand, if the same student were describing the event in a written paper for school, she would express herself differently, drawing on her academic language skills: "The data from the science experiment indicate unexpected results. The following report outlines the findings."

In both scenarios, the student's language choices are perfectly appropriate—the register used reflects the context and purpose for communication. Importantly, in the context of school (and for that matter, many professional settings), the texts students read are characterized by traits of the academic language register, and therefore, when it comes to school texts, students must have facility with the academic language register if they are to experience deep comprehension and learning.

In the next chapter, as part of a broader discussion about oral language, we zero in on the characteristics of academic language and the role it plays in ELs' literacy development and achievement, highlighting how instruction that fosters ELs' capacities with this register of the English language can open up a gateway for learning.

Closing Opportunity Gaps

The research reviewed in this chapter reminds us that it's not "reading" per se that impedes ELs' advanced literacy skill development; it's actually the language of print—in the newspaper, the textbook, the magazine article—that proves difficult and demands instructional emphasis. Our task, then, is to shift our model for teaching literacy to one that maintains strong code-based instruction but is even more intentional about building up the meaning-based competencies that go into literacy. And it can be done. In today's linguistically diverse classroom, research suggests that a classroom-wide, universal approach focused on building up academic vocabulary and conceptual knowledge holds huge promise. The past decade has seen a relative surge in classroom-based research focused on doing exactly this—providing ELs and their classroom peers with deep language- and content-based instruction, with a focus on teaching both specialized vocabulary and the specialized structures of language in academic speech and text. And so, in this book, we present what goes into this kind of knowledge-building approach to literacy instruction.