Summary notes from a conference call held on June 8th with Reading First directors in the Eastern Region. The purpose of the call was to discuss issues related to reading instruction for English Language Learners (ELL). Russell Gersten acted as the primary presenter and discussant on the call, and members of the ERRFTAC staff also participated.

It is important for educators to understand that until recently not much scientific research has been conducted on the instructional needs of ELL students. Compared to the U. S., over the past ten years Canada has conducted a good deal more scientific research; however, the quantity of ELL research in the United States has increased by 500% in the past two years. This is largely due to the NIH and IES support for research on this topic, higher accountability demands, and a move towards treating the topic scientifically, rather than politically and emotionally.

The research indicates that the rate of ELL student learning can be the same as their non-ELL peers of the same socio-economic level. ELL students can learn basic reading skills as quickly -- or even more quickly -- than some English speakers. Research results have largely focused upon the first two or three years of schooling and indicate each of the following:

• Word reading development for ELL students is the same as that of English speakers. The word reading results were the same for ELL students that have received systematic and explicit instruction, including instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics.

• Phonological processing of ELL students can develop at a higher performance level than their English-speaking peers. ELL students tend to attack sounds in a more strategic fashion than their English-speaking peers, possibly because they have a heightened attention to sound as they strive to hear the sounds of their new language. Robin Morris’s research with Korean and Mandarin-speaking students confirms this.

• Although oral reading fluency has not been much of a focus of ELL research, Oral Reading Fluency assessment results conducted by Gersten and colleagues indicate that, on average, ELL students can perform as well as their English-speaking peers at the end of first grade, if provided with appropriate instruction.

• ELL students will learn to read even if the teacher does not know how to speak the native language of the student. In a recent study involving Hispanic students, researchers attempted to accommodate the differences in native and second languages within their ELL instruction (i.e., as with vowel sounds--five vowels in Spanish verses twenty-two vowel sounds in English). However, researchers did not get the effects that they expected. They concluded that teachers do not need to know the native language of the students in order to effectively teach ELL students how to read. Nor do they necessarily need to modify the scope and sequence of a high quality program for ELLs. Rather, they need to provide clear feedback and clear models when students experience trouble hearing or vocalizing a particular sound.

• As might be expected, the vocabulary and receptive language levels of ELL students in grades K-3 is, typically, not as high as that of native English speakers. Therefore, there needs to be a greater concentration upon vocabulary development and general listening comprehension for these students throughout the primary grades.

The general principles of effective vocabulary instruction -- established by research of Stephen Stahl and Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown (authors of *Bringing Words to Life*, Andy Biemiller and others) -- all hold true for ELL students. This was verified by a recent study in Reading Research Quarterly by Maria Carlo, Catherine Snow and Diane August. In learning new words, ELL students need multiple exposures over several days, using multiple modalities such as listening, speaking, and writing. Using different media and reviewing new words are very helpful to ELL students.
ELL students benefit from explicit, systematic instruction in the grammar and syntax of the English language. This presents a challenge. Some teachers seem to naturally have a good sense of language, but many do not. In addition, vocabulary is typically not the strength of the core programs which assume that students already know the meanings of many of the foundational words; however, ELL students do not. These students need instruction that focuses upon syntax and the use of abstract foundational words such as will, can, and have in kindergarten and first grade and in words like because, however in the primary grades. Both vocabulary and listening comprehension instruction need to be built around abstract language, often called academic English. An effective approach would be to introduce only one or two of the abstract/foundational words at a time with other words that are more concrete. (e.g. a set could include which, tunnel, fatigue, superior)

ELL research indicates that the predictive validity of oral language proficiency in English upon entry into school with learning how to read in the first couple of years of schooling is close to zero. In other words, these two factors are not related. We can conclude that it is not necessary to wait until students are language proficient before they are taught to read. Also, it is not necessary for teachers to be masters of all the different languages in order to be effective in working with ELL students.

Utilizing a valid and reliable screening assessment is valid and has meaning for ELL students. This is based upon the “hit rates” of ELL students at benchmark as it relates to SAT-10 results at the end of the year. While fewer ELL students are meeting benchmark, those ELL students that perform more strongly on the valid and reliable screening and progress monitoring measures also do better on the SAT10. These results can also be used for planning appropriate ELL Tier 2 interventions. Looking at Letter Naming Fluency (LNF), specifically, it is almost as good a predictor for ELL as for native language learners. Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) in ELL students correlates with state reading accountability tests, at least partly because ORF reflects an ELL student’s familiarity with syntax and structure of the English language. Although assessment measures may indicate that some ELL students are one or two years behind, it is important to perceive this as a designation of the need for extra instructional support rather than as a learning disability.

Many of the instructional techniques that we use for native language learners also work for ELL students. New research from the past five years indicates each of the following:

- Phonological awareness transfers across languages; however, this is not always the case with decoding/word attack ability.
- Many ELL students are not new arrivals. Some are second and third generation students who have greater development in speaking, reading, and writing the English language than their parents.
- A dedicated block of time to English language development precipitates greater ELL growth. The research of Barbara Foorman and Bill Saunders in Texas and California found that a dedicated thirty minutes of English language skill instruction in addition to the reading block led to significantly greater growth. We think that, as much as possible, this block of time should be linked to the core reading instructional program. But extra time needs to be spent on word order, tense agreement and other syntactic skills. This may or may not be useful to native English speakers, depending on their familiarity with formal, academic English.
- Instruction that includes students talking with peers is less threatening as an environment for many ELL students than is instruction in larger groups led by the teacher. Paired classroom organization and format might be easier for teachers to monitor than groups. Consequently, paired instruction is an advantageous group structure in the classroom. Regarding small group instruction, programs with heterogeneous groups such as peer assisted learning strategies that are structured work best for the stimulation of language development.
Some studies that have been referenced in the past indicate that it takes five to seven years for a non-English speaker to become fully comfortable with a new language. However, these studies are so flawed that they have consistently been excluded from syntheses of scientific research on the topic. Some recent studies indicate that language proficiency can take place prior to this time frame.

Appropriate small group instruction for struggling ELL readers is very similar to that of native English speakers. It is not radically different; however, proactive instruction that is more targeted at student language development is needed as opposed to the typical reactive instruction. More visuals are utilized with phonemic awareness and phonics tasks and instruction. For instance, phonemic segmentation instruction would include a picture of a hut when segmenting the sounds in the word “hut.” Small group instruction would also include more talk about the words and pictures.

Most of the studies that have been analyzed focused upon students at the Kindergarten, first and second grade levels. ELL students need more work in language development than native speakers. Their vocabulary and listening comprehension performance is generally much lower than native English speakers, as well. From the pool of research now available, we can conclude that the current curriculum and instruction provided throughout classrooms do not include enough focus upon language development for ELL students.

If you need further information regarding this topic, please do not hesitate to contact us at (850) 644-9352.

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