
Section I:

Why Beginning Reading Instruction Matters

Introduction

No skill is more important in a child's education than learning to read. Because reading is a foundation for a wide variety of school subjects, poor reading adversely affects a child's general school performance and frequently his or her feelings about school. Poor reading also places children at increased risk of dropping out of school and of behavioral problems, and limits their long-term occupational and economic prospects. Furthermore, avid reading contributes significantly to the development of many verbal abilities (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Thus, individuals with reading difficulties often are deprived of an important source of opportunities for improving verbal competencies and general knowledge—contact with the language and ideas of print.

Not only is learning to read important, but in terms of formal schooling, the kindergarten through Grade 3 years are particularly critical in children's development of reading proficiency. Without appropriate intervention, children who struggle in reading in these beginning grades are at high risk of experiencing long-term reading problems (Juel, 1988; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998). A "wait and see"

approach to early reading difficulties can be disastrous for these children. High-quality reading instruction in the K-3 years can prevent many reading difficulties from developing in the first place. Primary-level teachers must be prepared to teach children who vary greatly in their backgrounds, experiences, needs and abilities. In order to provide effective instruction to all children, teachers need excellent preservice training and ongoing professional development opportunities; adequate material resources, such as a wide range of books at a variety of reading levels provided in classroom and school libraries; and the support of specialists, such as library media specialists, reading specialists, special educators, and speech and language pathologists. These specialists can serve as valuable resources in establishing an effective K-3 reading program. With appropriate classroom instruction and support, the need to place poor readers in remedial reading or special education could be greatly reduced, and these services could be reserved primarily for the neediest children.

High-quality beginning reading instruction is particularly critical in preventing or alleviating potential reading problems.

Clearly, many factors other than classroom instruction influence children's reading achievement. At-risk readers tend to come from at-risk environments. For example, reading difficulties are especially common among poor children because these youngsters often lack experiences and opportunities that are very important in learning to read, such as preschool exposure to a rich base of oral language and literacy and adequate access to books. And, regardless of their economic backgrounds, there are individual differences in the ease with which children learn to read, just as there are individual differences in how easily children learn a sport or how to play a musical instrument. Obviously, however, excellent teaching is even more, not less, important for youngsters who are at risk in reading—and with this kind of teaching, the majority of at-risk children can be successful (National Reading Panel, 2000). In sum, although many important factors influence children's reading achievement, high-quality beginning reading instruction is particularly critical in preventing or alleviating potential reading problems. Early reading instruction matters.

The Nature Of Proficient Reading

Skilled reading involves a complex interplay of abilities and habits. Proficient readers actively construct meaning; for example, their comprehension extends far beyond an understanding of the literal information in a text to include drawing inferences, making evaluations and using prior knowledge to interpret what they are reading. Proficient readers also identify printed words with ease; they recognize the pronunciation and mean-

ing of most words automatically, without effort, and can use their knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences, when necessary, to figure out unfamiliar words. At the same time, proficient reading draws heavily on broad oral-language competencies, such as knowledge of word meanings (vocabulary), understanding of idiomatic expressions (e.g., “it’s raining cats and dogs”), background knowledge and comprehension of grammar and syntax. And proficient readers read strategically; for example, if they do not understand something they have read, they use strategies to repair their comprehension, such as rereading or looking up a word in the dictionary. In skilled reading, these components—active construction of meaning, accurate and effortless reading of individual words, broad language knowledge and comprehension strategies—all work in concert to enable good reading comprehension.

Not only does proficient reading involve a complex interplay of different reading-related competencies, there also is an interplay between these various abilities and motivational factors. Nearly all children enter school with an interest in reading and strong motivation to learn to read. However, because repeated failure is rarely motivating, children who struggle in reading may quickly abandon their attempts to learn. Struggling readers can begin to lose motivation for reading as early as first grade (Chapman & Tunmer, 1997; Stanovich, 1986). Children also can lose motivation to read for reasons other than low achievement, for example, insufficient opportunities for choice in reading materials or, in the case of high achievers, an insufficient level of challenge. Conversely, even among individuals with a history of serious reading difficulties, motivation to read can play an important role in eventual outcomes (Fink, 1996). Thus, whether or not children have reading difficulties, fostering motivation to read is an important part of any program of reading instruction (Gambrell, 1996).

Reading is complex. It does not develop along a simple continuum or a straight-line progression where, having accomplished one step, a child proceeds to the mastery of the next. Rather, many skills are acquired in tandem and the “mastery” of one does not necessarily guarantee the mastery of others. For example, children can have excellent oral vocabularies but still have trouble learning to decode words; other children may have good decoding skills but may have difficulties understanding what they are reading because of (among many other possible reasons) lack of exposure to vocabulary or to background knowledge. For example, satirical children’s books such as Eugene Trivizas’ *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* or Jon Scieszka’s *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* are usually greatly enjoyed by youngsters who know the familiar “three little pigs” story, but which probably will not be fully appreciated or understood by those who have never heard the original fairy tale.

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The Importance Of Oral Language As A Foundation For Reading

Oral-Language Facility

Oral-language competencies form an essential foundation for learning to read and write. Much of this foundation develops during the preschool years. Oral-language abilities important to reading include semantic competencies, such as vocabulary (e.g., knowing what an “alligator” is); grammatical and syntactic competencies (e.g., understanding, in a syntactically complex sentence such as “the dog that bit the cat jumped over the fence,” it’s the dog, not the cat, who did the jumping); and phonological competencies, which involve sounds in spoken words.

There are many ways that adults can foster young children’s oral language and literacy development. Children’s opportunities to talk with adults, as well as with other children, are extremely important in language development. For example, when adults take children to public parks, libraries, zoos or museums and engage them in conversation about these experiences, they are promoting children’s vocabulary learning, concept development and background knowledge. When adults tell children stories, they are helping to create a base of knowledge about the structure of narratives, and an enjoyment of them, that provides a foundation for literacy learning. Indeed, using language to discuss any ongoing activity with a child—whether the activity is making dinner, building a tower with blocks, planting flowers or numerous other everyday experiences—helps to foster a wide range of oral-language competencies.

Reading to children is an important influence on oral-language development.

One particularly important influence on oral-language development involves reading to children. When adults read aloud to them, children are exposed to a richer variety of vocabulary and to “book language” that is not ordinarily encountered in everyday conversation. Rereading of favorite books and discussions of stories are especially helpful in promoting oral-language development (Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Crone & Fischel, 1994). Furthermore, children acquire other kinds of print-related knowledge (i.e., basic print concepts) when they are regularly read to: how to orient a book, that print conveys meaning, or that reading in English involves progressing from left to right across the page. And last but certainly not least, frequent reading to children communicates that reading is a much-valued and enjoyable activity.

Not only is oral language an important foundation for beginning reading, but oral-language growth also continues during formal schooling and interacts with children’s developing reading and writing skills. For example, oral vocabulary helps to form a foundation for learning to read, but as

children learn to read and write, they also acquire new vocabulary from encountering words in books or from trying to convey new ideas in their writing. Thus, children should learn to read in a language-rich environment.

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Teachers of young children can promote oral-language competencies in many ways, including encouraging children to retell familiar stories sequentially; establishing a sharing time when children can bring in interesting objects to tell other children about; taking children on field trips to places where they will encounter new concepts and vocabulary; and eliciting from children further expansion or clarification of ideas.

Oral-Language Awareness

Not only is young children's facility with oral language important, but so is their awareness of the structure of oral language, including phonological awareness, word awareness and morphological sensitivity. Sensitivity to sounds in spoken words (phonological sensitivity or phonological awareness) is a precursor to phonemic awareness and can be enhanced by encouraging young children to play with sounds in words—such as by using tongue twisters, making silly rhymes, singing rhyming songs or reading alliterative books (e.g., *Big Brown Bear*). To enhance children's awareness of the concept of word (not natural to youngsters), they can be encouraged to play with words by talking backward. To enhance morphological sensitivity, children can be encouraged to add morphemes (e.g., -er, -ed and -est) to nonsense words (e.g., I'm grick; you're gricker).

One resource for teachers (as well as parents and child-care providers) who are interested in promoting young children's language and literacy development is *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (National Research Council, 1999). In addition, school speech and language pathologists have extensive knowledge in this area that can be helpful to classroom teachers and to families.

Learning To Speak Vs. Learning To Read

Although oral language plays a critical role in learning to read, the **process of learning to read** differs from the **process of learning to speak** in some important ways. For example, the vast majority of preschool youngsters acquire an oral language (and sometimes more than one) simply through exposure and everyday social interaction. Children do not need to be explicitly taught formal grammar in order to learn to speak. By contrast, for most children, learning to read requires instruction (Adams & Bruck, 1995). Learning to read demands specific competencies, such

as awareness of phonemes in spoken words (phonemic awareness) and knowledge about letter-sound and spelling-sound correspondences in English, that most children do not acquire independently. Providing young children with abundant exposure to books and reading is extremely important, but by itself, is not sufficient for most children to learn to read.

Children Who Are English-Language Learners

English-language learners are children whose dominant language is one other than English. Because an adequate base of oral-language competence in a language is essential to learning to read in that language, researchers agree that these youngsters need educational support to acquire English literacy. However, exactly what the nature of this support should be is controversial—especially whether children should receive initial instruction primarily in their native language or in English.

Nevertheless, there is widespread consensus on many key points. Like all children, those who are English-language learners benefit from having home experiences with literacy. Whether children first learn to read in English or in their native language, they must be taught the comprehension competencies essential to all readers, including learning vocabulary, background knowledge, comprehension strategies and inferencing. They also must be taught essential word-identification competencies, but here the nature of the written language that children are learning must be taken into account. If the children are learning to read in their native language and that language is alphabetic (which is typically the case), then the word-identification competencies required will be similar, but not identical, to those required for English literacy. For example, children who are learning to read Spanish—like those learning to read English—must develop phonemic awareness, an understanding of the alphabetic principle and knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences. However, the writing system used in Spanish differs from English in some specific ways (e.g., many spelling-sound correspondences are different, accent marks are used in Spanish but not in English, and punctuation is sometimes different in the two languages).

Students who are English-language learners require substantial educational support to acquire English literacy.

It is important to consider the extent to which children who are English-language learners may have had literacy experiences in their native language, whether at home or as part of prior schooling. Many of these experiences will have benefits for later literacy learning, whatever the language of reading instruction. For example, if children have been read to in their native language, they may have acquired considerable background knowledge and motivation to learn to read, both of which will be valuable to learning to read in any language. However, teachers also must consider whether literacy experiences in some native languages may create specific confusions for children in learning to read English—for

example, exposure to a nonalphabetic written language that is written vertically rather than horizontally (e.g., one such as Chinese). If teachers are aware of these potential confusions, then they can take steps to address them in instruction.

To sum up, youngsters who are English-language learners:

- require substantial educational support;
- need a foundation of oral-language competence in English before they can learn to read in English;
- need to develop the same kinds of comprehension competencies as do all readers, whether or not their initial reading instruction occurs in English;
- need to develop word-identification competencies, whether or not their initial reading instruction occurs in English (but here the specific competencies required may vary to some extent with the nature of the written language being learned); and
- need the same kinds of home experiences with literacy as do other children, thereby making the development of “family literacy” a high priority.

In addition, teachers of English-language learners:

- need an extensive knowledge base about language and literacy development, about second-language acquisition, and about how to accelerate both second-language learning and literacy acquisition;
- need knowledge about how to develop the reading-related competencies important to all readers, including both word-identification and comprehension competencies; and
- need adequate access to the same resources as other teachers (e.g., access to a variety of books at a range of reading levels and access to specialists).

Connecticut Public Act 99-211 allows for a variety of approaches with English-language learners, including both initial instruction in the student’s native language and initial instruction in English. This act also maintains the requirement of providing bilingual instruction in schools in which there is a minimum of 20 students of the same language group. Individual students would receive instruction as part of the bilingual program only if their parents agree to it. However, PA 99-211 sets limits on native-language instruction. Specifically, PA 99-211 requires that all bilingual education programs provide for the use of English for more than half of children’s instructional time by the end of their first year in the program. Students are limited to 30 months in the program (not counting summer school or two-way language programs, i.e., programs also serving English-proficient students who are learning a second language, such

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as Spanish). Students who complete 30 months must leave the program, but if they have not met the state English mastery standard, and if they are in schools that have a required program of bilingual education, they are to be provided with language transition support services until they do meet the standard. These support services may include tutoring, “sheltered” content teaching programs, literacy development and a variety of other services.

The requirements of PA 99-211 continue to reflect the fact that students who are English-language learners require substantial support. The legislation allows parents to decide whether they wish their children to receive this support through a formal bilingual education program. Researchers have recommended a variety of approaches for meeting the needs of these children. The remainder of this section describes some of the recommendations that have been made by investigators in this area, with examples of references that interested readers may pursue.

Both the National Research Council (1998) and the International Reading Association (1998a) have recommended that, if it is feasible to teach English-language learners to read in their native language—for example, if instructional materials and native-language teachers are available—schools should do so. At the same time that children are learning the basics of reading in their native language, they should be learning spoken English, and should be supported when making the transfer of their native-language literacy skills to English. Sometimes it is not feasible for schools to teach children to read in their native tongue—appropriate teachers and materials may not be available, and the number of children who speak the language may not be large enough to justify the development of a bilingual program in the language. For these children, initial instruction should focus on developing spoken English-language abilities, including the use of print materials (e.g., reading to children) to develop oral-language, phonological awareness and basic print concepts, prior to the onset of formal reading instruction in English.

Other researchers (e.g., Porter, 1990; Rossell & Baker, 1996a, 1996b) have recommended greater initial emphasis on having all children learn English, whether or not native-language instruction is feasible. Rossell and Baker (1996a) suggest that, if the school’s primary goal is to promote high levels of literacy in English, children who are English-language learners should initially be placed in a structured immersion setting (i.e., self-contained class) to learn English with a teacher who is highly knowledgeable about how to facilitate second-language acquisition. They further recommend rapid transitioning of children (generally within a year) to regular classroom settings, although this transitioning would not preclude ongoing support services to children within the regular classroom.