

Centering English Learner/ Emergent Bilingual Students in Literacy Research and Instruction



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There is a considerable amount of attention currently on the Science of Reading, with many states rushing to adopt policies that are purportedly aligned with it. There are very good reasons for focusing on reading instruction. To be literate, that is, to read and write, is fundamental to an individual's ability to successfully navigate in society. However, not all policies, curricula, and instructional practices that stake claim to the Science of Reading banner address the vast body of research about how people become skilled readers. There is a real danger that in the race to enact the Science of Reading, educators, especially those serving underserved communities, will embrace a narrative and response that simplifies the disparities in reading achievement between resourced and under-resourced schools to a lack of phonics and decoding instruction.

To become a skillful reader requires attention to both sides of the reading equation: language code-based skills and language comprehension skills. Moreover, for students who are simultaneously learning English and content in school, referred to as English learners/emergent bilinguals (EL/EBs) in this article, the Science of Reading is still in its infancy. Based on the research about their literacy needs, they need more than what a monolingual English speaker does. They need reading instruction that does not privilege English literacy and undermine biliteracy development, but one that addresses their language and literacy needs, ideally fosters biliteracy from the beginning, and leverages their home language in support of their English language and literacy development. It is for these reasons that Sobrato Early Academic Language (SEAL) has joined with other researchers and advocates for multilingual learners to call for a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction that is research-based and leverages the cultural and linguistic assets that these students bring with them into the classroom.

This article is about SEAL's contributions at the Reading League Summit in March 2023, where hundreds of practitioners, researchers, and other experts gathered to discuss current research, practice, and policy considerations regarding reading development and instruction for EL/EBs. The authors of this

article were among the national panelists who shared their work, research, and best practices for supporting EL/EBs' literacy development. Following are some key points they shared in their respective panels.

Foundational Reading Skills Within a Comprehensive Literacy Program

This panel session explored what the research says about foundational reading skills and pedagogical implications for teaching literacy skills in a linguistically diverse classroom. In her remarks, Martínez touched on the science around reading, learning and development, and the bilingual brain, and offered recommendations.

While acknowledging the important contributions of the Simple View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope to our understanding of the abilities needed to become a skilled reader, Martínez stressed that we also need to understand the instructional context. In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) published "How People Learn II", noting that in the past several decades we have seen an explosion of research that has important implications for individual learning and schooling. This research highlights the complex interplay between the learner, the educator, and the learning environment. Teachers know how dynamic and unpredictable a classroom environment can be and how important student motivation, prior knowledge, and socio-emotional well-being are to the success of a given lesson. A more recent model of reading, dubbed the Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021, see Figure A), could help us better conceptualize the reading process by bringing the reader and the reading task into account.

There have also been considerable scientific advances in understanding the bilingual brain. Bialystock's research, in particular, has highlighted the advantages of bilingualism at various stages of human development and, importantly for this particular topic, how both languages of a bilingual person's linguistic repertoire are always active in the brain (Bialystock,

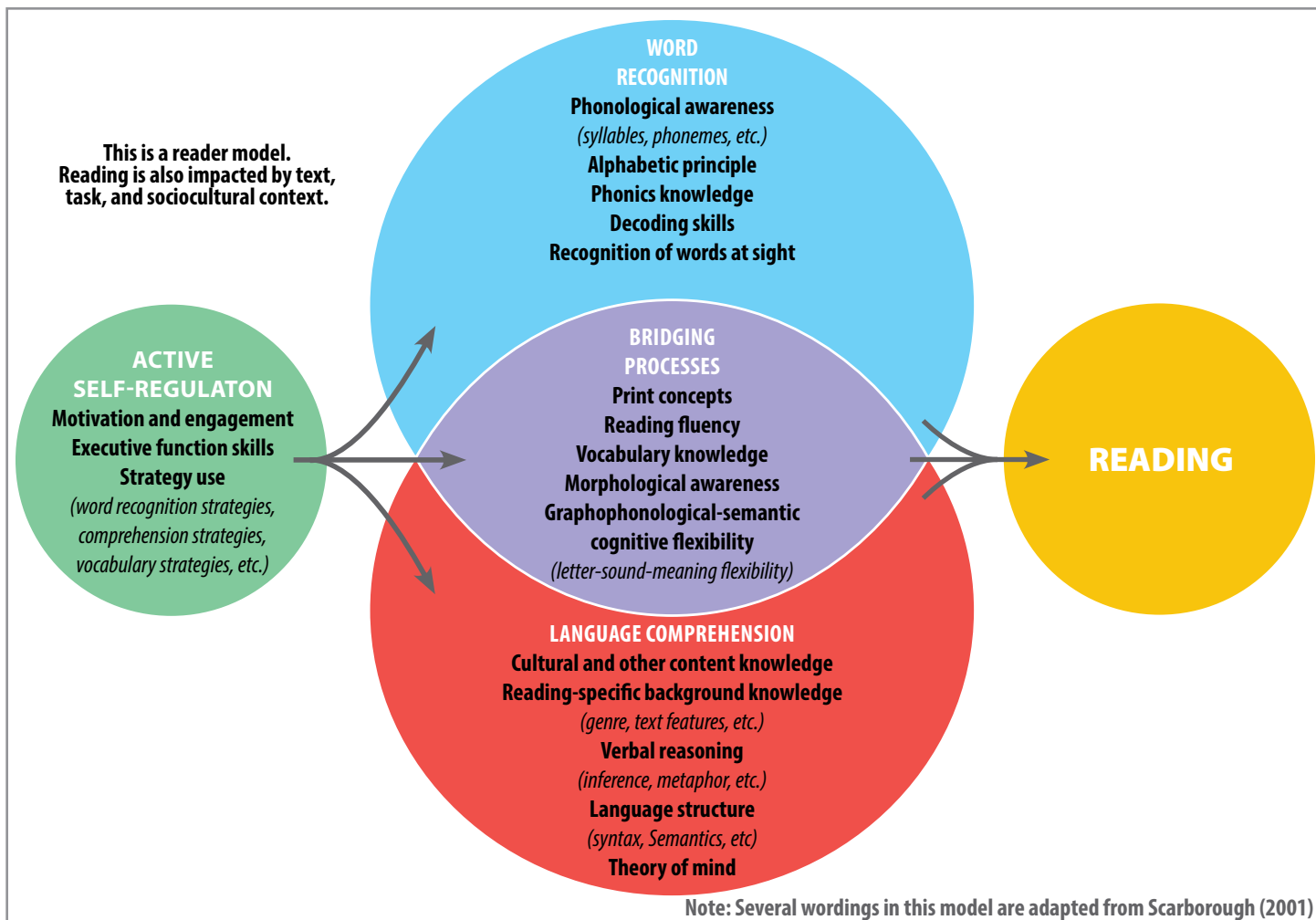


Figure A

2017). When considering how to teach foundational reading skills, educators need to keep in mind not only the linguistic assets EL/EBs bring and supports they will need to learn to read in a new language, but also whether the students are learning in a bilingual or English-only program.

Martínez then discussed foundational reading skills for EL/EBs with this broader research context in mind and shared the four recommendations from a 2016 Institute for Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide for teaching these skills to K-3 students (see Figure B).

She noted that the first and fourth recommendations are arguably more challenging to teach and appear to be what EL/EBs really need. Research shows that differences between ELs and non-ELs are typically very small when it comes to phonological awareness and decoding. Much larger differences between the two groups are found in reading comprehension, language comprehension, and vocabulary (Goldenberg, 2020). While many may be familiar with the importance of academic language and vocabulary, what the first recommendation also calls out is the importance of providing students with opportunities to use language for both inferential and narrative purposes. Moreover, as noted in the fourth recommendation, students need opportunities to read longer passages, which is best supported by permitting students some choice in what they read.

She identified additional considerations for EL/EBs that apply to both English-only and bilingual contexts, including

providing multiple opportunities and appropriate scaffolds for oral language practice; explicitly teaching English language development, morphological awareness, and academic language; building student’s background knowledge of key concepts, and leveraging the home language to the greatest extent possible, including, but not limited to, encouraging families to continue using their home language.

Within bilingual contexts, teachers should also cultivate students’ metalinguistic awareness and not waste precious instructional time reteaching foundational skills that transfer between the two languages. However, they should explicitly teach language irregularities within and across both languages.

Martínez concluded her presentation by highlighting key findings from the federal Reading for Understanding (RfU) Initiative. The Institute for Education Sciences funded this research over 10 years ago, partly in response to the fact that the previous \$6 billion investment in Reading First resulted in no significant impact on reading comprehension. A major takeaway from the RfU research projects was the deep connections found between knowledge, language, and reading comprehension. While EL/EBs were involved in many of the projects, the focus of the RfU Initiative was on English instruction and English reading comprehension, and the report that synthesized the RfU findings emphasizes the need for more reading comprehension research focused on EBs (Pearson et al., 2020). Martínez pointed out that the need for research is particularly acute as it relates to biliteracy development and instruction for emergent bilinguals

Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in K-3 (IES Practice Guide, 2016)

Recommendations

1. Teach academic language skills, including inferential and narrative language use and vocabulary knowledge.
2. Develop awareness of the segments of speech sounds and how they link to letters.
3. Teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, write and recognize words.
4. Ensure that students read connected text daily to support reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension.

Figure B

within bilingual instructional contexts. She suggested that this much-needed research could build upon the important work already done by Escamilla and her colleagues (Escamilla et. al., 2014).

Developing Oral Language, Vocabulary, and Background Knowledge

A second panel focused on the research base, benefits, and implications of developing oral language skills in more than one language. It also addressed the role of a student's home language in literacy development and instruction. Montes Pate's presentation focused on the benefits of building oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge in EL/EBs' home language(s) to support literacy development, a key factor that Scarborough has acknowledged is missing from the Reading Rope (see Figure C).

Montes Pate highlighted that in working with EL/EBs it is important for educators to know that the Rope speaks specifically to children who are developing literacy in their primary or home language. She added that the process of teaching children to read in their primary language is relatively easier because teachers are building on the knowledge of the language students already have, such as phonology, semantics, and their background knowledge. However, this advantage does not apply to the majority of ELs/EBs in the United States who find themselves immersed in English-only classrooms where reading and content instruction is primarily delivered in English and frequently by teachers who do not speak the home language(s) of their students. In this English-only context, EL/EBs may struggle with skills related to English literacy, such as hearing and isolating unfamiliar sounds needed to decode text, recognizing letters and words in print, and understanding the structure and meaning of text.

Figure C. Image from Dr. Scarborough's Presentation to the AIM Academy (2019)

AIM Academy

A Case History of a Twisty Metaphor - Dr. Hollis Scarborough

Understood

Many Factors that Influence Reading Are Not in the Rope

The rope is intended to illustrate the knowledge and skills that the reader brings to the situation, and that are specific to reading (rather than, say, to math).

So one must always think of the rope as being "woven" in a particular context that could affect the growth of some or all of the strands. Potential influences:

- ▶ preschool experiences
- ▶ SLI, **ESL**, ADD, other EF weaknesses
- ▶ family history
- ▶ adequacy of prior instruction
- ▶ socioeconomic (SES) differences

Did you know...?

She emphasized the important role of building on students' home language(s) and how findings from both the *National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth* (August & Shanahan, 2006) and the 2017 NASEM report, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, show that literacy is best developed initially in students' strongest language and this approach benefits their English literacy development. It is critical to recognize that EL/EB children come to school with years of having developed language skills in their home language(s). The degree to which teachers leverage that linguistic resource and build upon it to engage them in literacy and learning a new language is a major factor in their educational success. Ideally, we want to continue developing students' home language(s) and set them on the path of becoming bilingual and biliterate.

She described a comprehensive and integrated literacy approach for EL/EBs based on a National Committee for Effective Literacy paper (Escamilla et al., 2022) that takes dual language development and second language pedagogy into account and incorporates the recommendations of the National Literacy Panel and the NASEM report. This approach includes essential elements of literacy instruction such as teaching foundational skills, oral language development, cross-language connections, English language development, and more. Rather than learning skills in isolation, which can be challenging for EL/EBs in an English-only context, a comprehensive approach to literacy connects literacy development to language development and content knowledge through standards-based, thematic instruction. It includes the use of high-quality and culturally inclusive materials, embraces students' home language, and affirms bilingualism. In addition, within a dual language/bilingual program, a comprehensive approach to literacy development has an explicit goal of biliteracy, teaches native language foundational skills, and uses dual language assessments to monitor students' biliteracy development and academic learning.

The aspects of building oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge in a student's home language are essential for literacy development, but they also have a tremendous, beneficial impact on the lives of these children and our society. Literacy instruction should also promote bilingualism and biliteracy development for EL/EBs so that these students can benefit from the many advantages of multilingualism, such as higher levels of abstract thinking, increased likelihood of graduating from high school, more job opportunities and earning potential, and a strong sense of identity and connection to family and culture.

In closing, Montes Pate ended with a quote by Dr. Miguel Cardona, U.S. Secretary of Education, "Why have we normalized that we are primarily a monolingual country even though our nation has only become more multicultural, more interdependent with the rest of the world? It defies our historical reality as a nation born of immigrants. So today, reconozcamos que: bilingualism and biculturalism is a superpower."

Conclusion

For more details about all four panel presentations, visit the Reading League summit's website at <https://www.thereadingleague.org/trl-summit/>. SEAL continues to advocate for a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction for EL/EBs that is both research-based and asset-based, embraces the bilingual brain, and fosters biliteracy development as much as possible. For additional resources about what a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction entails for EL/EBs in K-12 settings as well as dual language learners in early learning, please visit the resources page of the National Committee for Effective Literacy's website at: <https://multilingualliteracy.org/resources/>. 🌸

References are available in the appendix of the online version: https://www.gocabe.org/index.php/multilingualeducator_publication/



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