

A Review of Research on Language Literacy for Limited English Proficient/English Language Learners

Overwhelmingly, the research on English language learning for LEP/ELLs emphasizes the importance of valuing the native language. Students who speak a language other than English deserve to be viewed as linguistic resources. This was affirmed by Secretary of Education Richard Riley in April 1998:

“Some children already come to school with the ability to speak two languages. We should build on this linguistic base and recognize that our nation will be the better for it in the new global environment . . . Think of the many advantages, economic, cultural and political, that a fluency in two languages can give to the American people. America’s message of democracy, human rights and economic freedom would surely reach a wider audience.”

It is important to discuss the implications of English language development in an academic context, prior to exploring detailed research data. Learning a second language can be very difficult and time-consuming. In foreign language classrooms in high schools across the United States, developing French, Russian, Japanese, or other language skills tends to focus on the very concrete language needed for everyday survival in the foreign country. It is not until much later (if the students are inclined to pursue their studies past three or four years) that language relating to demanding academic content will be introduced. Contrast this with the necessity for LEP/ELLs to acquire English within the confines of a demanding academic environment. Not only must they quickly become adept at social interaction for simple survival, but they are also expected to be able to understand, read, write, and explain concepts at an academic level appropriate to their age and cognitive development at an increasingly rapid rate. Cummins (1981, 1989) contrasts the differences between these registers of language use as: **1) Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)** or **social or conversational language** used in face-to-face everyday communication; and **2) Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)** or **academic language** used in educational settings. Once the difference between these uses for language is understood, it is easier to value the research that has been utilized in developing effective programs to promote the acquisition of the English language. Learning English for academic purposes is a complex process, which all of the research has shown to take a significant length of time.

The Role of the Native Language in Acquiring English

Study after study has demonstrated that there is a strong and positive correlation between literacy in the native language and learning English. Cummins (1989) explains that:

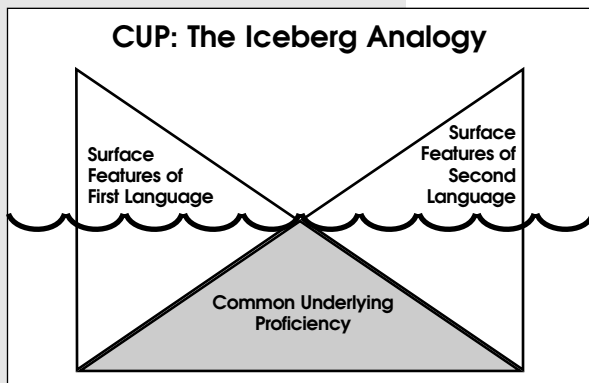
“ . . . although the surface aspects (e.g., pronunciation, fluency, etc.) of different languages are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency which is common across languages.

Key Concepts:

- ◆ Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)/social or conversational language
- ◆ Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)/academic language
- ◆ Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP)
- ◆ Native language literacy
- ◆ Second language literacy
- ◆ Universal aspects of literacy
- ◆ Transfer of skills
- ◆ Threshold hypothesis

A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas.

Ferdinand de Saussure



Source: Cummins, J. (1980)

This 'common underlying proficiency' (CUP) makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related skills across languages. Transfer is much more likely to occur from minority to majority language because of the greater exposure to literacy in the majority language outside of school and the strong social pressure to learn it."

In recognition of this principle, *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996), published by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, stipulates in Standard 10:

"Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum."

Moreover, in March 1998 the National Research Council, in its study entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burn and Griffin, eds.), recommends that:

"LEP children should be taught to read in the first language while acquiring proficiency in spoken English and then subsequently taught to extend their skills to reading in English."

The importance of valuing the skills and knowledge which students bring to the school regardless of the native language they speak cannot be underestimated. It is in utilizing the students' background knowledge that a more effective and efficient transition to acquiring English can best be accomplished.

Native Language Arts Instruction and the Acquisition of English Language Arts

Over the past 30 years, there has been a consistent body of research which points to the importance of native language literacy in the development of second language literacy. Furthermore, research findings suggest that the reading and writing processes function similarly for native and second language learners (Grabe, 1991).

The universal aspects of literacy occur in all languages, as stated by Goodman (1973):

"the reading process will be similar for all languages with variations to accommodate the specific characteristics of orthography used and the grammatical structures of the language."

Similarly, in addressing the universal aspects of writing, Conner and Kaplan (1987) indicate that writing requires cognitive planning, problem-solving, and learning strategies that, once learned in the native language, can be transferred to learning a second language. Several studies have been conducted supporting the universality of literacy development in different languages. Barrera (1981) and Hudelson (1981) have shown that Spanish readers make similar miscues, while Romatowski (1981) and Hodes (1981) reported similar findings for readers of Polish and Yiddish, respectively. In addition, Chang, Hung, and Tseng (1992) found that Chinese students produced the same kinds of miscues as readers of other languages.

In support of the transferability of native language literacy skills into English, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD, 1987) indicates:

"In fact, it is clear that the ability to transfer to English what is learned in the first language applies not only to content-area subjects like science, math, but also to skills in reading and writing — even when the orthographic system is quite different from the Roman alphabet. . . ."

The transfer of literacy skills from one language to another is made possible due to the universal aspects of literacy. Research supports the theory that second language learners transfer native literacy skills into second language reading and writing in an interactive, reciprocal process (Escamilla, 1993; Rodriguez, 1988; Cohen, 1987; Garcia and Padilla, 1985; Barnitz, 1985). Students use their native language literacy skills and strategies to become literate in the second language, and what is learned in the second language enhances native language literacy.

Concepts and skills in literacy in one language will only transfer if they have been completely learned. Cummins (1981, 1989) calls this “the threshold hypothesis” and asserts that native language literacy can only transfer to a second language when students have reached a critical threshold in their native language. In a longitudinal study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education to compare the effectiveness of early-exit bilingual education, late-exit bilingual education, and English immersion strategy, Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, Pasta and Billings (1991) looked at the progress of 2,000 students enrolled in these programs from 1984 to 1988 in California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, and Texas. The results of this study indicated that by the end of third grade, there were no significant differences in reading, math, or English among students in the three programs. However, by the end of sixth grade, there were significant differences favoring students who were in late-exit bilingual programs. Similarly, Thomas and Collier (1996) analyzed the academic progress of 42,000 students over periods of eight to 12 years. Their research indicated that: 1) for LEP/ELLs with at least two to three years of schooling in their native language, it takes five to seven years to reach full proficiency in English; 2) for LEP/ELLs with no schooling in their native language, it takes seven to ten years to reach full proficiency in English; 3) for LEP/ELLs schooled bilingually in both their native and second languages, it takes about four to five years to reach full proficiency in English. Their findings confirmed that the amount of time to reach full proficiency in English is significantly enhanced when students have academic competency and literacy in their native language.

Both studies found, in support of Cummins’ threshold hypothesis, that students with the highest levels of native language literacy were those who eventually became the strongest readers in their second language. They concluded that the single best predictor of second language reading proficiency for second language learners is native language literacy.

Finally, in the most recent meta-analysis of the effectiveness of bilingual education, Greene (1998) reviewed 11 studies which included the standardized score results from 2,719 students, 1,562 of whom were enrolled in bilingual programs in 13 states. Greene found that limited English proficient/English language learners (LEP/ELLs) who were taught using their native language performed significantly better on standardized tests than similar students who were taught only in English.

In conclusion, the development of native language skills plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of English language arts by limited English proficient/English language learners.

ESL Instruction and the Acquisition of English Language Arts

Over the past 15 years, ESL instruction has changed dramatically and continues to change. The learner is seen as being actively involved in making sense of the new language, both in oral/aural as well as in literacy development. As Hamayan (1993) states:

“ . . . proficiency in a second language can best be developed when it is allowed to emerge holistically and naturally through the use of functional language for authentic purposes.”

This philosophical/pedagogical shift has required that ESL instruction incorporate a more meaningful and cognitively demanding curriculum. In order to ensure that

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Hamayan (1993)

second language learners do not fall far behind their monolingual peers, it is now expected that the ESL professional incorporate content-area material, i.e., authentic English literature, science experiments, historical documents, problem solving, etc., into planning and instruction. In their longitudinal study of bilingual and ESL programs, Ramirez, et al. (1991) stress the need for interactive environments for English language learners.

Swain (1993) maintains that academic and cognitive benefits result from the use of collaborative learning when learners are actively involved through exploration, inquiry, and interaction. Students must be afforded full access to meaningful language and literacy experiences and participation in the sort of critical problem solving that leads to both individual and social well-being (Altwerger and Ivener, 1994) .

ESL Instruction and the Acquisition of Content-Area Knowledge

In support of cognitive academic language and content-area integration, O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce (1996) acknowledge:

“ . . . what second language educators have overtly recognized is that the language of each content area has special concepts, vocabulary, and language functions that require unique forms of instruction in which language and content are integrated. As part of this instruction, students should have opportunities to learn and apply concepts in the content areas through all four language skills . . . Research has shown that appropriate content instruction facilitates language learning.”

It is precisely because instruction in ESL has made a major transition in its focus that the role of the mainstream ELA curriculum is receiving an ever-increasing amount of support.

In conclusion, based on the literature reviewed on language literacy for limited English proficient/English language learners, the research suggests the following:

Summary of Research on Literacy Development in Native and Second Languages

- Universal aspects of literacy underlie the reading process (which is essentially similar for all languages), and facilitate the transfer of skills and knowledge from one language to another.
- Meaningful and cognitively demanding English as a second language (ESL) instruction promotes the acquisition of English language arts.
- There is a strong and positive correlation between literacy in the native language and learning a second language. Students with the highest levels of native language literacy are those who eventually become the strongest readers in their second language.
- Valuing the native language and building upon the existing knowledge of LEP/ELLs enhance students' cognitive and academic development.
- Interactive and collaborative learning environments provide access to meaningful language and literacy experiences, as well as involving higher-level thinking skills.

Addressing the educational needs of a diverse population requires examination of assumptions about literacy and beliefs about and expectations for limited English proficient/English language learners whose backgrounds may or may not be different from their teachers'. The more teachers learn about the development and uses of literacy and the diverse sociocultural experiences of limited English proficient/English language learners, the better prepared teachers will be to create appropriate environments for learning through literacy. Using research findings, teachers can create classroom conditions to shape and broaden what it means to be literate in these settings and to respond to the literacy demands of society.

The principles of the teaching and learning of language arts will be examined in the ensuing chapter.