

Why Is There So Little Attention to Reading for ELs (Actually All Students)?

By

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BLOG IN WWW.ExC-ELL.COM

What Reading Researchers Say

Tim Shanahan's January 25, 2020 blog asks the question, "Why is it so hard to improve reading? He mentions that national surveys show that, in general, teachers persist in teaching with instructional level texts, instead of grade level texts. Plus, there are components of reading that are treated very lightly or skipped altogether (<https://shanahanonliteracy.com/>). This sounds like what I see happening in so many schools with ELs – watered down texts with limited vocabulary and not enough explicit instruction on reading.

Shanahan affirms as do most reading experts (Sawchuk, 2019; Schwartz & Sparks, 2019; Will, 2019) that students need explicit instruction in the 5 basic components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension, and teachers need explicit modeling and practice on teaching reading. Although there are all kinds of reading programs, basal readers, phonics, programmed readers, linguistic readers, language experience approach, balanced literacy, reading workshops, guided reading, multiple cueing systems, decodable texts, research-based this, and child-centered that Shanahan finds that those that provided explicit decoding teaching in elementary grades did a bit better, as did those with a writing component. We agree, and we found that integrating reading, writing, vocabulary and content helps ELs accelerate their reading.

The National Reading Panel (2000) also showed that providing explicit phonics instruction in grades K-2 improved students' reading success and higher average achievement across the board. This goes along with Nagy (2005) who states that we can predict by the end of first grade which students will have reading difficulties in secondary schools. Our research also found that reading at grade level by second grade in dual language or English only programs can predict who will leave 5th grade as a Long-Term EL (Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz & Slavin, 1998). Our other studies continue to parcel out reading strategies for ELs (August, Carlo, Calderón, 2000).

Recently, School Achievement Partners released an analysis of Lucy Calkin's *Units of Study* and Shanahan mentions that he helped with that study. He affirms that they scrutinized the degree to which the program was in accord with the research on reading instruction, including how effective it was with English Learners. Although they heard from some teachers that they swear by Lucy's workshops, the writers' workshops still did not show positive effect sizes for ELs. When Graham & Hebert (2010) studied writing programs, including Lucy's writing workshops, he actually found negative effect sizes. Yet, these workshops are prevalent in many schools.

In essence, Shanahan finds that Lucy's program and the current trends in reading instruction and reading programs might teach reading in some way but not the type of reading that is necessary today: "Reading is deeply implicated in our academic, economic, civic, and social lives. Achieving the levels of reading that we have in the past is insufficient." After reading Shanahan's blog, I began to wonder, is this why the country is doing so badly in reading as compared to other countries?

We need to do so much better! Particularly to prevent Long-Term ELs in elementary schools and to do more to improve their reading in secondary schools.

The Carnegie Study on Reading for ELs

The question "Why is it so hard to improve reading?" is similar to the question the Carnegie Corporation of New York asked fifteen years ago when they funded us to conduct a five-year study focused on ELs. "Why are ELs lacking in reading comprehension?"

My Johns Hopkins University colleague, Rachel Hertz-Lazarowitz from Haifa University, and I had already conducted an experimental/control five-year study on reading in dual language schools in Ysleta ISD in El Paso, Texas. This study called Bilingual Comprehensive Reading and Composition (BCIRC) showed great results when the five key reading strategies nested in Cooperative Learning were compared to the usual textbook reading and other district's reading approaches. The same reading texts were used by both cohorts in order to control for that variable. Students were matched by proficiency level and schools were comparable in socio-economic status. Students in BCIRC were able to transition out of EL status by 4th grade and continued to do well in State tests into middle school as compared to control students who mostly remained at EL status.

The success of the reading approach for the experimental group (which integrated vocabulary, reading, writing and cooperative learning) in elementary schools became the cornerstone for the five-year Carnegie study in secondary schools. The same methodology was used to test what is now called ExC-ELL (Expediting Reading Comprehension for English Language Learners). It was tested comparing matched schools in New York City and in Kauai. Students in the experimental schools outperformed their control peers on the Gates-MacGinitie Vocabulary and Reading Tests and school district exams. ExC-ELL was implemented as a whole-school approach and the schools went from the lowest performing to exemplary in two years. BCIRC and ExC-ELL are **the only EL instructional models** that have been empirically tested and have shown evidence.

BCIRC and ExC-ELL are the only empirically tested and evidence-based models for EL instruction.

Thus, ExC-ELL was born.

We worked with teachers and administrators in NYC and Kauai to build its components and test them in different content classrooms. Simultaneously, we came up with a classroom observation

protocol and we invited teams of principals, superintendents, coaches and teachers to help validate and determine reliability. The same process was used to construct the three-day professional development model/program on instructional strategies for teachers and administrators, and the two additional days for principals and coaches on how to coach and support teachers.

Back in 2007, we noticed that one of the five components identified by the National Reading Panel, vocabulary, was not receiving sufficient attention in most traditional reading programs, especially for ELs. Therefore, we developed a way to preteach five key words before reading. These words came from the reading passages the students were about to read. This helped ELs enter the reading with more confidence and ability. Vocabulary and discourse became a precursor into reading. Unfortunately, teaching vocabulary has become an end in itself in many cases. Once teachers preteach five or so words, the most important component is dropped – student reading. Without reading, words are forgotten, meaning is not clarified, and discourse (talking, discussing, arguing, etc.) never develops. Worse yet, the content that students are to read and learn from reading is not understood nor learned. Moreover, if teachers are not explicitly teaching students to read with the twelve reading components as described by ExC-ELL, academic writing is stifled or suppressed.

Large gaps between multilingual learners and general education peers still persist. Much has been done to create awareness of the importance of vocabulary/academic language in most schools and even in textbook series. We are delighted about that. Nevertheless, it is only 1/12 of a comprehensive approach to EL success. Now, our attention needs to be on in-depth reading skills to expedite success. ExC-ELL reading strategies can be incorporated into any textbook sequence or existing instructional models that up to now have only afforded ELs modicum success. **It's time to do better! Don't you think?**

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