

## Reading Research and English Language Learners

By: Beth Antunez (2002)

These studies reveal the importance of native language proficiency and the development of oral language skills for later reading and writing.

Study after study has demonstrated that there is a strong and positive correlation between literacy in the native language and learning English (New York State Education Department, 2000; Clay, 1993) and that the degree of children's native language proficiency is a strong predictor of their English language development (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Literacy in a child's native language establishes a knowledge, concept and skills base that transfers from native language reading to reading in a second language (Collier & Thomas, 1992; Cummins, 1989; Escamilla, 1987; Rodríguez, 1988).

Hiebert et al. (1998) synthesized reading research for The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) and recommended that ELLs learn to read initially in their first language, while the National Research Council (NRC) found that, for ELLs, learning to speak English should be a priority before being taught to read English. Research supports that oral language development provides the foundation in phonological awareness and allows for subsequent learning about the alphabetic structure of English (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

The NRC's report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, explains that hurrying young non-English-speaking children into reading in English without ensuring adequate preparation is counterproductive. The NRC makes a two-pronged recommendation, strongly emphasizing the importance of native language oral and, when feasible, written proficiency:

- "If language-minority children arrive at school with no proficiency in English but speaking a language for which there are instructional guides, learning materials, and locally available proficient teachers, these children should be taught how to read in their native language while acquiring oral proficiency in English and subsequently taught to extend their skills to reading in English.
- "If language-minority children arrive at school with no proficiency in English but speak a language for which the above conditions cannot be met and for which there are insufficient numbers of children to justify the development of the local capacity to meet such conditions, the initial instructional priority should be developing the children's oral proficiency in English. Although print materials may be used to support the development of English phonology, vocabulary, and syntax, the postponement of formal reading instruction is appropriate until an adequate level of oral proficiency in English has been achieved (p. 324)."

It is important to note that neither the NRP nor the resulting Reading First legislation examines or makes recommendations specific to reading instruction for ELLs, though there were 4.4 million ELL students enrolled in public schools (Pre-K through Grade 12) for the 1999-2000 school year, a number representing 9.3% of total public school student enrollment, and a 27.9% increase over the reported 1997-98 ELL enrollment (NCBE, 2002).

The above-cited seminal reading research indicates that ELLs should have native language literacy and oral English proficiency before being instructed to read in English.

### See also

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- [ColorinColorado.org](#), our sister web site on how to teach English language learners

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