Literacy for English-Language Learners: Four Key Issues
Diane August

Presented at the U.S. Department of Education’s First-Annual Summit
on English Language Acquisition
Washington, DC  November 13, 2002

SLIDE 1

First, thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you about literacy and English-
language learners. During this presentation, I will first discuss what we know about reading in a
second language, including effective instructional practice, and then I will briefly describe a
program project grant funded jointly by the National Institute of Child Health and Human
Development and the U.S. Department of Education that I direct. It is based at the Center for
Applied Linguistics. David Francis will then describe in more detail a second program project
grant funded by the same agencies that is based at the University of Houston.

SLIDE 2

Across the nation's school districts, the number of students from non-English speaking
backgrounds has risen dramatically. They represent the fastest growing segment of the student
population by a wide margin. From the 1989-90 school year through 1996-97, the number of
limited English proficient (LEP) students in public schools grew 70%, while total enrollment
increased by only 14% (NCBE, 1999). English-language learners (ELLs) made up 9.3 percent of

SLIDE 3

These students come to U.S. schools with many resources to share in classrooms, including
linguistic resources in their native language. Yet it is important to understand that all students
who are learning English as an additional language are not alike.

Among immigrant students, some ELLs have strong academic preparation. For the most part,
these students need English language development so that as they become more proficient in
English; they can transfer their educational knowledge to the courses they are taking in the
United States. A few subjects, such as U.S. history, may need special attention.

SLIDE 4

Other immigrant students arrive at U.S. schools with limited formal schooling—perhaps due to

1 I would like to acknowledge the following individuals and institutions for their support for this presentation: The
Center for Applied Linguistics; the Center for Students Placed at Risk at Johns Hopkins University; and the
Imagination Station and its founder George Grayson.
2 The demographic information presented in this paper is taken directly from work prepared by Deborah Short at
the Center for Applied Linguistics.
war or the isolated location of their home. Ruiz de Velasco and Fix (2000) found that 20% of all ELLs at the high school level and 12% of the ELLs at the middle school level have missed two or more years of schooling since age six.

Among Hispanic students age 15-17 who are newcomers, more than one-third are enrolled below grade-level (Jamieson, Curry, and Martinez, 2001). These students are not literate in their native language. They have significant gaps in their educational backgrounds and often need additional time to become accustomed to school routines and expectations.

SLIDE 5

Schools also enroll students who have been raised in the United States but speak a language other than English at home. While most of these students learn English during their elementary school years, some nonetheless reach secondary levels having never mastered literacy in English or the home language.

SLIDE 6

In this talk I will focus briefly on three key areas that impact the development of literacy in English-language learners: first, the relationship between first and second-language literacy; second, the relationship between English-language proficiency and English literacy; and third, what constitutes optimal literacy instruction for second-language learners.

For the first two areas I will briefly summarize the research and for the third area—optimal instruction, I will describe a few recent research-based practices and programs—four that focus on the acquisition of literacy in English and two that focus on the development of biliteracy.

SLIDE 7

The first area I would like to discuss is the relationship between first- and second-language literacy. That is, do specific native-language and literacy skills transfer from the first language to the second? This is an important question because one rationale for providing native-language instruction to ELLs is based on the notion that academically mediated language skills transfer across languages (Cummins, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1984).

Recent reviews by Fitzgerald (1995a, 1995b) and Garcia (1998) cite considerable evidence that readers use knowledge of their native language as they read in a second language. As examples, Spanish phonological awareness and Spanish word recognition significantly predict children's English word recognition and pseudo-word recognition (Durgunoglu et al., 1993). Learners show high correlations across oral discourse skills between their two languages if both are used in educational settings (Velasco, 1988). Knowledge of Spanish cognates transfers to ESL reading...
(Garcia and Nagy, 1993; Jimenez et al., 1991; Nagy et al., 1993). Knowledge used to guide comprehension in native-language reading is also used in ESL reading (Goldman et al., 1984; Langer et al., 1990; Jimenez et al., 1996). Good writing in Spanish by speakers of Spanish as a first language is related to sophisticated writing in English as a second language (Lanauze and Snow, 1989).

Theories on positive transfer additionally suggest that transferability of skills may be bi-directional—that is, certain cognitive abilities learned through reading in a second language will transfer to reading in the native language (Fitzgerald, 1999, pp. 19-20).

There is also some indication that children's first language may temporarily interfere with second-language learning: for example, first-language phonological and orthographic processes interfere with spelling second-language words with unfamiliar phonemes or graphemes (Fashola, 1996); miscues in ESL oral reading can be attributed to native-language syntactical knowledge (Gonzalez and Elijah, 1979); and word order variation, relative clause formation, complex noun phrases, and other complex structural differences among languages can mislead the ESL reader (Grabe, 1991).

**SLIDE 8**

The second broad area that I would like to address is the relationship between English-language proficiency and English literacy.

Researchers have documented a relationship between oral language proficiency in a second language and second-language reading. For example, Peregoy and Boyle (1991) sought to determine the specific linguistic dimensions of second-language oral proficiency that differentiate low, intermediate, and high second-language readers. They examined four features of oral proficiency: grammatical complexity, well-formedness, informativeness, and comprehension. Grammatical complexity is concerned with the structural complexity of utterances. Well-formedness refers to grammatical correctness. Informativeness describes the amount and quality of information provided in response to specific questions, and comprehension refers to the understanding of questions demonstrated by appropriate response. Subjects were 57 third-grade low-SES Spanish-speaking children who had begun learning English in kindergarten or first grade. Results indicated mean scores on each oral language feature increase as you move from the lowest to the highest reading group; thus, the highest second-language readers have the highest oral proficiency scores.

Although research has indicated there is a relationship between second-language oral proficiency and second-language literacy, there has been considerable debate regarding what this means for instruction.

A recent National Research Council report (Snow et al., 1998) and an International Reading
Association resolution (1998) suggest that if native-language reading instruction does not precede or coincide with English reading instruction, then English reading instruction should be delayed until a modicum of oral English proficiency has been achieved (cited in Fitzgerald, 1999). Note that the level of oral English proficiency was not specified.

Others (most notably Fitzgerald, 1995a, 1995b, 1999) cite evidence that oracy and literacy can develop at the same time (Fitzgerald and Noblit, 1999).

Finally, there is also evidence that second-language learners' oral development can be enhanced through second-language reading instruction (e.g., Elley, 1981; Elley and Mangubhai, 1983). Second-language reading comprehension can generate gains in second-language oral skills at all levels of second-language oral proficiency. With regard to skills associated with beginning reading, findings suggest that the use of reading and writing activities may contribute to children's sound-structure awareness because, as children read and then begin to write words that have meaning for them, they begin to analyze their own speech. This in turn promotes early reading development (Vernon and Ferreiro, 1999).

One important thing to keep in mind is that it is essential to “contextualize” the relationship between oral proficiency and reading, because other factors also impact the relationship, including the quality of classroom instruction and child background variables such as prior knowledge and native-language literacy.

**SLIDE 9**

I’ll now turn to the third topic—optimal literacy instruction for English-language learners. I’ll describe four interventions designed to bolster literacy in English—one focused on decoding, one on vocabulary, one on comprehension, and one on writing.

**SLIDE 10** Phonemic Awareness and Word Reading

First I’ll talk about phonemic awareness and word reading. In recent work in England, Stuart (1999) sought to extend to English-language learners previous research findings that demonstrate that phoneme awareness training, particularly when combined with letter-sound teaching, results in improved reading and spelling. His research also sought to provide training for whole classes, rather than small groups, use a commercially available program, and give minimal training to teachers administering the program.

The study sample consisted of two groups of five-year-olds; 96 were English-language learners and enrolled into either the experimental or control program. The vast majority of the ELLs in the study were Sylheti speakers. The experimental group was instructed with the Jolly Phonics Program; it provides early structured, focused, and rapid teaching of phoneme segmentation and

---

4 Sylheti is the language of the Surma valley region, consisting of most of the Sylhet Division in Bangladesh and the Cachar District in Assam, and it is spoken by over 9 million people. It is related to the rural dialects of eastern Bengal, but with a high proportion of words derived from Persian and Arabic, and has a distinct grammar.
blending skills and of grapheme-phoneme correspondence. Central to the program is use of meaningful stories, pictures, and actions to reinforce recognition and recall of letter-sound relationships and precise articulation of phonemes. An interesting feature is that children are taught gestures to help them remember the letter-sound associations. Children were taught to look at the letter, be reminded of the object, say its name and isolate the first consonant.

The control group was instructed with a holistic approach based on Holdaway’s (1979) use of Big Books.

Schools were given the option of choosing one approach or the other, and statistics indicated that there were no significant differences between schools on social, ethnic, and linguistic composition or on Key Stage 1 SAT performance.

Some training advice was given to teachers implementing the interventions. With regard to the Big Books approach, teachers were told to concentrate on word-level work, emphasizing words and letters. Researchers met with teachers using the Jolly Phonics program and discussed the content of the program. Teachers were given copies of a training video and had the opportunity to attend a training seminar conducted by one of the researchers.

Teachers were asked to spend one hour per day for twelve weeks on reading and writing, either using the Big Books or Jolly Phonics. Researchers ensured that children were receiving the intervention for an hour a day for the allotted 12 weeks.

Prior to the 12-week intervention, children were pre-tested on measures of spoken and written language, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge, and were post-tested on all measures immediately after the intervention and again one year later. Control measures that were used included measures of oral language, auditory perception, alphabet knowledge, rhyme awareness, and mathematical knowledge. Experimental measures included phoneme awareness, phonics knowledge, reading measures, writing measures, and delayed post-tests.

Results indicated strong, specific, significant, and positive effects of the Jolly Phonics intervention; the experimental program accelerated children’s acquisition of phoneme awareness and of phonics knowledge, and their ability to apply these in reading and writing. In the year following the intervention, both groups made comparable progress in most areas; however, at the end of the year, the experimental group was still significantly ahead in phoneme awareness and phonics knowledge and on standardized and experimental tests of reading and writing. Thus, early concentration on teaching phoneme awareness and phonics can radically improve reading and spelling standards in inner city second-language learners.

5 Pre-test results indicated that on some of the critical experimental measures, the Jolly Phonics group was significantly ahead of the Big Books group. Thus it was necessary to control statistically for pre-test differences. Because many of the measures departed wildly from normal distributions, it was not possible to co-vary out pre-test scores. The researchers thus used gain scores to examine differences between pre- and post-tests. With regard to the control measures, overall, good control was achieved on oral language at pre-test, on auditory perception, on the untreated phonological measure of rhyme awareness, and on alphabet knowledge at pre-test.
With regard to intentional vocabulary learning, McLaughlin and colleagues (2000)—colleagues including Catherine Snow and me—developed, implemented, and assessed an intervention designed to enrich the vocabulary knowledge and bolster the reading comprehension of Spanish-speaking fourth- and fifth-grade English-language learners and their English-only peers. In accordance with research indicating words are best learned from rich semantic contexts, we selected target vocabulary words from brief, engaging reading passages. We focused on a relatively small number of vocabulary items (12 each week) that students at this level were likely to encounter repeatedly across texts in different domains. Although we focused on about 12 words each week, we developed activities to help children make semantic links to other words and concepts and thus attain a deeper and richer understanding of a word's meaning, as well as learn other words and concepts related to the target words. In keeping with research-based best practice, the lessons also taught students to infer meanings from context and to use roots, affixes, cognates, morphological relationships, and comprehension monitoring. We developed and implemented 170 lessons over two years; each lesson lasted about 30 minutes. The lessons will be published by Brookes, and we have submitted a report of the study for publication.

The study was carried out in schools in California, Virginia, and Massachusetts. The first year of the study, participants were 223 students in 15 fourth-grade classrooms. During the second year of the study, the authors followed the children into fifth grade, adding some new students in the same fifth-grade classrooms. Each year, approximately half of the students were English-only speakers and half were Spanish-speaking English-language learners. Half the students each year were in intervention classrooms and participated in the vocabulary enrichment activities and half were in control classrooms and participated in regular classroom vocabulary development activities not related to the intervention.

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed to test the effects of predictor variables—school in which the program was implemented, language status (English-only or English-language learner), and treatment. The major finding is that our curriculum improves student performance in three areas: knowledge of the words taught, knowledge about word analysis, and comprehension of texts including challenging words. Furthermore, the curriculum was effective for both ELLs and English-only children. Finally, two years of exposure to the vocabulary intervention had a greater effect on outcomes than one year, and the more challenging curriculum implemented the second year had a larger effect than the curriculum implemented the first year.

With regard to reading comprehension, Saunders and Goldenberg (1999) examined the effects of instructional conversations and literature logs on limited- and fully-English-proficient students’ story comprehension and thematic understanding. Students were in three fifth- and two fourth-grade classrooms. Children in the five classrooms were matched by language proficiency and teachers’ rating of reading skills, and then randomly assigned within classrooms to one of the
four treatment conditions. To control for teacher effects, all four treatment conditions were carried out in each classroom.

In the literature-log group, teachers asked students to write about personal experiences related to a main character’s experience in the story that they had read. In the 45-minute lesson, students read their logs aloud, and then the teacher led a discussion about the similarities and differences between students’ experiences and those of the characters in the story. In the instructional-conversation lessons, teachers attempted through discussion to clarify the factual content of the story and develop students’ understandings of the more sophisticated concepts. Students in the read-and-study-only group did not participate in small-group lessons with the teachers; instead, they worked independently or with the teaching assistant on reading and writing activities related to social studies curriculum. Students in the literature-log-and-instructional-conversation group engaged in both activities.

Prior to the intervention, all students wrote essays on a theme that was to appear in the story, telling what they thought or knew about the topic. A few days later, teachers reviewed the plan of activities, introduced the story with a prepared three-sentence synopsis, and read aloud the first page of a six-page story. Students then read the remainder of the story independently. Students took a comprehension pre-test on the story. Following the intervention, students were scored for both interpretive and factual comprehension. Scoring was blind to student identity, treatment condition, and whether the test or essay was a pre- or post-assessment.

The authors found that students in the instructional-conversation group, literature-log group, and literature-log-plus-instructional-conversation group scored significantly higher on story comprehension than the control group. Moreover, students in all three experimental groups were significantly more likely to demonstrate an understanding of the story themes than the control group. The combined effects of literature logs and instructional conversations on students’ essays about a story’s theme varied by language proficiency: limited-English-proficient students’ essays benefited from the combined effects of literature logs and instructional conversations; fully English-proficient students’ essays, in contrast, showed no such effect. Thus, for English-language learners, instructional conversations to clarify text as well as the opportunity to respond to text in writing were beneficial.

SLIDE 13 Narrative and Expository Writing

Deborah Short at the Center for Applied Linguistics is developing a model of high quality sheltered instruction known as the SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol). This project is working with middle school teachers to identify key practices for sheltered instruction and to develop a professional development model that will enable more teachers to use sheltered instruction effectively in their classrooms. Sheltered instruction is a practice in which teachers use specific strategies to teach a specific content area (e.g., social studies or math) in ways comprehensible to the students while promoting their English language development. It has become a common instructional approach for language minority students at the secondary level, particularly as schools prepare students to achieve high standards. Although sheltered instruction
is widely advocated as an effective instructional strategy for language minority students, there is little agreement among practitioners as to what constitutes an effective sheltered lesson.

In the first two years of the project, the authors identified, based on a literature review and classroom research, effective teaching strategies involved in sheltered instruction and developed a model of sheltered instruction that utilizes the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). From 1997-2000, they worked with teachers through collaborative inquiry and video-based research to conduct sheltered lessons, and trained them to implement the professional development model. Several of the teachers were also trained as trainers, thus building capacity within the school systems.

Preliminary research indicates the following:

- After several years of field testing the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, a study was conducted to establish the validity and reliability of the instrument (Guarino, Echevarria, Short, Schick, Forbes, and Rueda, 2001). Findings indicated that the SIOP is a highly reliable and valid measure of sheltered instruction/SDAIE.

- 1997-98: Using a prompt that required narrative writing, ELL students in classes whose teachers had been trained in implementing the SIOP to a high degree demonstrated significantly higher writing scores than the control group (taught by non-SIOP sheltered teachers). The assessment used was the IMAGE (Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English), scored blind.

- 1998-99: Using a prompt that required expository writing, ELL students in classes whose teachers had been trained in implementing the model to a high degree out-performed control students.

Research on the SIOP is continuing.

SLIDE 14 Programs to Build Biliteracy

Now I will briefly turn to two program models that enhance biliteracy in English-language learners. The first model is a two-way immersion program and the second is a newcomers program. Both have biliteracy as a goal.

Two-way Immersion

Research has shown two-way immersion, known as TWI, is an effective educational approach for language minority students. TWI programs typically promote students' academic and cognitive development in their native language while academic English is acquired. These programs also integrate language minority and majority students socially into classroom and
The TWI project is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the funds it provides to the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence. Principal investigators for the TWI program are Donna Christian and Fred Genesee; Liz Howard is the project director.

One TWI program involved in the study is the Alicia Chacon International School. It is an exemplary K-8th grade two-way immersion magnet school in the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas. The student population is well balanced with regard to native language, with roughly equal numbers of native English speakers, native Spanish speakers and students who enter with proficiency in both languages. As the name implies, multilingualism and multiculturalism are stressed at the school, and to that end, instruction is provided in a variety of languages. In addition to receiving instruction through both Spanish and English, students also elect to study a third language from their time of entry into the program. It follows an 80/10/10 model, based on allocation of languages of instruction in the primary grades, with 80% of instruction being provided in Spanish, 10% in English, and 10% in the third language. The ratio of Spanish to English shifts over time until reaching a 45% to 45% ratio in fifth grade.

Students at Alicia Chacon, as at all schools in Texas, are required to take the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, a criterion-referenced assessment that is administered to students each year. Results for the TAAS collected at the end of fifth grade indicate that the Chacon students did very well, with close to 100% meeting expectations for math and reading and 95% meeting expectations for all tests taken. Moreover, on measures of oral language and narrative writing in Spanish and English administered by CAL researchers at the end of fifth grade, Alicia Chacon students were as high or higher than mean scores of all students studied by the project.

SLIDE 15

Newcomer Programs

The last program model I will describe is the newcomer model. Many school districts across the United States are enrolling increasing numbers of secondary immigrant students with low level English- and/or native-language skills and, often, limited formal schooling in their native countries. In response, they have developed newcomer programs to serve the students through an intensive language development and academic/cultural orientation program for a limited period of time, before placing them in the districts' regular language support and academic programs. Most of these secondary newcomer programs enroll students for up to two years. The programs may be located at a separate site or as a program within a school. In a few cases, the newcomer programs are full-length high schools; students enter in the ninth grade and remain in the program until graduation.

The goals of newcomer programs are to help students acquire beginning English skills, provide some instruction in core academic content areas, and guide the students' acculturation to the school system in the United States. Some programs have additional goals, such as developing students' native-language skills and acclimating students and their parents to the community. Some of the programs have developed their courses and curricula according to an English as a
second language (ESL) design; some follow a bilingual education design; some are native-
language literacy programs; and others offer a combination of these three designs.

The International High School at LaGuardia Community College is an example of a highly
effective four-year newcomer program. It is a multicultural alternative educational environment
for recent arrivals, and enrolls students with varying degrees of limited English proficiency.
This school maintains a continuing collaboration with LaGuardia Community College, offering a
high school/college curriculum combining substantive study of all subject matter with intensive
study and reinforcement of English. The faculty has organized the entire school around thematic
study in which students are also provided opportunities to develop their native-language skills
further. The mission of the school is to enable each of the students to develop the linguistic,
cognitive, and cultural skills necessary for success in high school, college, and beyond. This
school assisted in the creation of Bronx International High School, Brooklyn International High
School, and Manhattan International High School. The four schools continue their collaboration
and mutual support.

LAB (Language Assessment Battery), portfolios, and other performance-based assessments are
used to evaluate students in all areas for achievement, promotion, and graduation. In addition to
these requirements, students take New York State Regents Exams in English language arts,
mathematics, biology, and global history. A major goal of the instructional program is to
integrate and unify the learning experience. In order to integrate assessment better with the
instructional program, The International Schools have established common graduation
procedures. When students have successfully completed a minimum of four years of thematic
study, they present themselves for graduation before a certification panel comprised of students
and faculty from several theme-based teams and representatives from the larger community.
Each student is sponsored by a faculty advisor who assists the student in assembling a portfolio
of work drawn from his/her coursework, in preparing the presentation, and in arranging
scheduling. Students may include college course work and independent study as part of their
petition for graduation. The panel certifies that the student’s progress merits the granting of a
high school diploma. The use of common assessment procedures ensures reliability,
consistency, and review across the International Schools. As members of the New York
Performance Standards Consortium, the four schools are hoping to continue with a modified
portfolio as the Regents exams are grandfathered in.

The percentage of International High School students passing courses has grown since the
introduction of interdisciplinary course clusters (91% in 1994-95, 93% from 1995-97, 95.3%
from 2001-2002). Attendance has increased to 94.1% (2001-2002), and dropout rates are below
the city average: just 1% compared to 20.4% for New York City.

I should just briefly mention that work on newcomer programs at CAL is supported by the U.S.
Department of Education through funds to the Center for Research on Education, Diversity &
Excellence. CAL has developed a directory of newcomer programs.

We will now talk about two programs funded jointly by the National Institute of Child Health
and Human Development and the U.S. Department of Education. They are part of the DELSS
initiative that Peggy McCardle described—developing English Literacy in Spanish Speakers. I
will briefly describe the program project based at CAL and David Francis will describe in more
detail how the DELSS initiative at Houston is addressing the three issues I raised earlier—the relationship between first and second language literacy, the relationship between oracy and literacy, and optimal literacy instruction.

SLIDE 16

This five-year program project based at CAL is entitled Acquiring Literacy in English: Cross-linguistic, Intralinguistic, and Developmental Factors.

SLIDE 17

The program project contains an administrative core, a research core that focuses on the development and validation of assessments and cross-project analyses, and three subprojects.

SLIDE 18

Subproject 1 assesses the dual language abilities of 350 Spanish-English bilingual children and 100 monolingual Spanish-speaking children, starting in preschool and concluding in second grade. Data is also being collected on a subsample of the bilingual group through home visits and classroom observations. The project seeks to develop and pilot measures appropriate for young bilingual children, to study longitudinally the relationship between growth in language skills in the two languages, to gain predictive and description information about the relationship between the home and school environments, and to understand differences between the literacy process for monolingual and bilingual children.

SLIDE 19

Subproject 2 explores the role of Spanish in the development of English reading competencies by studying second- through fifth-grade Spanish speaking students as they develop literacy in Spanish and English. In the study of transfer of skills, we control for nonverbal ability, language proficiency, and language of instruction. This project will also implement an intervention designed to promote cross-linguistic transfer of skills and, in a separate study, will investigate teacher implementation of this intervention.

SLIDE 20

Subproject 3 is a longitudinal investigation of spelling in Spanish-English bilingual children from grades 2 to 5 that seeks to understand the developmental trajectory of English spelling for native Spanish speakers, identify potential native-language influence in their English spelling, and determine the relationships between English spelling skills and English reading ability in bilingual children.

Additional information about this program project grant as well as about the TWI and newcomer programs can be found at the CAL website: www.cal.org.
References


12
second Yearbook of the National Reading Conference, pp. 367-373. Chicago, IL: National Reading Conference.


McLaughlin, B., August, D., Snow, C., Carlo, M., Dressler, C., White, C., Lively, T., and


