Chapter 11
Teaching Reading to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Elementary Students

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ABSTRACT

The number of English language learners is increasing rapidly in U.S schools. The academic success of these students is a national concern since ELLs lag behind their peers in reading and math, and they have high drop-out rate. Reading is one of the hardest topics for ELL students. This chapter analyzes some common reasons why ELLs lag behind their peers in reading classes, provides some solutions to overcome these challenges, and provides some implications to teach ELLs better for elementary teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Luis1 was a third-grader whose heritage language was Spanish. His teacher, Ms. Keith, had substantial knowledge about teaching reading gained from her recent undergraduate coursework. She was concerned because although Luis demonstrated an exceptional ability to orally read the English-language texts used for instruction, difficulty came when the comprehension conversation occurred. Luis, said Ms. Keith, just didn’t understand what he was reading, and she wondered if he had some kind of disability. She asked me (second author) to work with Luis to try to figure out the disconnect between decoding and comprehension. She gave me a copy of the text Luis and his reading group were working with that day. It was an article in a kids’ magazine devoted to recycling, including information on the recycling of glass, such as glass jars.

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Luis and I found a quiet place, and I asked him to read the article to me. He demonstrated his excellent proficiency in decoding, although he did slow down considerably when he came to this sentence in the first paragraph: “You can see through glass.” After he finished reading the entire article, I asked him to tell me about what he had just read. He looked at me with a quizzical expression. I waited, then repeated my comprehension prompt. He continued to look at me with that same quizzical expression, then slowly said, “Dr. Donnell, I just don’t understand. If you threw glass, it would break.” For him, “through” was the major stumbling block to his comprehension of the entire article, as he associated the word only with baseball, and his productive language was able to supply only that meaning in the context of what he was reading. His comprehension of the entire article was confused because of a single word in the first paragraph, the meaning of which was outside his known lexicon.

As seen with Luis and Ms. Keith, a major question for classroom teachers in the U.S., who are often monolingual English speakers (Lucas, 2011), is what to do to make sure their novice speakers of English “get” what is being taught in their non-heritage language.

Often referred to in the literature as English language learners (ELLs), students whose primary language is not English and who have limited English language proficiency, this population is the fastest growing student group in the United States (Webb & Barrera, 2017). There were 4,460,956 ELLs at public schools, comprising 9.3% of entire U.S. school population during the 2012-2013 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016). One of the most critical challenges in ELL education is closing the academic achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students. ELLs lag behind their non-ELL peers in both reading and math (Fry, 2008), and have a higher dropout rate than other student groups (Echevarria, Short & Powers, 2006; Menken, 2010). According to a 2013 NCES report, ELL students have the lowest graduation rate among all student groups in the United States.

An additional major concern is that even though the student population in U.S. schools has drastically changed in recent years with the increasing numbers of English language learners, also known as children who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD; Herrera, 2010), most teacher education programs fail to prepare their students for this rapidly-increasing diversity (Lucas, 2011; Abbate-Vaughn, 2009; Karabenick & Noda, 2004; Obidah & Howard, 2005). As a result, a great many first-year classroom teachers are unable to support the learning of CLD² readers to their students’ greatest capacity due to a lack of instructional strategy knowledge.

BACKGROUND

CLD Children and Reading

CLD children are highly likely to have a difficult time comprehending texts used in reading instruction that are written in English (Johnson & Keier, 2010), which is the primary language of instruction in the U.S. Vocabulary, syntax, cultural and social clues, figurative language and many other components of a reading text can quickly become stumbling blocks. Farrell (2009) highlights, “Many times, beginning ELLs plunge into a text when they start to read, but when they meet a difficult word or confusing sentence or paragraph, their reading grinds to a halt and becomes painful, boring, no fun, or too difficult for them to continue…and some give up trying to learn how to read in the second/subsequent language” (p. 1). Without appropriate instruction, this very easily could have happened to Luis. As seen with Luis, vocabulary very often has different meanings in different contexts. Such multiple-meaning words can
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