Chapter 15

Lost in Comprehension: Addressing English Language Learners’ Reading Needs in the Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

The reading education of English language learners (ELLs) has been established as a critical issue in education policy and practice. Due to rapid growth of immigration to the United States, significantly increasing numbers of students in U.S. schools come from homes in which English is not the primary language. These students often face challenges in learning to read in school, and data has shown a significant achievement gap between ELLs and non-ELLs. This chapter discusses these difficulties, along with specific research-based strategies that mainstream teachers can utilize to assist ELLs in learning to read. Lastly, the authors explore multimodal learning as a potential support for ELLs learning in the classroom.

Introduction

The reading education of English language learners (ELLs) has been established as a critical issue in education policy and practice. Due to rapid growth of immigration to the United States, significantly increasing numbers of students in U.S. schools come from homes in which English is not the primary language (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). During the 2012-2013 school year, there were 4.85 million ELLs in U.S. schools, comprising nearly 10% of the total population of students in U.S. public schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). This number is higher than in prior years, which has been a trend for the past decade, as the number of ELLs increased by 60%; however, the general student population only grew 7% during this same time (Grantmakers for Education, 2013). By 2030, the percentage of students that are ELLs is expected to be around 25% (Cheung & Slavin, 2012).

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As a highly ethnically and racially diverse student population, English language learners in the United States are typically positioned as low school achievers, due to their lack of English knowledge. In contrast to Caucasian students, as well as non-hispanic minority students, lower school achievement is particularly prevalent among ELLs who speak Spanish as their first language (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997; McCardle, Keller-Allen, & Shuy, 2008). Nevertheless, as will discuss in the next sections, we feel this is due to misunderstanding the challenges ELLs face in the classroom as well as the many assets they bring with them.

Additionally, according to national reports, ELLs disproportionately experience reading difficulties across various age levels (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015), in contrast to mainstream students. Although the bias of standardized tests, which privilege native English speakers of a middle-class background, may be at least partly to blame, this is not our argument here, as we seek to prepare teachers to optimize elementary education for ELLs in the current high-stakes standardized assessment environment.

ELLs typically do not learn to speak English until they arrive at school; at this time, mainstream students have been speaking English for approximately 5 years and are beginning to learn to read. Although ELLs’ reading abilities typically improves as their spoken English develops, many are often left behind their mainstream classmates (Cheung & Slavin, 2012). The 2015 Nation’s Report Card (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2015) reported that the average reading score for fourth-grade ELLs was 189, whereas the average score for fourth-grade non-ELLs was 226. This 37-point gap only grows as students progress through school; the average score for eighth-grade ELLs was 223 while the average score for non-ELLs was 268, creating a 45-point gap.

As is evident, elementary reading teachers face an incredible challenge to teach ELLs to read, write, and speak English. There are ongoing debates on the best approaches, including arguments that center on the language of instruction. Although there are no easy answers to the question of how to best teach ELLs to read, there has been much research exploring varying ways teachers can help these students achieve early literacy. Given the current and continuing increase of students who are ELLs, educators in the United States must begin to acknowledge, assist, and educate these students in order to close the reading achievement gap.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how elementary teachers can foster ELLs’ reading abilities through classroom practices. First, the authors explore the varied understandings of reading comprehension and explain their sociocognitive and linguistically-based understanding of reading, in which society, culture, background knowledge, and language in the spoken and written forms affect reading comprehension. The authors then investigate the many issues ELLs face with reading in the elementary setting, as well as how teachers can help students overcome these issues. This chapter will discuss the research-based instructional approaches that have been shown effective for assisting elementary ELLs in learning to read. Finally, the authors will explore how multimodal learning can be used to support ELLs in learning to read and building linguistic awareness in order to help students achieve 21st century reading skills.