

# Reach All Readers

Using the Science of Reading  
to Transform Your  
Literacy Instruction

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## Bonus Chapter: Teaching Reading to English Learners

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# BONUS CHAPTER

## Teaching Reading to English Learners

If you have English language learners in your classroom, you may wonder if the science of reading applies to them. The answer is a resounding *yes*. This is because the reading development for English learners follows largely the same pattern as reading development for monolingual English students.<sup>1</sup>

It is also true that early risk indicators are the same for both groups of students.<sup>2</sup> This means that what you learned in Chapter 11 about assessment and intervention also applies to English learners: when you see signs of reading difficulty such as phonemic awareness challenges, letter-sound correspondence struggles, or difficulty with decoding, it's imperative that you provide early intervention aligned with the science of reading rather than apply a "wait and see" approach. Acknowledging these early risk indicators does not mean that a child has a reading disability; it simply means that the child needs more intensive instruction than is typically provided.

In addition to providing intensive instruction as needed, there are general things to keep in mind when working with English learners to support their reading development. The rest of this chapter will share specific strategies for teaching English learners in the areas of oral language development, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

### Oral language development for English learners

While Chapter 3 addressed oral language for all students, English learners may require additional support that varies depending on their level of language acquisition.<sup>3</sup>

If students are new to English and not yet speaking it, you will want to speak slowly with shorter words, always using correct phrasing. In addition, model what you are asking students to do as you give the instruction. For example, model what it looks like to follow these instructions.

- "Open your book."
- "Underline the words with short a."
- "Tap a finger for each sound in the word."

Soon students will begin speaking short words and sentences. In this stage, add opportunities for them to say words and simple sentences. For example, when teaching with a decodable text, ask them to point to objects in the picture and name them. Provide simple questions that require a yes or no answer. At this stage it is important to model correct usage but not overly correct errors in spoken language.

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When students start to speak more frequently with longer words and sentences, begin to use more academic vocabulary when speaking to them. Ask basic questions that require short answers, and modify writing and other open-ended activities by providing a word bank. Begin to correct students' speaking errors, but only when their errors directly interfere with meaning.

When students' speech is fairly fluent in social situations, they have moved to the next stage of oral language development. Because they may still struggle to express themselves in academic settings, be sure to provide opportunities for them to work with patient and considerate partners. Move beyond literal questions by asking English learners to explain their thinking. Sentence starters will help them frame their answers.

Eventually, students' speech will be fluent in social settings but still exhibit gaps in the school setting. Support your English learners by explicitly teaching key academic vocabulary and phrases. Give more correction than you might have given in previous stages, even on errors that do not affect meaning. As students' fluency increases, explicitly teach challenging elements of spoken English such as idioms and sarcasm.

## Teaching phonemic awareness to English learners

When teaching phonemic awareness to English language learners, apply what you learned in Chapter 4. Here are a few more things to keep in mind.

### COMPARE ENGLISH PHONEMES WITH STUDENTS' HOME LANGUAGE

English has approximately 44 phonemes, while Spanish has only 23. One reason for this difference is that Spanish has just 5 vowel phonemes, compared to English's 19. Understanding how English differs from a student's native language can help you highlight similarities and know when to give extra attention to unfamiliar phonemes.

To learn more about a student's home language, visit <https://mylanguages.org/>. Then click on the Alphabet tab to see how that language compares to English.

The good news is that English language learners can benefit from phonemic awareness instruction even when they are not yet proficient in English.

When doing a phonemic awareness task, remember to do the following:

- Choose a particular phoneme to teach, and prepare a list of sample words that feature the phoneme.
- Give students multiple opportunities to pronounce the sample words.
- Teach students the meaning of the sample words through actions or pictures.
- Encourage students to connect the English word to the word in their native language.

Here is a sample script for a phoneme segmentation lesson for English learners, based on the one shared by Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan in her book, *Literacy Foundations for English Learners*.<sup>4</sup>

Today we will learn a new sound in English, /sh/.

Say the word ship. (SHIP)

Let's say the sounds of the word ship. (/sh/ /ɪ/ /p/)

This is a picture of a ship.

How do you say this word in your home language? Now say it in English.

The next word is shark. Say shark. (SHARK)

Let's say the sounds of the word shark. (/sh/ /ɑr/ /k/)

This is a picture of a shark.

How do you say this word in your home language? Now say it in English.

### WHEN STUDENTS STRUGGLE TO PRONOUNCE A PARTICULAR PHONEME

Think of a phoneme from a different language that is difficult for you to pronounce (for example, I have never been able to trill the Spanish *r*). Your students may have a similar difficulty, but researchers Sylvia Linan-Thompson and Sharon Vaughn do not recommend turning phonemic awareness lessons into articulation lessons.<sup>5</sup>

If students struggle to pronounce a phoneme, show them how to form their mouth to produce the sound by modeling and letting them practice. But don't spend a lot of time on this; move on quickly, reviewing the sound each time you come back to it.

### TEACHING PHONICS TO ENGLISH LEARNERS

Do not wait until students are proficient in English before teaching them phonics; because English has a deep orthography, it's important to get started as soon as possible. Teach synthetic phonics using the same scope and sequence that you use for the rest of your class.

When teaching the alphabet to English learners, work to determine similarities and differences between the two alphabets (if your student's first language is an alphabetic one). This will help you anticipate letters that may be particularly challenging, especially if the letter's sound in the student's home language is different from its sound in English. For example, in Spanish the letter *j* is pronounced /h/ instead of /j/. In addition, there are no silent letters in Spanish, so the final silent *e* may present a special challenge.

Be prepared to give more explicit instruction and to provide more practice opportunities than native English speakers might need when learning letter names and sounds. Have your student(s) practice putting letters in alphabetical order, singing the alphabet while pointing to each letter on an alphabet chart, and naming the letter that comes before or after a particular letter.

Here is a sample script for teaching a new letter-sound correspondence to English learners, based on the one shared by Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan in her book, *Literacy Foundations for English learners*.<sup>6</sup>

Repeat each of these words.

Fish. (Fish.) Fun. (Fun.) Foot. (Foot.) What sound did you say at the beginning of each word? Yes, the sound is /f/.

Look in a mirror as you make the /f/ sound. What are your teeth doing? Touch your throat. Is this a quiet or noisy sound?

The letter name is *f* and the spelling is /f/.

Let's figure out if you have this sound in your home language. (Discussion will vary.) We will use the word fish to help you remember the sound of the letter *f*: /f/.

Say the letter name. (F.) Say the keyword. (Fish.) Say the sound. (/f/.)

Make sure to incorporate pictures and other visual aids during your phonics lessons so that students understand the words they are reading. This is especially important when reading decodable books with English learners; take the time to slow down and explicitly teach unfamiliar vocabulary. This will slow your pace, but it's important that students understand the words they are decoding. Just make sure that the visual aids do not distract from the phonics learning.

When teaching decoding, be sure to give extra practice with words that contain sounds which do not exist in the student's native language. For example, give native Spanish speakers extra practice with words that contain the sounds of the graphemes th, sh, h, v, z, and j, because the common sounds of these graphemes do not exist in Spanish.

## Helping English Learners Build Oral Reading Fluency

English language learners will benefit from the fluency instruction you are already giving to the rest of the class. However, tweaks and enhancements may be needed.

When doing fluency exercises, make sure that you explicitly teach words whose meanings may be unfamiliar to English learners. According to Cárdenas-Hagan, no text used for fluency practice should have more than five words that are unfamiliar to a student.<sup>7</sup> You can teach these words before the reading by providing simple definitions and tying to background knowledge.

Choral reading supports English language learners as they learn proper pronunciation and phrasing. They can hear their own errors when compared to the reading of their peers, without risking embarrassment. Choral reading may also increase students' willingness to engage in the reading process.

Like choral reading, echo reading is an especially useful strategy for English learners who are just learning to read. It improves reading rate on familiar passages.

Partner reading is especially beneficial for English learners because they can interact with a fluent model (a peer), discuss the text's meaning, and hear and practice appropriate expression. When pairing English learners for partner reading, there are multiple options. The pair can be at a similar reading level

or moderately different. You might alternate between pairing a particular English learner with a native English speaker, an English learner with stronger reading skills, and an English learner with weaker reading skills (allowing this particular child the chance to be the coach).

In traditional partner reading settings, students take turns reading paragraphs or pages. You might choose to have your English learner read the same section of text that their partner read instead of tackling a new section. Teach the students to ask each other questions about what they've read and/or summarize the key points.

English learners may also benefit from following along with the recording of a text read by a native English speaker. As with monolingual English speakers, for this to be effective at building fluency, the student must be following along with the reading, not simply listening.

When assessing the fluency of English learners, be careful when using reading rate to determine proficiency. They may have learned to decode quickly and accurately but may not understand what they are reading. Are they reading with expression? Can they retell what they've read?

## Teaching Vocabulary to English Learners

The explicit teaching of vocabulary to English learners is critical for two reasons. First, vocabulary instruction is the foundation for making sense of a new language. Second, if students' vocabulary is limited, comprehension will also be limited.

### VOCABULARY TIERS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

When considering the three tiers of vocabulary that you learned about in Chapter 7, it can be helpful to think about them a little differently when it comes to English language learners. Researchers Calderon and Minaya-Rowe proposed the following tiers of vocabulary for English learners, with instruction focusing primarily on Tier 2 and Tier 3 words:

**Tier 1** - Words that require very little instruction, such as clear cognates (*accident* and *accidente*) or words that students are likely to learn during everyday instruction (*read, talk, answer, etc.*)

**Tier 2** - Multiple meaning words that would normally be considered Tier 1 words (run, play, hard, can, etc.)

**Tier 3** - Cognates that are not as obvious (*tend* and *atenere*)

**Tier 4** - Content-specific words and words used infrequently (these are equivalent to Tier 3 in Beck and Mckeown's word tiers)<sup>8</sup>

When choosing words to teach in depth, it's also important to focus on academic vocabulary (see Chapter 7). Teach both general academic vocabulary (such as *describe, identify, and compare*) as well as academic vocabulary specific to a particular subject area (such as *subtract, equals, and solve*).

### OTHER TEACHING TIPS

Teach students to be on the lookout for cognates when learning words independently. Of course, this strategy will only work if the word in the child's language is already part of their vocabulary. Examples of English-Spanish cognates include:

- accident / accidente
- brilliant / brillante
- animal / animal
- attention / atencion
- color / color
- enter / entrar

Keep in mind that English learners will need more frequent and more intense vocabulary instruction than their peers. Explicitly teach new words, provide opportunities for students to understand the words in different contexts, and provide multiple exposures to the words over time. Whenever possible, include real objects, pictures, or drawings when teaching new words.

## Helping English Learners Comprehend Text

When teaching English learners to comprehend text, use what you've already learned from Chapter 8. In addition, keep the following tips in mind.

### **BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE**

English learners often lack the background knowledge needed to comprehend texts due to different educational or cultural experiences. Before teaching a new text, systematically identify key concepts, vocabulary, and cultural references students need to understand. Then build this knowledge through targeted activities.

### **PROVIDE NONVERBAL SUPPORT**

Incorporate visuals, gestures, real objects, and graphic organizers to make text comprehensible. These concrete supports help English learners access meaning when vocabulary is challenging

### **GIVE STUDENTS OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN WITH A PARTNER**

Research supports giving students 90 minutes a week of activities in which they're paired with a student who has a different level of English proficiency. As with any assigned partner work, these should be activities that practice material or strategies which have already been taught.<sup>9</sup> I recommend having students partner read while using a strategy such as ReQuest, Collaborative Strategic Reading, or paragraph-shrinking (see Chapter 8). When implementing these paired activities, it is essential to establish clear routines, model the expected interactions, and provide scaffolds such as sentence frames to ensure productive engagement for both partners.

I hope that this bonus chapter about teaching English learners has shown you that there isn't an extra set of knowledge you need to teach reading to students who are learning English. The bottom line is that teachers who understand both the science of reading and the art of teaching are equipped to teach English learners.



## Key things to remember

- ◆ The science of reading applies equally to English learners
- ◆ Early intervention is critical - don't wait for English proficiency to address reading difficulties.
- ◆ Build oral language development alongside reading instruction.
- ◆ Leverage students' home language knowledge by highlighting similarities and teaching cognates.
- ◆ Give extra time and attention to vocabulary instruction.
- ◆ Support comprehension with visual aids and meaningful peer interaction.

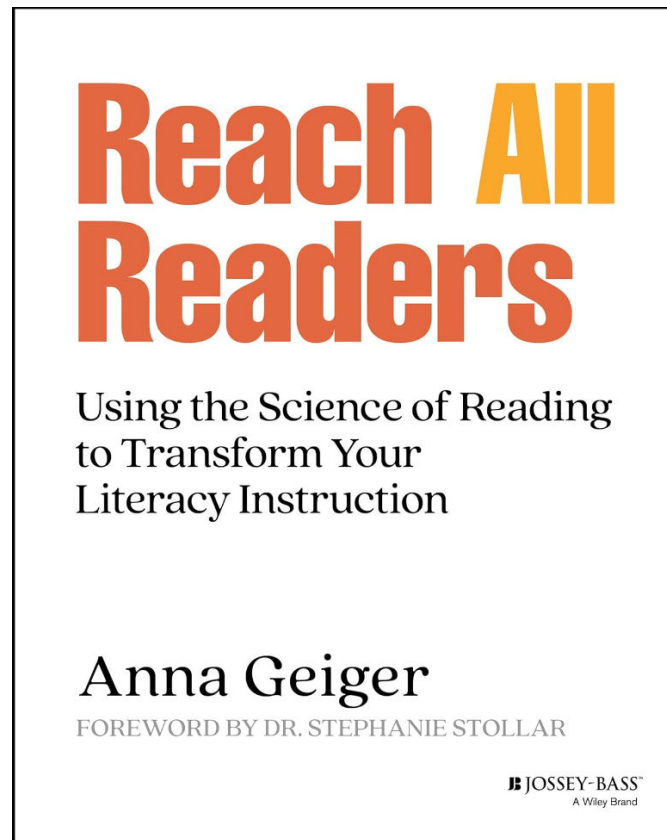
## Learn More

- ◆ Read *Literacy Foundations for English Learners*, by Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan.
- ◆ Visit this link to find a list of podcast episodes related to teaching reading to English learners: <https://www.themeasuredmom.com/podcast-index/#English>
- ◆ Get a lengthy list of English-Spanish cognates here: [www.colorincolorado.org/sites/default/files/Cognate-List.pdf](http://www.colorincolorado.org/sites/default/files/Cognate-List.pdf)

## Notes

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