



LESSONS IN LEARNING

First language not necessarily
linked to reading proficiency

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The importance of successful basic literacy development in the early years of schooling cannot be overstated. Young learners who do not learn to recognize words accurately and effortlessly, to decode unfamiliar words and to spell will struggle with reading and experience academic difficulties in later years¹.

Fortunately, research provides guidance about promoting the development of literacy in young children², even if they have limited oral language proficiency in English. Developing literacy in children with no or limited English-language proficiency is especially important in Canada because of the large number of immigrant children or children of immigrants who do not speak English. Acquiring literacy skills can be particularly challenging for the English Second Language (ESL) children entering the Canadian school system every year.

Conventional wisdom suggests that lack of oral English proficiency is the main impediment to successful literacy learning for young ESL students, but recent evidence suggests that this may not be true. To clarify the issue, CCL examined the evidence devoted to the following questions:

- Is it more difficult for young ESL students to acquire basic literacy skills than their English-speaking peers?
- Are the risk factors for later reading problems the same for both ESL and native English students?
- At what point should educators intervene in order to avoid persistent reading problems among ESL students?
- Do ESL students require different literacy teaching strategies or interventions?

Is it more difficult for young ESL students to acquire basic literacy skills than their English-speaking peers?

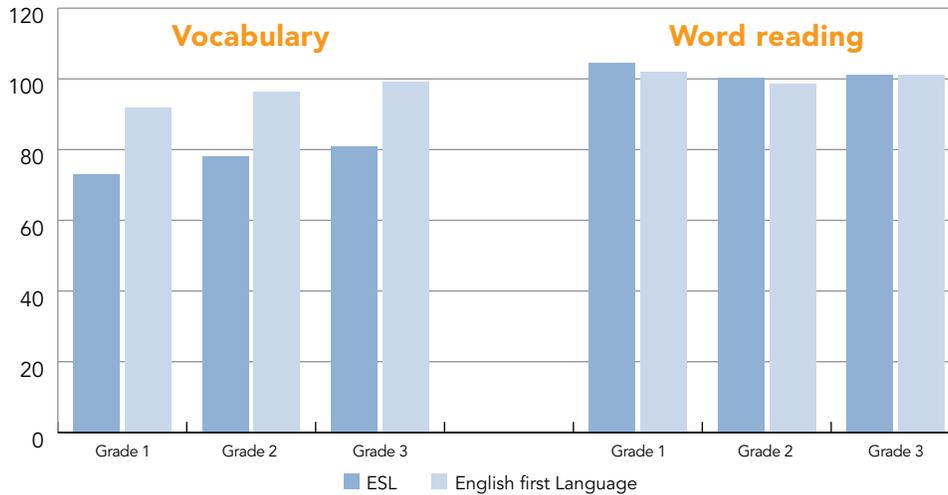
In the United States, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, a panel of recognized U.S. and Canadian experts, has found that ESL students are typically two to three years below grade level in their performance on reading tasks and three times more likely to drop out of high school than their native English-speaking peers³.

However, ESL students are not a homogeneous group. They differ along a number of individual, social, cultural and economic dimensions. Some are well-prepared for the task of acquiring literacy skills in a second language, while others are not. As a result, some studies have found that ESL learners are relatively delayed in their literacy development³, while other studies suggest they perform as well as or better than their English-speaking peers^{4,5,6}.

Recent Canadian studies show that, despite the advantages shown by native English students on oral language tasks, the gap disappears when it comes to word-based reading tasks. Figure 1 represents data from ESL and native English students from the same neighbourhood and attending the same schools in metropolitan Toronto. These ESL students outperformed their native English peers in the speed of reading letters and isolated words⁴ Similar findings were

revealed in a study conducted in British Columbia⁵. Research also indicates that, similar to first language learners, phonological awareness and speed of reading letters are the predictors of ESL word-based reading achievement^{3,6,7}.

Figure 1:
Comparison of ESL and English first-language students



Although English native speakers perform at a higher level on oral language tasks compared to their ESL peers, the performance of ESL children on reading tasks is at a similar level. These findings indicate that ESL students do not require a high level of oral English proficiency in order to acquire English literacy skills. Once young ESL students acquire a minimum level of oral language proficiency, their ability to learn how to read words and simple texts in English quickly reaches the same level as their first language peers. The story is somewhat different, however, when it comes to acquiring higher levels of literacy such as reading comprehension and writing.

The above indicates that oral language skills are not a good indicator to use when assessing the reading ability in young ESL students and should not be used as an indicator for reading difficulties among ESL learners⁸. However, oral language proficiency may play a more important role at a later stage of reading development (e.g., reading comprehension)⁹.

Are the risk factors for later reading problems the same for both ESL and native English students?

Similar factors account for the successes and difficulties experienced by both ESL and English first-language learners. In their review of the research on the development of reading among English language learners, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth identified phonological awareness, letter naming speed, and working memory as factors that predicted reading success for learners from a variety of language backgrounds⁹. Students who are slower and make more errors in naming letters, who experience difficulties with rhyming tasks, and who demonstrate poor working memory are likely to encounter reading

difficulties, regardless of their oral language skills^{4,9}. Similar to native English-language speakers, pre-literacy skills such as letter naming and sound-symbol correspondence appear to be markers of word-based reading performance for young ESL learners⁹.

When is the right time for assessment of poor ESL readers?

Concern about the educational difficulties experienced by second-language learners began about 30 years ago. In particular, observers were disturbed that too many second-language learners were placed in special education classes¹⁰. As a consequence, well-intentioned professionals and school officials delayed diagnosing ESL learners as needing special attention for reading disabilities for a number of years, believing that ESL students' reading difficulties were related to linguistic and cultural factors rather than to psycho-educational and cognitive factors.

A positive outcome of this movement has been the development of alternative and culturally sensitive assessment procedures, as well as a growing awareness that assessment in a child's native language may be a more accurate indicator of cognitive functioning than assessment in English. However, delaying the diagnosis and treatment of reading difficulties only makes the problem worse.

Research indicates that 5% - 15% of students lag behind their peers in developing appropriate basic reading skills^{11,12}. This is true regardless of language background. As is the case with all students, some ESL learners may read with difficulty because they have problems with decoding skills. These problems will not diminish as the ESL learner develops better English language skills and must be addressed as early as possible. When ESL students show evidence of being at risk for reading difficulties—if they experience difficulties in phonological awareness, speed of letter naming, and working memory⁷—it is crucial that they receive help quickly. This is true for all students; ESL learners are no exception. By remaining attentive to current research, practitioners may be able to avoid both under-identification and over-identification of ESL children who are at risk for developing reading difficulties¹³.

The danger is that the poor reading performance of ESL learners will be mistakenly attributed to lack of oral language skills⁸. When this happens, ESL learners do not receive the help they need. This delay in receiving help increases the gap between ESL and English first-language learners and makes helping these children more challenging. It is as crucial for ESL children to receive early intervention as it is for their English first-language peers. Early intervention minimizes reading problems that adversely affect academic achievement.

Do ESL students require different literacy teaching strategies or interventions?

Research on effective teaching strategies for ESL students is scarce. However, some conclusions can be drawn from the available evidence. In general, most components of effective interventions designed for native English speakers are also beneficial for young ESL students.

We need to make certain that ESL students do not lag behind their native English-speaking peers on reading tasks. To do so, a **comprehensive and balanced approach** to teaching reading is needed. Such an approach should include the following components to the extent that is possible^{9,14,15}:

- Phonemic awareness;
- Letter-sound correspondence;
- Letter combinations;
- Writing letters;
- Reading individual words;
- Words in connected text;
- Oral language proficiency;
- Using children’s native language in teaching reading and oral language;
- Improving reading for at-risk ESL learners by providing support for practice outside of the classroom, such as tutoring programs with an emphasis on the following components^{16,17}:
 - Phonemic awareness,
 - Letter-sound correspondence,
 - Word-reading practices,
 - Reading text to build vocabulary,
 - Completion of simple, comprehension tasks, and
 - Home-based, repeated reading using audiotapes.

Phonemic awareness

is the “insight that every spoken word can be conceived as a sequence of sounds represented by the letters of the alphabet, an awareness of phonemes is key to understanding the logic of the alphabetic principle and thus to the learning of phonics and spelling”¹⁸.

Letter-sound correspondence or sound-symbol correspondence refers to the correspondence between the sounds of the language and the printed letters⁹.

Letter combinations refer to combinations of letters that can be pronounced but are not real words in the language⁹.

Working memory refers to a person’s capacity to store information while engaging in other mentally demanding activities. For example, working memory is required when a person is asked to make a judgment about each of a series of spoken sentences and then to recall the last word of each sentence in the order in which it was spoken¹⁹.

In summary, persistent reading difficulties among ESL students are generally the result of deficits in skills specifically associated with reading, rather than deficiencies in oral English.

Early identification of reading problems combined with immediate and sustained help are the key components to ESL student success in literacy. As with native English speaking students, young ESL students benefit from quality and balanced instruction strategies for teaching basic literacy, which also includes an oral language component.

Assessment strategies and interventions used with monolingual students can also be used successfully with ESL children, especially if they are applied early when the problem occurs, at the appropriate level, and maintained until reading proficiency has been developed.

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