Reading Comprehension Instruction for English Language Learners

with Learning Disabilities: Validated Instructional Practices

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Research examining effective instructional strategies for English Language Learners (ELL) with learning disabilities (LD) is limited (Gersten & Baker, 2000; Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006; Sáenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Given the paucity of research from which to draw, many best practices for ELL/LD students are often based on research with English language learners without disabilities (Müller & Markowitz, 2004) or the extant research on effective practices for students with LD, which frequently is not disaggregated by students’ native language or English language proficiency (Klingner et al., 2006). The purpose of this InfoSheet is to present a brief review of several validated instructional practices for developing reading comprehension skills for ELL students with learning disabilities.

To provide effective, culturally responsive reading comprehension instruction for English language learners with and without LD, educators need to create culturally responsive teaching and learning environments. Cloud (2002) indicated this can be achieved when teachers focus their efforts on curriculum and materials, classroom interactions, teaching approaches, resource management, and counseling and parent outreach (see Cloud, 2002, for a comprehensive discussion). For example, reading comprehension is enhanced when students read material that allows them to make personal connections with familiar themes and to affirm their identities.

Teachers also need to understand the relationship between first and second language acquisition and the ways that a student’s learning disability affects English language acquisition. According to Gutierrez-Clellen (1999), native language learning should be used to support second language acquisition; interventions are successful when they broaden students’ linguistic
resources rather than narrow them. Ortiz (1997, 2001) suggested that the best programs for English language learners with learning disabilities incorporate supportive culturally responsive learning environments and validated instructional practices. Literacy instruction for ELL students with LD needs to promote a high level of student engagement, activation of higher order cognitive processes, increased opportunities to respond, and opportunities for students to practice English language skills in supportive, cooperative learning groups.

Reading Comprehension

Klingner and Bianco (2006) examined several validated approaches for developing reading comprehension skills for ELL students with LD. Although they acknowledge the limited research, the following is a summary of their review.

Graphic Organizers. Graphic organizers (e.g., semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, semantic/syntactic feature analysis) facilitate the learning of key concepts and vocabulary for ELL students with LD. In several studies, positive results were achieved when students were taught to use various graphic organizers to learn vocabulary and/or increase reading comprehension (Bos & Anders, 1992; Gallego, Durán, & Scanlon, 1990). Semantic mapping, a strategy involving diagramming related concepts from a reading passage, has been recommended for improving content area learning (Echevarria & Graves, 1998; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Graphic organizers address the needs of ELL students with LD because they visually display how concepts are related and also organize the information for the students, facilitating their learning.

Modified Reciprocal Teaching. Klingner and Vaughn (1996) investigated the use of a modified version of reciprocal teaching (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) with middle school ELL
students with LD. With traditional reciprocal teaching, teachers and students dialogue as they progress through four strategies: summarizing, question generating, clarifying, and predicting. Klingner and Vaughn modified traditional reciprocal teaching by including a strategy to activate prior knowledge. This strategy benefits ELL students with LD because students have the opportunity to dialogue, express their ideas, and collaborate with each other. By adding the activation of prior knowledge to reciprocal teaching, Klinger and Vaughn helped ELL students with LD connect what they already know to the new concepts. This facilitates learning and comprehension.

**Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR).** CSR (Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998) is another adaptation of reciprocal teaching that includes additional comprehension strategies and components of cooperative learning. This peer mediated instructional strategy was developed to teach content instruction, language acquisition, and reading comprehension to diverse learners, including English language learners with LD. CSR integrates four different comprehension strategies so that students, working in collaborative groups, are guided through a reading passage using prereading (“preview”), during reading (“click and clunk” and “get the gist”) and postreading (“wrap-up”) strategies. This multi-component comprehension strategy has been effective for increasing vocabulary (Klingner, Vaughn, Argüelles, Hughes, & Ahwee, 2004) and reading comprehension (Klingner et al., 1998) while also promoting cooperative learning.

**Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT).** CWPT, an effective strategy originally designed for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Greenwood, Arreaga-Mayer, Utley, Gavin, Terry, 2001), provides structured opportunities for English language learners to converse in English while they retrieve knowledge and skills in their primary language. A key component of CWPT
is deliberate attention to increasing students’ *opportunities to respond* - a critical component for English language learners with and without LD (Arreaga-Mayer, 1998; Gersten & Baker, 2000). When using CWPT, the teacher presents new material to be learned to all students in the class. Students are then paired based on ability and compatibility and alternate roles between tutor and a tutee. Tutors receive scripted materials and strategies for tutoring (e.g., point sheets, comprehension questions) and giving feedback. Error correction and positive feedback are provided immediately which facilitates learning. The tutor-tutee dyad structure allows students to remain actively engaged through increased opportunities to respond (Arreaga-Mayer & Greenwood, 1986; Delquadri, Whorton, Carta, & Hall, 1986; Veerkamp, Kamps, & Cooper, 2007), allowing ELL students with LD to practice the English language and learn from each other.

**Summary**

Although there is a limited body of research from which to draw when examining validated instructional strategies for English language learners with learning disabilities, there are promising results from several recent studies. There is general agreement among researchers that effective instruction for English language learners (with or without learning disabilities) must be delivered in a culturally responsive learning environment that addresses students' individual needs and considers their culture and language difference. Thus, reading comprehension is enhanced when teachers use culturally relevant materials that engage the students and provide students opportunities to respond.

**References**


