Until recently, there was a lack of strong empirical research available to guide methods of instruction for English language learning students, particularly in the area of reading instruction. Historically, there have been three or four instructional approaches used by many professionals in schools throughout the United States, such as English as a second language (ESL), structured English immersion, transitional bilingual, and two-way dual language immersion. However, none of these instructional approaches are clearly founded on evidence-based research. The search for effective instructional programs based on empirical research for all English language learners (ELLs) increased with the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB; P.L. 107–110). NCLB requires that states and local education agencies ensure that ELLs acquire the English language and achieve the same high achievement standards and receive the same high academic content set by the state for all students and that language and reading instruction programs that are funded with federal dollars be founded in research. To measure progress toward the two legislated goals for ELLs, states must administer content tests in reading/language arts and math/science and submit adequate yearly progress (AYP) reports based on these standardized assessments of all students.¹

**ABSTRACT:**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the present article is to provide the closing context for this clinical forum that showcases prereading and reading development research with Spanish-speaking English language learning children.

**Method:** Background information, including legislation, judicial review, and past research, are used to interpret the results of the studies in the clinical forum.

**Implications:** Suggestions for practitioners and future research are presented based on the clinical forum and background information.

**KEY WORDS:** English language learners, reading, bilingual, education

¹Most states, if not all, offer a standard set of accommodations for ELLs who need them to participate in standardized assessments. There are usually criteria in place for which accommodations ELLs may receive based on a needs assessment. For more information, see the National Center for Educational Outcomes (2006) for state Web sites that describe available accommodations or modifications for ELLs (http://education.umn.edu/NCEO/LEP/Accommodations/StateLEPAccommPolicies.htm). In addition, NCLB allows an ELL’s score to be omitted from state AYP reports under specific conditions.
the Bilingual Education Act (P.L. 90–247). The Supreme Court decision in Lau v. Nichols (1974) reiterated that non-English-speaking students had the right to a public education and that language could not be a barrier to content knowledge based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (P.L. 88–352). Although the Supreme Court remained silent on which approach schools should use to address issues of language acquisition, as well as which approach schools should use to address language education, this case emphasized the application of education for all to the ELL students. Furthermore, the school system was directed to provide sound instructional approaches that ensured that language differences would not preclude ELL students access to the grade-level content knowledge that was taught to all students. The San Francisco School System, the defendant in the 1974 Supreme Court case, was the first district that had to take affirmative steps to open its instructional program to ELLs. Several additional court decisions have extended this initial decision (e.g., Castañeda et al. v. Pickard, 1981; Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver, CO; Plyler v. Doe, 1982); consequently, many federally legislated education laws specifically include a legal focus on ELL language development and academic achievement.

NCLB is one such piece of education legislation. This act is the reauthorization of the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 (IASA; P.L. 103–382). NCLB specifically provides funds, in the form of federal grants, for education research that is specific to nonnative English speakers and Native American students through the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). All educators, including clinical practitioners, work within legal, fiscal, and academic constraints, such as federal legislation (NCLB); state and local laws; and the expectations of local education agencies, districts, schools, and even local communities. Practitioners can use their clinical intuition to guide student education, but research evidence should be the basis of such clinical intuition. Researchers investigate methods of instruction and approaches to intervention that have been implemented under various conditions to determine what works for which students. However, it is unrealistic to expect that empirical research will ever identify any single method of prereading or reading instruction as being effective for all children, and this is no less true for ELLs.

The U.S. Department of Education has historically provided federal funds to conduct research projects that will enhance instruction, assessment, and general practical knowledge specific to the language development and academic achievement of ELLs. Often, the U.S. Department of Education has worked in partnership with other federal agencies, including the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), to build a better and more comprehensive body of knowledge that is useful to educators who interact with the fastest growing group of students in our public school systems. That is, with an annual increase of approximately 10%, non-English-speaking students are the fastest growing subgroup among public school populations (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2003).

One significant research initiative began in 1999, when the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with NICHD, solicited research that focused on reading in Spanish-speaking children. The resulting research consortium was named the Development of English Literacy in Spanish-Speaking Children (DELSS). This consortium has conducted research on prereading and reading development in preschool and school-aged ELL students since 2000. Several studies from that project are reported in this issue.

Based on that work and on what was known about teaching bilingual and ELL students, DELSS researchers launched their projects in 2000 (for more information, see the DELSS Web site http://www.cal.org/delss/). Researchers continue to investigate new methods and approaches, such as the tiered intervention model or response to intervention, which may work for both populations (e.g., Ardoin, Witt, Connell, & Koenig, 2004; Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, & Francis, 2006; Denton, Foorman, & Mathes, 2003; Foorman & Nixon, 2006; Kamps & Greenwood, 2005). In such a model, a student who is not demonstrating adequate progress with appropriate reading instruction (see description in Denton et al., 2003) would receive supplemental, more intensive instruction (Tier 2) based on information gained from ongoing progress monitoring. (For more information, see Ardoin et al., 2005; Denton et al., 2006; Foorman & Nixon, 2006; Kamps & Greenwood, 2005.) Use of tiered intervention models that work for monolingual English speakers has been hypothesized to work for ELLs as well (e.g., Mathes, Pollard-Durodola, Cárdenas-Hagan, Linan-Thompson, & Vaughn, 2007), but it is clear that more empirical research is needed to ensure its effectiveness and efficiency with this group before it is widely distributed as a successful model for ELLs.

Teaching literacy to ELL students includes additional complexities and challenges. The cultural and language differences pose challenges for students who are learning to read in the majority language as well as challenges for practitioners who are assessing these students’ prereading or reading skills in either language. The research presented in this special issue provides some insight into various considerations and instructional methods for prereading and reading instruction and skill measurement with Spanish-speaking ELL students. Such considerations should be taken into account before providing any type of instruction or treatment.

THEMES THROUGHOUT THE CLINICAL FORUM

Several themes emerge when reading the articles in this clinical forum, including cultural and language influences on prereading and reading instruction, as well as if and when cross-linguistic transfer occurs between languages. Practitioners must account for the child’s culture, linguistic background, and language abilities and adapt the instructional approach when the child is not making appropriate progress in an instructional program (e.g., Denton et al., 2006; Kamps & Greenwood, 2005). An ELL student’s response to a particular instructional program is influenced by cultural differences (e.g., Hammer, Rodriguez, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007), language differences (e.g., Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson, & Pollard-Durodola, 2007; Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007; Uccelli & Páez, 2007), the method of instruction (e.g., Mathes et al., 2007), the quality of the teaching and qualifications of the instructor, as well as the possibility of learning disabilities. This clinical forum focuses on the first three of these for Spanish-speaking ELL students.

In the first article of this clinical forum, Hammer, Rodriguez, et al. (2007) examined parenting beliefs and literacy practices of mothers of Puerto Rican descent to determine whether relationships exist between mothers’ beliefs and their literacy practices. The authors examined the idea that cultural beliefs about education may differ for first-generation immigrants as compared to second-generation immigrants. Mothers were divided into two groups: one
group exposed their children to Spanish and English from birth (home English communication; HEC); the other group exposed their children to only Spanish until the children entered Head Start, where the children were exposed to English (school English communication; SEC). The HEC group contained significantly more mothers who were first-generation immigrants. Despite this significant difference, there were no significant relationships between parent beliefs and literacy practices. Although such a finding does not rule out cultural influences on literacy and language, including differences in narration (Gutiérrez-Clellen, 2002; Silliman, Bahr, Brea, Hnath-Chisolm, & Mahecha, 2002; Silliman & Champion, 2002; Westby, Moore, & Roman, 2002) and pragmatics, it does clearly indicate that we cannot assume that first-generation immigrant mothers do not provide early literacy experiences for their children.

Poor receptive vocabulary and poor understanding of narrative structure have been shown to limit a child’s ability to comprehend text (Miller, Iglesias, Heimann, Fabiano, Nockerts, & Francis, 2006; Páez, Tabors, & López, in press). Uccelli and Páez (2007) explored the developmental patterns and associations between oral vocabulary and narrative skills in a sample of 24 low socioeconomic status bilingual children from the Early Childhood Study of Language and Literacy Development of Spanish-Speaking Children (Páez et al., in press; Tabors, Páez & López, 2003). Seven of the ELL kindergarten children scored ≥2 SD below the monolingual means for oral vocabulary measured in both English and Spanish. Of these 7 children, 3 continued performing 2 SD below the mean for oral vocabulary in both languages. Overall, oral vocabulary was significantly associated with narrative quality within each language. Although there were moderate cross-language associations in kindergarten and first grade for narrative quality and story score in English and in Spanish, only kindergarten Spanish story score was positively associated with first-grade English narrative quality. All other outcome-related associations were within language from kindergarten to first grade (e.g., kindergarten English oral vocabulary was associated with first-grade English narrative quality).

The variation in performance for the Spanish-speaking ELL children in the present study emphasizes the need for researchers to examine environmental risk factors beyond bilingualism, including economic hardship and low levels of parental education. The lack of cross-linguistic influences could stem from different approaches to classroom instruction (e.g., English immersion vs. bilingual), but Uccelli and Páez (2007) noted no significant differences in predictive relationships among instructional programs. Further, the lack of cross-linguistic associations over time from English to Spanish could have been secondary to different demands on the production of English narrative structure from the production of Spanish narrative structure. Such a result would be consistent with the argument that the expectations underlying what we assume to be the same measures differ across languages, and that these expectations should differ for monolingual versus bilingual children as well (McCandie, Mele-McCarthy, & Leos, 2005; Thordardottir, 2005). Thus, there is some evidence that cross-linguistic transfer may be indicated by vocabulary diversity, but that each language also exerts its own unique influences to language growth.

In the third article, Hammer, Lawrence, and Miccio (2007) examined the relationship between the receptive language development and reading outcomes of bilingual Head Start children followed through the end of kindergarten. Rate-of-change for English and Spanish receptive language abilities during Head Start predicted a child’s early reading ability in each language. Hammer, Lawrence, and Miccio found that English receptive language abilities during Head Start positively predicted emergent reading in English and letter–word identification in English. This finding contradicts results from the Head Start Families and Children Experiences Survey (FACES; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003), which did not find the same positive gains when children’s abilities were measured over a 1-year period. Hammer, Lawrence, and Miccio suggested that this difference may be related to the use of different statistical measures, but also may reflect the amount of time children spent in Head Start for the present study (i.e., 2 years) as contrasted with FACES (i.e., 1 year; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Hammer, Lawrence, and Miccio noted that using the Spanish language at home did not enable children to maintain age-appropriate Spanish language and prereading abilities according to Spanish monolingual norms. They argued that this suggests a lack of cross-linguistic transfer of English prereading knowledge to Spanish prereading knowledge, a suggestion that is consistent with the lack of cross-linguistic transfer from kindergarten English story score to first-grade Spanish narrative quality.

Cárdenas-Hagan et al. (2007) examined the influence of language of instruction on English language learning in Spanish-speaking ELL students. The main relationship found was between fall Spanish letter name and sound identification and spring English letter name and sound identification for children who initially had relatively lower English letter name and sound identification scores. This relationship was replicated for phonological awareness and oral language in Spanish-instructed children when controlling for early English skills. This may be indicative of some cross-linguistic transfer from Spanish to English. This study emphasizes the need for individualized instruction corresponding to the needs of the students. Unlike Uccelli and Páez (2007), who determined that the Spanish story score was a predictor of English narrative quality, Cárdenas-Hagan et al. determined that fall Spanish phonological awareness and oral language abilities were only predictors of English phonological awareness and oral language abilities after controlling for early English skills and when instruction was provided in Spanish.

In the last article of this clinical forum, Mathes et al. (2007) discussed the results of four early intervention studies using a tiered model of instruction. Students selected for Tier 2 supplemental intervention were native Spanish-speaking struggling readers receiving either English or Spanish instruction, and the language of intervention was matched to the language of classroom instruction. The interventions were implemented as Tier 2 supplemental early reading interventions; the English intervention was modified using techniques that are commonly used in English as a second language instruction. The basic interventions were proactive reading (Mathes, Torgesen, Wahl, Menchetti, & Grek, 1999) and its Spanish counterpart, lectura proactiva (Mathes, Lincoln-Thompson, Pollard-Durodola, Hagan, & Vaughn, 2001). Denton and colleagues (2006) contended that not only should Tier 2 supplemental intervention be of high quality, but the primary classroom reading instruction also should be of high quality.

There were positive effects for both the English and the Spanish interventions. In addition, students maintained the progress they made in intervention through second grade in the respective language. Little cross-linguistic transfer was seen, and any cross-linguistic transfer that did occur persisted weakly through second
grade, if at all. Most importantly, native Spanish-speaking struggling readers benefited from Tier 2 supplemental instruction that was provided in addition to the core reading instruction whether the language of instruction was English or Spanish. According to Mathes and colleagues (2007), the lack of lasting cross-linguistic transfer from English instruction to Spanish reading was secondary to the lack of educational supports provided for Spanish in the English immersion school.

COMMENTARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The articles in this forum described several characteristics of Spanish-speaking ELL students in our schools, but they did not describe the characteristics of non-Spanish-speaking ELL students. Practitioners in the United States are often unaware of the differences among ELL students based on native language or language spoken in the home, in part due to the huge number of languages. However, nearly one in five Americans speak a language other than English at home, and non-English-speaking students are the fastest growing subgroup of children in public school populations, with an annual increase of approximately 10% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). There are more than 400 different native languages represented among ELL students in the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). Children’s experiences in learning English vary, as Hammer and colleagues (Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2007; Hammer, Rodriguez, et al., 2007) have shown: Some preschoolers have far greater exposure to English than others. In older children coming to this country as first-generation immigrants, there may be variations in literacy learning depending on the amount of prior schooling they have had in their native language. Certainly the linguistic characteristics and the writing system of the native language will have some impact. In cases in which multiple native languages are represented in a single classroom, native language support may not be a feasible option; in such cases, one should heed carefully the modifications that Mathes and colleagues (2007) used in adapting an English reading intervention to make it optimally useful with ELL students.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has published several knowledge and skills needs, practice guidelines, and preferred practice patterns related to culturally and linguistically appropriate services (ASHA, 2004a), reading and writing assessment, and intervention (ASHA, 2001, 2002, 2004b). These guidelines direct speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to “best practices” in language, reading, and writing assessment and intervention with ELLs as well as with native English speakers. Culturally appropriate practices are important, even across native English speakers, as there are cultural influences on language even among the dialects of English across the United States. Practitioners need to integrate instructionally appropriate intervention practices with culturally appropriate practices. Use of a tiered intervention approach to teach ELLs in the classroom with their peers may be a useful practice. The SLP could have a role in every part of the intervention, ranging from normal classroom instruction to pull-out intervention if progress is not made during the supplemental Tier 2 intervention. Further, the SLP shares in the responsibility of identifying those children and adolescents who are in need of additional reading and language services, whether the children are native English speakers or ELLs.

Throughout this clinical forum, the authors of this body of research discussed the need for additional research and the urgency with which the research must be commissioned and performed. Each group of authors proposed its own list of proposed topics for future research that include investigations of culturally sensitive treatment approaches, parent responsiveness to child treatment, classroom programming differences and student achievement, the impact of these differences over time (i.e., monolingual programs vs. bilingual programs), and establishing bilingual or ELL norms for language and literacy development. As is noted throughout each article, there is a need for additional measures appropriate to bilingual and ELL students that account for the linguistic diversity of this population. We need to more fully understand how language development in all linguistic domains (speaking, listening, reading, writing and comprehension) interacts to impact and influence the academic achievement of ELLs. This list is brief and incomplete, but offers a sampling of the topics that should be included in future national research agendas.

It should be clear that all of the factors described in this clinical forum need additional attention as related to ELLs who are native Spanish speakers and as related to ELLs who are native speakers of other languages (Asian languages, Native American languages, European languages, etc.). Although the present clinical forum focuses on Spanish-speaking ELLs, there are other children who are ELLs in the United States, ranging from Native American children (e.g., Hawaiian, Tlingit, Cherokee, Navajo) to the native speakers of Asian languages. Research on the education of ELLs has been gradually expanding to examine the optimal practices for teaching native speakers of languages other than English. For example, a list of practice and research priorities was developed in collaboration with the Native American community (for more information, see two thematic issues of the Journal of American Indian Education, Demmert & McCardle, 2006; McCardle & Demmert, 2006). It is also important to study biliteracy practices for ELLs with first languages other than Spanish within a single language; however, a school-based practitioner in the United States will rarely, if ever, have the luxury of working with these students grouped by native language. In addition, the large number of possible native languages that may be encountered within a school or classroom minimizes the practicality of native language support for learning, except through innovative technological solutions. Thus, methods need to be examined that afford English language learning students the opportunity to retain their native language without placing a strain on the practitioner or extraordinary budget demands on the education system.

A current and continuing topic of high importance is the value of bilingual abilities within today’s global society. This is being addressed via several different avenues of research: the intimate interaction of literacy and language abilities, the maintenance of native languages whenever possible, and how to best encourage the development of a strong language base before the onset of formal education. In advising preschool teachers about working with bilingual or second-language learning children, Tabor (1997) pointed out that the cognitive work of preschoolers is to develop concepts about how the world works and to acquire vocabulary to talk about those concepts. Much of that learning occurs in interactions with adults, most often, parents. In Tabor’s words, “What is important about these interactions is not what language is used, but what concepts and vocabulary are developed” (p. 138). Therefore, encouraging a parent to speak to a child only in a
language in which the parent is not proficient can place that child at risk in terms of optimal language and literacy development. Further, giving up the native language in the home will also mean giving up aspects of cultural and personal identity (Tabors, 1997). To reinforce the importance of robust language development, we can hark back to such seminal studies as the one by Hart and Risley (1995) regarding the difficulties in “catching up” when monolingual children start school with impoverished vocabularies. How much more so are we putting our ELL students at risk if they begin school with less than optimal language abilities and then begin to learn a new language? A related concern has been whether children must have a threshold level of English before the onset of reading instruction. While oral language proficiency plays a key role in reading, a child can begin to learn both at the same time. That is, instruction need not be delayed awaiting this undefined “threshold” (McCardle & Chhabra, 2006).

In conclusion, research on ELL students will ultimately benefit both children and practitioners. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 asserts that all children have the right to a free, appropriate education, one that should take affirmative steps toward opening its doors to children whether English is their native language or not. Practitioners and researchers should work in symbiosis. Practitioners should use objective measures to analyze the responsiveness to instructional programs and the achievement gains of ELL children in both the classroom and treatment room. Researchers should examine the programs or methods used by practitioners to better understand what works for whom and under what conditions. Both researchers and practitioners can learn from one another, and ultimately, the children and our society will benefit. And it is journals such as this one, in which researchers write for both the research and practice communities, that can ensure that the valuable research being conducted ultimately is translated to practice that changes the lives of children.

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