Clinical Forum

Prologue

Development of English Literacy in Spanish-Speaking Children: Transforming Research Into Practice

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In July 2005, Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools hosted a clinical forum presenting current research on, and clinical implications for, working with bilingual children (see Kohnert & Goldstein, 2005). The present clinical forum on Spanish–English language learners adds to the knowledge base presented in that journal issue and in many other clinic-focused articles. This clinical forum was designed to showcase prereading and reading development research that was conducted with Spanish-speaking English language learners (ELLs). The importance of such research becomes obvious when examining the population of the United States. The population of ELLs in America increases approximately 10% each year (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2003). Approximately 5.5 million students attending U.S. public schools are not native speakers of English; of these, 80% are native speakers of Spanish. Despite the increasing number of children in the United States who speak a language other than or in addition to English, there has been little empirical research available to guide prereading and reading education of Spanish-speaking ELLs. Thus, when federal agencies, including the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI, now the Institute of Education Sciences, or IES)1 partnered, with significant input from the Office of English Language Acquisition, they solicited research on prereading and reading development and began with an initiative focused on Spanish-speaking children, entitled the Development of English Literacy in Spanish-Speaking Children (DELSS) initiative.

ABSTRACT: Purpose: The purpose of the present article is to provide the background for the clinical forum contained in this issue, which showcases prereading and reading development research that was conducted with Spanish-speaking children who were English language learners.

Method: We focus on the articles presented in this clinical forum and provide the background for the research.

Implications: There is a need for further educational research to ensure that practitioners achieve literacy for all children.

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

1The Department of Education’s role in this solicitation began within the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, which subsequently was reorganized and made part of the Institute of Education Sciences.
more advantaged peers. For example, NAEP fourth-grade reading data indicated that 16% of Hispanic students and 18% of American Indian/Alaska Native students are at proficient or higher levels of reading, in contrast to 41% of White students; these included assessments administered with accommodations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Accordingly, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in the schools are likely to receive referrals for ELLs and will need to understand methods for assessment and therapy that are specific to these children. There are questions about whether the same assessments that are used with monolingual children provide an appropriate picture of ELLs and whether the same therapeutic approaches that are used with monolingual children are appropriate for ELLs.

The present forum focuses on initial language and cultural influences on the development of literacy via education. Five articles cover various issues associated with prereading and reading development in Spanish-speaking ELLs: the first two concern cultural influences on treatment/education (Hammer, Rodriguez, Lawrence, & Miccio) and the relationship between narratives and vocabulary (Uccelli & Páez); the last three concern initial language and language proficiency influences on treatment (Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio; Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson, & Pollard-Durodola; Mathes, Pollard-Durodola, Cárdenas-Hagan, Linan-Thompson, & Vaughn).

Culture influences education in many ways. Despite the teachings of cultural sensitivity at several colleges and universities, the practices of such sensitivity are easily forgotten in the clinic and classroom. To further explore this, Hammer, Rodriguez, and colleagues studied Puerto Rican mothers grouped by child language expectations and examined the relationships between parent beliefs and literacy practices. In the second article, Uccelli and Páez investigate the relationship between oral vocabulary and narrative skills. In the past, researchers have pointed to a link between reading comprehension and early narrative ability (e.g., Uchikoshi, 2005) as well as between reading abilities and oral vocabulary (Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Ouellette, 2006). The present study not only examines the relationship between oral vocabulary and narratives, but also describes these factors as observed in a longitudinal sample of 24 Spanish/English bilingual children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. The last three articles examine the influence of language proficiency on children’s primary language (L1) and secondary language (L2) and on reading development in one or both languages. Hammer, Lawrence, and Miccio examine this influence over time using growth curve statistics; Cárdenas-Hagan and colleagues also examine the effect of language of instruction and the relationship between L1 and L2; and Mathes and colleagues summarize the results of four studies to describe the effects of language of instruction on L1 and L2 prereading and reading abilities while using a tiered intervention.

These studies shed light on the complexity of influences of culture, language, and proficiency in the Spanish-speaking ELL population. Parallel to the statistics and pictures of failure, there is a robust horizon of education research that has attempted to determine how literacy skills are developed and refined over time, and how literacy proficiency might correlate with overall language proficiency and academic success. Current literacy and education research efforts have begun to address the need for scientifically based instruction. Such studies aim to establish cause and effect regarding the intersection of language abilities, instructional practice, and the acquisition of core academic content as well as more fully understand how to make this instruction culturally and linguistically relevant to the students.

The DELSS initiative was launched in 1999 in response to the need for rigorous research studies that would begin to shed light on literacy learning in ELLs. NICHD and OERI (now IES) partnered to solicit projects that would guide knowledge development on the critical factors that influence the development of English language literacy competencies among children whose first language is Spanish (NICHD, 1999).

The articles in this clinical forum represent only a sampling of the research projects that have been funded within the DELSS initiative. As the funding period for that initiative ends, both NICHD and IES continue to fund research testing optimal instructional methods for the identification and remediation of reading and learning difficulties among ELLs and seeking to understand what factors influence the development of reading in ELLs. Such research seeks to address the needs of students and educators who are charged with serving language-minority children and youth, who, in the United States, represent a total of 440 languages other than English and Spanish (Zehler et al., 2003). The synergistic effects of the collective studies funded under DELSS are still being realized; DELSS investigators continue analyzing their data and publishing their results (http://www.cal.org/delss). Our goal was to present work from the DELSS network with implications for those individuals who are working with bilingual and language-minority children in the United States. The children range from preschool through the early grades, and the research includes both prereading and reading development. These articles are only part of the knowledge needed in order to provide the best practices for educating language-minority children, but they are a contribution that should help us move toward the goal of literacy for all children. We hope that clinicians, teachers, and professors find this information useful for educating individual clients or students in the preschool and school-age groups.

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