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Understanding and Supporting Literacy Development Among English Learners: A Deep Dive Into the Role of Language Comprehension

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A distinguishing feature of English learners (ELs) centers on coming from homes in which a language other than or in addition to English is used, but bilingualism itself is not a risk factor for low academic achievement. Yet in the United States, ELs' reading achievement continues to lag behind that of their English-proficient peers. In this introduction, I discuss the need for research that centers the role of language comprehension among ELs for understanding and supporting their literacy achievement, highlight some of the key contributions made by the authors of articles that comprise this special topic collection, and offer several avenues that are ripe for future research.

Keywords: *bilingual/bicultural, case studies, correlational analysis, diversity, experimental research, language comprehension/development, longitudinal studies, reading*

The consequences of compromised reading comprehension across the lifespan can be far-reaching. An extensive body of work links low reading proficiency, directly and indirectly, with an array of negative life outcomes, including adverse health outcomes (Baker et al., 1997; Batterham et al., 2016; Berkman et al., 2011), school dropout rates (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Hernandez, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2015), and unemployment rates (Kickbusch, 2001; Lerman & Schmidt, 1999; World Literacy Foundation, 2018). Thus, the national profile of only one in three U.S. students able to read at or above the *proficient* level is alarming (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). This issue has been persistent: U.S. students' stagnant reading skills have long been documented and debates about how best to support students' reading development have also long been discussed among researchers and practitioners (Castles et al., 2018; Kim, 2008; P. D. Pearson, 2004). Although reading development is a highly complex developmental process, resisting simple solutions for a "best" approach, a wealth of research on the science of reading offers insight into some of the key contributors of this developmental process. However, the bulk of work in this area has been anchored on English monolinguals. In light of the increasingly diverse student population across the nation, the articles that comprise this special topic collection could not be timelier. Reading research to date demonstrates that, in contrast to their English monolingual peers, students from linguistically diverse homes often develop adequate word reading skills and yet struggle with both language comprehension and reading comprehension (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017; Nakamoto et al., 2008). It may be that the language comprehension domain represents a potential high-leverage point to help this growing population of learners develop literacy skills that will allow them to fully access the curriculum. The articles in this special topic collection span a wide developmental age range (early childhood to adolescence) and specifically help address gaps in the field's understanding of the role of language comprehension for both understanding and supporting the literacy development of linguistically diverse learners in the United States with varying levels of English proficiency.

Linguistically diverse learners are a historically underserved population and this growing student population stands at 12 million (Kena et al., 2016; Kids Count Data Center, 2018). Importantly, this population of students has a wide range of English proficiency, with about 4.6 million formally identified by their schools as English learners (ELs)—students who are in the process of acquiring English and whose primary language is not English (NCES, 2019). This means that a majority of these students are reclassified as English-proficient by their schools (Former ELs) or are English-proficient since formal school entry (Never ELs). Mirroring trends in the field, the articles in this special topic collection utilize some of the most commonly used terms, including ELs, dual language learners (DLLs), and language minority (LM) learners. In this introduction, I use the term EL in reference to all learners from homes in which the only language used is not solely English, with the recognition that many of these students are English proficient. The most substantive point is that this heterogeneous student population's developmental

experience stands in sharp contrast to that of their peers from homes in which English is the *only* language used.

Because a distinguishing feature of ELs centers on coming from homes in which a language other than or in addition to English is used, a stubborn myth is that exposure to and use of another language in the home (i.e., bilingualism) compromises academic achievement in general and English language development specifically. Yet setting aside the empirical evidence that bilingualism itself is not a risk factor for low academic achievement (Han, 2011; Hernandez et al., 2008), the fact is that the bulk of ELs are U.S.-born and have been instructed only in English since formal school entry (and often during the early childhood years; Sugarman, 2018). Given the default English-only instructional context in the United States, it is not surprising that the majority of assessments in U.S. classrooms—including language and reading assessments—are administered only in English. For ELs, reliance on English-only language and reading assessments raises important educational equity concerns as these assessments only capture their developing or additional language (English). Even for Former ELs and Never ELs, performance on English-only assessments reflects their skills in only one of the two known languages. It would be misguided to assume that ELs share common profiles, but it must be acknowledged that this U.S. population is generally more susceptible to risk factors for academic achievement and well-being, including being overrepresented in poverty (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; Hernandez et al., 2008), and poverty is a well-known risk factor for compromised academic achievement (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Indeed, national data consistently find limited academic success among ELs, particularly in reading, in which they lag behind their non-EL peers (e.g., NCES, 2019). Given the links between ELs' low literacy achievement and a wide array of negative life outcomes, supporting their English reading comprehension achievement is not only a pressing educational necessity but also a matter of social equity.

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, passed under President Obama as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016), is the latest policy that aims to ensure equal access to high-quality education for *all* U.S. students (Migration Policy Institute, 2020), including ELs. A key and new provision under 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act is the inclusion of ELs in the EL subgroup for 4 years rather than 2 years after being reclassified as English-proficient (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2016; Migration Policy Institute, 2020). This represents a promising step toward more accurately characterizing ELs' achievement to ultimately best support their growth into successful, independent learners. The articles in this special topic collection in turn attend to the needs of Current ELs, Former ELs, and Never ELs. But before delving into the unique contributions of the articles in this special topic collection, it is important to operationalize reading comprehension and take stock of the rich accumulation of knowledge in this research area that sheds light on empirically based contributors.

Reading Comprehension Development and Its Key Contributors

The goal of reading is *comprehension*, and reading comprehension is a complex, high-level developmental process that is multideterminate (J. M. Fletcher, 2006; Guthrie et al., 2004; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Decades of theoretical work and empirically based studies underscore the predictive roles of a constellation of various processes—including word reading, fluency, language comprehension, background knowledge, and executive function—for successful reading comprehension (August & Shanahan, 2006; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). At the most parsimonious level, Hoover and Gough's (1990) Simple View of Reading represents one of the most well-known and empirically supported models of reading comprehension. The Simple View of Reading frames reading comprehension as a product of word reading (i.e., the ability to read the printed words in a text) and language comprehension (i.e., the ability to automatically associate meaning to speech sounds). Put simply, if students cannot read the printed words in text but can understand their meanings in oral language, this does not represent *reading* comprehension. Similarly, if students can read the printed words in text but cannot understand the meanings of the words they read, this does not represent reading *comprehension*. Reading comprehension requires that students *simultaneously* read the printed words in text and understand the meanings of the printed words.

Scarborough's (1998) strands of reading provide a clear and useful framework for understanding the developmental shift in the relative influence of word reading and language comprehension on reading comprehension. In short, word reading skills initially serve as a stepping stone (though often referred to as a "bottleneck") to successful reading comprehension; without the ability to read the printed words in text, students cannot fulfill the task of reading comprehension. The central focus in primary-grade classrooms is thus on ensuring students develop word reading skills that allow them to automatically and fluently read printed words. However, the goal of reading is not to simply read the printed words, regardless of the automaticity in which this can be done. The goal of reading comprehension is for students to make meaning from the text they read; the requisite recruitment of language comprehension and word reading must both be supported in the classroom from the very beginning. The key difference between word reading and language comprehension is that there are a finite number of letters and corresponding sounds to be learned while language is infinite, that is, there is no point at which students are said to know the meaning of all the words in a given language

(English, in the U.S. context). As Scarborough's strands underscore, language comprehension skills play an increasingly predictive role for reading comprehension outcomes over time, such that students must become more strategic in applying their language comprehension skills for successful reading comprehension. In other words, once word reading skills become automatized (typically by the end of the primary-grade years though there is wide variability), variability in students' language comprehension skills account for more of the variance in reading comprehension.

Taken together, instructional support is certainly needed for students to develop word reading skills, but instructional support is *also* needed for students to develop and expand their language comprehension skills. It is important to underscore that, simply because word reading skills are expected to become automatized does not mean word reading is a "low-level" skill in the sense of being an "easy" or "simple" task. On the contrary, a wealth of rigorous scientific studies has empirically shown that supporting students' word reading skills is a nonnegotiable component of effective reading instruction (e.g., Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Ehri et al., 2001; Perfetti & Hart, 2002; Rupley et al., 2009). Of concern, however, many ELs in the United States tend to struggle with both language comprehension and reading comprehension even though their word reading skills are often comparable to or surpass that of their monolingual English-speaking peers (Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017). Language comprehension remains an understudied but highly promising area of research for understanding ELs' reading comprehension achievement. The articles in this special topic collection fill many gaps in this area.

The Understudied Role of Language Comprehension

Even though theoretical and empirical work has revealed language comprehension as an important predictor of subsequent reading comprehension (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Lervåg et al., 2018; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017; Sonnenschein et al., 2017), word reading research has been central in studies of reading. Compared with language comprehension, there are also a wealth of measures that have been developed to efficiently tap word reading. It is thus understandable that word reading assessment dominates in schools for identifying reading comprehension difficulties, including for ELs (M. Spencer & Wagner, 2017). A nonnegotiable first step is to ensure studies focus on language comprehension to allow an understanding of its development and influence on reading comprehension. Spanning the pre-K to high school years and including the ELs from various linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency, the studies that comprise this special topic collection help fill this gap by providing insight into how to support ELs' reading development via a concerted focus on their language comprehension skills, broadly defined and measured.

With a targeted interest on enhancing dual language Spanish-speaking preschoolers' language comprehension, T. D. Spencer et al. (2020) anchor their study on investigating the effect of multitiered, Spanish-English instruction for students attending Head Start in the Southwest United States, a long-serving EL region. Results of the cluster randomized group study revealed positive effects on students' narrative language skills in English, which is not to be underestimated as these children were selected on the basis of evidencing below-age expectations on English measures. Furthermore, this study suggests that the combination of classroom Spanish lessons and family engagement activities may represent a promising mechanism by which to support students' Spanish language skills in the service of not only bilingualism but also biliteracy. Borman et al. (2019) also conducted a randomized controlled trial, but targeted struggling first graders from Spanish-speaking homes. The study was similarly conducted in areas that have historically served ELs (Texas, Arizona, and Illinois), and the intervention (Spanish counterpart of Reading Recovery) was delivered in Spanish by bilingual teachers. Given the Spanish instructional context, results expectedly revealed positive effects on students' Spanish-language test outcomes. But it is worth underscoring that results also suggested promise for English outcomes, which have not been previously investigated.

At the upper-elementary level, H. Hwang and Duke (2020) and Phillips Galloway et al. (2020) offer insight into predictors of English reading comprehension, with a focus on the role of prior knowledge and academic language skills, respectively. H. Hwang and Duke's secondary data analysis—utilizing the ECLS-K national data set—focused on ELs from various language backgrounds and monolingual English-speaking peers. Prior knowledge was operationalized as science domain knowledge, revealing the predictive role of prior knowledge for English reading comprehension, particularly for ELs. Their results underscore the importance of content knowledge development for ELs, calling into question the practice of pulling ELs out of content area instruction. Phillips Galloway and colleagues contribute to our understanding of the influence of Spanish and English school-relevant academic language skills in predicting English reading comprehension among fourth and fifth graders attending K–8 dual language instruction programs. Their cross-linguistic investigation revealed that Spanish and English academic language skills are positively related and exert a unique influence on English reading comprehension, with implications for drawing on ELs' full repertoire of linguistic resources to support academic language development.

Linking the early elementary- and middle-grade years, Kung (2019) also utilized the ECLS-K national data set. The potential moderating effect of first-grade instructional emphases (i.e., extent to which sounds and letter–sounds relations were emphasized, extent to which meaning construction was emphasized, and overall amount of reading instruction/activities) on reading growth (through Grade 8)

was investigated for Asian language minority learners compared with their English-only peers. Results of this study somewhat diverge from existing findings on LM learners' reading development, particularly in terms of suggesting that meaning-based instruction may be more important after the primary-grade years. Thus, this study broadens the conversation and raises questions about generalizing findings across home language groups. Finally, at the high school level, Meskill et al. (2019) attended to instructional conversations among ELs from various language backgrounds that support comprehension and academic content mastery (in this case, focused on biology). Results of this case study carried out in the Northeast United States offer unique insight into expert instructional strategies and suggest a model of language and content learning supported by multimodal (i.e., learning with, through, and around content in multiple forms) mediation.

Areas Ripe for Future Language Comprehension Research

A single study cannot possibly address the plethora of open questions surrounding the characterization of equitable education for ELs in the United States, but the six articles in this special topic collection do make important contributions to our understanding of ELs' language comprehension skills (broadly defined and measured). Results of these studies, collectively, also provide targeted direction for the design of future studies to further broaden the field's understanding of the ways in which ELs' language comprehension skills develop, can be supported, and influence academic achievement in general and reading comprehension in particular.

With one exception (Kung, 2019)—likely related to the fact that students' native oral language skills were not accounted for in the analyses—all findings underscore the need to support ELs' language skills, both in the home language and in English. However, the majority of the studies in this collection, as is generally the case in the field, focused on students from Spanish-speaking homes. A likely contributing factor to this relates to the dearth of measures available in other languages (Espinosa & López, 2007; Peña & Halle, 2011). Yet Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese are the next most common home languages among ELs in the United States (NCES, 2019). Measures, and specifically language comprehension measures, designed for use with linguistically diverse learners continue to be sorely needed. The call for the development of these measures does not ignore important research in this area that has been ongoing for decades (e.g., Bedore et al., 2005; Hammer et al., 2008; B. Z. Pearson et al., 1995). However, most of the research in this area has concentrated on the early childhood years. In fact, only recently have studies turned their attention to investigating the utility of language comprehension measures designed for and normed on ELs at the elementary-age level (J. K. Hwang et al., 2019; Mancilla-Martinez et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, on account of the lack of these measures in other languages, this work is also focused on students with varying levels of proficiency in Spanish and English.

On a related vein, it remains the case that most ELs receive English-only instruction (Sugarman, 2018) and the teacher workforce remains predominantly female, White, and English monolingual (Guarino et al., 2006; Haddix, 2017). Future studies can contribute to our understanding of how the language and reading needs of ELs in English-only instructional contexts can best be served. Indeed, the needs of ELs who continue to be classified as limited English proficient (often referred to as long-term English learners) despite being in English-only instructional contexts for numerous years remain a conundrum. Among other factors, relying on English-only measures when assessing ELs may be at play. Thus, efforts to diversify the human capital in supporting an increasingly diverse student population in U.S. public schools (not just culturally but also linguistically) may represent an important mechanism by which to ensure that use of measures in a language other than English are even feasible, among other benefits.

Finally, it is also the case that the intersection of EL and special education status remains underresearched despite the well-known academic challenges ELs face relative to their English-proficient peers and despite the documented misidentification of ELs in special education (T. V. Fletcher & Navarrete, 2003; Sullivan, 2011; Yamasaki & Luk, 2018). For instance, 50% of ELs with disabilities have a specific learning disability compared with 38% of non-ELs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014–2015). Specific learning disability subsumes language-based and other learning disabilities that do not fit into other special education categories, including reading comprehension difficulties (Counts et al., 2018; Hibel & Jasper, 2012). This is thus an issue of educational equity that demands the field's attention, particularly considering the rapidly growing population of ELs in so-called "New Destination" states, such as those in the Southern region of the United States (e.g., Alabama, North Carolina, and Tennessee), that have not historically served this population of learners. Nationwide, there is a documented shortage of teachers certified to work with ELs (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017), and we can expect that ELs in New Destination states likely have even fewer opportunities to receive instruction from educators who are familiar with their unique linguistic needs and who are trained to meet their language and reading needs.

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