

Supporting Reading Comprehension for Adolescent Students with Learning Disabilities Who
Are English Learners

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The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grants R305A150058 and R305F100013 to The University of Texas at Austin. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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Abstract

Many adolescent students who are learning English and are identified with learning disabilities have difficulties with both reading comprehension and English language proficiency. In the secondary grades, these students have fewer opportunities to improve their reading comprehension and to learn from a range of disciplinary texts. To address these challenges, this article provides research-based practices to improve the language and literacy skills of these students through explicit instruction on word reading and academic vocabulary.

Keywords: intensive intervention, adolescents, reading, students who are learning English, learning disabilities

Supporting Reading Comprehension for Adolescent Students who are Learning English
and have Learning Disabilities

In the United States, approximately 9.4% of the public-school population includes students who are learning English (EL) and many of these students receive services or participate in programs designed to improve their language proficiency (McFarland et al., 2017). Despite this, many students who are EL in the secondary grades still have difficulty with reading comprehension (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016). While most students who are EL are not placed in special education to address these difficulties, new data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that 13.8% of students who are EL, approximately 665,000 students, are receiving special education services (McFarland et al., 2017). Students who are EL with disabilities consistently perform lower on the reading subtest of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than students who are EL-only or students with disabilities (SWDs)-only (NCES, 2016). In grade 8, 60% of SWDs and 67% of students who are EL performed below the basic level in reading on the NAEP, compared to 89% of students who are EL with disabilities. A similar pattern exists in grade 12, where 94% of students who are EL with disabilities performed below the basic level, compared to 61% of SWDs and 73% of students who are EL. Students who are EL with disabilities are at an even greater risk for school failure than either group alone due to this low reading achievement, as it impacts their ability to participate in their general education classes, as well as their transition into post-secondary education and employment. Many of these students drop out of school at a higher rate than students with disabilities who speak English only (National Clearinghouse for English Acquisition and Instruction Educational Programs [NCELA], 2017b; Trainor, Murray, & Kim, 2016), and they are also less likely to receive post-secondary education and to participate in

postsecondary employment than their peers with disabilities who are speak English-only (Trainor et al., 2016).

To further complicate the matter, students who are EL are often underrepresented in special education in the primary grades and overrepresented at the secondary school level (Samson & Lesaux, 2009; Sullivan, 2011). These students tend to have difficulties in their primary language and English and exhibit characteristics known to impact both subgroups. For example, students who are EL with LD may have trouble learning letter-sound relationships because of phonological difficulties associated with LD, but this is further impacted by the fact that their primary language may have different letter-sound relationships that are not applicable in English. Thus, it is imperative that students who are EL with LD be placed in an instructional program that provides both effective language and disability related services.

Reading Comprehension Difficulties of English Learners with Learning Disabilities

The majority of students who are EL with disabilities receive special education services for learning disability (LD) (Lipscomb et al., 2017; NCELA, 2017b; Trainor et al., 2016), and estimates suggest that approximately 68% of students who are EL with disabilities are identified with LD (Trainor et al., 2016). While learning disabilities can impact different areas of academic performance, the most common type of LD is in reading (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007), and it follows then that students who are EL with LD are likely to have difficulties with reading comprehension – constructing meaning from text (RAND, 2002; Duke & Carlisle, 2011). From a theoretical standpoint, the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) suggests that reading is the product of decoding (i.e., reading isolated words with automaticity and accuracy) and linguistic comprehension (i.e., interpreting words, sentences, and connected text). Many adolescents with LD in reading have problems with both decoding words and

understanding what they read (Catts et al., 2005; Cirino et al., 2013; Hock et al., 2009; Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010; Solari et al., 2014), and thus, students who are EL with LD also have similar difficulties. In a large, state-wide analysis of the reading performance of students who were EL with LD in grades 3 through 10, Solari and colleagues (2014) found that these students performed significantly lower than their peers (i.e., students in general education, students who are EL, and students with LD) on measures of reading comprehension, text fluency, and spelling. Similarly, Lesaux and Kieffer (2010) examined the reading performance of sixth-grade students with reading comprehension difficulties whose primary language was not English and found that approximately 21% of the sample had below average performance in the subskills of decoding, fluency, and vocabulary. It is also well-documented that students who are EL have difficulty with comprehension which stems from difficulties in oral language and vocabulary (Carlisle, Beeman, Davis, & Spharim, 1999; Lesaux & Geva, 2006; Lesaux & Harris, 2017; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Swanson, Rosston, Gerber, & Solari, 2008).

Intensive Reading Intervention

One method for improving the reading comprehension of students who are EL with LD is through intensive intervention designed to target the subskills involved in proficient reading which include both word reading and vocabulary, in addition to supporting oral language development. Providing supplemental intensive reading intervention is crucial for this population because in the secondary grades, students who are EL with LD receive most of their instruction in general education classes, which may require them to already possess adequate word reading and vocabulary knowledge to be successful at text comprehension according to the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). If students who are EL with LD lack these skills in middle and high school, then they are likely to struggle to comprehend information across their content

area courses. When working with this population, it is important to note that students who are EL with LD may have difficulties with comprehension as a result of their disability, English proficiency, or both, and targeted intervention should integrate strategies for students who are EL and strategies for students with LD. This article provides recommendations for teaching word study and vocabulary for students who are EL with LD in the secondary grades.

These recommended practices have been evaluated in several studies of a multicomponent reading intervention for students who struggle with reading comprehension, SWDs, and students who are EL with LD (Roberts, Vaughn, Fletcher, Stuebing, & Barth, 2013; Vaughn et al., in press; Vaughn, Roberts, Schnakenberg et al., 2015; Vaughn, Roberts, Wexler et al., 2015). In the previous studies, the reading intervention included daily instruction in word study, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. It was first evaluated with middle school students (Roberts et al., 2013), and students who received continued intervention throughout middle school significantly outperformed those students who did not receive intervention, with a small to moderate effect on word reading and comprehension outcomes. The intervention was then tested with ninth and tenth grade students with comprehension difficulties (Vaughn, Roberts, Wexler, et al., 2015). Students assigned to the reading intervention made significant gains on a standardized measure of reading comprehension. Ninth and tenth grade SWDs who received this reading intervention also performed better than SWDs in the comparison group on reading comprehension (Vaughn, Roberts, Schnakenberg, et al., 2015). Most recently, the reading intervention has been evaluated with ninth and tenth grade students who are EL with reading difficulties and disabilities, and students who received intervention significantly outperformed students in the comparison condition on reading comprehension and vocabulary

(Vaughn et al., 2018). The following sections are based on this research and describe strategies for teaching word study and vocabulary in secondary settings.

Word Study

Students who are EL with LD in the secondary grades encounter many larger, multisyllabic words in content area text daily, and these words significantly contribute to the meaning of the text (Carnine & Carnine, 2004). If students can't pronounce these words, they will have difficulty understanding what the text means. It is important that reading intervention for students who are EL with LD includes with word study instruction to ensure that they will be able to adequately access text. Word study involves teaching advanced decoding strategies to improve students' word analysis and word recognition skills (Boardman et al., 2008; Scammacca et al., 2007). Effective word study teaches students about the structure of words and how to break words into parts and then how to blend those parts together to read the words, in addition to teaching students to analyze word parts for meaning (e.g., pre = before, so prewrite would mean to write before) (Boardman et al., 2008). Previous meta-analyses and studies of multi-component reading interventions have shown that word study instruction has a positive impact on both word reading and comprehension outcomes (Joseph & Schisler, 2009; Roberts et al., 2013; Scammacca et al., 2007). The strategies described in the following sections are based on *REWARDS Secondary*, an explicit instruction program designed for struggling readers in grades 6-12 (Archer, Gleason, & Vachon, 2014). We offer several recommendations based on this curriculum and the unique needs of students who are EL with LD for teachers to incorporate word study instruction into classroom practices.

Before students can begin successfully decoding longer, multisyllabic words, they need to be able to read the parts of those words (i.e., vowel sounds, affixes) in isolation. It is important

for students to learn how to identify and pronounce vowel sounds because each part or syllable in multisyllabic words has one vowel sound, and thus, identifying these vowels helps students break longer words into their parts. A teacher can introduce this concept this by saying, “Today, we’re going to learn about parts of words because all words can be broken up into smaller parts. Finding the smaller parts will help us read longer words. We can find the number of parts by figuring out how many vowel sounds are in a word. Watch me.” The teacher writes a sample word on the board such as “bookbag.” The teacher says, “Bookbag. The first vowel sound is /oo/, so I underline the letters oo. The second vowel sound is /ă/, so I underline the letter a. Because there are two vowel sounds, I know this word can be broken up into two parts.” The teacher then provides lists of words and students have to identify the number of vowel sounds and number of parts.

It is also crucial for students who are EL with LD to learn common vowel sound-spelling relationships to be able to identify and pronounce the parts of longer words, as English vowel sounds may not be present in students’ primary language. For example, the English sound /i/ like in “bit” does not exist in Spanish (Klingner & Eppolitio, 2014). Table 1 lists examples of sounds in English that are not present in Spanish and Chinese (Kress, 2008), as these are the most common languages spoken by students who are EL in the United States (NCELA, 2017a). To teach these common spelling-sound relationships, the vowel or vowel combination (e.g., i, ai, ee, aw) is presented in isolation and an example word is provided that uses the target combination. For example, the pattern “ai” can be introduced by saying, “This pattern is ai and it makes the sound /ā/ like in the word main.” Then, students practice reading the new vowel sound aloud in addition to previously learned vowel sounds. Teachers can prepare a list of vowel sounds and present them on the board through technology or by using flash cards. When teaching vowel

sounds not found in students' primary language, teachers should clearly pronounce the sound and provide multiple opportunities for students to practice. The teacher might say, "Today, we're going to learn about a new vowel sound, and you may not have heard it before. The sound is /ĩ/. Listen to me say it again and then repeat after me. /ĩ/." Students repeat. Additional opportunities to read this sound can be incorporated into daily practice activities. For students whose primary language is logographic and uses characters like Chinese, the teacher may need to place greater emphasis on the sound-symbol relationships in English which is an alphabetic language. Providing this additional practice in in sound-spelling patterns helps address the literacy needs of both students who are EL and students with LD.

<Table 1>

Students also benefit from learning how to pronounce common prefixes and suffixes. Table 2 provides a list of the most common prefixes and suffixes in English in grades 3-9 as reported by White, Sowell, and Yanagihara (1989). The following procedure can be used to teach prefixes and suffixes:

1. Select 2-4 prefixes or suffixes for introduction.
2. Model correct pronunciation of each affix and provide a sample word.
3. Have students read the affixes in isolation.

A sample script for this activity is as follows: The teacher says, "Here are our three new prefixes for today: -im, -in, and, pre. Does a prefix come at the beginning of a word or the end?" Students respond, "beginning." The teacher says, "Great. Repeat after me." The teacher reads each prefix and the students repeat the pronunciation aloud. The teacher says, "Now, let's look at some words that use those prefixes. The word impossible begins with the prefix -im. Let's say it together." The students read the word and then the teacher continues this procedure with the

remaining words. After the introduction of new affixes, teachers have students review previously learned affixes by reading them aloud. Affixes can be presented in various ways such as a list on the board, on a chart, or through flashcards.

Students not only need to know how to pronounce affixes, but they also need to learn the meaning of common affixes. Because students who are EL with LD often have difficulty with vocabulary, the addition of instruction of affix meanings will help address both their language and disability-related needs. To do this, the teacher provides a simple definition for the affix, uses it in a sample word, and gives a sample sentence. For example, a teacher might say “im- is a prefix that means not or opposite of. The word impossible means not possible or not able to be done. It was impossible for the soccer team to win because two star players were hurt and could not play in the game.” When providing key words and definitions of affixes for students who are EL with LD, teachers should consider students’ prior knowledge and language needs. Students are more likely to remember concepts if they connect to what they already know or if the words are already in their vocabulary (Klingner & Eppolito, 2014).

Students who are EL with LD also need multiple opportunities to practice reading words aloud with affirmative or corrective feedback from the teacher. Words can be presented in lists, sentences, or paragraphs, and there are several resources available that can be used to create lists, sentences, or paragraphs. *The ESL/ELL Teacher’s Book of Lists* (Kress, 2008) provides several lists of content-area that would be especially useful for students who are EL with LD in the secondary grades. Similarly, *The Reading Teacher’s Book of Lists* (Kress & Fry, 2016) includes lists of words useful for content area literacy, in addition to high-frequency word lists. As with the teaching of affix meanings, teachers also need to consider the vocabulary and language skills of students who are EL with LD when selecting words for use in lists, sentences, and paragraphs.

If students are unfamiliar with a word or concept in their primary language, they will be less likely to retain the word's pronunciation and meaning in English. Additional vocabulary instruction may be required for words that students do not understand. Word study and vocabulary instruction can be integrated and complement each other to improve reading comprehension outcomes for students who are EL with LD. The next section describes procedures for explicitly teaching vocabulary.

Vocabulary. Intensive reading intervention includes robust, explicit vocabulary instruction because vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading achievement for students in the secondary grades (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Cunningham & Stannovich, 1998), and this is an area in which students who are EL with LD could benefit from additional instruction and practice. Explicit vocabulary instruction includes repeated exposures to words in oral and written contexts and allows students to have multiple opportunities to practice reading words (Kamil et al., 2008). Many typically-developing students learn vocabulary words and meanings through repeated exposures to new words in text; however, students who are EL with LD often do not have these same experiences with text and may fall behind their grade-level peers. Multiple sources recommend incorporating direct and explicit vocabulary instruction to improve reading comprehension (Baker et al., 2014; Boardman et al., 2008; Kamil et al., 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007) and reading interventions that target vocabulary instruction consistently yield improved outcomes on vocabulary and comprehension (Roberts et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., in press; Vaughn, Roberts, Schnackenberg et al, 2015; Vaughn, Roberts, Wexler et al., 2015; Wanzek, Swanson, Vaughn, Roberts, & Fall 2016).

When planning for vocabulary instruction, teachers first select a text that provides opportunity for vocabulary development (Baker et al., 2014). In the secondary grades, this text

could be from a content-area textbook or a supplemental article that is aligned with the content that is being taught in the core, general education curriculum. For example, if ninth-grade students who are EL with LD are beginning to learn about cells and their functions in Biology, the intervention teacher may select a recent news article about cells that corresponds with this content. Selecting a text that corresponds with the general education curriculum can increase students' access to that curriculum, because key concepts and ideas will be pre-taught and students will have additional time to engage in learning. It can also be motivating for secondary students to see practical applications of the concepts they are learning in class (Kamil et al., 2008)

Once a text has been selected, teachers preview the text to determine possible vocabulary words. The best words to target for explicit instruction are those that: (1) will be frequently seen in other texts and content areas, (2) are related to the main idea, (3) are unknown by the students, and (4) cannot be learned using context clues or through structural analysis (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts [VGCRLA], 2013). In the secondary grades, content area texts often use a variety of academic vocabulary words, which are words that are frequently used in science, history, geography, and mathematics, in formal discussions, essays, and even articles (Baker et al., 2014). Using the aforementioned Biology example, the teacher might decide to explicitly teach the word "function" as it will be frequently encountered in the course and other subjects, and helps students understand the main idea of the unit, in that cells have different roles or functions in the body. The *Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000) is one reference for teachers in the word selection stage, as it lists 570 high-frequency word families found across content areas.

After approximately three to five words are selected, they can be explicitly taught using a six-step procedure (VCGRLA, 2010):

1. have students pronounce the word
2. provide a student-friendly definition with visual
3. have students discuss what is known about the word
4. provide examples and non-examples
5. engage in deep processing activities
6. have students create powerful sentences with the new word

For students who are EL with LD, it is also important to include cognates, words with similar pronunciations and meanings, in this routine during steps 1 and 2. This provides an additional language support for students who are EL because it allows them to use their primary language to help support second language learning. Making these connections explicit can be motivating for students who are EL, as this shows them that their primary language can be used as a valuable asset in their learning process. For example, in Spanish, the word “clasificar” is a cognate for classify and if students can connect what they know about “clasificar” to the new English word, “classify,” then this helps strengthen vocabulary learning. Table 3 provides an example of how to teach the word classify using this six-step routine.

<Table 3>

There are several considerations when planning vocabulary instruction for students who are EL with LD. First, it is important to use student-friendly definitions. Traditional dictionary definitions do not provide the language support that students who are EL with LD often need. For example, the traditional Merriam-Webster dictionary definition for classify is to “arrange in classes.” Students who are EL with LD may not have an understanding of what classes are,

which limits their ability to understand and apply this definition. In contrast, the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2018) provides student-friendly definitions designed for ELs, and the definition provided for classify in Table 3 came from this dictionary. Using student-friendly definitions provides scaffolding for students' language needs as well as their needs due to having an LD.

Second, review of vocabulary words is essential for students who are EL with LD to retain the meanings of the words, and it can be beneficial for students to complete meaningful deep-processing activities. One type of daily review activity involves briefly reviewing word definitions and then having students use the words meaningfully. For example, the teacher reviews definitions by saying, "I'm thinking of a word that means ...". This process would repeat for each word. Students can respond in various ways such as writing the word on a whiteboard, pointing to the word on a response card, or even responding with technology such as clickers. Then, after the definition has been reviewed, students use that word in a sentence or generate an example of the word. The teacher might say, "Now that we've reviewed the definition for classify, I want you to turn to your partner and tell them something that you could classify. Start your sentence by saying I can classify..." The teacher provides a sentence stem for the partner talk because students who are EL with LD benefit from additional language support when constructing sentences. In addition to daily review, it is beneficial for students to learn word meanings in-depth through deep-processing activities such as word families and graphic organizers. Word families, or other forms of the target word, can be explicitly introduced. For example, the teacher can tell students that the word classify is related to classifies, classification, classified, classifying, and reclassify and then have students practice reading those word forms aloud. It is important to explicitly point out connections in meaning and pronunciation with

words in this word family to help address the language needs of students who are EL. Another deep processing activity is a type of graphic organizer known as a word map. Figure 1 provides an example of a word map for the word convert. This map asks students to write the definition in their own words, identify word relatives, write sentences, identify sentences in which the target word is correctly used, and make connections. Word maps provide additional practice with the target vocabulary word and can foster deeper learning for students who are EL with LD.

<Figure 1>

Lastly, because students who are EL with LD have difficulty with oral language, it is important to purposefully plan lesson activities that will support oral language development (Baker et al., 2014). One way to help students who are EL with LD develop oral language skills is to allow students to discuss academic content with their peers (Baker et al., 2014). Within the context of vocabulary instruction, teachers can have students complete review and deep-processing activities with partners or in small groups. In the previous example using the word classify, the teacher had students work in pairs to generate examples of things they could classify and provided students with a sentence stem as a way of scaffolding their oral language. Teachers can also use activities such as “Turn and Talk” in which they present a structured question prompt and sentence stem for students to answer in pairs. An example question prompt and sentence stem for a unit on cells is “How do cells use glucose in order to function? Tell your answer to your partner and start your sentence by saying, ‘Cells use glucose to function by ...’ Be prepared to share your answers with the class.” These language supports are crucial for students who are EL with LD to develop the skills necessary for proficient reading comprehension.

<Figure 2>

Conclusion

Many adolescent students who are EL with LD in the secondary grades continue to have difficulty with reading comprehension, and it is crucial to implement intensive reading interventions with this population. Adolescent students lean heavily on their word reading skills and vocabulary knowledge in order to learn from the abstract and technical language of content area material, and students who are EL with LD experience great difficulty with these skills that are critical for reading comprehension and ultimately, academic success. The challenges are heightened for older students acquiring English as a second language. For these reasons, it is imperative that instructional considerations for students who are EL with LD include explicit instruction on word reading and vocabulary development, two areas of research that have been associated with improved outcomes for these students (Boardman et al., 2008; Vaughn et al., in press, Wanzek et al., 2016). Figure 2 summarizes the recommended practices in this article to support reading comprehension for students who are EL with LD. Additionally, solely focusing on reading words and new vocabulary is not sufficient and deep comprehension will not ensue. Within intensive reading intervention, students who are EL with LD must be given many opportunities to experience using words and applying their meaning in order to develop oral and written language skills which are important for both populations of students. Moreover, these instructional practices can also be embedded across content areas and secondary grades.

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