



**Research Report**  
ETS RR-12-03

**Effective Practices for Developing  
Literacy Skills of English Language  
Learners in the English Language  
Arts Classroom**

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**February 2012**

Effective Practices for Developing the Literacy Skills of English Language Learners in the  
English Language Arts Classroom

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ETS, Princeton, New Jersey

February 2012

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a review of literature presenting instructional strategies—based on normative as well as empirical arguments—which have proven to be effective in envisioning what *all* teachers need to know and be able to do to teach English language arts (ELA) to English language learners (ELLs). The studies selected for review address what is particular to teaching ELA to ELLs. The paper is divided into two main sections: (a) teachers’ linguistic practices and (b) teachers’ pedagogical practices. In the first section, we report on the studies that analyze teachers’ understanding of linguistics and present implications for their instruction of ELLs. Three areas of effective practice are emphasized based on the particular aspects of teaching ELA to ELLs. The first area is that teachers should recognize that literacy skills in ELLs’ native languages might influence the ways in which ELLs process linguistic information in English. The second area highlights the argument that teachers should find ways to facilitate ELLs’ mastery of academic vocabulary. The third area covers the significance of enhancing ELLs’ metacognitive reading skills. In the second section, on teacher pedagogical practices, we discuss two broad pedagogical skills that emerge from both the normative and empirical studies reviewed and are closely related: (a) the teachers’ ability to help ELLs construct meaning from the texts or speech represented in the ELA classroom and (b) the teachers’ ability to engage ELLs in actively learning to read and write. The paper ends with a summary and a brief reflective statement on the limitations of the review of the literature.

Key words: English language learners, ELLs, understanding teaching quality, literacy skills, English language arts, English language arts classrooms

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In 2008, 10.9 million, or 21% of U.S. school-age children (ages 5–17) spoke a language other than English at home, an increase from 18% in 2000, and from 9% in 1979 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The number of school-age immigrant children is projected to grow from 12.5 million in 2005 to 17.9 million in 2020 (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007; Passel & Cohn, 2008). Within this population, the U.S. school enrollment of students considered to be English language learners (ELLs) increased by approximately 51%, from 3.54 million students in 1998–1999 to 5.3 million in 2008–2009 according to state level data (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2011). The number of ELLs enrolling in public schools is exponentially increasing throughout the United States, even in regions that traditionally have not been accustomed to linguistic and cultural diversity (Reeves, 2009).

As the ELL student population is growing rapidly, ELL achievement gaps in academic subjects still persist. In reading, for instance, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2005 showed that 71% of ELLs at grade 8 scored below Basic as compared to 27% of non-ELLs (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). The results of the 2007 NAEP indicated that 70% of ELLs at grade 8 scored below Basic in reading as compared to 24% of non-ELLs. Similarly, NAEP results in 2009 at grade 8 indicated that 74% of ELLs scored below Basic in reading but only 22% of non-ELLs scored below Basic.

In terms of the development of ELLs' reading skills, there is consensus in the literature that limited language proficiency constrains reading development (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Shanahan, 2006; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). However, though reading is often associated (almost exclusively) with English language arts (ELA), it is central for student learning in *all* the other content areas, as captured in Jeanne Chall's (1983) idea of *reading to learn* (as Francis et al., 2006). That is, reading is an essential mediator for successful learning in all content areas (Brown, 2007).

Given the increasing population of ELLs in the United States and the critical nature of their reading proficiency for academic success, this review of literature focuses on what teachers can do to enhance ELLs' reading abilities in English to improve their literacy skills in the

English language arts (ELA) as well as other content areas (mathematics, science, and social studies). The warrants presented in this paper draw on (a) empirical connections to student learning, (b) theoretical relationships to student understanding, and (c) normative claims about what matters in relation to effective practice. The studies discussed in this paper are neither exhaustive nor conclusive of what teachers should be able to do to improve ELLs' literacy skills. Given the dynamic field of teaching ELA to ELLs, the studies reviewed most likely do not present a comprehensive picture of all possible effective instructional practices. However, for the purpose of contributing to the dialogue about what teachers of ELLs should be able to do to improve ELLs' reading skills in and out of ELA classes, we present a selected set of effective teaching practices culled from the literature.

### **Methodology**

In our survey of literature, a wide range of databases was searched, including ERIC, Academic Search Premier, PsychInfo, Education Research Complete, Education Full Text, JSTOR, and Wilson Select Plus. Using the keyword "teaching content to ELLs," the search yielded 57 peer-reviewed research and conceptual papers published since 1998. Other keywords, developed to integrate all the content areas that ELLs are held accountable for, were *teaching science to ELLs*, *teaching mathematics to ELLs*, and *teaching ELA to ELLs*. We included works prior to 1998 that we deemed important to consult because they were cited in multiple sources. We selected studies according to the following criteria: (a) the studies needed to report on empirical and/or normative arguments associated with effective teaching practices; and (b) the studies needed to report on particular aspects of teaching ELLs in ELA classrooms. Some of the studies that met the inclusion criteria were subjected to ancestral search (using their references). The studies found in the ancestral search reflect the most commonly cited references.

Although the two inclusionary criteria listed above were applied, our search did not meet two additional criteria cited as potential problems associated with literature reviews by Kennedy (2007): Namely, our search did not include (a) "defining the boundaries of the literature" (b) "distinguishing literature from lore" (p. 140). That is, without defining the boundaries of the literature, we sought to understand what is considered to be effective instructional practice,

looking into the studies that provided normative and/or empirical arguments for what teachers should be able to do to teach ELA to ELLs. By effective practice, we refer to practice that attends to the particular aspects of teaching ELLs, considering the diverse characteristics of the ELLs. These studies were selected on the interpretive basis of addressing those aspects.

First, we present the themes emerging from the studies in two main sections. In the first section, we discuss the studies that relate to unpacking linguistic demands of ELA content for ELLs and present implications for the instruction of ELLs. By linguistics, we refer specifically to properties of linguistics such as phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax, and semantics as these apply to language acquisition and content learning. In this discussion, *unpacking* refers to teachers' facilitation on how language is used to communicate and construct meaning while developing students' reading and writing skills. In the second section, we discuss effective pedagogical practices that teachers draw upon while teaching reading and/or writing to ELLs.

### **Teachers' Understanding of Linguistics**

In this section, we discuss some of the components that make up teachers' understanding of linguistics when scaffolding and/or developing ELLs' reading skills in ELA classrooms. More specifically, three areas of effective teaching practices that arise from essential knowledge about linguistics are highlighted, again on the basis of addressing what is particular to teaching ELA to ELLs. Most of the studies reviewed reflect normative arguments, although some are empirical pieces that demonstrate the importance of a particular practice. The first area of effective practice is that teachers should recognize that literacy skills in ELLs' native languages might influence their processing of linguistic information in English. A second area is that teachers should facilitate ELLs' mastery of academic vocabulary. Teachers' ability (a) to engage ELLs in the active learning of academic vocabulary and (b) to link all learning to their everyday experiences emerges as a primary area of interest. The third area of effective practice concerns teachers' guiding ELLs through metacognitive reading strategies that can provide them with the tools to monitor and repair comprehension of text when needed. Pedagogical implications and examples are included throughout our discussion.

## **Recognizing the Interaction of ELLs' Native Language With English**

Some sources suggested that teachers should be aware that ELLs' performance in English language reading might be affected by structures in their native language. Teachers' recognition of a possible interaction effect between the native language and English could help them to understand and remediate the causes of ELLs' misconceptions or errors in English. One implication drawn in this section is that teachers should capitalize at the lexical and semantic levels on the native language resources ELLs bring along.

Regarding word-level reading skills, in a study of Spanish-speaking ELLs in early elementary grades, Lindsey, Manis, and Bailey (2003) found that word recognition and phonological processing or decoding skills are associated. Some reading research has argued that phonological awareness is central to learning to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998) and that incorporation of phonological awareness in early interventions might resolve reading difficulties at the kindergarten level (Leafstedt, Richards, & Gerber, 2004). Leafstedt et al. (2004) found that phonological processing in Spanish is a significant determinant of the development of word-level reading skills in English, especially at the early stages of learning to read. Other variables showing linguistic transfer from Spanish to English were letter and word knowledge, print concepts, and sentence memory. Results of this study mirror findings of previous research that suggest that phonological awareness transfers from the first language (L1) to English and is predictive of word identification skills.

Similarly, Akamatsu (2003) found cross-linguistic transfer effects of native-language orthographic features on second-language reading comprehension. Study results revealed that the ELLs from nonalphabetic L1 backgrounds like Chinese and Japanese could not process English words as effectively as their ELL peers from an alphabetic native language background. Because there are possible positive and negative effects of interaction between native language and English, Durgunoglu (2002) proposed that, for teachers, the most important result of their knowledge of transfer of cross-linguistic skills from L1 to L2 is an increased awareness that ELLs may be incorrectly diagnosed as having a disability. This misdiagnosis usually occurs when ELLs demonstrate a delay in mastery of reading skills in L2 or when an ELL's first language interferes with her or his acquisition of English reading skills. This is a compelling

argument for having teachers recognize areas of transfer or interaction between ELLs' native languages and English. Recognition of these possible interactions would allow teachers to investigate whether students' difficulties in learning English might result from the interaction or transfer between their native language and English.

Another area of transfer or interaction between the native language and English that teachers of ELLs should be aware of is vocabulary. For example, a study by Jiménez (1997) showed that five struggling Latina/o students in special education middle school classrooms benefited from the opportunity to search for cognate vocabulary and reflect on the text in Spanish. The students were provided with culturally relevant and familiar texts. The instruction aimed to develop their reading skills at resolving the meanings of unknown vocabulary items, asking questions, and making inferences. The highlight of this study was the use of native-language resources as mediators to make sense of the text, primarily at the lexical level. August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow (2005) claimed that teachers should take advantage of students' first language in teaching high- or low-frequency English words in content instruction, because ELLs might greatly benefit from the knowledge of similarities and differences between their native language and English. The authors recommended the transfer of cognate knowledge as an instructional strategy to develop ELLs' vocabulary in English and suggested that teachers should reinforce all newly acquired vocabulary through oral language activities, read-alouds, and systematic repetitions. Furthermore, Herrera, Perez, and Escamilla (2010) claimed that teachers can help ELLs identify the cognates that have common origins between the two languages by having the students refer to the context in which the words appear. Once ELLs can identify cognates between their native language and English, they have the opportunity either to acquire in English the label or word for the concept that they know in their native language or to reinforce their knowledge of the word in their native language with its English counterpart (D. E. Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Y. S. Freeman & Freeman, 2009). Similarly, August et al. (2005) claimed that the teachers should draw ELLs' attention to false cognates like *rope / ropa*; *embarrassed / embarazada* and provide accurate translations of false cognates (p. 55).

However, a challenge that mainstream monolingual teachers face if they are to draw on ELLs' knowledge of cognates was pointed out by Franquiz and de la Luz Reyes (1998) through

the words of a teacher: “If I am not fluent in the languages my students speak, how can I effectively teach English language arts to a linguistically diverse class?” (p. 212). Instead of espousing mandated familiarity with all students’ languages, Franquiz and de la Luz Reyes argued that the original ways in which ELLs put their ideas forth should be included as part of regular classroom practice and, thus, as a pattern of interaction. Inclusion of students’ linguistic and cultural resources does not require a teacher to be fluent in the ELLs’ native languages. Instead, teachers should be cognizant that ELLs’ performance in English-language reading might be affected by ELLs’ literacy skills in the native language. Teachers also need to know how literacy in the home language typically affects learning.

When teachers understand the role of literacy in the home language, they could then refrain from judging student mistakes as indications of lack of textual understanding or literacy skills, especially if ELLs’ lexicon in English and in-depth knowledge of word meaning are not rich. With this attitude, teachers could come closer to exploring ELLs’ background knowledge or native language resources. For example, Rubinstein-Avila (2006) suggested drawing on content-area cognates, employing graphic organizers to point out the features of different text types like (a) cause and effect; (b) compare and contrast; and (c) combining visual, verbal, and print cues to help ELLs build a knowledge base about unfamiliar topics or content. Vocabulary knowledge closely relates to reading comprehension (Carlo et al., 2004); while teachers should capitalize on ELLs’ native-language resources, doing so may not always be helpful if the vocabulary represented in the reading text is academic and outside ELLs’ knowledge of everyday vocabulary (in both English and their native language). This might imply that the teacher needs to know when to draw on the native language resources and when not to do so. In the next section, we focus specifically on the development of ELLs’ academic vocabulary.

### **Developing ELLs’ Academic Vocabulary**

In addition to the awareness of the interaction between students’ native language and their learning to read in English, research presented in this section suggests that teachers are advised to master skills needed to incorporate a balanced variety of cooperative, direct, contextualized, and repeated vocabulary instruction into their classroom practice. Teachers

should be cognizant of the lexical challenges that ELLs face while reading texts and should differentiate their instructional practices accordingly (Calderón, 2007; Herrera et al., 2010).

**Distinguishing academic from everyday vocabulary.** In an insightful discussion on reading and its role in improving achievement in the content areas, Calderón (2007) highlighted the importance of teachers' identification of lexical challenges and emphasizes vocabulary development as a foundation for reading in the content areas, including English language arts. Based on the work of Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), Calderón suggested that teachers distinguish words as belonging to one of three tiers. Tier I words are common, everyday words. If students do not know a Tier I word, the word will most likely represent a concept that students already know in their native language, but for which they have no label in English. Calderón exemplified *butterfly* as a Tier I word that ELLs may not know but for which they probably have the concept. Teachers could teach the English word for this concept by, for example, pointing to a picture of a butterfly.

Tier II words are more academic terms that are used across disciplines. As one teacher in Calderón's article (2007) put it, these words provide "ways of talking about school stuff" (p. 31). A number of Tier II words are prepositions and conjunctions that are used across all content areas, for example, *so, at, into, within, by, if, then*. According to Calderón, not knowing Tier II words might make it difficult for ELLs to comprehend a text. Also, some of the Tier II words might be cognates with Spanish. Calderón identified Tier II cognate words such as *digestion/digestión, coincidence/coincidencia, industrious/industrioso*, and *fortunate/afortunado* and hypothesizes that if these words are not brought to ELLs' attention during instruction, the transition to content-specific (Tier III) words becomes difficult.

Tier III words are low-frequency words that may be content-specific. These are more likely to have cognates in ELLs' home language because they are frequently content-specific words such as *osmosis, photosynthesis, or peninsula*. Calderón (2007) made the case that English teachers should focus their vocabulary instruction on Tier I and II words to build a base for ELLs' acquisition of more content-specific Tier III academic vocabulary. In teaching academic vocabulary, Townsend and Collins (2009) drew on the findings of an intervention study to

suggest that teachers should provide multiple direct exposures to target words in multiple texts and contexts so students could have various opportunities to use the words with personalized meanings.

Herrera et al. (2010) suggested that teachers differentiate their vocabulary instruction to ELLs by selecting the right tier words. According to these authors, teachers should tap into ELLs' prior experiences and background knowledge before beginning a lesson. For instance, teachers could ask questions about ELLs' experiences and background knowledge related to the vocabulary to be used in the lesson. This kind of pre-assessment or check-in with students provides teachers with the information that they need to bridge the gaps in ELLs' current knowledge of the target vocabulary. By drawing upon ELLs' experiences and background knowledge, teachers could better ensure that they enable 100% of the class to participate. The authors also recommend that teachers be able to employ visual instructional strategies for developing ELLs' vocabulary, such as engaging ELLs in the graphic organization of key vocabulary terms with charts or diagrams. Another strategy the authors exemplify is word splash and webbing. With these activities, teachers allow ELLs to write a word on a piece of paper and then add all the words they know or think of when they read the word or make meaningful associations among words. Lastly, Herrera et al. (2010) suggested that helping ELLs make meaningful associations might involve teachers' drawing specific links to cultural backgrounds, cognates, and prior academic content. Ajayi (2005) also suggested that teachers should guide learners to construct vocabulary meanings reflecting their life experiences and prior linguistic and educational backgrounds.

Calderón (2007) suggested other helpful instructional approaches for teaching ELLs vocabulary. One method has teachers preteach the vocabulary that is critical to comprehension of the text in a seven-step process that involves

...explicit teaching of vocabulary, including contextualization of newly introduced vocabulary as used in the text, providing dictionary definitions, re-contextualizing the vocabulary in ways familiar to the students, and incorporating oral activities in which students talk about or use the new vocabulary. (p. 34)

In preteaching vocabulary, for example, the first step suggested for the teacher would be to say the word in English and, if it is a bilingual classroom, in the primary language. Second, the teacher would state the word in the context in which it appears in the text and, third, provide a definition or key definitions from the dictionary. Fourth, the teacher would provide another example of the word in a student-friendly context. The teacher would also repeat the word at least three times to familiarize ELLs with its phonological representation. Finally, oral activities follow whereby ELLs relate the word to their own lives. For instance, to reinforce the meaning of *mesmerize*, ELLs might tell their partners about a time that they felt mesmerized (Calderón, 2007).

Thus far, we have discussed how teachers should be able to differentiate amongst everyday vocabulary, academic vocabulary common across content areas, and content-specific academic vocabulary in order to strategize their instruction. The idea was introduced that teachers should contextualize academic vocabulary so that meaningful connections could be drawn between academic vocabulary and ELLs' everyday lives and their prior academic knowledge or cultural backgrounds.

**Contextualizing vocabulary instruction.** One of the ultimate goals while learning to read and reading to learn is to construct meaning. One way to make reading meaningful is to connect the new content to what is already familiar or known (McIntyre, Kyle, & Chen, 2008). From an instructional viewpoint, contextualization refers to drawing connections between what needs to be learned and students' existing schema or experiences. That is, ELLs should have the chance to link new vocabulary to their existing lexical repertoire and experiences (Dutro, 2002; McIntyre et al., 2008). When teaching academic vocabulary to ELLs, the kinds of connections that teachers make provide ELLs with an important scaffold, especially if they are grappling with abstract and new concepts. Contextualizing and drawing connections between new vocabulary and ELLs' experiences is one way that teachers could address ELLs' lexical needs. In this way, ELA and reading teachers could engage ELLs in active learning of academic vocabulary (Calderón, 2007). While teachers are building connections between new academic vocabulary in English and ELLs' existing experiences or knowledge of cognates (as discussed above), they

should also address ELLs' needs for repeated practice with new vocabulary (Marzano, 2004). Marzano (2004) argued that new vocabulary gradually becomes first nature to students as they are given opportunities to practice and apply the vocabulary in multiple contexts.

In contextualized instruction, ELLs also benefit from engaging in interactive learning experiences. For instance, Calderón (2007) suggested that interactive vocabulary learning should occur through constant oral dialogue between the teacher and students about the text. She suggests that teachers should know how to implement effective strategies such as the following in the classroom:

...having ELLs draw a cartoon using the word, design a creative way of representing the word, helping them invent a mnemonic device to remember the word, such as a brief chant, rhyme, rap, joke, or even a Shakespearean iambic pentameter stanza; helping them try to come up with as many synonyms or antonyms for the particular word as possible; letting ELLs use all the words of the week, develop word games to play with other pairs (p. 41)

These strategies enable ELLs to apply new vocabulary terms in meaningful contexts.

Teachers should also develop various ways to customize their instructional practices based on their assessment of ELLs' lexical needs (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). In other words, the type of learning and practice activities teachers choose to implement with their ELLs should reflect the students' level of proficiency in English. Peregoy and Boyle (2008) differentiated vocabulary learning strategies according to beginning and intermediate proficiency levels. According to these authors, beginning-level ELL vocabulary learners could benefit from language teaching that contextualizes the vocabulary by pairing actions with words to convey meaning. The authors suggested that, for the beginning-level ELLs, teachers could enact physical response activities like Simon Says or other demonstrations of word meaning with gestures and dramatization. Peregoy and Boyle also suggested that teachers read aloud written text or let ELLs read aloud a text. With the intermediate level ELLs, the authors recommend various vocabulary-teaching tools, such as word or language wheels. These tools help ELLs to learn the words in their different forms, for example, verb conjugations

or adverb and adjective forms. Stated in broad terms, teachers should be able to recognize the challenges that ELLs have with various types of vocabulary and differentiate instruction depending on their assessment of these challenges.

**Contextualizing through familiarity with genre and structure.** Another consideration in the teaching of vocabulary concerns genres. Certain genres of texts are particularly conducive to contextualizing ELLs' learning of academic vocabulary. Hadaway et al (2002) pointed out that teachers' integration of nonfiction literature into instruction provides ELLs the opportunity to encounter concept-related vocabulary terms in more authentic contexts that aid in understanding vocabulary at a deeper level. Nonfiction literature such as poems, biographies, journals, or diaries offers more current, relevant, and interesting ways to engage ELLs in authentic experiences when compared to textbooks; the language of textbooks tends to be abstract, relying heavily on technical vocabulary and avoiding controversy by presenting ideas from a nonspecific, objectified perspective.

Ranker (2009) presented results from a qualitative study of ELLs in a first-grade English as a second language (ESL) classroom. The teacher guided the students through the nonfiction genre by preparing a whole-class book on frogs. This was done to scaffold the students' later small-group efforts such as conducting research and writing their own books about other animals, drawing on the skills they had learned in the whole-class project. In the study, the teacher began the workshop by reading aloud from a set of nonfiction books about frogs and had the students look through the books to locate particular kinds of information (e.g., what frogs eat). Then, the teacher had the students mark the locations in the books with sticky notes on which they write a brief note about what they have found. Later, they shared the research with the class, wrote complete sentences about each note, and organized the sentences, which the teacher then recorded in the class book. Ranker noted that the students were not only able to extend their learning about the nonfiction genre to their small-group books on other animals, but that some students transferred the skills to writing a book about the *Titanic*. Ranker wrote: "This was an example of students engaging in *transformed practice* (New London Group, 2000), or using already learned literacy practices in new contexts and for new purposes" (p. 587).

There are other examples of activities that can be employed to facilitate ELLs' comprehension of the reading text and thus expose them to vocabulary learning in context through engaging them in nonacademic texts (Porter, 2009; Rieg & Paquette, 2009). Rieg and Paquette (2009) presented the idea that ELLs' decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and metacognitive thinking could be enhanced through music, drama, movement, and readers' theater activities. According to the authors, drama and kinesthetic illustrations of the content increase students' motivation and reduce their anxiety to learn content. Additionally, Porter (2009) suggested that teachers

- use adapted texts or abridged versions of texts; activate students' schemas and background knowledge by asking them to read summaries of scenes before reading the full text;
- chunk texts by breaking scenes down into smaller sections based on a shift in focus, action, or emotion;
- use visual aids, such as a map of character relationships, student drawings of characters, and student-produced storyboards of important events in the play;
- provide explicit instruction in difficult vocabulary and structures, that is, teaching students how to use word analysis, context clues, cognates, and dictionaries to access the meanings; and
- incorporate instructional conversations, having students participate in discussions during the course of all these activities.

It is equally important for teachers to help ELLs understand how a variety of sentence structures is used to convey meaning in different types of texts like compare–contrast, persuasive, or argumentative text. For instance, Dreher and Gray (2010) pointed out that, if ELLs are not familiar with the sentence structures within a compare and contrast text, this might hinder their comprehension of the information or content in the text and hence hamper their construction of meaning. Dreher and Gray suggested that, once ELLs' understanding of certain text structures is improved, teachers could further help ELLs to activate and extend their understandings of the text by building upon their background knowledge as “ELL

students are also likely to draw on different types of background knowledge than native English-speaking students, and to come from cultural and linguistic backgrounds that may be different from that of either their peers or their teacher” (p. 141). Further, familiarizing ELLs with text structures like compare-contrast will help the teachers to expand and enrich ELLs’ academic vocabulary knowledge, especially of terms such as *unlike*, *similar to*, *compared to*, and *resembles*.

While it is important to develop ELLs’ academic vocabulary, teachers should not sacrifice development of ELLs’ reading comprehension through a too-narrow focus on academic vocabulary instruction. Cummins (2003) and Shanahan and Beck (2006) posited that word recognition and decoding skills alone, which ELLs acquire quickly, do not guarantee higher levels of proficiency in reading comprehension. Thus, teachers should strive to develop a range of reading skills—from word recognition to comprehension strategies—while teaching ELLs to read. That is, teachers need to balance word level decoding skills with high-level reading strategies. This point leads us to the emphasis in the literature on teaching ELLs reading strategies that would enable them to monitor their own language learning and reading skills. In the next section, we discuss the third effective and essential teaching practice: teaching ELLs metalinguistic strategies so that they can monitor their own language learning. This proposition is based on the premise that metalinguistic skills, which refer to knowledge about how language works, are essential in ELLs’ development of literacy skills.

### **Improving ELLs’ Metalinguistic Knowledge in Reading**

Metalinguistic skill refers to the ability to monitor one’s language learning processes and also the ability to talk about the language that one uses or is learning to use. Metalinguistic skill is a subset of *metacognition*, defined as ELLs’ “ability to think about [their] own thinking” by Herrera et al. (2010, p. 142). Proficient ELL readers are expected to monitor their thinking, identify problems whenever they cannot comprehend the text, and find the relevant resources (e.g., bilingual dictionaries, reading strategies) to build comprehension. Further, there is growing evidence that students who are becoming bilingual benefit by learning to read using

metalinguistic tasks such as (a) defining words or (b) increasing phonological awareness of sound-letter and sound-word correspondence (Carlisle, Beeman, Davis, & Spharim, 1999).

Various strategies emerged in the literature as effective practice for teaching metacognitive skills to ELLs, including read-alouds and think-alouds. That is, teachers of ELLs could facilitate ELLs' development of metalinguistic skills through a process of teaching them to verbalize their thoughts while reading (Herrera et al., 2010; Vacca & Vacca, 2008). According to Herrera et al., teachers can guide ELLs through effective reading strategies by modeling how to use reading comprehension strategies in practice. An important precursor to engaging ELLs in these think-alouds is modeling of the process by the teacher. Vacca and Vacca (2008) suggested that while thinking aloud students should be guided to “1) develop hypotheses by making predictions, 2) develop images by describing pictures forming in their heads from the information being read, 3) link new information with prior knowledge by sharing analogies, 4) regulate comprehension by demonstrating strategies” (p. 50). All these practices imply the use of particular strategies to monitor reading at a high level of cognitive awareness.

Taboada (2010) claimed that ELLs appear to benefit from explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies such as “questioning, making inferences, monitoring, summarization, visualizing, [and] identification of main ideas” (p. 314). Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002) classified such metacognitive reading strategies into three categories: global, problem solving, and support reading strategies (see also Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002). One caveat is that teachers might need to explicitly model these strategies for ELLs and guide them through repeated practice until they become habituated. Teachers of ELLs may benefit from effective practice in teaching ELLs metacognitive reading strategies. Table 1 provides an overview of the types of metacognitive reading strategies and descriptions and examples for particular strategies. The strategies mentioned so far are ones that *all* good readers employ, but ELLs could benefit from some coaching or scaffolding to acquire these strategies.

**Table 1*****Metacognitive Reading Strategies***

Type of strategy	Description	Examples
Global reading strategies	“Generalized, intentional reading strategies aimed at setting the stage for the reading act...”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• setting purpose for reading</li> <li>• activating prior knowledge</li> <li>• checking whether text content fits purpose</li> <li>• predicting what text is about</li> <li>• confirming predictions</li> <li>• previewing text for content</li> <li>• skimming to note text characteristics</li> <li>• making decisions in relation to what to read closely</li> <li>• using context clues</li> <li>• using text structure</li> <li>• using other textual features to enhance reading comprehension</li> </ul>
Problem solving strategies	“Strategies for solving problems when text becomes difficult to read.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading slowly and carefully</li> <li>• adjusting reading rate</li> <li>• paying close attention to reading</li> <li>• pausing to reflect on reading, rereading</li> <li>• visualizing information read</li> <li>• reading text out loud</li> <li>• guessing meaning of unknown words</li> </ul>
Support strategies	“Use of outside reference materials, taking notes, and other practical strategies.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using a dictionary</li> <li>• taking notes, underlining, or highlighting</li> <li>• paraphrasing or summarizing text information</li> <li>• revisiting previously read information</li> <li>• asking self questions</li> <li>• using reference materials as aids</li> <li>• discussing reading with others</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from “Assessing Students’ Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies” by K. Mokhtari & C. A. Reichard, 2002, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(2), 252. Copyright 2002 by the American Psychological Association.

**Summary**

In this section on teachers’ understanding of linguistics, three main areas of effective practice were drawn from the literature. The first was that teachers should recognize that ELLs’ native language literacy might influence or interact with their literacy development in English. Second, teachers should incorporate a variety of contextualized and systematic explicit or incidental instruction of academic vocabulary into their practice. Third, teachers should provide

ELLs with metacognitive reading strategies as tools to monitor and repair their comprehension of text. A point worth re-emphasizing is that word recognition skills should be balanced with higher order reading comprehension strategies that overall should help ELLs to construct meaning.

### **Pedagogical Practices in Teaching Reading and Writing to ELLs**

In this section, we present the effective pedagogical strategies that do not purely require linguistic skills or understanding of linguistics from teachers of ELLs. Here, we discuss two areas of pedagogical strategies that emerge from both the theoretical and empirical studies reviewed and that are closely related: (a) the teachers' ability to help ELLs construct meaning from the texts or speech represented in the ELA classroom, and (b) their ability to engage ELLs in actively learning to read and write. First, we discuss ways in which teachers can help ELLs to construct meaning.

#### **Helping ELLs Construct Meaning**

One part of the knowledge base that emerged in relation to teachers' pedagogical skills in teaching reading and writing to ELLs has to do with facilitating ELLs ability to make meaning of oral and written text. Ajayi (2008) defined "*meaning making* as a process by which learners gain critical consciousness of the interpretation of events in their lives in relation to the world around them. In this way, the meaning that individual learners arrive at after reading a story or watching a video is mediated by their social, cultural, and historical experiences" (p. 211). What is critical to this process are the connections built between learners' own lives and the experience of learning. When individuals learn to read, the meaning-making process involves receiving and decoding textual or visual scripted input and labeling the input with meaning. The pedagogical skills needed to help ELLs construct meaning expand upon the linguistic knowledge base of utilizing ELLs' native language in reading instruction, as discussed in the previous section on teachers' understanding of linguistics.

In this section, we elaborate on the pedagogical skills identified as essential for ELA teachers to facilitate ELLs' construction of meaning. Specifically, we present three effective practices that help teachers to engage ELLs in meaning-making. First, we discuss how teachers could build upon ELLs' background knowledge and cultural experiences to help them construct

meaning. Second, we present a few highlights from an emerging line of research on multi-modal ways of communicating and constructing meaning. Lastly, we highlight the research and views suggesting that teachers should design collaborative learning activities in order to help ELLs construct meaning in academic texts.

### **Building From the Known to the Unknown**

One asset that helps teachers in their attempts to facilitate ELLs' comprehension of text and construction of meaning is the pedagogical skill to build upon background knowledge and cultural experiences. In other words, teachers need to build on what is already familiar to ELLs and gradually introduce the unknown so as to facilitate their comprehension and processing of text in reading or writing (Herrera et al., 2010).

Research has confirmed that background knowledge facilitates reading comprehension (Dochy, Segers, & Buehl, 1999; Krashen, 2004; Peregoy & Boyle, 2004, as cited in Brown, 2007). According to these scholars, one point of consideration for teachers is that textbooks may not be conducive to drawing upon ELLs' background knowledge because the textbooks might be designed with the assumption that all readers share similar cultural experiences and have the necessary background knowledge to comprehend the text. Brown (2007) offered the example of ELLs reading a text about hazards facing pioneers in the West: "Runaway horses, stampeded cattle, prairie fire, blizzards, heat, sunstroke, Indians, lice, snakes and the pure loneliness of the open plains-all of these and more faced the western pioneers of the 1800s..." (p. 34). Brown presented such examples to support the claim that ELLs may not have the necessary background knowledge to comprehend texts.

By building on ELLs' background knowledge, teachers essentially build schematic connections between *text* and ELLs' *self* (Herrera et al., 2010). That is, whatever exists or does not exist in ELLs' past experiences or background knowledge should be capitalized on to build smooth access to comprehending the text and connecting with it. This is because the schematic background knowledge that teachers help to establish could facilitate ELLs' understanding of the language and concepts and mitigate any comprehension difficulties they may experience. Similarly, in a report from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon, and McLean (1999) cited building on and making explicit

connections between students' existing knowledge and academic content as helpful in transitioning ELLs to mainstream English instruction. The authors found several successful strategies for making such connections when teaching literature in the ELA classroom: (a) building on students' background and existing knowledge base, (b) integrating literature logs to get students to write their answers to specific questions about themes in the story being read, and (c) promoting students' extended discourse through working the text—reading it, rereading it, discussing it, writing about it, and listening to what others have written about it. Farris et al. (2007) proposed literature circles for ELLs to help them to make “text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world” connections by engaging them in read-alouds, independent and shared reading, as well as oral discussion and writing based on one selection of literature (p. 39). Thus, teachers ought to ensure that ELLs make connections to the ideas they are reading about to mitigate the difficulty that they might already have because of their limited knowledge of the language.

As hinted at above, one important aspect of ELLs' background knowledge is their literacy experience in their native languages. Several research studies suggested that teachers scaffold students' meaning-making through drawing upon their current knowledge and early literacy experiences as well as exposure to age-appropriate books in the native language (Hancock, 2002; Helman & Burns, 2008) and providing ELLs with the opportunity to use their native language (Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000). One strategy that is not a direct teaching practice is for the entire school community to support ELLs' development of literacy in their home language. In a longitudinal study, Reese et al. (2000) pointed out that family literacy practices were influential in students' subsequent English reading achievement. Time spent on literacy activities in the native language, early literacy experiences as well as having families that encourage and provide literacy activities, and formal preschool experiences are strong predictors of subsequent English reading achievement. Moreover, in a brief review of literature on literacy and ELLs, Teale (2009) concluded “that reading instruction in L1 helps in learning to read English, [and] that L1 instruction contributes positively to academic achievement in L2” (p. 702). Further support for the benefits of building on ELLs' L1 literacy was provided by Slavin and Cheung (2005). In their review of effective reading programs for ELLs; they posited that, while the number of high-quality studies is small, existing evidence

favors bilingual approaches, especially paired bilingual strategies that teach reading in the native language and in English at the same time. Whether taught in their native language or English, ELLs may benefit from instruction that builds on their cultural experiences and background knowledge.

### **Using Multiple Modalities**

Another emerging effective practice that concerns helping ELLs construct meaning is to facilitate access to multimodal ways of communicating meaning. That is, teachers should provide ELLs with access to different genres and modes of text such as “reports, newspapers, pictures, songs, manuals, textbooks, narratives, procedures, legal documents, spoken or written words, and the different text types associated with electronic multimedia” (Ajayi, 2008, p. 209). This approach to construction of meaning is situated within a multimodality perspective arguing that a combination of different modes may be needed to convey a message and make meaning as new media dominate public communications. From this perspective, Gee (2003) argued that meaning making involves “learning how to situate (build) meanings in different domains, be they videogames, computers, movies, television, visual images, literature, and so on” (p. 26).

From a similar perspective, Ajayi (2008) examined the ways in which high school language learners co-constructed word meanings through multimodal representation and drawing upon sociopolitical realities in ELLs’ daily lives. The theoretical orientation and the intervention used in the study was built around notions like *participatory pedagogy*’ and meaning-making used as critical transformation of the social reality. The authors noted that through multimodal representation of a newspaper report (*GOP Congressman Renews Push for Immigration Curbs*) using multiple tools and resources such as a political text, photographs, and a campaign video clip and through activities like meaning-guessing, campaign advertisement, and cartoon strips, as well as group and whole class activities, learners had the opportunity to negotiate meanings of selected vocabulary items and phrases like *permanent status*, *temporary status*, *guest-worker program*, *undocumented immigrants*, *illegal aliens*, and *political asylum* as well as *amnesty*, *opposition*, *advocacy*, *legislation*, *legalization*, *overhaul*, *immigration*, and *anti-immigration*.

One of the implications of this work is that construction and negotiation of meaning through multiple modalities and types of texts provides the opportunity not only to ELLs but to

all learners to explore and interpret literary work. This opportunity then allows them to understand where they stand and express their voices. It then is important to engage second-language learners in dialogue to help them construct meaning as well as enhance their critical skills in reflecting on complex issues relevant to their everyday lives. Along these lines, we next reflect on what it means to involve ELLs in the construction and negotiation of meaning through collaborative activities.

### **Designing Collaborative Activities**

Collaboration is another effective teaching practice that supports the teacher skill and knowledge base of helping ELLs construct meaning from text. Teachers should design collaborative activities to provide ELLs with opportunities to fill in gaps in their comprehension of text and to construct meaning. Creating a collaborative classroom environment allows for linguistic interactions with peers and the teacher (Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Slavin, 1998). Calderón et al. (1998) presented an intervention program that incorporates cooperative reading and writing activities. This intervention program, Bilingual Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (BCIRC), was designed to help bilingual second- and third-grade limited-English-proficient students succeed in reading in their home language, Spanish, while making a transition to English reading. The BCIRC program entailed a series of activities that occur before, during, and after reading and writing in both their first and second languages. These activities involved building background and vocabulary knowledge and allowing ELLs to make predictions while reading and writing. Calderón et al. described a partner-reading, treasure-hunt activity in which students answer a series of questions about “the characters, setting, problems, and problem solutions...” and “look for clues to support or reject their answers, make inferences, synthesize, and reach consensus” (p. 158). This intervention program highlights the positive effect of the cooperative learning for ELLs, which allows them to engage in linguistically complex interactions around the solution of real problems situated within a story-writing activity. This seems to benefit ELLs both in native-language literacy skills as well as reading and writing skills in English.

A study by Calhoun, Otaiba, Cihak, King, and Avalos (2007) similarly emphasized that teachers should be able to engage ELLs in reading and the discourse around a story. In their study, a peer-mediated program grounded on the theoretical view on peer-assisted learning strategies was administered. Peer-assisted learning strategies suggest that ELLs will benefit from peer-mediated instruction because the memory load required of them in second language reading processes could be high. The program was divided equally between activities focused on raising ELLs' awareness of sound-word correspondence and story sharing activities geared towards allowing students to decode words for peer comprehension. Teachers guided instruction to be reciprocal so that ELLs had an opportunity to switch roles between being a coach to a partner and being coached by a partner who was at a higher proficiency level. Students benefited considerably from the activity in which the partners traded stories, made predictions about the story, and then retold the story. The implication this study has for teachers teaching ELLs to read and write is that struggling ELL readers benefit considerably from collaborative peer activities that pair one high- and one low-level performing reader, especially while they are trying to construct meaning from the text. With regard to helping ELLs to engage in the text and construct meaning, Kong and Fitch (2002) presented the case of a teacher who implemented book clubs with her culturally and linguistically diverse students. One effective practice noted from the teacher was that she allowed time and space for students to read, write, and talk about the age-appropriate literary books they had read for their book club. The classroom community shared ideas collaboratively in fishbowl discussions that allowed more capable students to model and scaffold while the others listened to the discussions until they were ready to express themselves.

In another study, Klingner and Vaughn (2000) also showed the benefits of employing collaborative strategic reading skills in a fifth grade class at an elementary school in a large, metropolitan school district in the southeastern United States. In this study, the process of building collaborative strategic reading skills includes several components: (a) *preview* the topic where students predict what the passage might be about; (b) *click and clunk* where students monitor their reading performance and identify places where the text doesn't make sense; (c) *get the gist* by asking students to restate the main point of the text; and (d) *wrap-up* by having students summarize the main points learned by letting them generate questions about the parts

that were not learned. Once teachers and learners were familiar with the specific steps for implementing these strategies, the actual implementation in the classroom yielded improvement in students' grades.

In this section, we have focused on strategies teachers could use to help ELLs construct meaning from the text. As is described above, allowing ELLs to construct and share meaning through collaborative peer activities stood out as an effective teaching practice and strategy. In the previous sections, it was emphasized that teachers could facilitate ELLs' construction of meaning through providing access to multimodal texts and that teachers should build connections between ELLs' linguistic and cultural resources and unknown content or concepts. Next, we will highlight several important teaching practices or strategies to engage ELLs actively in learning to read and write.

### **Engaging ELLs in Reading and Writing**

Teachers should facilitate ELLs' efforts to connect with the text by constructing meaning in reading. These efforts largely involve a dialogue between the reader and text. Dutro (2002) and Vacca and Vacca (2008) both argued that active engagement in meaning making from the text is a must for ELLs and all readers. Vacca and Vacca characterized engaged readers as motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially interactive. In order to achieve this ideal scenario for all learners, teachers should be able to guide instruction in ways that engage and sustain students in reading in English. Several strategies are offered as recommendations to the teachers with the goal to engage ELLs in a process of reading to allow them to react to text in writing.

One commonly recommended strategy is helping ELLs realize what they know, what they want to know, and what they have learned from reading a particular text. This instructional strategy, referred to as *KWL*, "engages students in active text learning" (Vacca & Vacca, 2008, p. 213) about the content or the ideas in the text, raising their awareness of what they already know, what they do not know, and what they would like to learn. One way of providing ELLs with enough linguistic support to participate in this consciousness-raising strategy is through the use of *sentence walls* (Carrier & Tatum, 2006), which are well-formed phrases and sentences that

ELLs can resort to whenever they need to express an idea in academic language. The rationale is that ELLs need “prefabricated” word- and sentence-level chunks they might consult whenever they need to join in the conversation around the content or text (p. 285).

Similarly, Vacca and Vacca (2008) suggested engaging students in active expression of their understanding of the text through the use of discussion webs, which allow them to engage in further exploration of the text and thoughtful discussion of different sides of an issue. The discussion webs recommended by Vacca and Vacca are essentially graphic organizers, which are tools to represent and organize ideas and concepts. The classroom enactment starts with students brainstorming about the ideas they want to contribute to the discussion based on their interactions with the text. At later stages, students are given the opportunity to team with partners to realize and resolve differences in perspective. Finally, they share their ideas and resolutions about the issue with the entire class. Discussion webs could be especially beneficial for ELLs, as they need the encouragement to voice their opinions, which reinforces their engagement in the text and content. While engaging in such activities, ELLs also have the opportunity to phrase their understanding of the text in their own words (Marzano & Pickering, 2006). This sense of ownership is also highlighted by Jacobs (2001), who recognized in her own high school classroom that ELLs became avid readers after a year of reading books of their own choosing and discussing important ideas, quotes, agreements, and questions from those books with their peers and teacher. According to Jacobs, “A big part of making the transition from English Language Learners (ELLs) to English students has to do with their learning to read freely and confidently for pleasure” (p. 37). This final stage of engagement with the text as an autonomous reader is what all teachers of ELLs should aspire to achieve with their ELLs. In order to get there, Jacobs (2001) recommended that teachers guide ELLs towards owning their own language-learning processes.

While engaging culturally and linguistically diverse students in construction of meaning from and dialogue with the text through discussion activities, the teacher should permit the use of the native language in the classroom. Students’ use of their native language would respect, affirm and legitimize its role in students’ learning to read and write texts in English and to engage in discussion of text (Franquiz & de la Luz Reyes, 1998). Similarly, Whitmore and

Crowell (2005) reflected that ELLs could become part of an empowering classroom community, during elementary school and beyond. In follow-up interviews with students 10 years after a three-year ethnographic study in a third-grade bilingual classroom, students reported that earlier literary experiences that had allowed them to pursue reading and writing topics of their own interest were influential in their gaining a sense of empowerment that carried over beyond the third-grade classroom. Whitmore and Crowell argued that teachers should affirm ELLs' linguistic and cultural resources while also encouraging them to pursue their creativity and curiosity to learn.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In our attempts to delineate the teacher knowledgebase needed to help ELLs acquire and maintain high levels of reading skills, reading emerged as central to learning in all content areas, not just in ELA classrooms. Certain effective practices were discussed within the domains of understanding of linguistics and pedagogy. Per the understanding of linguistics, it was emphasized that teachers should recognize the interactions of native-language literacy with literacy skills in English. Specifically, teachers should recognize that these interactions might interfere with ELLs' decoding skills at the lexical and syntactical levels. Also, teachers should be able to identify differences and challenges among every day, general academic, and content-specific vocabulary. The broad goals in doing so should be to help ELLs to make contextualized and meaningful connections with academic vocabulary through reading and to develop skills in reading to learn content. In supporting ELLs to become good and purposeful readers, teachers should help them achieve a level where the students can monitor their own reading and be ready and resourceful enough to repair their own breakdowns in understanding and in interpreting the text.

As for teachers' pedagogical skills, two areas of emphasis emerged as particularly essential in helping ELLs develop good reading skills: (a) helping them construct meaning from texts or speech represented in the classroom, and (b) engaging ELLs in active learning to read and write. In the first area, initially we discussed teachers' ability to draw on ELLs' background culture. Next, the effectiveness of exposing ELLs to various genres and text types through

various modes was discussed. To expose ELLs to and engage them in meaning-making from literary and nonliterary texts, it was argued that it is important for teachers to enact peer collaborative activities. In the second area, the emerging argument in developing ELLs' literacy was that teachers should provide ELLs the opportunity to engage in reading and discussing the text and follow a process-approach to react to text in writing.

The effective teaching practices and the underlying research presented in this review may not always be directly applicable to the subgroups within the entire ELL population or to a particular grade level. Furthermore, some of the effective teaching practices might not underlie the teacher knowledge or skill set that is specific to teaching ELLs. Rather, some practices appear to be applicable to all students or struggling readers or writers. Further research should explore what specific teacher knowledge contributes to effective instructional practices distinctly applicable to ELLs.

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