

## Using a Bilingual Reading Strategy to Reduce SLD Numbers

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**Abstract:** Studies show that for Spanish speaking students, vocabulary expansion in Spanish increases fluency and comprehension in English. Therefore, creating a bilingual reading intervention program with a strong emphasis on vocabulary building in the early grades will help improve the students' overall reading comprehension in English and avoid improper placement.

In the past 30 years, the number of students categorized as Specific Learning Disabled (SLD) has more than tripled (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The overrepresentation of minorities in this category is just as alarming as its general increase. Many Hispanic students are mislabeled as being SLD when, in reality, a language barrier is the main cause of their poor reading skills (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). Studies show that Spanish speaking students transfer phonological awareness and word-identification skills to the English language (Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; Proctor, Carlo, August, & Snow, 2006). Increasing the breadth and depth of the lexicon is an important and well documented factor in improving reading skills (August et al., 2005; Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Improving students' reading skills before they are labeled reduces the number of students in special education.

Proctor et al. (2006) found a correlation between Spanish vocabulary and English fluency in the early formative years. Their study was conducted using bilingual students and studying the effects of literacy instruction in one language (Spanish) on the reading comprehension of the second language (English). Expanding the vocabulary in Spanish helped increase fluency and comprehension in English (Proctor et al., 2006). The purpose of this paper is to argue that a bilingual reading intervention program with a strong emphasis on vocabulary building in the early grades will help improve a student's overall reading comprehension in English, thus lowering the number of Hispanic students being placed in SLD.

### Properly Defining SLD

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is a disorder "in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, §2657.30(a)). Children who have a great discrepancy between their IQ-test and their academic achievement receive the label of SLD. This model requires the student to fail before treatment is given (Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006). For the most part, identification of potential at-risk students does not occur until the third grade under this model. This is especially true for Hispanic students. Hispanic students who are learning English as a second language do not possess the same reading skills as students whose first language is English (Carlo et al., 2004). By the time these students' needs are addressed, the achievement gap between them and English only learners (EOL) is very wide, forcing many into unnecessary special education programs (August et al., 2005). These students do not have a learning disability, rather a deficit in the size and scope of their vocabulary that hinders their reading pace and comprehension. Without proper early interventions, English Language Learners (ELL) may be confused for students with specific deficits and needs in reading. Placing them in special education programs will only further widen the achievement gap.

The re-authorization of Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 changes the method of identifying children who may have a SLD. The Act now allows a local education agency to use any research-based intervention in the evaluation process of the child. This empowers teachers, allowing them to identify students with possible disabilities earlier and provide students with proper assistance in their studies. A current form for identifying students is Response-to-Intervention (RtI), which uses research based interventions by the classroom teacher to monitor and remedy gaps in student learning. The success of RtI relies heavily on early intervention in Kindergarten and first grade on the part of the teacher.

### **Early Intervention and RTI**

Early intervention is based on the notion that if students are given proper attention and supplemental support, the number of students needing long term remediation or special services is reduced, thus narrowing the gap between the low and high performing students (Schwartz, 2005). Using the early RtI model for SLD identification in reading allows for earlier identification, a stronger focus on the effective instruction of students, and a continuous monitoring process of student learning and desired instructional outcomes (Compton et al., 2006). For RtI to be effective, practitioners must intervene at an early age. Early reading interventions should occur between Kindergarten and first grade to maximize the effectiveness of the RtI (Compton et al., 2006; Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005). Spira et al. (2005) found that if the skills needed to read are not attained by the beginning of third grade, the students would be unlikely to learn the skills. Early intervention allows for the participation of those students identified at-risk in the second tier intervention, before their reading problems increase (Compton et al., 2006). This minimizes the number of students who are low achievers being categorized as SLD because of inappropriate instruction.

The basic model of RtI includes three tiers. The first tier involves either a universal screening test in reading for all students in Kindergarten or first grade or continuous monitoring of the progress of the whole class and recording discrepancies amongst the students by the teacher for the first five to ten weeks (Compton et al., 2006). The second tier provides specialized instruction and remediation in smaller groups to students who are functioning at a slower pace than the general class (Compton et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2005). This tier calls for continuous monitoring of the remediation throughout an 8-20 week period (Davis, Lindo, & Compton, 2007; Schwartz, 2005). If the student has not been successful with the intervention, the student would be moved to the third and final tier, which normally is special education and requires an evaluation by the multidisciplinary team to determine the student's exact needs (Compton et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2007). The goal is to intervene early and remediate the reading deficit before it becomes a major problem. Under this model, ELLs receive additional remediation under tier two. With this remediation, the gap between the ELLs and EOLs would narrow.

### **Vocabulary Acquisition**

Although many factors are pertinent to being able to read and comprehend what is read, one aspect of being a successful reader is overlooked by most primary school curriculums - vocabulary. Vocabulary, or the building of the lexicon, may be a powerful predictor of reading comprehension (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Ironically, though, our schools are not emphasizing vocabulary importance in the curriculum. In fact, their lack of inclusion in the curriculum causes the gap to continue to expand among the students with reading differences (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Studies have stated that low or restricted vocabulary in the primary grades has a

limiting effect on a student's reading comprehension in the middle grades (Biellmiller & Boote, 2006).

Vocabulary builds schema. It creates literal meanings, connotations, semantic associations, and ties to other words and constructs (August et al., 2005; Carlo et al., 2004). As a student reads a passage, the different words conjure up these different schemas and connections. If a large majority of the words in a passage have no pre-established schema for the student, or are unknown to the student, then the reading of the passage becomes a daunting feat for the student (August et al., 2005; Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). As the student's vocabulary expands, so does the refinement of the existing schemas and phonemic differences between the words, improving reading comprehension (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Roberts, 2005). Vocabulary has also been found to be extremely important in the building of phonological awareness (Lindsey et al., 2003; Roberts, 2005). The connections between schema and phonological awareness with vocabulary help ease the students into reading.

From an early age, vocabulary may be taught through the repetition of words and stories with direct explanations of word meanings (Biemiller & Boote, 2006). By repeating the words and having the children attach meaning to them, vocabulary acquisition improves (Biemiller & Boote, 2006), thus allowing students to make phonological connections to words (Roberts, 2005). In a study conducted by Biemiller and Boote (2006), the researchers' use of repetition of oral reading combined with explanations of unknown words helped improve the number of words that young students were able to learn. This study involved a total of 122 students from grades K-2 and approximately half were students who learned a language other than English first. Students gained an average of 12% of word meaning by repetition and 10% more when adding word explanations to the repetition. How does vocabulary acquisition affect ELLs?

### **English Language Learners**

English language learners (ELL) enter the classroom with many disadvantages. The majority of ELLs are learning a language that is different from the one spoken at home (Lindsey et al., 2003), limiting their exposure to the English language only to the classroom setting. English Only Learners (EOL) come into the classrooms with 5,000 to 7,000 learned words before beginning formal reading instruction (August et al., 2005), while ELLs come into school with significantly less learned vocabulary (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). Although ELLs probably bring with them the equivalent size of vocabulary in their native language, their lack of vocabulary in English places them at a great disadvantage. ELLs also enter the classroom with fewer word associations and schemas (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). In essence, even if they possess the knowledge of a certain word, they may not be able to apply the word in all of its contexts correctly.

Despite the limitations in language of these students, significant strides have been made through the implementation of reading interventions. Effective interventions have at their core a strong focus on vocabulary development. In their study, Droop and Verhoeven (2003) found that ELLs' vocabulary had a strong and direct influence on their reading comprehension. The increase in ELLs' vocabulary size and the connections they made to other word meanings helped make drastic improvements in reading comprehension. In another study by Carlo et al. (2004), reading comprehension for ELLs also improved as vocabulary increased. This study further found that direct vocabulary instruction (explicitly teaching new words with explanation of meaning as the reading was done) and instruction in word-learning strategies were effective methods for teaching ELLs. There should be an even greater increase if ELLs were allowed to learn as bilingual learners.

### **Bilingual Learners**

Building the students' vocabulary in both languages will expand the students' connections and schemas of words, improving their reading skills. Exposing students to two languages has been effective in improving reading and writing skills (Lesaux & Siegel, 2003). Proctor et al. (2006) found that students who speak two languages are able to focus more and have better use of the meaning-making strategies from both languages. Furthermore, these researchers found that knowledge of Spanish vocabulary enhances English reading comprehension. Other studies have found that bilingual students use their knowledge in the native language to infer meanings for English cognates (August et al., 2005). As previously stated, phonological awareness and word-identification skills were transferable from Spanish to English in studies of ELLs (Lindsey et al., 2003; Proctor et al., 2006).

### **Future Considerations**

The question still remains - How do educators develop a successful intervention program for ELLs? The goal should be to create an early RtI program that focuses on strengthening vocabulary through systematic repetition of words and direct explanation of said words. The key is to develop this program through bilingual instruction. Instead of forgoing the vocabulary these students have learned in the native language, it should be used to build new connections to the English language. The ELLs benefit from receiving English vocabulary and reading instruction in conjunction with the EOLs in the class. They should also receive an additional amount of time learning the same vocabulary and reading in their native language, thus allowing students to make the semantic connections of the new words and transfer them to learning English.

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