Using the ELSB Curriculum
with Students with Disabilities
Who are English Language Learners

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The number of English language learners, also known as English learners or limited English proficient students, has been steadily increasing across the United States. According to the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (OELA, 2008), more than 5 million English language learners have been identified in school systems across the United States, of which 80% are Spanish speaking (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). To place this growth in further perspective, in the past decade alone the number of these diverse learners has grown 60%, while the total school population has grown only by 3% (2009). Educators urgently need to build capacity for educating students who are English language learners, especially in the area of literacy. When English language learners also have autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability (ID), or some other developmental disability, finding an appropriate approach to literacy may be especially challenging. In this article we describe some of the challenges in educating students with disabilities who are English language learners, review research on literacy instruction for this population, and describe how the *Early Literacy Skills Builder* (*ELSB,* 2007) incorporates these research-based practices.

▶ Challenges

One of the challenges in providing literacy for students who are English language learners and have disabilities is building educators' capacity to serve these students' unique needs. Mueller, Singer, and Carranza (2006) note that, due to a lack of experience with this population, educators who currently teach English language learners with ID are often unable to provide the linguistic accommodations and supports these students need for daily instruction. English language learners, by definition, have a first language that is not English, which can make acquiring literacy skills in a second language difficult. Traditionally, students identified as English language learners have more difficulty acquiring skills such as vocabulary (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Hickman, Pollard-Durorola, & Vaughn, 2004; Manyak & Bauer, 2009), resulting in lower academic achievement overall (McCardle, Mele-McCarthy, Cutting, Leos, & D'Emilio, 2005). Take into

account a significant ID and we are now faced with a diverse group of individuals, which neither practitioners nor researchers are quite sure how to accommodate (Rivera, Wood, & Spooner, 2011; Rivera, 2011; Spooner, Rivera, Browder, Baker, & Salas, 2009).

A second challenge educators may face is determining best or evidenced-based practices for this diverse group of individuals. A brief literature review by Rivera (2011) found six studies—one survey (Mueller et al., 2006) and five experimental studies (i.e., Duran & Hiery 1986; Rohena, Jitendra, & Browder, 2002; Rivera et al., 2011; Rivera 2011; Spooner et al., 2009)—that focused on academic and functional instruction for English language learners with ID. Because of the scant research, it is critical that researchers and practitioners begin to increase efforts and use of effective strategies (e.g., shared stories, systematic instruction, direct instruction) that have worked effectively for both students with disabilities and typically developing English language learners. By combining these best practices we may be able to better serve English language learners with disabilities.

▶ Research-Based Literacy Instruction

Two important guidelines educators can follow in teaching early literacy to students who are English language learners and have disabilities are to build vocabulary through literature-based lessons and to promote skills with systematic and direct instruction. Research has shown that vocabulary knowledge contributes greatly to reading comprehension and academic success (August et al., 2005; Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003; Becker, 1977; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Gersten & Geva 2003; Tannenbaum, Torgesen, & Wagner, 2006). An option for teaching important literacy skills, such as oral vocabulary, to elementary-age English language learners with ID is to use shared stories, also known as read alouds, shared storybook readings, and dialogic reading (e.g., Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee, & Spooner, 2009; Sipe, 2000). In this approach, the teacher reads a story aloud, creating opportunities for the listener to interact with the story (e.g., by commenting on pictures and answering questions) to build understanding. Shared stories have been used successfully in teaching literacy skills to typically developing students, students with ID, and English language learners (e.g., Browder, Mims, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Lee, 2008; Coyne, Simmons, Kame'enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004; Silverman, 2007ab; Skotko, Koppenhaver, & Erickson, 2004). Justice and Kaderavek (2002) suggest that shared stories help introduce students to components of reading such as print awareness, alphabet knowledge, and phonological and metalinguistic awareness. Additionally, researchers have shown that young students who are read to on a daily basis demonstrate higher scores on

vocabulary and comprehension assessments (Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Coyne et al., 2004).

For English language learners in particular, shared story interventions have provided positive results leading to an increase in overall vocabulary development. For example, Silverman and Hines (2009) conducted a group study comparing the effects of multimedia and traditional shared story interventions on vocabulary acquisition for both English language learners and English-only learners. Student samples were taken from four grade levels: pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Results from this study indicated that English language learners made positive gains in vocabulary word acquisition in both conditions.

Shared stories also have been effective with students who are English language learners with disabilities. Spooner et al. (2009) used a story-based lesson instructional package to teach emergent literacy skills to a Hispanic English language learner with a moderate ID. The instruction had a cultural context; that is, components such as language and heritage reflected the student's fund of knowledge. A task analysis with forward chaining was used to teach three emergent literacy skill sets. Skills taught within the three sets were (a) making predictions, (b) engaging in the literature (e.g., orientating the book, opening the book, turning the pages), (c) learning vocabulary words, and (d) answering comprehension questions. Results from the study found that the student was able to increase the number of correct responses across skill sets, improving upon her emergent literacy.

Additionally, Rivera (2011) conducted a study using two linguistic, multimedia shared story (MSS) instructional packages for two English language learners with moderate ID. The purpose of this study was to examine the comparative effects of English and Spanish multimedia shared story interventions, with constant time delay procedures, on the acquisition of English oral vocabulary for the two participants. Results from the study found that the students were able to increase their English vocabulary using both interventional packages; however, one student performed better using the Spanish MSS, while the other performed better using the English MSS. This may indicate that the use of primary language, presented within instructional materials and instruction, may be a critical piece in English vocabulary development for some English language learners with disabilities.

One of the defining features of the way shared stories are adapted for students with disabilities, especially those with moderate and severe developmental disabilities, is to incorporate systematic prompting and feedback to teach specific target responses during the read aloud. This systematic instruction also has been effective in teaching other literacy

skills. One of these methods of systematic prompting is called "time delay" and is used to fade teacher prompts by adding small increments of time (e.g., 4 seconds) before the teacher offers assistance. Using rigorous criteria to evaluate research quality, Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Spooner, Mims, and Baker (2009) found time delay to be an evidence-based practice that has been used successfully to teach picture and sight word recognition to students with moderate and severe developmental disabilities. This research includes studies showing time delay to be an effective instructional method for teaching sight words to English language learners with ID (e.g., Bliss, Skinner, & Adams, 2006; Rohena et al., 2002).

▶ Early Literacy Skills Builder

The *ELSB* (2007) was developed to incorporate the components of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (2000). It also uses the two key strategies found effective in the small amount of research on students with disabilities who are English language learners. First, the *ELSB* uses a shared story in every lesson and promotes the use of a second daily lesson using read alouds of children's literature. The *ELSB* teaches vocabulary and early phonemic awareness and phonics skills using systematic prompting procedures like time delay.

In addition to incorporating these methods that gleaned directly from research with students with disabilities who are English language learners, the *ELSB* (2007) incorporates other broader recommendations for educating these students. Cline and Necochea (2003) designed a conceptual framework for students who are English language learners: Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE). SDAIE includes the following eight components for planning instruction for these students: (a) connecting to previous learning, (b) using visuals and manipulatives, (c) providing low risk and safe environments, (d) providing multiple access points, (e) creating cooperative and interactive instruction, (f) chunking and webbing, (g) being respectful of the learner, (h) and using primary language support.

The *ELSB* (2007) incorporates each of these recommendations for planning instruction for students who are English language learners. The *ELSB* connects to previous learning by repeating objectives across lessons in a spiral of increasing expectations. This provides students the opportunity to practice newly mastered skills. It also uses many visuals and manipulatives, such as embedded pictures. A low risk and safe environment is created through the emotional warmth and humor in the lessons. For example, a frog named Moe encourages students to practice words in sentences because "that's what the big frogs

do." The *ELSB* offers multiple access points, especially when it comes to various response modes. All responses can be made using assistive technology, pointing, and speech. The instruction is interactive and cooperative through a "my turn/your turn" format (direct instruction), allowing for multiple group formats. The lessons also focus on friendship and personal awareness. For example, as students progress through the curricula they witness the main character, Moe, making two new friends, Molly and Hippo. The lessons use chunking and webbing by providing instruction in small-connected steps, with connections to prior lessons, and familiar formats for responding. The lessons create respect for learners by offering encouragement and praise (positive reinforcement) as they try new responses. Primary language support is an option for use with the *ELSB*. For example, lessons might be introduced using the student's primary language, as in research conducted by Rivera (2011), Rohena et al. (2002), and Spooner et al. (2009).

As mentioned earlier, teachers may have limited experience and training in how to teach early literacy to students with developmental disabilities who are English language learners. A key advantage of the *ELSB* (2007) is that all lessons are fully scripted. By following the script, teachers incorporate the key evidence-based practices built into the curriculum. The script is written in a teacher-friendly format and includes fun social interactions (e.g., greeting Moe the frog) as well as the targeted instruction.

▶ Summary

While research on teaching literacy to students with moderate and severe developmental disabilities who are English language learners has emerged only in the last decade, these studies offer important guidance in using literature as the focal point of the lessons with read alouds and in teaching target skills using systematic prompting and feedback. The *ELSB* (2007) incorporates both of these evidence-based practices and acts as an engaging format for students with diverse needs and cultural backgrounds.

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