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Strong Core Instruction for ELLs – Tier 1

The foundation of RtI for ELLs is high-quality core, or Tier 1, instruction focused on promoting language and literacy development. Only once a rigorous, effective instructional core is in place—one that targets the student population’s needs on a daily basis as part of a long-term plan—can we begin to build interventions that will serve as truly supplemental and supportive instruction. Unfortunately, some ELLs are taught in contexts with insufficient opportunities to learn; this kind of environment is also known as a “disabling context” (see Tiers 2, 3). To prevent such inadequate learning opportunities, strong core instruction must be the norm. This guide provides a reference for instructional strategies that support differentiated, Tier 1 instruction to promote ELLs’ literacy development.

The guide focuses specifically on:

- developing different key domains of literacy, to support competencies in reading, writing, listening, and speaking
- presenting instruction that makes direct and appropriate connections to ELLs’ community values, identities, and languages¹

In combination, this high-quality core literacy instruction is necessarily culturally and linguistically responsive.

Part I. Key Literacy Domains

Oral Language: The Underpinning of Learning and Knowledge

Why this focus?

Core literacy instruction should build on and expand students’ existing oral language competencies to support literacy learning and content knowledge. We know from research that English oral language proficiency is closely related to academic achievement in English. Without well-developed oral language, ELLs cannot readily handle the language and knowledge demands

¹ adapted from Klingner, Soltero-González, & Lesaux, 2010

of the school curriculum—a curriculum that is delivered almost exclusively through oral and written language—especially as they move up through the grades.

But large-scale observational research carried out in linguistically diverse schools tells us that systematic instruction focused on oral language is limited. For example, research in high-minority, high-poverty schools² finds that early elementary classrooms devote only 8-11% of the reading block to vocabulary development. This minimal focus on vocabulary and language development is mirrored in a similar study, also conducted in a large urban school district, documenting practices in secondary classrooms³. With this research in mind, we know that extending and strengthening oral language instruction in classrooms serving ELLs will require a considerable, but very necessary, shift in practice.

What does oral language instruction look like?

Building students' oral language skills means teaching specialized vocabulary (and the often-abstract concepts such words represent), as well as the specialized structures of language in academic speech and text—often referred to as elements of *academic language*. Accessing middle and high school textbooks demands a knowledge of academic language. Building such conceptual and language skills is essential for ELLs to succeed in school.

Core instruction that promotes oral language development is necessarily rich in both language and content. In these learning environments, students have opportunities to learn about, study, and discuss the language of texts. They then use this text-based content learning in interactive experiences like labs, demonstrations, dramatic plays, and debates that promote academic conversation and knowledge building.

Strategies that promote ELLs' oral language development must be explicitly planned and incorporated throughout the school day. These strategies include, but are not limited to:

- building background knowledge:
 - starting with rich text and big ideas so students encounter and study abstract language and abstract concepts, and learn about the world
 - previewing key concepts and challenging vocabulary, as well as reviewing students' understanding of important points
 - when possible, drawing on and using students' home languages
- close, interactive reading aloud (Click [here](#) for an example):
 - frontload vocabulary, sentence structures, and concepts

² Gamse and colleagues (2008)

³ Lesaux et al.

- ask open-ended questions along the way; engage students in discussion and dialogue about a big idea in the text
- include relevant multicultural literature as well as multicultural chants, songs, and poems that help to build phonemic awareness
- storytelling using wordless books
- collaborative discussion and debate:
 - devote instructional planning and time to student projects that are discussion-based, including oral presentations and debates
 - during discussions, pose open-ended questions and keep the conversation going
- role playing and rehearsed oral performance
- multifaceted and intensive vocabulary instruction:
 - study words, word parts, and word families as part of the content-based literacy instruction; build words and knowledge at the same time; include a focus on words with multiple meanings
 - include vocabulary learning strategies such as using visual cues, total physical response (TPR; i.e., physically acting out new terms), and realia
- sentence transformations through guided dialogue
- language frames for speaking and listening
- jointly constructed extended writing:
 - e.g., co-constructing a written text based on a shared classroom experience
 - connecting writing assignments to content under study; supporting
- explicit connections to community and content

Written Language: The Gold Standard

Why this focus?

Writing skills play an increasingly important role in determining students' school and professional success, but developing advanced written language skills can be a particular challenge for ELLs. This challenge is due, in part, to the type and quality of writing instruction students receive. In fact, large-scale survey research indicates that many teachers report feeling under-prepared to effectively teach writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Kiuahara, Graham & Hawken, 2009).

What does written language instruction look like?

Whether students already know how to write in their home languages, or whether they are in the early stages of English writing development, instruction should be adjusted to refine and expand their competencies, and to help them acquire the academic writing skills they need in the content areas. Quality writing instruction during the classroom literacy core should be

sustained and extended (e.g., developing extended research pieces, essays, and stories), so that it is continually linked to oral language and reading instruction.

Strategies for promoting ELLs' written language development during the instructional core include the following:

- connect the ways in which students and their families use literacy at home and in the community (e.g., topics, styles, and cultural knowledge) with classroom writing themes
- provide different types of writing tools in the classroom
- promote different types of writing purposes, genres, and formats
- model writing activities using the language experience approach:
 - Write students' dictations about a shared classroom experience. Use the text produced from students' dictations as the basis for refining students' writing abilities.
- guide students' early writing by co-constructing predictable and rhythmic books (e.g., poetry, rhyme, and patterned language books)
- use writing in the service of deep text analysis, perhaps in tandem with literature circles
- interact with students (and have students interact with each other) through written communications:
 - For example, use dialogue journals. These journals are written conversations between the teacher and individual students. Although the purpose of dialogue journals is not to correct students' errors, it is recommended to recast them and use the correct model in your responses as a way to advance students' language proficiency.
- model language structures when jointly writing texts:
 - This method can be used to generate books for the classroom library such as modified patterned language books, stories for wordless picture books, recipe books, and scripts for readers' theater.
- teach the writing process (i.e., developing ideas, writing them down, getting feedback, editing, producing the final draft, and publishing):
 - During the first stages of the process, focus writing instruction on communication and meaning construction, as opposed to mechanics and correctness. Many ELLs may struggle with editing their own writings when correctness obscures the expression of meaning and the development of complex ideas.
 - During the latter stages of the process (i.e., editing, producing the final draft, and publishing) support ELLs as they edit their own writings. Try using writing rubrics and the traits model to guide students. Bear in mind, most writing rubrics do not account for the bilingual strategies that ELLs often use when they write. Encourage ELLs to focus on conventions (e.g., spelling, grammar) as the last step in the editing process.

- Celebrate writing! Have students read their finished works aloud for their peers as each takes a turn sharing their writing during their writing celebration. Be sure to incorporate appropriate social, cultural, and linguistic adaptations.
- integrate oral language and vocabulary instruction into writing instruction by having students:
 - verbalize their thinking before putting it into writing, and share aloud after they have both thought and written about the topic
 - use new vocabulary and language structures in their writing

Word Reading and Spelling Skills: Word Work in Context

Why this focus?

Reading and writing words requires an awareness of the individual sounds in spoken words, knowledge of letter-sound relationships, decoding skills, and sight-word knowledge. Thus, word reading and spelling skills are platforms for both unlocking the message of a text and communicating through written language. Although effective reading comprehension and writing cannot be achieved through proficient word reading and spelling skills alone, they are certainly necessary for literacy success and thus are key components of culturally and linguistically responsive core instruction.

What does word reading and spelling instruction look like?

All efforts should be made to teach word-reading and spelling in interactive ways, and within the context of reading and writing activities, rather than in isolation. After all, for these skills to give reading and writing meaning, they need to be continuously linked to the context in which they will be used. The following are examples of word work activities that researchers have found effective when used with ELLs. These strategies are organized by three key components of reading and spelling skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight words.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate the phonemes or sounds in spoken words. When designing phonemic awareness instruction for ELLs, first identify what students already know in their home languages *and* in English. Then, provide explicit instruction to students with low levels of phonemic awareness (once a student has developed this skill, he does not require explicit instruction). Research shows that many activities that work well with monolingual learners should also help ELLs, including:

- singing songs
- reciting rhymes
- reading and rereading poems and books with rhythmic patterns
- making up alliterative sentences

- playing word games in which students manipulate sounds and syllables

When promoting ELLs' phonemic awareness, bear in mind that enhancing this skill in a student's home language can facilitate the skill in English.

Phonics is the understanding of sound-symbol correspondence. When ELLs have learned to read in another language first, the process of learning to read in English is facilitated. This facilitation can be particularly useful when the orthographic systems of the two languages are similar (such as Spanish and Portuguese) but can be more challenging when they are not (such as French and Japanese). Research shows many activities that work well with monolingual learners should also help ELLs develop phonics skills. Such activities include integrating the following practices into a rich unit of study:

- creating student-generated word lists with specific rhymes (e.g., night, flight, bright)
- sorting words according to their spelling patterns
- identifying rhymes during shared or independent reading
- searching for familiar letters and letter combinations in texts
- using letter cards, rhymes cards, and/or magnetic letters to build and break apart words

Sight words are the most commonly used words in English and, as such, readers encounter them frequently. Many of these words have irregular spelling patterns (e.g., said, where, the). When teaching ELLs sight words, teachers should connect instruction to books read in the classroom. Teachers can help ELLs recognize sight words with accuracy and efficiency using strategies including, but not limited to, the following:

- building words using magnetic letters or letter cards
- creating sight-word books
- rereading short, familiar texts
- creating an interactive word wall

Fluency: Reading with Ease, Not Racing Through Reading

Why this focus?

Fluency is the ability to read accurately and efficiently while maintaining meaningful phrasing. Bear in mind, fluency should not be confused with accent. Students can read fluently in English with a Spanish language accent, for example. Because fluent reading frees up the cognitive space needed to make meaning from text, culturally and linguistically responsive core instruction should include activities that promote this key reading skill.

What does reading fluency instruction look like?

Like word reading and spelling activities, it is important to build students' fluency in meaningful and relevant ways. Activities that build ELLs' reading fluency are appropriate for a wide range of students, including non-ELLs, so teachers can use them frequently, and can involve all of the students in class. Strategies such as the following will help build fluency:

- modeled fluent, expressive reading
- shared reading of big books and other shared texts
- repeated reading
- readers' theater
- choral reading
- partner reading
- reading along with audio books
- recording reading

Reading Comprehension: Putting it all Together

Why this focus?

For all readers—including ELLs—reading comprehension is a multifaceted process that requires a number of separate, but related, competencies. Comprehension is facilitated by fluent word reading, but it is not guaranteed by it. Instead, comprehension requires a mastery of a range of abilities as well as the knowledge necessary for both extracting and making meaning from text. Some of the challenges that ELLs may face in reading comprehension are related to language proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and use of comprehension strategies.

What does reading comprehension instruction look like?

Providing instruction that enhances ELLs' reading comprehension means building background knowledge, highlighting key vocabulary, and interacting socially to make meaning. Strategies for building reading comprehension include, but are not limited to:

- reading thematically related texts, across genres (i.e., text sets):
 - reading aloud, modeled and shared reading
- modified guided reading (select books according to stage of development):
 - use guided reading format to model and build the multiple components of reading comprehension (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, word-reading skills, comprehension monitoring)

- reciprocal teaching (i.e., the teacher models using reading strategies when reading aloud, then leads students in a text-related discussion. As students become more proficient at applying the strategies, they take turns leading discussions about text content.)
- scaffolded retelling (i.e., students share and compare their retellings of text and provide feedback at the whole story level, at the phrase and individual word levels, and back to the whole story level; students use visual cues such as graphic organizers to clarify and consolidate their thinking.)
- literature circles (i.e., small groups of students who read or listen to the same book—or text set related to the same theme—and meet to discuss their understanding with others.):
 - include quality literature in which the children can see themselves
- reading responses incorporating art, music, drama, poetry

When implementing these reading comprehension activities, be sure to:

- draw on students' existing knowledge
- build students' background knowledge
- focus on key vocabulary [including transition words (e.g., therefore, first, however), content-specific words (e.g., petri dish, robber barons, hypotenuse), and all-purpose academic words (e.g., culture, impact, contribute, research)](e.g.,)]
- ask questions to promote understanding and prompt critical thinking and analysis
- provide students with multiple ways to show what they are understanding and learning (oral, written, role play, drawing)

Comprehension Strategy Instruction: More isn't always better

Comprehension strategy instruction is a part of content and language rich literacy curricula and important for literacy development. But we need to be mindful of how much strategy instruction is part of standard comprehension instruction. Many ELL students have strategies for reading text but lack the knowledge and language to make sense of what they are reading—so their strategies do not help them much. In fact, many ELLs have proficient word reading and good strategies, but also have underdeveloped language, vocabulary, and content knowledge. For this reason, reading comprehension instruction should target their language-learning needs. When vocabulary and content knowledge are similarly well-developed, their reading strategies will be much more useful to support comprehension.

Part II. Connecting to ELLs' Home and Community Identities and Languages

Making Learning Meaningful

Why this focus?

ELLs' home and community literacy practices and funds of knowledge should be valued as resources for literacy learning at school. Devising activities and projects that are related to students' lives at home or in their neighborhoods is likely to increase students' motivation and literacy success.

How do I make connections between ELLs' home/community and classroom learning?

This aspect of literacy instruction should permeate all of the above domains. Strategies for connecting school learning to students' homes and communities include, but are not limited to:

- storytelling about family and neighborhoods:
 - try compiling these stories in a book for the classroom library. They can include realistic elements like photographs and excerpts of interviews with family members.
- autobiographies and personal narratives:
 - try incorporating this writing project into a social studies unit
- books created in the home language (written, audio-taped):
 - try reading them with similar language background peers
- letters to family and friends (including those who live far away)
- research projects in the local community
- lessons or units that draw from students' local literacy practices and knowledge
- instructional classroom visits from family and community members who share knowledge and experiences; connect these conversations to content learning

Bilingualism as Resource

Why this focus?

ELLs draw on what they know about their home languages to learn to read and write in English. In other words, a student's home language is a scaffold around, or a "bootstrap" into, English. Students who capitalize on cross-language transfer learn to read and write in English more easily than students who do not use this strategy. There are many skills and much

knowledge that can transfer from a home language to English, and thus do not need to be re-taught. [e.g., vocabulary (cognates, or words that look similar in two or more languages and have similar meanings, such as democracy and *democracia*), print awareness and concepts of print, sound-letter correspondence, comprehension strategies, and background knowledge.]

Knowledge of what literacy-related skills and experiences ELLs have in their home languages allows teachers to build on students' strengths and needs, promote metalinguistic awareness, and encourage this type of language and knowledge bootstrapping.

How do I make connections between ELLs' home language and English?

Teachers should help and encourage ELLs to identify similarities and differences between their two languages and apply them to learning to read and write in English. There is no need to re-teach children what they already know. Teaching for cross-language connections should be done throughout the day and across the curriculum. Some ways to promote it include:

- identifying cognates in books read, and creating a word wall with these examples
- highlighting the similarities and differences between the home language and English in relation to syntax, spelling, text structure, and punctuation
- using students' home languages to build background knowledge by previewing key concepts and challenging vocabulary, as well as reviewing key concepts – all in native languages when possible
- reading bilingual books to point out parallels and contrasts between the two languages (e.g., tone, text structure, word choice)

Culturally Responsive Teaching in Action

Digging deeper: Linking Language and Learning to Big Ideas

Miss Leslie's kindergarten class is studying a unit about things that grow. She and the children are just wrapping up a discussion about the similarities between sprouting plants on the nearby shelf and those in the book, *The Ugly Vegetable*. Using content-rich language, she then reminds her 5-year-olds about center time. "If you choose to go to the science table to make compost for our worm habitat, don't forget to add the leftover carrot sticks from the soup we cooked yesterday." Joseph waves his raised hand, indicating his choice. The science table is Joseph's favorite and Miss Leslie finds it is where he does some of his best learning. While Joseph makes his way toward the worm habitat and the other students walk to their chosen centers, Miss Leslie sits down in the writing area. Meeting with the students there, she uses questioning strategies she and her colleagues have been focused on as part of their ongoing professional development. Miss Leslie then joins Joseph and his peers who are mashing carrots, leaves, and soil together. She grabs the book on the table, *Wiggling Worms at Work*, and engages the students: "Hmm. What information do we still need about worms? What other questions do we have?..."

Revolutionary Instruction: Linking Language and Learning to Big Ideas

"Whoa, she cut a bullet out of her leg!" Javonne, a 4th grader, is amazed as he reads *The Secret Soldier: The Story of Deborah Sampson*. "That's extraordinary. How does that violate what people used to think about women?" Ms. McCombs asks. She watches as Javonne's head turns toward the academic word wall, looking for a reminder of the definition of *violate*. Ms. McCombs had incorporated ideas from the reading curriculum into all of her teaching, including suggestions for using academic vocabulary in all contexts. As a result, Javonne and his classmates had become accustomed to referencing the word-wall resource throughout the day. During this unit on the American Revolution, the students have been studying the historical period from multiple angles and opening up opportunities to build language. During reader's workshop, the students have been examining biographies, learning about influential American colonists, and having discussions in-character about entering the war. During social studies, they have been learning about the key events and figures, and have had mock debates about whether to join the British, or fight against them. A writing project will conclude the unit; their task will be to write a biography, integrating information from multiple sources and weaving in some of the words they have studied along the way. Ms. McCombs will use these compositions to assess her students' ability to synthesize research in writing and their understanding of the academic words. She'll then present these data at the upcoming cluster meeting, where conversations about the literacy curriculum materials have been a great help during this first year with the program. Javonne's teacher holds her tongue, giving him a moment to process her question about the bullet wound and construct an answer. He responds: "Um, that goes against, I mean, that *violates*..."

The Language of Math

Frustrated by how much their ELL students were struggling with various math concepts, a group of teachers went to the students' homes and spoke with the students' parents. Amidst the lively Hawaiian Creole conversations between parents and children, the teachers noted that the children did, indeed, have mathematical knowledge; they just needed a new way to access the harder concepts that had been too difficult to understand in class. The teachers rearranged lesson plans, building on the math knowledge that they witnessed and organizing class work so the concepts taught first were the ones that built on students' strengths (e.g., counting rather than vocabulary related to position of objects). After teaching the math vocabulary in Hawaiian Creole, and incorporating activities students were familiar with outside of school (e.g. running a student store to understand money, teachers included cooking activities of native cuisine), the teachers saw dramatic increases in their students' math success. Tapping into student strengths and helped students overcome their weaknesses.

Content-Based Literacy Instruction for Young Readers

Mr. Evans looked forward to teaching her bilingual first graders an integrated social studies/ literacy instruction unit about shelters around the world. He wanted the students to get a feel for what it was really like to live in different places, and he was as excited as they were about the lesson plans. The students researched the reasons why shelters were designed in certain ways, and how the local weather, geography, topography, economy, and other factors affected living arrangements. They designed shelters together and brought items from their homes to furnish them. When the assistant principal, Mrs. Margolis, walked by one day when they were all talking and planning and working throughout every corner of the room, the constant buzzing of voices made her stop and say, “Such fun you’re all having! Can I come in?” Later, Mr. Evans and Mrs. Margolis discussed the successful lesson. Mr. Evans said he was pleased with how collaboratively the students had worked in their small groups, and he thought that the volunteers, Spanish- and English-speaking parents who were in the room at the time, helped keep the kids focused and invested in the project (adapted from research by Arce, 2000).

Content-Based Literacy Instruction in the Upper Grades

Ms. Martinez looked around her 5th grade social studies classroom and smiled. Finally, she could see that her focus on helping ELLs better understand the material and engage in the learning process was paying off. From the start of school this year, she had been diligent about including systematic content-specific vocabulary lessons into the daily classroom work. She chose her words intentionally, focusing on upcoming unit vocabulary, but also including the common words in the social studies textbook that the linguistically diverse students struggled with every year. As she walked between the tables, she could hear a usually-reticent ELL student chime in during group work, and she determined that the time spent on defining and giving examples of how to use the novel words, plus the class time she had them devote to review and oral practice, made a real difference for those students she has been most concerned about. In years past, words such as *period*, *community*, and *distribute* would trip up these students, and yet these were words that repeatedly appeared—in some form and in different contexts -- in the reading she was assigning nightly. While their vocabulary needs were great, she felt as if this focus on building knowledge about often abstract words was helping kids better understand the concepts in these difficult pre-selected texts.