



Toward Comprehensive  
Effective Literacy Policy  
and Instruction for  
English Learner/Emergent  
Bilingual Students



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**Effective literacy education for English learner/  
emergent bilingual students is an urgent  
achievement and equity issue impacting well over  
five million students in the nation's schools.**

It is imperative that English learner/emergent bilingual students leave school as proficient readers and writers in English and preferably more languages and who thrive and succeed in school and their communities. Closing the opportunity and achievement gaps for these students who have too often been left behind should be a high priority. Too often, however, one-size-fits-all literacy approaches designed for English proficient students are inappropriately applied to English learner (EL)/emergent bilingual (EB) children – with harmful consequences. Amidst an increased focus on early literacy across the nation today, it is essential that we get it right for EL/EB students this time, avoid foundational skill-centered literacy approaches that have failed them in the past, and heed the specific research on literacy development for second language and dual language learners. Fortunately, we have a strong research base to build upon and know what effective literacy instruction for English learners should be.

**The failure of one-size-fits-all “scientific” reading  
and literacy approaches for EL/EBs in the past.**

In the 1990s, concerns about a reading crisis in the United States fueled national research and policies aimed at closing achievement gaps by focusing on early literacy. The 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* mistakenly relied upon inappropriate English assessments for EL/EBs, leading to mandated use of a narrow foundational skills literacy curriculum and instructional approaches as the corrective action. An accompanying curriculum and professional development initiative, Reading First, was instituted seeking to ensure that all students would score at state reading benchmarks by third grade. Reading First required schools to adopt “scientific, research-based reading programs” based in part upon the research of the National Reading Panel which had identified five components of reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Reading First, however, primarily emphasized the phonemic awareness and phonics components- a narrow slice and loose interpretation of the National Reading Panel’s work. An extensive evaluation of the efficacy of Reading First found that while there was an impact on strengthening decoding skills among first-grade students,



there was no significant impact on student reading comprehension test scores in subsequent grades and no improvement in student motivation and engagement with literacy. Reading First policies—and the “scientifically based” literacy curricula and approaches that schools adopted—were never designed for EL/EB students. As stated in the introduction to the National Reading Panel’s report delineating the limitations of their work, “*The Panel did not address issues relevant to second language learning.*” Across the nation, gaps in literacy skills for EL/EBs did not close. Indeed, the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) confirmed Reading First’s failure to reduce reading gaps for this population.

**Literacy instruction for English learners should be based upon the specific research about English learners which consistently shows that effective literacy instruction for English learners is NOT the same as for monolingual English proficient students.**

In a 2006 research report on literacy development of EL/EB students, the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth found that the National Reading Panel’s components of effective literacy instruction were insufficient for EL/EBs. The report laid out the fundamental understanding that the development of language and literacy for students with two or more languages is distinctly different from monolingual literacy development. It critiqued the shortcomings of programs that primarily emphasized foundational reading skills, calling instead for a **comprehensive approach** to literacy development that teaches skills in context, and integrates meaning-making (learning new concepts), language development, and foundational skills of reading (phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency) and recognizing that literacy is more than reading skills but includes the interrelationship of writing, oral language and comprehension. The report and subsequent research on effective English literacy instruction for students who are English learners have consistently called for recognizing the presence and role of home language in the development of literacy, the specific processes of second language development, the uniqueness of the dual language brain and cross-language mechanisms, the importance of building background knowledge, the need for scaffolds to support comprehension, and calling for more attention to the role of oracy as a foundation for literacy. It made clear the ways in which effective literacy instruction for

EL/EBs is different in significant ways from instruction for monolingual students. The conclusions of this report inform instruction for all EL/EBs but are critical for those learning to reading in English-only instructed classrooms.

Furthermore, the past decade has seen a growth of dual language programs nationwide in response to research on the benefits of bilingualism. Strong and consistent research has established that emerging bilingual children have benefited greatly from dual language programs that develop literacy in English and a partner language (usually the EL participants’ home language). Research has demonstrated that teaching emerging bilingual students to read in their home language promotes higher reading achievement in English in the long run. In fact, well-implemented dual language programs show more positive student outcomes in English literacy than monolingual English programs. In addition, participants in dual language programs achieve biliteracy (literacy in two languages!). Effective biliteracy instruction and dual literacy pedagogy involve the strategic and inter-related use of two languages - providing intentional opportunities for students to make cross-language and cross-cultural connections, and using strategically coordinated and aligned literacy instruction in both languages with a scope and sequence authentic to each language. Effective biliteracy pedagogy emphasizes the use of literacy in both languages for meaningful interaction and academic study.

### **A Call to Heed the Research on Effective Literacy for EL/EB students.**

A one-size-fits-all approach fails to address the unique needs of EL/EB students and does not capitalize on their strengths. Despite the important development of research on language and literacy development for EL/EBs, a renewed concern about early literacy and a drive to get all children reading at grade level by third grade is tempting many states and districts to limit what should be *robust and informed literacy instruction to an uninspired*



narrow focus on a few foundational reading skills. Because literacy skills are so foundational and the stakes so high, all students should be taught to read and write in the most effective, appropriate way for them. At both the policy and practice levels, effective literacy education for ELs requires rejecting the misguided and harmful imposition of literacy assessments and literacy approaches designed for English-speaking students upon EL/EB students. It means heeding instead what is known about literacy development and the dual language brain, applying knowledge of second language and biliteracy development, and being guided by assets-oriented, research-based literacy instruction principles.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Committee for Effective Literacy (NCEL) calls for literacy instruction that recognizes, honors, and leverages dual language brains and builds on the considerable research and knowledge base about what constitutes effective literacy instruction for English learners. It calls for federal and state leadership and investment in effective literacy instruction and in the teachers, curriculum, and resources needed to support the instruction that EL/EBs need.



## National Committee for Effective Literacy

The National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL) uplifts research, policies and practices to ensure that English learner/emergent bilingual students leave school as proficient readers and writers in English and preferably more languages and who thrive and succeed in school and their communities. We are researchers, teacher educators, teachers, administrators, school board members and advocates from across the nation with deep expertise in literacy and the education of English learners/emergent bilingual students.

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## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

There are multiple terms used throughout the nation to refer to students who enroll in schools with a family language other than English, who are not English proficient, and who face barriers to equal educational opportunity related to attending schools that are still predominantly and overwhelmingly taught only in English. Officially in federal law and state education codes is “**English Learner.**” The field of English learner education is now navigating to “**Emergent Bilingual**”, a more accurate and assets-oriented terms that (1) avoid the deficit view that labels them only in terms of the language they don’t yet know and instead acknowledges the fact that these students enroll in school already with a language, (2) that the process of language and literacy development is a dual language process involving both their home language and their second language regardless of whether they are being instructed just in English or bilingually, and (3) responds to the fact that in increasing schools and districts, the goal is the development of biliteracy and proficiency in multiple languages. This paper uses the combined term “**English learner/Emergent bilingual**” (**EL/EB**) to refer to all students who enroll in school with a home language other than English.