Effective Instruction: The Intersection of Structured Literacy and Second-Language Acquisition for Multilingual Learners

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Over the past quarter-century, national awareness of multilingual learners (MLs)—particularly those with emergent English proficiency, federally known as English Learners (ELs)—has steadily grown. Note that we use *multilingual learners* to describe all students who come to school with two or more languages, regardless of the status of their English proficiency. This awareness is timely, as children who speak a language in addition to English at home represented 21% of all students in 2022 (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2022), with estimates indicating that MLs could represent 40% of the school-aged population by 2030 (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). With such a demographic shift predicted, the perspective on meeting the needs of a theoretically monolingual classroom must evolve along with student populations. Far greater numbers of learners are acquiring English than a single specialist or English language development add-on program can serve, so any sense of urgency over their academic achievement must extend into our shared consciousness because it no longer describes a small proportion of learners.

One pivotal first step in developing this shared consciousness about the needs of MLs came from the seminal report *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth* (August & Shanahan, 2006), along with its 2010 update. This report reviewed the research on second-language learners' literacy acquisition and presented several conclusions, with two major findings of interest to us:

1. While MLs benefited from instruction that focused on the five essential components of reading instruction—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—they also required simultaneous, systematic English oral language development. Well-developed oral (i.e., spoken) English proficiency is associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills.
2. MLs benefit from literacy instruction in their native language, which supports their ability to learn to read and write in English. MLs instructed in their native language as well as English performed better, on average, on measures of English reading proficiency than MLs instructed only in English.

Conversations and research reviews about literacy development for MLs have been captured in the recent past (e.g., Goldenberg & Cárdenas-Hagan, 2023; Vargas et al., 2021). Various groups have convened to share understanding and explore points of agreement and divergence regarding how MLs may or may not benefit from instruction grounded in the science of reading (National Committee for Effective Literacy, 2022; Pivot Learning, 2023; The Reading League, 2023). Such discussions and publications have covered numerous topics, including foundational skills for speakers of all languages, the risk of reading difficulties for MLs and others, and the language of instruction (English only vs. English and the home language). In addition to shifting the narrative toward a greater understanding of multilingualism, we are most interested in how evidence-based instructional practices may serve to increase both the English language proficiency and the overall literacy achievement of MLs.

Learning Two Languages at Once

While this article specifically discusses the instruction of English because it is the primary language of school, the authors take learning English to signify an ultimate goal of multilingualism, which ideally includes maintenance or continued learning of the first language. The conversation around MLs has historically emphasized what they lack—look no further than the federal *English learner* label that serves not to highlight an abundance of linguistic resources and experiences but to raise alarm over an emergent skill requiring some length of instructional time. Despite this deficit view, the benefits of multilingualism have been substantiated by cognitive science and neuroscience. A multilingual brain is a healthy brain, with research demonstrating strengthened memory, attention, executive function, flexibility, and more.

While all students who speak more than one language are considered MLs, scientists make a distinction between the brain processes for *simultaneous* and *sequential* bilinguals. Simultaneous bilinguals acquire two languages from birth, with both languages showing up as a first language on brain scans. Sequential bilinguals acquire one language before age 5 and then learn a second language after age 5. Depending on whether the first or second language is activated, brain scans will look different for sequential bilinguals. Students labeled ELs are most often sequential bilinguals who acquire English in the school setting.

While language learning is a natural process, whether a learner is a simultaneous or sequential bilingual makes a difference in *how* they learn language. Babies start acquiring their first language(s) in utero and can make distinctions between languages as young as 6 months old. Nearly every baby follows a universal pattern for naturally building language competence—yet while first-language acquisition compels infants from *no* language to the *initial* language, second-language acquisition (i.e., sequential bilingualism) is inherently different, as it goes from *initial* language to an *additional* language. Because of this difference, learning a second language requires explicit instruction and systematic practice, and the field of second language acquisition offers ongoing and extensive study to support this process.

When we look at data about MLs in the U.S., we find that instruction, as it stands today, does not include adequate English language development. Long-term emergent multilinguals (formally, Long-term English learners—i.e., students who have not been designated English-proficient after six years in a U.S. school) represent 23% to 74% of MLs in Grades 6 through Grade 12 (REL at WestEd, 2016). As practitioners seek guidance for how to do more and better for their students, an approach that integrates effective instructional practices can create a path to advance both English proficiency and literacy achievement for MLs, as well as support the opportunity to maintain or grow the first language with a goal of multilingualism.

Language and Structured Literacy

Scarborough's reading rope (2001) offers one visual for how language and literacy interact, specifically in the reading process. Additionally, when we look at the "WHAT" in the International Dyslexia Association's Structured Literacy® infomap (International Dyslexia Association, 2023; see https://dyslexiaida.org/infographics/), we find a throughline connecting language and literacy, seeing that the domains of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are central to the content that underpins Structured Literacy. The IDA's Structured Literacy Brief (International Dyslexia Association, 2021) states that

> Structured Literacy is characterized by the provision of systematic, explicit instruction that integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and emphasizes the structure of language across the speech sound system (*phonology*), the writing system (*orthography*), the structure of sentences (*syntax*), the meaningful parts of words (*morphology*), the relationships among words (*semantics*), and the organization of spoken and written discourse. (p. 6)

A comprehensive but concise explanation of these italicized language areas is available at the American Speech-Language-Hearing (ASHA) website, which describes the complexity of language by stating, "Spoken language, written language, and their associated components (i.e., receptive and expressive) are each a synergistic system comprised of individual language domains (i.e., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) that form a dynamic integrative whole" (Berko Gleason, 2005). With this complexity in mind, the development of all aspects of language must occur through explicit, direct instruction and intentional speaking practice in order to cultivate both literacy and language proficiency in any language.

Learning and Teaching

The IDA infographic referenced previously also names principles of effective instruction under

the "HOW" section, indicating that instruction should be direct and systematic; mastery-focused; and utilize targeted, prompt feedback. These principles can be mapped backward onto key findings in the research on how learners learn (Deans for Impact, 2015; Bransford, et al., 2000) and thus also applied to learning a language. Following are three findings of note:

1. Learners bring background knowledge to any new concept, and this initial understanding must be engaged as the foundation for further learning.
2. Learners must not only have an understanding of new information but also develop an internal framework for organizing it.
3. Metacognition—or "thinking about thinking"—allows learners to zoom out and reflect on their learning, actively make connections, monitor their own progress, and achieve learning goals.

This research is applicable to learning anything new, whether an instrument, a sport, content-area concepts, the reading process, or, indeed, a second language. Because learning and teaching are inextricably linked, it should be no surprise that principles of effective instruction align to learning processes for optimal outcomes among students. Archer & Hughes (2011) offer three components in particular:

- direct, explicit instruction
- routine
- corrective feedback

Next, we explore each of these as they relate to both language and literacy.

Direct, Explicit Instruction

Direct, explicit instruction ensures that new learning is clear and intentional, while background knowledge serves as the foundation. In order for learners to digest a large, new concept, the concept must be broken into its smaller parts, with each part taught systematically and explicitly. Explicit teaching occurs through the *I do, we do, you do* framework where the teacher models and clearly explains concepts (*I do*), students practice the concept with teacher support and corrective feedback (*we do*), and students practice with a partner and/or independently (*you do*). Such explicitness, paired with "carefully paced explanation, modeling, and examples can help ensure that students are not overwhelmed" (Deans for Impact, 2015). As teachers support learners' ability to sequence the information, established knowledge moves into the long-term memory, freeing working memory to engage with the steps that are novel.

Applications to Language and Literacy

An ML's first language serves as foundational background knowledge—rather than a barrier—to second-language learning. Layered upon this foundation, English language structures such as syntax (word order and sentence structure) must be explicitly taught and practiced, particularly as language proficiency expectations become more rigorous. There is essentially unanimous agreement that rich, comprehensible input (Krashen, 1977) is a core necessity for acquiring a second language—but to progress from moderate to advanced English proficiency, some researchers name other key ingredients for learners to build second-language proficiency, such as comprehensible output (i.e., grammatical speech; Swain, 2000). Thus, educators must move beyond broad input or "teacher talk" alone by explicitly calling learner attention to specific language structures and having learners use these structures by providing intentional speaking practice. Noticing features in a systematic, sequential way and then amply using them in structured practice is what we mean when we refer to *systematic oral language development*.

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The spoken and written word are inherently connected, as speaking and writing are the productive language domains. Thus, written discourse—including text structures such as narrative and informational text—should be explicitly taught. By directly teaching the purpose, structure, features, and signal words of narrative and informational text structures, students will improve both their reading comprehension and writing skills, as well as reinforce the language-literacy connection. Just as teachers can use language or sentence frames with varying syntactic structures to support learners' oral production and practice, they can also provide these frames alongside graphic organizers to instruct on the features and signal words of varying text structures as students practice their writing.

Routine

Routine includes repetition of a new concept, with multiple modes of interacting with the

concept to strengthen learning (Moreno, 2006). Engaging multiple senses and learning tools all serve to deepen knowledge of the new information, as does repetition over weeks or months to engage long-term memory (Cepeda et al., 2006). The ultimate goals in both language and literacy are the construction of an internal framework (i.e., syntax or grammar) along with automaticity and eventual mastery of language content (i.e., vocabulary and comprehension). Instructional routines are pivotal to supporting internal frameworks and automaticity: They guide learners to internalize the sequence of instruction, allowing them to focus on new instructional content rather than on how to learn something. By underscoring what is important, consistent instructional routines minimize confusion and provide students with a scaffold for the new learning. For teachers, routines can maximize instructional time by utilizing a consistent pattern, thus making it easier to teach new concepts.

Applications to Language and Literacy

Simply noticing new language structures is not enough to learn them; learners require ample, structured practice to comprehend and produce the English language with mastery. Such structured practice with new language features must be repetitive and oral in nature (Hopman & MacDonald, 2018). Specifically, the teacher should facilitate frequent opportunities for students to engage amongst themselves in structured conversations that have a linguistic purpose. This ensures that learners will internalize English features, map the contexts where this learning can be utilized, and free their working memories for increasingly complex language (Glaser & Chi, 1988; TeachingWorks, n.d.).

In addition to practicing language structures, learners must also acquire rich language content in order to develop English proficiency. When teaching general academic vocabulary (Tier 2 words) that is encountered in text, teachers can follow a specific instructional routine that provides direct instruction of a word's definition in a student-friendly way. This routine capitalizes on learners' background knowledge rather than using formal dictionary definitions that students may not understand. The instructional routine for teaching the meaning of a specific word also allows students to hear and think about how the word is used in multiple contexts, as well as practice using the word orally and in their writing. The routine engages students with short and fun opportunities to actively process word meanings by answering questions about the word and responding to examples and non-examples. These activities provide repeated exposure to vocabulary and continued opportunities for oral practice. Such consistent and repetitive routines help create the internal framework for long-term memory storage.

Corrective Feedback

Corrective feedback is "essential to acquiring new knowledge and skills" (Deans for Impact, 2015). Such feedback is not intended to catch a learner when they make a mistake or to comment on the learner's performance but to activate the learner's metacognitive function. This allows students to assess what they know and what more they need to accomplish a specific outcome. Corrective feedback is most effective when it is task-focused, specific, and used promptly (Shute, 2008; TeachingWorks, n.d.). To best serve metacognition, it also allows learners to plan, monitor, and self-correct in the moment.

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Applications to Language and Literacy

It is important to understand that both academic language (text-focused) and standardized English (spoken) are language varieties that we use to instruct. Our learners may have different degrees of familiarity with these varieties and/or demonstrate strength in other English varieties. In the case of MLs who are learning the language varieties of school, it is beneficial to know about *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972)—a learner's ever-changing internal framework for their first and second language—when we evaluate their spoken and written language outputs. As we identify patterns in a learner's spoken language output that approach more advanced use of standardized English, we can supply immediate, specific, corrective feedback. After correcting a student's utterance, one particularly helpful scaffold is ensuring that the student repeats the correction back, demonstrating their *uptake* of the modification. This uptake is key: It can spur students to analyze their initial utterance, compare it to the feedback, and incorporate modifications into their interlanguage (Ellis, 2000). Over time, a learner's interlanguage should evolve to demonstrate advanced use of standardized English. Corrective feedback is *not* intended to "fix" a speaker's interlanguage

or English variety, but to inform their growing understanding of how their first and second language (or their English variety and a variety of school) work and interact.

Writing conferences can support effective corrective feedback for written language output. Conferences between a student and teacher not only offer a feedback opportunity on written content but also provide opportunities for students to clarify their thinking and produce spoken language through natural conversations centered on their writing. Wilson (2018) suggests that feedback should vary in manner and focus. The manner in which teachers convey feedback to students comes in three forms: direct, queries, and praise. Direct feedback (e.g., "Start this sentence with a capital letter." or "Move this paragraph to the beginning.") provides specific instruction. Queries (e.g., "What do you mean when you say this?" or "Where might there be a place to add dialogue?") can engage students in productive language opportunities to help clarify their thinking and improve their writing more independently. It is also important to balance the focus of feedback between higher and lower-level writing skills, with Wilson suggesting that a focus on higher-level skills—such as word choice, organization, ideas, and elaboration—has the greatest effect on writing quality and should thus be the focus of teacher feedback. Meanwhile, well-taught peer feedback structures can support the improvement of lower-level writing skills such as spelling and punctuation.

Conclusion

As detailed throughout this article, effective instructional practices map onto well-documented learning processes that are relevant to both second language acquisition and Structured Literacy instruction. It has been said that all teachers are language teachers and all teachers are reading teachers, so it is important for language and literacy instruction to be accessible to all educators—regardless of content area. Ultimately, having a solid understanding of effective instruction equips educators to support students with an asset orientation as they build on their first language while simultaneously learning the language of English and the reading and writing of English. ■

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