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Effects of Writing Instruction on Head Start English Learners at Risk for Reading Difficulties

There is a general consensus that language and literacy skills are critical in the development of reading and writing in early childhood. Educators play an important role in acquiring these fundamental skills for all children; however, the majority of the research literature fails to describe how teachers can provide quality literacy instruction for English learners (ELs), who stand to benefit immensely from efficient, effective, and structured preschool instruction in these skills.

The goal of this study was to test the long-term efficacy of a literacy curriculum that introduced concepts of written language—through explicit and meaningful literacy activities—to Spanish-speaking preschool students.

Many intervention programs for ELs are designed to improve fundamental literacy skills—such as phonemic awareness and alphabet and print knowledge—based on a supposition that such interventions will promote reading. A large body of research agrees that acquiring these specific skills is key for all children to becoming literate. Yet, many programs overemphasize one skill set (e.g., phonemic awareness) while ignoring other important areas of development (e.g., print knowledge).

In this project, the effectiveness of a curriculum that introduced literacy skills as part of a coherent package, in contrast to the more common approach of targeting specific skills separately, was tested.

A unique aspect of the curriculum was its focus on writing skill instruction. Research suggests that early reading and writing processes develop concurrently. For example, the development of early writing skills, such as writing letters and names, has been associated with improved letter knowledge and phonological awareness. However, the majority of intervention programs focus solely on improving reading outcomes without paying attention to the concurrent development of writing.

This study contributes to the literature by enhancing our knowledge of how preschool teachers can support children's developmental processes in writing. Furthermore, it focuses on Spanish-speaking preschool children's acquisition of English while developing early reading and writing skills, of which little to no empirical data exist.

The literacy curriculum was initially taught over a 10-week period to 74 low-income, Spanish-speaking preschool children enrolled in six California Head Start childcare agencies. (Head Start is a federal program focused on helping to boost the school readiness skills of children from low-income families.)

Students in a treatment group were introduced to concepts of print and writing on a weekly basis, building from simple to more complex. During the first week, the goal was to understand the concept of directionality (reading books from front to back, and writing left to right and top to bottom). Subsequent weeks focused on understanding that print carries a message, to understanding that letters in words can be identified.

The curriculum included common literacy skills taught in preschools, such as phonological awareness (helping children recognize and produce words starting with the same sound). Yet, these skills were taught through storytelling and in the context of activities that promoted writing, such as adding a new ending to a storybook; making mailboxes, post

office signs and logos on pizza boxes; making lists; and making remote controls and a movie sequence with a script. A control group of children participated in arts and craft activities related to storytelling *without* the literacy components.

Research has strongly established that Spanish-speaking EL children need instruction in their first language to promote meaningful and effective learning experiences. Therefore, relevant instruction, storytelling, and activities were provided in Spanish during the first visit to provide children with opportunities to learn new literacy concepts in their native language. During the second visit, English was used to promote development of new vocabulary skills in the second language. Samples of children's writing were collected to monitor changes in their writing development.

The children's writing skills were assessed at the end of the intervention through a task in which they were observed creating scribbles, generating mock letters and alphabet letters, and separating words. In addition, children were prompted to write their name, and three specific words in each language (*car, balloon, frog, mariposa, sopa, mamá*). In general, we found that, compared to the control group, the treatment group had statistically significant gains in English and Spanish writing.

A follow-up study was conducted to analyze whether the ef-

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children's emergent writing skills.*

fects of the intervention were maintained. Forty-one (of the original 74) children who participated in the intervention were tested two months into the start of their kindergarten school year. In addition to the development of writing skills, the follow-up study analyzed pre- and post-intervention understanding and maintenance of growth in print conceptualizations (e.g., numbers are different from letters, reading directionality is right to left, and print conveys meaning) in both languages.

Analyses showed that both the treatment and the control group children made gains in English and Spanish writing skills; however the treatment group scored significantly higher. Children's understanding of print conceptualizations in English showed a similar pattern, with both experimental groups exhibiting increases in knowledge, but the difference between the average scores for the groups favored the treatment group. There was no significant effect on children's understanding of print conceptualizations in Spanish.

In summary, the findings support the idea that consistent and explicit writing opportunities in Head Start EL preschool classrooms have positive effects on Spanish-speaking children's emergent writing skills. Specifically, children exposed to and offered ample opportunities to explore literacy activities through writing showed sustained English and Spanish writing gains in kindergarten, compared to a compared group.

These longitudinal results suggest that children who received the literacy curriculum were in a better position to learn new writing concepts in kindergarten than those who were not exposed to the literacy curriculum in preschool. This is further impressive considering the fact that the children had experienced a summer academic break. Writing activities can serve as a valuable instructional tool, especially when presented in a coherent literacy curriculum based on multimodal instruction (storytelling, concepts-of-print, writing, and oral language) to help young English learners develop new understandings about text, print, and language prior to formal schooling.

—Carola Matera

This cover story is based on the final report for UC LMRI Dissertation Research Grant #08-08CY-02DG-SB. The complete report is available on the UC LMRI web site.

2009 UC LMRI Research Grants Call for Proposals

Deadline: February 1, 2009
(signed application forms due by 4pm Friday, January 30)

For detailed information and grant applications,
visit the UC LMRI web site.

Research Grants Awarded

The UC LMRI Faculty Steering Committee received 13 research grant proposals in the October 2008 Call for Proposals. Funding was awarded to three researchers (see abstracts, beginning in next column).

DISSERTATION GRANT AWARD

Making *Sentido*: Making Sense of Spanish-English Code-switching and Language Ideologies in a Sixth-Grade English Language Arts Classroom

PI: RAMÓN MARTINEZ, UCLA
DISSERTATION GRANT #09-08CY-06DG-LA
FUNDED: OCTOBER 2008

This dissertation study examines bilingual Latino students' Spanish-English code-switching and their attitudes and beliefs—our language ideologies—about this language practice, exploring the potential for leveraging these language practices and ideologies as resources for literacy learning.

In schools throughout Los Angeles, bilingual Latino students communicate using a combination of Spanish and English, often referring to this practice as *Spanglish*. Linguists refer to it as *Spanish-English code-switching*, noting that it is a common language contact phenomenon in bilingual communities.

Conceptually, this study draws on an extensive body of educational research that frames cultural and linguistic diversity as a resource for teaching and learning. Particularly influential to this study is the tradition of sociocultural research examining students' everyday language practices.

It is hoped that this study will extend current research on students' everyday language practices by foregrounding students' language ideologies. Moreover, it is hoped that this study will pave the way for collaborative and design-based classroom research focused on leveraging students' everyday language practices and ideologies for literacy learning.

INDIVIDUAL GRANT AWARD

Exemplary Student Teachers Address the Language Demands of Classroom Tasks Across Disciplines: An analysis across two teacher education programs.

PI: BARBARA MERINO, UC DAVIS
DISSERTATION GRANT #09-08CY-04IG-D
FUNDED: OCTOBER 2008

As teacher educators at two large research universities, we investigate how exemplary student/beginning teachers (EBTs) drawn from two elementary and secondary cohorts understand and address the language demands of classroom tasks as seen through the Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT).

We propose the following research questions: (1) How do EBTs understand and address the language demands of classroom tasks? (2) How do they scaffold the development of AL across disciplines? (3) How do program features, coursework and fieldwork, influence the EBTs' perspectives and practices in the development of academic literacies? (4) How do EBTs, in their first year of teaching, view their efficacy in addressing AL within their disciplines for all students and for ELs?

PROPOSAL PREPARATION GRANT AWARD

The new Proposal Preparation grant category is intended to (1) support UC faculty in applying for funding for large, multi-year research projects; and (2) promote collaboration among researchers within the University of California.

NSF GK-12 Program: School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society

PI: MARY BUCHOLTZ, *UC SANTA BARBARA*
DISSERTATION GRANT #09-08CY-01PP-SB
FUNDED: OCTOBER 2008

School Kids Investigating Language, Life, and Society (SKILLS) is a five-year program to promote graduate student training along with academic outreach to public schools by creating teams of Graduate Student Teaching Fellows and Master Teachers in ninth-grade social studies classrooms in Santa Barbara County.

These teaching teams will introduce the scientific methods and findings of linguistic research to students of linguistically and ethnically diverse backgrounds (primarily Latinos and Native Americans).

The project's focus on original scientific discovery is expected to lead students to a greater appreciation of linguistic phenomena as well as a deeper engagement with all science. SKILLS is also expected to stimulate students' interest in scientific careers and broaden participation in science. At the same time, it will foster cross-campus graduate student and faculty research by creating a vertically integrated research team involving high school students, high school social studies teachers, graduate student teaching fellows, and faculty members with a shared focus on the linguistic diversity of California.

UCLMRI RESEARCH GRANTS: FINAL REPORT ABSTRACTS

Following are edited abstracts from three recently completed UC LMRI Research Grants. Visit the UC LMRI web site for a searchable database of all UC LMRI-funded grants.

Text and Context in Linguistically Diverse Mainstream Classrooms

PI: GEORGE C. BUNCH, *UC SANTA CRUZ*
INDIVIDUAL GRANT #05-05CY-06IG-SC
COMPLETED: MAY 2008

In this study, we examined the writing of linguistically diverse students in a 7th grade social studies classroom explicitly designed to provide students from non-dominant linguistic backgrounds access to a wide variety of texts and literacy practices as well as support in developing the more traditional literacy practices valued in contemporary school settings.

We conclude that the classrooms provided students opportunities to build on and expand the textual resources they brought with them to the classroom as they negotiated a wide variety of oral, written, visual, cultural, and "personal" texts.

We argue that in order to serve the needs of students from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds, educators and educational researchers

need to understand and appreciate these challenges and how students are responding to them. In order to do so, we need to view language as inseparable from the cultural and situation contexts in which it is used.

BTSA Accountability for English Learners and Students of Diverse Cultural Backgrounds In A Standards Based Learning Environment

PI: TERESA I. MARQUEZ-LOPEZ, *UC RIVERSIDE*
INDIVIDUAL GRANT #02-02CY-04TG-R
COMPLETED: MAY 2008

This study focused on the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) induction program as a means for preparing teachers of English learners and culturally diverse students and assisting in reducing the achievement gap. The study found that BTSA-ELL Enrichment program enhanced bilingual beginning teachers' ability to plan, deliver, and assess academic content area instruction.

The study found that BTSA-ELL Enrichment program enhanced bilingual beginning teachers' ability to plan, deliver, and assess academic content area instruction. It was observed that Bilingual (BCLAD) and monolingual (CLAD) teachers were operating from two different instructional paradigms which we refer to as "dual tier paradigm." The BTSA-ELL support providers offer improved mentoring for teachers operating through their understanding of the "dual tier paradigm."

The study concludes that the BTSA-ELL Induction model should be evaluated for state adoption as the induction model for teachers of English learners.

Leveraging Bilingual Youths' Translation Experiences for School Literacy Tasks

PI: MARJORIE FAULSTICH ORELLANA, *UCLA*
INDIVIDUAL GRANT #05-05CY-10IG-LA
COMPLETED: MAY 2008

This paper reports on a design-research study that we conducted in a sixth-grade Language Arts classroom. We worked with the classroom teacher to develop curricular activities that leveraged her students' translating experiences for the development of academic writing skills. Our goal was to help students recognize that their ability to shift voices when translating in everyday contexts could also be applied to writing for different audiences.

Our analysis of students' writing suggests that they were able to draw on their rich linguistic repertoires to shift voices appropriately for each audience. We argue that, although bilingual students might not immediately recognize the richness of their translating practices, educators can work to help them cultivate meta-linguistic awareness, and then draw on their own linguistic and communicative resources to develop competence in writing.

A central component of our work involved a series of collaborative "Work Circles," through which we engaged these teachers in dialogue about their students' translating experiences and worked collaboratively with them to co-design translation-based classroom activities.

This paper describes only a small piece of the entire research project. We will continue analyzing broader corpus of data and report additional findings in the future.

UC LMRI News

Director Rumberger Completes Term; Assistant Director Romo Appointed as Interim Director

In July 2007, Professor **Laura Romo**, from UC Santa Barbara's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, was selected to serve as UC LMRI's Assistant Director. Romo spent a year in that position, working with outgoing two-term Director **Russell W. Rumberger**, and becoming familiar with UC LMRI's operations and administration.

As of October 1, 2008, Romo has been appointed by the Office of the President to serve as UC LMRI's Interim Director. Romo will work closely with the UC LMRI Faculty Steering Committee on advancing the goals and mission of UC LMRI and working towards more progress on educational issues affecting linguistic minorities, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, and immigrants.

Professor Romo stated, "I am honored to be selected to work with the Steering Committee to accomplish the goals of LMRI. We have many challenges ahead, especially given these times when funding is in question; however, change can be positive and I look forward to ushering in a new era."

A Message from Departing Director Russell W. Rumberger

On September 30, 2008 I finished my second term as Director of UC LMRI. When I assumed the position 10 years ago, I had little idea of what lay ahead. I had limited experience as a scholar of linguistic minorities and as a director of a systemwide research center such as UC LMRI. But I was fortunate to have an expert, hands-on Faculty Steering Committee. And I had the great fortune to share this journey with LMRI's Associate Director, **Patricia Gándara**, a renowned scholar and passionate leader in the field, from whom I have learned so much.

As Director, I was committed to building the reputation and impact of UC LMRI, not only throughout the UC system, but also throughout the larger community of policy and practice. One way we did this was through the newsletter, which now features a cover story on new research findings written for a lay audience. Another way was by expanding our website to include not only information on LMRI publications and activities, but also a searchable database that now includes more than 750 research reports issued by outside organizations.

Working at UC LMRI also afforded me the opportunity to publish a number of LMRI-related reports and briefs (including more than ten newsletter cover stories, nine EL Facts, and as author or co-author on several policy reports, joint publications, etc.). I was also honored to participate in the reviews and funding of over 100 research grants for faculty and graduate students.

The need to improve the educational outcomes of linguistic minority students is even more urgent today, and I have faith that under the leadership of Interim Director, **Laura Romo**, UC LMRI will continue to fulfill this mandate.

LMRI Updates Website

As of November 1, 2008 UC LMRI's website has been upgraded and modernized, showcasing a leaner, more dynamic look, making important content easier to navigate, and highlighting four key sections: grant calls, events, publications and resources. Visit the site at: <http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu>.

SAVE THE DATE
UC LMRI's 22nd Annual Conference
May 1-2, 2009

PREPARING 'HIGHLY QUALIFIED' TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS
Riverside, California

Co-sponsored by:
UC Riverside Graduate School of Education

Further Information:
<http://www.lmri.ucsb.edu>

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Reports in This Issue

Abstracts from UC LMRI Research Grant awards and from Final Grant Reports featured in the newsletter are edited for space considerations.

A searchable database of all UC LMRI-funded grants can be found on the UC LMRI website.

Back Issues: Newsletters from 1992 to the present are archived on the UC LMRI web site. A limited number of hard copies are available by request.

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