

# UC Berkeley

## Newsletters

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## Improving Reading Comprehension of English Learners through Listening Comprehension Instruction

One of the most important educational challenges for linguistic minorities—students who come from households where a language other than English is spoken—is developing proficiency in English, particularly reading comprehension. Most existing research and instructional efforts have focused on developing *word-level skills*, such as phonological awareness (the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words), alphabet knowledge (the ability to associate sounds with letters and use these to form words) and word reading. The 2006 National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth concluded that with effective instruction, linguistic minority students who are not yet proficient in English—English learners—reach similar levels of attainment on word-level skills as their English-speaking peers.

However, the panel also found that English learners rarely reach the same level of proficiency on *text-level skills*—such as reading comprehension, vocabulary and writing—that are critical for long-term success in school. The Panel further found that oral proficiency in English, including listening comprehension and vocabulary, is an important though understudied predictor for later reading performance.

While the need is great for intervention-based research to determine the most effective method of teaching text-level skills for language minority students, to date few such studies have been conducted. In particular, literacy interventions for English learners (ELs) have not investigated the potential impact of teaching comprehension skills and strategies to pre-reading EL kindergarteners through listening comprehension instruction.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of three different interventions, varying in amounts of time dedicated to oral language or listening comprehension skill instruction. The study had two main objectives: (1) to see if EL kindergarteners could effectively be taught listening comprehension strategies and generalize the taught comprehension skills to new text; and (2) to determine the most efficient combination of instructional elements to successfully teach both word-level and text-level skills to EL kindergarteners. The study was conducted on a sample of 91 Spanish-speaking EL kindergarten students in a Southern California elementary school. Students were randomly assigned to three intervention groups. All students were given a pretest in phonological awareness and vocabulary in order to identify students who were at risk and students who were not at risk for poor reading, and to determine the effectiveness of the

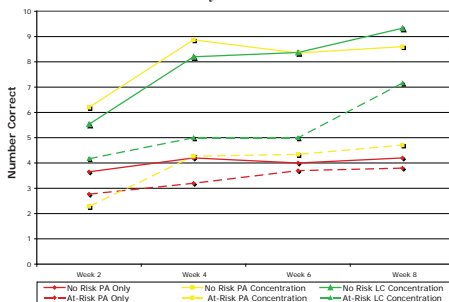
three interventions for both types of students.

All students received eight weeks of supplemental literacy instruction for twenty minutes, three times per week. One group, Phonological Awareness Only (PA Only) spent 100% of instructional time on word-level skills—phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. The two experimental groups received varying amounts of time dedicated to listening comprehension instruction, with the remaining time spent on word-level skills. The first experimental group, Phonological Awareness Concentration (PA Concentration) spent 70% of instructional time on word-level skills, with the remaining time spent on listening comprehension skills. The other group, Listening Comprehension Concentration (LC Concentration) spent 70% of instruction time on listening comprehension skills, with the remainder of time spent on word-level skills.

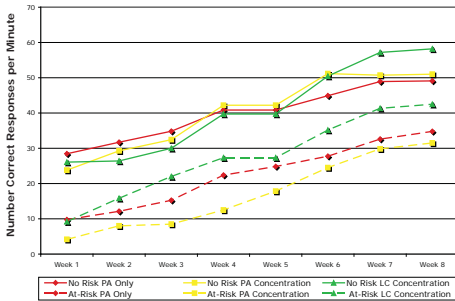
Elements of the intervention related to listening comprehension included direct instruction of different fundamental comprehension skills: direct fact recall, summarizing/main idea, prediction and inference, as well as vocabulary building activities. Word-level instruction included activities to build phonological awareness (blending, segmentation, onset and rime) as well as alphabet knowledge (letter sounds and names). All students were assessed weekly on several measures of word-level skills and bi-weekly on listening comprehension.

The results of this study demonstrate that interventions for EL kindergarteners, both those at-risk and not at-risk at pretest, can

**Figure 1: Number of Correct Responses of Listening Comprehension Assessment by Weeks of Intervention**



**Figure 2: Number of Correct Responses on Test of Phonological Awareness (DIBELS Phoneme Segmentation Fluency) by Weeks of Intervention**



concentrate on an important precursor to reading comprehension (i.e., listening comprehension) without loss of positive effects on word-level skills. Students who received the intervention in which listening comprehension was emphasized over phonological awareness—both those who were labeled as at-risk and not at-risk for reading failure at pretest—outperformed comparable students who received either an intervention that emphasized phonological awareness, or those who were taught only phonological awareness. As might be expected, those students who received the most instruction in listening comprehension performed best on measures of listening comprehension (Figure 1). However, these students also outperformed students in the other groups on measures of phonological awareness (Figure 2). Moreover, although word decoding was not explicitly taught in any condition, students receiving either a large or small dose of listening comprehension instruction performed better on decoding pseudowords (made-up English words) compared to students who received only phonological awareness instruction.

These results have several implications for early literacy instruction for young ELs. First, these results suggest that it is possible to teach young ELs comprehension strategies before they begin to read. This is important given the large disparities on measures of comprehension between language minority students and their English-speaking peers in later elementary grades and beyond. Previous research has demonstrated a relationship between early listening comprehension or oral language ability and later reading comprehension. Early listening comprehension and vocabulary instruction may be a crucial element of later successful reading comprehension.

Second, this study demonstrated that both groups of students—those performing at normal levels on early literacy skills and those identified as at risk for reading failure—benefited from comprehension instruction. This finding is important for two reasons. First, this instructional model can be used for students at varying levels of literacy skill; benefits were seen for both groups of students: at risk and not at risk. Additionally, this finding demonstrates that at-risk students may need instructional interventions that have components of both word-level and text-level skills for optimal growth on literacy skills. In general, in early elementary school (kindergarten through second grade)

literacy interventions for students who are identified as at risk for later reading failure have concentrated on word-level skills instead of text-level skills. This study has demonstrated that for at-risk students, instructional time can be spent on comprehension skills without loss of learning on important elements of word-level skills (phonological awareness and word reading). Specifically, this study showed that instructional time for EL pre-readers can concentrate on comprehension skill development without a trade-off for basic word-level skill development.

Both practitioners and researchers agree that reading comprehension requires the successful combination of word- and text-level skills. While the most effective way of teaching comprehension skills to EL pre-readers demands further study, this research demonstrates that from a very early age instruction for EL students can include both of these skill sets, resulting in growth of word- and text-level skills simultaneously.

—Emily Solari

*This cover story is based on the final report for UC LMRI Dissertation Research Grant #06-05CY-03DG-SB. The complete report, "Effects of Listening Comprehension Versus Phonological Awareness Interventions for Kindergarten English Learners," can be found on the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database ([http://www.proquest.com/products\\_pq/descriptions/pqdt.shtml](http://www.proquest.com/products_pq/descriptions/pqdt.shtml)). Dissertations are available free from this site if your library is a Digital Dissertation subscriber.*

## FINAL GRANT REPORT ABSTRACT

### Early Identification of English Learners At-Risk for Academic Failure

PI: PENNY CHIAPPE, UC IRVINE  
INDIVIDUAL GRANT #05-05CY-08IG-1  
COMPLETED: FEBRUARY 2007

This study was guided by two goals: 1) to examine if the measures used to identify children at-risk for learning disabilities in reading and mathematics are appropriate for English learners, and 2) to determine if EL children should be assessed in English, the language of instruction, or their home language.

Standardized tests assessing reading and mathematics achievement were administered to native English speakers (NS) and Spanish-speaking English learners (EL) in the autumn and spring of the first grade. Measures of word recognition, oral reading fluency, and phonological processing in English discriminated between good readers and children at-risk for reading difficulties, but not between NS and EL children. However, EL children showed significantly greater performance and growth in English than they showed on parallel Spanish measures.

Similarly, the mathematics tests administered in English discriminated between those who were typically achieving and children at-risk for math difficulties, but not between NS and EL children. However, NS children did show advantaged performance on orally administered word problems in English.

Thus, teachers can identify EL children at-risk for reading

difficulties using the same English measures of decoding and oral reading fluency that they use for NS children. Furthermore, they can identify EL children who would benefit from intervention in mathematics on the basis of their performance in solving equations that are free of confounds with oral language proficiency in English.

Finally, when EL children receive instruction in English only, presenting parallel tasks in their home language increases the possibility that they will be over-identified as having learning disabilities.

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## 20<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL CONFERENCE

For the first time in its history, UC LMRI's annual conference was held outside the state of California, in Tempe, Arizona on the host campus of conference co-sponsor Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College of Education. This year's conference, held May 3-5, 2007, focused on "*Immigrants, Education, and Language*" and attracted over 150 participants.

In addition to six breakout sessions (a total of twenty presentations), and a special panel presentation chaired by ASU's **Terrence G. Wiley**, this year's conference also featured the presentations of eight papers commissioned specifically for this conference.



Keynote Speakers Norma González and Peter Roos

**Norma González** (*University of Arizona*) opened the conference on Thursday night with her keynote address entitled: "*Contested and Contesting Language Ideologies*," and **Peter Roos** (formerly of *Multicultural Education Training and Advocacy*) closed the conference on Saturday afternoon with his keynote presentation on "*Reviving Bilingual Education*."

This year's conference was coordinated by **Amber Johnson** at ASU and by **Briana Villaseñor** at UC LMRI. "It was such a pleasure to work together on the conference with ASU again," Briana noted. "As first-time hosts of the conference, Amber and her staff did an outstanding job and the feedback from participants has been excellent. We look forward to continuing this successful partnership again at next year's conference in Sacramento."

**SAVE THE DATE:** The next UC LMRI annual conference, co-sponsored by ASU's Mary Lou Fulton College of Education, will be held May 2-3, 2008 in Sacramento, CA. The conference theme will observe and reflect on the 10-year anniversary of California's Proposition 227. Visit the UC LMRI web site to find information on the 2008 Conference Calls for Papers and to download this year's official conference program and presenters' papers.

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## LMRI NEWS

### Two New EL Facts Published

EL Facts are statistical briefs summarizing data on English learners, their teachers, and their schooling experiences. The eighth publication in this series, "*The Growth of the Linguistic Minority Population in the U.S. and California, 1980-2005*" and the ninth in the series, "*California's Linguistic Minority Public School Students, 2005*" are now available on the UC LMRI web site.

### LMRI Co-Sponsors AAAL Conference

UC LMRI was proud to be a co-sponsor of the **American Association for Applied Linguistics** annual conference, April 21-24, 2007, in Costa Mesa, CA. The AAAL conference is known for its in-depth symposia and focused workshops on key issues in applied linguistics and sessions on a wide range of research studies. At each conference, research is shared about the role of language in all aspects of cognition and social action, including language learning and teaching. More info at <http://www.aaal.org>.

### Grants Administrator Due Date Draws Near

**Briana Villaseñor**, UC LMRI's Business Officer and Grants Administrator, will be out of the office on maternity leave from June 25, 2007 through October 1, 2007. She is expecting a boy, due July 7, 2007. UC LMRI wishes her and her husband Christian all the best.

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### California Dropout Research Project Publishes New Statistical Briefs

UC LMRI's affiliated **California Dropout Research Project** was launched to study and develop solutions to the state's high school dropout crisis. In spring 2007, the first two statistical briefs by **Susan Rotermund** were released—"Graduation and Dropout Rates for 2002 High School Sophomores" and "*The Reasons Students Drop Out of School, California and the U.S.*" This series of briefs focuses on specific dimensions of the dropout problem using existing state and federal databases.

Along with several more statistical briefs, the California Dropout Research Project will issue a series of research reports and policy briefs over the next year.

The Dropout Project is now prominently featured on the UC LMRI web site's main navigational menu.

# Education Policy Center News

UC LMRI established an Education Policy Center at UC Davis in 1997 to disseminate research findings to policymakers. The Center sponsors research and colloquia on policy issues in the education of English learners. More news and activities can be found on the UC LMRI web site.

## Study Findings Put Into Practice

Julie Maxwell-Jolly has been deeply engaged working with the Davis Unified School District to reorganize its instruction for English learner (EL) students. The Policy Center studied the district for more than a year to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional strategies and to learn how instruction could be reorganized to better promote academic gains for EL students. Dr. Maxwell-Jolly is now testing out the recommendations of the study in an attempt to create a "template" that districts can use to conduct self-studies of their teaching practices with EL students.

## Coachella Case Ruling

The Policy Center has been very involved for more than a year in examining evidence for the class action lawsuit, *Coachella Valley Unified School District v. California*, on behalf of ten California school districts that sued the Department of Education to stop the practice of testing EL students for accountability purposes with English-only tests that they claimed were neither valid nor reliable for these students, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind act.

California Superior Court Judge Richard A. Kramer ruled in May 2007 that the court did not have ministerial authority to overrule the discretion of the state education officials in their judgment to use English-only tests with California's English learners. Even though testing experts, including Educational Testing Service (ETS) psychometrists, would not claim the tests were either valid or reliable for English learners, the case was lost on legal, not substantive, grounds.

Mary Hernandez, a lawyer for the plaintiffs, in a comment to an editor at EdWeek (see: [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2007/05/another\\_take\\_on\\_coachella\\_wall\\_1.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2007/05/another_take_on_coachella_wall_1.html)) added that the judge has not yet dismissed the entire case, and he could still find fault with California's standardized testing system for English learners through the remaining causes of action in the case.

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### Reports in This Issue

The UC LMRI Newsletter features abstracts from UC LMRI Research Grant Award recipients and—as they are completed—the abstracts from their Final Grant Reports.

Complete copies of UC LMRI funded Final Grant Reports can be found on the UC LMRI web site. (Abstracts featured in the newsletter are edited for space considerations.)

Dissertation Grant Reports can be found on the UMI ProQuest Digital Dissertations and Theses Database ([http://www.proquest.com/products\\_pq/descriptions/pqdt.shtml](http://www.proquest.com/products_pq/descriptions/pqdt.shtml)). Dissertations are available free from this site if your library is a Digital Dissertation subscriber.

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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