Teaching Reading to English Language Learners
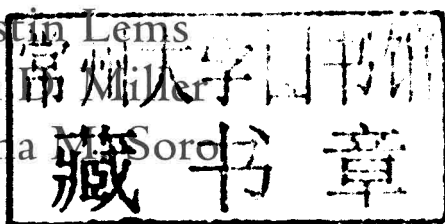
Insights from Linguistics

Kristin Lems, Leah D. Miller, and Tenena M. Soro

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About the Authors

Kristin Lems, EdD, is Professor in the ESL/Bilingual Education Program at National-Louis University, where she directed a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education in ESL teacher education in DuPage County, Illinois. She pursued her twin interests in reading and ESL through a doctorate in reading and language from National College of Education and a master's degree in TESOL from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Her doctoral dissertation on adult ESL oral reading fluency won a finalist award from the International Reading Association for Outstanding Dissertation of the Year. Dr. Lems spent 2 years as a Fulbright Scholar in Algeria doing inservice training of postsecondary EFL teachers, and wrote a book on ESL/EFL methods for the Peace Corps. Her coedited book, *Fluency Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*, with Timothy Rasinski and Camille Blachowicz, was a finalist for the Frye Book Award of the National Reading Conference. Dr. Lems consults on reading and ESL in the Chicago Public Schools. She is also a professional folk singer and sings for children in schools and libraries in several languages, including Farsi, which she learned teaching in Iran.

Leah D. Miller, MA, is Assistant Professor in the ESL/Bilingual Education Program at National-Louis University, and also teaches graduate linguistics courses at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has served as coordinator of the ESL/Bilingual Education Program at National-Louis University for the past decade and has taught all of the courses in the program. In addition to doctoral coursework in linguistics at Northwestern University, Ms. Miller has a master's degree in TESOL from Southern Illinois University. She is on the board of Illinois TESOL/BE, where she heads its Awards Committee, and serves as a consultant on issues related to ELL assessment and the WIDA standards. She has presented at TESOL con-

ventions and meetings of the American Educational Research Association, the American Association for Applied Linguistics, the National Council of Teachers of English, and other prestigious venues. She has a keen interest in content-area ESL and linguistics, and, with Kristin Lems, codirected a Department of Education grant in ESL teacher education. Besides reading research, Ms. Miller's passions include spending time with four adopted grandchildren and Jervis the cat, and reading dictionaries.

Tenena M. Soro, PhD, teaches courses in linguistics, cross-cultural education, foundations, and reading for the ESL/Bilingual Education Program at National-Louis University. He has also taught courses in ethics and philosophy, linguistics, and social science at Columbia College, Northeastern Illinois University, and Northwestern University. He has a doctorate in linguistics and a Graduate Certificate in African Studies from Northwestern University, in addition to two undergraduate degrees from Université d'Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Dr. Soro's dissertation included a linguistic analysis of his native language, Cebaari, and he is proficient in six additional languages. He has presented on linguistics and ESL topics at state and national conferences, including TESOL and the American Educational Research Association, and in 2008 he received the Outstanding Adjunct Faculty Award from National-Louis University. In addition to teaching, he is a serious student of yoga and meditation.

Preface

Educators and policymakers agree that there is an urgent need to rethink the assumptions around teaching the increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States. To bring those students to academic success in a limited period of time, educators need a working knowledge of the systems that compose English and how students are expected to use them for success in reading and writing. P. David Pearson (2007) puts it well:

> As a profession, we have not met our responsibilities to ensure that all of us as teachers, whether novice or veteran, possess the very best and most current knowledge available. We have been too ready to dismiss deep disciplinary knowledge—linguistics (from phonology to text structure to pragmatics), language development, psychology of reading and learning, orthography, literature, and culture—as too distant from the concerns of classroom teaching to merit much emphasis in our preservice and in-service programs.
>
> Both the teaching profession and the profession of teacher educators should redress this wrong by insisting on more rigorous standards for teacher knowledge. (p. 151)

A panel called by the Carnegie Corporation raised a similar list of challenges to improve the teaching of adolescent ELLs. One of the six recommendations was to increase educator capacity for improving literacy in these students (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007).

Teaching Reading to English Language Learners aims to address precisely these concerns by increasing the knowledge base of educators involved with teaching ELLs.

Teachers in our many classes have overwhelmingly demonstrated to us their interest in obtaining a deeper knowledge of English that includes lin-

guistic elements. Many have indicated to us that the book's chapters have given them many "aha!" moments. Piloting this book over the course of 18 months has shown us that teachers can make immediate use of their new knowledge in a variety of teaching situations, and that they want to.

Our book was written for the following audiences: (1) instructional leaders in English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education; (2) reading teachers and specialists who need to know more about the processes of ESL reading; (3) current or future ESL teachers who need to develop expertise about reading; and (4) general education teachers at all grade levels who need to know more about both ESL and reading in English for ELL students. This book can be used in reading classes, ESL or applied linguistics classes, elementary or secondary education methods classes, and study groups for practicing teachers or coordinators.

We wrote this book after looking in vain for a text that could be used for a graduate course we teach about reading in English as a new language. Students in our classes are obtaining their state endorsements in teaching ESL and they will be considered the experts in their buildings or districts. Therefore they need to master key concepts related to linguistics as well as those related to reading. Some of the books we considered focused only on ESL students in higher education; others made assumptions about second-language reading that were not validated in second-language acquisition research; and the linguistics-focused books were overly technical, with few applications to life in the classroom. After years of preparing supplementary handouts, we decided it was time to combine our knowledge of research and best practices from the reading and linguistics fields into one place and include suggestions for usable classroom applications. We have tried to present these insights in a manner that is clear, readable, and even enjoyable. You will be the judge of that effort!

Chapter 1 contains an overview of the second-language acquisition field because we want to establish a common set of understandings and terminology for our readers. Chapter 2 is devoted to a subject that is of scholarly interest in several professions but often glossed over: the influence of first language on learning a new language, especially in regard to reading. These two chapters also establish our point of view on some important issues that schools must address when planning programs for their ELLs.

The seven chapters that follow address specific components that must be built into a "syndrome of success" in order for ELLs to enjoy and succeed in reading and writing in English:

- The critical development of oracy.
- Learning successful decoding of the English alphabet.
- Using morpheme study to increase vocabulary.

- Understanding word formation processes, cognates, and collocations in English.
- Developing reading fluency.
- Developing a set of flexible reading strategies.
- Learning to write in the forms school demands, and using writing to learn.

At the beginning of each chapter, we include a list of new vocabulary introduced in the text. The meaning of each term can be looked up in the glossary at the end of the book. Within each chapter, we have interspersed pertinent vignettes from our own experiences and those of ESL practitioners we know. The chapters are followed by a section titled "What Does This Mean in the Classroom?" with practical applications that are consonant with the linguistic insights of the chapter. Some of these are described in detail and can be used right away, whereas others are only sketched briefly. The end of each chapter contains questions for further study. They can be used in a classroom setting, professional development setting, or for self-study.

This book may raise as many questions as it answers for you. However, we are confident that bringing awareness of linguistic features of English will have both immediate and long-term benefits for your classroom teaching or instructional leadership. It is also likely to raise your curiosity about language in general. You will notice things about English and about literacy—your own and that of your students—that have never occurred to you before! And you will undoubtedly find ways to incorporate your new understandings into your educational venue.

The more we have learned about the subject of learning to read in English as a new language, the more exciting the journey has become. Although we are glad to see the book completed and ready to make its contribution to the world, we continue to be captivated by these compelling topics. We are also mindful that these insights can have a huge positive impact on the lives of real learners in the real world. We wish you happy reading!

Acknowledgments

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We appreciate the fine support from the team at The Guilford Press—it was a pleasure to work with you every step of the way! Special thanks to Craig Thomas, as well as Anna Nelson, Joi Rowe, Mary Beth Wood, Katherine Lieber, Lauren Foust, and Paul Gordon. Thanks also to indexer Carol Lems-Dworkin and to the authors and artists whose materials we have included in the book.

We appreciate the comments and suggestions of hundreds of students who used piloted versions of the book. Your interactions with the book as it evolved have made it much better!

Most of all, we appreciate the encouragement and support of our families and friends, who endured so much in the past 2 years when we were unavailable—even on weekends and holidays—as we worked on this book. Your belief that we were doing something important and valuable meant everything to us.

Guide to Pronunciation in This Book

We have chosen to avoid special symbols in favor of common, simplified forms that can be created on a standard typewriter, with the exception of the schwa sound, /ə/.

Consonants

Sound	as in
Voiced	
/b/	*bad*
/d/	*dog*
/g/	*go*
/j/	*job, fudge*
/l/	*lid*
/m/	*mad*
/n/	*not*
/r/	*red*
/v/	*van*
/w/	*win*
/z/	*zip*
/ng/	*sing*
/th/	*that*
/y/	*young*
/zh/	*measure*

Voiceless

/p/	*pin*
/t/	*tap*
/k/	*kid*
/f/	*fit*
/h/	*hat*
/s/	*sad*
/ch/	*chin*
/sh/	*shell*
/TH/	*think*

Vowels

Sound	as in	commonly called
Short vowels		
/ae/	*had*	short *a*
/e/	*bed*	short *e*
/i/	*bid*	short *i*
/a/	*father, hot*	short *o*
/oo/	*book*	alternate short *u*
/u/	*cut*	short *u*
/ə/	unstressed vowels (*across, zebra*)	schwa sound
Long vowels (all diphthongs in English)		
/ey/	*say*	long *a*
/iy/	*see, happy*	long *e*
/ay/	*I*	long *i*
/ow/	*go*	long *o*
/uw/	*you, food*	long *u*
/aw/	*saw, dog*	open *o*
Additional diphthongs		
/ou/	*house, crowd*	
/oy/	*toy*	
r-controlled vowels		
/ar/	*hard*	
/er/	*hurt*	
/ir/	*fear*	
/eyr/	*care*	
/ayr/	*fire*	
/owr/	*floor*	
/uwr/	*sure*	

Contents

Big Ideas and Research
That Guide the Profession

New Vocabulary in This Chapter: *English language learners (ELLs), language-based theory of learning, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, orthography, syndrome of success, language-specific, second-language acquisition (SLA), balanced literacy, communicative competence, idiom, input hypothesis, comprehensible input, motherese/caretaker speech, output hypothesis, comprehensible output, affect, affective filter, integrative motivation, instrumental motivation, assimilative motivation, intrinsic motivation, resiliency, grammar translation, English as a foreign language (EFL), English as a second language (ESL), audiolingualism, oral proficiency, communicative approach, content-based instruction (CBI), content area, cognitive academic language learning approach (CALLA), specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE), sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP), sheltered instruction, socially constructed, zone of proximal development (ZPD), instructional conversation, realia*

Language is an important part of how humans communicate with each other. It is no small thing! Through language, we learn how to "mean things" (Halliday, 1993) and how to share all of those meanings with others. The story of how those meanings are created and shared is truly the story of the human family. It is our distinctly human endowment.

Being able to share meanings with others in more than one language is an even more remarkable achievement. There is no question about the

value of biliteracy and bilingualism both for the individual and society. It opens options for self-expression, economic viability, and common problem solving across language groups. We unequivocally support bilingualism and biliteracy as a core goal for an educated society.

That being said, however, we do not pretend that achieving this goal is easy, fast, or inexpensive! Many program models have been implemented in the United States and around the world to facilitate the development of biliteracy. In this book, our specific goal is to help educators foster the growth of English academic proficiency by *English language learners (ELLs)* in the pre-K–12 learning environment regardless of the program model in which they are situated.

Certain big ideas about learning, literacy, and second language acquisition underlie and inform the rest of the book, so we introduce them briefly in this chapter. In addition, we provide an overview of some of the research-based best practices for teaching English as a new language that emanate from those big ideas.

The Language-Based Theory of Learning

The *language-based theory of learning* (Halliday, 1993) is a good organizing principle for talking about second language acquisition. Halliday considered all learning as a linguistic process taking place in three interconnected areas: learning language, learning content through language, and learning about language. Figure 1.1 shows these three areas of the language-based theory of learning.
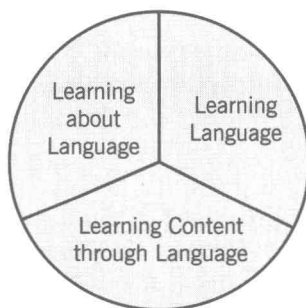
Halliday (1993) explains his theory:

FIGURE 1.1. Three language functions. Based on the language based-model of learning (Halliday, 1993).

With this formulation I was trying to establish two unifying principles: that we should recognize not only a developmental continuity right through from birth to adult life, with language in home, neighborhood, primary school, secondary school, and place of work, but also a structural continuity running through all components and processes of learning. (p. 113)

Halliday recognized that language is more than a skill; it is also a tool for all other learning. Halliday's formulation nicely captures the concept of language both as a means to an end and an end in itself and helps guide our thinking about how teaching English as a new language needs to account for all of those functions. Those who teach English as a new language can structure in activities that help learners learn language, learn content through language, and learn about a language; conversely, learners will struggle if any one of these three functions is neglected.

Universals and Specifics of Language and Literacy

Language is a system that contains small elements that can be combined in an infinite number of ways in order to make larger structures. Human language has four universals: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The *phonology* of a language is the set of its sound patterns and the rules that govern how they can be combined; these patterns and rules give the language its distinct auditory identity. *Morphology* is the set of units of meaning that make up the words of a language and the ways those units of meaning can be combined. Every language also has *syntax*, the set of rules governing the ways in which words can be combined into phrases and sentences. Finally, the *semantics* of a language are the meanings that emerge from all of the previous three elements: the sounds, word meanings, and word-order patterns. Even though the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of every language differ, all languages have them.

On the other hand, not every language has a writing system, or *orthography*. The first evidence of written records dates back only about 10,000 years; writing systems were invented in the same fashion that early civilizations invented the wheel, glass, and other sociocultural characteristics. Although orthographies also differ according to language, their invention in any society is not inevitable.

This difference is important because the four universals are naturally acquired by native speakers of a language, whereas orthography is a feature of literacy, is not natural, and needs to be taught (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005, p. 164). Pinker (2007) says, "Language is an instinct, but reading is not" (p. 14). If reading and writing were universal and inevitable, no language

group would have failed to develop a writing system, but we know that many societies, even some lasting several centuries, have not. The Mississippian peoples living in Cahokia, for example, developed complex dwellings, trade, many tools, and fine works of art, but never developed a writing system. Because reading and writing are not inevitable processes even in a first language, it stands to reason that considerable energy and effort are needed to learn to do them in a new language.

Interaction of Two Developing Systems

When ELLs achieve literacy in a new language, there are two large-scale, long-term developmental processes going on at the same time. One is the learning of literacy, and the other is the learning of the new language. The two metaprocesses develop, overlap, and interact in many complex ways. Their successful dual outcomes can be thought of almost as a kind of "syndrome." Normally a syndrome is thought of as a group of factors which, taken together, form a pattern that accompanies a disease or disorder. However, we'd like to flip that definition to describe a positive pattern. A positive syndrome for literacy in a new language, which we will call a *syndrome of success*, can be thought of as a situation in which the presence of seemingly disconnected factors working in combination make success more likely. Because they are complex, researchers do not know all of the necessary ingredients or proportions thereof, but we do know that a certain number of characteristics need to be "in the mix," and that some cannot be missing.

Some key features for the syndrome of success in building first language literacy include: listening comprehension, phonological and phonemic awareness, oral language production, the concept of word, sound–symbol matching (phonics), word recognition, ability to construct meaning from print, fluent decoding, fluency, recognition of grammar and syntax patterns, vocabulary knowledge, knowledge of the function of punctuation, ability to spell, awareness of the diverse purposes of print, the ability to relate new information to prior experiences, writing for different purposes, and many other skills. In school settings, these are often classified into the five-part framework developed by the National Reading Panel: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Many have called for the inclusion of writing as a core skill as well.

Throughout this book, we use the term "L1" to represent the concepts "language one," "native language," "heritage language," or "first language," and the term "L2" to mean "second language" and sometimes "subsequent language," or "additional language."