**Research-Based Best Practices for Teaching English Learners**

**How Do You Provide Explicit Skill Instruction?**

Explicit instruction refers to task-specific, teacher-led instruction that overtly demonstrates how to complete a task and can be used to teach students both basic and higher-order reading skills. Elements of explicit teaching include setting and articulating learning goals, illustrating or modeling how to complete a task, and assessing student understanding and ability to complete the task independently (Tikunoff, 1983). The routines and consistent language used in explicit teaching provide ELLs clear, specific, and easy-to-follow procedures as they learn not only a new skill or strategy but also the language associated with it (Calderon, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Slavin, 1996; Edelsky et al., 1993; Hernandez, 1991; Muniz-Swicegood, 1994; Saunders et al., 1996).

Explicit skill instruction has been shown to be effective with ELLs who are in the beginning stages of learning to decode English texts. Explicit instruction assists students in identifying and using the structural and visual cues present in words. English language learners can use unique features of words, word patterns, or similarities to other known words as an aid in decoding unknown words (Au, 1993). In fact, when given explicit instruction on phonemic awareness and decoding, many ELLs acquire these skills at the same rate as monolingual English speakers (Chiappe, Siegel, & Wade-Woolley, 2002; Geva, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Schuster, 2000).

Teachers who teach explicitly also make relationships obvious among concepts, words, or ideas to help students see the link between prior learning and new learning. During reading instruction, for instance, you might remind students of the meaning of a particular vocabulary word in a different context, extend their knowledge by providing additional meanings of multiple-meaning words, or help them see similarities in previously learned spelling patterns. Another example is to teach a new concept such as subtle word distinctions—say, the differences among downpour, drizzle, and sprinkle to describe the fall of precipitation.

In addition, during vocabulary and comprehension instruction, explicit instruction can be used to teach ELLs metacognitive skills and strategies so they think about and prepare for a task and learn to regulate their own learning and understanding (Dianda & Flaherty, 1995). A teacher who teaches a skill explicitly—by modeling, explaining, and demonstrating the skill in context—provides students insight into the thinking processes (metacognition) that proficient readers use. The teacher models skills and strategies step by step, provides students opportunities to practice, and teaches students to use the skills and strategies independently. For example, in teaching students to make predictions prior to reading a text, you would first tell students what you are going to do and why. Then, model the process step by step using think-aloud instruction. Finally, guide students as they make their own predictions and prompt them as needed.

**How Do You Provide Opportunities to Practice?**

All students, but English language learners in particular, need many and varied opportunities to practice their skills with assistance from the teacher as well as independently (Grabe, 1991; McLaughlin, 1987). Effective teachers have several ways to provide students additional practice and review. During instruction they make sure that there are enough practice items so that students have multiple opportunities to use the target skill and receive feedback as needed. Other methods that provide students multiple opportunities to respond and engage students are choral response and all-response activities. They provide ELLs a low-risk setting for practicing new skills while simultaneously providing teachers an efficient way of providing all students adequate practice. Students who have received explicit instruction and guided practice can then practice the skills and strategies they have learned through student-directed activities such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning (Calderon et al., 1996; Muniz-Swicegood, 1994).

**How Do You Adjust Instructional Language?**

Ensuring that the input or instruction that English language learners receive is comprehensible is an indispensable practice in teaching ELLs. For instruction to be meaningful, students must understand the essence of what is said to them. Teachers who adjust their level of English and vocabulary scaffold ELLs' acquisition of new skills and strategies during reading instruction as well as their acquisition of English language skills. Two ways in which you can modify your language to enhance instruction are to adjust the level of the vocabulary you use and to use language consistently.

First, you can adjust the level of English vocabulary during instruction by using clear, explicit language when you introduce a new concept. Identifying the instructional objective will help you stay focused on the most critical directions needed to complete a task and reduce the amount of talk you use. If the goal of a lesson is to have students segment phonemes in words, before modeling the task, tell students what they will be doing directly, using words they understand. In addition, use explicit discourse markers, such as first, second, and finally, to help students organize information.

Explicit discourse markers are particularly effective if you pair them with visual prompts, such as holding up your fingers or writing each step. For example, in introducing a lesson on segmenting words, a teacher who is mindful of language might say, “Today you will learn to separate the sounds in a word. To separate the sounds in a word, you say each sound.” Discourse markers are also helpful in giving directions for activities—for example, “First, I will say the sounds of a word, and then you will tell me the word.”

A second effective practice is to use consistent language. Consistent language provides students a model for talking about the new concept. In addition, the use of consistent language allows ELLs to focus on the task rather than trying to figure out the meaning of new words. For example, when teaching students to segment words into phonemes, choose just one word to explain the concept of segmenting, such as stretch, separate, or divide. Students can then associate the task with the target word, and they will know what to do when they hear you use the target word. Furthermore, using teaching routines consistently will minimize student dependence on language they may not yet know.

**How Do the Critical Elements of Reading Contribute to the Reading Development of English Language Learners?**

A balanced curriculum requires instruction in all the elements of reading. Reading instruction for ELLs is most effective when both basic and higher-order skills are included on a daily basis. English language learners can benefit from sound reading instruction even before they are fully proficient in English as long as the instruction is comprehensible (Geva, 2000; Hudelson, 1984; Linan-Thompson et al., 2003).

Phonological awareness is an important early reading skill for all students. A number of studies have found that students that have phonemic awareness in their home language can often transfer that knowledge to a second language (Gersten & Geva, 2003). However, when they are receiving beginning reading instruction in a new language, children will be learning some phonemes that may not exist in their home language, and they will need explicit instruction in producing these sounds and may need additional practice to identify them readily. If students have not yet developed phonemic awareness skills, participation in carefully designed activities will help them develop such skills and familiarize them with the sounds of English (Gersten & Geva, 2003).

In addition to the new sounds that students may need to learn in order to participate in phonemic awareness activities, they may also need to learn new letter-sound correspondences, new orthographic patterns, and which orthographic representations are most important in English (Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993). Explicit instruction in these differences contributes to the development of appropriate decoding skills (Fashola et al., 1996).

Although many English language learners develop phonemic awareness and decoding skills, their fluency development tends to lag behind. Improved fluency and automatic word recognition will allow students to focus on understanding and analyzing the content of the text. Repeated reading activities provide the practice these learners need to develop automatic recognition of English phonemes, high-frequency words, and word patterns, which in turn increases reading rate and accuracy (Grabe, 1991; McLaughlin, 1987).

Vocabulary development is perhaps the most critical element of literacy instruction for English language learners. Vocabulary knowledge is necessary for reading comprehension, and for ELLs it is also necessary to develop English oral language skills. It is not possible to directly teach ELLs all the vocabulary they will need; therefore, teaching students strategies for learning new vocabulary is essential so they can acquire new vocabulary on their own.

Strategy instruction is also a key component of comprehension instruction. ELLs use the same cognitive strategies as native English speakers to comprehend the text they read. Grabe (1991) found that providing ELLs a framework for using strategies prior to, during, and after reading helped students comprehend text.

Comprehensive reading instruction taught explicitly and systematically builds both reading and English language skills. Specific factors that contribute to instructional efficacy are the explicit teaching of English letter-sound correspondences; word patterns and spelling rules; vocabulary development that emphasizes relationships between and among words to build oral language skills; instruction in when, where, and how to use comprehension and vocabulary strategies; and introduction of skills in isolation and practice in context.

**What Assessments Are Appropriate for English Language Learners?**

Research on effective reading instruction for ELLs has documented the importance of assessing students' progress in reading (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). To ensure that students are learning and understanding the instruction they receive, effective teachers monitor progress both daily and periodically and provide students opportunities to evaluate their own progress according to predetermined goals and objectives (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Daily assessment occurs as part of instruction; it is naturally necessary to monitor student understanding of the lesson. Checking in frequently with students during instruction allows you to determine whether or not students understand and can complete the instructional task. Effective teachers correct student errors and give corrective feedback about tasks on an ongoing basis to ensure that students are practicing the new skills they are learning correctly.

Most reading measures cannot tell you the cause of a student's difficulty. However, if a student does not meet a benchmark, he or she needs more instruction in that particular area. Screening measures in 1st grade are valid for identifying students who need intensive early intervention, but students' oral language proficiency is not a valid predictor of reading success or failure. Assess all ELLs using benchmarks and progress-monitoring measures to identify students at risk for difficulties, and provide supplemental instruction. Systematic assessment and continual progress monitoring are critical components of instruction that have been validated with ELLs acquiring English literacy skills. We will provide several assessment possibilities in later chapters.

Our intention is that this book will provide guidance to teachers who, like our composite Carolyn Derby, are committed to improving their instruction for ELLs. Some teachers will feel confident in expanding many of the effective practices they are already using and applying some of the new ideas from this book. Other teachers may find this book a valuable resource for altering their practices, and still others will blend some of the instructional practices from this book with other excellent resources they have discovered.

Chapters 2–6 in this book will provide background information and short examples of the five major components of teaching reading and other literacy skills to English language learners. Most important to teachers, each chapter has a lengthy final section of fully developed, effective classroom lessons that incorporate the material in the chapter and focus clearly on the reading components under discussion.