

A response to “Toward Comprehensive Effective Literacy Policy and Instruction for English Learner/Emergent Bilingual Students” by The National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL)

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Executive Summary

The National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL) has launched an initiative arguing that literacy policies gaining traction around the country are a disservice to English Learner/Emergent Bilingual (EL/EB) students. It’s important to examine key arguments stripped of the rhetoric that typically surrounds disagreements in our field:

First, part of what NCEL claims is important for EL/EB students is also part of the literacy policies it criticizes. Chief among these is what NCEL acknowledges is “the importance of all five of the components of a comprehensive reading approach described by the National Reading Panel,” namely phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (p. 6). This agreement, reiterated in the paper’s recommendations, is extremely important. Yet it seems to be overshadowed by the report and webinar focusing primarily on how very different literacy instruction must be for ELs and non-ELs. In fact, there are important areas of overlap—beginning with the 5 components the National Reading Panel identified—that must be acknowledged and upon which we can build.

Second, however, the report conflates “one-size-fits-all” and “science of reading.” Indeed, Section 4 explicitly criticizes “One-Size-Fits-All ‘Science Of Reading’” in one fell swoop, treating them as if they were the same thing. This is simply incorrect and creates confusion. We know from reading research (whether we call it “science of reading” or “reading research” or something else) that students differ. One size cannot fit all. Sowing further confusion, one of the report authors speaking in the webinar warns about “frameworks presented to schools that propose that 90 minutes of instruction every day be devoted to phonics and decoding” (37:15). We know of no such frameworks. If they exist, they should be incinerated.

Third, NCEL says the five components identified by the National Reading Panel are not sufficient for EL/EB students. Among the reasons is that these components pay insufficient attention to the role language plays in literacy acquisition. This is a valid point and has been demonstrated by neurolinguistic studies and classroom interventions. These interventions, based on the five components combined with an English language development component, have been found successful in randomized and controlled experiments. Citing these, and others with older students, would have strengthened NCEL’s argument

In sum, we see areas of overlap and agreement that provide a basis for working together to improve the literacy development of EL/EB students and *all* students. We are committed to this mission.

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The National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL) has launched an initiative to challenge literacy policies that it claims are a disservice to EL/EB students. The first part of this initiative involves NCEL’s [White Paper](#); the second, a [webinar](#) presented by two of the paper’s three authors.

The education of EL/EB students concerns educators throughout the country. If there are sharp disagreements from credible sources over recommended policies and practices, educators and policy makers are put in a bind: To whom should they listen? What is the right path toward formulating and enacting programs that best serve students? It is critical that those of us concerned about the education of these, or any, students be clear about where we agree or disagree and help policy makers and educators move forward as productively as possible with relevant information and stripped of rhetoric.

There are numerous points made in the paper and webinar that at a minimum require clarification, beginning with the webinar’s subtitle: “Beyond Foundational Skills.” No one familiar with the research on reading, whether for EL/EB students or for English speakers, needs convincing that we must go “beyond foundational skills.” There is simply no argument from the research perspective. If departments of education and state legislation reduce reading instruction solely to foundational skills instruction, they are badly misreading the research and need help in getting it right.

Similarly, one of the authors in the webinar says, “We worry when we see frameworks presented to schools that propose that 90 minutes of instruction every day be devoted to phonics and decoding.” (37:15) If this is true, *everyone* should worry. Fortunately, we don’t know of any such frameworks. If they exist, they should be immediately incinerated. From a research standpoint, such a framework has no basis in [reality](#). Some states do require a 90-minute literacy block, but that is to include many more aspects of literacy than just phonics and decoding.

But there are also many statements made in the paper or the webinar that are indisputable. For example, one of the authors on the webinar says, “The National Reading Panel [NRP] was a really important leap forward in defining effective literacy instruction” (10:45). (The statement does not appear in the paper.) The webinar and paper both accurately point out that the NRP report did not address issues relevant to second language learning, but the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth report of 2006 did. This subsequent report, the NCEL document says, “affirmed the importance of all five of the components of a comprehensive reading approach described by the National Reading Panel but found that these components are not sufficient for EL/EBs” (p. 6)

Another indisputable statement made in the webinar regards an early literacy program the author suggests could be a model for educating EL/EB students. “The literacy blocks [in this program] amount to 25% of instructional time being devoted to what we would call foundational skills.”

(37:35) This seems about right to us and, more important, consistent with inferences to be drawn from [research](#).

Although there are many claims in the NCEL paper that could be addressed point by point, disputing or accepting in turn, policy makers and educators need helpful and actionable guidance grounded in actionable research findings. We therefore think it essential to address explicitly NCEL’s recommendations, found on p. 14 of the paper and at the 42:00-minute mark of the webinar (under the heading “In Sum”). These proposed action steps are consequential: If enacted, they would influence policy and instruction for EL/EB students. Indeed, in the webinar one of the authors states that “Our paper is offered as guidance about *what we should be doing* in literacy instruction for our English learners.” (Emphasis added.)

Below we state our agreement or agreement with qualifications or further specifications with NCEL’s recommendations. Importantly, there are no areas of disagreement. We want to be clear that we do not see the need to take sides since there are no significant divergent viewpoints. Our goal is to be as clear as possible about where there is overlap, and therefore no need for further disputes, and where there might be a need for further discussion, clarification, and, if not agreement exactly, then at least clarity about where differences lie and whether they might be resolved or reconciled. We are all invested in the academic success of EL/EB students. It is also our goal to promote equity in educational outcomes.

We begin with several maxims we hope are either beyond dispute or to which we should all aspire:

- “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free” (Frederick Douglas, quoted in NCEL paper)
- “Once you learn to write, you will forever have a voice.” (NCEL paper)
- “Language supports reading and reading supports language.” (Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan)
- “One size doesn’t fit all.” (John Madden)

Now to NCEL’s recommendations:

1. Reaffirm the understanding that literacy embraces writing as well as reading, and encompasses all five essential components described in the National Reading Panel as crucial and inter-related.

Agree. There is no argument that literacy includes both reading and writing and that both should be the focus of instruction.

We will build upon those findings and heed the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth and the National Academies of Sciences by:

– Embracing the dual language brain;

Agree. There are differences in neural activation patterns, called a bilingual “neural signature” (Jasinska & Petito, 2014), between monolingual and bilingual children’s reading development. We also want to maximize a student’s ability to tap into their multilingual resources when

learning to read and write. See below, under Recommendation 2, for more on brain activity in monolingual and bilingual reading acquisition.

– Scaffolding and targeting instruction for EL/EBs to bolster comprehension, participation, and language development;

Agree. We need to differentiate instruction based on language proficiency, ability levels and provide culturally responsive instruction that meets students where they are, brings them to higher levels of competence, and honors their linguistic and cultural identities.

– Supporting oral language development as the foundation for literacy; and

Agree, with Qualifications/Specifications: Different aspects of language and language instruction are relevant at different stages of reading (literacy) development. In beginning and early reading, when foundational skills (phonological awareness, sound-symbol associations, phonics, decoding, and fluency with all) are key, the language’s phonology is the critical aspect. Learners must be able to hear and distinguish individual phonemes (or appropriate phonological units, depending on a language’s orthography) within words and associate them with the letters they represent. At this stage, vocabulary is important for reading acquisition, because once phono-graphics are used to read words, vocabulary plays a confirming role. But the vocabulary used for beginning/early reading is limited. Although important, vocabulary needs are relatively modest. Nonetheless, young children start school with oral language skills that are far stronger than their ability to decipher written language. Oral language development must also be addressed through listening and speaking and from read-alouds to expose students to text they cannot yet read. Words and text beyond their reading level should be included, for example, from content areas such as science and social studies and texts that build general knowledge about the world.

Comprehensive oral English language development beyond what is needed for beginning and early reading is then critical. One reason is that as reading progresses into intermediate and more advanced stages, the oral language needs and challenges become exponentially greater. Knowledge and facility with vocabulary (including advanced and complex morphology), syntax, and discourse features become keys to continued literacy development beyond the beginning and early stages. So, although oral language needs at the beginning and early stages of literacy development are relatively modest, they quickly (~2nd to 3rd grade levels) become a great deal more than modest. All aspects of oral language development must therefore be addressed beginning as early as possible, even before more advanced oral language features are required for literacy acquisition. The neurolinguistic and classroom research supporting these claims is reviewed in [Goldenberg \(2020\)](#).

– Emphasizing the development of high levels of biliteracy.

Agree, with Qualifications/Specifications: Bilingualism has been part of the U.S. educational landscape even before the U.S. was the U.S. ([Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015](#)). There are many reasons to support emphasizing the development of high levels of biliteracy, both for EL/EBs and for fluent English speakers. Unfortunately, this support is not generally present in U.S.

schools and among policymakers. The vast majority of EL/EB students are in English-only instruction, which explicitly promotes neither bilingualism nor biliteracy. For these students, the development of high levels of biliteracy is largely moot, barring out-of-school opportunities amenable to biliteracy development.

The unfortunate reality is that most EL/EBs are in a school environment that focuses on English instruction and English outcomes, at best indifferent and at worst hostile to bilingual education and bilingual language and academic outcomes.

We should keep trying to make bilingual education and *bilingualism* itself a more prominent part of the educational landscape. While the politics play out, policy makers and educators need clear guidance for providing effective policy and instruction for students in their classes *right now*, where high levels of biliteracy are simply not an option.

2. Insist that effective literacy instruction is understood not as a one-size-fits-all but should be specific to the needs of various student groups and communities. EL/EBs require attention to their dual language brain and realities—the cross-language imperatives, the hopes and need for biliteracy development.

Agree, with Qualifications/Specifications: Children undoubtedly vary in their strengths, needs, cultures, dispositions, and experiences. There are group differences but also individual differences *within* groups, such that we must be cautious about putting children into rigid categories because they are part of a particular group or community. EL/EB students, for example, vary widely in their English proficiency, literacy experiences outside of school, home languages, cultures, and many other dimensions that will have an impact on their strengths, needs, and opportunities. It is a truism that one size does not—and cannot—fit all.

Nonetheless, there are numerous known elements that are essential for literacy instruction, beginning with the “five essential components described in the National Reading Panel,” as the NCEL report and webinar state.

We also know from studies of mono- and bilinguals around the world that the process of learning to read is fundamentally the same for both—the linking of a language’s **phonology** (the sounds constituting spoken speech) with its **graphical representation** in writing (the orthographic system), then with its **semantic system** (vocabulary, morphology, syntax). However, instruction is different in one important way: When learning to read (and write) in a language the learner is simultaneously learning to speak and understand, there must be additional support for the semantic system to join the phonological and graphemic systems. (There also needs to be additional support for the phonology of the language since there are likely to be sounds not used in the learner’s first language.) The binding of the three is what enables literacy. See [Journal of Neurolinguistics](#) references at the end of the document.

English-proficient students learning to read generally have the necessary semantic knowledge; EL/EBs typically do not, although they will vary in their English proficiency and will therefore vary in the needed semantic (and phonological) support. Moreover, EL/EB children in the United States often grow up in homes and communities where their native language and English are

used. Therefore the complexity of variability in language proficiency across their home languages and English should not be underestimated (López & Foster, 2021).

For literacy to develop beyond foundational skills, language development beyond what is needed for foundational literacy skills is necessary. Knowledge, both specific to the text being read and general world knowledge, is also necessary. As are engagement and motivation. Direct experiences play a role in what is likely to be comprehensible to readers. Literacy knowledge and skill in students' home language also play a role in the acquisition of literacy in a second language. Possibly other factors will be discovered in future research.

Although there is set of elements required for literacy acquisition and development that is common to all learners, the mix of those elements will vary by student groups and by individuals. Here are two examples that make this concrete:

1. For English-proficient students, Connor and colleagues (2014, 2016) have found a danger of too much code-focused instruction when students are making adequate progress in foundational skills. These students needed more of a meaning focus. Connor's work is perhaps the most outstanding example of recent "science of reading" research that helps us understand the needs of different learners, even those already proficient in English, and how they can be determined and addressed.

2. Specific to EL/EBs, the work of Sharon Vaughn and colleagues (2006a) and Linnea Ehri and her colleagues (2007) is very important. Both tested early interventions for Spanish-speaking students at risk for reading difficulties in reading English. The interventions were based on successful interventions developed for at-risk English-proficient students (grounded in the five key elements identified by the National Reading Panel). The interventions were then modified to provide ample English oral language support and instruction so that students understood the words and texts they were being taught to read. Both interventions produced significant and positive effects on EL/EB student's early literacy development. Ehri's description of her intervention is revealing:

One purpose [of the intervention] was to develop oral language by encouraging students to talk about the books and by explaining the meanings of new vocabulary words. These words were written in students' personal books, and the meanings were reviewed each time the book was read. Another goal was to spark the student's interest in the book. The tutor coached the student through the reading of the book and prompted the application of the reading skills and strategies that had been taught. *Students were encouraged to decode unknown words by relying on their letter-sound knowledge and then cross-checking with meaning and pictures to confirm the identities of the words.* (Ehri et al., 2007, p. 424; emphasis added)

Notice in particular the italicized text: Consistent with what is noted above, students were taught to identify words using letter-sound knowledge—foundational skills—then “cross-checking,” i.e., confirming, using “meaning and pictures.” Confirming with meaning would have been difficult or impossible—even using pictures—if students did not understand the meaning of the words and text. Making sure students understood the written language they were being taught to

read was explicitly one of the purposes of the intervention, as clearly articulated in Ehri's description.

It is also worth noting that a Spanish version of the intervention for EL/EBs in bilingual programs was also successful in helping students at risk for reading difficulties in Spanish (Vaughn et al., 2006a & b). The program was based on the same principles and the same five elements identified by the National Reading Panel and endorsed by the National Literacy Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth and the NCEL report and webinar. Since students were being taught to read in a language they already knew, however, there was no need for an additional language development component to support their Spanish literacy acquisition.

3. Call for federal and state leadership and investment in effective literacy instruction and in the teachers, curriculum, and resources needed to support the instruction that EL/EBs need.

Agree. There needs to be more professional development and effective curriculum and assessments made available to support enhanced reading outcomes for EL/EB students.

In conclusion, we see significant areas of overlap and agreement, and we hope to create a bridge that will allow us to work together to improve the literacy development of EL/EB students and *all* students. We are committed to this mission. It is in the best interest of the children and ultimately society that we work together to solve these complex and critical educational issues. We all must be part of the solution.

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