



## Joint Statement

### **Understanding the Difference: The Science of Reading and Implementation for English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals (ELs/EBs)**

Members from The Reading League (TRL) and the National Committee for Effective Literacy (NCEL) convened in March 2023 for an in-person summit in Las Vegas discussing the early literacy needs of English learner/emergent bilingual (EL/EB) students. This summit sought to highlight the areas of alignment between experts in the fields of reading science and English learner/emergent bilingual (EL/EB) education.

One universal truth that emerged was that the science of reading has become a buzzword and lightning rod in the greater field of education. Our collective objective is to unite as a community of experts who understand the science of reading as a comprehensive body of knowledge. This knowledge should be embraced and applied to inform instruction, complemented by understanding and addressing the social, linguistic, and cultural factors that impact students. Furthermore, it is important to identify practices that are implemented in schools under the name of the science of reading that do not align with the scientific evidence of how English learner/emergent bilingual students (ELs/EBs) learn to read.

As a nation, we have engaged in a broken game of telephone, observing frequent miscommunications or misinterpretations of the term "the science of reading" that vary depending on the individual spin or schema of the users. So, what is the science of reading? [The Science of Reading: Defining Guide](#) (TRL 2022) defines it as:

*...a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world, and it is derived from thousands*

*of studies conducted in multiple languages. The science of reading has culminated in a preponderance of evidence to inform how proficient reading and writing develop; why some have difficulty; and how we can most effectively assess and teach and, therefore, improve student outcomes through prevention and intervention of reading difficulties.*

Unfortunately, the prevailing understanding of the science of reading as a comprehensive body of knowledge does not always align with common perceptions. Consequently, misconceptions have emerged, including one widely held belief that the science of reading exclusively pertains to research on foundational reading skills. In truth, extensive research has been conducted in numerous domains of reading and writing that necessitate equal attention. Another misconception is that EL/EB students are not included in the corpus of studies referred to as the science of reading. There are multiple studies that have included EL/EB students. Yet it must be acknowledged that there is much more scientific research conducted with monolingual English-speaking children, and that the studies that have included EL/EB students are discussed as an "after-thought" or not referenced at all.

We must ensure all stakeholders understand the importance of lifting the research and neuroscience of bilingualism and biliteracy in conversations about policy, instruction, professional development, and implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction. Arrendondo et al. (2008, p. 16) concluded:

In our increasingly multilingual and multicultural society, it is important to consider the impact of bilingualism on the development of language, and how exposure to more than one language from a young age might shape an individual's brain both structurally and functionally. In the recent past, bilingualism was thought to impede cognitive and linguistic development, effectively 'confusing' the child's brain with multiple languages. We now know that this is NOT the case.

Additional research related to teaching literacy development for ELs/EBs is needed to advance our understanding of literacy development for these students in both English-medium and bilingual settings as well as our application of effective instructional practices in these settings. Moreover, the

full body of scientifically-based research has not fully translated into the reading practices implemented in classrooms. Too often, publishers, professional learning organizations, and policymakers focus on specific components of reading research or instruction. Comprehensive literacy instruction encompassing the vast body of scientific knowledge cannot be packaged into a single program, box, or presentation, particularly one that emphasizes only phonics, despite publisher and professional learning provider claims. Likewise, policymakers have sometimes focused on specific components from the scientific research base, not the totality of this body of research.

Using this body of scientific research, including the research on teaching emerging bilingual learners, we can uplift practices that support students in developing proficiency in language, reading, and writing—in English and in students' home languages. These practices are illustrated in numerous publications, including The Reading League's [Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines](#) and the practices found in the Council of the Great City Schools' [Framework for Foundational Literacy Instruction for English Learners](#), and The [Reading for Understanding Initiative](#) emphasizes the importance of not focusing exclusively on foundational skills; nurturing the profound interconnections among knowledge, language, and literacy must be considered. These resources not only provide guidance on instructional practices; they also present scientifically-based research findings from which these practices are derived. This includes research that specifically addresses EL/EBs as exemplified in the *National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Students and Youth*. Additionally, the [National Committee for Effective Literacy's Comprehensive Literacy Instruction for English Language Learners](#) includes precursor skills and elements of literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading along with recommendations for essential contexts for literacy development.

Effectively translating this knowledge into practice among schools and educator preparation programs poses a formidable challenge. It necessitates a transformative approach in educator preparation programs to equip teachers with the requisite knowledge and understanding of how to instruct students in reading and writing, as well as the pivotal role of oral language and home language development, particularly for ELs/EBs. It calls for clear, precise, evidence-aligned guidance from federal and state educational

leaders. It demands a sustained commitment from schools and districts to adopt a comprehensive and interconnected approach to literacy development, encompassing instruction, assessment, intervention, the establishment of a multi-tiered system of supports, utilization of evidence-aligned instructional materials, provision of coaching, and ongoing professional learning, among other factors.

School decision-makers face the daunting task of translating knowledge into practice amidst persistently low literacy rates, emerging state mandates, teacher burnout, and diminishing budgets. This makes them susceptible to prioritizing options that appear simple, time-saving, and cost-effective in order to fulfill policy requirements or merely tick a box. Despite good intentions, leaders may mistakenly believe that the practices they implement align with the findings from the science of reading, when in fact they do not. Too often, the instructional practices may inadvertently perpetuate misconceptions regarding what the science of reading is NOT (TRL 2002):

## What the Science of Reading is **NOT**

- ❌ an ideology or philosophy
- ❌ a fad, trend, new idea, or pendulum swing
- ❌ a political agenda
- ❌ a one-size-fits-all approach
- ❌ a program of instruction
- ❌ a single, specific component of instruction, such as phonics

Some examples of reported practices that are **not** supported by the science of reading are:

- A “one-size fits all” curriculum adopted as a singular, “science of reading” checkbox.
- Addressing evidence-aligned instruction only in one tier of instruction (e.g., only in general education, only in intensive intervention).

- Forsaking English language development, oral language development, primary language support or instruction, knowledge in content areas (e.g., history, science, civics), oral read-alouds, comprehension, or writing for the sake of a literacy block that focuses solely on foundational word reading skills.
- A focus on phonics and/or phonic decoding only for an extended period (e.g., 45-90 minutes) that does not include instruction in other subcomponents of language and literacy (e.g., encoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension).
- Assigning EL/EB students exclusively to foundational skills interventions (e.g., phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics) without intervening in other areas of literacy, as informed by data from linguistically and culturally appropriate assessments normed on the target population of students.
- Professional development that addresses EL/EBs needs superficially (as an afterthought or addendum).
- Little or no attention to English language development and development of biliteracy for EL/EB students are incorporated into literacy instruction.

So what IS needed to support positive literacy outcomes? This is a complex issue that does not have a simple solution. With the intent of forward momentum and in collaboration, we offer guidance based on evidence to serve as an initial foundation:

- All students must receive comprehensive instruction that includes all the components of literacy including language development, development of content knowledge, vocabulary, foundational skills for decoding, comprehension, and writing.
- Foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and encoding are explicitly and systematically taught to impart the phonology and orthography of the language of instruction. This instructional approach enables students to acquire the alphabetic principle and learn to decode text accurately, automatically, and fluently—a critical foundation for proficient reading and comprehending complex texts.

- An understanding that oral language is acquired naturally, but mapping oral language to written language requires explicit instruction to develop new neural pathways.
- There are differences between literacy development and language development; however, both must be attended to for students to comprehend texts. As such, instructional emphasis must also be placed on oral language development and English language development for English learners, (i.e., students learning to speak and understand English as they are learning to read and write) to ensure students are not simply decoding, or attempting to decode, words that they do not understand.
- A student's home language is an asset that should be valued and nurtured because of its intrinsic value and because it can be used to leverage second language acquisition and second language literacy development. Instructional practices in which teachers' explicitly encourage students to make connections between their home language and English benefit their language and literacy development.
- Whenever possible, students should have access to dual language instruction in which a student is able to learn in their home language *and* in English to work towards the goal of positive literacy outcomes in both languages.
- Emerging neuroscience suggests multilingualism provides benefits to a student's executive functioning due to enhanced cognitive control.
- EL/EB students may have a larger linguistic repertoire in more than one language that should be considered when looking at the totality of a student's literacy skills.
- In bilingual programs, foundational literacy skills should be taught in a manner that is authentic to the language(s) of instruction.
- During instruction, opportunities to integrate language, literacy, writing, and content knowledge should be provided.
- A wide variety of materials that ensure students develop reading skills should feature books and materials that build both foundational skills (e.g., controlled/decodable texts) and rich language and vocabulary, background knowledge, and comprehension skills (e.g., informational texts, narrative texts, poetry).
- Each student comes to the classroom with many assets and capacities including funds of knowledge, family, culture, language, and interests.

- Materials for EL/EB students should be culturally and linguistically responsive. Materials should be age-appropriate, as well as responsive to students' literacy needs as informed by data, while maintaining high expectations.
- Instruction is informed by a variety of assessments in all language(s) of instruction (whenever possible) including teacher observations of children's progress.
- Dedicated time for English Language Development is necessary for all EL/EB students; and should not be removed to make time for interventions.
- Decision-makers must make a long-term commitment to building educator and leader knowledge in the science of reading, *including* research and practice for language and literacy development for ELs/EBs.
- Policies, commercial programs, and professional development must address all components of literacy development for EL/EB students and should consider the role of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy.

With this statement, it is our goal to stand unified as a community of experts and assert our vision for what practices will lead to, or deter, equitable outcomes and high achievement for all students, particularly for English Learners and Emergent Bilinguals. Working together with a collective assets-based understanding, focused on alignments and our common goal of advanced literacy outcomes for all students, is the right thing to do for our field and our students.

Signed by,



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