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,
Many thanks to the authors and contributors:

- Dr. Mitchell Brookins, Educational Consultant, Teacher PRO
- Dr. Heidi Beverine Curry, Chief Academic Officer, The Reading League
- Ryan Buggy, Data Manager, The Reading League
- Dr. Linda Cavazos, Executive Director, ELLAS Consulting
- Dr. Ester de Jong, University of Colorado, Denver
- Dr. Amy Elleman, Middle Tennessee State University
- Dr. Kathy Escamilla, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Kari Kurto, National Science of Reading Project Director, The Reading League
- Dr. Claude Goldenberg, Nomellini & Olivier Professor of Education, Emeritus, Stanford University
- Dr. Ioulia Kovelman, Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan
- Dr. Magaly Lavadenz, Leavey Presidential Endowed Chair in Ethics and Moral Leadership, Executive Director, Center for Equity For English Learners, Loyola Marymount University
- Martha Hernandez, Executive Director, Californians Together
- Dr. Sylvia Linan-Thompson, University of Oregon, Department of Special Education and Clinical Sciences
- Dr. Martha Martinez, Director of Research and Evaluation, Sobrato Early Academic Language
- Dr. Maria Murray, President and CEO, The Reading League
- Dr. Laurie Olsen, Researcher, Author, Advocate
- Patricia Montes Pate, Early Learning Senior Program Manager, Sobrato Early Academic Language
- Dr. Jody Slavick, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, Strategic Advisor, Californians Together
- Dr. Julie Sugarman, Migration Policy Institute
- Becky Sullivan, Director, K-12 English Language Arts, Sacramento County Office of Education
- Dr. Jose Viana, Senior Education Advisor, Lexia Learning
- Dr. Brianna Lynn Yamasaki, Assistant Professor for the Department of Psychology, Emory University
Co-signed by the following non-profit and/or professional organizations:
**Co-signed by the following Individuals:**

Dr. Tracy White Weeden, Neuhaus Education Center  
Dr. Kathy Escamilla, University of Colorado, Boulder  
Dr. Jim Cummins, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto  
Dr. Hollis Scarborough  
Phyllis Hardy, Executive Director, MABE  
Ester J. de Jong  
Dr. Nell K. Duke, Stand for Children and the University of Michigan
Tami Reis-Frankfort, Founder, PhonicBooks
Amy McGovern M.Ed, Reading Specialist
Louise Dechovitz, Co-Founder, Illinois Early Literacy Coalition
Wong Fillmore, Jerome Hutto Professor of Education Emerita, University of California at Berkeley
Rhianna Casesa
Becky Linderholm, Reading & Multilingual Learning Specialist
Margarita E. Calderón, Ph.D.
Dominic Grasso, Ph.D., Asst. Professor, California State University Northridge
Mary Parr-Sanches, President, NEA-NM
Amy Martello
Laura Freeman
Terri Janiak, Literacy Consultant
Leticia Spilane
Juan Van Ginkel
Donna L. Giacoletti, Reading Specialist, AZ
Howie Berman, Executive Director, ACTFL
Andrea Setmeyer
Jesse Steif, Ed.S.- President, The Reading League Florida
Piper Riddle, Executive Director NUES
Jenn Marshall-Aletto
Carol Benz
Melissa Vasquez, M.Ed., Instructional Design and Training Specialist
Dr. Alicia Roberts Frank, Regional Administrator for Special Programs, Dyslexia Specialist
April Boyle, Education Specialist
Rachel Griffin
Lauren Brannan, Ph.D. Associate Professor of Reading Education
Michelle Young, EL Program Specialist, TRL California Board Member
Charlene Brown, 2nd Grade Teacher
Liliana Rodriguez
Renee Hopper M.Ed., Implementation Coach
Ms. Tonja Gray, TRL Texas BOD Secretary, Adjunct Professor, McMurray University
Allison Caldwell, Dyslexia Specialist
Pam DeMato, Executive Director, Shelby Literacy Center
Jennifer L. Harris
Laura Johnson, Director of Learning Support, Saul Mirowitz Jewish
Community School
Ana Gabriela Bell Jimenez, Ph.D.
Robert J. Rogers, M.D.
Christine Quesada, Assistant Director of Literacy and Humanities
Carol M. Johnson
Joel Gomez, President, Center for Applied Linguistics
Kevin Chavez, ATDLE Executive Director
Rosa G. Molina, Executive Director, ATDLE
Anne Brewster, Board President, The Reading League Illinois
Nicole R. Kade - Chief Education Officer, Greenfield Learning Inc.
Maria R. Coady
Jennifer Macias, Multilingual Services Coordinator, OGSD
Dr. Anya Hurwitz, Executive Director, SEAL
Dr. Sonia Soltero, Professor and Chair, DePaul University
Antoinette Gutierrez, Ed.D, Director Multilingual
Gabriela Marquez Clark, District EL Coordinator
Fabiola De La Torre
Dr. Daisy Skelly, ELD Specialist, MO
Mary Murray Stowe, President of the Virginia Branch of the International Dyslexia Association
L. Erika Saito, Ph.D., K-12 Level Assistant Chair
Laura A. Gonzalez, Superintendent
Guadalupe Solis, Ed.D.
Janine Silva, ESOL Teacher
Kim Collins, Dyslexia Specialist, TRL-NC Board Member
Adrian J. Sandoval, Director, Center for the Education and Study of Diverse Populations
Michael Rodriguez, Executive Director, Dual Language Education of New Mexico
Anna Fritz, President, The Reading League Kansas
Vicky Xiong-Lor, Assistant Professor & Hmong Bilingual Authorization Coordinator
Eduardo de León, Executive Director, The Language Academy of Sacramento
Abbey Kerins
Kristen Koeller, President, The Reading League California
Dr. Kathry Futterman, Adjunct Faculty, Cal State East Bay
Holly Gil, Instructional Specialist and Consultant
Margarita Espino Calderon, Ph.D.
Michael Solis, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of California, Riverside.
Linda Rhyne
Jordan Paxhia-Marion, M.S.Ed. and Founding Director of TRL-CA
Jorge Cuevas Antillón
Rebecca Miles, President, The Reading League Michigan
Clair Wilson Founder Phonic Books
Rebecca Miles, President, The Reading League Michigan
Chris Montecillo Leider, Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics at University of Massachusetts Boston
Melissa Lear Fisher, Board President, The Reading League Michigan
Dr. Teerath Kaur Grewal
Angela Wright
Dr. Laurie Olsen
Dr. Kathy Futterman-Adjunct Faculty Cal State East Bay
Laura Hamman-Ortiz, Assistant Professor of TESOL and Bilingual Education, University of Rhode Island
Javier Bolivar, Executive Director
Jennifer Diehl
Jennifer Upham - San Diego County Office of Education
Yvonne Williams Director of ML Educator Engagement
Sharon Dunn, MTSS Leadership Consultant, LLC
Ronit Glickman, Teacher
New Mexico Association for Bilingual Education
Adrian A. Pedroza, National Executive Director, Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors
Anna Navarro, Program Specialist, Multilingual Services
Darcel Sanders, CEO, GO Public Schools
Anthony Burik, CATESOL President
Rabia Hos, Associate Professor, University of Rhode Island
Susan E. Miller, Director, Robinowitz Education Center NJ
Diep Nguyen, Ph.D Director of ELRP
Yolie Flores, President & CEO, Families in Schools
Nicole Leach, NAELPA President
Dr. Ellen Bernstein, President, Albuquerque Teachers Federation
Liliya Stefoglo/WABE President
Jeanne-Marie Wright/WABE Parliamentarian
Jill Castek, University of Arizona
Gwen Perea Warniment, Ph.D. Executive Director, New Mexico Legislative
Education Study Committee
Alex Frazier, President, The Reading League Colorado
Silvia Dorta-Duque de Reyes
Alicia Pratt, Coalition Coordinator, Coalition for a Multilingual Rhode Island
Dr. Susan J. McGilvray-Rivet
Alejandrina Velez-Villa
Kimberly U. Leimer
Dr. Julie Esparza Brown, Professor in Special Education
Dr. Barbara “BK” Kennedy, Globalingo Education Consulting, LLC
Pedro Mendia-Landa
Maria L. Wilson-Portuondo, Bilingual Special Education and Equity Specialists
Marianne Fiocca-Stern, ESL Teacher and Dyslexia Practitioner
Theresa Austin, Ph.D.
Ruth Silva, Dual Language Teacher, ELD
Allison Briceño
Dr. Pierre de Galbert, Brown University
Dr. Julie Coiro, Professor, University of Rhode Island
Dr. Stefanie Argus, Assistant Professor of Education, Landmark College
Kara E. Clayton, Faculty
Frank Romanelli
Amy Correia, Ph.D., Clinical Assistant Professor of TESOL/BDL
Michelle Schira Hagerman, Professeure agrégée, Faculté d’Éducation de la University of Ottawa
Lillian Ardell, PhD, Founder at Language Matters, LLC
Elisabeth Ambroiggio Director of Bilingual and Multicultural Programs
Silvestre Arcos, Learning Designer, Student Achievement Partners
Tori Filler, Literacy Designer, Student Achievement Partners
Carey Swanson, Senior Literacy Designer, Student Achievement Partners
Alyssia Bell, President, UNITE-LA
Ryan Pontier
Dr. Sharon Merrill, Board Member, Californians Together, former President, CABTE
Maria R. Coady, Ph.D.
Dr. Patricia Venegas-Weber, Research Scientist, UW Seattle
Laura M. Silva, Multilingual Learner Program Coordinator
Jeanne-Marie Wright, ELL Instructor/WABE Board Parliamentarian
Crystal A. Buskirk, ELD and Multilingual Learner
Jing Ren
Cynthia Garcia-Doane, President, Association of Mexican-American Educators, Inc
Cristina Sánchez-López
Maria Medina, EL Services Coordinator - WJUSD
Liliana Smith
Gloria Cho, Department Head of Bilingual Education, Brockton Public Schools
Michael B. Matsuda, Superintendent
Nirmala G. Flores, Ed.D, Assistant Professor, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Vanessa Aramayo, Executive Director, Alliance for a Better Community
Dr. Marina Madrid
Maria M Hernandez, Ed.D.
Elisabeth Ambroiggio Director of Bilingual and Multicultural Programs-Waukegan Public Schools
Samantha Tate, Administrator
Doris Chávez-Linville, Director of Linguistic & Culturally Diverse Innovation at Renaissance
Becky Sullivan, Director, K-12 English Language Arts, Sacramento County Office of Education
Margarita P. Pinkos Ed.D.
Dr. Laura Ascenzi-Moreno, Brooklyn College CUNY
Meredith Liben - Reading Done Right
David Liben
Fawn Canady
Kim Gibbons, Ph.D
Magaly Lavadenz, Ph.D
Sue Pimental
Amelia Van Name Larsen, M.A.Ed.S.
Tricia Kelly, RITELL Coordinating Council President
Molly Jo Fuentealba
Vickie Ramos Harris, Director of Educational Equity, Catalyst California
Dana Gastich French, UpRiver Education
Beth Skelton, Consultant
Dr. Michelle Hosp, Director of Foundational Literacy at Renaissance
Sara Sharer, MA Reading Interventionist/ELL Coordinator
Dr. Pam Kastner, The Reading League Pennsylvania
Breanna Guzman
Dr. Nicole M. Mancini, CCC-SLP, Chief of Academics
Dr. Kristin M. Larsen, ELD Curriculum Specialist
Tiffany Seaman, Secretary, The Reading League Kansas
Jamey Peavler
Melanie Hooper, President, The Reading League South Carolina
Amy Rotundo
Dr. Rosamaria Murrillo
Antonio A. Fierro, Ed.D.

References:

