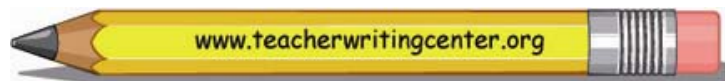


# Speaking of Writing: The Significance of Oral Language in English Learners' Literacy Development

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In pockets of the country today, some English language development<sup>1</sup> (ELD) educators are reasserting the importance of oral language instruction as part of a systematic, effective ELD program. While the extent to which practitioners are implementing oral language instruction in ELD classrooms varies, practical experience and formal research underscore the significance of oral language as a critical part of an English learner's achievement of full language proficiency. Students who have had extended opportunities to use, practice, and refine their oral language are far better equipped to reach a high level of written discourse and achieve academic success.

### The Oral Language Instruction Debate

In considering different pedagogical approaches over the past 30 years, ELD educators have debated the role of oral language instruction. At times, the ELD curriculum evidenced a diminished emphasis on oral language instruction in order to accommodate the methodology du jour. Some approaches to ELD instruction completely overlooked oral language development as the foundation of written language. More recently, ELD educators are seeing reading and writing as natural extensions of what students have understood through the development of their listening skills and expressed orally through the development of their speaking skills. It is axiomatic that if students do not have the ability to express their ideas orally, they will not be able to express their ideas in writing. Oral language and written language are inextricably linked. Biemiller (2007) points out that initially children's level of listening comprehension determines what they can comprehend when

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<sup>1</sup> English language development (ELD) is also referred to as English as a second language (ESL) and English to speakers of other languages (ESOL).

reading. Other research (Baker, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Hiebert & Kamil, 2005; and Pressley, 2000) confirms the importance of vocabulary in students' ability to successfully make meaning from text. Bailey and Moughamian (2007) and Snow, Tabors, and Dickinson (2001) studied the close connection between students' ability to grasp complex grammatical structures and the organization of discourse presented orally, and their successful application of these concepts in literacy outcomes.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences created the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth. One outcome of this initiative was a report that identified, assessed, and synthesized research on the education of English learners with special attention to literacy achievement. A major finding in this report (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 4) is that "Instruction in the key components of reading is necessary—but not sufficient—for teaching language minority students to read and write proficiently in English. Oral proficiency in English is critical ... but student performance suggests that it is often overlooked." The research the panel reviewed confirms that English learners do well in word-level skills in literacy (e.g., decoding, spelling, word recognition), but they lag behind native English speakers in text-level skills. The report concludes, "It is not enough to teach ... reading skills alone. Extensive oral English



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development must be incorporated into successful literacy instruction.” The panel determined that the most successful programs offered strong oral language development in English along with high-quality literacy instruction.

### Variations in Instructional Time Devoted to Oral Language

The amount of time teachers, schools, and districts dedicate to oral language instruction often depends on variables such as student age and level of language proficiency.

Generally, teachers afford younger students far more opportunities for oral language practice. In contrast,

teachers provide older students with less oral language instruction and practice because the emphasis in the upper grades is on content, reading, and writing instruction. Similarly, English learners at the Beginning and Early Intermediate levels tend to engage in more listening and/or speaking activities, while reading and writing activities

consume more instructional time in classrooms where English learners are at the Intermediate level and higher.

Other factors that influence the instructional time dedicated to oral language instruction include the teacher’s expertise in second language teaching and confidence with oral language activities; class size; and the district’s and/or state’s English language proficiency (ELP) standards.



*Older students often receive less oral language instruction because the emphasis is on reading, writing, and content.*

### ELD Curriculum and District Priorities

While most ELD educators concur that oral language practice is an appropriate part of ELD instruction, there is a wide variation in the emphasis on oral language instruction among districts, schools, and classrooms. This is a result of several factors. For example, the ELD curriculum a district, school, or teacher selects for instruction will determine how much time is dedicated to oral language instruction and practice. Even the overall amount of time allocated for ELD instruction will affect the percentage of instructional time that can be devoted to oral language activities. Further, the amount of oral language instruction is affected by the district’s emphasis on oral communication skills in relation to its emphasis on literacy skills. If developing literacy is the primary goal, ELD lessons often will reflect more writing and less oral language instruction and practice. Paradoxically, this may undermine the progress of English learners to achieve higher levels of literacy.

### The Importance of Speaking in Overall Language Development

The social dimension of language as a human phenomenon is what makes language alive, dynamic, and real. It does not require a skilled linguist to observe that in first language development listening and speaking are precursors to reading and writing. Humans are programmed to talk before they learn to read and write, and this holds true in second language development. Consider that in any given day human beings spend much more time interacting orally with language rather than using language in its written form. Rivers (1981) studied language use outside the classroom context and found that speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing combined. Within the classroom context, Brown (1994) found that listening and speaking are students’ most often used language tools. Most methodologies, formal

or informal, place an emphasis on students talking early even if they may be learning reading and writing simultaneously.

Practical experience and formal research confirm that people cannot learn a language without multiple opportunities for meaningful repetition. Oral language interactions and the chance to produce the language in meaningful dialogue and activities provide the practice that is critical to internalizing the language. James Asher's work (2003) on Total Physical Response (TPR) supports the notion that very soon after the teacher models the language students want to imitate what has been said.

Krashen's research (1987; 1988) looked at the linkage between listening and speaking. He does not suggest that more listening results necessarily in more talking, at least on the part of the students. Krashen argues that when English learners finally speak, their speaking provides evidence that they have acquired the language. This assumption oftentimes led some educators to jump too quickly from speaking instruction to reading and writing instruction.

### English Learners and the Link between Speaking and Writing

The goal of writing instruction is to develop students' ability to produce cohesive and coherent written discourse. However, this goal presupposes that the student has the language resources to support the written expression of his or her ideas. The idea that "you learn to write by writing" is well and good for English-only students who need only to practice their writing skills to become better writers. However, this maxim is not helpful in describing the task for many English learners who are struggling with a limited English vocabulary, a shaky grasp of syntax, and unfamiliar English grammatical forms and functions. How are these English

learners going to learn to write well? In this case, more writing is not the solution. As indicated earlier, research suggests that more talking—oral language development—is the prerequisite to developing strong writing skills.

Traditionally, teachers do most of the talking in subject matter classes, and too often this is the case in ELD classrooms as well. When it comes to language learning, a different dynamic must exist, and that is one in which students who are learning the language use it to interact with others. Those interactions to convey meaning, exchange thoughts and ideas, and solve problems must occur first on an oral level and then on a written level.



*Too often, ELD teachers do most of the talking in class. A different dynamic must exist when it comes to teaching language.*

### Conclusion

Oral language instruction should be the cornerstone of a systematic ELD program. It offers educators the most effective way to provide the foundation English learners need to develop skills that will allow them to read and write proficiently in English. The emerging trend toward reasserting the critical role of oral language development in a balanced ELD program is an important step forward in the ELD instruction of the 21st century. Without a solid grounding in oral language, English learners will be greatly disadvantaged in their quest for full language proficiency. Students who have extended opportunities to develop oral language skills are best positioned to achieve academic success.

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