Comprehension Instruction for English Language Learners

English language learners are a diverse group, with varying educational experiences, primary language literacy skills, and levels of English proficiency. All of these factors have an impact on students’ ability to read and comprehend materials in English. There are many things that educators can do to support second language readers’ comprehension. Our primary task is to ensure that students have the necessary background to be effective, fluent readers. This includes helping students develop a broad vocabulary base, knowledge of English grammatical structures, familiarity with text content and text structures, and ensuring that every student has solid foundational literacy skills.

Second Language Readers

Today educators are faced with the challenge of providing appropriate instruction to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Within this context is the special challenge of teaching children who are non-native speakers of English to read in English, while simultaneously developing their oral language proficiency and other skills necessary to succeed in school. Although the reading process is essentially the same for all students, second language readers bring different resources and unique needs to the task, with important implications for instruction.

While it is impossible to categorize all English language learners (ELLs) into a single group that can be addressed with one instructional approach, all of them, by definition, need to develop proficiency and literacy skills in English. Fortunately, an evolving body of research, theories and experiences, point to some promising practices for improving reading comprehension for second language readers.

Background Knowledge

Reading is an interactive process directed toward the sharing of meaning. To engage in this process effectively, second language readers must be able to draw on their own language, literacy, and socio-cultural knowledge to reconstruct the author’s message. In other words, comprehension is directly related to what the reader already knows.

We readily recognize that the more one knows about something, the easier it is to talk, read, and write about it. We also know that comprehension is enhanced when students have opportunities to connect new concepts with their personal experiences and past learning. It follows then that the more familiarity students have with certain aspects of a text, the easier it will be for them to comprehend it. Among these critical aspects are

- Vocabulary and Language Structures
- Text Content and Text Structure
- Decoding Demands
Vocabulary

Because vocabulary knowledge is so closely tied to reading comprehension, English language learners must develop a broad vocabulary base in order to be effective readers. When students encounter a large number of unknown words while they are reading, their comprehension is disrupted. English learners may misinterpret a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire reading selection if they do not know the meaning of one or more key words.

For this reason, it is extremely important for teachers to directly teach key vocabulary and provide opportunities for ELLs to use this vocabulary orally and in writing. Students acquiring English need many opportunities to hear and use English, to take risks, and try out their knowledge of the language.

In Avenues each unit begins by building important background and using clear, colorful visuals to introduce students to theme-related, academic vocabulary. Students have repeated opportunities to use the content area words as they sing and innovate songs and work with Picture Cards. Avenues also includes direct instruction in key selection vocabulary—the words that are key to understanding each reading selection. The new words come alive for students as key vocabulary is introduced

- with songs
- through role-plays
- in photo stories

To deepen word knowledge, the key words appear in the Picture Dictionary at the end of each Student Book and are continually reinforced in daily activities. To further support comprehension, on-page glossaries rephrase less essential vocabulary. This enables students to quickly access the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases and continue with their reading.

Language Structures

In addition to developing vocabulary, teachers must also help second language readers learn the structures of the new language. Grammar instruction supports reading comprehension by helping students:

- recognize types of sentences
- understand parts of speech
- predict word order
- identify verb forms that cue tense
- recognize function words

Understanding how English works helps readers predict and fully grasp the author’s message. For example, knowing how to identify nouns, verbs, and descriptors can help students separate important information from unimportant information. And to be able to use context clues effectively a reader must have strong intuitions about English word order.

Avenues supports reading comprehension with powerful previews of each selection, including a preview of the selection’s language structures. First, students hear the language model and, with prompts from the teacher, are led to explore how English works. They then experiment using the language structures in a risk-free and meaningful context.

With each selection in Avenues, teachers will find support to build their students’ language skills. In grade 3, for example, nouns are introduced in a preview of “The Fox in the Moon.” As students work through the unit, sequential lessons give them extensive practice in reading and writing a progression of language structures: nouns and articles, plural nouns, possessive nouns, specific nouns, and irregular plurals. This type of comprehensive grammar instruction builds important background for reading and leads to oral and written fluency.


**Text Content**

We know that background knowledge affects reading comprehension—familiarity with the topic greatly enhances a student’s comprehension. Research suggests that this may be even more significant for second language readers. Studies have shown that when students read passages reflecting their own cultural traditions, their memory and comprehension were better than when they read equally difficult passages about unfamiliar topics. When ELLs are familiar with the content of the text, their limited language proficiency doesn't have as great an impact on their comprehension.

The challenge for teachers is to build sufficient text content background for ELLs and to support them during the reading process. *Avenues* helps educators accomplish this in several ways:

- The program presents authentic, multicultural literature that speaks to students’ own lives and experiences.
- For in-depth theme study, each unit pairs fiction and nonfiction readings connected to grade-level content.
- The **Student Book** uses strong visual support to preview the selection's genre and the story elements or text features.
- The **Teacher's Edition** includes a “picture walk” to preview key events or main ideas.
- Sheltering strategies such as the use of role-play, demonstrations, real objects, and restatements help make the selection content fully comprehensible.

To support students during reading, the selections in *Avenues* include built-in comprehension support. Each one is divided into manageable chunks with an introduction that sets a purpose or prompts a prediction. There is strong picture support for the selection content, and the Before You Move On features provide frequent comprehension checks. In addition, suggested Reading Options tailor the reading experience to students’ language and literacy levels.

**Text Structures**

Familiarity with different text structures—the ways a piece of writing can be organized—also enhances students’ reading comprehension. Because text structures vary across cultures and languages, ELLs benefit from explicit instruction in a variety of English text structures commonly used in fiction and nonfiction writing. For example, once students know how a problem-solution story is structured, they can anticipate, search for, and locate key story elements.

Instruction in expository text structures is especially important because as students move through the grades, content area texts become longer, more complex, and more conceptually demanding. Text structure knowledge has the added benefit of helping students to organize their own thoughts and ideas when writing in English.

To support comprehension, *Avenues* includes a preview of the text structure of every reading selection. During the Read and Map activities the teacher models how to complete a graphic organizer that reveals the underlying organization of the selection. After students read the selection, they complete their own graphic organizers and use them to retell the story or summarize main ideas. This type of mapping of text structures has been shown to contribute to readers’ comprehension and recall.

**Decoding Demands**

In order to unlock the meaning of words on a printed page, readers must be able to recognize the words automatically and group them into meaningful phrases. Knowledge of the English writing system requires that students have a solid foundation in phonological awareness, concepts of print, and letter-sound correspondences.

Each English language learner brings a unique set of experiences and skills to the classroom. Some have strong academic backgrounds and know how to read in their home language. Others may have had years of interrupted schooling and lack even the most basic understanding of
how print works.

Even students who are able readers in their home languages will encounter entirely new sounds and new letter-sound correspondences when they begin to read in English. The assessment tools in Avenues provide a clear picture of students’ concepts about print, phonological awareness, knowledge of English letter names and letter-sound correspondences, and basic decoding skills. For beginning readers Avenues includes a comprehensive strand to develop concepts of print and phonological awareness. Teachers will also find systematic, sequential phonics instruction at all grades. Phonics Street and Reading Basics teach children strategies for reading multisyllabic words and words with affixes.

Conclusion

The purpose of reading is comprehension. Reading is deriving meaning from the printed page, and this process is closely tied to what readers know. For ELLs this means that they must develop the basic background that will allow them to understand what they read. Factors other than lack of English proficiency may contribute to their reading difficulties. Familiarity with text content and text structures associated with the new language is also important.

A relevant curriculum for ELLs must be built on what students need to know, while honoring their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Prior literacy experiences and background knowledge determine the extent to which readers can interact with information in a text. Thus, we must design instructional materials with the strategies to enhance the language and literacy skills of ELLs.

Selected Bibliography


Josefina Villamil Tinajero, Ph.D.

Dr. Tinajero is an author of Avenues, a K-5 language and literacy program. She specializes in staff development and school-university partnership programs and has consulted with school districts in the U.S. to design ESL, bilingual, literacy, and bi-literacy programs.

Dr. Tinajero has served on state and national advisory committees for standards development, including the English as a New Language Advisory Panel of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards and the Texas Reading Academies. She is currently professor of Education and Dean of the College of Education at The University of Texas at El Paso. Dr. Tinajero is the current President of the National Association for Bilingual Education, and also served in that capacity from 1997-2000.