



Doing What Works

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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Topic: Teaching Reading in English to K-5 English Learners

Practice: Develop Academic English

Current Practices in Teaching Literacy to K-5 English Learners (short version)

Long Beach, CA • April 2007

Highlights

- Definition of Academic English
- Why Academic English is important
- How Academic English is different from oral conversation
- Components of Academic English, including phonology, grammar, socio-linguistics, discourse
- Teacher support and professional development

About the Interviewee

Russell Gersten is a nationally recognized expert in both quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation methodologies, with an emphasis on translating research into classroom practice. He is regularly consulted as an expert in the area of mathematics research, use of randomized trials in educational research, and the education of English learners. Gersten works with the Center on Instruction, one of the five content centers in the Comprehensive Center network. In 2002, Gersten received the Distinguished Special Education Researcher Award from the American Educational Research Association's Special Education Research Division. He has over 125 publications in scientific journals such as *Review of Educational Research*, the *American Educational Research Journal*, and *Exceptional Children*, and serves on 13 editorial boards, including some of the most prestigious journals in the field, such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *Exceptional Children*, and *Elementary School Journal*.

Full Transcript

I'm Russell Gersten. I'm the Director of the Instructional Research Group—we're a small research institute in Long Beach, California—as well as a Professor Emeritus in the School of Education at University of Oregon.

The practice guide is, is different in a few important ways from other, other things that are available or have been written. Probably the two key things about this were that we are trying to be practical, but also be very focused. Our charge was coherence. Was not to just list 11 things or various research traditions, but to actually give guidance—specific guidance—and be clear about how confident we are in it.

There really are two or three big ideas that underlie the suggestions, and I will say this: we weren't aware at the beginning. We didn't say "what are our three big ideas," but these are the ones that kept coming up as we reviewed the research, looked, got different perspectives on it. Number one is that English learners can learn to how to read in English at about the same rate as native speakers. This was not known five or ten years ago. This has been replicated, repeated time and time again, that is very important for people to know and to use as a foundation in policy. So that's one part that we can and should teach kids how to read and, and not have lower standards or expectations for English Learners.

Second big idea is, that the whole idea that English language development needs to be improved and now we have some direction for how to improve it. And the reason the language development is so important is for kids—we know they can learn how to read in first, second grade—they can read accurately, and this kind of thing—but to build the kind of comprehension that we want, you have to start in Kindergarten, or hopefully Pre-K, with the development of academic English. Those are the two big ideas, and that's what we hope will give this document coherence.

I'm just gonna give you a brief overview of the recommended practices that are of course detailed in the practice guide, and a little bit of the reasoning. We really think the screening and progress monitoring is essential because unlike 5-10 years ago, English learners can now be included in and, and are included, in the annual assessments in grade 3 through 8 and high school. But this is a way for kids to be included in all the assessments that are done in a school and to make sure that kids are making adequate, round progress, even in kindergarten and first grade, where we can track whether they are learning how to read.

The second recommended practice is, there have been several high-quality studies about reading interventions that work for teaching kids to basically learn how to read. These are kids again who are really struggling, be they first graders or fourth graders, with just the rudiments of learning how to read for a variety of reasons. So we do have some powerful package. The What Works Clearinghouse describes them. So that's another practice.

Third one is the whole importance of richer vocabulary instruction than, than most conventional reading books have, is critical. It's a life or death issue for these kids. And there are resources that people can use, and we've used successfully in our own research. There are some books—and these are just examples, I don't want to recommend them—like *Bring Words to Life* or *The Vocabulary Book*, that can be used as a basis for improving vocabulary instruction. And having teachers understand, why one needs to go beyond what in the typical reading text, or what's even in supplements.

The whole other idea of systematically teaching academic language, teaching it a lot, using writing whenever possible, using the academic content the kids are learning, the stories they are reading, the science material they're reading.

The last practice we recommend—'cause there is increasing research supporting it—is the importance of kids working with peers, and with a structured procedure, this can be done as early as Kindergarten, working in groups of either two or four, but where they know what to do. They have little tip sheets and little guides.

What's hugely important about this is - any of us - like when I've gone into rooms with a lot of English learners, especially when kids are maybe in many cases making the transition from Spanish language instruction to English language instruction, they tend to talk in a very low voice, they're very afraid of making mistakes. They're in a class of 30 in the fourth grade. If you do this with a peer, there's not the same anxiety. Let's say you get - tense agreement is off, and your buddy corrects you, it is not a major kind of thing like being afraid the teacher is going to correct you in front of 25 kids. So those are our five key practices we recommend.