Teaching English Language Learners At Risk for Reading Disabilities to Read: Putting Research into Practice

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The purpose of this article is to describe features of interventions that are empirically validated for use with first-grade students at risk for reading disabilities who are English language learners (ELLs) and whose home language is Spanish. The empirical evidence supporting these interventions is summarized. Interventions for improving oral language and reading abilities with struggling readers who are ELLs taught in either Spanish or English are described as a means to assist school districts and teachers in defining and implementing effective interventions for ELLs at risk for reading difficulties. The interventions described may be useful to educators seeking information about Response to Intervention as a means of identifying ELLs who require services for learning disabilities.

Special education identification, placement, and instruction decisions for students who are English language learners (ELLs) have been largely based on research and practices

There is a clear need for well-conducted studies examining the effectiveness of interventions for ELLs with reading difficulties.

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION AS A MEANS FOR IDENTIFYING ELLS WITH READING DISABILITIES

Related to the need for appropriate interventions is the recent interest in response to intervention as a means of identifying students with learning disabilities. Using a response to intervention model, children would be identified as needing special education services only after demonstrating inadequate response to interventions that have been shown to be effective with most students. Of course, before such a model can be implemented, it is necessary to have validated interventions. Thus, at the current time, it is very difficult to actually implement this model with ELLs because efficacy of various interventions has not been tested with this population.

Much of the impetus fueling the support for response to intervention as a practice for identifying students as learning disabled is related to three issues: (a) the lack of support for IQ-achievement discrepancy as an appropriate criteria for identification for learning disabilities (Fletcher et al., 1994; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002); (b) the value of early intervention for students with reading difficulties (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998); and (c) concern over the use of IQ tests as a conventional practice in identifying students for special education—particularly with minority students (National Research Council, 2002). The rationale and related history of traditional practices for identifying students with learning disabilities have been debated for decades, literally since the category learning disabilities was included within special education (Hallahan & Mock, 2003). Response to intervention is not without pitfalls, including concerns about who is going to monitor students' progress and provide appropriate interventions to determine whether students qualify for special education (see Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002; Fuchs, 2003; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003 for reviews).

Despite challenges, response to intervention appears to hold promise as a practice for providing early intervention, appropriate identification, and reduced use of IQ tests for students with disabilities. This practice is very much aligned with the recommendations of the Committee on Minority Representation in Special Education (Donovan & Cross, 2002). However, for response to intervention to be an appropriate procedure for students who are ELLs with reading difficulties, appropriate interventions associated with improved outcomes need to be developed and empirically tested (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Responding to this need, we have conducted two randomized, controlled trials with ELLs at risk for reading difficulties (Vaughn et al., 2004; Vaughn et al., in press). In each of these studies, we examined interventions designed to meet the needs of ELLs, building on what we know about teaching monolingual English speakers who experience reading difficulties. Currently, we are in the process of replicating the findings with a new cohort of at-risk first-graders and following students' performance into second and third grades. For this research, we targeted the largest group of ELLs in the United States—students whose home language is Spanish. The purpose of these studies was to: (a) develop two interventions—one in English and one in Spanish specifically designed for ELLs at risk for reading problems; (b) identify ELLs (Spanish/English) with significant reading problems whose core first-grade reading instruction was in English, and identify ELLs (Spanish/English) with significant reading problems whose core first-grade reading instruction was in Spanish; and (c) match the language of the intervention to the language of their core reading program.

Our goals in constructing these studies were twofold. First, we sought to design effective curricula for teaching reading to struggling ELLs (Spanish/English), based on the research base with monolingual English students and our assumptions about its generalizability to ELLs (specifically those who are English/Spanish). Second, we tested the effectiveness of delivering instruction using these new curricula against treatment as usual for at-risk ELLs in randomized controlled trials. Through this activity, we sought to begin to build a research base to guide decision making about placement and instruction for these students. If response to intervention is to be implemented with young students at risk for reading problems, identifying interventions that have demonstrated effectiveness with ELLs is necessary to assist in documenting their response to effective interventions so that outcomes can be validated for use in identification for learning disabilities.

Because the findings from these studies are reported in articles that are currently in press or review (Vaughn et al., 2004; Vaughn et al., in press) or being reviewed for publication, we will provide only a brief summary of the findings in this article. However, because both interventions demonstrated effective outcomes in a controlled, experimental setting for the target students, we will describe the features of the intervention curriculum and make suggestions for educational practice for teachers of students with reading difficulties who are ELLs. We believe that understanding the fundamental design and elements of the intervention are exceedingly important to the myriad of educators who are searching for effective interventions for bilingual students with reading difficulties.

DESIGN OF THE ENGLISH INTERVENTION AND THE SPANISH INTERVENTION FOR ELLS AT RISK FOR READING PROBLEMS

There were four major phases to the development of the interventions. Phase I was the development of an English intervention (Mathes, Torgesen, Wahl, Menchetti, & Grek, 1999). This curriculum had been designed for previous intervention studies and validated with monolingual English struggling readers (Mathes et al., in press). This curriculum was used as our core intervention curriculum for ELLs who were learning to read in English. In Phase II we designed a set of language support activities to modify the English intervention so that it would be appropriate for ELLs. These support activities ensured that appropriate practices related to effective English as a second language were included throughout the instructional sequence. Phase III involved the development of a Spanish intervention for students who were ELLs initially learning to

of words that were presented either by the teacher, or located in the students' activity book. In terms of decoding phonetically regular words, children were initially taught to sound out. This process began with simple CVC words (i.e., closed syllable). Initially children were given very simple words and extended time to blend the sounds represented by the letters to form words. However, the amount of time allowed to sound out the words was gradually decreased, while the complexity of the words was gradually increased. Further, as the time for figuring out words decreased, there was increased emphasis on "reading words fast" on the first reading. In order to accomplish this, children were initially asked to sound-out words silently. Across time, the amount of time allowed to sound out silently was also decreased. As children moved toward decoding unknown words quickly and efficiently, they were also learning to read words representing the six different syllable types, although terminology about syllable types was not included. As children demonstrated success reading one syllable type, that syllable type was included in reading multisyllabic words. Initially children read simple cvc/cvc words such as *rabbit*. Initially children applied the sounding-out strategy to each syllable, read each syllable "fast," then read the whole word. The sounding-out step was quickly removed so that children read each syllable part, then read the whole word. By the end of the program, they were reading two- and three-syllable words comprising any combination of the six syllable types.

Another important aspect to the word recognition strand was teaching children to be what we called "flexible decoders." Children were taught that "sometimes parts of words did not sound out quite right," but that sounding-out usually produced a pronunciation that was close enough to figure out what the word really was. In this way, children were not burdened with being responsible for knowing which words could and could not be sounded-out. Instead they were taught that they could sound out any word they did not know automatically, but if the resulting word was not a "real word," they had to be flexible.

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In particular, we targeted three types of words. Words in the directions were defined to ensure that students understood the task, words used in phonemic awareness and phonics lessons were defined to provide context, and vocabulary words in connected text used for fluency building and comprehension were defined. To explore the meaning of words, intervention teachers provided the word and asked if any students knew the meaning. If students were unable to provide a definition, the teacher used the word in a sentence and asked for a definition again. If students were not able to give a definition or gave an incomplete definition, the teacher provided the definition. All definitions of words were accepted, but the teacher told the students how the word would be used in the context of the lesson. Students were then asked to give the definition or use the word in a sentence. In addition to providing a definition orally, pictures, gestures, or role-play were used to enhance the students' understanding of the word.

To ensure that students understood the tasks they were asked to perform, we defined words they may not have known prior to beginning the task. The use of consistent and explicit language throughout the curriculum helped students learn the words and focus on the task. Words such as *stretching* and *tracing* were defined prior to asking students to perform a task. Before each lesson in which teachers used word lists to complete tasks or in which students would read connected text, words that may have been unknown to the students were also defined. Students were told that the words would be used in the task or would appear in the story. If students had previously learned a specific meaning of a word, teachers reminded students of the meaning they had learned, told students they would learn a new meaning, and provided a sentence as a prompt. This process was used if the target word had been previously learned as a particular part of speech. For example, *mop* was first learned as a noun when it was part of a word list and later as a verb when it appeared in a story.

Phase III: Development of the Spanish Intervention for At-Risk Readers Who Are ELLs

In designing the supplemental reading intervention in Spanish *Lectura Proactiva* (Mathes, Linan-Thompson, Pollard-Duradola, Hagan, & Vaughn, 2003), we applied research on the sequence and development of Spanish literacy acquisition to the same instructional design principles used to create Proactive Reading. The result was a curriculum that was different in terms of the sequence and focus of instructional content, but similar in terms of instructional design and delivery. Thus, teachers delivered explicit instruction designed to assist students in the integrated and fluent use of alphabetic knowledge and comprehension strategies.

Lessons were organized so that various content strands (i.e., letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, speeded syllable reading, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension strategies) were carefully woven together. The order for presenting letter–sound correspondences represented those letters used most frequently in Spanish. Elements such /b/ and /v/ were separated because they are very similar in Spanish. A strand on speeded syllable reading was added into the Spanish intervention and less emphasis was placed on phonemic

awareness. Most importantly, the speed at which children prog
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less time. In later lessons, teachers timed individual students on entire stories while the remaining students read in pairs. What differed from the English intervention was that children were reading text of greater richness and complexity at rates that were faster than their English counterparts.

Comprehension

A second objective of connected text reading was to teach comprehension strategies. From the beginning, students were asked to make predictions or tell what they knew related to the story before reading using a modified KWL procedure (Ogle, 1986). KWL is a strategy used to activate students' background knowledge, to assist students in setting purposes for reading, and to help students construct meaning by connecting what they already know about a topic to what they have learned (K—What do I Know? W—What do I Want to learn? L—What did I Learn?). After reading a story, students were asked to retell and sequence events of the story. Students were then asked to identify story grammar elements and later to identify main ideas. Children were also asked to write the main idea of the story in the later part of the curriculum. Finally, summarization was introduced using either story grammar for narrative text or simple content webs for expository text.

Phase IV: Oracy Component for English and Spanish Intervention

We anticipated that students who met the criteria for significant risk for reading difficulties and disabilities would also benefit from an intervention that addressed their language and vocabulary development needs. For this reason, we allocated 10 minutes of our intervention time daily to language and vocabulary development. Though seemingly not extensive, over the 7.5 months that this intervention was provided, students received 50 minutes per week of language and vocabulary development in small groups which constituted about 3 hours per month or about 22–25 hours of language and vocabulary intervention for the academic year. For students whose core classroom reading instruction was in English, the language and vocabulary development was in English. For students whose core classroom reading instruction was in Spanish, the language and vocabulary development was in Spanish.

We selected daily read-alouds from children's books as the primary basis for designing the language development and vocabulary enhancement element of our instruction (Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004). This decision was based on research that suggests that teacher read-alouds are: (a) frequently used by teachers, (b) enjoyed by students, and (c) readily available as an activity to integrate into the teaching routine. However, despite the prevalence of this practice for enhancing vocabulary and comprehension (Coyne, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2004; McKeown & Beck, 2003), there were few specific guidelines for how teacher read-alouds might be used with ELLs.

In response, we organized a teaching routine that included identifying selected books for teachers to read aloud, identifying the vocabulary to teach and discuss prior to reading, asking teachers to read the book for a specified amount of time,

and giving students an opportunity to discuss and use the vocabulary as they retold the story they had heard. The teacher scaffolded and supported their language use with questions and extensions. The daily objective of the small group read-aloud was to assist students in building and extending vocabulary and improving their listening comprehension and oral expression. Because we were also interested in improving their background knowledge, we focused almost exclusively on expository texts. Because our goals were to give many exposures to related words and to build knowledge, we organized books based on themes so that vocabulary would be redundant and concepts could be organized, reinforced, and extended.

We selected books based on topics of high interest to young students and with consideration of the fact that their listen-

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OVERVIEW OF OUR INITIAL STUDIES

administered in both Spanish and English. The outcome measure was the number of words correctly read, minus the number of words read incorrectly, during the 1 minute allowed for reading.

Intervention

All intervention participants remained in their regular core reading program and were provided intervention in addition to this core program. A complete description of the intervention is provided in the previous section (Design of the English Intervention and the Spanish Intervention for ELLs At Risk for Reading Problems). Many of the students in the comparison group were also provided supplemental intervention by the schools as part of their "treatment as usual," but these students did not receive the experimental treatment intervention. Students in the intervention were not provided any additional instruction (other than their core reading program) by the schools. Students in the experimental intervention were taught in groups of three to five daily for 50 minutes each day and were provided systematic and explicit instruction in oral language and reading by intervention teachers who were hired and trained by our research team. The intervention lasted for most of the school year (about 7 months), allowing time for screening, pretesting, and posttesting. All students were provided the reading and oracy intervention in the same language as their core reading instruction.

FINDINGS

Because both of these intervention studies are either in press or in review (Vaughn et al., 2004; Vaughn et al., in press), and the purpose of this article is to identify the critical elements of effective intervention programs for bilingual students who were provided either an intervention in English or an intervention in Spanish, only a summary of the critical findings from each of the intervention studies is reported here.

Pretest Differences