

# Building Consensus: Future Directions for Research on English Language Learners at Risk for Learning Difficulties

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*The growing population of English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools and the low academic achievement of many of these learners have been the subject of much debate. A significant related issue is determining the sources of ELLs' difficulty, namely, understanding the distinction between learning disabilities (LD) and learning difficulties due primarily to contextual factors and second-language learning. This article addresses the future directions for research in this area, with an emphasis on the need to build consensus through converging lines of evidence. Issues of sample definition, study design, and methods are discussed; also emphasized in the article is that in order to answer questions about the sources of difficulty for ELLs who are struggling, an understanding of the trajectories and experiences of those not experiencing difficulties is needed. Throughout the article, parallels are drawn between this emerging field of research and the LD research conducted with monolingual English speakers. An example of a study for which the design, analyses, and dissemination relates to many of the issues raised in the article is presented.*

I am a second grade teacher in a small city in the northeast U.S. I have a Latino student, who although born in America, was not exposed to much English before school. According to testing from our ELL program, he was ready to be exited from that program by the end of Kindergarten. When he came to my class, he had lost, over the summer, the few reading skills he had. Orally, he is quite articulate. I've been using language experience, leveled readers, sight word practice with a volunteer, dolch phrases, and work with word families. I've started working with him one day after school, one on one. In our school, we have very little access to literacy help, and although I have put in a referral, the ELL component complicates the identification process. My principal recommends retention, but I don't want him to become part of the dropout statistics.<sup>1</sup>

To use a cliché, the education of English language learners (ELLs) is in a state of crisis. Educators pose multiple questions about effective instruction for ELLs and, as in the case above, teachers may feel isolated and undersupported by both colleagues and the research base in their attempts to provide effective instruction for these ELLs struggling in mainstream classrooms. The ELL population includes a significant proportion of learners characterized by low academic achievement and high rates of grade retention and school dropout (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003, 2004), and, by and large, many of the questions about this growing population remain unanswered (see Garcia & Cuellar, 2006). Albeit with generally good intentions, there is a lot of educational guesswork taking place across the nation, particularly with respect to services for ELLs who are struggling. Cases such as the one above are typical, and under such circumstances, learners are shortchanged. Among students in the United States—and indeed in urban public school districts—a significant proportion of ELLs may be the most vulnerable of all students to the challenges that districts face in providing effective schooling.

However, when we turn to the extant research to inform decisions about educational programming, study design, valid identification for ELLs with learning disability, and appropriate prevention and intervention practices for ELLs at risk for difficulties, there is a dearth of robust information from which to draw. Much of what is known about effective instruction for ELLs is based on anecdotal reports of effectiveness and corresponding descriptions of how to use these practices in classrooms. Aside from studies that have focused on the appropriate language of instruction for early literacy instruction (e.g., Carlisle & Beeman, 2000; Huzar, 1973; Ramirez, Pasta, Yuen, Billings, & Ramey, 1991), and in contrast to the research conducted with native English speakers, minimal experimental research has been conducted to evaluate effective practices to promote ELLs' language and literacy development.

As can be seen from the results of a comprehensive search for studies to review as part of a synthesis of research conducted with language minority learners (August & Shanahan, 2006), the body of research has considerable breadth but lacks sufficient depth in several areas. In particular, there is a need for research that provides further insight into the developmental processes of second language and literacy attainment—especially for older ELLs—and instructional practices to promote this development (Lesaux, 2006; Shanahan & Beck, 2006). Very few studies have evaluated educational practices for ELLs in special education; of those that have been conducted (e.g., Fawcett & Lynch, 2000; Jimenez, 1997; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Ruiz, 1995), the approaches vary significantly in their theoretical grounding and methodology. Although this is not a problem in and of itself, it means that there is little opportunity to synthesize findings

and to comment on the effectiveness of the approaches because only small numbers of studies are available. In addition, some studies are characterized by very small sample sizes and do not include a control group to evaluate the approach.

The reasons for the limited cohesion in the research on ELLs run well beyond attribution to any one party or stakeholder. To some extent, it reflects the diversity inherent in studying this population, and the diversity within the population itself. The extant research is varied with respect to discipline of inquiry (e.g., linguistics, sociology, psychology, education), the questions asked and research paradigms employed, and the samples of ELLs with whom the studies were conducted.

At this time, the underlying theoretical and practical question inherent in the extant research and in conversations among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers who must guide future research on ELLs is this: What are the contextual and child-level factors that promote language and literacy development such that having two languages is indeed an asset, or at least is not associated with academic difficulties for a sizeable number of ELLs?

On the one hand, there is a considerable amount of research evidence that bilingualism may facilitate the development of reading skills in a second language and that bilingual learners benefit from heightened metalinguistic awareness (e.g., Bialystok, 1997; Cummins, 1991). On the other hand, learning to read in a language in which one is not yet proficient has been identified as a risk factor for reading difficulties in children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and national assessment data (e.g., NCES, 2003, 2004) demonstrates that learners designated as ELL are not faring well in U.S. schools, particularly as compared with their native-English-speaking peers. Research suggests that this is the case for ELLs both while participating in specialized language support programs (Albus, Thurlow, & Liu, 2002) and after reclassification as fluent English proficient (FEP; de Jong, 2004). The disparity between the research findings suggesting bilingualism is an asset, and the reported low academic achievement of the ELLs represented in national data sets, may well reflect the samples studied in that research and the heterogeneity inherent in bilingual populations. By and large, the research that has reported heightened metalinguistic awareness has been conducted with bilinguals who are not language minority learners or who are not of low socioeconomic status. Issues of sample definition and the corresponding heterogeneity in the population are addressed in the next section.

Among many challenges districts in the United States already face in meeting the needs of this growing population of learners, the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001* has substantially increased the pressure on school districts to simultaneously reclassify language minority learners as FEP and to increase their academic achievement in subject-area content. At the state

and district levels, it appears that very significant decisions about the academic programming for language minority learners often hinge solely on performance on a test of English language proficiency. For example, a recent study of the classification and reclassification criteria for the 10 states with the largest enrollment of ELLs showed that although all states used English language proficiency tests, only 4 cited criteria that also included assessments such as subject area standardized tests (Ragan & Lesaux, 2006). This process has the potential to significantly narrow the parameters of effective instruction for language minority learners who are in particular need of developing academic language and related rigorous reading instruction, in addition to content-area knowledge.

Further, ELLs are especially likely to lack the English vocabulary they need to comprehend difficult texts (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). The largest and fastest growing segments of ELLs in the United States are made up of students who immigrated before kindergarten, and U.S.-born children of immigrants (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005). Many of these learners enter school with levels of English proficiency comparable with their native-English-speaking peers, and by middle school, few of these ELL students need instruction in basic English. However, many of them—including those who have been in the United States all their lives—lack the academic English vocabulary to support learning from text.

To address and advance our understanding of the overarching goal of promoting language and literacy for ELLs, future research must be designed to address the significant gaps in the knowledge base related to their academic achievement. In particular, future research must be designed to address sources of academic difficulties in this population, and the questions surrounding the specific case of ELLs with a learning disability (LD).<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to identify salient gaps in the knowledge base and to explicate issues related to the design of future research in the area, as well as the issues related to research and practice and the desired instructional implications of that research.

In light of the need to build consensus via research about the factors related to academic achievement, the primary argument of this article is that to arrive at any form of consensus about identification and instructional practices related to ELLs and to address the salient gaps in the research, findings from converging lines of evidence is requisite. Evidence must come from sets of studies that represent different paradigms and in which both qualitative and quantitative analytic techniques are employed yet yield similar or identical findings.

Throughout the article, I emphasize that in order to answer questions about ELLs with LD (ELL/LD), we need to focus on the trajectories and experiences of those who are not experiencing difficulties. I also borrow from, and draw parallels to, the history of the field of LD research

conducted with monolingual English speakers in order to place the state of the current field in context. Drawing these parallels is not intended to suggest that the field of ELL/LD research should mirror the field of LD research with native English speakers, but rather that the ELL/LD field can learn from the lessons of that research, circumvent some of the problems identified in that literature, and reinforce the need for ELL/LD research to consider the role of contextual factors in learning difficulties.

In the latter part of the article, I address what has historically been discussed as a research-practice divide and propose a research-practice framework, which focuses on programmatic research. The framework is based on the premise that the production of knowledge about ELLs' academic development and the improvement of practice based on such knowledge depend on a coordinated cycle of research, development, implementation in practice, and evaluation, leading in turn to new research and new development.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of this cycle, gaps in the knowledge base will continue to exist, and problems with the current knowledge base will not be adequately addressed. Moreover, the success of such an effort requires attention to the ways in which knowledge can reach teachers in order to improve students' learning. Finally, I conclude with an example of a current study for which the design, analyses, and dissemination relate to many of the issues raised in the article.<sup>4</sup>

#### ELLs AND LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: GAPS IN THE KNOWLEDGE BASE AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Although learning disabilities are present in all groups regardless of age, race, language background, and socioeconomic status (Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2003), estimates of the prevalence range from only 5% to 15% of the population (e.g., Lyon, 1995; Lyon et al., 2001). Given the high proportions of ELLs who are failing in school (NCES, 2003), it is likely that many do not have LD. However, knowing which students have an LD and which students are struggling primarily as a result of other factors and combinations of factors (e.g., lack of appropriate instruction, lack of sufficient exposure to English) is crucial for researchers, school personnel, and districts.

As reflected in the existing research, there are several theoretical approaches to studying ELLs' developmental processes, particularly when addressing issues related to achievement. With the aim of identifying future directions for research on ELLs, particularly ELLs at risk for or experiencing learning difficulties, this article has been written with the recognition that there is indeed a proportion of ELLs with a learning disability, as traditionally defined, but that for the majority of ELLs who

struggle with academic achievement, the difficulties are likely to be related to an interaction between the learner characteristics and the learning conditions. Here, I must acknowledge the sociocultural frameworks advanced in the field by several researchers (e.g., Artiles, 2002; Artiles & Trent, 1997; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Keogh, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1997). A sociocultural framework for the questions related to ELL/LD is one that emphasizes both the learner and the conditions in which learning is happening and thus recognizes the neurological basis of an LD and the sociocultural influences on children's learning problems. To this end, I note that the few studies (e.g., Ruiz, Rueda, Figueroa, & Boothroyd, 1995) conducted on effective instructional practices for ELLs in special education were designed to consider the interaction of the child's skills and the context of instruction. An emerging area of ELL/LD research focuses on the response to instruction model (RTI; discussed in more detail later in the article), which is consistent with a sociocultural framework for understanding learning difficulties.

The gaps in the knowledge base on ELLs, particularly those ELLs experiencing academic difficulties, center primarily on three major, related issues: (1) valid and reliable identification and classification practices (ELL and ELL/LD), (2) normative developmental trajectories of ELLs' language and literacy skills, and (3) understanding effective instructional practices, particularly for those ELLs experiencing academic difficulties.

#### VALID AND RELIABLE IDENTIFICATION AND CLASSIFICATION PRACTICES

One might well argue, and many researchers have, that the first issue—the lack of a valid model of identification—is the most pressing issue for the field. For example, in identifying the issues related to learners from diverse backgrounds in special education, particularly with respect to those identified as LD, Reschly (2002) noted that “minority overrepresentation in special education is a significant but largely silent contributor to a quarter century of increasing learning disability (LD) prevalence and to the current diagnostic confusion about what LD is and how it should be identified” (p. 361).

Similarly, Gallego, Zamora Durán, and Reyes (2006) put forth a very clear argument that the practices surrounding definition and identification of LD have not kept up with demographic fluctuations in the school-aged population. There are parallels to be drawn between the state of the field of ELL/LD and the field of LD research conducted with native English speakers. In 2003, Hallahan and Mock characterized the prior 15 years as a “turbulent” period in the history of the field of LD, with definitional issues at the crux of this turbulence. ELL research currently suffers from a lack of consensus on a valid and reliable model of identification of LD, and

embedded in this issue is the lack of consistent operationalization of the ELL classification itself. To address definitional issues and advance the field of ELL/LD research, it is crucial to circumvent the well-established validity problems of a solely psychometric approach (i.e., IQ achievement) to identifying LD by moving to models, such as RTI, that consider the role of instruction in learning difficulties. The RTI model is discussed in more detail in the next section of this article; the tenets of the model are central to the gaps in the knowledge base on ELLs and achievement. Having a model of identification and service delivery that does not address the needs of children from minority backgrounds results in ethically questionable practices and practices that shortchange ELLs (see Klingner & Harry, 2006).

To establish a valid model of ELL/LD identification, we need a better understanding of the normative developmental trajectories of all ELLs—with and without learning difficulties (discussed next)—and the long-term influence of factors, such as age of entry into schooling and characteristics of literacy instruction, on academic outcomes. However, that there is no single operational definition of ELL, that the classification practices for ELLs vary by school context, and that research has typically conceptualized language minority learners primarily as a single distinct population have contributed significantly to the lack of a coherent knowledge base (for related discussions of ELL identification, see August & Hakuta, 1997; de Jong, 2004; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2001; Wright, 2005). In the interests of replication and generalizability, researchers and practitioners need to be explicit in defining terms and criteria for inclusion in studies or in relevant programs on which data are reported.

In some cases, researchers use the term *bilingual*, and in fact the language of the home is the societal one; these are children whose parents have enrolled them in a bilingual program. In other cases, the term *bilingual* can reflect homes in which each parent speaks a different language, and often one parent is a native English speaker. Finally, and perhaps most often, the term *bilingual* is used for ELLs. In this case, we might presume that a proportion of these learners have some proficiency in English, but the population is likely characterized by significant variability in this proficiency. Within this last group of ELLs, consider at least three distinct subgroups: (1) U.S.-born ELLs who enroll in school at kindergarten and have been exposed to English (albeit varying amounts) since birth; (2) recent arrivals with uninterrupted schooling in their native language and adequate educational preparation, including native language and literacy skills; and (3) recent arrivals with limited, or considerable gaps in, educational experiences and who may not have developed native literacy skills to the same extent as peers with uninterrupted schooling. From a developmental and educational perspective, each of these descriptions of *bilingual* represents a very different learner and context of second-language

learning. Further, there are the distinctions to be made when samples are drawn from a particular program (e.g., two-way or native-language-maintenance models) typically associated with a specific level of proficiency. Generally speaking, researchers in the field have not been making these distinctions in their own data collection and analysis or for the reader, yet this would contribute substantially to our understanding and interpretation of findings related to academic achievement.

#### THE NEED TO IDENTIFY AND UNDERSTAND DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES

The second major issue related to gaps in the knowledge base relates to a lack of understanding of the normative trajectories for ELLs. There is a dearth of longitudinal research on the development of language and literacy skills and the influence of instructional and demographics on these trajectories over time. In addition, several methodological limitations inherent in the published reports based on district-, state-, and federal-level data that have focused on this population reduce their impact on the field. Significant issues related to design, sample, and measures prevent the integration of the findings to advance our understanding of the reading development of ELLs and the sources of difficulties for a significant proportion of these learners.

#### *Samples of Study*

Reports based on district-, state-, and federal-level data typically focus on only the subset of ELLs described earlier in this article: those language minority learners who meet the district criteria for formal limited English proficiency (LEP) or other designation for language support. Thus, we learn only about this subset of ELLs in the absence of two other important groups of ELLs. The first group includes ELLs who were initially classified as LEP but whose proficiency levels in English subsequently progressed to a level at which they no longer classified as LEP and were no longer part of the data set. The second group is composed of those ELLs whose English proficiency was sufficiently developed that they were not classified as LEP upon school entry. Classification system aside, each of the three subgroups described falls under what we would refer to as ELL, given that the language of the home is one other than English. Thus, the language environment of these learners is qualitatively different from that of LI speakers.

It is important to consider that a significant percentage of children coming from homes where a language other than English is spoken are not classified in schools as ELL and thus are not represented in reports or

studies that use school-classified populations of ELLs.<sup>5</sup> The classification of ELL is a temporary one; once students are reclassified as fully English proficient (FEP), they are no longer part of the group of ELLs on which data are being collected and analyzed in the school districts. In effect, the group of ELLs who make up the district, state, and national data are really just a subgroup of ELLs in the schools, and by definition, they are those students who are not yet proficient in English. Further, because the classification criteria for ELL classification and reclassification as FEP vary from state to state and from district to district, it is not surprising that the field is plagued by a lack of shared understanding about these learners. For researchers, this means an inability to make comparisons between data sets from urban districts across the nation, and an inability to obtain a clear picture of nationwide performance.

With respect to understanding normative trajectories, states are required to monitor ELLs' progress for only 2 years after redesignation as FEP, which is a primary cause of our lack of understanding of ELLs' trajectories of language and literacy development. Despite language minority backgrounds, many of these students attain levels of proficiency similar to their native English-speaking peers, and some surpass native speakers in academic achievement, yet we have very minimal longitudinal data on these learners.

Related to the specific questions of ELL/LD, here again I return to the theme of capturing the complete picture in our future research. We have as much, or more, to learn from those ELLs who overcome difficulties and experience success as we do from those students with persistent difficulties. Thus, although it is necessary to track the students who continue to receive special education services to better understand their difficulties and appropriate intervention, it is of equal interest to gain insight into the profiles and circumstances of students who receive special education services and who subsequently perform at grade level. What was the reason for referral? What was the form of the intervention? During which years did the student receive the intervention? By identifying those children who continue to receive special education services and who remain below grade level in achievement—as compared with children who once received special education services but who are at grade level—we will be in the position to examine the early markers that distinguish the two groups.

### *Study Design*

Second, among those reports that provide longitudinal data, many are retrospective in nature and include only those learners for whom there is complete data for the years of interest. Within the immigrant population, there is an increased propensity to relocate often because of employment

opportunities, housing and transportation, and upward mobility following initial arrival in the country (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Suarez-Orozco, 2004). Thus, it is important to consider whether attrition may have influenced the results so that it can be empirically established that the group of ELLs for whom there is complete data is in fact representative of the initial ELL sample. However, this is not possible given the design. Prospective, longitudinal studies are needed to provide a more complete and accurate picture of ELL achievement and related influencing factors.

### *Measures*

A final concern related to the interpretation of many of the published findings on ELLs is the lack of standardized measures used to examine their academic achievement and language proficiency. Many researcher-developed measures and rating scales (e.g., Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, National Assessment of Educational Progress) and state-specific measures of achievement (e.g., California English Language Development Test) are used with the school-aged population. Although the findings may be interpreted with respect to a comparison sample of L1 speakers in the same study or with respect to intragroup variability among ELLs, these findings do not allow for comparisons with the findings from many other studies. Although in some cases, it is desirable to develop measures to study a particular construct in a reliable and valid way, and likely with more specificity, studies that include researcher-designed measures should make measures available to other researchers, and the measures should be used in concert with standardized measures for the purposes of interpretation and replication.

In addition to the need for similar measures to be used across studies in order to promote generalization, increasing the number of studies that use the same measures will also provide the opportunity to determine the extent to which measurement error is inherent in the results (for a discussion of measurement issues see Abedi, 2006; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006; Solano-Flores, 2006).

### EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

A third and equally significant gap in the knowledge base is that we lack a thorough and conclusive understanding of particular instructional practices that promote ELLs' academic achievement and, more specifically, the prevalence of ELLs who experience difficulties and the types of services they receive for them. In some states, Hispanics are disproportionately represented in the LD category, and given that up to 80% of ELLs are Spanish speakers, this has implications for questions related to ELLs

(Donovan & Cross, 2002). Emerging research conducted by Artiles and his colleagues suggests that within the special education classification, there may be overrepresentation of ELLs at some grade levels and underrepresentation of ELLs at other grade levels; this is likely due to inappropriate identification and instructional practices (Artiles, Aguirre-Munoz, & Abedi, 1998; Artiles & Klingner, 2006; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Other research suggests that in some instances, ELLs are overlooked for remedial services for literacy difficulties because teachers assume that their difficulties stem from lack of proficiency with the language of instruction when this may not be the case (Limbos & Geva, 2001). An added complexity and concern is that in many districts, although against regulation, some practitioners reported that language minority learners are eligible for special education services or English language instruction, but not both (Lesaux, 2005). Issues of special education placement and access for ELLs are discussed in greater detail by Klingner and Harry (2006).

In addition to this lack of understanding of effective practices for ELLs who are in need of instructional support for difficulties, there is a lack of understanding as to whether students experiencing difficulties have had sufficient opportunities to learn, and the extent to which there is evidence that students have had sufficient exposure to effective and appropriate instruction to promote typical development. The vulnerability of a significant percentage of ELLs to poor academic achievement, combined with the fact that in the United States, these learners tend to attend schools with limited resources (see Snow et al., 1998) and are exposed to inferior curriculum and teaching quality than their native-English-speaking peers (Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003), calls into question whether the great majority of ELLs receive timely exposure to effective instruction and rich opportunities to develop language and literacy skills. Thus, the caveat of opportunities to learn is particularly important when examining the source of learning difficulties for these learners (Klingner et al., 2005). Future research must continue to conceptualize ELLs' learning difficulties as having roots in child-level cognitive-linguistic or contextual factors.

Unfortunately, consistent with the ideological and policy issues that pervade the field and that, to some extent, restrict the advancement of practice on more empirical grounds, the research that has focused on instructional opportunities for these learners has centered on language of instruction rather than more specifically on components of effective instructional approaches and their relationship to academic outcomes. Although the majority of research conducted with ELLs in special education is not necessarily comparable in design or evaluative in nature given the design, the research that has been conducted begins to suggest that with

appropriate instruction, some students classified as LD can perform at grade level. In a quasi-experimental design, Klingner and Vaughn (1996) demonstrated that reciprocal teaching instruction with Hispanic ELLs in the seventh and eighth grades did indeed improve their comprehension. These findings are consistent with the research conducted with native English speakers on the effectiveness of reciprocal teaching (e.g., Brown, Palincsar, & Armbruster, 2004; Lysynchuk, Pressley, & Vye, 1990; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). More studies that build on the knowledge base on reading instruction and intervention from studies conducted with native English speakers are needed to inform effective practices for ELLs receiving special education services.

The one experimental study in this area (Maldonado, 1994) evaluated the effects of bilingual (Spanish-English) special education services as compared with special education services delivered in English for second- and third-grade Spanish-speaking ELLs randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. Three years after the implementation of the program, the results of the study, based on student performance, favored bilingual special education services. Although informative in the sense that we learn about the effects of language of instruction in special education, as with most research in the area of language of instruction, the study does not provide insight into the nature and quality of instruction for ELLs.

It is interesting to note that the field of LD research conducted with native English speakers shifted from an emphasis on a broad question (i.e., whether students with LD should be educated in an inclusive or segregated context) to more specific and meaningful questions such as the instructional practices best suited for these learners. For the field of ELL/LD research, a shift from broad to specific issues is overdue—in this case, from an emphasis on efficacy of program type (e.g., bilingual, structured immersion) to a similar emphasis on specific instructional techniques and interventions. The purpose of this shift would be to promote the language and literacy development of ELLs, with an emphasis on prevention of difficulties.

An emerging practice in schools and an area of research that relates to both a valid model of identification and intervention of ELL/LD, and to issues of opportunities to learn for ELLs who are experiencing learning difficulties—reading in particular—is that of response to instruction (RTI). RTI is a model for identifying students with reading disabilities and has been developed in light of the growing population of students identified as learning disabled, the heterogeneity within this group, and the misidentification or lack of identification of many students (for a discussion, see Fletcher & Reschly, 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Consistent with a sociocultural framework for understanding learning difficulties (Artiles, 2002; Artiles & Trent, 1997; Keogh et al., 1997; Speece & Case, 2001), within the RTI model, the most important component of learning disability

identification is the opportunities to learn components of the IDEA Specific Learning Disability regulations. Thus, the role of instruction is central to the model; before any LD identification, children considered “at risk” and/or low achievers are provided with intervention, eradicating psychometric approaches as the sole basis for LD identification and shifting to an emphasis on specific instructional techniques in order to prevent subsequent difficulties or to promote early identification that considers instruction and learners’ skills. Inherent in the model is the assumption that many children will demonstrate response to intervention, and only those whose response to intervention remains very low may then be considered for formal identification of LD.

The widespread concerns about opportunities to learn for ELLs, and the prevalence of low academic achievement within this population, suggest that there is considerable promise in the RTI model for these learners, both to provide ELLs with early intervention and to arrive at proportionate representation of ELLs receiving special education services. Research conducted with native English speakers that focuses on the effectiveness of RTI as an approach to LD identification is beginning to accumulate (e.g., Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Speece & Case, 2001) and, similarly, research on the use of RTI with ELLs is beginning to emerge (e.g., Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, & Francis, 2005). In light of the need to identify sources of learning difficulties for ELLs, it is crucial that the field of ELL/LD research continues to investigate this model. By doing so, the field is likely to arrive at a valid model of identification and intervention for at-risk ELLs, prevent reading difficulties for many struggling readers within this population, and circumvent the likelihood of lost time if efforts are focused solely on a psychometric approach to identification (Lyon et al., 2001).

Although the need for a shift from broad to specific issues of instruction has been put forth in previous work focused on ELLs (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997), and research on models of identification and intervention such as RTI is beginning to emerge, much of the discussion and debate about educating ELLs remains related to questions such as efficacy of language of instruction and is very intertwined with issues related to policy and ideology; the questions of empirically based effective practices to promote ELLs’ academic achievement and how to support those experiencing difficulties are the background.

Perhaps the most drastic example of politics and ideology trumping thoughtful and substantive investigation into best practices is the recent use of state-level public referenda (e.g., California, Colorado, Arizona, and Massachusetts) to dictate the language of instruction for the great majority of ELLs. Thus, these political and ideological debates play out in school settings and have a significant influence on ELLs’ education, which is, in many settings, of inferior quality compared with that of native speakers

(Gandara et al., 2003; Gandara et al., 2000; Gutierrez et al., 2002), particularly when broad-based reforms are implemented without the capacity to do so effectively. These debates are at the expense of a focus on deliberations about effective and high-quality instructional techniques and approaches for ELLs, particularly in light of the heterogeneity within the population. And it is the ELLs, perhaps with LD, struggling in school who are most vulnerable to these debates. Further, attention to these debates contributes to a lack of consensus about ELLs' developmental trajectories of language and literacy, which would inform practitioners, such as the one featured in the opening of this article, about expectations for these learners and corresponding methods of literacy instruction.

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? BUILDING CONSENSUS WITH A FOCUS ON DESIGN, REPLICABILITY, AND GENERALIZABILITY

In addressing these three salient gaps in the knowledge base, several methodological issues need to be addressed by, and bear on, research that is guided by the goal of promoting an understanding of the nature and source of learning difficulties for a proportion of ELLs, and the overall academic achievement of the ELL population. Table 1 presents the main points raised in this article as they relate to salient gaps in the knowledge base, and methodological considerations for future research in this area.

In a recent paper on education research, Schneider (2004) discussed the problem of lack of replication, the consequences of which include disparate findings that hinder the research community's ability to accumulate knowledge. By replication, Schneider alluded not just to the same findings under similar conditions but also to the need to replicate the design with cases that are sufficiently different to put forth a generalization of results. This assertion is consistent with a report by the National Academy of Education (NAE) on the topic of research priorities for the field (1999). Without convergence of results from multiple studies, Schneider aptly explicated that the objectivity, neutrality, and generalizability of research findings are questionable.

To explicate this notion of ELL research as a case in point regarding the need for increased focus on replicability and generalizability to build consensus on research questions, consider the example of the research on reading comprehension of language minority learners. Here I use the term *language minority learners* because much of what is known in this area has been conducted with Turkish immigrant children acquiring Dutch in the Netherlands (e.g., Aarts & Verhoeven, 1999; Droop & Verhoeven, 2003). The studies conducted in the Netherlands provide a similar context to the United States, with Turkish migrant children from low-income

**Table 1. Future Directions for Research: Gaps in Knowledge Base and Methodological Considerations**

Salient Gaps in Knowledge Base	Salient Methodological Considerations for Study Design
Valid and Reliable Identification and Classification Practices (ELL/LD)	Procedures and criteria for sample selection made explicit Sample description includes contextual information (e.g., socioeconomic status) Type of bilingualism described (language minority learners, bilingual from two-language household, bilingual due to instruction in a second language) Degree of bilingualism explicated (e.g., native language skills, years of formal instruction in native language and second language)
Normative Developmental Trajectories of Language and Literacy Skills	Prospective, longitudinal design Samples to be studied include full range of ability in the population of language minority learners; study not limited to subset of ELLs formally designated Employ standardized measures to promote replication When appropriate and feasible, include measures of native language ability
Effective instructional practices	Intervention studies that allow for an examination of the interaction between the learner characteristics and the instructional context and the corresponding influence on outcomes Evaluation of specific components of programs or specific techniques employed Evaluation includes the effects of implementation of the program or technique Design includes a control group comparable on key features (e.g., language and literacy ability, demographic context)

backgrounds, but naturally there is some caution in generalizing the findings to English speakers in the United States. Given the incidence of difficulties with reading comprehension within the ELL population, combined with their often low vocabulary levels, one could argue that this is a domain that deserves significant attention in the research on ELLs.

Investigations of reading comprehension ability of language minority learners typically use one global measure of comprehension within a cross-sectional design. The different formats of these measures (e.g., cloze, multiple choice) provide little opportunity to compare findings across

studies, and even when there is comparability on a global measure, we often lack specificity about the aspects of the reading comprehension process (e.g., ability to draw inferences, expressive vocabulary) that are primarily tapped by the measure. Thus, although global measures inform the overall finding that language minority children's reading comprehension performance may be poorer than the performance of their native-speaking peers, these assessments fail to provide information about ability in different subskills measured when assessing reading comprehension. Given the complex nature of reading comprehension (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002) and the critical role that comprehension plays in overall academic achievement, this proves insufficient for the field.

Only a handful of studies (e.g., Aarts & Verhoeven, 1999; Carlisle, Beeman, Davis, & Spharim, 1999; Droop & Verhoeven, 1998; Garcia, 1991; Hutchinson, Whiteley, Smith, & Connors, 2003; Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; Verhoeven, 1990, 2000) have examined those skills that have an influence on reading comprehension for this group of children. Only those studies conducted in the Netherlands (i.e., Droop & Verhoeven, 2003; Verhoeven, 1994, 2000) have examined the relationship between word reading and different aspects of reading comprehension (e.g., reading vocabulary, ability to draw inferences), which is crucial for an understanding of the profile of an ELL with LD.

In addition to this small number of studies in the area, the samples studied range from the learners in the primary grades through learners in high school, and with samples that range from Spanish speakers acquiring English and Turkish speakers acquiring Dutch, through to samples that report on a sample of ELLs from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. The very broad nature of the construct measured leaves little to be gleaned about the nature of reading comprehension development and difficulties for the language minority learners studied. Finally, only two of these studies are longitudinal, and thus collectively, the studies provide no insight into the developmental processes of reading comprehension for language minority learners.

There is indeed a fine balance to strike between diversity of methods in order to produce converging lines of evidence, and with enough consistency and specificity to arrive at robust findings in response to pressing questions about ELLs. Yet, as can be seen with the example above, as a knowledge base, research on ELLs is a prime candidate for an increased focus on replication and generalizability. The studies in this area do not necessarily share methodology, design, or variables of interest, and when one is interested in designing a developmental study to investigate issues related to language and literacy, well-established frameworks to be used and sets of findings on which to build are lacking. Of most importance

for this field at this time is the need for replication of findings with sufficiently different cases and in sufficiently different settings to promote generalization (NAE, 1999; Stokes, 1997). This is particularly salient when we consider the question of the nature and source of learning difficulties for those ELLs who are struggling.

Within the field of LD research conducted with monolingual English speakers, the notions of replication and generalizability were central to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Dyslexia Program. Within the program—which was funded for a decade or more—similar questions were asked using many different sites, similar constructs and measures, large samples varying in ability, and various designs, including longitudinal, cross-sectional, and intervention studies. From this body of research, much was learned about developmental trajectories of children with reading disability, early screening and intervention for children identified as at risk for reading difficulties, and appropriate and valid models of identification of reading disability. With respect to research design—not unlike where the field of reading research and learning disabilities was in the 1980s—the issues related to better understanding the learning difficulties of those ELLs who are struggling calls for longitudinal research that focuses on developmental trajectories of language and literacy development for the overall population of ELLs. In turn, such research would inform our understanding of the identification of early predictors of later difficulties of ELLs.

To begin to accumulate converging lines of evidence about these learners and address the gaps in the knowledge base, several methodological issues should be considered. These considerations bear on the design of any study with ELLs: whether to inform a valid model of identification and intervention for ELLs who are struggling, or to identify the salient variables (cognitive, linguistic, instructional, and demographic) related to academic difficulties and success for ELLs, or to inform an understanding of normative trajectories of academic achievement for this population.

First, evidence must come from various designs, including cross-sectional, longitudinal, and intervention studies. Given the primarily cross-sectional nature of the existing research conducted with ELLs, here I argue for an emphasis on longitudinal studies and instructional studies. Longitudinal design is particularly well suited for understanding developmental processes; this type of research has implications for the design of instructional approaches but will also inform the expectations of those working with ELLs. For ELLs, language and literacy development is under rapid development, growth is likely nonlinear, and many of our questions can only be answered by tracking their development and response to instruction over time. Longitudinal studies afford the opportunity to capture developmental processes, inform our understanding of what is

typical for specific populations of ELLs, and provide insight as to which variables have differential effects on outcomes at different times. For example, as it stands, most assessments used with ELLs in studies of language and literacy development of ELLs were designed and standardized with monolingual speakers and then administered within a cross-sectional design. Thus, longitudinal studies will address the predictive validity of these measures that were standardized and normed for use with monolinguals when used with ELLs; for states and districts to do this, the academic achievement of language minority learners would have to be tracked for longer than 2 years, which would also contribute to a focus on the long-term academic success of all language minority learners.

When feasible and relevant, researchers should consider native-language literacy skills, educational program, and age of entry into U.S. schools in the design of the study. The difficulties with native-language assessment however, run well beyond the sheer feasibility with respect to having valid and reliable instruments and trained personnel to conduct assessments in up to 50 languages in some districts; it is very difficult to ascertain what can be expected from ELLs for whom instruction is most typically in English, and what pattern of results reflects learning difficulties or simply lack of instruction. Nevertheless, given the documented relationship between aspects of first and second language and literacy skills for those students who do have an opportunity to develop both languages, particularly with instructional supports to do so (e.g., Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Gottardo, 2002; Quiroga, Lemos-Britton, Mostafapour, Abbott, & Berninger, 2002), a dual-language assessment, if possible, is likely to inform our understanding of the difficulties that particular ELLs experience. Finally, to be able to compare results across studies, there is a need to use similar measures, including surveys, interviews, and observational tools, to assess the constructs and variables of interest.<sup>6</sup>

As noted in the previous section of this article, few studies—particularly those that emphasize preventing difficulties—inform our understanding of specific instructional approaches to promoting the language and literacy development of ELLs (for recent examples, see Stuart, 1999; 2004; Vaughn et al., 2005). In addition to studies designed solely to evaluate the efficacy of instructional techniques for ELLs, accumulating research findings from studies that examine the appropriateness of the RTI model of identification will similarly shed light on effective instructional practices for ELLs experiencing learning difficulties.

A second consideration in the design of research on ELLs is that this is a population that has typically been conceptualized—both in schools and in research—as a single population. This practice has the potential to overestimate the homogeneity of the population (Artiles et al., 2005). Within the body of research on ELLs, one result of this conceptualization

has been the failure to disaggregate samples on factors such as language ability; there is much variability depending on the way that language ability is assessed, particularly given that ELLs' language development is characterized by negotiating two languages. In the realm of considering effective methods of instruction for ELLs, few studies have disaggregated the results of the evaluation of the instructional approach or intervention programs by such variables as initial levels of language or literacy ability in either or both (native and second) languages. Disaggregating results of any study by vocabulary or another aspect of language ability (e.g., Gersten & Baker, 2003) is likely to provide more insight into the development of academic skills in language minority populations and to better understand the dynamic processes at play. Further, although the relationship between language development and academic achievement in ELLs reflects dynamic processes, as with most developmental and educational research, it is inevitably measured as a static entity, and the risk is that the nuances of the complex processes are not captured. In this vein, a critical step forward in research on language and literacy development for this group is to model what a dynamic relationship between two languages is, as opposed to analyzing and reporting on development or proficiency in either or both languages.

A third and related consideration that I put forth relates to the instructional and demographic context of studies conducted with ELLs. This consideration relates to the tendency to treat ELLs as a single, homogeneous, and distinct population. As with native English speakers, opportunities to learn, program type, and demographic factors such as socioeconomic status play a significant role in the development of language and literacy skills for ELLs. The instructional context of any study necessarily has an impact on the interpretation of findings of any study focused on academic achievement of school-aged children, particularly ELLs, given the incidence of academic difficulties in the population. However, many studies do not afford the reader much, if any, information about the instructional context for the participants in the study—including program type or methods of reading instruction—let alone include a relevant measure related to instruction in order to consider instruction in the analyses and its impact on the findings. At the very least, the instructional context in which the research was conducted must be described, and at best measured, in order to provide the ability to replicate findings.

In addition to focusing more attention in research to the instructional context of reading development, the demographic context with respect to the sample, the school, and the community must also be described and assessed where possible given that it also has an impact on the interpretation of extant research findings (Artiles, Trent, & Kuan, 1997;

Bos & Fletcher, 1997). Given what is known about the relationship between language and literacy development, and socioeconomic status at the child or neighborhood level (e.g., Hart & Risley, 1995; White, 1982), this is important information to be provided in any study related to academic achievement. However, given the distinct language characteristics of ELLs, equally important is the provision of information about language practices in the home and school, and the linguistic context of the school and community. To provide an example of how context may have an influence on ELLs' academic achievement, consider a sample of ELLs from diverse native language backgrounds and who constitute 20% of the student population in a given school. Then consider a sample of Spanish speakers who attend a school where 97% of students are Spanish speakers, which also reflects the language of the community. The differences in these linguistic contexts have important implications for the language and literacy development of these learners and for the interpretation of research findings. All too often, the instructional and demographic information is missing from research studies conducted with ELLs, particularly those conducted with ELLs who are struggling; this has implications for the design of subsequent studies, both developmental and instructional. Studies that focus on the interactions among child-level and contextual variables that have an effect on the academic achievement of ELLs are sorely needed.

The fourth and final consideration for study design is equally related to the need for more specificity in addressing a particular question and is salient to the example of the body of research on reading comprehension of ELLs. In this case, I refer to the need to assess particular aspects of complex processes such as reading comprehension and oral language proficiency, rather than to administer global measures of these broad constructs. A shift away from broad constructs will allow for the accumulation and replication of specific findings about the skills that contribute to these processes and how they relate academic outcomes (for a discussion, see MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006).

#### BUILDING CONSENSUS AND INFLUENCING PRACTICE: THE NEED FOR RESEARCH-PRACTICE ITERATION

In such an article, I would be remiss not to address the pressing issue for many fields of research that stem from a profession of practice—for example, medicine, journalism, and business management—not the least of which is education. This issue centers on a *research-practice divide*, bridging the *gap* between research and practice, *translating* knowledge into *best practice*. The terms vary as a function of semantics and context, but the main issue remains: that of the somewhat independent and distinct nature of

research topics and findings, and the field of practice itself. In this vein, I put forth the need for programs of research that are characterized by what I refer to as *research-practice iteration*. This concept recognizes the need (1) to continue to accumulate a coherent knowledge base, via programmatic research, that addresses many of the gaps in the extant research, and (2) to keep issues of practice within the context of any program of research. Here I do not intend to make claims about overall school reform, nor to weigh in on the debates about how to change practice at very global levels. Rather, my focus is on undertaking a program of research and on forming research-practice relationships that have the potential to bear on and inform practice. In order to advance the field, many researchers must engage with a program of research featuring questions that relate directly and indirectly to practice and that have the potential to provide information about ELLs to school districts and practitioners.

To maintain the overarching goal of building a coherent knowledge base about the nature and sources of the learning difficulties that a significant population of ELLs experience, researchers must consider the need to answer similar questions with sufficiently different samples and research designs. And indeed, the first steps to answering a particular question may require basic research, but we must be committed to basic research that will eventually have implications for the education of ELLs. This is the case whether the research has been designed to shed light on valid and effective identification practices for ELL/LD, effective intervention, and/or to shed light on developmental trajectories of reading and the factors that influence them. Similarly, whether based on research that would be considered basic or applied, research reports must acknowledge the overarching questions related to, or problems of, practice and service delivery. And although this acknowledges at least the context of schooling as a platform for such research, I argue that in order to have a greater impact on the field, research designed to advance the knowledge base related to ELLs and academic achievement must be much more programmatic than it is in its current state.

Within any program of research, current findings are central to the design of future research. These findings generate new research questions, may influence practice, and are likely to result in unanswered questions to be addressed in subsequent studies. Thus, in keeping with the goals of research, maintaining a programmatic emphasis allows for the opportunity to identify persistent problems or gaps—be they practical or theoretical—in the knowledge base. In addition, programmatic emphasis allows for the opportunity to identify solutions to problems and to advance knowledge in a way that is not possible with single independent studies that do not build closely on previous research. Any program of research increases the chances to build relationships with school districts and district personnel

(e.g., Harry & Klingner, 2006; Harry, Klingner, & Sturges, 2002) over time and thus to influence practice and service delivery. Central to any program of research is the timely dissemination of the findings. Given that questions and concerns about ELLs are ubiquitous (such as those of the educator featured in the opening passage of this article) and that historically, there has been a significant time lag between research findings and implementation in practice, it is crucial that findings be shared with teachers in settings, such as professional development workshops and sessions, in addition to contributions to the academic literature. In the specific domain of ELL/LD, this is particularly important given the prevalence of learning difficulties in this population and the global lack of specialized teacher training to effectively address their needs in mainstream classrooms.

### BUILDING CONSENSUS AND INFLUENCING PRACTICE: AN EXAMPLE FROM CURRENT RESEARCH

To address many of the issues raised in the article to date and to illustrate the elements of research-practice iteration, in this last section, I present the design and findings of a prospective longitudinal study conducted with Spanish-speaking ELLs. The study begins to address two major gaps in the knowledge base, first by investigating the normative developmental processes of language and literacy acquisition for ELLs, and second by informing our understanding of ELL/LD and the sources of academic difficulty for ELLs experiencing it.

#### EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDY

The Early Childhood Study is a longitudinal study conducted with 4-year-old Spanish speakers in Massachusetts and Maryland (Tabors, Paez, & Lopez, 2003). The goal of the study was to examine the dual language and literacy development of these young Spanish speakers from prekindergarten (pre-K) through second grade and to identify those factors most strongly related to their development of language and literacy skills in their two languages over time. Related to the previous discussion about the heterogeneity within the population of ELLs and the external influences on development, in addition to measures of children's language and literacy development, the study was designed to yield information about children's home language use, family literacy practices, classroom quality, and family demographics.

The sample studied is composed of 344 children, the majority of whom were born in the United States to parents who came from 22 countries and the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. Consistent with the need to advance our

understanding of the sources of difficulty for those ELLs who are struggling, the battery of assessments used in this study represent child-level and contextual factors that have an influence on achievement. The standardized measures used in the study provide the opportunity to examine specific language and literacy skills in English and Spanish beginning at pre-K, and other measures examine contextual factors such as home literacy practices and language use in the home and classroom.

In light of the previous discussion about transparency of ELL definition and the inclusion criteria for study, it is of note that the parameters for inclusion in the study were that (1) Spanish was at least one of the primary languages spoken in the home and (2) the children qualified for entry into kindergarten the following year based on chronological age. Of the participating families, 70% reported that they used only Spanish at home, whereas the remainder reported that they use both Spanish and English at home. Seventy-seven percent of the families in the sample reported an annual income of less than \$30,000 and 21% reported an annual income of less than \$10,000. When the study began, these children were in English preschool settings, typically Head Start programs. In the spring of that preschool year (age 4), these children were administered a number of school readiness tasks in both English and Spanish. These tasks included measures of vocabulary, phonological awareness, and other measures of early skills related to later literacy development. In addition, data were collected for the study describing the language use in the preschool classrooms that the children attended while participating in the study. Observations were conducted to obtain a measure of classroom quality related to literacy.

As can be seen in Figure 1, at age 4, the sample scored, on average, two standard deviations below the monolingual population mean in vocabulary on a standardized test administered in both Spanish and English. This finding corroborates with studies conducted with similar populations (e.g., Cobo-Lewis, Pearson, Eilers, & Umbel, 2002). For young ELLs charged with the task of learning two languages, it is important to identify what these seemingly low scores in vocabulary mean for the trajectories of these learners and whether in fact they have any predictive validity for later literacy development and academic outcomes. In this case, a cross-sectional design would limit any comprehensive inferences about development; a longitudinal design is imperative to address these questions.

Of interest in light of questions related to ELL/LD in the fall of pre-K, 20% ( $n = 68$ ) of the sample scored two or more standard deviations below the mean in vocabulary in both Spanish and English. At first grade, 78% of this subsample ( $n = 53$ ) still had scores that were two or more standard deviations below the mean in English, and corresponding literacy skills were also below average. At first grade, only 22% of the subsample of the

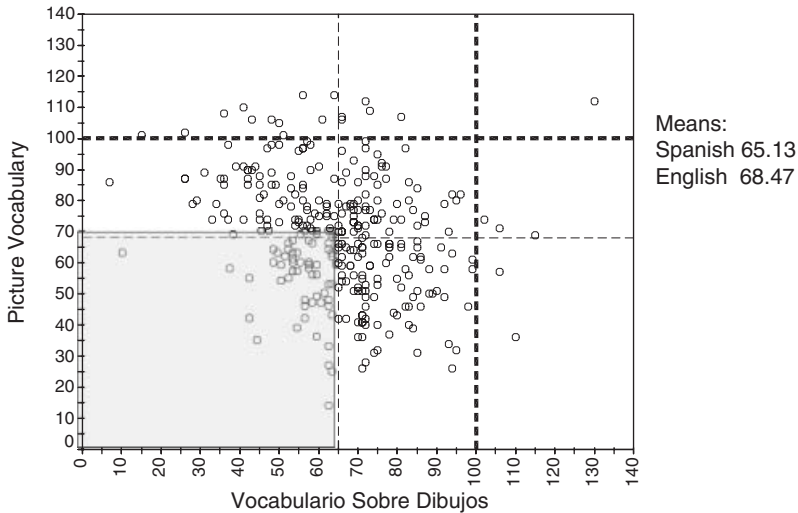


Figure 1. Pre-K Fall Picture Vocabulary.

group demonstrated vocabulary skills in English in the average range. Because all the children's instruction is in English, and by first grade the Spanish skills of the overall sample had decreased compared with national norms, Spanish vocabulary was not included in our classification system of vocabulary ability to track the subsample beyond pre-K. However, it is still possible to examine skills in Spanish and examine native language skills in relation to the development of skills in English. In light of the research needs of the field previously described, we are particularly interested in the linguistic, social, and cultural variables that have an impact on these different trajectories, specifically those children who make gains in English vocabulary and related skills. On average, this subgroup of children who had scores two or more standard deviations below the mean was distinct from the overall sample in that they were lower on measures of vocabulary, and the means for this group were lower than the overall sample on all measures administered. The measures included early literacy and phonological measures, and demographic and contextual factors such as family income, years of maternal education, and home literacy practices. However, it is unclear to what extent these results will have predictive value within the sample of study. Further, the importance of these constructs across languages is of question, given that the battery is effectively based on those skills that have theoretical importance based on reading research conducted with native English speakers. For example, research with Spanish speakers in Spain has demonstrated that phonological awareness, albeit important for word reading in Spanish, functions slightly differently in development

and in its relationship to reading for Spanish speakers (e.g., Jimenez Gonzalez & Garcia, 2005; Jimenez & Venegas, 2004). The prospective longitudinal design will shed light on the issues of construct importance and predictive validity within the present study.

The subsample with low vocabulary knowledge in both Spanish and English as compared with their peers clearly delineates the research dilemmas inherent in studying the ELL population and the basis of shortcomings of what we might consider “typical” instruction to augment the English language and literacy skills of ELLs in the first couple of years of schooling. This is a group of children who, at age 4, were assessed with tasks in English and Spanish that were based on norms derived from monolingual speakers. For this reason, it is difficult to gain insight into what can be expected from these learners given that they must split their cognitive and linguistic resources between two languages. Nevertheless, they are learners who will be evaluated with English assessments and who, for one reason or another, appear even more at risk for school difficulties than many of their Spanish-speaking peers. As such, it is crucial to track these kids over time to understand which children represent a profile of a child with a learning and/or language disorder, and which children’s performance reflects their status as young second language learners assessed with a tool designed for monolingual English speakers (see MacSwan & Rolstad, this issue, for a relevant discussion). However, the results demonstrate the relative stability of low vocabulary levels (by national standards), even for a group of learners who were subsequently immersed in an English instructional setting for 3 years. The findings relate directly to questions about appropriate early instruction and opportunities to learn for young Spanish speakers.

In light of a sociocultural framework for investigating sources of difficulty for ELLs, it is of interest to examine the role of the social, cultural, and instructional factors that play a significant role in language development for these young children. Further, this study has the potential to inform our understanding of the RTI model as it applies to ELLs. The sample is a relatively homogeneous one with respect to demographic and schooling characteristics and language background of the participants, and the participants are being followed longitudinally from a young age. Thus, there is opportunity to analyze the variability in language and literacy skills, to examine early predictors of reading success and difficulty, and to investigate the incidence of reading difficulties over time.

The study findings are discussed annually with staff and teachers in the school districts who participate in this study, and many of these discussions have centered on the progress of those children experiencing difficulties. Further, a study in progress to investigate the specific subsample of children who demonstrated early difficulties in both languages is being carried out in

collaboration with the district resource teacher at one of the two study sites (Lesaux, Tabors, & de la Torre-Spencer, 2005). This is exemplary of research-practice iteration, because the district resource teacher's professional responsibilities include working directly to support teachers who have these ELLs in their classrooms and who, like the teacher in the opening case, have many unanswered questions about these learners.

## CONCLUSION

ELLs constitute one of the fastest growing populations in today's classrooms, and within the population, a significant proportion of students are among the most vulnerable to academic failure. What are the contextual and child-level factors that promote language and literacy development such that having two languages is indeed an asset, or at least is not associated with academic difficulties for a sizeable number of ELLs? This question is a significant and crucial one that must guide research in this field. Programmatic research that investigates the contextual and child-level factors that promote language and literacy development of ELLs in order to accumulate robust sets of research findings is sorely needed. Beyond broad debates about language of instruction and the merit or shortcomings of corresponding programs, researchers must ask questions about specific practices to prevent reading difficulties and augment language and literacy skills of all ELLs. This instructional research must be informed by an understanding of their developmental trajectories of language and reading development and their influencing factors. Research that serves either of these purposes will help to decrease the all-too-common scenario presented in the opening of this article.

In order to build consensus about ELLs developmental trajectories, predictors of learning difficulties, and a valid model of LD identification, future research must focus on sampling the full range of academic achievement among ELLs, including those who once received language support services and are thriving in mainstream classrooms. This would provide a much more complete picture of academic achievement within the population, and the opportunity to develop normative profiles, and to better understand the developmental processes associated with academic success for this group. These findings will in turn promote a better understanding of the challenges associated with second language learning (see Escamilla, this issue), and the challenges of a subgroup of ELLs who struggle because of learning disability as traditionally conceived.

As is often discussed, the history of a field is both a point of reference and a guide for the future. For that reason, it is important to be clear that future research that results in information and knowledge about ELLs and their

learning difficulties may not be new per se, but rather like any emerging field, the contributions to come will be extensions, modifications, refinements, verifications, and replications of previously observed phenomena or stated positions. As was the case for the LD field, the future research related to ELL/LD will more than likely extend and advance the works of the extant research, and bring more depth to it.

However, where the field of ELL/LD differs from the field of research conducted with native English speakers is the added complexity of the political and ideological debates that have permeated the discussion about ELLs and have had a significant influence on policy and related classroom practice. Although such debates are not likely to be reconciled or to simply subside on account of research alone, we might contemplate the positive effects on practice of a robust knowledge base. Specifically, one that includes but is not limited to an understanding of the salient factors related to ELLs' language and literacy skills over time, effective instructional practices to promote academic achievement with a particular emphasis on early identification and intervention for those who are struggling, and a valid model of identification for LD.

As with any field of research, as new research answers existing questions in order to develop a more refined and sophisticated understanding of ELLs and their academic achievement, new and pressing problems will also be exposed. Further, and also the case in any field of research, we need to remain clear that evidence constitutes findings from a *set* of studies conducted with sufficiently different cases that are guided by a similar research question. To this end, it is important to consider that we need to go beyond broad variables such as program type, and design group comparisons, to provide specific findings. Sufficient level of detail needs to be included in studies to promote replication and to be clear as to the limitation and constraints (e.g., sample, instructional characteristics) that influence generalizability.

To accumulate a cohesive knowledge base about ELLs, to influence practice and related policy in a timely manner, and to support educators such as the teacher featured in the case at the beginning of this paper, research is needed. This research must be designed to reflect an understanding of the guidance afforded by sound empirical investigations undertaken in a programmatic manner and the benefits of applied research, which has the potential to inform and improve practice.

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## Notes

1 This is a variant of an actual case, written as a representation of the many unsolicited queries I receive via e-mail from teachers with specific questions about ELLs who are struggling in their classrooms.

2 In this article, I use the term *learning disability* to refer to a learning disability in the traditional sense, in reference to childhood academic problems that reflect a neurological basis. I use the term (more often) *learning difficulties* and make no attributions as to the source of the difficulty. The two terms are not used interchangeably.

3 In part, this reflects a model proposed by the RAND Mathematics Study Panel (n. d.) with respect to advancing the field of research on mathematic achievement.

4 It is of note that in light of the previously described demographics of the ELL population, and the emphasis on future directions for research on ELL/LD, the paper is written with a primary emphasis on research to be conducted with school-aged ELLs who are US born or who enrolled in US schools in the elementary or middle school years, as opposed to the more specific case of late arrivals such as high school newcomers, and/or older learners with significant gaps in prior education and/or lack of formal schooling.

5 In some districts, this classification is referred to as limited English proficient (LEP). For purposes of consistency, I have used the term *English language learner (ELL)* throughout this article.

6 One effort to address this issue is the DeLSS project initiated in 1998 by the NICHD and the Institute of Education Sciences. The research supported within this network of investigators has as its goal the development of new knowledge relevant to the critical factors that influence the development of English language literacy (reading and writing) competencies among Spanish speakers. All projects within the network are based on three overarching research questions; the studies address the questions with various samples across the nation and use divergent methods and analyses to do so. Findings from this program of research are beginning to emerge in the literature.

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