What Success Do English Language Learners Have in Reading Recovery?

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Many regions of the United States and Canada are increasingly diverse in terms of the language background of the population. School districts that once served primarily monolingual English-speaking students are now characterized by large numbers of students who are learning English at the same time they are learning to read and write. As with monolingual children, English language learners (ELL) may be unlikely to succeed in first grade because they are not yet demonstrating literacy behaviors commensurate to their peers. Whether they are at risk due to language competence or to literacy competence, while not immaterial, is not a major factor in determining the appropriateness of providing a literacy intervention.

ELL students are eligible for selection into Reading Recovery if they have sufficient English language proficiency to be administered Clay’s *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (1993). No other consideration is made in terms of level of proficiency in English, and Reading Recovery does not endorse setting a minimum score on any language assessment measure as a criterion for selection of ELL students. Moreover, Reading Recovery does not recommend that schools adopt a policy of holding eligible ELL children for entry into the program later in the first-grade year. (See related article, Selecting English Language Learners For Reading Recovery, page 28.)

How valid is the policy of selecting ELL children for eligibility exclusively on the basis of having sufficient language to be administered *An Observation Survey*? Several research studies have obtained data that serve to answer that question; I review briefly three of these studies here in order to underscore the extent to which Reading Recovery is indeed a viable intervention for ELL children.

**English Language Learners in New York**

In New York, Ashdown and Simic (2000) studied six years of data for children served in Reading Recovery (N=25,601). Within that population, the researchers identified three groups of learners: a Reading Recovery group comprised of native English speakers (N=15,673), fluent non-native speakers (N=6,388), and limited English-proficient speakers (N=3,540). In addition to data for Reading Recovery children, the researchers collected data each year from a comparison group of initially low-performing children (who did not receive Reading Recovery) and a random sample of average-performing children.

Analysis of data revealed that comparable proportions of each Reading Recovery subgroup were successfully discontinued: 62.2% of native English speakers, 66.3% of fluent non-native speakers, and 61.7% of limited English-proficient speakers. Furthermore, Reading Recovery as a literacy intervention narrowed the achievement gap between native and non-native speakers; that is, at end of first grade, ELL children who received Reading Recovery attained reading levels commensurate with their average-performing English-speaking peers.

On the basis of their findings, Ashdown and Simic observed that “both native speakers and English language learners are equally likely to be successful” (p. 38), and “language proficiency was not a factor impacting children’s opportunities to complete the program” (p. 35). They also concluded, “doubts that may exist in some schools about fully adhering to...a principle [of selecting the lowest-performing children] with English language learners are not supported by the data presented here” (p. 41).

**English Language Learners in England**

In an early evaluation of Reading Recovery in the United Kingdom (Hobbsbaum, 1995), outcomes with respect to participants’ success were calculated for monolingual (English-speaking children) and for bilingual children (children of varying English language proficiency). The average discontinuing rate for monolingual children (N=1,172) was 66%, and the average discontinuing rate for the bilingual group (N=294) was 63%.
In considering the data obtained, Hobsbaum concluded:

There is no evidence that bilingual children's outcomes differ from those of the children who only speak English, and it is clear from this that on entry to the programme bilingual children are scoring lower on all of the subtests of the Observation Profile, but by the end of the programme there are no differences between them. (pp. 32–33)

**English Language Learners in California**

Neal and Kelly (1999) examined three years of California data for all Reading Recovery children who received complete programs (N=3,366); data were analyzed for ELL children, Reading Recovery non-ELL children, and a random sample of first-grade children. Their findings were that similar proportions of ELL children (72%) discontinue from the program as compared to other Reading Recovery children (75.2%) and that the mean number of lessons for ELL students to discontinue (67.7) was similar to the mean number of lessons for other Reading Recovery students to discontinue (63.3).

Moreover, when they compared ELL children to a random sample of their peers, ELL children who discontinued attained end-of-year scores that exceeded mean scores of the random sample. Neal and Kelly observed that “the common assumption that children who are learning English will take much longer to acquire literacy than children whose first language is the language of instruction is not borne out by these data” (p. 102).

**What These Studies Indicate**

The clear evidence from these studies is that ELL children make comparable progress to their native English-speaking peers. In addition, the California data indicate that they do so in roughly the same amount of instructional time. These findings may at first be surprising until the full context of Reading Recovery intervention is considered:

The context of one-to-one tutoring is characterized by constant, language-rich interactions between a language learner and an expert user of that language. That children are enabled to accelerate their literacy learning in a daily regimen of authentic reading and writing activities whether they are proficient in the language of instruction or still acquiring academic-level competency in their second language should not be a surprising finding. (Neal & Kelly, 1999, p. 103)

Is the selection criteria, as established by Dr. Clay, for selecting ELL children into Reading Recovery—that is, sufficient English proficiency to be administered her Observation Survey—a viable one? The results of these studies answer an unqualified yes. As Ashdown and Simic (2000) concluded,

Since the general pattern of results suggests that [Reading Recovery] ‘works’ for all students, it is obviously important to ensure that language proficiency does not result in children’s inappropriate exclusion from the program. Given the demonstrated effectiveness of the program for all language groups, districts can have confidence that Reading Recovery is an appropriate instructional intervention for these children as well. (p. 39)

**References**


