Typically, whenever I pick up an edited book, I am concerned that each chapter will be written by authors who have differing viewpoints and voices. And with those differences, the flow and ease of understanding is disjointed for me as the reader. However, that is not the case with Achieving Literacy Success with English Language Learners: Insights, Assessment, Instruction (RRCNA, 2009). The editor, Cynthia Rodríguez-Eagle has managed to overcome my worry by having a distinct theme running through each chapter — as educators we are all responsible for the literacy success of our English language learners (ELLs). Each author is able to emphasize that the work is not inherently a second-language teacher’s responsibility to ensure literacy success, but that true success will occur for these students when all adults work to embrace children’s native language in the process of teaching them English.

The book’s intent is to give educators tools for assisting our fastest growing population of students in the United States, our ELLs. Once only a growing population in border states and gateway cities, ELLs are becoming a prominent group of students in classrooms all across America. It has now become a national focus for professional learning and study among teachers in every state. This book, divided into two parts, Insights and then Assessment and Instruction, helps teachers of ELLs—especially teachers of young children—examine the tools to respond to the literacy needs of this promising group of children.

The first chapter is written with the big picture in mind, describing the current state of immigration of young children to the United States. Rudy Rodríguez underscores the vital statistics and patterns of ELL student enrollment in our schools. He demonstrates the call for action among educators by sharing the eye-opening changes that are occurring in U.S. schools with the influx of immigrant students. He suggests that educators must adjust current traditional literacy teaching if there is a true expectation for success among our ELL students. The argument is made that all educators must evaluate their core values when it comes to meeting the needs of all students, regardless of circumstance. And when students do not speak English, the commitment to the profession is more important than ever.

In Bogum Yoon’s chapter on students as “valued members or uninvited guests,” teachers have the opportunity to use “positioning” as a way to empower ELL students in the classroom. Teachers can effectively position themselves as the “cultural bridge” between assimilating new cultures while at the same time honoring the child’s own culture and identity. Yoon emphasizes that teachers can help develop language in children when they are valuing them as “complex social beings rather than simply as language learners.”

A distinct theme runs through each chapter — as educators we are all responsible for the literacy success of our English language learners.
language development that both the ESL and the mainstream teacher should jointly use whenever working with ELL students. The chance of an ELL student’s literacy success cannot be squarely placed on the shoulder of the ESL teacher alone.

One of the most-relevant chapters for teachers of young students is how Reading Recovery principles and strategies have power for ELL students. Reading Recovery, a strategic one-to-one approach to teaching reading developed by Marie Clay, depends on a teacher’s skill in collecting information and then making careful analysis to guide and inform next steps for teaching. Rodríguez-Eagle’s personal experience as a teacher of Descubriendo la Lectura (DLL) gives additional emphasis to the parallel purposes of using the same early literacy tools in Reading Recovery and DLL. The same principles are in place to find the “instructional reading level.” Text level selection remains a vital piece for all teachers to master in working with either the native English or ELL student.

Rodríguez-Eagle effectively relies on Clay’s Reading Recovery foundational findings to support how ELL students may benefit from the same instructional supports that teachers provide in traditional Reading Recovery settings. Further, Rodríguez-Eagle shares how instruction in both the Reading Recovery and the regular classroom work together to build strong literacy skills. Reading Recovery teachers work to foster student conversation so that oral language skills are developed. Likewise, the use of oral language is key for supporting the ELL students’ reading and writing.

Patricia R. Kelly’s chapter on literacy assessment and instruction in the primary classroom underscores the critical elements of Reading Recovery that contribute to the success of ELL learners. Kelly describes a study that supports the notion that Reading Recovery principles, when used with ELL students, accelerate the reading performance of ELLs just as it does for the native speaker. Ten principles are examined in the chapter and supporting data is presented.

The teaching of comprehension and vocabulary to ELL students are also examined in two chapters. Again, both authors, Neal and O’Leary, rely on the insights from Reading Recovery as the most-effective approaches for ELL students’ comprehension and vocabulary development. ELL students face four main literacy obstacles: unknown concepts, vocabulary, abstract ideas, and language structures. The authors demonstrate how these obstacles can be mitigated by using “meaning-centered” instruction, the cornerstone of Reading Recovery — “meaning-making.”

One section shares how writing can be used to make cross-language connections from Spanish to English. The authors explain that when native Spanish-speaking ELL students learn to write in Spanish, there is a positive impact in learning to write in English. The Dictado, widely used in Mexico and Latin America, is a cross-language method that loosely means to embrace the written language as a bridge or connection to the student’s oral language. The value is in the information the teacher gains from having students dictate the language they will use as they are learning to read. Teachers gain knowledge of each student’s oral language competencies. The authors effectively present sample lessons in both Spanish and English for using The Dictado.

The final chapter in the book helps teachers understand that effective classroom practices can enhance student engagement. Williams and Haag offer three strategies—student as questioner, student as language detective, and student as performer—all of which actively engage students while incorporating the tools that are already present in ELL students. An example offered is how an ELL student relies on cognates for building new vocabulary. As a student acts as a language detective, new cognates are found or detected in their environment. The cognates are then added to their treasure chest of new words. This is a simple, yet effective, way to engage students while relying on the strength held by ELL students to build new knowledge.
As the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and staff development for Denton Independent School District in Texas, I am forever on the lookout for resources that not only support our literacy efforts with ELL students but will also take us to the next level of making English learning easier for young children. The chapter written by Lori A. Helman, “Tailoring Instruction for José and Khamtay: How Literacy Assessments Guide Teaching with English Language Learners” sums up a number of salient points for me as a central office administrator. Helman stresses the key ideas that students bring knowledge with them and it is up to good teachers to learn how to build a systematic manner to assess learners, informally and formally, to collect the appropriate information that guides next-step teaching.

In our district, teachers have undergone extensive professional learning in using ongoing, informal assessments of students. Our teachers had to move from thinking that assessments were evaluative to a true understanding that good informal assessments provided essential information about each child’s learning. That information then guided the work of the teacher. All of which is hard work. It requires a teacher to analyze and interpret the meaning of pieces of information on a number of children. Reading Recovery is a prime example of how, through the use of running records, a teacher “responds” to learning. Helman shares multiple examples of assessments that a teacher may use to collect information about how a student is progressing in literacy acquisition. Additionally, she shares useful information for teachers when assessing students at various developmental levels. Moreover, Helman goes to great lengths in explaining patterns in literacy development with ELL students.

As school districts search for urgent solutions to address the literacy needs of a growing ELL population, educators must reexamine what we know about effective early literacy instruction. Reading Recovery and Descubriendo la Lectura answer that call to action. In this book, we now have a well-written and concise resource for teachers and administrators about ELL needs. But more importantly, teachers will have a better understanding of how the use of Reading Recovery principles address ELL needs in our quest to achieve literacy success.

---

About the Author

Dr. Mike Mattingly is the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and staff development for Denton ISD, Denton, TX. He has served as a teacher, principal, and executive director in school systems in Texas and Georgia, and is the former president of the Georgia Association of Curriculum and Instructional supervisors. His wife, Sally, is a former Reading Recovery teacher.