



*The Reading Matrix* © 2009  
Volume 9, Number 1, April 2009

## **Reading Strategies: Adaptations to Meet the Needs of Secondary English Language Learners with Learning Disabilities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Special education teachers working with secondary level English language learners (ELLs) with learning disabilities (LD) are often faced with the question of how to provide reading comprehension instruction that meets the needs of this unique group. If a learner has the dual diagnosis of ELL and LD, how does one provide effective instruction? This article looks at reading strategies for improving the reading comprehension skills of secondary level English language learners with learning disabilities. Adaptations are recommended so that the strategies are more appropriate for this unique and underserved population.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

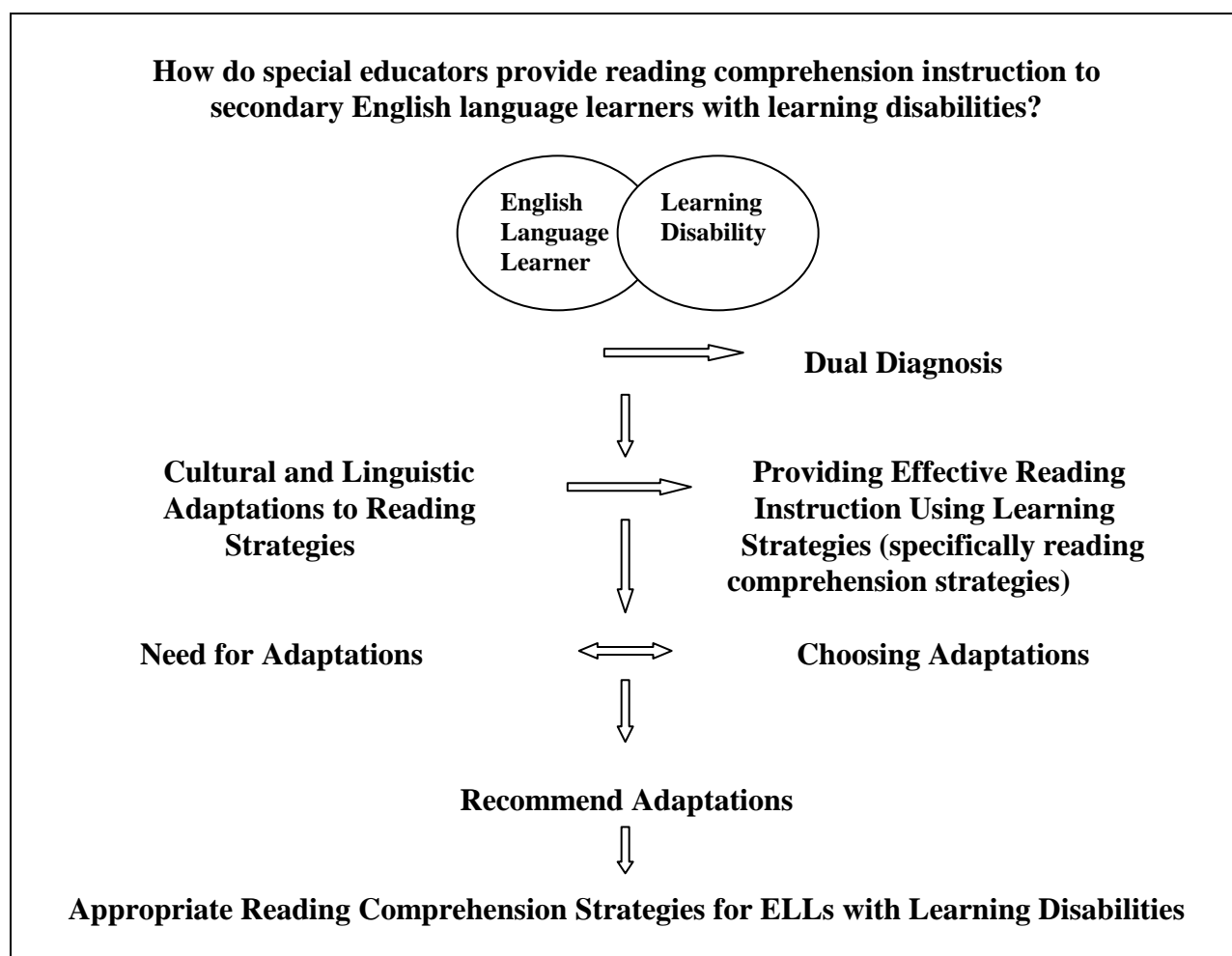
Providing reading comprehension instruction to secondary level English language learners with learning disabilities has long been a challenge not easy to answer. Indeed, providing adaptations to reading strategies intended for use with students with learning disabilities is an important way to accomplish the goal of accommodating the learning needs of English language learners with learning disabilities in reading comprehension. Accommodations are needed because for a significant number of culturally and linguistically diverse students, English is not their first language. They are learning English as a second language and usually are labeled as limited English-proficient (LEP) or as English language learners (ELLs). In addition, some ELLs have difficulty understanding or speaking English because they may also have a learning or language disability (LD) that interferes with their learning processes. These students require special education instruction to assure that they achieve their fullest potential (Ortiz & Polyzoi, 1988).

Furthermore, a national study by the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) on LEP students with disabilities (SpEd-LEP) indicate that SpEd-LEP students represented 9% of the LEP K-12 population in 2001-2002 and 8.2% of all special education students overall (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Stephenson, et al., 2003). Furthermore, this study purports that the population of LEP students with disabilities has future projected growth, and therefore, the attention and immediate need to appropriately address and provide services to this unique

population is extremely significant (Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Stephenson, et al., 2003). Based upon the aforementioned data, it is apparent that the enrollment of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds in special education services will only continue to increase.

Thus, many special educators are faced with the challenge of adapting materials for ELLs. This article summarizes how to provide reading comprehension instruction that meets the needs of this unique group using appropriate and effective instructional features in the field of both ELL and LD. It also recommends tips for improving the reading comprehension skills of secondary ELLs with LD by adapting strategies making them more appropriate. Figure 1 explains the process for providing reading comprehension instruction to these students.

**Figure 1.** Culture, Language, and Learning Disabilities



## **Providing Effective Reading Instruction**

A common form of intervention to provide high-quality instruction to ELLs with learning difficulties is the use of learning strategy instruction. Learning strategies are defined as techniques, principles, or rules that enable a student to learn to solve problems, complete tasks independently, and increase their reading comprehension (Mercer & Mercer, 1998). Research has shown that learning strategies are appropriate for students with special needs who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Hudson & Fradd, 1987). Furthermore, ELL literature suggests learning disabilities affect learning in any language and must, therefore, be a guiding factor in designing instruction (Schwarz & Terril, 2000).

If learning disabilities are the guiding factor in interventions and if reading is the most common problem, it is imperative to look at learning strategies, particularly reading strategies. Gersten, Baker, and Marks (1998) indicate that teaching all students, including ELLs with LD, how to read and understand what they read is essential. Research consistently reveals that a major reason many children with learning disabilities experience poor comprehension is due to a failure to read strategically and to spontaneously monitor their understanding of what is being read (Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). Additionally, Vaughn and colleagues (2000) assert that if strategies are taught to students with learning disabilities, improvements in reading comprehension are likely to occur.

Students with learning disabilities often experience deficits in comprehension; therefore, reading comprehension strategies are relevant. Reading without comprehension seems pointless and not reading strategically or employing a technique to monitor comprehension is likely to add frustration and anxiety to the reader causing significant difficulty with understanding in the reading process. Students with learning disabilities must find meaningful ways to complete the task of gaining understanding from written text, and reading comprehension strategies offer avenues for improving or increasing reading comprehension. We next consider what adaptations are relevant for reading strategies intended for use with students with learning disabilities to be most appropriate for ELLs with LD.

## **Need for Adaptations**

Since some language learners have a learning or language disability and will require special education services, it is important to look at the type of instruction that would be beneficial for this group. Research findings on ELLs and LD suggest learning strategy instruction is an effective intervention which enables previously unsuccessful students with disabilities and ELLs to become effective learners (Chamot & O'Malley, 1984; Deshler & Schumaker, 1986; Hudson & Fradd, 1987; Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000).

Even though research recommends the use of learning strategies, researchers also contend that modifications need to be made to learning strategies to include salient instructional features of effective bilingual programs (Hudson & Fradd, 1987). However, the literature this claim is based upon has two assumptions. First, the teacher is fluent in the target non-English language. Second, the teacher has the assistance of at least one fluent, literate assistant who can provide non-English language support to accommodate language learning as well as academic skill development for students who are ELL/LD.

Apart from the study presented above, there is little research regarding modifications to learning strategies, specifically reading strategies. It is important to apply modifications because there are many classrooms in which students speak five or six different languages.

### **Choosing Adaptations**

Even though ELLs and students with LD have commonalities, ELLs have instructional needs that are far different from those of native English speakers with LD (Gersten, et al., 1998). These instructional needs suggest plausible adaptations to reading comprehension strategies intended for use with students with LD. Ortiz and Polyzoi (1988) present salient instructional features of effective bilingual programs. First, the use of the non-English language is important in mediating comprehension and developing English language proficiency. Second, for application to the general education classroom, English language skills must become an integral part of content area instruction. Third, cultural relevance facilitates academic and social skills acquisition. Further, the control of vocabulary, opportunities to verbalize thoughts, comprehensible input, initial teaching strategies, strategies that build comprehension and other language abilities, and key instructional principles are suggested because the learning challenge for second-language learners is fundamentally different than that of monolingual students (Gersten et al., 1998).

The use of ELL instructional needs driving adaptations to reading comprehension strategies designed for students with LD represent embedding the learning needs of language learners to reading comprehension strategies. Monolingual or native speakers of English approach reading from a different linguistic perspective, while second and foreign language learners approach reading from a language acquisition perspective of learning how to speak, read, listen, and write a new language.

Gersten, Baker, and Marks (1998) describe a critical component of ELL instructional strategies to be comprehensible input, meaning students should be able to understand the essence of what is being said or presented to them. When input is comprehensible, students understand most aspects of what is required for learning—the learning experience pushes them to further understanding.

Research indicates the most promising instructional strategies for ELLs include providing students with opportunities to verbalize what they are learning and to receive feedback or encouragement from peers (Almanza, Singleton, & Terril, 1995-1996; Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Gansehow & Sparks, 1993; Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). Additionally, the use of organizers, providing opportunities to use several senses, using learning strategies, recognizing and building upon learners' strengths and prior knowledge, simplifying language, but not content, and making concepts accessible through the use of pictures and maps have been found to be successful.

Commonalities between ELL and LD instructional features are few when compared with the differences (Table 1). It is interesting to find that these two areas, with separate instructional features and bodies of knowledge, have some similar instructional features. Fortunately, these similarities appear to provide the necessary overlap for students with a dual diagnosis of ELL and LD.

**Table 1.** Instructional Features for English Language Learners and Students with Learning Disabilities

Commonalities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. use of peers and <i>interaction with others</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- feedback and encouragement</li> </ul> </li> <li>b. verbalization of thought           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- verbalize what they are learning (learning by verbalizing and receiving feedback)</li> </ul> </li> <li>c. use of organizers           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- graphic organizers, story maps</li> </ul> </li> <li>d. building upon strengths and prior knowledge           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- connect students' learning to past experiences</li> <li>- relevant background</li> <li>- knowledge and content draws on students' experience</li> <li>- reinforce verbal with written to simplify language, but not content</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. control of vocabulary</li> <li>b. sensitivity to language and culture</li> <li>c. incorporating English language skills</li> <li>d. sharing about language, culture, country, and experiences</li> <li>e. opportunities to speak and use native language</li> <li>f. consistency in language use with students</li> <li>g. use various modalities (visual, auditory, tactile, discussion, experiences, gestures) to enhance understanding and contribute to comprehension</li> </ul>

Differences focus on the impact of language and culture. These differ from LD instructional features in that language and culture are not embedded in reading strategies intended for use with learners with LD.

### **Recommended Adaptations to Reading Strategies**

The inclusion of cultural and linguistic features makes reading comprehension strategy instruction appropriate for secondary level ELLs with LD. Such adaptations accommodate their learning needs in reading comprehension given the teaching strategies (i.e., demonstrations, modeling, examples, experiences, visuals/graphic organizers) and the commonalities shared in instructional features for students with learning needs and learning disabilities.

As already shown in Table 1, suggested modifications to reading strategies include, but are not limited to, controlling vocabulary, showing sensitivity to language and culture, incorporating English language skills, sharing about language, culture, country, and experiences, seeking opportunities to speak and use native language, employing consistency in language use with students, and using various modalities (visual, auditory, tactile, discussion, experiences, gestures) to enhance understanding and contribute to comprehension. Special educators who are unable to speak the students' native language face the challenge of providing appropriate reading comprehension instruction. Table 2 outlines an example of adaptations to reading comprehension strategies teachers can utilize.

**Table 2.** Sample Reading Comprehension Strategy Adaptation

<b>Lesson:</b>	Improving Reading Comprehension of Informational Text Using the RAP Paraphrasing Strategy
<b>Class:</b>	Reading Workshop
<b>Setting:</b>	Fully self-contained special education class
<b>Population:</b>	9-12 mixed English language learners with learning disabilities
<b>Text:</b>	Encyclopedia article on the Bill of Rights
<b>Goal:</b>	To prepare students to be able to read content area text for academic courses

**Paragraphing Strategy-RAP:** RAP teaches students to recall main ideas and facts from their reading materials (Lebzelter & Nowacek, 1999).

1. **R**ead a paragraph silently
2. **A**sk themselves to identify the main ideas and details of the paragraph and
3. **P**ut these in their own words, including at least two details related to the main idea

**Adaptations:**

- **Controlling vocabulary:** When acquiring new vocabulary, control vocabulary by limiting the number of vocabulary words introduced. Also, choose key vocabulary words within context of the reading text. For example, vocabulary words associated with the Bill of Rights may include the following: amendment, constitution, citizen, ratify/ratification, immunity/immunities, Congress, freedoms, Thomas Jefferson, federalists, and anti-federalists. However, ten words may be too many. You may control vocabulary by only choosing five key or essential words such as constitution, amendment, congress, ratify/ratification, and immunity.
- **Showing sensitivity to language and culture:** Activate student prior knowledge by connecting students' learning to past experiences in relation to the concept studying. Relate concept to concept in students' culture. For instance, engage students in a whole group discussion with the following guiding questions: *What do you know about the constitution? What do you know about the Bill of Rights? What do these terms mean to you?* Additionally, to make connections for the student, ask the following: *Do we have class rules? Do we have school rules? What are some rights and freedoms that you have at school? Do you have a right to be safe at school? Do you have a right to be respected?* Lastly, to relate the concept to a concept in the students' culture, find the word that means rights or freedoms in the students' native language such as "libertad" in Spanish or "danh từ" in Vietnamese and discuss what that means to them.
- **Incorporating English language skills:** Include opportunities for students to learn academic language such as grammar and syntax. For example, conduct a mini-lesson in which you teach a skill in ten to fifteen minutes such as subject-verb agreement, sentence variety and types, fragments, run-on sentences, etc. You would then ask students to proofread their paraphrased sentences in light of the mini-skill presented. Also, include opportunities to converse and discuss using their new language skills in oral discourse in groups (such as a *grand conversation*) and/or when presenting to class (oral presentation) a main idea or fact with two details.
- **Incorporating culture, language, and experiences:** Use materials available for student use about native country in English (i.e., find an encyclopedia article or any document about students' native country constitution and Bill of Rights). Incorporate student sharing about their own language, culture, country, and experiences orally with the class. Sharing

experiences in relation to concepts being learned facilitates a better understanding of the concept in language learning (in light of what they know in their language – now in relation to the English language). Students can tell you what they know about citizens' rights in their country.

- **Seeking opportunities to speak and use native language:** Students work in collaborative groups with peers to discuss paraphrasing of main ideas before writing them down. Having students respond in native language with peers facilitates comprehension of text just as it would in any cooperative group work.
- **Employing consistency in language use with students:** Be aware of language use. For instance, when teaching students how to use the RAP strategy through informational text, avoid using complex figures of speech or idioms that can confuse students when they are still acquiring language proficiency.
- **Using various modalities:** Use various modalities (visual, auditory, tactile, discussion, experiences, gestures) to enhance understanding and contribute to comprehension: visuals (pictorial of key people and the actual Bill of Rights document), hands-on experiences (creating a timeline of key events in the development of the Bill of Rights using internet surfing of sites such as the National Archives, National Constitution Center, and Library of Congress), cooperative learning (discussions such as a grand conversation in small groups with guiding questions from the teacher), and videos.

## CONCLUSION

The United States represents a diverse society. In this diverse society, students with language learning needs and LD should receive appropriate reading strategies to improve their reading comprehension. This instruction is necessary because reading is indicated as a significant difficulty for students with LD. Since instructional strategies for these two groups have similarities and differences, it is plausible that the differences noted in ELL instructional strategies appear to suggest a need for adaptations to reading strategies designed for use with students with learning disabilities. In turn, these adaptations will accommodate ELLs with LD's unique learning needs and appropriately assist the language learner with a learning disability.

Recent research on ELLs suggests that LD should be the guiding factor for program design, so LD instructional techniques are sufficient. However, other research on ELLs suggests modifications based on the assumption of a teacher or assistant being fluent in the students' native language. Because research in LD does not address or embed cultural and/or linguistic needs and because some classrooms are multilingual, it is pertinent that researchers and practitioners consider accommodations for ELLs with learning disabilities. As the number of students from linguistically diverse backgrounds continues to grow, special educators will increasingly serve these students in the years to come and the adaptation of reading strategies will provide the essential link to success in the classroom.

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