The science of reading, phonics, and multilingual learners

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“The Right to Read”

Howard (2025); Shankar Institute (2025)

45 states have passed “science of reading legislation”

23 reference five pillars and oral language and writing

Silent on the role of content and background knowledge in supporting reading comprehension

17 states prohibit “three cueing system”

key research-based instructional levers for multilingual learners are only minimally addressed in 4 out of 45 states

Research and Pedagogy

MacPhee et al. (2021) “The media have asserted a direct connection between basic research and instructional practice that, without sufficient translational research that attends to a variety of instructional contexts and student *populations, may perpetuate inequities.”* (p. S145).

Seidenberg et. al (2020, p. 122) “In the absence of sufficient translational research, almost every reading curriculum can claim an equally loose connection to the ‘science of reading.’ The risk of course, is that such programs will prove ineffective, not because the basic science is wrong but because the translation was poor.”

National Committee on Effective Literacy (NCEL)

https://multilingualliteracy.org/

“ there is much more scientific research conducted with monolingual English-speaking children, and the studies that have included EL/EB students are discussed as an "after-thought" or are not referenced at all.”

https://multilingualliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Joint-Statement_SOR-EL_EB.pdf

As media and states take up the science of reading . .

de Jong, E.J. & Herrera, S. (2024). Asking the right question. *EL Gazette, 488.* https://www.elgazette.com/elg_archive/ELG2402/mobile/

de Jong, E.J.& Herrera, S. (2023), English Literacy for Multilingual Learners: Voices from the Field, *Language Magazine,* April.

… something gets lost in translation…

What the science of reading folks say it is NOT (Reading League)

a single, specific component of instruction, such as phonics

a one-size-fits-all approach

Realities on the Ground

It’s about (English) phonics.

“And so I would say that's the biggest thing I got from Letters training, as well as just making sure that I hit like phonics and phonemic awareness. With those kids.”

It’s about *correct* language (English)

“Well, it, it brought an awareness to me. About making sure that I am cognizant about how I am saying things, how I am writing things, the importance that I put on the speaking aspect and the writing aspect to the curriculum because I, you know, heaven forbid, I don't want to teach someone the incorrect way.”

The focus is on a blanket reading curriculum that every kid needs to fit. And oh, well, this curriculum says some ELL options down here at the bottom. So we're going to call that a 'one size fits all' thing, you know? . . . A student who one: struggles with the language, and then two: also struggles to read, is never going to pass a phonics screener. And so, they give them [ELs] these phonics screeners. Well, of course he bombed the thing.

See also Strong & Escamilla (2024) *Voices from the Field.*

"The question is not 'should phonics be taught or not?' for ELs. Given English orthography, there is no question that phonics is an important component of reading for native English speakers and ELs alike. **A better question is: What conditions are necessary for phonics instruction to be effective for ELs?**

Processes that lead to fluent reading comprehension in a given language rely upon:

- The learner's oral comprehension of the target language for multiple purposes.
- The learner's exercise of literacy skills that allows for a seamless transition from decoding of print to making meaning.
- The teacher's ability to contextualize instruction."

(From: de Jong & Herrera (2024) – *Asking the right question: Teaching reading to bilingual learners*.

https://www.elgazette.com/asking-the-right-question-teaching-reading-to-bilingual-learners/

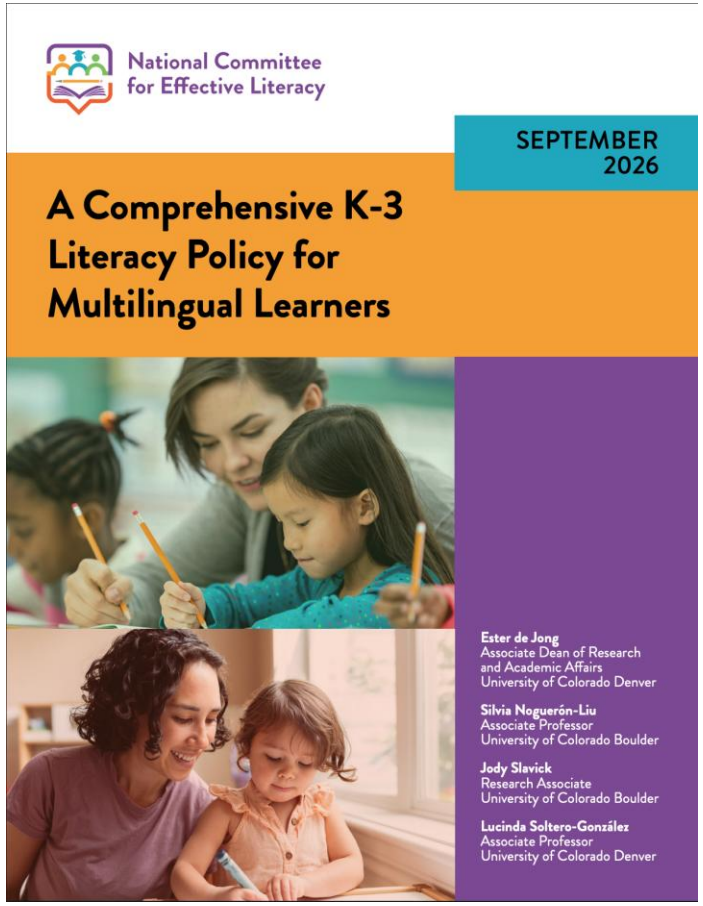
ACTA Position Statement Highlights

- Meaning first
- Phonics does not equal reading
- Integration
- ~~Scripted, Paced Curricula~~
- Role of home language
- Asset-based
- Teacher Professional Learning

Additional Considerations

- Beyond small group or individual student interventions: mainstream classrooms and systems
  - Administrator professional learning
  - Effective EAL classroom practices
- Assessments – early screeners for dyslexia, progress monitoring, identifying reading difficulties
- Culture/identity/literacy engagement
- Bilingual education programs
- Language-specific approaches (Spanish vs English)
- Does it make a difference?

Literacy Policy through a Multilingual Lens



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