Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction: The Central Role of Literacy Engagement

BY JIM CUMMINS, Ph.D.

Educators around the world know intuitively that it is important to encourage their students to read extensively in order to promote strong literacy development. However, many may not be fully aware that literacy engagement has emerged as a powerful determinant of literacy achievement—stronger even than students' socioeconomic status (SES). More specifically, the research evidence suggests that schools can significantly reduce the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage by ensuring that students have access to a rich print environment and become actively engaged with literacy.

This paper outlines the research evidence supporting the role of literacy engagement in determining literacy outcomes and also examines the implications of this research for classroom instruction. Specifically, it points to the empirical and theoretical foundations of school-wide and classroom-based instructional initiatives that expand students' opportunities to become actively engaged with literacy.

The case for literacy engagement as a primary determinant of reading achievement is both logical and empirical. Logic dictates that literacy engagement is crucial because academic language is found primarily in printed text rather than in everyday conversation. Students who do not read extensively have far less access to academic language than their peers who become actively engaged with literacy. Active engagement with printed text is particularly important for English learners (ELs) who are trying to catch up academically.

The empirical case for literacy engagement as a primary determinant of achievement derives from the following research findings:

• Even children's picture books, intended for children in the early grades, contain almost twice as many sophisticated or rare words compared to the speech adults direct to children or speech between adults (Massaro, 2015). Therefore, children who experience less access to print at home and school have less opportunity to expand their vocabulary knowledge and develop familiarity with other aspects of academic language (e.g., grammar and discourse conventions).

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• Students from low-income backgrounds experience significantly less access to written language in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods (e.g., public library access) than is the case for higher-income students (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001).

• An extremely large body of research demonstrates a causal relationship between literacy engagement and literacy achievement for both native-speakers and second-language speakers of the school language. This research is summarized in a later section.

The next section discusses the nature of reading comprehension and academic language in order to elaborate on the reasons why literacy engagement plays a crucial role in their development.

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READING COMPREHENSION AND DECODING SKILLS

During the era of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation (2001-2015), considerable emphasis was placed on ensuring that all students had a good grasp of decoding skills, which were accurately seen as fundamental to the development of strong reading comprehension ability. The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasized the importance of implementing a balanced approach that combined systematic phonics instruction, designed to develop decoding skills, with the use of high quality literature. The report emphasized that "systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program" (p. 2–136).

However, federal policies implemented under NCLB focused on intensive phonics instruction to the neglect of high quality literature and a balanced approach to reading instruction. For example, the $6 billion Reading First program, designed to help low-income students in the early grades develop a strong foundation in reading skills, refused to fund any programs that emphasized balance between phonics instruction and a focus on broader literacy skills (e.g., reading children's literature and writing development) (Cummins, 2007). Not surprisingly in view of this emphasis, the evaluation of the Reading First program (Gamse et al., 2008) reported that Reading First exerted a positive impact on decoding skills at Grade 1 but no influence on reading comprehension skills at Grades 1, 2, or 3. These findings were consistent with the earlier National Reading Panel's (2000) finding that systematic phonics instruction exerted no impact on reading comprehension skills beyond grade 1 for normally achieving and low achieving students.

These findings raise the question of what instructional strategies are effective in promoting sustained reading comprehension skills. To answer this question, we need to understand the nature of academic language—the language we find in written texts and formal instructional contexts.

CONVERSATIONAL AND ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

There is widespread agreement among educators and researchers that the language we use in everyday social interactions is very different than the language students are required to understand and use in school. What I have called *conversational fluency* represents the ability to carry on a conversation in familiar face-to-face situations. The vast majority of native speakers of English and other languages have developed conversational fluency when they enter school at age 4 or 5. This fluency involves use of high frequency words and simple grammatical constructions.

Academic language proficiency, on the other hand, includes knowledge of the less frequent vocabulary of English as well as the ability to interpret and produce increasingly complex written language. As students progress through the grades, they encounter far more low-frequency words, complex syntax (e.g. passives), and abstract expressions that are virtually never heard in everyday conversation. Many of these low-frequency words come from Latin and Greek sources (e.g., predict,

photosynthesis, sequence, revolution, etc.). Students are required to understand linguistically and conceptually demanding texts in the content areas (e.g. literature, social studies, science, mathematics) and to use this language in an accurate and coherent way in their own writing. Use of *nominalization*, where abstract nouns are created from verbs or adjectives, is common in academic text (e.g., acceleration, distribution, etc.) (see Hiebert, 2014, for a detailed discussion of text complexity).

The complexity of academic language helps explain why many EL students who have acquired conversational fluency and decoding skills in English are still a long way from grade-level performance in reading comprehension. Students who can 'read' English fluently may have only a very limited understanding of the words they can decode. We know from extensive research that EL students typically require at least 5 years to catch up to native speakers in academic language proficiency (e.g., Thompson, 2015). By contrast, it usually takes only about 1-2 years of sustained exposure to English for students to become reasonably fluent in everyday conversational language. These trajectories reflect both the increased linguistic complexity of academic language, and the fact that English learners are attempting to catch up to a moving target. Students whose first language is English are not standing still waiting for EL students to catch up academically. Every year, they make gains in reading, writing and vocabulary abilities. Thus, EL students have to run faster to bridge the gap.

The research reviewed in the next section suggests that teachers can significantly accelerate ELs' catch-up trajectory by enabling them to read and understand grade-level texts as rapidly as possible.

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LITERACY ENGAGEMENT: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Lindsay (2010, 2013). A comprehensive analysis of the relationship between print access and educational outcomes was carried out by Lindsay (2010) in a meta-analysis of 108 correlational and experimental or quasi-experimental research studies. Lindsay concluded that print access plays a causal role in the development of reading skills: "interventions that lend print materials (e.g., books and magazines) to children or give print materials to children cause improved attitudes towards reading, increased reading behaviour, improved emergent literacy skills, and improved reading performance" (2013, pp. 29-30).

OECD (2004, 2010) PISA Research. The Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) is a series of large-scale studies of 15-year old students in countries around the world carried out since 2000 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These studies involving hundreds of thousands of students have consistently shown that "the level of a student's reading engagement is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student's interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages" (OECD, 2004, p. 8). Reading researcher, John Guthrie (2014, p. 5), reinforced this conclusion, noting that students whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income.

Brozo, Shiel, and Topping (2007) similarly articulated the implications of the PISA data for low-SES students: "Keeping students engaged in reading and learning might make it possible for them to overcome what might otherwise be insuperable barriers to academic success" (pp. 307–308).

More recent PISA findings (e.g., OECD, 2010) confirm these trends. Engagement in reading was assessed through measures of time spent reading various materials, enjoyment of reading, and use of various learning strategies. Across OECD countries, reading engagement was significantly related to reading

performance and approximately one-third of the relationship between reading performance and students' socio-economic background was mediated by reading engagement. In other words, there was about a one-third overlap between the negative effects of low SES and the positive effects of reading engagement. The implication is that schools can potentially 'push back' about one-third of the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage by ensuring that students have access to a print-rich environment and become actively engaged with literacy.

Sulllivan and Brown (2013). In an ongoing British longitudinal study involving a nationally representative sample of several thousand students, Sullivan and Brown (2013) reported that children who were read to regularly by their parents at age 5 demonstrated significantly stronger performance on vocabulary, spelling and math tests given at age 16 than those who did not have this early exposure to books. Furthermore, the amount of pleasure reading students reported at age 10 significantly predicted later scores at age 16. The authors were able to demonstrate a causal relationship between reading engagement and reading achievement that was not dependent either on the socioeconomic background of the parents or on cognitive or academic ability: "Once we controlled for the child's test scores at age five and ten, the influence of the child's own reading [at age 16] remained highly significant, suggesting that the positive link between leisure reading and cognitive outcomes is not purely due to more able children being more likely to read a lot, but that reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time" (2013, p. 37).

Many other studies, reviews, and meta-analyses demonstrate the same pattern of significant relationships between print access/literacy engagement and reading achievement among both L1 and L2 students (e.g., Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2013; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen 2004; Mol & Bus, 2011; Nakanishi, 2015; Sparks, Patton, & Murdoch, 2014). In short, multiple research studies provide highly credible evidence that literacy engagement plays a central role in literacy achievement.

This research is of particular significance for Els who must 'run faster' in order to catch up academically with native speakers of English. The instructional conditions that enable ELs to become actively engaged with literacy are summarized in the literacy engagement framework discussed in the next section.

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THE LITERACY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

The Literacy Engagement framework (Figure 1) (Cummins & Early, 2011) incorporates research findings on the effects of literacy engagement among EL students by positing that print access/literacy engagement is a direct determinant of literacy attainment for both ELs and for the general population of students. The framework also argues that engagement will be enhanced when (a) teachers actively scaffold students' ability to understand and use academic language, (b) instruction connects with students' lives and expands their intellectual and imaginative horizons, (c) students' emerging personal and academic identities are affirmed, and (d) students' knowledge of, and control over, language is extended across the curriculum.

Scaffold meaning. There is a large degree of consensus among literacy researchers regarding the necessity of providing instructional support (scaffolding) to enable all students to comprehend meanings and use the target language effectively within the classroom (e.g., through graphic organizers, demonstrations, use of students' L1, etc.).

Effective instruction for ELs will also connect to students' lives by activating their existing knowledge and building background knowledge as needed. Learning can be defined as the integration of new knowledge or skills with the knowledge or skills we already possess. Therefore, it is crucial to activate ELs'

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preexisting knowledgeedge so that they can relate new information to what they already know. However, we also want to expose students to a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts that stimulate their imaginations and get them excited about learning. Thus, activating students' background knowledge is just the first step in the process of promoting literacy engagement. *(See Figure 1 below)*

Identity affirmation is also crucial for literacy engagement. Students who feel their culture and identity validated in the classroom are much more likely to engage with literacy than those who perceive their culture and identity ignored or devalued. It is therefore important for students to gain ample access to books and other print material that discuss themes and issues that not only resonate with their background knowledge but also extend their knowledge and curiosity into new spheres of inquiry.

Finally, literacy engagement among ELs and struggling readers requires that teachers explain how language works in subjects across the curriculum and stimulate students' curiosity about language. Students who gain a sense of control over language will want to use it for powerful purposes. This focus on language awareness includes explicit vocabulary instruction in the context of students' engagement with print, and explicit instruction about the discourse conventions of particular genres of language. For bilingual students, it would also include drawing students' attention to cross-lingual connections (e.g., cognate relationships). For example, teachers can
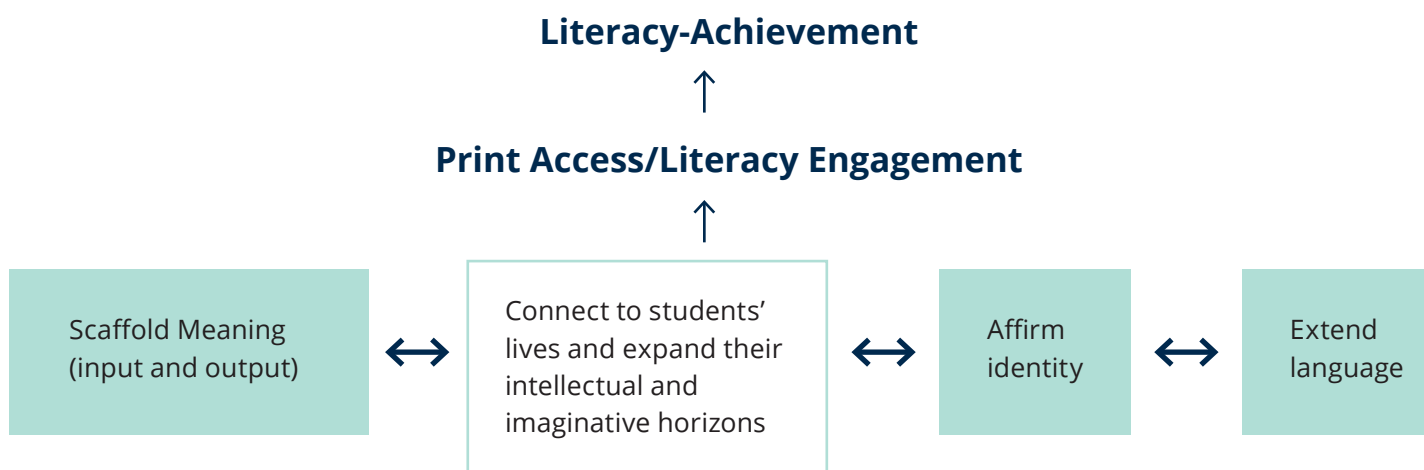
Literacy-Achievement

↑

Print Access/Literacy Engagement

↑

| Scaffold Meaning (input and output) | ↔ | Connect to students' lives and expand their intellectual and imaginative horizons | ↔ | Affirm identity | ↔ | Extend language |

Figure 1. The Literacy Engagement framework

encourage students to keep 'cognate notebooks' where they make note of Spanish-English cognates that they encounter in the texts they read.

CONCLUSION

The research reviewed in this paper demonstrates clearly that students who engage in extensive reading (and writing) develop stronger reading comprehension skills. This is particularly the case for low-income students (many of whom are EL) who may have limited access to books and other forms of print outside of school. In developing school-based policies focused on print access and literacy engagement, educators might discuss issues such as the following:

• To what extent is our school library stocked with culturally relevant and engaging books that students are encouraged to check out and read at home?

• To what extent do our students have access to classroom libraries that they can use for independent reading within class and at home?

• To what extent do our school and classroom libraries include books in students' home languages?

• To what extent do we work with parents to ensure that they know about local public libraries and get library cards for their children?

• To what extent do we schedule whole class and/ or small group discussions of books that encourage students to think more deeply about issues and allow us, as teachers, to communicate our enthusiasm for reading?

A final thought: the effects of literacy engagement, which eminent researcher John Guthrie called 'stunning,' highlight the fact that teachers have considerable power to promote strong literacy skills even among students who face socioeconomic challenges and are learning the language of instruction. Some simple instructional initiatives can make a huge difference in enabling all students to become enthusiastic readers (and writers) who develop identities of both confidence and competence.

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