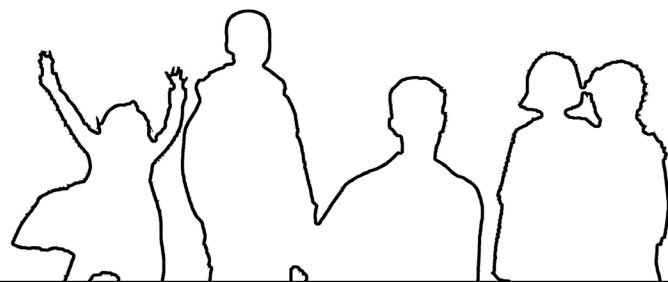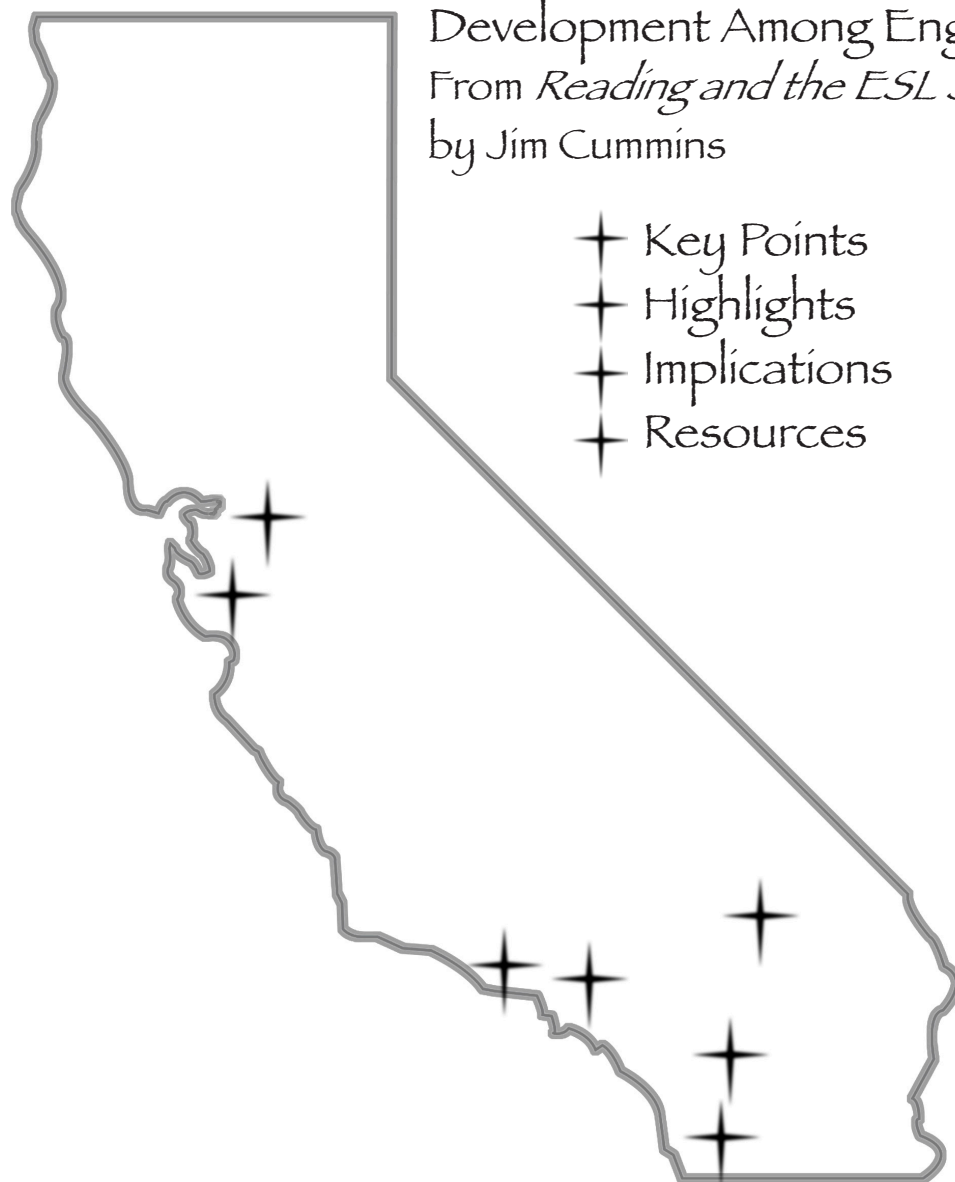# In the STARlight

Research & Resources for English Learner Achievement

Issue 1

A Framework for Promoting Sustained Reading
Development Among English Learners
From *Reading and the ESL Student*
by Jim Cummins

+ Key Points
+ Highlights
+ Implications
+ Resources

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Students of Today Achieving Results

A Framework for Promoting Sustained Reading Development Among English Learners

Based on Jim Cummins' Article, *Reading and the ESL Student,* Orbit, 2002, 33(1), 19-22.

How can we promote sustained reading development among English Learners?

In order to answer this question, it is important to look at three different aspects of language proficiency: 1) conversational fluency, 2) discrete language skills, and 3) academic language proficiency.

Conversational Fluency

English Learners can function in familiar everyday situations with a relatively small vocabulary. Linguists estimate that knowledge of about 2,000 words is all that is necessary to communicate successfully in any given face-to-face conversation. Eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, intonation, etc. are helpful clues in understanding others and being understood.

Discrete Language Skills

These skills include rule-based phonological, literacy, and grammatical knowledge that students can acquire through direct instruction or active participation in a literacy and language rich environment. English Learners can learn discrete language skills at the same time as they are learning basic vocabulary and acquiring conversational fluency.

Academic Language Proficiency

As students progress through the grades, academic language becomes increasingly complex, particularly in the content areas. Academic language includes: 1) understanding difficult concepts; 2) a vocabulary that includes many low frequency and technical words not commonly used in everyday conversations; and 3) sophisticated grammatical constructions (e.g. passive voice) also rarely used in conversations.

All three aspects of language proficiency are important. However, while direct instructional strategies are effective in developing decoding skills, they are insufficient by themselves in promoting reading comprehension and academic language proficiency. A combination of extensive reading and comprehension-focused instruction is required for optimal development of reading comprehension.

Fourth Grade Slump

The *fourth grade slump* refers to the situation whereby low-income students who demonstrate grade level reading performance in the primary grades begin to fall significantly behind at fourth grade and succeeding grades.

Numerous studies have documented significant gaps between decoding and comprehension performance. Trends indicate that direct instruction and scripted programs often place more emphasis on the development of phonemic awareness at the early grades than on vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Strong development of reading comprehension abilities is promoted by opportunities and incentives to engage in extensive reading and does not develop automatically solely on the basis of decoding skills

Implications for Teachers

What can teachers do to teach the language of academic success? There are four instructional components that research suggests are strongly related to increasing reading comprehension:

- Large amounts of time for actual text reading:
  Time-Saving Tips for Text Reading. The University of Texas, Austin (2002).
  http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/handouts/1466.html (April 2004).

- Teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies:
  Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension.
  Rand Reading Study Group (2002).
  http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1465/MR1465.pdf (April 2004).

- Opportunities for peer and collaborative learning:
  Four Leading Models of Cooperative Learning. Harvard Education Letter Research Online. (May/June 2000)
  http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2000-mj/abstracts.shtml#a3 (April 2004).

- Occasions for students to talk to a teacher and one another about their responses to reading:
  Effective Teaching Practices for English Language Learners. Mid-Atlantic Regional Education Laboratory. (2002).
  http://www.temple.edu/LSS/pdf/spotlights/700/spot705.pdf (April 2004).

The research is conclusive in showing strong relationships for first and second language learners between opportunities to read and vocabulary development and reading comprehension abilities. Research also underscores the importance of explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and word meanings.

Characteristics of Schools That Stand Out

These are some components of highly effective schools that foster academic achievement for English Learners:

- Schools where teachers have a high degree of autonomy;
- Schools with flattened hierarchies instead of top down processes;
- Schools that foster imagination;
- Schools that articulate their belief system; and
- Schools that develop a language policy using primary language and culture as an asset.

No Child Left Behind Implications

Under the *No Child Left Behind* umbrella, the following areas need to be addressed in order to promote success for English Learners: 1) staff development to help teachers engage students in active use of written and oral language for authentic purposes; 2) implementation of successful program models that support sustained literacy development beyond the primary grades; 3) utilization of available resources and research on effective reading practices for English Learners; and 4) support for a literacy-rich environment at home.

Resources

Alice Weinrib's Second Language Education web site:
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~aweinrib/sle/

International High School in New York
http://www.ed.gov/inits/teachers/97-98/4.html

Dual Language Showcase: Thornwood School
http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/about.htm

e-Lective Language Learning Program: A Tool to Enable Students to Access the Curriculum and Harvest the Language of Academic Texts. Contact Jim Cummins at
ELective320@aol.com

"In short, immersion in a rich literature environment where students have ample encouragement and opportunity to read (and write) extensively is crucial for the development of reading comprehension and academic language proficiency." (Jim Cummins, 2002)

In the STARlight

STUDENTS OF TODAY ACHIEVING RESULTS

Questions for Reflection

1. How would you gauge your school's or district's language arts, ELD, and academic content programs in terms of their success in addressing each of the three aspects of language proficiency that Cummins discusses? What additional sources of evidence or data might you consider in measuring and monitoring English Learners' progress in developing language proficiency, including academic language in the content areas?

2. Cummins addresses the phenomenon known as the fourth grade slump. What has been your school's or district's experience with this? What conversations might you initiate with colleagues to address this issue, particularly as it relates to issues of academic language proficiency?

3. The article lists four research-based implications for teachers that suggest how they can effectively teach the language of academic success to English Learners. How might your current policies, structures, and practices need to change to ensure that:
- Classroom teachers deliberately schedule blocks of time for text reading?
- Teachers are adequately trained on the use of a broad repertoire of comprehension and learning strategies?
- Your reading program offers opportunities for students to interact with each other and with the teacher on meaningful academic tasks?

4. What leadership support do you need in your school or district to successfully implement program models that show long-term academic, linguistic, and effective success for English Learners?

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