Research on ESL children has surprising results

*GSE's Nonie Lesaux says non-native speaking kindergartners may read better*

By Beth Potier
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For an increasing number of children whose first language is not English, learning to read - arguably one of school's most important and most difficult lessons - can be an especially high hurdle.

New research from Harvard Graduate School of Education (GSE) Assistant Professor Nonie Lesaux, however, finds that with proper intervention, children who speak English as a second language can learn to read English as well as or even better than their English-speaking peers.

Lesaux's study, published in the journal "Developmental Psychology" this month, tracked 1,000 children speaking native English and English as a second language (ESL) in mainstream English classrooms from kindergarten through second grade. With participants from across an entire school district in North Vancouver, Canada, the research is the first-ever longitudinal study to look at a population-based sample that took in a citywide sweep of social classes, immigrant populations, and native languages - 33 of them.

"The ESL group as a whole did better in grade two on a number of reading and language measures ... than their native-speaking counterparts," says Lesaux, adding that the achievement of the ESL students "stunned" some of her professional colleagues. The implications on the expectations of ESL students could be far-reaching, she says.
The success of the young readers - ESL students as well as native English speakers - turned on an intensive literacy curriculum that the school district developed in partnership with Lesaux and her co-author, University of British Columbia professor Linda Siegel, who lent their research-based expertise to the process. "It was a very bottom-up approach, an amazing collaboration," says Lesaux of the research-to-practice development. Dubbed "Firm Foundations," the curriculum draws from a number of proven literacy techniques and adds constant monitoring, assessment, and intervention.

"It's a combination of everything we know works well," says Lesaux, "but everything happens in a really systematic way." So while many of the literacy activities - storybook reading, work with vocabulary and the alphabet - may be at home in a kindergarten classroom, what's unique to this program is that all students, including those who spoke no English when they entered kindergarten, are held to particular benchmarks.

"It's a very preventive model," says Lesaux. "For years we've been pulling these kids out in grade two, grade three, when they're having difficulties. Instead, the idea was, kindergarteners love to learn, they love to play around their learning, so let's do it in the classroom and target those kids who might have difficulties down the road."

In addition to the Firm Foundations curriculum, which guides the entire class, Lesaux and Siegel applied a more focused intervention to the children (including but not exclusively the ESL students) who demonstrated difficulties. In small groups, students received intensive training in phonological awareness, the understanding of the sound system of a language. Progressing systematically through oral language processing, they would play with how words sound: If they see a picture of a cat, and pictures of a sun, a fish, and a hat, can they identify which rhymes with cat? Do they know that the sounds in "cat" are "k" and "at"? That when you take the "b" sound off "bus," it becomes "us"?

Lack of English proficiency an advantage

The study found that such intensive phonological awareness in kindergarten gave students a solid foundation on which to build reading skills in first grade. But why, by second grade, were some students who spoke no English in kindergarten achieving higher reading skills than their native English-speaking peers?

Lesaux credits what she calls a metalinguistic awareness of the bilingual kids that exists precisely because they are learning English as a second language. "They're much more tuned into language than the other kids," she says. "In many ways, they were doing a lot more work around language than the monolinguals, for whom language is much more unconscious."

While Lesaux, who started teaching at the GSE just this fall, and her colleagues have trained other school districts in Canada on this prevention/intervention model, she doesn't know of any U.S. school districts that have adopted it. Despite its proven success in Vancouver, she's not sure it will catch on without a mandate.
"It's not a quick fix," she cautions. "It was short-term pain for long-term gain." The program owes its success in no small part, she says, to extraordinary district-wide buy-in. Early literacy was a top priority that required extensive teacher training and professional development. "This isn't a program you can just purchase and use," she says.

Yet the model shouldn't demand significant extra resources from budget-strapped school districts. Lesaux and her colleagues worked flexibility into the curriculum, tapping parent volunteers as well as classroom teachers and reading specialists. With this intervention providing such a solid reading foundation in kindergarten, the Vancouver schools were able to shift their reading resources to younger grades rather than invest in additional resources.

"What decreased over time was the number of kids who had to go down to the resource center in the later years," says Lesaux. "It's pay now or pay later."

**Timely and controversial**

With bilingual education in the political crosshairs and states, including Massachusetts, legislating its demise, Lesaux's research has a timely and controversial edge. Yet she insists that rather than advocating for or against bilingual education, her study provides a model for effectively teaching the growing number of ESL students that are a reality for schools.

"It's saying that if you are going to move to an English-only immersion model, then it has to be guided by really systematic instruction with an understanding that this is another risk factor for these kids," she says. Providing enough support, intervening early, and monitoring development and achievement are key to helping ESL students - as well as English speakers with reading difficulties - learn to read.

Lesaux is currently analyzing the fourth-grade data from this continuing study, and then she will turn the rest of the study to the Canada-based researchers while she digs into collaborations with some of her GSE colleagues. She also plies her expertise as a research associate on the U.S. Department of Education-funded National Panel on the Development of Literacy in Language Minority Children and Youth.

While Lesaux is quick to note that this model does not create biliteracy - it only teaches students to read in English, leaving literacy in their native language to instruction outside the schools - it makes a strong statement about the capacity for ESL children, whose lack of English fluency puts them at risk throughout school, to learn to read and achieve.

"It certainly does say that their English language-learner status doesn't have to be a negative thing," she says, "nor does it presuppose poor reading."

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