The California Reading Initiative: A Formula for Failure for Bilingual Students?

DAVID FREEMAN
YVONNE S. FREEMAN

How can I help my limited English speakers? They are all struggling with the phonemic-awareness activities and phonics exercises. Then, when they read, they don’t seem to know what they are saying.

This is a problem that the bilingual teachers we work with often ask us after attending district-mandated inservices on the California Reading Initiative (California Department of Education, 1996a). This document summarizes the State’s position on early reading instruction and serves as a directive to schools. The opening sentence states its purpose:

The California Reading Initiative is a comprehensive strategy to reform reading instruction in the public schools that is based on the research of the past two decades which illuminates the way children learn to read and how we can enhance that process. (California Department of Education, 1996a, p. 1)

The Initiative is backed by legislation that directly ties school funding to practices such as teaching phonemic awareness and systematic, explicit phonics.

In California, the Initiative has already had a direct impact on reading instruction for thousands of children. Like the teachers quoted above, we have serious reservations about how this new approach to teaching reading will work, especially in a state where one fourth of the students are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). Less than 30% of the nearly 1.4 million LEP students in California were receiving primary language instruction in 1997 (California Department of Education, 1997). With the passage of Proposition 227 (The UNZ Initiative), which requires that LEP students be taught English through structured immersion, the vast majority of LEP students will be taught reading entirely through English. For these students, an approach that begins with the development of phonemic awareness in a language they don’t speak might well be a formula for failure.

In this article, we describe the formation of the new Reading Initiative. We critically assess its research base and discuss problems in teaching LEP students to read following the Initiative’s directives. We then present additional research that supports a different approach to reading instruction, one which we feel is consistent with more effective programs for bilingual students.
FORMATION OF THE CALIFORNIA READING INITIATIVE

In response to a general perception that children were not learning to read, California officials took three major steps. First, a task force was assembled. Their report, Every Child a Reader (California Reading Task Force, 1995), begins "There is a crisis in California that demands our immediate attention. National and state reports indicate that a majority of California's children cannot read at basic levels" (p. 1). The report contains a series of recommendations for improving reading instruction. Although the report acknowledges the importance of students' home languages and cultures, it does not recommend that LEP students be instructed in their native language.

A second document, Teaching Reading: A Balanced, Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Reading in Kindergarten Through Grade Three (California Department of Education, 1996b), issued by the State Superintendent, the State Board of Education, and the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, describes in detail how the recommendations from the task force report should be implemented in the early grades. The emphasis is on phonemic awareness, knowledge of letter names and shapes, and the teaching of systematic, explicit phonics. Teaching Reading sets out expectations for each grade and examples of classroom practice.

These documents provide the basis for the California Reading Initiative (California Department of Education, 1996a), "a comprehensive strategy to reform reading instruction in the public schools" (p. 1). The Initiative is backed by legislative bills and budget documents that "require that preservice, inservice, and leadership training focus on the following elements of effective reading instruction" (p. 3). The first four elements listed in the Initiative are phonemic awareness, systematic explicit phonics instruction, sound-symbol relationships, and decoding. Comprehension is not listed, and independent reading of high quality books is the thirteenth and final element of effective reading instruction.

The training called for in the Initiative begins with preservice teachers. Teacher education programs must prepare teachers to teach phonemic awareness; systematic, explicit phonics; and decoding. New teachers will be tested on their competence in implementing these practices. The training also extends to inservice teachers. Staff development must include phonemic awareness, systematic, explicit phonics instruction, sound-symbol relationships, and decoding. For schools to receive designated funds, at least 90% of the teachers must receive this training. In many schools, teachers are monitored by administrators or outside consultants to ensure that they are following the instructional practices consistent with the training. The training also extends to school leaders because the inservice sessions must now include administrators and school board members as well as teachers.

In addition, to meet state Board of Education requirements, instructional materials must now include systematic, explicit phonics and spelling instruction.

The comprehensive approach to implementation contained in the Initiative has ensured that a "new way" of teaching reading is already being put into action in California classrooms. All three documents rely on a research base that supports a view of reading instruction with a heavy emphasis on decoding. Our concern is that this emphasis will prove to be a stumbling block for all students and will be especially problematic for the many students who enter school lacking a knowledge of English phonology. This concern increases every time teachers ask us how they can help their LEP students who are struggling with phonemic awareness activities and phonics exercises.

THE RESEARCH BASE FOR THE CALIFORNIA READING INITIATIVE

State Department documents repeatedly refer to "research-based" practices. A review of the documents, however, reveals that the research base for beginning reading instruction is largely limited to studies of students' ability to use decoding skills to pronounce words. Many of these studies show a positive correlation between tests of phonemic awareness and tests of decoding. However, few of the studies emphasize comprehension.

For example, the research includes work by Stanovich (1986), who reviewed a number of studies and concluded that those students who have more phonemic awareness are most likely to become successful readers. In most cases, though, these studies used the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) as the measure of reading. This test equates reading with recognizing words.

Juels (1994) longitudinal study of children learning to read gives further support to the central role of phonemic awareness and decoding skills for word recognition. In Juels study the children who became poor readers entered first grade with little phonemic awareness. It should be noted, however, that by the end of third grade, even the poor readers approached the ceiling on the phonemic awareness test. This suggests that phonemic awareness may be a result of reading (or being read to) rather than a prerequisite for reading. Determining whether phonemic awareness is a cause of reading or an effect is difficult. (Stanovich 1986), for example, suggests that it may be both a cause and an effect. He uses the term "reciprocal causation" to describe this phenomenon.

Phonemic awareness may be a result of reading (or being read to) rather than a prerequisite for reading.
California is basing its *Reading Initiative* on a model of reading that begins with exercises to help students develop phonemic awareness. However, the research findings on the benefits of teaching phonemic awareness are not clear-cut. One could equally argue for extensive reading to and with children to help them develop phonemic awareness instead of engaging them in exercises to teach phonemic awareness directly. Especially for LEP children, additional reading has been shown to increase proficiency in both oral and written English (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1993).

The approach to reading that California is taking minimizes the role of comprehension. The *Initiative* does not list comprehension as one of the elements of effective reading instruction. Similarly, research by Stanovich, Juel, and others focuses more on decoding and word recognition than on comprehension. Juel (1993) did consider comprehension in her study, and the students who were poor readers in first grade still scored below grade level on a comprehension test at the end of fourth grade. However, the mean score on the comprehension test for those fourth graders who were defined as poor readers was a 3.5 grade equivalent. In other words, these students were only about a half year below the norm for students at their grade level.

Studies not included in the research base suggest that students may learn to decode without developing good comprehension. For example, Korkeamäki and Dreher (1993) studied Finnish students who had received systematic phonics as part of an early decoding program. By sixth grade, only half the students could comprehend their school textbooks. The researchers concluded that “Students need to learn the symbol-sound correspondences to decode unfamiliar words, but they need to have many opportunities to interact with print—to read and write purposefully” (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 1993, p. 481). This study was conducted with native Finnish speakers. Our concern, like that of the teachers quoted at the beginning of this article, is that LEP students are even more likely than native speakers to learn to decode without developing adequate levels of comprehension.

Despite findings such as these, California’s *Reading Initiative* is designed to translate selected research findings directly into instructional practices. The Reading Program Advisory (California Department of Education, 1996), for example, states in its report *Teaching Reading*:

> There is sufficient guidance now available from research about how children best learn to read and about how successful reading programs work to ensure that virtually every child will learn to read well, at least by the end of third grade. (p. 2)

The California documents frequently cite Adams’ (1990) extensive review of research on word recognition. Adams’ work has direct instructional implications. Goodman (1993) summarizes Adams’ argument:

> Oral language is innate but written language is learned . . .
> So written language, unlike oral language, must be taught.

Reading is word recognition. Skillful reading (word recognition) involves relatively complete processing of individual letters. Research shows that young children are not “phonically aware” and can’t easily recognize individual letters and match phonemes with letters. Direct instruction in phonics and letter-by-letter reading is necessary (p. 84).

Although Adams also calls for frequent reading to and with children, California policymakers have relied on her research, along with that of Stanovich, Juel, and a few others, to create a prescriptive teaching sequence that features direct instruction in decoding skills.

**THE PROBLEMS OF USING A WORD-RECOGNITION APPROACH TO TEACHING LEP STUDENTS TO READ**

The teaching sequence outlined in the California reading documents, in our view, poses a number of problems for teaching any student to read. However, in this section, we focus on problems that specifically affect LEP students. The sequence begins with phonemic awareness, the “ability to become aware of and manipulate the discrete sound segments which comprise words” (Honig, 1996, p. 21). Exercises designed to help students develop phonemic awareness are based on the assumption that students’ oral language is already well developed. Since LEP students have not yet gained full control over English phonology, these exercises will be more difficult for them than for native English speakers.

Phonemic awareness is seen as a prerequisite for developing the phonics skills needed for decoding. Honig (1996) states, “phonemic awareness is necessary for decoding; decoding is necessary for word recognition; and word recognition is the key to comprehension in the first grade” (p. 39). However, as Goodman (1993) points out, phonics is “the set of complex relationships between phonology and orthography” (p. 8). Since phonology varies by dialect, phonics rules also vary by dialect. This presents difficulties for LEP students whose dialects may differ from the teacher’s or from those people who create phonemic-awareness activities. The phonics rules that LEP students are taught do not match the rules they would develop naturally in trying to connect their speech sounds with English orthography.

Even if second-language learners do begin to speak English, they may not speak in standard English, and teachers may decide they are not ready to move into extensive reading. Díaz, Moll, and Mehan (1986) observed reading lessons that were given in both Spanish and English to the same bilingual children in third and fourth grades. They found that English reading lessons for these children “focused on mechanical tasks of practicing decoding skills, word sounds, or lexical meanings” (Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986, p. 210). English teachers assumed that students could not read and gave
them decoding tasks. As the researchers point out, “The lessons in English presupposed a lack of both oral and reading competence. This presupposition was reinforced by the children’s pronunciation problems and expository difficulties in English reading contexts” (p. 203). In reading Spanish, though, these same students read well and were able to discuss their reading in both Spanish and English.

On the other hand, some students may learn to pronounce words to sound like English, but they may not attach meaning to the English sound sequences. Yvonne Freeman, in her research in 1996, found this to be the case with a bilingual Spanish/English-speaking ten-year-old girl. When reading aloud, the girl read almost perfectly, making very few miscues. Yvonne told the girl she would be asked to retell the story when she finished reading it aloud. After the reading the girl explained, “I have to read it again to myself. I just read it aloud in school.” Rather than decoding the words, some students, especially second-language learners, may simply be recoding, changing the written language to oral language without achieving comprehension.

Other potential problems with the teaching sequence outlined in the California documents may be less evident, but they may be even more pernicious. For example, the documents call for frequent testing and early intervention, including phonemic-awareness screening and intervention in kindergarten. It is not clear what phonemic-awareness screening would entail for LEP students, but it is likely that students who have not yet fully developed English phonology would receive early intervention. This may result in LEP students being limited in the amount of reading they do, which was the case in English reading for the students Diaz, Moll, and Mehan (1986) studied.

Frequent testing also results in students being placed in reading groups or groups based on leveled books (ones that are written for different levels of reading proficiency). What we have observed is that the LEP students are generally in the lowest groups. The result has been to separate LEP students from native speakers within a class. The LEP students are aware they are in lower groups, and this erodes self-confidence (Valdés, 1996). Parents of LEP students are also aware of the lower placement, and the practice tends to separate parents of students in higher and lower levels.

A SECOND RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING READING

The California Reading Initiative is research-based, and the research findings have been directly translated into classroom practice. As we have suggested, what the documents list as effective teaching practices may serve to limit full literacy development for any student, and these practices pose special problems for LEP students. Research not included in the California documents support an alternative approach and instructional practices that we feel would benefit all students, especially LEP students. In this section, we review this research and, in the following section, we argue that the approach to teaching that is consistent with this research offers greater chances of success for LEP students because of the parallel between features of this approach and characteristics of effective bilingual programs.

Ruddell (1997) identifies two kinds of research excluded from the California documents: literacy-process research and sociolinguistic research. The omission of these two lines of study is troubling because this research seems particularly pertinent for teaching reading to LEP students.

Some students may learn to pronounce words to sound like English, but they may not attach meaning to the English sound sequences.

Literacy-process research attempts to “study children who are not yet conventionally literate and see what they’re doing and then to follow their progress into conventional literacy” (Ruddell, 1997, p. 15). Literacy-process research includes a number of studies of emergent readers and writers (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Freeman & Whitesell, 1985; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Read, 1971; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). These studies analyze students’ literacy development using writing samples and informal observations, as well as formal measures such as miscue analysis (Goodman, 1965).

Sociolinguistic research examines the effects of the social context on literacy development. As Ruddell (1997) comments, “these studies serve the very important function of reminding us of the complexity of what we’re trying to understand and explain” (p. 27). For example, Heath’s (1983) study of differences in literacy practices among three groups in the Carolinas showed that children from homes where parents understood school practice did much better in school reading achievement than children from home communities where conceptions of literacy were very different from those held by teachers. Valdés’ (1996) study of migrant families in the Southwest revealed that children in her study were often misunderstood, mislabeled, and misplaced. Neither the students nor their families understood school expectations.

A third type of research not included in the California documents is work that looks at the effects of extensive reading on literacy development. A number of studies of programs featuring book floods or free voluntary reading have shown impressive gains in reading achievement as the result of students’ engaging in sustained silent reading or simply being read to (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1996a, 1993; McQuillan, 1998).

These three lines of research all provide support for a sociopsycholinguistic model of reading (Goodman, 1996; Smith,
1988; Weaver, 1994). This model is based on the premise that reading develops when teachers read to and with students and when teachers take the social practices of their students’ communities into account in designing instructional practices. In addition, there is an emphasis on the importance of teachers understanding the process of literacy development so they can provide appropriate assistance through carefully chosen strategy lessons. These may include, but not be limited to, lessons that focus on phonics (Mills, O’Keefe, & Stephens, 1992).

We recognize the problems inherent in attempting to apply any research directly to classroom practices, whether it is the research the California Reading Initiative cites or the research we find more compelling. As Ruddell (1997) correctly points out sometimes research cannot be applied directly to classroom practice because sometimes one piece of research, or a whole line of research on one aspect of literacy processes, does not give us a complete enough picture of the process we’re trying to teach. (p. 3)

However, the socio-psycholinguistic model has a wide research base, and practices associated with this model are also consistent with characteristics of effective bilingual programs.

**EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO READING AND EFFECTIVE BILINGUAL PROGRAMS**

Rather than implementing a set of practices for teaching reading for bilingual students that includes phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding, California could adopt an approach informed by research on effective programs for bilingual education. Collier (1995) and Ovando and Collier (1998) have pointed out that bilingual students need to develop language proficiency, cognitive proficiency, and academic proficiency. To help students develop these proficiencies in a positive affective and social context, Collier and Ovando argue that extended instruction in the primary language is essential. English can be a positive addition to a strong native-language base, but only if that base is fully developed. Program comparison research by Cummins (1996), Ramirez (1991), and Lucas (1990) as well as case study research describing approaches to literacy development in bilingual classrooms (Freeman & Nofziger, 1991; Kucer, Silva, & Delgado-Larocco, 1995; Whitmore & Crowel, 1994) all support Collier’s conclusions.

Collier’s studies have shown that when students continue to be instructed in their first language at least through sixth grade, they do much better on tests of reading in English than students who receive all their instruction in English. The California Reading Initiative does not discuss the language of instruction. The Reading Program Advisory (California Department of Education, 1996) does state that any complete and balanced reading program must meet the needs of all students, including English language learners, but no provision is made for primary-language literacy instruction.

Simply providing primary-language literacy instruction is not enough. Freeman and Freeman (1997, 1998) offer extensive discussion and description of effective reading instruction for Spanish-speaking children. Collier (1995) has identified a number of characteristics of effective bilingual programs. They include the following:

1. Integrated schooling, with English speakers and language-minority students learning each others’ languages.
2. Perception among staff, students, and parents that it is a “gifted and talented” program leading to high expectations for student performance.
3. Equal status of the two languages achieved to a large extent, creating self-confidence among language-minority students.
4. Healthy parent involvement among both language-minority and English-speaking parents, for closer home-school cooperation.
5. Continuous support for staff development emphasizing:
   - whole language
   - natural language acquisition through all content areas
   - cooperative learning
   - interactive and discovery learning
   - cognitive complexity for all proficiency levels

There appears to be a clear contrast between the features of effective bilingual programs as outlined by Collier (1995) and the decoding or word-recognition approach to teaching reading found in the California Reading Initiative. Figure 1 summarizes four of these contrasts.

According to Collier (1995), effective bilingual programs emphasize whole language and natural language acquisition, characteristics found in those approaches to teaching reading that are consistent with a socio-psycholinguistic model but lacking in those approaches based on a word-recognition view of reading. Why, then, is California, with its high percentage of LEP students, launching its current Initiative, with its emphasis on decoding and word recognition?

The answer may be found by considering the parallels between the shift from California’s earlier literature-based approach to teaching reading to a word-recognition approach and the replacement of bilingual programs with English-only programs. In the first place, the attacks on literature-based approaches to reading are as difficult to respond to as attacks on bilingual education. In both cases, the attackers misrepresent real facts and practices (Crawford, 1997; Freeman and Freeman, 1998; Krashen, 1998, 1996; McQuillan, 1998). It’s as absurd to say that almost every teacher in California only uses children’s literature to teach reading as it is to say that every bilingual student is in a bilingual class with a bilingual teacher. It’s as ridiculous to claim that teachers who use literature never teach skills or phonics as it is to say that students
Collier’s Key Characteristics

Integrated schooling, with English speakers and language-minority students learning each others’ languages.

Perception among staff, students, and parents that it is a “gifted and talented” program leading to high expectations for student performance.

Equal status of the two languages achieved to a large extent, creating self-confidence among language minority students.

Healthy parent involvement among both language minority and English-speaking parents, for closer home-school cooperation.

Continuous support for staff development emphasizing:
- whole language
- natural language acquisition through all content areas
- cooperative learning
- interactive and discovery learning
- cognitive complexity for all proficiency levels

Figure 1. Characteristics of effective bilingual programs and word recognition reading programs.

Segregated schooling based on early testing and leveling of students. Separation of students into reading groups.

Perception among staff, students, and parents that it is a remedial program. Intervention to remediate assumed deficits predominate in instruction.

Unequal status resulting from frequent testing and grouping by levels. This unequal status reduces or destroys student self-confidence.

The leveling of students tends to divide parents as well by creating hierarchies of status.

Staff training by outside experts who emphasize strictly following the guides in the adopted materials. Follow-up is primarily designed to monitor teachers’ proper use of the materials. The materials encourage rote learning and following strict sequences of prescribed activities.

in bilingual classes never hear a word of English. It’s hard to respond rationally to attacks like these that are based on misrepresentations.

Further, the justification for using word-recognition programs parallels the rationale that has been advanced for using English-only programs, such as structured immersion or ESL pull-out. Most evaluations of word-recognition reading programs are short-term and focus on students’ ability to pronounce words or nonsense syllables. How will students do later in academic content areas that require high levels of literacy? That is something which is not clear. Similarly, students in pull-out ESL, taught traditionally, may appear to do better than students in bilingual programs if we only look at test scores from early grades. However, Collier (1995) and Ramirez (1991) have shown that if we follow bilingual students over time, students in programs with long-term primary-language support score higher on standardized tests given in English. Yet these and other research studies favoring long-term bilingual education are often discredited, ignored, or misrepresented in a process Cummins (1996) has called a deliberate distribution of “disinformation.”

Finally, reading instruction that focuses on developing phonemic awareness, phonics knowledge, and word-recognition skills as a prerequisite to meaningful reading is similar to the English-only approach some bilingual students receive. If students must “learn to read” before they “read to learn,” they are bound to fail behind the students who engage in meaningful reading from the beginning. In the same way, students who do not receive primary-language instruction must learn English before they can use English to learn, and this delays their academic development (Cummins, 1996; Krashen, 1996).

The evidence from research in bilingual education would suggest that a reading program based on socio-psycholinguistic theory would be more effective for second-language students than would the current proposals. Proposition 227 succeeded in dismantling most bilingual programs in California. Advocates of the Unz initiative claimed that bilingual education had failed. We would assert that it was never fully implemented. Similarly, literature-based approaches to teaching reading are being replaced because of claims that this approach to teaching reading had failed as evidenced by California students’ low scores on standardized tests of reading. Will the new Initiative solve California students’ reading problems? Our analysis suggests that it will not. As the Initiative is more fully implemented, we fear that there will be even more teachers like those we quoted at the beginning of this article asking, “How can I help my limited English speakers? They are all struggling with the phonemic-awareness activities and phonics exercises. When they read, they don’t seem to know what they are saying.”
CONCLUSION

A reading revolution seems to be sweeping California. Never have we seen so much money put into staff inservices. Never have we talked to so many teachers who are being told exactly how they should teach reading and what materials to use. Never have we seen so much emphasis placed on testing students and putting them into leveled groups. This word-recognition approach specifically targets poor and minority students, many of whom are also bilingual learners. The claim is that explicit teaching of decoding skills will help these students succeed. However, when we see such a strong contrast between what research shows is good for bilingual learners and the effective features of the new reading Initiative, we fear that bilingual students, in particular, who are caught up in this revolution, may be destined for failure.

References


David Freeman directs the Language Development and TESOL programs at Fresno Pacific University, in Fresno, California. Yvonne Freeman directs the Bilingual Education Program, at Fresno Pacific University, in Fresno, California.

---

**SEARCH FOR NEW EDITOR OF ENGLISH LEADERSHIP QUARTERLY**

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *English Leadership Quarterly*. In April 2001, the term of the present editor, Henry Kiernan, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than November 1, 1999. Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal, and be accompanied by the applicant's vita, and one sample of published writing. If applicable, please send at least one letter of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials which cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the CEL Executive Committee in March 2000 will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in August 2001. The initial appointment is for four years, renewable for three years. Applications should be addressed to Marlo Welshons, *English Leadership Quarterly* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Marlo Welshons, Managing Editor for Journals: mwelshon@ncte.org; (800) 369-6283, extension 3623.