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**Developing Literacy in Second Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth**

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In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) released its influential report assessing the scientific literature on teaching children to read. While reaction to the report has been somewhat controversial, what is clear, particularly for educators and researchers of second language literacy development, is the panel’s explicit exclusion of studies that focused on the literacy development of language-minority students (NICHD, 2000). Given the demographic trend of increasing English language learner (ELL) enrollment in the U.S. and the significant academic achievement gap that exists between ELLs and their native English speaking peers, the need for research addressing literacy development in second-language learners is paramount. As a response, in 2001 the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth was formed with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Comprised of experts in reading, language, bilingualism, research methods, and education, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth was charged to examine and report on the existing research literature on the literacy development of language-minority students.
Developing Literacy in Second Language Learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, the resulting work of the panel’s three year systematic review of the literature, represents a significant contribution to the research community “that indexes thoroughly what we know about literacy learning and instruction for language-minority students” (McCardle, 2006, x). The opening chapter of the report presents relevant background on the panel’s charge, key terminology used in the report, and a summary of the panel’s methodology. This is followed by a cogent overview of the changing demographics of America’s public schools. These introductory chapters set the stage for the panel’s discussion of the identified research topics across five sections: Development of Literacy in Second-Language Learners, Cross-Linguistic Relationships in Second-Language Learners, Sociocultural Contexts and Literacy Development, Educating Language-Minority Students: Instructional Approaches and Professional Development, and Student Assessment. Each section is introduced by a well-constructed synthesis chapter that provides background information and summarizes the research reviewed. In depth reviews of the research studies follow the synthesis chapters. The concluding chapter pulls together cross-cutting themes found in the volume and defines clear directions for future research in the field.

From the outset the report reveals the rigorous methodology adhered to by the panel, from the selection of its members and development of research questions, to the screening and analysis of the research studies. For the most part, studies included focused on language minority students ages 3-18 acquiring literacy in a second language. Methodological standards adopted by the panel required studies to report empirical data and to disaggregate outcome data where language-minority students did not comprise at least 50% of the sample. Additionally, for quasi and experimental studies, a control or comparison group was required, as was random assignment or pretesting “to establish the degree of comparability between groups prior to treatment” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 5). Two appendices to the methodology section add significantly to the strength and transparency of the panel’s work. The first (Appendix 1.C) addresses the specific acceptance criteria for inclusion of studies, and the second meticulously documents the panel’s search procedures for identifying relevant literature for review. In all, the panel conducted seven extensive literature searches. It is worth noting that the contribution of this volume to the language and literacy research community results as much from its adherence to a rigorous and transparent scientific methodology as from its content analysis.
Section 1 of the report focuses on the development of literacy skills with specific emphases on the trajectories and predictors of literacy development. The majority of the studies examined the relationship between second language oral skills and second language literacy skills. The findings suggest that language-minority students have greater success with word-level skills, revealing that even after minimal exposure to second language reading, language-minority students developed word reading skills equivalent to their native English speaking counterparts. The studies that examined text-level skills such as reading comprehension and writing depict a more challenging situation for language-minority students. Perhaps more revealing is the limited amount of developmental research available. For example, the National Reading Panel, which excluded studies that focused on literacy development in language-minority students, reviewed over 200 experimental studies that examined comprehension, while the National Literacy Panel was only able to identify three that focused on comprehension in second language literacy.

In the second section of the volume, the panel presents its findings on cross-linguistic relationships. The studies reviewed here investigated how first and second language literacy are interrelated, drawing predominantly from Lado’s (1964) contrastive analysis hypothesis and Cummins’ (1978) interdependence hypothesis. The panel’s analysis identified a correlation between the first language literacy skills of word reading, vocabulary (cognates), reading strategies, reading comprehension, spelling, and writing and these same skills in a second language. While these findings confirm that language-minority students who are literate in their first language are better prepared for the task of second language literacy development, the panel suggests that a shift in our conceptual framework of transfer would broaden our understanding of the relationship between first and second language literacy. Specifically, the panel emphasizes shifting focus away from the search for direct transfer of knowledge and skills, to a broader understanding of how language-minority students draw from a range of skills and abilities across languages.

Section III examined the influence of sociocultural factors on second language literacy development. Specifically, the panel reviewed studies that investigated six factors: immigration, discourse and interaction, sociocultural characteristics of students and teachers, parents and family influences, district, state, and federal policies, and the role of language status. With a
few exceptions, there was little evidence for the influence of sociocultural factors on literacy development. The panel qualifies this however, citing issues in the research as opposed to ruling out the influence of sociocultural factors. They indicate the majority of studies were descriptive, qualitative studies that failed to directly and empirically address the research questions. Notably, the report acknowledges that many parents of language-minority students demonstrate a desire to support their children’s literacy and academic development, but schools and educators often fail to capitalize on this resource.

Regarding instructional practices, the panel reported effective literacy instruction practices for native-English speakers are effective for language-minority students as well. Essentially, direct instruction of the key components of English literacy, namely phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, is essential for teaching language-minority students to read and write in English. Having said this, the panel cautions that while such instruction is necessary, it also adds that it is not sufficient. In order to be most effective for language-minority students, certain modifications that take into account students’ unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds are necessary. Concerning the use of the native language in instruction, the report concluded that “there is no indication that bilingual instruction impedes academic achievement in either the native language or English” (August & Shanahan, 2006, p. 397). Across the entire review of studies, the report found a moderate positive effect for bilingual instruction. This is the case at both secondary and elementary levels.

Assessment of language-minority students’ literacy and language development raises many questions of reliability and validity. Issues of cultural and linguistic bias, as well as inappropriate norming procedures are all major concerns regarding language-minority student assessment. In its work, the panel found that most assessments of language-minority students’ proficiency were inadequate. Specifically, the panel summarized the need for stronger diagnostic assessments of language-minority students’ reading comprehension. Additionally, the panel recommended on-going assessments that monitor student proficiency over time.

One of the particular strengths of the volume lies in its guidance for future research. In fact, one could argue that one of the major findings resulting from the panel’s work is the conclusion that research on literacy development in language-minority students remains quite limited.
Specifically, the report indicates a significant need for research focusing on the developmental aspects of second language literacy development, with a particular emphasis on secondary students. Additionally, the panel provides sound recommendations regarding research design and methodology. Among these recommendations is a call for longitudinal studies since growth in second language literacy development is likely to be non-linear, and many research questions would be best addressed by documenting response to instruction over time. Also, the panel recommends researchers begin to recognize the heterogeneity of language-minority students as a group, citing a need to further explicate instructional contexts and procedures.

Effectively synthesizing a quarter of a century of second language literacy development research, this impressive volume serves as a benchmark of our scientific knowledge at this time. Simultaneously, the report exposes the significant research gaps unaddressed by the field and provides clear suggestions, both methodological and topical in nature, for enhanced future research. It should be expected that this seminal work will become a desktop reference for scholars and researchers interested in the literacy development of language minority students. With any luck, the report will come to be recognized as “Volume I” in a continuing series of such influential works.