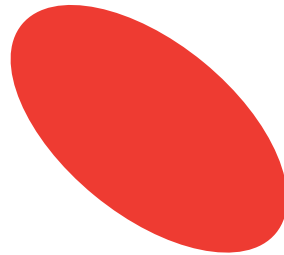


Newcomers

Language and Literacy for the 2020s Generation

BY MARGARITA CALDERÓN, PH.D.



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These past two years have turned our schooling traditions sideways. Some traditional methods are ready to go back to their original upright position, others need straightening out, and many more should be dropped immediately. When it comes to addressing Newcomer students with sincerity, authentic care, and current informed research and practices, one must first consider that many existing trends, myths, and superficial methods must be dropped. One of those is how we have taught language and literacy for many years.

This country was built by Newcomers. During its history, waves of literate and nonliterate immigrants have appeared along with anti-immigrant politics. These politics have affected the quality of instruction for those who needed more assistance. Albeit, immigrants continue to come, despite the hurdles, misunderstanding, bias, and the fear accorded to them by former Newcomers or whose ancestors were Newcomers.

The Newcomers generation of the 2020s continues to come with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds but we can now offer better instruction based on empirical studies. While

harmful beliefs will be slow to change, the schools are now being held more accountable for the academic growth and social-emotional well-being of new arrivals. The combination of research-based instruction and school accountability is prompting whole-school approaches for enacting success for Newcomers and all English learners.

Who Are the Newcomers Now?

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Newcomer students, or as they are now called, Recently Arrived English Learners (RAELs), are also known as asylum seekers, immigrants, refugees, or migrant children who have been in the United States for less than one or two years. Some RAELs come highly educated and need only vocabulary/discourse and some basic reading instruction in English to catch up to grade level. Others are Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE), or in some states are called Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE), who come into Grades 4 to 12 and have only two years or less of education in their native countries. Many have gone through traumatic experiences complicating their readiness to learn.

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—Margarita Calderón, Author and Education Consultant

Currently, we see Newcomers arriving from Afghanistan, Haiti, Central America, Africa, Asia, and less and less from Mexico. However, in our studies we find that the SIFE category might include:

- *Newcomers with two or more years of education interrupted in their native country*
- *Newcomers who attended school in the United States, returned to their native country, and then returned to the United States*
- *Newcomers who attended Kindergarten in English, switched to Grades 1 and 2 in their first language, and then jumped into English in Grade 3*
- *Newcomers who attended U.S. schools since Kindergarten but have language and literacy gaps due to ineffective instruction*
- *Newcomers who attended school in one location for a few months, moved to another location for a few months, and perhaps had some out-of-school weeks in between (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2011)*

Shifts in School Efforts and Approaches

We can't go back to where we were before March 2020. The COVID hiatus helped schools take a closer look at Multilingual learners, English learners, and Newcomers in particular because they were there on Zoom/Teams, or they were among the missing who needed to be found. Teachers learned to reach out to immigrant families and families learned to trust caring educators. Schools started feeling more accountable due to ESSA requirements. Thus, all these positive moves should be continued and enhanced.

ESSA's requirements support the enhancement of the positive trends. The piece of legislation insists that:

“Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires attention to — and action on — equity. States and districts must ensure that low-income students and students of color are not taught at disproportionate rates by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers, and must measure and report on progress toward eliminating inequities.”

“The purpose of this title [ESSA] is to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps.”
<https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf> pg. 14

“An equity-focused school system — one that sets high expectations for all students, provides resources necessary for meeting those expectations, measures and reports progress toward them, and ensures action when any school — or any group of students — falls off track.”
<https://search.usa.gov/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&affiliate=ed.gov&query=ESSA>



Another bit of good news is that these mandates can be supported by the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to provide mental health services and supports for Multilingual students and their teachers, staff, and families as stated in the U.S. Department of Education brief:

1. *Address the academic impact of lost instructional time through the implementation of evidence-based interventions.*
2. *Ensure that the interventions implemented respond to students' social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs.*
3. *Address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, migratory students, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care (U.S.D.O.E., 2021 p.4).*

Newcomers' Challenges

Newcomers are among the students hardest hit in the pandemic as they face challenges with language, technology, mystifying core content, and social-emotional challenges. Their parents' challenges are their own language barriers and financial strains on the family, which made it difficult to help their children with online learning and now hybrid learning. Nevertheless, the language, literacy, and core content learning must accelerate to help Newcomers experience the type of growth expected by ESSA and by educators and their parents.

Newcomers Face Not Only Language but Mainly Literacy and Content Knowledge Challenges

- 4.1. *English language skills*
 - a. *Survival language*
 - b. *Differences between social and academic English*
 - c. *Technology language*
 - d. *The language to express social emotional conflicts and new cultural norms:*
 - *Being misunderstood*
 - *Fear of not fitting in with peers*
 - *Social emotional skills/competencies (e.g., politeness, cooperative learning)*
 - *Feeling ill*
 - *What they perceive as lax discipline*
- 5.2. *Reading skills*
 - a. *Gaps in subject-specific vocabulary and information processing words*
 - b. *None or limited foundational reading skills*
 - c. *Background knowledge of subject/academic content*
 - d. *Confusion with the variety of reading approaches and routines in each classroom*
- 6.3. *Writing skills*
 - a. *None or little experience in academic writing*
 - b. *Not enough knowledge of vocabulary and basic writing conventions*
 - c. *Differences between our way of writing versus theirs*

Reading Is the Key to All Learning

Early reading failure or success is contingent on how the foundations of reading instruction are taught to Newcomers. Word recognition—letters and sounds, phonemic awareness, and knowing how to use letters and sounds to read words—must be accompanied by word meaning. Without vocabulary instruction, phonics is just noise for them to repeat.

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SIFE students who come in the upper elementary grades or middle or high school probably missed out on understanding the alphabetic principle. Yet most educators are reluctant to or do not know how to teach basic reading skills to older SIFE in the core content areas (Calderón, 2007a, 2007b).

Fundamental reading is phonological awareness, phonics, oral language fluency, vocabulary, orthographic knowledge, and reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2001; National Early Literacy Panel, 2001; National Panel for Language Minority Children and Youth, 2008). These are sometimes known as phonemic awareness, decoding, spelling, reading fluency, language of text development, and oral and written discourse and reading comprehension.

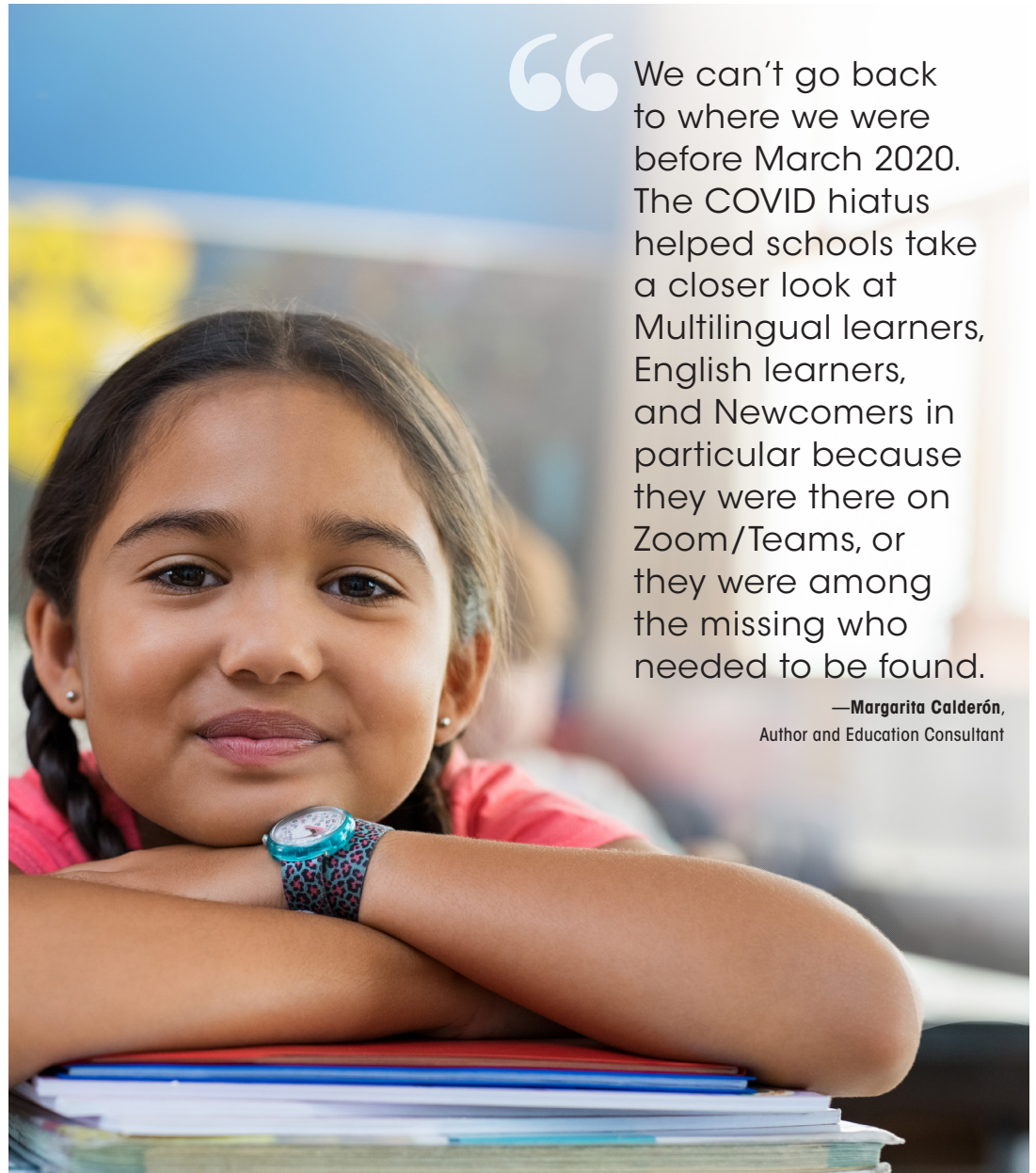
Due to the late introduction of phonics for most ELs, depth of reading comprehension strategies must be brought in as soon as possible. This means that the books selected for RAELs must meet certain criteria.

Criteria for Selecting Reading Programs for Newcomers

- *Have sufficient depth for using comprehension strategies*
- *Use English sentence structures that are simple enough to decode*
- *Use expository texts such as science that enable students to learn concepts as they read for a purpose**
- *Use expository texts that deal with social studies for students to learn about U.S. history, legislature, geography, and current events***
- *Read English literature, short stories, and poetry to show the cadence and richness of the language; ideal for choral reading*

*Science, social studies, and math share about 40,000 cognates (words that sound almost the same, are spelled almost the same, and have the same meaning) between English and Spanish, and other Latin-derived languages.

**These core subjects also have systematic vocabulary while English language arts trade books, novels, and short stories do not share as many cognates since English for ELA uses mostly Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. Therefore, content texts are easier for teaching reading and information processing words, also known as Tier 2 vocabulary. Tier 2 words/phrases are those found in sentences that explain the subject-specific concepts, also known as Tier 3 words.



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Important Points to Remember About RAEI Reading

- *Reading comprehension is the product of word recognition and language comprehension.*
- *RAELs must speak, read, and write from day 1 with the right support.*
- *Subject matter knowledge comes from vocabulary, sentence comprehension, text features, and text structures.*
- *There must be a balance between foundational reading skills and reading comprehension skills. Phonics alone does not work. Reading comprehension without word recognition and meaning does not work.*
- *The purpose of reading is to understand, enjoy, and learn.*
- *Reading failure is unnecessary; for 20 years we have known from scientific panels what works.*
- *For 15 years we have known from scientific panels and empirical studies what works with RAEI (August et al. 2006, Calderón, 2007a, Calderón, 2007b; Slavin et al., 2009; August, Carlo & Calderón, 2011; National Academies of Science, 2017; Calderón & Montenegro, 2021).*

How Can We Address Individual Literacy Omissions?

Given the complexity of RAEI's diverse backgrounds, teachers need to plan instruction much more carefully than before. It is no longer just the job of the ESL or reading specialist to teach reading to RAEI. Due to the large number of RAEI arriving in every school, the ESL/ELD, reading and core content teachers need to collaborate to provide a comprehensive model where RAEI become fluent readers, speakers, spellers, and writers. RAEI in middle and high school are a diverse group, and their distinct abilities and needs require linguistic, academic, and socio-emotional support from well-prepared content and ESL/ELD teachers. Despite a broad range of student learning experiences, schools must support RAEI to be college and career ready along with all Multilingual learners.

Reading instruction is not just for ESL/ELD and ELA anymore— all teachers are reading teachers, even in high schools.

Schoolwide commitment to RAEI is where every teacher is being supported and appreciated by the administration because the task of providing quality instruction to RAEI is not easy. Here are some evidence-based practices for individual needs. These can be a point of departure for studying how each applies in their subject areas. A comprehensive year-long professional development program can facilitate this learning and curriculum/lesson integration.



INTEGRATING LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CONTENT

Language and Literacy Needs of RAEs	Instruction to Provide RAEs for Reading in All Subjects
Many have weak or no oral English skills; might speak an indigenous language. Refugee children might have had traumatic experiences and are now afraid to talk.	There is no need for a “silent period.” As soon as they arrive, they need SEL, a safe place with a buddy for hourly opportunities for oral language practice with small-group or partner activities, aided with vocabulary and frames on table tents and teachers preteaching key words they can practice with their buddies.
Many sound almost fluent when reading aloud but do not understand what they read.	Plan on providing comprehensive instruction on alphabet, phonemic and phonological awareness, vocabulary for all phonics, read-aloud fluency, and reading comprehension strategies (not just phonics without vocabulary and comprehension).
Some have had no opportunity for phonemic awareness or learning the alphabet or decoding skills in their primary language or in English.	Explicit and systematic phonemic awareness and phonics instruction that includes decoding practice and word learning should be taught within science and social studies topics, not just in English language arts. Conduct choral reading.
Decoding a word is not sufficient to access meaning.	Decoding skills such as blending, chunking, base word and affixes recognition are practiced through fluency activities, along with meaning of the words in a sentence or paragraph context.
Many may not have background knowledge on a topic, particularly a subject-specific concept (Tier 3 words).	Science and social studies topics that correlate with standards are introduced in each lesson with suggestions for tapping and building background knowledge by using text features and think-aloud strategies.
Many may know one meaning of a word but not multiple meanings (polysemous words), nor more sophisticated words for specificity.	Polysemy, specificity, connectors, and transition words are taught from the text students are about to read. The students practice using these words while reading with a partner and summarizing after each paragraph.
Some may have an everyday vocabulary and syntax, but they do not have not academic depth of word knowledge and complex sentences.	Explicit instruction at all three tiers of vocabulary: Tier 1 (everyday) vocabulary; Tier 2 (information processing; all the words that nest Tier 3 words/phrases) vocabulary; and Tier 3 (subject-specific content vocabulary).
Some may not know how to apply cognate knowledge to understand content.	English/Spanish cognates for understanding and remembering science and social studies concepts are explicitly taught. Math, science, and social studies have over 40,000 cognates between Spanish and English. Show other connections between languages. They are used for translanguaging practice as students become truly bilingual and biliterate.
Many may not have had opportunities for rich discussions in English or in the native language.	The activities for phonics, reading comprehension, and the writing process must all be nested in rich discussions. The more RAEs read, the faster language and content is developed.



INTEGRATING LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CONTENT, CONT.

Language and Literacy Needs of RAELs	Instruction to Provide RAELs for Reading in All Subjects
Some may not have the type of comprehension strategies and skills necessary to understand what they read fluently.	Reading comprehension strategies are explicitly taught before each lesson, even in the core content areas.
Writing may not reflect American English conventions or mechanics.	Students practice writing related to different genres and apply mechanics of correct English usage for each genre. The more students read, the more they become aware of writing conventions, as teachers point them out.
Adolescent RAELs may be disengaged due to lack of age-appropriate, motivating materials designed with realistic language and literacy expectations supported with adequate resources and staff.	Look for books, texts, and programs that provide high-quality, high-interest materials for preadolescent and adolescent learners that take students from where they are and move them into higher levels quickly.

“The most fundamental responsibility of school is teaching students to read.”

—Moats, 2020



INSTRUCTIONAL DO'S AND DON'TS

As you consider the instructional practices listed above, you might also want to keep in mind some instructional DO'S and DON'TS.

- ⊕ *Instead of “filling in the gaps,” address all foundational reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies with the same core content materials.*
- ⊕ *Avoid silent reading if you haven't pretaught vocabulary, text features, text structures, reading comprehension strategies, and peer summaries that are necessary to delve deeply into that text.*
- ⊕ *Don't tell students to use dictionaries or translations; they need to focus on decoding.*
- ⊕ *Don't jump into reading without preteaching vocabulary.*
- ⊕ *Avoid round-robin reading; use partner reading instead, and monitor the pairs.*
- ⊕ *Don't jump into writing if the vocabulary and reading sequence hasn't been the foundation for academic writing assignments.*

However:

- ☺ *Ensure your reading programs for RAELs have activities for all the reading components.*
- ☺ *The sequence for ensuring comprehension is:*
 - *Preteach 5 words/phrases from the text*
 - *Model with a short paragraph how to approach the text*
 - *Students follow with Partner Reading + Summarization (if they are not summarizing, they are not practicing the new words, concepts, and discourse).*
- ☺ *Use Cooperative Learning activities to anchor language, literacy, and content.*
- ☺ *After teaching the sequence, RAELs are ready to start writing sentences, summaries, and/or short compositions because they have learned key words, read about key concepts, discussed with peers, and are now ready to write.*



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IN SUMMARY

Teacher commitment implies making adaptations to the way they have taught before, the way they were taught before, shifts in their former beliefs and mindsets. For this reason, all teachers must have the tools and continuous technical support to provide congruous instruction with the diversity of ELs. Teachers need to learn new ways to integrate language, literacy, and social-emotional learning into all content instruction. Since the learning slide from the effects of COVID-19 has affected most students, not just RAELs, the integration of academic language and more literacy skills in each content area will benefit all students in the school.

Consequently, the role of administrators in a school with small or large number of ELs/multilingual learners is to implement a whole-school comprehensive professional development on RAEL services and academic success. School district administrators can take advantage of this hiatus and critical juncture to rethink their own structures and offer timely support to schools for shifting to more effective ways of addressing obsolete policies along with past discriminatory injustices and watered-down instruction for RAELs, SIFE/SLIFE, and LTELs.

PHOTO CREDITS

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