

Supporting English Learners with literacy and reading

Like all students, **English Learners (ELs)**, sometimes referred to as “**Multi-language learners**” (MLs) or “**Emergent Bilinguals**,” (EBs), need high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction. This must include all of the components of structured literacy aligned with the [science of reading](#). However, students who are English Learners have **unique strengths** and needs that require additional emphasis in some areas.

Literacy Resources for the Families of English Learners:

Colorín Colorado (available in [English](#) and in [Spanish](#)) is a top website for families and teachers of English Learners. Resources include [News about English Learners](#), [Resources for Families](#), [Resources for Teachers](#), [Videos](#), and more. With so much wonderful information out there, here are some articles about supporting English Learners with reading and literacy that may be a great place to start:

- [Helping your child learn to read](#)
- [Family Literacy at Home](#)- video series in English and Spanish
- [Why Reading to Your Kids in Your Home Language Will Help Them Become Better Readers \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Literacy Instruction for ELLs](#) (has sections for each grade span, and on specific components such as comprehension, close-reading, etc.)
- [Reading 101 for English Language Learners](#)
- [8 great reading tips for families](#) (available in 16 languages)



Research on teaching English Learners to read and supporting their literacy growth.

A growing area of literacy research focuses on English Learners' literacy journeys. Here are some key findings:

- It is important to **build students' home-language literacy** (such as through continuing to speak and read in the home language at home, or through bilingual education) and to **value and leverage students' linguistic assets, including their home language**. This is helpful not only for retaining the student's home language, but for strengthening their development in English as well.
- **Building content knowledge and teaching reading in context of content (such as science and social studies)** is essential. This is true for all readers, but may be especially true for English Learners.
- **Explicit vocabulary instruction** for English Learners should include all “tiers” of words including tier 1 (basic words, which native speakers may not need instruction on, such as “orange” and “book”), tier 2 (academic vocabulary found in many contexts, such as “benefit” and “distinguish”), and tier 3 (domain-specific content words, such as “judicial” and “photosynthesis”).
- **Explicit instruction should focus on language and syntax and meaning** (not just decoding and phonics) and students need lots of guided practice with **oral language** development (speaking and listening).
- **Foundational Skills** are still important for English Learners. **Phonemic Awareness** (building flexibility with manipulating the sounds in a given language) may need targeted support due to different languages containing different sounds (“phonemes”). **Phonics** should include instruction on phonics patterns that may be different between students' home language and English, and build on the patterns that transfer between the languages, using a [structured approach](#).

There are **unique challenges** to mastering reading and writing in English – the many different languages that have contributed to English mean that there are more complicated spelling patterns and many “exceptions” to the rules. Additionally, there are many different sounds to master, including a single letter having a different sound depending on the situation. So, it is vital that English learners receive explicit English Language Development instruction and that their [foundational reading skills](#) instruction (phonics, etc.) is attuned to these issues.

Additional Research:

- **Q&A:** “[What research says on teaching English learners to read](#)”
- **Research overview:** [Literacy Research on English Learners: Past, Present and Future](#) Claude Goldenberg and Elsa Cardenas-Hagan (academic/research)
- **Joint Statement:** [Understanding the Difference: The Science of Reading and Implementation for English Learners/Emergent Bilinguals](#)

Dive deeper into GO's literacy library!