Selecting English Language Learners for Reading Recovery

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Reading Recovery is designed for children who are the lowest achievers in the class/age group. What is used is an inclusive definition. Principals have sometimes argued to exclude this or that category of children or to save places for children who might seem to “benefit the most,” but that is not using the full power of the program. It has been one of the surprises of Reading Recovery that all kinds of children with all kinds of difficulties can be included, can learn, and can reach average-band performance for their class in both reading and writing achievement. Exceptions are not made for children of lower intelligence, for second-language children, for children with low language skills, for children with poor motor coordination, for children who seem immature, for children who score poorly on readiness measures, or for children who have...been categorized by someone else as learning disabled. (Clay, 1991, p. 60)

While this explanation is straightforward, questions about the selection of English language learners (ELL) seem to persist. Three of the questions are so pervasive they warrant responses and explanations.

Do children need to reach a certain proficiency level with English before they are eligible for Reading Recovery?

To be eligible for Reading Recovery selection, the students must be the lowest-achieving children, determined by their performance on An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement (Clay, 1993a). In addition, the children’s English proficiency must be “sufficient for them to understand the directions and required tasks of the assessment instrument” (Neal & Kelly, 1999, p. 91).

Is there a test that can identify which children will succeed in Reading Recovery?

“At entry to the program, the rate and level of progress cannot be reliably predicted for any child” (Askew, Fountas, Lyons, Pinnell, & Schmitt, 1998, p. 18). In the Reading Recovery Subgroups Study, conducted in 1991, Bryan Tuck and Marie Clay (cited in Clay, 1993b) studied the records of 420 Reading Recovery students. They found that predictions of the program outcome for students at the beginning or during the program were not sufficiently reliable to be used for determining placement or the length of time a child should be in the program.

Predictions of outcome status for individual children from either high or low entry scores, or even after 10 weeks of instruction are likely to be wrong in a significant number of cases. A full programme of instruction (varying according to individual needs from 12 to 20 weeks) provides at present the best practical estimate of which children will need further individual assistance. (p. 95)

A Reading Recovery program designed specifically for the individual student is the best way to determine what is possible for that learner in terms of literacy development. The notion is to change the obvious prediction about the literacy progress of the lowest-achieving students, based upon their performance at the beginning of first grade. Those predictions are positively changed as a result of Reading Recovery instruction.

Should we hold children with limited English until later, when a teaching slot opens and they have learned more English?

This question relates to the first question about the English proficiency level required before receiving Reading Recovery instruction. The child with limited English proficiency who is one of the lowest achievers in the first-grade classroom is one of the least likely to benefit from classroom teaching. If the child is left without individual Reading Recovery instruction, that child may become...
increasingly confused, and it will be much more difficult to catch up to average peers.

There is only one circumstance under which it is recommended to delay serving the child. “Entry to Reading Recovery may be delayed a few months if a child is unable to understand what he or she is being asked to do when given the tasks of the Observation Survey” (Clay, 2001, p. 279). So long as the child can understand the directions of the Observation Survey and qualifies as the lowest-achieving student, that child should be served from the beginning of first grade.

It is important to remember the fundamental basis of Reading Recovery instruction. The teacher begins to teach the child starting with what the child already knows. The teacher uses that very specific, individual knowledge base to design a program for that child. Marie Clay (2001) explains how this works for ELL students:

In Reading Recovery children’s individual lessons are monitored and changed daily, according to idiosyncratic needs. The ‘English for Speakers of Other Languages’ (ESOL) group perform well in Reading Recovery where they are given 30 minutes every day with a teacher who increases their time for talking and personalises their instruction, while teaching them to read and write. (p. 278)

**How do ELL students with limited English proficiency perform in Reading Recovery?**

These children do quite well with Reading Recovery instruction. The results of several research studies in many different locations demonstrate that these children reach the same levels in the same amount of time as their English-as-a-first-language counterparts (Ashdown & Simic, 2000; Gentile, 1997; Hobsbaum, 1997; Neal & Kelly, 1999; and Smith, 1994). They are able to catch up to their average-achieving classmates while learning English as a language for conversation and instruction. The school will need to continue to provide opportunities for the children to expand their control of English, but a large percentage of them will be able to read and write as well as their English-speaking peers.

Editor’s Note: See related article, What Success Do English Language Learners Have in Reading Recovery? on page 40.

**References**


