

Effective Literacy Instruction for English Learners with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

As the number of English learners with learning disabilities continues to grow in U.S. public schools, educators are tasked with finding effective ways to support both language and literacy development. This article presents an instructional approach designed to meet the unique needs of this student population by combining current research with practical, language-focused teaching strategies. The approach highlights key areas such as academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, explicit spelling instruction, and culturally sustaining practices. It also offers guidance on assessment, progress monitoring, and implementation, with classroom tools and real-world examples to help educators apply these strategies in their everyday teaching.

Context

English learners now make up more than 10% of the student population in U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and an increasing number are also identified with learning disabilities. These students face unique and layered challenges at the intersection of language acquisition and learning difficulties. Yet, too often, their instructional needs go unmet due to gaps in teacher preparation, a lack of linguistically responsive materials, and persistent misconceptions about how language development and disability interact (August et al., 2014; Lesaux et al., 2014).

In response, this article introduces a comprehensive, research-informed instructional approach designed specifically to support literacy development for English learners (ELs) with learning disabilities (LDs). This approach distinguishes between three interrelated but distinct systems of learning: oral language development, which includes vocabulary and syntax acquired through interaction; literacy development, which includes explicit instruction in decoding, word recognition, and spelling; and comprehension, which reflects the integration of language and reading processes once students have access to written text. Maintaining these distinctions ensures that instruction is aligned with the developmental needs of English learners with learning disabilities. This article therefore urges educators to move beyond a “one-size-fits-all” pedagogy to instead create inclusive, language-rich, and culturally affirming classrooms to support the complex needs of students with learning challenges.

Foundational Concepts: Language Development and Learning Disabilities

Oral language development and literacy development represent related but distinct systems that develop through different mechanisms. Oral language develops through meaningful interaction and exposure, while literacy development requires explicit and systematic instruction in skills such as decoding and word recognition. While academic language proficiency requires consistent, scaffolded, and explicit instruction over time, students with LDs may struggle with areas such as phonological processing, working memory, and processing speed, factors that make mastering academic language even more difficult (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). For English learners with learning disabilities, instruction must be designed with an understanding that language development and reading development follow separate but interconnected pathways, rather than a single integrated system.

An additive bilingual approach offers a powerful foundation by building on students' home language skills rather than replacing them. Research shows that cross-linguistic transfer, where knowledge of phonology, syntax, and morphology in one language supports the development of these skills in another, can enhance English literacy outcomes (Petersen & Gillam, 2015). Equally important is the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which not only affirms students' identities but also fosters engagement and motivation by validating their linguistic and cultural experiences (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Academic Vocabulary Development

Academic vocabulary plays a central role in helping students access grade-level texts and engage meaningfully in classroom discussions. For ELs with LDs, acquiring this vocabulary can be particularly challenging due to limited exposure, language gaps, and processing difficulties (Lesaux et al., 2014). As a result, instruction must be intentional, explicit, and embedded across the curriculum.

Effective vocabulary instruction begins before students encounter new terms in context. Pre-teaching words using visuals, real-life examples, and bilingual supports can help bridge understanding. Bilingual word walls, for instance, can display key terms alongside images and definitions in both English and students' home languages, supporting cross-linguistic connections (Colón-Muñiz et al., 2022). Embedding vocabulary instruction into content areas ensures multiple exposures to the same words, increasing the likelihood of retention. Activities like sentence-building games, drawing, and peer discussions also provide opportunities for active, meaningful engagement.

Interactive Strategies

Active engagement is equally essential. Sentence-building games, peer discussions, and drawing activities provide multiple modalities for learning new vocabulary. For example, in a sixth-grade science class, Ms. Ortiz introduces terms like "habitat," "predator," and "adaptation" using bilingual flashcards and visuals. Students then draw representations and compose sentences in both languages, reinforcing meaning while affirming bilingual identities.

Table 1 outlines a variety of strategies for teaching academic vocabulary, including pre-teaching with visuals and using bilingual supports. Each strategy is paired with a brief explanation and classroom example to support implementation.

Table 1

Academic Vocabulary Instructional Strategies for ELs with LDs

Strategy	Example
Pre-teaching Vocabulary: Introducing target words with visuals and context	Using pictures for “habitat,” “predator”
Bilingual Word Walls: Displaying words with definitions in English and L1	Posting vocabulary in both English and Spanish
Embedding Vocabulary Across Subjects: Integrating words in multiple content areas	Using “adaptation” in science and social studies
Interactive Reinforcement: Engaging students in games and sentence construction	Vocabulary charades or sentence-building activities

Syntactic Awareness Instruction

While syntactic knowledge can support comprehension of written text, its primary instructional role is in developing language structure rather than teaching reading acquisition. For English learners with learning disabilities, mastering syntax can be particularly challenging. Limited exposure to academic English, combined with cognitive difficulties such as reduced working memory capacity, can make it difficult for students to process and produce grammatically complex language (Goodrich et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2011, 2013).

Explicit and Scaffolded Instruction

To support syntactic development, instruction must be explicit, visual, and highly scaffolded. One effective approach involves guiding students through both sentence construction and deconstruction. Sentence-combining activities, for instance, help students build more complex sentences from simpler ones, promoting a deeper understanding of grammar and structure (Hall et al., 2017). Visual tools like color-coded sentence strips can make abstract grammatical concepts more concrete by highlighting sentence parts such as subjects, verbs, and modifiers in different colors. Teachers can also model syntactic thinking using think-aloud strategies, helping students grasp how sentences are formed and why structure matters. Sentence frames offer additional support by providing students with partially completed sentences that they can build upon as they gain confidence.

For example, in Mr. Singh’s classroom, these strategies come to life. He uses colored sentence strips to visually distinguish between different sentence parts, such as the subject (green), verb (blue), and modifiers (orange). Students start with a simple sentence like “The dog ran” and expand it into more complex forms, such as “The large brown dog ran quickly through the field.” This kind of structured practice helps students build syntactic knowledge while also working on their expressive language.

Table 2 illustrates a sample color-coded sentence strip used in the classroom. By breaking down sentences into visually distinct parts, students can better understand and manipulate sentence structure, supporting both comprehension and written expression.

Table 2

Color-Coded Sentence Strip Example

Subject (Blue)	Verb (Green)	Object (Yellow)	Modifier (Orange)
The dog	ran	through the field	quickly

Scaffolded Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension reflects the interaction between language comprehension and word recognition processes once students are able to access printed text. For English learners with learning disabilities, challenges in comprehension often emerge when language demands and word-level reading skills are not yet fully developed. Language skills such as vocabulary and syntax support comprehension, while decoding and word recognition are prerequisite skills that allow students to access written text fluently. Comprehension difficulties are compounded by dense texts, abstract concepts, and unfamiliar academic language. For ELs with LDs, these challenges are intensified by cognitive barriers such as limited working memory, reduced processing speed, and gaps in background knowledge. Effective literacy instruction must therefore include deliberate, scaffolded strategies that explicitly teach students how to extract, synthesize, and apply meaning from text.

Once students have developed sufficient word recognition skills, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can support their ability to construct meaning from text. These strategies support meaning-making during reading but do not replace the need for explicit instruction in decoding and word recognition skills. For instance, during a science lesson on ecosystems, a teacher might model a think-aloud to identify the main idea and supporting details, then guide students through the same process with scaffolded prompts. Sentence stems and graphic organizers help ELs articulate comprehension while practicing syntactic structures simultaneously, reinforcing multiple pillars of this instructional approach.

Graphic organizers support comprehension by making relationships among ideas more visible during instruction and discussion. These tools are most effective when used to support understanding of language and content rather than as standalone literacy instruction. Story maps, concept webs, compare-and-contrast charts, and cause-and-effect diagrams are particularly effective for ELs with LDs. For example, in a sixth-grade lesson on early civilizations, students could complete a cause-and-effect chart linking historical events and outcomes, while integrating key vocabulary in English and their home language. Visual supports align with the emphasis on explicit vocabulary instruction, syntactic awareness, and culturally sustaining practices by providing multiple entry points for understanding.

Reciprocal Teaching and Peer Interaction

Reciprocal teaching can be used as a scaffolded discussion strategy to support comprehension of text once students have access to word-level reading, while also strengthening oral language development through structured academic dialogue. Students take turns leading discussions to summarize, clarify, question, and predict text content. Teachers scaffold participation using sentence frames, visual prompts, and bilingual supports. For instance, a sentence frame such as “The main idea of this paragraph is — because —” helps students express comprehension in grammatically accurate forms while reinforcing academic vocabulary. Peer interaction also encourages collaboration, confidence, and authentic language use, aligning with culturally sustaining principles by validating diverse perspectives.

Integration of Background Knowledge and Culturally Relevant Content

Connecting texts to students’ prior knowledge and cultural experiences supports comprehension and motivation. ELs with LDs often bring rich linguistic and experiential knowledge in their home languages, which can scaffold understanding of academic content. Teachers can pre-teach key concepts in students’ home languages, select texts reflecting students’ lived experiences, or engage students in discussions linking content to family and community knowledge. For example, when reading a story about migration, students may draw on their personal or familial experiences to make inferences, identify main ideas, and connect vocabulary to meaningful contexts. This reinforces multiple pillars of this approach, including culturally sustaining pedagogy and academic vocabulary development.

Cumulative Practice and Feedback

Comprehension skills require repeated, cumulative practice with ongoing feedback. Teachers should design activities that gradually increase in complexity, allowing students to practice summarizing paragraphs, sections, and entire texts. Feedback should be targeted and constructive, focusing on vocabulary use, syntactic accuracy, and idea integration. Digital tools with text-to-speech, highlighting, and interactive questioning can further scaffold comprehension, ensuring reading remains accessible, engaging, and meaningful for ELs with LDs.

Explicit Spelling Instruction

Spelling is more than just memorizing words. Spelling reflects students’ knowledge of orthographic patterns and supports written expression through accurate encoding of words. For English learners with learning disabilities, spelling can be especially challenging due to difficulties with phonological processing, limited vocabulary exposure, and inconsistent orthographic knowledge (Graham & Santangelo, 2014). To address these needs, spelling instruction must be explicit, systematic, and multisensory.

Effective instruction begins with a strong focus on letter-sound relationships and common phonics patterns. As students progress, instruction should also incorporate morphological elements, such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes, to build deeper word knowledge and improve spelling flexibility (Huang et al., 2022). Multisensory techniques are particularly helpful for ELs with LDs, as they activate multiple learning

pathways. For example, students may trace letters while saying the sounds aloud or use magnetic tiles to physically construct words. These activities strengthen students' understanding of how written words are structured through phonological and orthographic patterns. Spelling instruction supports written language development and is distinct from the instruction of decoding skills used in early reading acquisition.

Embedding spelling instruction within reading and writing tasks allows students to apply their skills in meaningful contexts, reinforcing learning and improving transfer. For example, in Ms. Nguyen's resource room, students use color-coded syllable tiles to build words, helping them visualize syllable boundaries and morphemes. They also engage in word-sorting tasks that group words by spelling patterns, which strengthens both orthographic and phonological awareness. These instructional strategies not only help with spelling accuracy but also support broader literacy growth.

Table 3 presents a range of multisensory spelling activities, each designed to reinforce phonics, spelling patterns, and morphological understanding in ways that are both engaging and effective for diverse learners.

Table 3

Multisensory Spelling Activities for ELs with LDs

Activity	Description	Benefit
Letter Tracing	Students trace letters while saying sounds	Reinforces phoneme-grapheme connections
Magnetic Letter Tiles	Students construct words with movable letters	Supports kinesthetic and visual learning
Word Sorting	Students categorize words by spelling patterns	Enhances orthographic awareness and pattern recognition
Morphological Analysis	Students break words into prefixes, roots, and suffixes	Builds decoding skills and vocabulary knowledge

Scaffolded Writing Approaches

Writing provides students with opportunities to apply language knowledge, including vocabulary and syntax, while also developing transcription skills such as spelling and sentence construction. However, writing is a complex task, demanding simultaneous coordination of linguistic knowledge, orthographic awareness, and executive functioning skills. Effective writing instruction must therefore be structured, explicit, and responsive to students' cognitive and linguistic needs, directly building on the pillars of vocabulary, syntax, spelling, and culturally sustaining practices. Structured scaffolding supports ELs with LDs in producing coherent, organized writing. Instruction should guide students through manageable

steps, including prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Prewriting strategies, such as storyboards, graphic organizers, or concept maps, help students plan their ideas visually before generating text. For example, in a fourth-grade social studies unit, students might use a cause-and-effect chart to plan a paragraph explaining the effects of colonization. Visual planning tools reduce cognitive load and support students' application of syntax, vocabulary, and morphological knowledge.

Sentence frames and model texts provide important support for students who struggle with generating complex sentences independently. Frames such as "I believe — because —" guide students in structuring arguments while practicing syntax and academic vocabulary. Multisensory methods support transcription skills in writing by engaging visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities during the encoding of language into print. Writing instruction involves both language formulation skills and transcription skills, which develop through different instructional processes.

Revision instruction is critical for developing higher-level writing skills. Teachers can model editing for clarity, coherence, grammar, and vocabulary use, gradually shifting responsibility to students. Peer review, guided by clear rubrics and sentence stems, reinforces language conventions, metacognition, and collaborative learning. For instance, students might exchange narratives and provide feedback on sentence variety, vocabulary use, and logical connections. Regular revision practices help students refine writing while integrating comprehension, vocabulary, and syntactic skills.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Culturally sustaining pedagogy is rooted in the belief that students' cultural and linguistic identities should not only be acknowledged but actively affirmed and sustained in the classroom (Paris & Alim, 2017). This approach is especially vital for English learners with learning disabilities, who often face marginalization on both linguistic and academic fronts. When students see their identities reflected in their learning environments, they are more likely to feel valued, engaged, and empowered (California Department of Education, 2022).

Implementing culturally sustaining practices involves intentionally selecting texts and materials that reflect students' backgrounds, lived experiences, and languages. It also includes creating space for multilingual expression through activities like writing, storytelling, and presentations. Encouraging students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires helps build self-efficacy and fosters a sense of belonging (Santibañez & Gándara, 2018). Beyond the classroom, strong family engagement through bilingual communication, culturally relevant events, and home-school partnerships reinforces the value of students' home languages and strengthens their support networks.

For example, in Ms. Rivera's bilingual literature unit, students explore folktales from their home cultures alongside English-language versions. They create bilingual, illustrated storybooks that celebrate their heritage; the storybooks are later shared with families during a showcase event. These experiences not only support literacy development but also affirm students' cultural identities and promote meaningful community involvement.

Assessment and Progress Monitoring

Assessing ELs with LDs requires a nuanced approach that accounts for both linguistic diversity and cognitive profiles. Traditional assessment methods often fail to capture the full range of students' abilities, leading to inaccurate conclusions and missed opportunities for support (Petersen & Gillam, 2015). To ensure assessments are fair, informative, and instructionally useful, educators must use a variety of tools and strategies tailored to students' unique needs.

Dynamic assessment offers one such avenue by focusing on students' capacity to learn when provided with scaffolding, rather than relying solely on static test scores. This method reveals how students respond to feedback and instruction, offering insight into their learning potential (DeLuca et al., 2017). Curriculum-based measures (CBMs) provide regular data on academic progress and can be adapted through linguistic supports such as simplified directions, visual aids, or extended time. Qualitative data, including observational notes, language samples, and student self-reflections, add valuable context to inform instruction and track growth over time.

For example, in Ms. Chavez's classroom, assessment is integrated into instruction. She uses adapted reading passages designed to assess word recognition as, for English learners, fluency measures should be interpreted as indicators of word recognition efficiency rather than general language proficiency. In addition, she holds brief one-on-one conferences where students explain their strategies and reflect on their learning. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data allows her to tailor small-group instruction based on students' evolving needs.

Table 4 summarizes assessment tools and strategies appropriate for ELs with LDs, along with recommended accommodations that improve accessibility, accuracy, and instructional relevance.

Table 4

Assessment Tools and Accommodations for ELs with LDs

Assessment	Accommodations
Dynamic Assessment: Measures learning potential through mediated tasks	Scaffolding and prompting during tasks
Curriculum-Based Measures: Frequent monitoring of academic skills	Simplified instructions and extra time
Language Samples: Analysis of spontaneous oral or written language	Collect samples in both English and L1
Observational Notes: Teacher-recorded observations of student behavior	Use checklists and anecdotal records

Classroom Implementation and Instructional Tools

Putting this approach into practice requires thoughtful planning, collaboration, and the use of accessible tools that address the diverse needs of English learners with learning disabilities. One key component is strong collaboration between general and special education teachers, often through co-teaching models that allow for differentiated instruction and the sharing of expertise. Structured classroom routines and learning centers provide consistency and create a supportive learning environment where students know what to expect and how to engage. A range of instructional tools can be used to support literacy development in meaningful, student-centered ways. Interactive bilingual word walls and anchor charts serve as ongoing references to reinforce language and content. Personal dictionaries encourage independence, while sentence stems help students construct more complex written responses. Reading guides and graphic organizers support comprehension by breaking down tasks and promoting strategy use.

In Ms. Delgado's fourth-grade classroom, co-teaching is paired with instructional centers that are organized to target language development and literacy skills separately, including vocabulary development activities, syntax-focused tasks, and structured writing practice. This separation ensures that language development activities are not conflated with foundational literacy instruction, such as decoding and spelling. Students rotate through the centers, receiving targeted support based on their individual needs. This structure not only allows for differentiated instruction but also keeps students engaged and actively involved in their learning.

Building Teacher Capacity and Professional Collaboration

Successful literacy instruction for English learners with learning disabilities depends not only on research-based approaches but also on the knowledge, skills, and collaboration of educators. Teachers often face significant challenges in addressing the intersecting needs of ELs with LDs, including gaps in preservice preparation, limited experience with linguistically responsive strategies, and uncertainty about adapting instruction for diverse learners (August et al., 2014). Building teacher capacity through professional learning and collaborative practices is therefore essential to ensure the pillars of effective instruction are consistently implemented.

Targeted Professional Development

Professional development for teachers should integrate evidence-based strategies for supporting both language development and learning disabilities. Workshops can focus on explicit instruction in academic vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and multisensory spelling, while also modeling culturally sustaining practices. Hands-on training using real classroom materials, including bilingual word walls, sentence frames, and graphic organizers, allows teachers to practice strategies in context. Ongoing coaching and mentoring reinforce these skills, helping teachers adapt approaches to meet the specific needs of their students. Collaboration between general education, special education, and bilingual specialists is critical. Co-teaching models, professional learning communities, and joint lesson planning create opportunities

for shared expertise and collective problem-solving. In these models, teachers jointly analyze student data, design tiered instructional supports, and implement interventions aligned with the approach. Collaboration ensures that instructional practices are consistent, responsive, and informed by multiple perspectives, ultimately benefiting students' learning experiences.

Data-Informed Collaboration

Effective collaboration is strengthened by shared use of assessment data. Educators can collectively examine curriculum-based measures, dynamic assessment results, and observational data to identify patterns in student performance and adjust instruction accordingly. For example, teams might notice that several ELs with LDs are struggling with sentence complexity. Together, they can plan small-group syntax instruction, scaffolded writing exercises, and targeted vocabulary reinforcement across subjects. For example, in Ms. Torres's fourth-grade classroom, co-teaching occurs between the general education teacher and a special education teacher. Weekly planning meetings allow them to review student progress, refine interventions, and coordinate the use of bilingual resources. Professional development sessions introduce new strategies for syntactic instruction and explicit spelling, which teachers practice and later adapt to their students' learning profiles. This collaborative model ensures that all students receive consistent, evidence-based support while fostering teacher confidence and expertise.

Conclusion

English learners with learning disabilities thrive in classrooms that are structured, language-rich, and culturally responsive. The instructional approach presented in this article integrates current research and culturally sustaining pedagogy into essential pillars that guide educators in delivering equitable, effective literacy instruction. Supporting ELs with LDs is a collective responsibility. It requires all educators, regardless of role, to maintain high expectations, build inclusive learning environments, and implement practices that affirm students' identities and experiences. By applying the strategies outlined in this article, schools can create learning environments where all students have the opportunity to grow, succeed, and see themselves reflected in their education. Through intentional, collaborative efforts, we can ensure that literacy development for ELs with LDs is not only achievable but empowering, laying the groundwork for academic achievement and lifelong learning.

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