



Read Naturally[®]
Live—Español

Rationale
& Research

This paper discusses why **Read Naturally® Live—Español** was developed and summarizes research findings relevant to the Read Naturally Live programs and the literacy needs of multilingual learners.

Why Read Naturally Live—Español?

While there has been a print version of the Read Naturally Strategy intervention program available in Spanish for many years (Read Naturally® Master’s Edition Spanish series), several underlying factors urge the development of an updated, web-based Spanish-language fluency program. These factors include:

- An urgent need to improve the educational approaches and outcomes for language minority students
- Growing advocacy and policy demands for implementation of research-based best practices for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), which includes providing instruction and assessment in a learner’s first language
- An unmet need for a research-based Spanish-language reading intervention to support development of Spanish for diverse learners within varied educational programs and settings

Educational Needs of English Learners

This section briefly summarizes the number of English learners in the U.S., score gaps between students with and without English learner (EL) status, and the diverse profiles and unique needs of English learners.

Demographics and Trends

Over five million students attending U.S. public schools are *English learners*, students whose home language is not English and who have qualified for services based upon performance on an English language proficiency (ELP) assessment. Trends in National Center for Educational Statistics data (NCES, 2019c) show a steady increase in the number of English learners from 9.7 to 10.2 percent of the overall student population from 2008 to 2017. Among English learners, 75 percent identify Spanish as their home language. About 14 percent of English learners are also identified as students with disabilities and are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Persistent Score Gaps

The most recent U.S. outcomes on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019) demonstrate a significant score gap between students identified as English learners and those who are not. These gaps have persisted over time at all grade levels and are seen across content areas. The most recent NAEP scores and score gaps by EL status for the reading and mathematics assessments are shown in the following tables.

2019 NAEP Reading Average Scores and Score Gaps by English Learner (EL) Status

Grade Level	EL Avg. Score	Not EL Avg. Score	Score Gap
4	191	224	13
8	221	266	45
12	235	288	53

2019 NAEP Mathematics Average Scores and Score Gaps by English Learner (EL) Status

Grade Level	EL Avg. Score	Not EL Avg. Score	Score Gap
4	220	243	23
8	243	285	42
12	111	152	41

These NAEP results demonstrate that English learners score significantly lower than students whose first language is English. This, of course, is not entirely unexpected. Limited English proficiency may adversely impact a student’s ability to learn from English-language instruction, participate in collaborative experiences with peers, and demonstrate their knowledge and skills within content areas. For this reason, advocacy has led to policy changes encouraging or requiring educational systems to evaluate and/or instruct students in their home languages, when practicable.

Diverse Learner Profiles and Educational Programs

Students identified as English learners are highly diverse with widely varying backgrounds and linguistic profiles, for example:

- Learners who are brand new to the country
- Second-generation immigrants born in the U.S. and with significant exposure to English
- Students adopted internationally into homes with native English speakers
- Students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE; itself a diverse category of learners), such as children of migrant workers with high mobility and disrupted schooling or immigrants formerly living in refugee camps

For students with English learner status, educational systems seek curricular materials capable of differentiation through comprehensive, customizable supports that utilize evidence-based practices. Educational technologies like Read Live afford increased levels of multi-modal support for students and efficient management of instruction, assessment, and materials for educators.

Educational Needs of Spanish Learners

This section briefly describes the number of Spanish language learners in the U.S. and abroad, policy shifts promoting increases in Spanish language instruction in U.S. schools, and global needs for quality reading intervention in Spanish.

Demographics and Trends

According to a recent report on the Spanish language by the Cervantes Institute (Fernández Vítors, 2017), The United States has 43 million native Spanish speakers and another 15 million people with varying degrees of limited competence with Spanish. Only Mexico has more second-language Spanish learners than the United States. The report projects that by 2050 the U.S. will have the largest Spanish-speaking population in the world.

In addition to increases in the number of Spanish speakers in the U.S., there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students of Hispanic heritage. The percentage of Hispanic students enrolled in U.S. public schools has doubled in the last 25 years from 13.5% in 1995 to over 27% in 2020 (NCES, 2019a). More than half of students enrolled in New Mexico (61.7%) California (54.3%), and Texas (52.4%) are Hispanic, while another 4 states have percentage enrollment distributions over 30% (Ariz., 45.5; Nev., 42.4; Colo., 31.7; Fla., 31.1) (NCES, 2019b).

Changing Policies and Programming

In recent years, there has been a shift away from decades spent promoting monolingualism and English-only instruction. Educators and policy makers have begun to acknowledge and embrace the benefits of multilingualism to both individuals and the national economy in an increasingly global community. Student advocates have pressed for a move away from a deficit-based stance (English proficiency) toward a strengths-based stance (general language, literacy, and content skills) for evaluating students' progress and argue that English-only assessments drive educational inequity and opportunity gaps. Federal data for the most recently available school year (2017-18) reveals that 68% of students who are Limited English Proficient graduated in four years compared to an overall graduation rate of 85% (NCES, 2019d). As well, longitudinal research (as described in the research section of this paper) has identified significant benefits from long-term instruction in students' home languages.

Increasingly, U.S. school districts offer specialized schools or programs within schools that provide language immersion or dual language instruction in both English and a selected second language. Given the changing U.S. demographics and the geographic proximity of Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas, programs in Spanish are common. These programs attract English learners from native Spanish-speaking homes, Hispanic learners seeking instruction in the language of their heritage, and native English speakers learning Spanish as a second language.

While data has not traditionally been collected in a systematic way, the American Councils for International Education (2017) published a joint report of a comprehensive survey study, collaboratively designed and conducted by seven cooperating organizations, intended to determine the foreign/world language enrollment across the formal K-16 educational system of the U.S. The study finds that approximately 20% of K-12 students are enrolled in study of a language other than English. Among these 10.6 million students, the report estimates 7.3 million are taking courses in Spanish, mostly in one of the 8,177 high school Spanish language programs. Spanish is the most widely taught language in high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. This data identifies significant opportunities for the benefit of a Spanish language intervention outside of the context of those working to develop English language proficiency.

The Master's Edition Spanish series was specifically designed to support acquisition of English reading proficiency. It offers direct English translations of stories in the Sequenced series as a support for native Spanish speakers using the program. While these translations are highly supportive, offering many benefits (activating background knowledge, developing English vocabulary, aiding in story comprehension), the word-for-word translations do not represent the natural speech nor writing conventions of Spanish. For this reason, many educators have expressed the need for newly developed translations of stories as seen in Read Naturally Live—Español to support Spanish language development.

International Needs

Finally, there are approximately 500 million Spanish speakers worldwide. An updated Spanish program with natural translations allows Spanish language development of native speakers needing reading intervention in single and dual language settings. As with users of Read Naturally Live, these students and educators stand to gain from the many benefits afforded by the web-based program within Read Live. Students in dual language settings may greatly benefit from the ability to develop proficiency in both Spanish and English within a single platform.

Educational Needs of Local Education Agencies

New policies and community demand for language programs have created a variety of needs within local school districts. This section summarizes these factors.

High-stakes Assessment

Passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 marked an increased focus on the learning of language minority students. This latest authorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires all English learners to take federally mandated state accountability tests and requires states to “make every effort” to provide state assessments in languages other than English when prevalent in a significant portion of the student population. These high-stakes tests are used to evaluate educational systems and to target resources for student support and school improvement. For this reason, districts seek practices and supports to increase the likelihood scores reflect language minority students’ knowledge and abilities.

A policy brief from the Migration Policy Institute (Sugarman & Villegas, 2020) examined state’s compliance with these mandates. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia identify in their state ESSA plans that Spanish is present to a significant extent. Some states have cited state laws or offered other arguments for not complying with the policy (Hanna, 2017). However, the policy brief found that a majority offer at least one state assessment in Spanish:

As of Spring 2020, 31 states plus the District of Columbia offer native language assessments, most commonly in math or science but sometimes in reading/language arts and social studies as well. These are typically available in Spanish, which is the most prevalent home language among ELs in most states. (Sugarman & Villegas, p. 1)

Federal law requires that ELs must take English/language arts assessment in English once they have lived in the U.S. for more than two years unless still under EL status, in which case they may take assessments in their native language for up to two additional years. Colorado (grades 3–4), New Mexico (grades 3–8 and high school), and Texas (grades 3–5) currently offer reading/language arts assessment in Spanish (Sugarman & Villegas, 2020). Research summarized later in this paper finds that development of English proficiency is more effective when students are taught in both English and their home language.

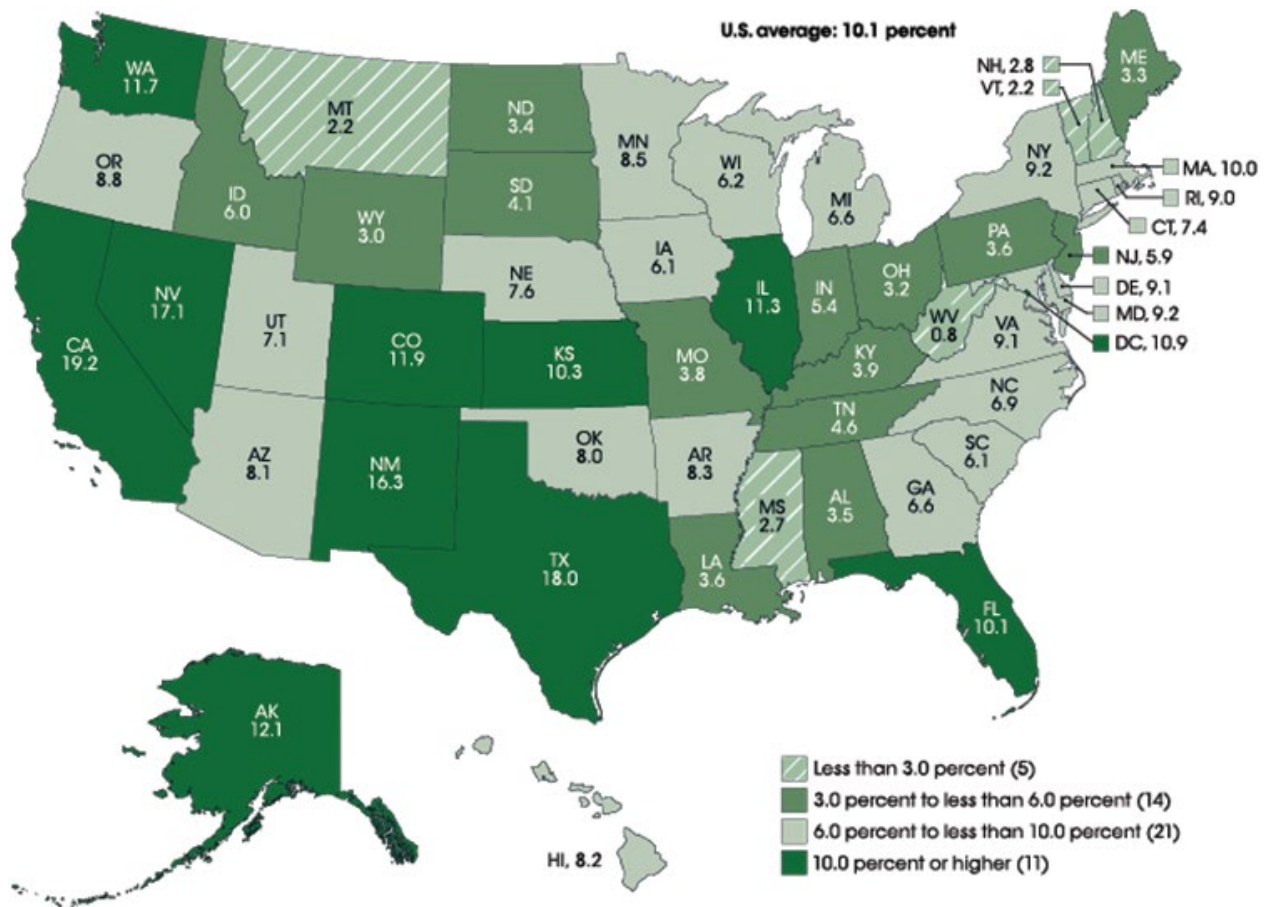
State Mandates

In addition to federal legislation, there are a variety of state statues and initiatives that impact the educational programs for English learners for both better and worse. Some policy changes have only come in response to court decisions finding that the needs of English learners have not been sufficiently met by school systems under previous policies.

For example, California passed the California Multilingual Education Act of 2016 (also known as Proposition 58) that reversed a nearly two-decade restriction on bilingual instruction for ELs (Proposition 227, 1998). The language of the new law now requires schools to provide bilingual instruction if 20 or more parents at a grade level or 30 or more parents at a school request it; it also removes a requirement that parents sign a waiver to enroll students in a bilingual or dual language program.

Nearly 1 in 5 California students are English learners. This represents not only 20% of the state population, but also over 20% of the EL students nationally. The percentage of ELs by state is shown in the table below (NCES, 2020). Texas, New Mexico, and Nevada also have EL enrollments over 15% of the total student body.

Percentage of public school students who were English language learners, by state: Fall 2017



Curriculum and Intervention for Varied Programs and Settings

In addition to the complexity of providing differentiated supports for the needs of such diverse English and Spanish learners as described above, the delivery models within educational systems include a variety of program structures and settings with needs for Spanish intervention materials, for example:

- English as a Second Language (ESL) and transitional bilingual programs
- Dual language programs
- Immersion programs
- Migrant education programs
- Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs
- Mainstreamed general and special education classrooms

It is the intent of Read Naturally Live-Español to support all of the above needs of students and systems.

What Does Research Say About Second Language Development?

Research into the educational needs of English learners and the effectiveness of instructional practices for the development of English proficiency has gained increased interest. This part of the paper summarizes aspects of this research relevant to the diverse educational uses of Read Naturally Live—Español as well as its design and evidence-based practices.

Building on Effective Literacy Instruction

The National Literacy Panel’s report on developing literacy in second language learners (August & Shanahan, 2006, 2010) found in its review of quality studies that language minority learners clearly benefit from instruction in the key components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—just as native speakers do.

The research for phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency have been previously summarized in other Read Naturally white papers and briefs. These documents also describe the evidence-based practices that form the basis of the Read Naturally Strategy and the benefits afforded by the program features of Read Live programs.

- For information on phonemic awareness and phonics, see the [Word Warm-ups Rationale and Research Brief](#).
- For information on fluency, see the [Read Naturally Strategy Rationale and Research Brief](#).
- For information on the science of reading and research on all three reading components specific to students with reading disability, see [Dyslexia and Read Naturally](#) (white paper).

While ELs require and benefit from these same components, the report states that this instruction is necessary but not sufficient. The panel recommends enhanced teaching that includes focus on oral language development, vocabulary in the new language, background knowledge, and attention to new sounds in the new language that are not present in the native language.

Benefits of Bilingualism to Individuals

Research evidence has found that bilingualism affords a variety of general and specific benefits. This section summarizes these findings.

Cognitive Benefits

A meta-analysis of research from 68 studies with quality designs exploring the cognitive differences between monolingual and bilingual children and adults finds that proficiency in more than one language has general positive cognitive effects (0.41) and moderate to strong effects demonstrating:

- Improved attentional control (0.96)
- Enhanced abstract and symbolic representation (0.57)
- Improved metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness (0.33) when both languages have alphabetic writing systems (like Spanish-English) and are acquired early in life

Studies also find moderate positive effects of bilingualism on working memory (0.48); however, these effects depend on the type of task being studied, and some studies found that monolingual individuals performed better in some tasks (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010).

Benefits of Instruction in a Student's First Language

A growing number of research studies have explored the contributions of a student's first language and literacy knowledge to English language development. This section summarizes such research as relevant for native Spanish-speaking students.

Cross-linguistic Transfer

Cross-linguistic transfer is the term for the knowledge and skills a learner knows in his or her first language that contribute to the learning of a second language. An analysis of the research findings in 160 studies of cross-language transfer of cognitive skills from alphabetic and nonalphabetic native languages to English reading (Shakkour, 2014) finds that:

- The “linguistic components of [a person's native language], such as phonological awareness, morphological awareness, orthographic knowledge and meta-cognitive knowledge, all contribute to the development of reading and reading comprehension in a second language” (p. 547).
- **Phonological awareness** has been found to transfer between home language to English learning, whether the home language is alphabetic or logographic.
- While the research base on the transfer of **morphological awareness** is small, studies have found that morphological knowledge from a transparent language like Spanish does transfer to opaque languages like English. In addition, morphological awareness in Spanish was found to be a good predictor of word reading in English (Ramirez, Chen, Geva, & Kiefer, 2010). However, transfer has only been found to go in one direction: from transparent language to opaque language (that is, morphological awareness neither transfers nor predicts word reading from English to Spanish).
- Research findings are mixed on whether **orthographic knowledge** transfers from one alphabetic language to another.

Supporting development of Spanish reading with Read Naturally Live—Español builds foundational knowledge of phonological and morphological awareness that also supports English learning.

Cognitive Retroactive Transfer

In addition to research evidence supporting the benefits of first language instruction to learning English as a second language, limited studies have found that intervention in English as a second language also provides benefit to the cognitive linguistic skills (phonological awareness, morphological awareness, syntax awareness, reading accuracy, and reading comprehension) of learners' proficiencies in their native and other languages (Abu-Rabia, Shakkour, & Siegel, 2013; Abu-Rabia & Shakkour, 2014). The one notable exception to this, once again, is orthographic knowledge (that is, spelling), which did not reveal transfer. These bi-directional benefits may partially explain the strong evidence supporting the benefits of dual language instruction for English learners summarized later in this paper.

Transfer and Teacher Knowledge

When learners apply their native language knowledge to a new language, sometimes it aids in learning that language. These benefits typically occur when the knowledge or skills in both languages are the same (such as shared alphabet or sounds) or similar (like cognates—words that are similar in spelling, meaning, and origin). However, other times a learner’s first language knowledge interferes with reading or speaking, causing errors (for example, a Spanish speaker vocalizing the English silent *e* or using an article in front of a day of the week instead of a preposition).

When educators understand the similarities and differences between two languages, they can explicitly reinforce the similarities and point out the differences. Some examples of similarities and differences between Spanish and English include:

- English and Spanish share 26 letters in their alphabets; however, the Spanish alphabet has four additional graphemes: *ñ, ch, ll, rr*.
- There are many letter-sound correspondences the languages have in common: *b, c* (hard), *c* (soft), *d, e, f, g, k, l, m, n, o, p, s, t, v, w, x, y*.
- The languages share many diphthongs; however, some of them may be spelled the same (*they, rey*) and some of them may be spelled differently (*out, autobús*).
- Both languages share common syllable types (e.g., open, closed) and syllable patterns (CV, VCV); however, the languages sometimes treat them differently (e.g., vowel sounds are regular and do not change in Spanish but vowel sounds do change in English).

The increased effectiveness of bilingual and dual language programs for building English proficiency may be because these programs are typically either co-taught by a native English speaker and a native speaker of the second language, or they are taught by a bilingual educator. This allows instruction to point out these similarities and differences, accelerating the acquisition of English.

Language-Independent Knowledge

There are a wide variety of language-independent knowledge and skills that learners acquire when learning to read. Examples of this include:

- meta-linguistic knowledge, such as that written symbols in alphabetic languages represent sounds
- metacognitive knowledge, such as that the purpose of reading is to understand what an author is communicating
- literary knowledge, such as story grammar or genre

Understanding an English learner’s first language abilities provides educators with important knowledge about the strengths and assets that individual brings to learning to read and write. Those strengths may be hidden by language barriers when assessed a learner’s weaker language (such as in English for some English learners). For this reason, educators may find that performance in Read Naturally Live—Español and the progress monitoring data it generates provide a more accurate evaluation of a student’s overall reading ability for Spanish-speaking students with limited English proficiency than performance with English stories in Read Naturally Live or core instruction.

Benefits of Bilingual Instruction on English Learning

In addition to the research demonstrating benefits to individuals from being multilingual, research clearly reveals the benefits of bilingual instruction for closing the reading performance gaps of English learners. This section summarizes some of those benefits.

General English Performance Benefits of Bilingual Programs

A meta-analysis (McField & McField, 2014) accounting for both the effectiveness of program implementation and research methodology finds moderate positive effects of bilingual educational programs over monolingual instruction on performance outcomes (0.41).

Superiority of Dual Language Programs

While some educational systems provide transitional bilingual education in the first few years of schooling until a student gains sufficient English proficiency to be fully mainstreamed, increasingly systems are offering long-term dual language programs. Collier and Thomas' longitudinal research (2017) over the last 30 years demonstrates that sustained dual language programs, which provide grade level instruction in both the student's first language (L1) and the second language (L2), often close English learners' achievement gaps by the end of elementary school. Shorter transitional bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) instruction taught through content, however, only close half the gap within the same time. Their data also shows that students who maintain their home language do better in school than those who gradually lose their native proficiency as they acquire the dominant language.

Data reveal that it takes an average of six years of instruction in both a student's L1 and L2 for an English learner to reach grade-level proficiency in English. However, it takes 7–10 years or more for students who are not provided the opportunity to be taught in their home language.

The International Literacy Association (2019) recently published a Literacy Leadership Brief highlighting the above data. In addition to the benefits afforded to English learners by dual language instruction, the brief also highlights the benefits of bilingualism for other historically underserved student groups:

Recent analyses of more than 3 million student records from the state of North Carolina over a three-year period found that by middle school, African American students of low income attending dual language classes were as much as two grades ahead of their peers not in dual language... (p. 6)

Conclusion

Schools in the United States have seen the number of Hispanic students double and a steady increase in the number of English learners over the past 25 years. Score gaps on national/state tests and graduation rates reveal that these student groups continue to be underserved. New educational policies have been enacted to track students' needs and promote best practices for supporting those with Limited English proficiency in a variety of settings and programs. At the same time, significant numbers of students are enrolled in second language courses, including over 7 million learning Spanish as a second language.

Research evidence demonstrates the benefits of being bilingual. It also validates that strengths in a language are transferred to the learning of another language. Studies of English learners have shown that they benefit from instruction in the components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) but that typical, best-practice instruction should be enhanced with additional supports to develop students' oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge.

Read Naturally Live—Español is a Spanish language reading intervention designed to meet students' and districts' needs in a variety of educational settings and programs. It can be used alone to support the Spanish language development of a native Spanish speaker or a student learning Spanish as a new language. Alternatively, it can be paired with Read Naturally Live to support both an emerging bilingual student's English and Spanish language development.

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