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# Employing Word Study with Spanish-Speaking ELs

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## Abstract

Phonics Instruction has had a controversial history. How to teach phonics to Spanish-speaking ELs is also controversial. Understanding the differences between Spanish and English and how phonics instruction occurs in each language would be insightful. Also, knowing how the nature of the two languages affects instruction would be beneficial. Furthermore, exploiting similarities between English and Spanish and examining differences will bolster instruction. This paper will discuss the reasons for word study and how it may be utilized to teach spelling and decoding to Spanish-speaking ELLs.

**Keywords**: word sorts, making words, cognates

There are some important differences between Spanish and English. The former has an alphabet that is more or less phonetically regular, although some exceptions exist. The English alphabetic system is known as an opaque alphabet. While there are many predictable sound-letter relationships, there are many exceptions. A letter or set of letters may be pronounced in different ways, and placement in a word has an effect (yellow, cry, silly). In addition, a sound may be represented by different letters or sets of letters (farm, phone, rough).

Due to these differences, the approach to teaching beginning reading differs between the two languages. Spanish instruction typically begins with an emphasis on vowels, which is mainly due to the fact that the vowels are predictable. In addition, many teachers use the syllable approach to teach sight words. Freeman and Freeman (1997) stated this is the preferred method because consonants can be pronounced only in combination with vowels. They also stated that this seems like a natural method because Spanish is a syllabic language. Spanish-speaking children who learn to read in Spanish before learning to read in English have an advantage over their Spanish-speaking peers who learn to read for the first time in a language that is unknown or partially-known; they have cracked the alphabetic code.

Having said that, there are many similarities and many differences in sound-letter correspondences between English and Spanish. Teachers need to take advantage of the similarities to address the differences. Krashen (1987) stated that effective learning was dependent on comprehensible input that was slightly above the student's present level. Krashen also stated that comprehensible output from the student was also crucial to the student's development. Cummins (1984) discussed a quadrant for designing learning activities. Cummins stated that activities are either cognitively-undemanding and context-embedded, cognitively-demanding and context-embedded, cognitively-undemanding and context-reduced, or cognitively-demanding and context-reduced. If instruction is too easy, that is to say that it is at a student's independent level, learning is unlikely to occur. If instruction is

challenging but not supported by the teacher, it is too difficult, which would be at the student's frustration level.

Some teachers have high expectations, which is fine. Without scaffolding, however, they only create a cognitively-challenging and context-reduced setting. What they should provide is a cognitively-challenging and context-embedded setting. Providing comprehensible input means working within each student's zone of proximal development. The learning environment is cognitively-demanding and context-embedded.

One way to provide comprehensible input and a cognitively-demanding and context-embedded learning setting is through the use of cognates. Richards, Platt, Platt, and Candlin (1992) define cognates as "a word in one language which is similar in form and meaning to a word in another language because both languages are related. Rodriguez (2001) advocated the use of cognates when teaching reading and utilizing word study with Spanish-speaking ELs. Spanish and English share a common alphabet, the Roman alphabet. Spanish and English share many cognates, which may be employed to make English more comprehensible for Spanish-speakers learning English. Rodríguez (2001) offered four reasons to use cognates. First, reading is recursive, oral language is linear. Second, reading allows more time to process language. Third, cognates are more easily recognized during reading. Finally, reading allows readers to distinguish word boundaries, which facilitates comprehension. Teachers should use cognates in their speech, and students should also see them in print.

While using cognates is a whole-word approach, students should also work closely with words. There are three benefits to this approach. First, students learn specific words. Second, students learn about the general alphabetic system of English. Third, it promotes phonemic awareness, which is a precursor to learning to read in English (Adams, 1990).

One approach to working closely with words is through the use of word sorts. A word sort is a developmental word study activity espoused by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2015). Sorts focus students' attention on features of words. Students place words into written categories according to a critical feature. Bear, et al. stated the purpose of word study is to examine consistencies in the English language and to aid in the decoding, and spelling of words. They advocate for word sorts in order to compare and contrast words. This approach reflects an analytical approach and is preferred to a synthetic approach. The use of whole words is utilized during sorts, and students can examine word parts during sorts. When done with a partner, word sorts can be highly effective as students discuss the words they sorted.

When working with young children, the teacher should begin with three-letter words because the medial vowels tend to be short vowels, which are more predictable than long vowels. Also, the one-syllable words may be reminiscent of the syllable approach in Spanish. The teacher can make the sorts easier or more difficult by the number of words that are sorted and by the contrasts between word elements. For example, having students contrast words that begin with "M" and "P" is easier than

comparing words that begin with "M" and "N" because the latter two are articulated in the same place; they are preconsonantals; they are articulated through the nose.

Teachers can also introduce rimes and onsets.  Rimes may also be known as word families (-am, -ake, -at, -op).  Onsets are the consonants that precede the rime in a vowel.  They may be a single consonant (c, d, h), a blend (fr, gl, fl) or a digraph (ph, ch, sh, th).  Wylie and Durrell (1970) stated that 37 rimes may be used in combination with onsets to create more than 500 words.  They further argue that the pronunciation of vowels is more consistent with rimes than across rimes.  Finally, it is more effective to examine words by onsets and rimes than attempting to sound out individual letters.

Making words is another way to have students work closely with words (Cunningham, 2017).  The teacher chooses the letters the students will manipulate to form words.  The teacher can make this easier of more difficult by the number of letters that are included and which letters are included.  For example, if the teacher wants the students to examine how the letter "C" is pronounced after the letters each vowel, the letters "S" and "K" may not be included.  If the student has worked with the letters "S" and "K" before, the teacher may want to include them.  After the teacher has given the student the letters, the teacher can ask the student to create words by giving the student directions such as to make an "animal" word or a "color" word. When having students work with difficult word elements such as silent letters, the teacher may scaffold the making of words by writing a space for each letter on the board and include the silent letter for the student.

Teaching decoding and spelling skills to Spanish-speaking ELs can be a challenge.  By utilizing cognates and having ELs work closely with words through word sorts and making words, teachers can support students in their efforts to navigate the sound-letter relationships of English.  Since English is an opaque language, teachers need to place ELs in positons to be successful in thinking about those relationships.  Making learning cognitively-demanding and context-embedded will make for more effective instruction and more adept learners.

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