

# A Summary of Science of Reading Strategies to Support English Learners



**Abbie Baack**

Wayne State College, Nebraska, USA // [abbaack1@wsc.edu](mailto:abbaack1@wsc.edu)

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores how the Science of Reading (SOR), a body of research identifying the most effective strategies for literacy instruction, can support English Learners (ELs). Despite being a rapidly growing student population, ELs face persistent educational challenges, including lower graduation rates and limited access to trained educators. The paper provides a historical overview of the SOR and examines how its five core principles can be adapted to meet ELs' unique needs. Each principle is paired with practical, evidence-based strategies. Emphasizing explicit, systematic instruction and oral language development, the article offers educators a toolkit for fostering EL literacy and language growth.

**Keywords:** Science of Reading, English Learners, literacy instruction, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development

## 1. Introduction

What is the Science of Reading (SOR), and does it support English learners' (ELs) instruction? This article will explore both of those questions by providing a glimpse into the history of SOR and examining some common obstacles that ELs may experience in education, as well as a summary of strategies that teachers can implement to assist ELs in overcoming these obstacles. Let's begin with some statistics about our ELs.

There are numerous challenges facing English Learners today. Despite being one of the fastest growing groups in education, only 3% of teachers have specialized training to work with these students (Rahman et al., 2017). During the 2023-2024 school year, ELs made up 10.6% of all K-12 students in the United States, totaling 5.3 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These students face a 13% chance of not graduating from high school and are twice as likely to drop out in comparison to their non-Hispanic White peers (NAEP, 2019). Additionally, many ELs experience discouragement while trying to navigate the complexities of language learning, which can result in a loss of motivation and confidence. Often, the root of these obstacles can be traced back to struggles with literacy.

If an individual is having a conversation about literacy instruction these days, the term "Science of Reading" is likely to emerge. SOR is the converging evidence about how children learn to read, what instructional strategies are most effective, and why. Tens of thousands of studies about early literacy have been published, and a common finding in many of them is evidence that supports SOR. This framework encompasses core principles that are vital to include when teaching children how to read, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Jiban, 2024).

The term Science of Reading was first traced back to the 1830s, when it was mentioned in the journal *American Annals of Education and Instruction*, for the Year 1836, Vol. 6. (Sager, 2024). The phrase was

included in a letter to the editor that was denouncing spelling instruction in schools of that era. The author of the letter merely signed it “Experience,” so there was no name to credit with the phrase. Over the years, many prominent names in education contributed ideas that aligned with the Science of Reading, including Dr. Samuel T. Orton, Anna Gillingham, Dr. Jeanne Chall, Phillip B. Gough, William Turner, and the National Reading Panel (Sager, 2024).

The SOR can be used to support English learners and provide them with a solid foundation of literacy skills. The instructional strategies discussed include additional considerations and adaptations to address the unique needs of English language learners. The SOR helps educators understand the important role of explicit and systematic techniques, as well as binding those words to language (TheReadingLeague, n.d.). This article examines how those five essential components of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension can be effectively utilized with English learners. We’ll look at each of the principles more in depth and consider how they align with effective instruction for ELs.

## 2. The Five Principles

The five principles of SOR emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach to reading instruction, grounded in decades of research. This approach highlights the necessity of explicit teaching of reading skills, particularly phonemic awareness and phonics, as foundational elements for developing fluent and proficient readers (Gonzalez & Huynh, 2024). According to the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth, many strategies that support native English speakers are also effective for students who speak a different language at home (August & Shanahan, 2006). In particular, instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension—the five essential components of reading identified by the National Literacy Panel—have demonstrated clear benefits for English Language Learners (Schwartz, 2022).

### 2.1 Principle 1: Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

Teaching the relationship between letters and sounds helps ELs decode new words, a skill crucial to reading fluency. Systematic phonics help bridge the gap between written and spoken language. This results in ELs needing very explicit instruction in phonemic awareness to assist in understanding the difference in the structure of some English words when compared to their native language. Using objects such as Legos, beads, or pennies to represent individual sounds can help EL students connect sounds to make words. It’s recommended to have the students touch or tap on the objects as they say the sounds to solidify understanding.

### 2.2 Principle 2: Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary can be one of the most daunting challenges for EL students due to cultural references, along with the fact that English is one of the most vast and complex languages with many inconsistent spellings and exceptions to grammatical rules. As stated by Cardenas-Hagan (2020), “vocabulary knowledge, more than any other factor, is attributed to EL’s academic success or struggles.” For this reason, EL students need to be pre-taught vocabulary to give them a foundation in key terms prior to reading the text. Some helpful strategies to incorporate when teaching vocabulary to EL students include role playing, pantomiming, realia (using real objects), quick sketches on the board, and having them repeat words back to you.

### 2.3 Principle 3: Fluency

Many EL students struggle with fluency because they lack the necessary vocabulary, grammatical understanding, and word recognition in English. This forces them to consciously decode every single word, which hinders their ability to read smoothly with a natural flow. Fluency can be further complicated by having limited exposure to proficient speech and hesitation due to fear of making mistakes and underdeveloped English oral language skills (Cardenas-Hagan, 2020). After ensuring that the reading material is at an appropriate level for the student, teachers would benefit from using the following methods: repeated reading, choral reading, echo reading, extra background and vocabulary supports, audio recordings, sentence strips, and integrating familiar topics.

### 2.4 Principle 4: Reading Comprehension

Some of the difficulties EL students may experience with reading comprehension include limited background knowledge of the English language, cultural references, and the use of figurative language. There are numerous strategies that teachers can implement to assist in reading comprehension with EL students, including think-alouds, meaning prompts, and clunk cards. Clunk cards can assist students with words or concepts they do not understand by monitoring their own comprehension and marking text that they find confusing (Nosratinia, et al., 2013, see Table 1). Additionally, during the reading, teachers should consistently provide opportunities for students to discuss the text by pausing to ask questions and have students try to retell the story in their own words or connect it to a personal experience.

**Table 1.** Sample Clunk Cards

<p>Clunk Card #1</p> <p>Reread the sentence with the clunk and look for key ideas to help you figure out the word. Think about what makes sense.</p>	<p>Clunk Card #2</p> <p>Reread the sentences before and after the clunk, looking for clues.</p>
<p>Clunk Card #3</p> <p>Look for a prefix, root word, or suffix that might help.</p>	<p>Clunk Card #4</p> <p>Break the word apart and look for smaller words that you know.</p>

### 2.5 Principle 5: Oral Language Development - Listening and Speaking

The Science of Reading recognizes the significance of oral reading as the foundation for comprehension. For EL students, developing strong oral language skills is essential and can be achieved through structured speaking and listening instruction opportunities while supporting reading and writing growth. There are countless engaging activities teachers can integrate into instruction to help EL students with listening, such as filling in lyrics to songs, “drawing” stories, or writing what they hear. Improvement in speaking skills can be achieved using the common think-pair-share method, doughnut inner-outer circle sharing, and talk tokens. Collaborative learning methods, such as jigsaw can also be beneficial in promoting speaking and listening skills for EL students. Table 2 provides each strategy along with a brief description of its implementation based on SOR principles.

**Table 2.** Oral language development strategies and descriptions

Strategy	Description
Realia	Using real life objects in classroom instruction.
Choral Reading	A reading technique where all students read in unison with the teacher leading.
Echo Reading	The teacher models the reading of a short sentence or phrase and students “echo” it back.
Think-Pair-Share	The teacher poses a question and has students discuss the answer with a partner before coming back as a class to share responses.
Doughnut Inner-Outer Circle Sharing	Students form two circles (one inside the other) and the inner circle students face outer circle partners to discuss questions or concepts.
Talk Tokens	Each student has a set amount of tokens or chips and is encouraged to speak by putting a token in the middle each time they contribute to the discussion.
Jigsaw	Students are divided into groups and each student becomes the “expert” on a specific section of text and then shares that information with the group.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, SOR can support EL students by emphasizing systematic, explicit instruction in key reading skills while recognizing the need for culturally responsive and differentiated teaching approaches. Applying the strategies highlighted in this article can further support the academic success of EL students, as well as Native English speakers (Schwartz, 2022). Educators can meet the growing needs of the EL population through targeted support centered around the five components of SOR. When educators intentionally integrate these elements, they help close the achievement gap for EL students and build the foundational literacy skills and language proficiency necessary for long-term reading success.

### The Author

Mrs. Abbie Baack is an instructor in the Department of Education and Behavioral Sciences at Wayne State College. With nearly two decades of teaching experience, Baack brings a wealth of knowledge to WSC. After teaching 4th and 5th grade for 19 years in Norfolk and Milford, NE, Baack worked at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, supervising student teachers and teaching a practicum course. She currently teaches literacy courses for Wayne State College, along with ESL courses.

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