Teaching English Reading: What’s Included in the Textbooks of Pre-Service General Education Teachers?

L. Quentin Dixon, Shuang Wu, Renata Burgess-Brigham, R. Malatesha Joshi, Emily Binks-Cantrell, and Erin Washburn

Summary

With changing demographics, pre-service general education teachers in many English-speaking countries will face the challenge of effectively teaching English language learners (ELLs) when they enter the classroom. Research into how to teach English reading has emphasized the importance of five essential components as summarized by the National Reading Panel, or NRP (2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Other research suggests spelling and assessment are additional important components of reading instruction (Coltheart and Prior, 2007; Geva, 2000). Furthermore, pre-service teachers in countries with substantial numbers of ELLs need to learn strategies that are effective for teaching reading to ELLs (August and Shanahan, 2006).

As reading in English may be taught differently in different countries, this chapter examines what pre-service general education teachers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Singapore may be learning from their textbooks assigned for courses in reading instruction. These courses, and thus the textbooks, include both the theory and practice of reading, so pre-service teachers can build both a theoretical understanding of how reading skills develop and a practical knowledge of how to implement instructional activities that will promote their future students’ reading development. The chapter details the amount of inclusion of the NRP’s five components, plus spelling, assessment, and English as a second language (ESL), in 39 English reading textbooks for pre-service general education teachers. Page counts quantify how much each component was covered. Results showed
that spelling and assessment are included most often, followed by phonics (decoding) and text comprehension, whereas fluency is the least likely to be included. Coverage of all five NRP components ranged from 5 per cent to 59 per cent of textbook content. Regarding content specific to second language learners, 74 per cent of the textbooks included coverage, ranging from 0.2 per cent to 74 per cent of the textbook content, with most below 20 per cent coverage. With the global increase of students learning English, this chapter highlights areas needing improvement in textbooks for classes that prepare pre-service general education teachers to teach reading to their students, including ELLs.

Introduction

With an increasingly globalized economy, the importance of English language learning has grown exponentially in the 21st century. The English language is an imperative medium of international communication (Kirkpatrick, 2007; McKay, 2002). In many countries, fluency in English is associated with access to marketable educational preparation and successful career outcomes (Hirtt, 2009; Wee, 2008). This is especially true for countries in which English is an official language or the language of the majority. Building on the work of Joshi, Binks, Graham, Ocker-Dean, Smith, and Boulware-Goode (2009) regarding the content of textbooks in the US used for pre-service general education teachers’ reading courses, we examined textbook content in other English-speaking countries which have substantial numbers of English language learners (ELLs). Our focus is on the textbooks used to prepare pre-service general education teachers to teach reading to schoolchildren in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Singapore.

Growing numbers of English language learners

Canada, New Zealand, and Australia are currently experiencing rapid growth in immigration. The Coalition for Equal Access to Education (n.d.), using data from Statistics Canada 2005, predicts that the proportion of the population not speaking the official languages of English or French will increase from 18.5 per cent (in 2001) to between 20.8 per cent and 24.8 per cent of the total population by 2017. The Australian situation is similar to that of Canada. Using data from a nine-year cohort, the Australian Council of Educational Research (2000) reported that 10.4 per cent of Australian students speak a language other