



David C. Anchin Center for the Advancement of Teaching
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

RESEARCH REVIEW ON EARLY LITERACY

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WHAT IS EARLY OR EMERGENT LITERACY?

Early literacy begins to develop the moment children are born. Parents and caregivers lay the foundation for children's reading success in infancy, as babies learn to recognize the sounds in their language and identify words within the speech stream. Practices such as reading books with babies, singing songs, drawing, and pointing out letters are important beginning steps in literacy development.

Formal early literacy instruction typically begins in pre-k or kindergarten. Early literacy instruction includes teaching decoding (working with letters and sounds), comprehension (understanding stories and informational texts, background knowledge), and oral language (vocabulary and sentence structure).



SHOULD LITERACY SKILLS BE EXPLICITLY TAUGHT IN PRE-K?

YES. Some believe that pre-k should be purely child-led and play-focused, without explicit attention paid to literacy skills. However, failing to plan and intentionally teach literacy skills in pre-k can widen achievement gaps between children living in poverty and their economically advantaged peers¹. Literacy instruction should always be developmentally appropriate, engaging, and implemented in meaningful contexts like shared book-reading and play.

¹ Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2018

WHICH LITERACY SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT TO TEACH IN PRE-K TO ENSURE LATER READING SUCCESS?

Long-term reading success depends on two sets of skills – decoding and language comprehension skills.

- **DECODING SKILLS** (learning letters, letter sounds, and phonological awareness skills like rhyming) help children learn to read print in the early grades. Decoding skills are essential; children cannot learn to read without them.² However, decoding skills alone are not sufficient for higher-level reading in later elementary and high school.
- **LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION SKILLS** (understanding the meaning of texts, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge) help children understand what they read. Comprehension and language skills continue to support reading success throughout children's lives. For example, having a large vocabulary in 1st grade predicts children's reading comprehension in 11th grade.³ Children who had preschool teachers that talked about books and who used new vocabulary words during play activities had higher vocabulary skills in 4th grade.⁴

²National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2009

³Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997

⁴Dickinson & Porche, 2011

WHICH LITERACY SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT TO TEACH IN PRE-K TO ENSURE LATER READING SUCCESS?

- Shared book-reading of both informational and narrative texts, while discussing new vocabulary words, key events, characters, and conceptual information
- Small group activities in which teachers scaffold children in math, science, literacy, and knowledge-building activities
- Writing and composing
- Phonological awareness activities, in which children practice manipulating the sounds in language (rhyming, songs that involve playing with sounds, sorting pictures by sounds)
- Brief explicit instruction in letter names, letter sounds, and writing letters.



WHICH FACTORS SUPPORT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMS?

- Certified teachers⁶ with a strong educational background (masters' or bachelors' degree)⁵
- The use of a research-based curriculum with explicit support for language and literacy^{5,6}
- Coaching teachers in the use of the curriculum throughout the school year⁵
- High-quality instruction and close teacher-child relationships⁷
- To support long-term effects, high-quality literacy instruction in pre-k must be followed by high-quality elementary school⁸

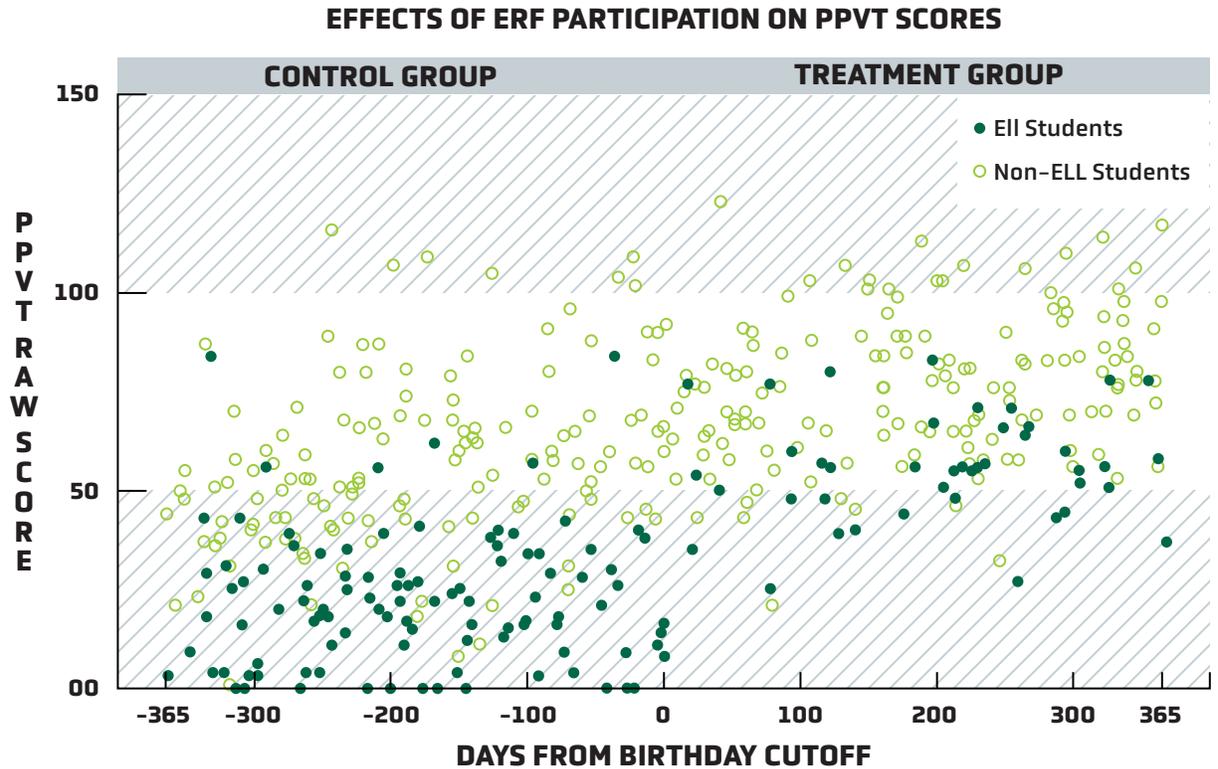
⁵Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013

⁶Wilson, Dickinson, & Rowe, 2013 ⁷Howes et al., 2008

⁸Unterman & Weiland, 2019

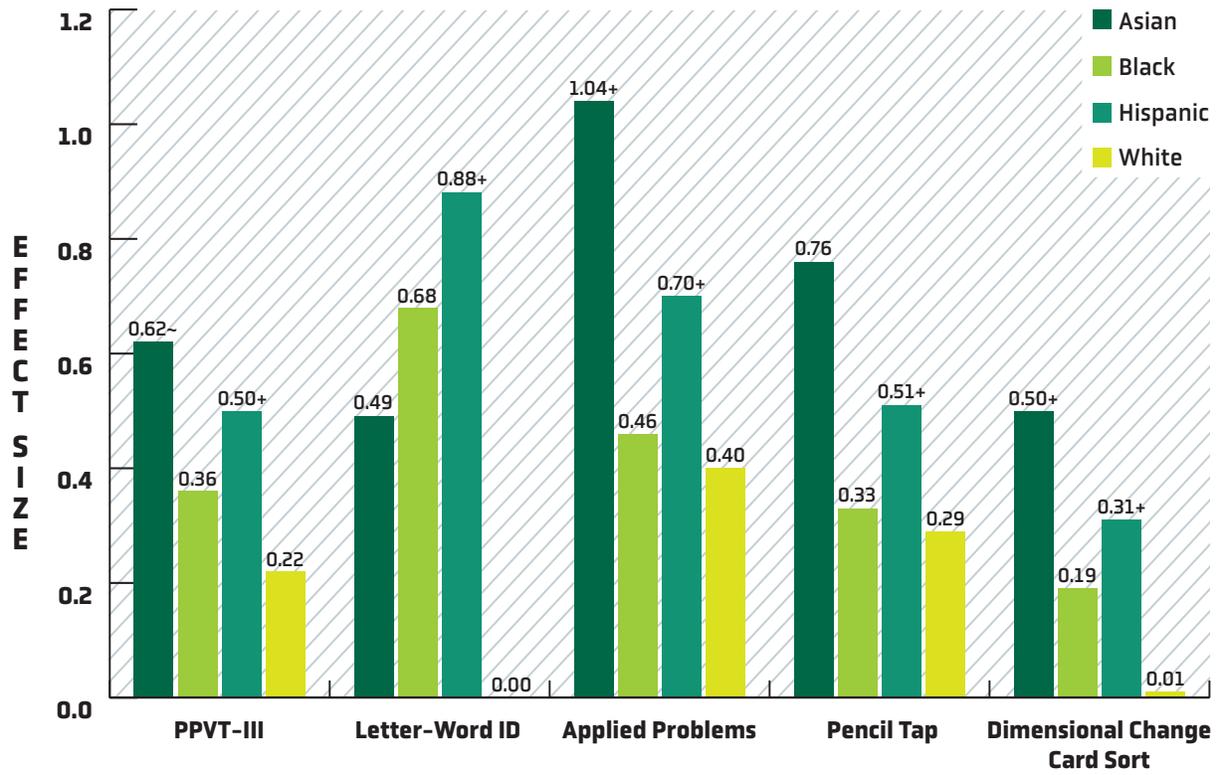
WHICH CHILDREN BENEFIT FROM HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION?

✓ **ALL CHILDREN**,⁹ including those with special needs.¹⁰ There is also evidence that children from low-income families and/or are dual language learners gain the most from high-quality literacy instruction.⁵ In some cases, high-quality literacy instruction in pre-k helped to close gaps in literacy skills between ELL children and their peers⁶, setting children on a more even playing field by the start of kindergarten.



From Wilson, Dickinson, & Rowe, 2013. Children who participated in a language and literacy-rich pre-K program had significant growth in vocabulary compared to control group peers; ELL students showed particularly large gains.

⁹ Gormley et al., 2005
¹⁰ Phillips & Meloy, 2012



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