In fall, 2005, there were 91,533 Hispanic students in Virginia’s schools, representing 7½ % of the state’s total public school population (VDOE, 2006). While many of those students were already proficient in English, others were English language learners, faced with the task of mastering a new language at the same time that they were tackling their content area subjects. For many of them, learning to read and write in English probably posed their greatest challenge. For some, this is a challenge that will continue throughout their years in school.

Research has shown that the key to overcoming reading difficulties is early identification of reading problems, coupled with early and appropriate intervention (Stanovich, 1986; Torgesen, 2002). We know that children who do not learn to read successfully by fourth grade often never learn to read well (Juel, 1988). When an English language learner has problems with reading, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether those problems are truly reading difficulties or if they simply reflect a delay in English language development (Durgunoglu, 2002). Too often, literacy assessment is postponed until the child’s English language proficiency is adequate to support testing in English. Children frequently require from three to five years to develop conversational proficiency in English and from four to seven years to develop proficiency in academic English, or the type of English needed to be successful in school (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Literacy intervention has little chance of success if delayed for that long.

A proven alternative is assessing bilingual students’ literacy development in their first language. Research has shown that the skills that contribute to reading success transfer across languages (Durgunoglu, 2002; Gottardo, 2002). Therefore, if assessment in a child’s first language reveals appropriate literacy development, then any problems the child has with English reading are likely the result of a lack of English proficiency rather than problems with essential literacy skills. On the other hand, if reading difficulties are present, they will be apparent in the child’s first language, as well as in English. Assessing English language learners in their first language makes it possible to diagnose reading difficulties in these children while it is still early enough to provide timely intervention. It also eliminates from intervention children whose problems are related to limited English proficiency and not to reading-related skills.

To that end, here at UVA, we have been working to create a Spanish version of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS). PALS instruments have been used successfully in Virginia schools since 1997. Providing a Spanish version of PALS will make early literacy assessment and intervention available to thousands of Spanish-speaking children who otherwise might fall between the cracks. The Spanish assessment, called PALS español, is not a translation of the English version. Although it follows the same format, all tasks and items have been designed to reflect the specific continuum of skills known to be associated with Spanish literacy development. Because the English and Spanish instruments are parallel, however, they can be used together to assess bilingual students’ literacy development in both their languages.

The PALS archival dataset currently houses over 2,000,000 PALS scores on essential aspects of literacy development in English. This is one of the largest existing datasets tracking the literacy performance of children in PreK through 3rd grade. As PALS español is piloted—and pilot data are added to this dataset—UVA will be uniquely poised to contribute to the knowledge base on literacy development among bilingual children.

References


