**Emergent Literacy and Universal Design for Learning:**

**A Prescription for Success?**

**Abstract**

The most critical period in literacy development occurs between three and eight years of age. However, as of 2007, 33% of fourth graders in the U.S. performed poorly on reading achievement tests, scoring below basic. Each of these articles offers the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, and its applications, as a means of addressing this problem. Two of these summarize UDL and its core principles including options for applying these to early literacy instruction. The third, a study using Literacy by Design (UDL) practices with young children exhibiting significant intellectual disabilities incorporates the use of technology, specifically eBooks, into literacy instruction.

UDL’s proactive design enables literacy skills to be attained by a wide variety of learners. Using multiple means of representation, engagement and expressions along with appropriate scaffolding can help educators address difficulties commonly encountered in early literacy instruction. While the results of this review are promising, the current practice of using standardized tests to access reading achievement presents a roadblock to the full implementation of UDL in U.S. public schools. Further attention to this issue is needed to realize the full benefits of using a UDL framework to teach emergent literacy skills.

**Keywords**

emergent literacy, early literacy, Universal Design for Learning, Literacy by Design, technology, eBooks

During the colonial period of U.S. history, the ability to read gave a person distinction among his peers and in society. Possessing this ability denoted superiority, so much so that it was against the law to teach colonial slaves to read. The educational rights of children in the U.S. today stand in stark contrast. Legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act has cemented these rights. According to 2007 data, 33% of fourth graders in the United States scored below basic on tests of reading achievement. Accompanying this statistic is the fact that of the millions of students serviced by IDEA in 2007, 54% spent 80% of their time in the regular education classroom (Haley-Mize & Reeves, 2013).

These conditions have prompted a critique of traditional instructional practices with emphasis placed on emergent-literacy instruction. This term has evolved to encompass those early-literacy skills that correlate with a later reading ability (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The effects of these practices can be seen clearly among students with significant intellectual difficulties. Literacy instruction for these students has traditionally focused on drill and practice instruction of sight words and other basic literacy skills in an isolated context (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995: Katims, 2000). Reading for meaning receives little attention and, as a result, these students fall behind in literacy achievement.

Emergent literacy needs to be viewed on a continuum just as the physical and social-emotional development of young children are. UDL and its emphasis on designing instruction that addresses the needs of students with vast differences in their developmental abilities lends itself well to early literacy instruction. The goal of reading is comprehension which enables the reader to bring meaning to the text. In UDL-infused classrooms, literacy experiences become multi-sensory and meaningful to young learners, thereby increasing their motivation and ultimate reading comprehension ((S. T., & E. M., 2012). Reading for meaning occurs in context and promotes a lifelong love for reading. Reading comprehension occurs when students make vital connections, such as connecting text to themselves, to other texts and the world around them.

Two of these articles present extensive options for using UDL. Tables with specific strategies are provided to address its core principles, multiple means of representation, expression, engagement, and assessment. Haley-Mize and Reeves apply these principles to the practice of storybook reading which facilitates a variety of emergent-skills, such as print awareness, oral language, and phonological awareness. Coyne and colleagues study the use of technology, specifically eBooks, to provide scaffolding to meet the needs of students with significant intellectual disabilities with (Coyne, Pisha, Dalton, Zeph & Smith, 2009) cautiously promising results.

The results of this review instill hope that educators can meet the early literacy needs of young learners. When applied with fidelity, UDL has the potential to address the myriad of needs in diverse populations of emergent readers. However, with 2001 passing and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, views on teaching and learning changed dramatically (). Reading in context for meaning and enjoyment was replaced with a new emphasis on skills subsets, such as phonics and fluency. Many policymakers and administrators believe that reading about letter sounds and word recognition. Real reading is an ingrained and pleasurable habit that will help students become lifelong learners. There is an increased emphasis in our public schools on standardized testing as a means of evaluating both learner and teacher. This high-stakes testing affects students, teachers, and communities at large. Test scores and school performance profiles attract or keep families away from individual school districts. Fewer families mean fewer taxes and fewer resources pouring into public schools. Teachers are often pressured to teach to the test (S. T., & E. M., 2012). How to incorporate UDL principles to these assessments is a much-needed subject of discourse and study in the world of public education.

**References**

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