



A comparison of initial literacy development in Spanish and in English

Spanish	Literacy Elements	English
The building blocks of literacy begin with the vowels and then move to consonants to form syllables. Understanding that there are strong vowels (a-e-o) and weak vowels (i-u) determines separation of words into syllables, accent rules, meaning of words, and impacts comprehension. Students first write vowels and then consonants as emergent writers because the vowels are constant and regular (5 vowels make 5 sounds).	Vowels and consonants	The building blocks of literacy are the names and sounds of each letter, which are taught very systematically. Students first write consonants and then vowels as emergent writers because the consonants are constant and regular (5 vowels make 15 sounds).
Letter names are not taught initially as they can only confuse students (h = “hache”, but students think it is “a”). Names of letters are learned formally once students have learned the letter sounds and can form syllables. Letter sounds are more important at the emergent stage of literacy.	Alphabet and initial sound	Knowing initial letter names and sounds are predictors of reading success. This is such an important skill that students are taught and tested over time to see if they have mastered letter names.
The concept of the accent is very important as it determines word meaning, not only as it relates to writing and spelling (the orthographic accent as in <i>papá versus la papa</i>) but also the diacritic accent (<i>mí vs. mi</i>). Understanding how vowels and syllables are formed is fundamental to being able to use accents correctly.	Accents	The concept of the accent is phonological, as in understanding the difference between <i>ímport</i> and <i>impórt</i>.

Phonological awareness occurs through writing, not only through oral language development. If you can say it, you can write it, because of the tight relationship between sound and symbol. The importance of rhyming occurs at the end of the word when studying word families, not at the beginning of the word.	Rhyming and Word Families	Understanding and developing onset and rime is fundamental to be able to decode and understand the relationship between sound and symbol as it appears at the beginning of the words, and this skill is learned and taught orally (c-at, f-at, m-at, s-at).
Understanding how to chunk words into syllables is one of the most important skills in emergent literacy and it is a strong predictor of long-term reading success.	Syllables	The role of syllabification is not as strong, and it is emphasized later – at around 3rd grade.
Word walls are categorized by the aspects of the language that are challenging, or irregular such as the “<i>letras tramosas</i>”: b/v; c/s/z; h muda, etc..	Word Walls	Word Walls are organized by speech sounds and their corresponding spellings. They may be organized by spelling domain (letter-sound relationships), morphology, or word meaning (vocabulary).
There typically is no real need for sight words since all words can be decoded. However, a list of words that students find challenging to write, and that match word walls, could be effective.	Sight words	Short words that appear with high frequency in early texts may be memorized with repeated exposure, thus resulting in students knowing them by sight. Teachers may teach the decodable parts of these usually irregular words to help make connections to phonics and spelling patterns. Some words that are fully irregular (such as “of”) may be memorized.
Because it is so transparent and regular, the <i>dictado</i> is used to teach spelling along with punctuation and other grammar skills. Spelling lists are not typically used because they are somewhat ineffective and limiting. The <i>dictado</i> focuses on word recognition skills within a meaningful context.	Spelling	Because it is so opaque and irregular, spelling is taught through a list of words that match patterns. The patterns are taught explicitly and systematically. The <i>dictado</i> can also be used in English to focus on word recognition skills within a meaningful context.

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