

# Why Focus on Native Language Literacy?

The thinking and language skills students develop in their native language helps them learn a second language:

- English learners who learned to read and write in the native language learn to read and write much more quickly in English, even when the native language uses a different alphabet.<sup>1</sup>
- When English learners have developed knowledge of math, science, and other content areas in their native language, they do not have to relearn that material in English.
- Academic knowledge and skill gained in the native language actually helps ELLs to learn English because it helps them understand what is being talked about in their classes.<sup>2</sup>

Literacy and content instruction in the native language helps learners to perform better in English:

- Not only do native language skills developed before immigration help ELLs' academic performance in English, but content and literacy instruction in the native language also speed up academic performance in English.
- Teaching initial reading in the native language will speed up learners' development of reading skills in English.
- Teaching English learners math, science, social studies, and language arts in their native language improves their academic achievement in English.

Learning English is not the biggest challenge for English Language Learners. Instead, it is to develop the academic literacy, knowledge, and skills needed at their grade level.<sup>3</sup>

- ELLs often become fluent speakers of English before they develop grade level academic skills.
- High levels of literacy, in depth content knowledge, and complex reasoning skills take much longer to develop than do speaking skills in a second language.



BRIEF

<sup>1</sup> Dressler, C. and Kamil, M.L. (2006). First- and Second-Language Literacy, In August, D. and Shanahan, T. D. (Eds.) Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the national Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>2</sup> Genesee, F., Geva, E., Dressler, C. & Kamil, M. L. (2006). Synthesis: Cross-Linguistic Relationships, In August, D. and Shanahan, T. D. (Eds.) Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners: Report of the national Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>3</sup> Cummins, J. (2000). Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, Ltd.

