Sold a Story en español
Episode 2: My child can’t read well. What should I do?
Q&A — in English

Valeria Fernández: Learning to read is hard. Learning to read ENGLISH is even harder.

Emily Hanford: English is one of the most difficult languages to learn. It takes a typically developing reader — who speaks English! — two to three years to master the basics of how to read the English language.

Fernández: And when English isn’t your first language... that adds a whole new layer of complexity. And then... on top of all that.... many schools are teaching kids to read using strategies that science has shown don’t work.

Hanford: And what teachers have told me is that those reading strategies can be especially confusing for kids whose first language isn’t English.

Fernández: That’s Emily Hanford. She’s the journalist who created Sold a Story — it’s a podcast, originally in English, that investigates how teaching kids to read went so wrong. We translated a version of the podcast into Spanish. I’m the host of Sold a Story en español. My name is Valeria Fernández. I’m an independent journalist based in Arizona.

If you haven’t heard Sold a Story en español yet, I recommend listening to that first. It’s the first episode on this podcast feed. This episode will make a lot more sense if you listen to that episode first. In this episode, we’re going to answer some of the questions you may have had as you were listening.

When I first heard Sold a Story, I had a lot of questions — as a journalist, and as a parent. I have a son who is four years old. He’s growing up bilingual in the United States. He’ll be starting school soon and learning how to read... What does all of this mean for him? What do I need to think about? So I asked Emily to come into the studio and share what she knows about kids who speak Spanish at home and are learning to read English at school.

Welcome Emily.

Hanford: Hi Valeria.

Fernández: Let me start by asking you — why translate Sold a Story into Spanish?

Hanford: Good question. I thought it was important for Spanish speakers in the United States — especially parents and other caregivers — to know about this. The reporting I have been doing
over the past six years about how children learn to read has been really eye-opening for a lot of people. It’s raised a lot of important questions about how children are taught to read in school.

And as you know, there are a lot of immigrant families who come to the United States and one of the things they are looking for is a good education for their children. And an absolutely essential element in a good education is being taught how to read.

I think most parents assume that when they send their kids to school, they will be taught how to read. That’s what I assumed when I sent my kids to school. Remember Corrine Adams from our first episode? That’s what she thought, too.

Adams: I don’t know how to teach a child how to read so I just assumed that the children I sent to school would come back to me literate. Cause that’s what school does, right?

But what Corinne realized is what many parents eventually realize — that their kids are struggling to learn how to read, and part of the problem is the way they are being taught.

Fernández: You mention in the program that 50 percent of Hispanic kids in fourth grade are reading below a basic level. Why is it so important for kids to have a solid foundation on reading early on for their overall academic success and career opportunities in the future? What does the research show us?

Hanford: Well, reading is essential — not just for success in school. Reading and writing are critical life skills. You have to be able to read the directions on your prescription medication — to read important documents and forms.

It wasn’t always so important for people to be able to read and write. But we live in a knowledge economy now. A lot depends on your ability to understand written information. There are more opportunities available to people when they have good reading and writing skills.

And research shows that children who don’t learn to read by the end of third grade are likely to remain struggling readers for the rest of their lives, and they’re likely to fall behind in other academic areas, too. They are more likely to drop out of high school, to end up in the criminal justice system, and to live in poverty.

Struggling with reading and writing can have social and emotional consequences too. Research shows that kids who have trouble learning to read are more likely to report feeling sad, lonely, angry, anxious and depressed. The stakes are really high here. It’s never too late to learn how to read, but it becomes increasingly difficult to become a good reader if you don’t master basic skills early in your education. So it’s important for kids to get off to a good start in reading.

Fernández: Why are so many Hispanic children struggling with reading?
Hanford: Well, one of the things I want to point out is that lots of children are struggling with reading in American schools — including many kids who speak English as a first language. So the problem is not just about a difference between the language a child speaks at home and the language a child is being taught to read in school.

But — speaking Spanish at home and learning to read English in school can make it more challenging to learn how to read.

That’s because language comprehension plays a really huge role here. The more English words you know the meaning of and the more you understand about how the English language works, the easier it’s going to be to understand what you are reading. Knowing how to speak a language really well helps when it comes to learning how to read a language.

But knowing how to speak a language isn’t enough. This is one of the reasons that many kids who speak English as a first language also have a hard time learning how to read.

Fernández: Yes, learning to read English can be really difficult. I remember how confusing it was for me because of all the different sounds that English letters can make. Spanish is consistent. Each letter corresponds with a unique sound — and it doesn’t change.

Hanford: Exactly. It’s much easier to learn how to decode Spanish.

English is one of the most difficult languages to learn. It takes a typically developing reader — who speaks English! — two to three years to master the basics of how to read the English language.

In contrast, it generally takes less than a year of good instruction for most Spanish-speaking children to learn how to decode Spanish. And as you know, Spanish is spelled pretty much the way it sounds.

Because of that, I can actually sound out Spanish. My pronunciation isn’t good, but I can decode the words pretty well.

But — you’re hearing me right now through an interpreter — I don’t speak Spanish — which means I can’t actually READ Spanish. I can decode the words, but I don’t know what most of the words mean.

READING is when you can decode the words AND understand what they mean. Those are the two KEY parts of the equation here. Decoding and language comprehension. You must have both to be a good reader.
**Fernández:** And what your reporting has shown is that teaching kids *how* to sound out written words is something that a lot of people have been arguing about in the United States... for a long time.

**Hanford:** Yes, there’s been a lot of fighting about phonics. Phonics instruction means teaching kids how the letters on the page correspond to the sounds of spoken language — and how by blending, or joining, the sounds associated with the letters, you are able to say the words.

There’s been a strong anti-phonics strand in American education, going way back to the 1800s when public schools were first established in the United States. Some people were concerned that phonics instruction would be boring and tedious and might turn kids off to reading.

But there’s been all this scientific research over the past 50 years that shows phonics skills are absolutely critical when it comes to becoming a good reader. You can’t become a good reader — in English or Spanish — without a good understanding of how the sounds in words are represented by letters.

And over the past couple of decades, American schools *have* been adding in some phonics. Kids usually get some phonics instruction when they’re in school.

But beginning readers were also typically taught that there are other strategies — really problematic strategies — that they can use to figure out the words. They were taught to do things like — look at the first letter of the word, look at the picture in the book, think of a word that makes sense.

My podcast Sold a Story investigates the roots of that incorrect idea — The idea that beginning readers don’t have to sound out written words. That’s one strategy they can use. But the idea is that kids don’t have to learn how to sound out written words because they can be taught all these other strategies — all these other ways to figure out what the words say.

That’s a big problem because research shows that kids must learn how to sound out written words to become good readers. When they are taught to use other strategies instead, they are actually being taught the strategies that struggling readers use to get by. In other words, one of the things all the research on reading has shown is that good readers are good at sounding out written words. Those other strategies — like, looking at the first letter and thinking of a word that makes sense — those are actually bad habits that struggling readers use to try to get by—not something that teachers should encourage kids to do.

**Fernández:** So, are kids learning English as a second language in American schools being taught those same bad habits? And how do they affect kids still learning to speak English?
**Hanford:** The answer to your first question is — yes. Those strategies have been a part of classroom instruction in many American schools for a long time. Kids learning English are being taught those strategies too.

And anecdotally, teachers have told me that those strategies can be especially confusing for kids whose first language isn’t English.

Let’s say you have a first grader who speaks Spanish at home. In school, they’re learning to read in English. This first-grader is reading a book and they come to an English word they’ve never heard before — let’s say it’s the word “rooster.”

**Fernández:** That’s “gallo” in Spanish.

**Hanford:** But the child doesn’t know the English word for “gallo.” The teacher says — look at the picture. And the child might say — “chicken.” Or maybe the child says “bird.”

This is a great opportunity for a vocabulary lesson. For the teacher to pause and help the child understand that the English word for “gallo” is “rooster.”

But for this to be a READING lesson, the teacher needs to tell the child to look carefully at the letters of that word — spelled r-o-o-s-t-e-r — sound out the word — r/oo/s/t/er — “rooster.” And tell the child what the word means — a rooster is a male chicken.

What you’re doing when you are learning to read — in English and in Spanish — is you’re getting the written forms of words stored in your memory. Not by looking at words and just “memorizing” them. The process in your brain is a bit different.

What you’re doing is linking the sounds in a word with the spelling of the word and the word’s meaning. When those three things about a word are linked in your mind — the spelling, the pronunciation and the meaning — that word can get stored in your memory.

The more words you store in your memory in this way, the better reader you can become. Because you’re not using your brain power to think about the letters and sounds to decode the words. You recognize the words very quickly, automatically — in an instant! And this frees up your brain to focus on the meaning of what you are reading. And that of course is the goal — to understand what you read.

**Fernández:** How do schools manage with bilingual kids? Take me, for example. I want to enroll my 4-year-old son in a dual language immersion school where kids are taught half the time in English and half the time in Spanish. Is it possible to learn to read and write in two languages simultaneously?

**Hanford:** Yes. Absolutely. Not only is it possible for students to learn in both their home language and in English — it’s good for kids to learn more than one language.
There was a time when many people believed that promoting or supporting bilingualism in school was not a good idea. That learning two languages could be confusing and that it might actually impede cognitive and linguistic development. But research shows that’s not the case. In fact, emerging neuroscience suggests that bilingualism is beneficial. It’s actually good for your brain.

Something else that research has shown is that oral language is acquired naturally. Learning to talk is a natural process. Your brain is basically wired to do it.

But reading is different. We are not actually born with brains that are wired to read. We can get really good at reading, but making the connections between oral language and written language typically requires explicit instruction.

Some people don’t need much instruction. They learn to read the language they know how to speak pretty easily. And it doesn’t really matter how they are taught to read. A small percentage of kids seem to need hardly any instruction at all.

But some kids need a lot of explicit instruction. And this doesn’t have to do with intelligence. This is very important. There are very smart people who have a hard time learning how to read. They can learn to read. But they must get good instruction — and sometimes a whole lot of good instruction — or they won’t become good readers.

**Fernández:** But just teaching kids how to sound out the written words isn’t enough, is it? It seems like teachers really need to focus on the meaning of words — especially with kids who are still learning to speak English?

**Hanford:** Absolutely. Phonics instruction isn’t enough. The kids have to understand what the words mean. They’re not going to be able to effectively store those words in their memory unless they know the pronunciation, the spelling AND the meaning of the words.

So, focusing on vocabulary is important and it’s especially important for English learners, as you said. But it’s important for native English speakers, too. They need to develop and expand their vocabulary as well.

I was in a first-grade classroom in California a few years ago where the teacher told me that all of the kids in her class spoke a language other than English at home. And some of the kids in her class were learning English as a third language.

The reading instruction was in English. The kids got explicit phonics instruction for part of the day. And they were broken up into small groups and the teacher was focusing on specific spelling patterns with each group. After learning about a spelling pattern, the kids would practice by reading a story that had words with the spelling patterns they had just been taught.
So they didn’t need strategies like look at the picture or think of a word that made sense — because they had been taught how to decode the words in the stories they were trying to read.

And in this classroom in California, not all of the reading instruction time was spent on phonics. There was also a lot of reading out loud by the teacher. And lots of conversation among the kids about what the teacher was reading. Lots and lots of talking, in English, to help the kids develop their language skills and their vocabulary.

Something else that’s really important to point out here is that having a good vocabulary in Spanish can help a child with learning English. Because there are many words that are similar in spelling and meaning between English and Spanish.

That means one of the best things you can do as a parent is talk to your child a lot and read to your child a lot — in Spanish. Research shows that oral language skills and literacy in a first language can facilitate the development of literacy in a second language. It’s really, really good to read to your child in Spanish.

And one of the things your child’s teacher should be doing is helping your child make connections between Spanish and English. The teacher may not speak Spanish. But they can still encourage your child to make connections between English words they are learning and Spanish words they already know.

Fernández: I want to make sure my child goes to a good school. Until listening to the podcast, I hadn’t really thought to ask questions about how a school teaches reading. How do I find out? What are the questions to ask as a parent?

Hanford: Yes, great question! It can be difficult to figure out how a school teaches reading. You might think that all schools in the country teach reading the same way. Or that at least all schools in the same district teach reading in the same way.

But there’s actually quite a bit of variation. So, how your child is being taught to read can come down to the teacher they have. What does that teacher know about how kids learn to read? What are they emphasizing in classroom instruction?

That said, I made Sold a Story because I realized that while different teachers and different schools use different materials and curriculum, the materials that a lot of schools use contain ideas about how kids learn to read that aren’t accurate.

I don’t think any school is deliberately teaching children based on inaccurate ideas. I’ve never met a teacher who didn’t want their students to learn how to read. But many teachers were never taught about a lot of the scientific research that’s been done on reading over the past 50 years. They just didn’t know about it.

That sounds shocking, I know.
I did a reporting project about why so many teachers didn’t know about this research. It’s called Hard Words. We have a Spanish translation of it, and you can find a link in the show notes.

I think one of the most important things to know is that many teachers and schools are learning about the scientific research now. And many of them are changing how they teach kids to read, which isn’t easy to do. There’s a lot that teachers need to learn. And schools and school systems are complex bureaucracies. Change is hard and change takes time.

Here are some things you can look for.

Is your child coming home with long lists of words they are supposed to “memorize?” That’s not a good sign. Research shows that just trying to memorize lots of words is not the best path to good reading skills. Kids should be breaking words apart and understanding that words are made up of different sounds that are represented by letters and combinations of letters. This is hard stuff in English because — as we talked about earlier — the same sound can be represented by different letters and letter combinations. And a lot of English words have silent letters. They’re part of how the word is spelled, but they don’t represent a sound.

Something you can do is ask your child — when you are reading in school and you come to a word you don’t know, what does your teacher tell you to do? If the child is learning to look at the picture and look at the first letter and try to come up with a word that makes sense, that’s an indication that the reading instruction is not aligned with scientific research.

Something else that you want to know is how your child is doing in reading. You may receive information from the school. If all you’re getting is something like — she’s a level B or level D or H — that’s not a great sign either. Those letter levels — to indicate what book a child is reading in what’s known as a “leveled reading system” — those have been used for a long time in schools. But research shows those letter levels can actually be misleading. And they don’t provide enough information about how a beginning reader is developing. You want more specific information about how your child is doing.

So, ask questions like — is my child able to identify and manipulate the individual sounds in words? What can you tell me about their knowledge of letters and sounds? What assessments do you use? Please show me my child’s data.

And you can also ask — what materials do you use to teach vocabulary and build my child’s knowledge?

You really want to make sure your child’s school is paying attention to both decoding and language comprehension and knowledge building.
Fernández: This could be really difficult for a parent who doesn’t speak English. How do you advocate for your kid if their teacher doesn’t speak your language?

Hanford: I think it’s a big problem. Though I have to say, again, that there are a lot of kids who speak English as a first language who are having a hard time learning to read in school. And their parents who speak English often have a hard time advocating even when there is no language barrier. There is a lot of strained communication about this issue that stems from misunderstandings about how kids learn to read and how to identify children who are struggling and get them effective help.

But for sure, there can be many more barriers for parents who don’t speak English or feel confident enough in English to ask questions and get the information that they need.

Something that everyone should know is that schools in the United States are required to provide information to parents in a language they can understand. That includes translated written materials or a language interpreter. The US Department of Education has a fact sheet — in Spanish and in English — that outlines your rights and if you are having any problems getting the translation you need, you can print it out and take it to the school. We’ll include a link in the show notes to the Spanish version and the English version so you can take that with you too.

Fernández: After listening to the podcast I find myself asking — is it up to us the parents to know every single detail of the curriculum and method in which our children are being taught? What if we don’t have the time to do that? Should we wait to see if our child doesn’t do well? Or is it time for us to be proactive?

Hanford: I think it’s a really good idea to establish a relationship with your child’s teacher early in the school year. So, don’t wait until there is a problem. Reach out and introduce yourself. Ask the teacher what you can do to support your child at home.

And if you have concerns about your child’s reading, don’t wait. Trust your gut if you think something’s wrong. Too often unfortunately, schools are late in alerting families when a child has a reading problem.

Sometimes that’s because the school isn’t doing good assessments and collecting the right kind of information about students in the early grades. Sometimes it’s because schools assume that kids will catch up, that everything’s going to be fine. That’s often what they will tell parents who reach out to say they are concerned.

There’s some survey data that shows the vast majority of parents — like, 9 in 10 parents — believe their kids are on grade level in reading. But I told you earlier that a lot of kids aren’t — including half of Hispanic kids. So there’s a disconnect here between what parents believe and what’s really going on.
And I’m sure it’s shocking for a lot of people to hear that. You want to be able to trust the schools. You want to believe that they are doing the best for your kids. It shouldn’t be a parent’s job to know every single detail of a curriculum.

But it’s really important to catch reading problems early. And to make sure your kids get effective help.

If your child is struggling, one of the things you want to figure out is — why? Are they not getting good instruction? Or do they have a learning issue such as dyslexia? And it can be both — your child might be struggling because they have dyslexia and because they are not being taught very well.

It's also important to note that if your child does have a reading disability, it doesn’t mean they aren’t smart. There are really, really smart people who have dyslexia. This is not about intelligence. Dyslexia is a difference in how your brain processes language. And if you have dyslexia, you can learn how to read and spell. But you’re going to need good instruction.

**Fernández**: Sold a Story first came out in English at the end of 2022. It seems to be getting a lot of attention. It’s been written about in The New York Times and lots of other publications. It’s won a bunch of big journalism awards. Has there been an impact in terms of changes in schools and in parent awareness?

**Hanford**: There’s been a big impact. This podcast has helped to draw a lot of attention to how children are taught to read. New York City — the largest school system in the country — has told schools they have to stop using curriculum and materials that contain the ineffective strategies we focused on in Sold a Story. Many other school systems are making big changes too. And state legislatures are getting involved. Since the podcast came out, at least 15 states have passed new laws relating to how schools teach reading and there are at least another eight states that are trying to ban the ineffective strategies we’ve been talking about.

Now, that doesn’t guarantee these strategies will go away. They are deeply entrenched in education. Many teachers have been teaching them for years. Just passing a law is not enough. There needs to be an investment in teacher knowledge and skills — helping teachers understand how children learn to read and WHY the disproven strategies we focused on in Sold a Story are not a good idea. Teachers need good training and good materials so they have the chance to learn how to teach in more effective ways.

Which isn’t easy. As I said before, teaching is a hard job. It’s a challenge to teach a class of 20 kids — or more — how to read.

And you asked about parent awareness. I think it’s one of the most important elements here. That’s why we translated Sold a Story into Spanish — parents need to know about this.
And there is a large and growing group of parents who have been raising awareness about this issue for many years. Parents are the ones who helped me understand — years ago — what a big problem it is when kids do not get effective reading instruction.

Many of the parents that I met had the money to do things like hire tutors for their kids or pay the tuition for specialized private schools. But lots of parents don’t have the money to do those things.

Parents should be able to assume that when they send their kids to school, they will be taught how to read.

If your child is struggling with learning how to read, they are not alone. You are not alone.

I think that’s the most important takeaway here. Speak up if your child is having trouble. Talk to your friends and neighbors about this. Share the podcast with them.

**Fernández:** Where can parents go if they want more information about all of this?

**Hanford:** Yeah, I’ve mentioned a couple of times that we will have links in the show notes. So just go to the podcast app where you are listening to this and scroll down to find those links. We’ll have that information I mentioned earlier about your rights to translation services at school and that article that I mentioned called “Hard Words.” And we also have a reading list for parents that’s full of links to lots of different resources that could be helpful to you. There’s a link to an article that explains what dyslexia is and how you can spot the signs of it at various ages. And other good information with things you can read and things you can do to help your child.

**Fernández:** Thanks for being here Emily.

**Hanford:** Thanks for the great questions. And for hosting the Spanish version of the program. I’ve learned a lot working with you and your team on the translation.

**Fernández:** That was Emily Hanford. And I’m Valeria Fernández.

Sold a Story is a production of APM Reports. This episode was edited by Curtis Gilbert, and translated into Spanish by John Ellis-Guardiola and Inger Díaz Barriga. It was produced by La Coctelera Music. The La Coctelera team includes Nuria Net, Alex García Amat, Lupita Alvarez and Daniel Durán. The APM Reports team includes Andy Kruse, Tom Scheck and Jane Helmke. Special thanks to Claude Goldenberg and Magdalena Zavalia. Our theme music is by Wonderly.

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