

The Effects of After-School Test Preparatory Program on the
High School Assessment Scores of English Language Learners
Enrolled in American Government

By Justin Rorke

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ABSTRACT

The study evaluated the effects of an after-school program on the test scores of ninth grade English Language Learners enrolled in an American Government class. The English Language Learners had the option of attending voluntary, weekly, one-hour, after-school sessions. The after-school sessions focused on vocabulary development, selected response strategies, and written strategies. The control group consisted of seventeen students who did not attend any sessions. The experimental group consisted of nine students who attended at least half of the ten sessions. Six students who attended some, but less than half, of the sessions were excluded from the study. The students in both groups were of varying levels of English fluency and from a variety of countries of origin. A pre-test was given to ensure that the groups did not differ significantly and a post-test was given after the ten sessions to determine the impact of participation in the intervention. The experimental group had significantly higher mean percentage scores (Mean = 66.33, SD = 16.30) on a High School Assessment style Government test than the control group (Mean = 32.82, SD = 12.86) [$t(24) = -5.77, p < .001$]. Implications and ideas for future research are discussed.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Beginning with the graduating class of 2009, all students must pass content High School Assessments in American Government, Algebra I, Biology, and English 10 as a requirement for graduation. This requirement includes students that are enrolled in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs, regardless of their level of English proficiency. Many students classified as English Language Learners (ELL) are at a disadvantage when testing, because it is not just their content knowledge being put to the test but also their English language skills.

This issue with testing of ELL students is compounded by the fact that in the suburban county in which this research was conducted, there are attempts to enroll a majority of ELL students into one particular school in each of the five districts within the county. Currently there are approximately 108,000 students enrolled in the school system, of which approximately 4,500 are enrolled in a TESOL program, which is approximately 4.2% of the total student population. In the district in which this research was conducted, the school with a TESOL program is the school where this researcher is a teacher. There are currently 1,211 students enrolled in this school and 140 of those students are part of the TESOL program, which is approximately 11.6% of the school population. As of the 2013 test administration, only 20% of ELL students have met the HSA graduation requirements; compared to 71% of all students who have met the same requirements. These demographic figures demonstrate the added impact that students enrolled in the TESOL program have on the overall success of the school. It is of extra importance in the school the research was conducted in to promote the success of ELL students.

The researcher has been teaching American Government since the 2006-2007 school

year, and has been involved in preparing students for the High School Assessments exam his entire career. Given this background, the researcher is always looking for ways to better increase his students' chances for passing the exam. In the 2010-2011 school year, the Maryland state government decided to remove the American Government High School Assessment as a requirement for graduation in an effort to save money that would be spent on administering the exam. After one year of this policy, during the 2011-2012 school year, the state government announced that the test will be administered as a graduation requirement for the 9th graders in the 2013-2014 school year. Currently there are sixty-five ELL students enrolled in American Government; but only thirty-four of those students are 9th graders, and need to pass the Assessment at the end of the year. It is especially important that as many of these students pass the exam at the end of this year as possible, because a trend that has been seen recently in schools is that if a student does not pass the High School Assessment the first time they will not pass the exam any subsequent time they take the exam.

Statement of Problem

What are the impacts of an after-school instructional program for students enrolled in a TESOL program geared for HSA preparation (including vocabulary instruction, test taking strategies, and writing strategies) on an HSA styled government test?

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis for this study is that there would be no statistically significant difference in the test scores of the ELL American Government students enrolled in a test preparatory after-school program and the ELL students not enrolled in the after-school program as measured by their scores on an HSA-style American Government test.

Operational Definitions

English Language Learner (ELL) a student designated as ELL has limited English proficiency

and receives English Language services from the school.

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) are programs in schools to teach the English language to students designated as having limited English proficiency.

High School Assessments (HSA) are state created tests given at the end of four high school curriculum level courses (American Government, English 10, Biology, and Algebra 1).

Students must pass the four criterion-referenced tests as a graduation requirement. Each HSA Exam is a mix of selected response and short essay questions and is presented to the student on the computer. The American Government HSA has three sections of approximately twenty to twenty-five selected response questions and one to three written response questions in each section. For this study, raw scores were converted to percentages correct.

Test preparatory after-school program is a 10 week program created by the researcher designed to prepare ELL students for the American Government HSA. The program will focus on content vocabulary development, test taking strategies, and written strategies.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

High Stakes Testing and Consequences

Over the past twenty years, there has been a series of new legislation aimed at improving the education of all students in America. These laws have focused on equalizing the access to education of all students, and increasing the level of accountability of teachers, schools, and districts. This has been attempted several ways through the legislation. For example, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 stated that all students, including students classified as Limited English Proficiency (LEP), must be included in all state and district assessments (Butler & Stevens, 2001). The purpose of this review is to examine the link between high stakes testing and English Language Learners. The first section of the paper will examine the growing impact of English Language Learners in American education. The second section will examine the impact of high stakes testing on ELL students. The third section will examine some strategies used as interventions and modifications used in testing as well as instructional interventions to use in the classroom with ELL students.

As time went on, merely ensuring the participation of all students in the assessment was not effective anymore. In 2001, the *No Child Left Behind* Act (NCLB), a re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, was passed by Congress. Included in the legislation was a mandate that all students in grades three through eight participate in annual statewide testing and high school students must participate in testing of English and Mathematics beginning in the 2005-06 school year (Fry, 2008). NCLB also mandates that English Language Learners (ELL) must participate in the testing in English after they have been enrolled in US schools for three years or reached a minimum level of English proficiency, whichever comes first. These testing results are compared to the results of monolingual American children and are used to determine which schools are meeting or failing to meet state and federal standards

(August & Shanahan, 2006).

Most states use the results of these statewide assessments as a part of a reward/punishment system. Some states reward schools with high scores with extra funds, extra staffing, or bonuses (Butler & Stevens, 2001). Under NCLB, if schools are not able to meet the progress set by the legislation, they must undergo corrective actions. This can include assistance plans, providing students the opportunity to transfer to a more successful school, or completing school-wide restructuring (Coltrane, 2002). Due to this reward/punishment system, and the fact that states are allowed to set their own methods of meeting the legislation's goals, states are encouraged to and rewarded for setting their standards lower and choosing less rigorous examinations and methods (Klein, 2010). Federal policies such as NCLB of 2001, and state initiatives such as Proposition 203 in Arizona, Proposition 227 in California, and Question 2 in Massachusetts, created more barriers for ELL students by limiting any approach other than using English only to teach or assess ELL students in reading and writing (August et al., 2006).

As part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the \$4.35 billion funding competitive grant program known as Race to the Top was created to reward the states that chose to participate in making progress on a series of redesigns aimed at making education appropriate and accessible for all students. Some of these redesigns were aimed at turning around low-performing schools, improving teacher quality, improving and updating state data systems, and implementing the use of a common set of standards and high-quality assessments. The states can improve through encouraging high quality charter schools, measuring student progress through comprehensive data systems and, controversially, basing teacher compensation and promotion partially on student performance on statewide assessments. States that refuse to link student achievement with the rating of teacher effectiveness are prohibited from participating and receiving grant money from the Race to the Top fund (Klein, 2010). This set of common standards are known as the Common Core Standards, and they place more emphasis on

formative tests as a gauge for student progress. These test scores, however, are not reliable or valid for all of the purposes for which they are used or for all the students to whom they are given (Butler et al., 2001).

English Language Learners

English Language Learners (ELLs) currently are the largest growing subgroup in the American educational system. In the 1996-97 school year there were approximately 3.4 million students enrolled in US schools, a 7% increase from the previous year. By the 1999-2000 school year, that number jumped to approximately 4.2 million (Butler et al., 2001). This trend has only continued since that time; the Pew Hispanic Center projects that the number of students that are either foreign-born or the U.S.-born child of foreign-born parents will total 17.8 million by 2020 (Fry, 2008).

Currently in U.S. Schools, eighty percent of ELL students are enrolled in specially designed programs, including transitional bilingual programs, sheltered content classes, or pull out English classes (Butler et al., 2001). The enrollment of ELL students is not evenly distributed throughout all schools in America. ELL student enrollment is concentrated in certain schools. As stated by Cosentino de Cohen, Deterding, and Clewell (2005) as cited in Fry (2008), almost 70% of ELL students were educated in 10% of the nation's elementary schools and nearly half of the nation's elementary schools educated no ELL students. This means that nearly half of the teachers in the nation do not see the struggle of ELL students in the current climate of high stakes testing.

Crago, Golberg and Paradis (2008) state that English as a Second Language (ESL) students in areas with communities of same language people will have more opportunity to use their first language (L1) and their second language (L2) development will be delayed. In addition, the schools that ELL students are concentrated in generally have high enrollment, higher student- teacher ratios, higher Free and Reduced Meals enrollment, and a higher chance of

being designated a Title 1 school (Fry, 2008). Hence, in addition to the language barriers between the teachers and students, there are also likely to be social and economic factors that will hinder the success of ELL students.

Compounding the difficulties of ELL students is the fact that many ELL students are coming from another country and enter the United States seeking refuge or asylum. According to the Department of Homeland Security, the United States will accept up to 80,000 people to enter the country under refugee status per year (Martin & Yankay, 2012). If the refugee is of school age they are immediately enrolled in American schools. Many of these students, due to the hardships in their home country, have severe interruptions in their formal schooling backgrounds and might even represent the first generation in their family to receive a diploma (Szpara & Ahmad 2007). These interruptions can delay, sometimes severely, the language skills of the students. Some slower second language (L2) developers have been misdiagnosed as having either a language or learning disability due to misinformation received by the schools and teachers (Crago et al., 2008).

Regardless of the fact that NCLB requires ELL students to participate in exams after the first three years enrolled in American schools, many children require a number of years to master the language of instruction before they can participate equally alongside their native English speaking peers (Butler et al., 2001). While Crago et al. (2008) stated that ELL students can take between three and six years to be indistinguishable from English natives in regard to receptive and expressive vocabulary, Ortiz-Marrero and Sumaryono (2010) posited that it can take between five and seven years for ELL students to master cognitive academic language proficiency (the academic language used in schools). Very few people, from teachers to administrators, policy makers to politicians, seem to appreciate the enormity of learning another language in all of its different academic and social aspects.

The problems involved in language learning are exacerbated when considering that many

ELL students, especially refugees or asylum seekers, enroll in the United States in middle school or high school and begin learning English after childhood. Many studies on the effect of Age of Acquisition (AoA) show that there is significant negative correlation between AoA and ultimate L2 acquisition, that is the older you become immersed in the L2, the less proficiency you will be able to achieve. As such, AoA is the strongest predictor of ultimate attainment (Birdsong, 2006). This author continued by stating that in terms of L2 acquisition, working memory, and episodic memory, there is an observed performance decline when the AoA is over the age of 15. However, at any AoA, L2 children are at a disadvantage when it comes to L2 vocabulary. Crago et al. (2008) likens this to L2 children having to hit a moving target, as they are trying to catch up in vocabulary size, the native speakers are increasing their vocabulary sizes as well, so the expectations on the ELL students is increasing over time. Studies have shown that if a student begins during the window of opportunity, the age at which learning potential is at its highest, work level skills of ELL students, such as decoding and spelling, are likely to equal native English speakers (August et al., 2006).

High Stakes Testing and English Language Learners

The combination of the pressure on teachers due to high stakes testing and education legislation and the extra supports required by ELL students, means that this group of students are unprepared for the assessments or are misrepresented by the resulting data. A majority of high stakes tests are written in English, thus putting ELL students that have not mastered academic English at a disadvantage and raises the question about how test results should be interpreted (Coltrane, 2002). Due to the fact that ELL students are much less likely than their English-speaking peers to score at or above proficient levels in both math and reading, many reformers and policy makers view the teaching methods used with ELL students as insufficient (Fry, 2008).

Before legislation such as NCLB, Race to the Top, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, many ELL students were excluded from high stakes tests. While this solves

some problems inherent in testing ELL students, it causes one glaring problem. If ELL students are not tested, there is no data on the success or failure of the program for those students, resulting in a lack of accountability for both teachers and schools. With no data about these students, ELL students and programs cannot benefit from any educational reforms (Coltrane, 2002). This policy resulted in the ELL subgroup becoming essentially the invisible members of the school: unaccounted, unrepresented, and ignored. Some states avoided this issue by assessing student's English language skills if it was determined that they were not proficient enough in English to participate in large-scale content assessments (Butler et al., 2001).

Butler et al. (2001) state that participation in assessments is crucial for the education of all students; from classroom assessments to statewide tests to national assessment programs like the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). While schools no longer give the NAEP, it is important for all students to be accounted for on a national level in order to ensure that states are appropriately educating all students. The accomplishment of this feat is one of the major goals of Race to the Top legislation, which hopes to unify all states curricula with the Common Core State Standards. This is necessary because states do not always sequence their curricula the same way or include the same content and as such national assessment topics would not align to the state curricula.

Under current legislation, all ELL students are mandated to take the statewide assessments, addressing the issue of accountability, but interpretation of the data is still problematic. Coltrane (2002) explains this by arguing that low scores on an assessment might merely mean that the learner has not mastered enough English to demonstrate his/her content knowledge, indicating a language and not a teaching issue needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, there is no way under current school practice to determine which factor is causing poor test performance as there is no single assessment which has proven to be an effective solution to the problem of measuring ELL content knowledge in English when the student's English language

ability is weak because statewide testing reflects English language proficiency, not the students content knowledge or skills (Butler et al., 2001; Coltrane, 2002).

In addition to language barriers and content-related difficulties, student familiarity with American culture plays a role in ELL student success on standardized testing. Coltrane (2002) states cultural familiarity and knowledge is assumed in many test items, and may contain references to ideas or events that are unfamiliar to ELLs due to the possibility that they have not been exposed to those concepts in their native cultures. Even our cultural reaction to vocabulary words might have a different impact on students from different cultures. For example, the word of *election* would bring to the mind of an American native the idea of free expression of beliefs and the people's political power having an impact on the nation. To someone from Azerbaijan, the word *election* might remind them of dictatorial power and fraud. Without the basis in American culture, the students' interpretation of a test question would be skewed even if the student had the content knowledge.

In addition, historic events that Americans take knowledge of for granted, like the Holocaust, might not be taught in other countries, so without the background knowledge that is not in the curriculum of the class, ELL students would be at a disadvantage. Egbert and Ernst-Slavit (2010) state that Social Studies vocabulary can be culturally biased and may have different meanings for students from different cultures. There is also a disconnect between the language on standardized assessments, the language used in the classroom by the teacher, the language of the textbook, and the language used on English proficiency assessments that needs to be addressed before a clear picture of progress and needs can be determined (Butler et al., 2001).

Testing Accommodations and Modifications

One way schools have attempted to lessen the achievement gap is by providing ELL students with accommodations on statewide standardized tests similar to the accommodations provided students with IEPs. Butler et al., (2001) state that accommodations should be regarded

as temporary measures in an effort to provide more inclusiveness for some groups of ELL students. Like students with IEPs, however, Ostovar-Namaghi and Rajaei (2013) cite Anderson (2010) who points out that all pupils are different and the accommodations and approaches provided for these students should be different and individualized. Current practice is to provide all ELL students with extended time on assessments and the ability to use bilingual dictionaries, as a blanket accommodation regardless of individual need.

Some common accommodations that are often provided and appropriate for ELL students can be divided into the following categories: timing/scheduling, setting, presentation, and response. Timing and scheduling accommodations provide student with extra time for the assessment or extra time for breaks during the test. Setting accommodations mean that students take the test in a smaller group, such as an ELL teachers' classroom, to ensure the students are comfortable in their testing room. Presentation accommodations refer to either allowing the testing proctor to explain test items or the test is translated into the students' native language. Response accommodations allow students to respond in their native language or dictate their responses for a proctor to scribe for them (Coltrane, 2002). Many of these accommodations seem like they would be appropriate and beneficial to ELL students struggling to take the test, however, several studies have indicated that accommodations such as extended time, use of glossaries, reading test materials aloud, or modifying the English on the assessment were of little to no help for the ELL students (Ahedi, 1998 and Castellon-Wellington, 1999 as cited by Butler et al., 2001). These findings are corroborated by August et al., (2006) who found that accommodations that provide simplified English did not help, those that provided extended time to ELL students were minimally beneficial. In contrast to Butler et al., August et al., (2006) found that the creation of English language glossaries and dictionaries did seem to help students. This just shows the need for individualized accommodations for student testing.

Many advocates for ELL students and equality have suggested that assessment in the

student's first language would allow educators to assess the student's content knowledge without penalizing the student for the lack of English proficiency. Unfortunately, there are some concerns and issues with testing in the student's first language. First, language assessment is usually done in one of two ways: (1) development of a parallel assessment; or (2) translating the English exam. Parallel development is expensive and requires the development of comparable academic materials in all languages. Translation of the exam requires that there be equivalency of linguistic features, such as word meaning and syntax, between the two exams in order to be valid (Butler et al., 2001).

In addition, even if the expense is not an issue for the school, the idea about whether translation or parallel development would be appropriate for students is an area of concern. August et al., (2006) found that assessment in Spanish had a significant and positive effect if and only if the students had been instructed in that content in Spanish, but a negative effect on Spanish speaking students if they have not been instructed in Spanish. This means that native language is only a useful accommodation for students if the students have had the opportunity for native language instruction. Coltrane (2002) agrees by stating that translation of an assessment into the native language may be helpful for ELLs that have a high level of cognitive academic proficiency in the native language, meaning that they have been taught in the native language. Butler et al., (2001) have found similar results and argue that Spanish only assessments benefit only those with very low English proficiency while students with moderate to intermediate English language skills benefit from a modified English exam. The other major downside to offering assessments in the student's native language is that there are over six thousand languages spoken in the world today, and if a school system offers an assessment in one language they must be prepared to offer assessments in the native language of any student that enrolls or risk creating a system of inequality.

Intervention

Many studies have been performed on the role of vocabulary in an ELL student's success rate on statewide assessments. Broer (2013) cites Freebody and Anderson (1981) who posits that the lack of vocabulary and not the lack of cohesive devices or other learning strategies was the biggest barrier to ELL student success in reading comprehension and writing cohesion. August et al., (2010) argue that focusing on enhanced teaching of a particular literacy component, such as decoding, vocabulary, or spelling, is greatly beneficial to struggling ELL students. Enhancing the vocabulary skills of ELL students through direct teaching of vocabulary and the instruction in vocabulary learning strategies will increase student ability to successfully demonstrate content knowledge on statewide assessments and high stakes tests. Vocabulary instruction is of extreme importance in the Social Studies class because, according to Dwyer (2007) as cited by Egbert et al., (2010), a study of textbook vocabulary shows that the quantity of Social Studies vocabulary by grade exceeded that of all other contents. This situation is made more arduous for ELL students because ELL vocabulary includes not only the typical content words but also academic language words that are used in the Social Studies classroom (Szpara et al., 2007).

The importance of direct vocabulary instruction is demonstrated by the fact that ELL students have been shown to be behind native speakers in the same age groups in not only vocabulary, but the ability to produce antonyms and synonyms, generating analogies and definitions, and making parallels between content and real world situations (Crago et al., 2008). In addition to academic language vocabulary, it is important to teach vocabulary that commonly appears on the statewide assessments, including the predictable patterns and phrases (Coltrane, 2002).

A quasi-experimental study by Ostovar-Namaghi et al., (2013), determining whether vocabulary instruction is effective on Iranian students learning English, has shown that the vocabulary training was significantly effective in the experimental group as shown on a

comparison between pre- and post-assessments in both the control and experimental group. They found that second language learners acquire useful vocabulary learning strategies to reduce the learning burden as well as learning new words. In addition, the study indicates that vocabulary instruction can improve students reading and listening comprehension. Ostovar-Namaghi et al., (2013) claim that more training should be given using cognitive, memory, and comprehension strategies, by embedding them in the regular classroom routine and activities.

There are myriad examples of vocabulary strategies that studies have used or promoted to be used in the classroom including immersing students in language rich environments, direct instruction of individual words, teaching students' strategies, bilingualism in the classroom, word lists, sentence writing, connecting new words with old, having students identify synonyms and antonyms, teaching the words in context providing a number of encounters with new words, making words real by connecting them to the world, physical gesture/visual cues, checking for comprehension, and presenting new vocabulary in both written and verbal form. Teaching students with any or all of the previous strategies will help create a learner-centered classroom where students know not only how to use the strategies that are taught, but when and why to utilize them. Promoting bilingualism in the classroom will allow students to use multiple languages when learning new content. This strengthens overall cognitive abilities, language knowledge, and content specific academic skills. Successful implementation of any or all of these strategies will cause students to become more motivated as they begin to understand the relationship between the use of the strategies and success in learning language (August et al., 2010; Sokmer, 1997 and Weaver et al., 1996 as cited by Broer, 2013; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994 and Yu, 2011 as cited by Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2013; Crawford, 1999 as cited by Szpara et al., 2007).

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of an after-school instructional program for students enrolled in a TESOL program geared for HSA preparation (including vocabulary instruction, test taking strategies, and writing strategies) on an HSA styled American Government test.

Design

This study was based on a quasi-experimental design using a convenience sample. The study used a pre-test/post-test design in which the purpose of the pre-test was to compare the groups prior to the intervention to assess for any pre-existing differences. Groups were compared on post-test results to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. The study did not assess gain scores.

The dependent variable in this study was the student scores on the American Government High School Assessment style exam. The independent variable in this study was the participation in the after-school program. The after-school program convened once a week for a ten-week period and focused on three major skills that were needed for success on the HSA; content vocabulary, selected response strategies, and written response strategies. Thirty-two of the thirty-four 9th grade ELL students enrolled in American Government were pulled out of class for a pre-test, the remaining two were absent from school and were not included in the experiment. Participation in the program was voluntary and those that attended at least half of the sessions were included in the experimental group while those that chose not to attend were included in the control group. Students who attended some, but not at least half of the after-school sessions, were not included in either the control or experimental groups. All 9th grade ELL students enrolled in American Government were then pulled out of class to take a post-test.

Participants

In the district in which this research was conducted, the researcher taught at a school with a TESOL program. There were 1,211 students enrolled in this school and 140 of those students were part of the TESOL program, 11.6% of the school population. This study originally included the thirty-two 9th grade ELL students enrolled in American Government that participated in the pre-test, however six of the students who took the pre-test attended some but less than half of the after-school sessions and were not considered part of the experiment due to the fact that they received an insufficient amount of intervention. This brought the total number of students included in this experiment to twenty-six. The 9th grade status includes only those students that entered high school in the 2013-2014 school year; any student that failed 9th grade in a previous year was not included in this study. Table 1 provides data about the country of origin of the students.

Table 1: Country of Origin of the Students Included in Study	
Country of Origin	Number of 9th grade ELL students
Bangladesh	2
China	1
El Salvador	5
Ethiopia	1
Guatemala	1
Honduras	1
Mexico	2
Myanmar	8
Pakistan	3
Peru	1
Vietnam	1

In order to protect the confidentiality of the students, the number of students from each particular country of origin was not being broken down into whether they were in the control group or the experimental group. The experimental group contained the students that attended at least half of the after-school session. This group totaled nine students with three males and six females. The control group was the remaining seventeen 9th grade ELL students enrolled in American Government, of which five were female and twelve were male. Table 2 shows the age and gender breakdown of both the control group and the experimental group.

Table 2: Age and Gender by Grouping				
	Control Group		Experimental Group	
Age	Male	Female	Male	Female
14	2	1	0	1
15	4	1	0	2
16	2	1	0	2
17	0	2	1	0
18	4	0	2	1

The students in both the experimental group and control group were included with the general education population for their classes. In two of the American Government classes that have large numbers of ELL students, a teacher from the ESOL department co-taught the class with the teacher. The other American Government classes had a much smaller number of ELL students enrolled in the class, and ESOL teachers were available for consultation and pedagogical advice but did not co-teach. Each of the students had one self-contained ESOL class, English as a Foreign Language, which focused on the English language and American cultural assimilation.

Instrument

The pre-test and post-test used in the study were both taken from the 2013 Public Release

Items for the American Government High School Assessment. The Public Release Items are released by the Maryland State Department of Education to provide examples of how students are evaluated on the High School Assessment. Every year that the High School Assessment is administered, some items from the test are released to the public as an indicator of what is being evaluated as well as an indicator of the format that is being used on the High School Assessment. The 2013 Public Release test is composed of three different sections, each of which contains 21-25 selected response questions and one written constructed response. The pre-test consisted of 21 selected response (multiple choice) questions each with four possible answer choices and one written response question. The post-test consisted of 25 selected response questions with four possible answer choices and one written response. The written responses are designed to be answered in one paragraph each and are scored by a four point rubric. The rubric used to score written responses is one that is provided by Baltimore County Public School for use in secondary Social Studies classes. The rubric was created to score the content of the answer and not the quality of the writing, as long as the writing quality does not interfere with the content. Each section assesses content from the entire American Government curriculum, so while the individual questions on the pre-test and post-test were different, they were drawn from the same pool of High School Assessment release questions. One section was used as the pre-test and a different section was used as the post-test. Since the pre-test and post-test had a different number of available points, scores were converted to percentage correct.

Procedure

For this study, the thirty-two 9th grade ELL students enrolled in the American Government class were pulled out of a class to take the pre-test. The pre-test was one section of the 2013 American Government High School Assessment Public Release Test. Two units of the American Government curriculum that is tested on the High School Assessment and had questions addressing that content on the pre-test had not been directly taught in the American

Government class at the time of the pre-test administration; however, all the ELL students were at the same part of the American Government curriculum, so there was no disparity between the students in the experimental group and the control group in regard to the amount of content that was taught prior to the pre-test administration. Once the pre-tests were completed, all students received a verbal and written explanation of the after-school program as well as a letter home explaining to the parents about the after-school program opportunity. Each of the four American Government teachers encouraged their students from the tested group to attend the sessions. This researcher was one of the American Government teachers. Of the original thirty-two students, fifteen students agreed to participate in the after-school program.

Each of the sessions of the after-school program was held on Wednesday afternoons for one hour and focused on three major skills needed for success on the High School Assessment: content vocabulary development, selected response strategies, and written response strategies. These three skills were determined by the researcher to be areas that many ELL students struggle with on the High School Assessment. Each of the sessions focused on a different part of the American Government curriculum: types and systems of government, values and principles of democracy, the Constitution, the executive branch, the legislative branch, the judicial branch, Supreme Court cases, foreign policy, economic systems, and fiscal and monetary policy. Students were encouraged to attend each of the sessions and student attendance varied each session with an average participation of nine students per session. Students who attended at least half of the after-school sessions comprised the experimental group and the ones who did not attend were identified as the control group. Students who attended some, but not at least half of the after-school sessions, were not included in either the control or experimental groups.

Each session followed the same format in order to establish a routine with the students. The students worked with other students in small groups to complete a fill-in-the-blank vocabulary activity. During the vocabulary activity, students used a word bank to define

approximately ten words from each unit. The vocabulary words were selected based on their likelihood of being assessed on the High School Assessment. After the students had the opportunity to complete the vocabulary activity with assistance from the teacher if needed, the teacher discussed the answers to the vocabulary activity by calling on students to read aloud and give answers. The teacher then distributed an activity with four to six selected response questions assessing the information reviewed that session. After students answered the multiple choice questions, the teacher led the class in a discussion of the questions and discussed strategies for answering selected response questions. The students then answered a written response question based on the content that was reviewed that session. In the first three sessions, sentence starters were provided for the students to assist them in completing the written responses. During the fourth and fifth sessions, sentence starters were no longer provided; the teacher asked students to create and volunteer their own sentence starters. In the last five sessions, no formatting assistance was provided for the students. This was intended to assist the students in developing strategies to improve their written responses.

The material for each session was developed based on the assessment limits established by the Maryland State Department of Education and was designed to provide a more rigorous and HSA-oriented review of the material than the student would receive in their regularly scheduled American Government class. The vocabulary review activities were created specifically for the after-school program. The selected response and written response activities were modified questions originally given as end-of-unit assessments in the American Government class. All activities were completed in the after-school program and there were no outside assignments given to students.

At the end of the ten weeks of the after-school programs, all of the 9th grade ELL students enrolled in American Government were pulled from class to be given a post-test. The post-test was a different section of the 2013 American Government High School Assessment

Public Release Test. At the time the post-test was administered, all American Government classes had completed all six units of the course curriculum that is included on the High School Assessments, so again neither the experimental or control group had an advantage in regard to the amount of content addressed in their regular classes.

The scores on the pre-test were compared by an independent samples *t*-test to determine whether or not the groups differed significantly prior to the intervention. The mean percentage correct of the control group (Mean = 26.59, SD = 9.59) did not differ significantly from the mean percentage correct of the experimental group (Mean = 33.33, SD = 15.10) [$t(24) = -1.40$, $p \geq .05$]. Since the two groups did not differ prior to intervention, it was not necessary to control statistically for pre-existing group differences when comparing post-test scores. The post-test scores were compared by an independent samples *t*-test.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The primary purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in achievement on a High School Assessment-style American Government test among ninth-grade ELL students enrolled in American Government class that attended an after-school program compared to ninth grade ELL students enrolled in American Government class that did not attend the after-school program. Achievement was assessed using American Government High School Assessment Public Release questions from 2013.

Table 3 below contains the results for comparing HSA American Government style test scores between the control and experimental groups.

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviation, and t-test Results for Comparing HSA American Government Style Test Percentage Correct Scores				
Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>t</i>-test statistic
Control	17	32.82	12.86	-5.77*
Experimental	9	66.33	16.30	

*significant at $p < .001$

The experimental group had significantly higher mean percentage scores (Mean = 66.33, SD = 16.30) than the control group (Mean = 32.82, SD = 12.86) [$t(24) = -5.77$, $p < .001$]. Consequently, the null hypothesis that there would be no statistically significant difference in the test scores of ELL American Government students enrolled in a test preparatory after-school program and the ELL students not enrolled in the after-school program as measured by their scores on an HSA American Government style test was rejected.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether achievement scores for ninth grade ELL students, as measured by an American Government High School Assessment style test, differed significantly between those who participated in an after-school test preparatory program and those who did not participate. The null hypotheses that there would be no significant difference in the performance of ninth-grade ELL students that participated in an after-school test preparatory program and those that did not participate in the program was rejected.

Implication of the Results

Based on the significant results of this research, schools should implement a similar program for ELL students in statewide or high stakes tested content areas. A program like the one implemented in this research will likely have a positive impact on ELL students in order to improve their performance and increase the likelihood that the students pass the High School Assessment. Participation in this program led to a significantly higher performance for the ELL American Government students and, following that vein, participation in a similarly designed program will likely improve the performance and increase the likelihood that students will pass the High School Assessment in other content areas, such as Biology, Algebra, or English 10. Based on the quantity of content specific vocabulary, Biology would be the most appropriate content to implement a program focused on vocabulary and testing strategies. The English 10 and Algebra High School Assessments have less reliance on content vocabulary and more reliance on using skills, so the structure of the after-school program would need to change in order to align with student needs on those specific tests.

Theoretical Consequences

While reviewing the results of the study, there is clear indication that participation in an

after-school test preparatory program is beneficial to ELL students' achievement scores on the American Government HSA Public Release test. One possible cause of this difference is the emphasis the after-school program placed on both selected response strategies and written response strategies. During the administration of the post-test, this researcher noticed that the students in the experimental group independently used several of the strategies taught during the after-school program, including crossing out wrong answer choices on the selected response and rewording the written response prompt to create sentence starters. The students in the experimental group also seemed more comfortable and confident in their written responses with less hesitation before writing and the overall length of their responses. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that increased exposure to not only the format of the HSA but also direct teaching of strategies for both the selected response and written response portions of the HSA had an impact in the performance of the students.

Threats to Validity

This study did contain some threats to the validity that require discussion. One possible threat to the internal validity of this study was the composition of the control group and the experimental group. While all thirty-two of the 9th grade ELL students enrolled in American Government were originally included in the study, as part of either the control or experimental group, six students had to be removed from the study due to attending some but not half of the after-school sessions, as noted in Chapter III. The exclusion of these students from the study resulted in the control group of seventeen students to be almost twice the size of the experimental group of nine students. There was also a gender disparity in the distribution of students in the control and experimental groups. As noted in Chapter III, there are twelve males and five females in the control group and three males and six females in the experimental group. The experimental group was comprised of the students that voluntarily attended at least half of the ten after-school sessions. While the pre-test demonstrated that the mean percentage correct of the

control group (Mean = 26.59, SD = 9.59) did not differ significantly from the mean percentage correct of the experimental group (Mean = 33.33, SD = 15.10) [$t(24) = -1.40, p \geq .05$], the students that voluntarily attended the after-school program could either have more motivation to succeed than those that did not attend the after-school program.

Another threat to the validity was the uniqueness of the samples. This study examined the impact of an after-school test preparatory program on ninth grade ELL students currently enrolled in American Government. This limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to other populations such as students of different age groups or students in different subject areas. In addition, the results cannot be generalized to student performance on other measures of knowledge of American government such as the ability to discuss the information orally or write term papers.

One final threat to validity is the potential bias in the scoring of the written responses. During the pre-test and the post-test, the written responses were graded by the researcher and one other teacher involved in the after-school program. During the grading of the pre-test written responses, there was no potential bias due to the fact that at the time of the scoring, there was no knowledge by either of the teachers involved in grading which students would be in the experimental group and which would be in the control group. During the scoring of the post-test, there might have been unconscious bias in the grading process because both teachers wanted the students involved in the program to succeed.

Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature

Much research has been done on the impact of vocabulary development on ELL students. August et al., (2010) argue that direct instruction of one of the components of literacy, such as vocabulary, will give students the ability to effectively demonstrate their content knowledge on statewide assessments and high stakes tests. In addition to teaching the content vocabulary, it is important to instruct the students in the patterns and phrases that commonly appear on high

stakes tests (Coltrane, 2002). The success of the intervention in this research can likely be tied to those two key ideas; (1) vocabulary instruction and (2) familiarity with the testing format. The results of this study support the findings of Ostovar-Namaghi et al., (2013), which found that direct vocabulary training is a significantly effective method to improve the vocabulary of Iranian students learning English. While Ostovar-Namaghi et al., study focused on students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and this research focused on students learning English as a Second Language, the successful implementation of vocabulary instruction is successful for both groups.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study provide some information about the efficacy of after-school test preparatory programs and the effectiveness of direct instruction of vocabulary, selected response strategies, and written response strategies. More research is needed before this time of intervention is implemented on a large scale. Future research should be done to determine the impact of after-school programs in other content areas besides American Government, to determine whether after-school programs are effective with English speaking students, to determine whether the effectiveness of the after-school program is dependent on the English language ability of the ELL student, or to determine whether teaching direct vocabulary and test strategies is more effective if taught in an after-school program or if taught in the regular classroom. It would be interesting for future research to try to differentiate whether the content area/vocabulary area instruction or the test taking strategy instruction are equally effective in improving performance. Further studies on these topics could help researchers and educators determine effective ways to help all students master the vocabulary and test-taking strategies for statewide and high stakes assessments. Additionally, researchers could examine the impact of the intervention on student's abilities in various content areas and on performance measures other than the highly structured high stakes assessments.

Summary

This study determined that an after-school test preparatory program focused on direct instruction on content vocabulary and test-taking strategies was significantly effective in improving ninth grade ELL students' scores on a High School Assessment style test. The results of this test are consistent with previous research. However, this study did raise questions regarding further studies that would need to be conducted to determine how consistent the findings are in other schools, other subgroups, and with other content areas. The purpose of education is to assist students in learning skills and developing the ability to apply knowledge. The after-school program created for this research was originally designed to assist students in improving their scores on the High School Assessment, but would also have the secondary benefit of teaching students those skills and how to apply the knowledge that they learned in the program and in the class. Successful implementation of a program focused on vocabulary development and test strategies will help students develop skills, both in the content area that the program is centered around and in students' other content areas.

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