

Impact of Additional Small Group Reading Intervention on English Language Learners

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Abstract

Reading is foundational and fundamental. English Language Learners are learning the English Language along with grade level content. Providing additional target small group reading intervention for ELLs allows them added opportunities to gain core reading skills to increase their reading fluency and comprehension. This study analyzes the impact of additional targeted small group intervention on guided reading levels of first grade English Language Learners. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System was used to measure benchmark and levels of students at the beginning and end of the sixteen-week period of additional small group intervention. The findings show that there was no statistically significant difference in students guided reading level growth over the sixteen-week period although growth was noted among student guided reading levels.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The population of English Language Learners (ELLs) continues to rise in Maryland. With the rise in enrollment comes a heightened focus on this subgroup's performance. In 2018 the Maryland State Report Card identified that in the 2017-2018 school year, only 11.4% of ELL third graders were proficient as measured by the English Language Arts (ELA) PARCC assessment, the percentage declines with only 10.2% of fourth graders and a rapid decline with 2.8% of fifth grade ELLs proficiently performing. As students move through the grade levels the expectations continue to rise. We are measuring academic achievement at grade level expectations for students who are still acquiring a command of the English language. One of the more recent measures of students reading achievement being used is the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment, which is designed to measure accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. This assessment can be given to students as early as Kindergarten to determine their instructional level. This instructional guided reading level can be compared to grade level expectations to determine if a student is considered on-grade level for fluency and comprehension. Interest in this problem came from the underperformance of this subgroup within PARCC on the state level and guided reading focus on a specific school population general in conjunction with the use of the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment system to level students.

The review of the literature focused on many components of small group reading instruction and English Language Learners. The limited research on the specific topic of additional small group reading instruction led the desire to research further.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine if additional small group instruction targeted for English language learners results in improved guided reading levels as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System.

Hypothesis

Targeted small group reading intervention will not show an impact on English Language Learners guided reading level growth as measured by Fountas and Pinnell's Benchmark Assessment System.

Operational Definitions

Targeted small group reading intervention is operationally defined as reading instruction focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Small group instruction occurs within groups of 10 or less students. 3 times per week at 30-minute intervals.

Guided Reading Level Growth is operationally defined as a measure of reading fluency and comprehension as measured by the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System guided reading system students. Benchmark levels are measured in the Fall, Winter, and Spring and monthly progress monitoring occurs for students below grade level. Student achievement will be measured on their growth of reading level and the grade level correlation of their reading level.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This literature review examines the impact of targeted small group reading instruction on English Language Learners (ELL) reading achievement. English Language Learners benefit from additional support as they are learning English as a second language. Targeted small group instruction can be the additional support an ELL needs to thrive. Reading levels can be measured in many ways, the measure of reading achievement that will be examined is the guided reading levels with the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. The first section of the review will define English Language Learners and ESOL programs. The next section will focus on best practices for literacy and for ELLs. Following, instructional grouping will be discussed. Culminating with a discussion of guided reading as an achievement measure, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System used to measure students guided reading growth.

English Language Learners and the ESOL Program

The rise in immigration in the United States has also brought along with it a rise in the number of English Language Learners. English Language Learners referred to as ELLs are students that have a language other than English spoken in their homes. While schools refer to English Language Learners as ELLs or ELs, many government and state agencies use the term LEP for Limited English Proficiency. Using the term ELL, focuses on the child and does not focus on the deficiency of language (Honigsfeld, 2009). Added research by Spees, Potochnick, and Perreira (2016) finds ELL or LEP students are the fastest growing student subgroup in education. Limited English Proficiency students (LEP) makeup about 10% of the country's total school population between kindergarten-12th grade. Public education is changing. As the faces

of our students are diversifying, and the student population of English Language Learners is growing.

To meet the needs of non-native speakers, ESOL has been the dominant model for second language instruction. Throughout the country there are many models of ESOL programs; each looks a bit different among districts and even differs among schools based upon the learners in that school and/or district and their needs. Guiding questions posed by Honigsfeld (2009) focus on the type of support a district or school is looking to provide to its ELLs. Questioning who will provide instruction, what type of curriculum and methods will be used, what language will students be instructed in, and what are the desired outcomes for ELL students in the program? Service delivery for ELLs looks different everywhere you turn: Some pull out small groups, some offer bilingual classes, some push in general education support. Each model strives to meet its learners' needs with the best methods of instruction.

Educational Trends in ELL Students

While ELLs come from all over the world, there are consistent trends present within their educational student subgroup. Reading is the largest area of struggle for much of English Language Learners. Snyder, Witmer, and Schmitt (2017) highlight when comparing ELLs acquiring the English language to their non-ELL peers, it is important to note that ELLs must learn and acquire the English language as well as the grade-level content that their non-ELL peers are also learning. With reading as a struggle, many ELLs get referred to special education services. Gyovai, Cartledge, Kourea, Yurick, and Gibson (2009) found that 56% of ELLs currently enrolled in special education services are referred to those service because of reading issues as well as finding that three quarters of ELL students read below grade level in the third grade.

Many factors become barriers to academic success for ELLs. Some of the barriers that plague many ELLs are low socio-economic-status (SES), culture, language. These barriers can often significantly diminish the success of ELLs in the general education setting and often lead to special education referral and placement (Tam, Heward, & Heng, 2006). Another trend found by Brooks and Thurston (2010) is that ELLs acquire social language quicker than academic language, which may be confusing for their teachers and may cause underachievement and/or referral and placement within special education services. Overall the trends with ELL students are underperformance compared with their native English- speaking peers, significant struggles in reading achievement, and over-representation in special education placements.

Components of Literacy Instruction

Becoming a good reader employs more than just one reading skill. It takes the combination of many reading skills to be a successful reader. When planning and implementing literacy instruction, best practice is to focus on more than one component of literacy. Kamps et al. (2007) proclaim, to learn to become good readers and perform on assessments, skills including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency must be well established. These components of literacy work together to build strong, fluent readers. The learning to read literacy components should be implemented with various instructional intensity and consistent progress monitoring. Using these literacy components as foundations for literacy instruction can prepare students to be successful readers.

Literacy Instruction Interventions for ELLs

The research outlines various layers of interventions for English Language Learners. Best practices for teaching ELLs come to be interventions for those who are learning English as a second language while also accessing their grade level curriculum. The breadth and depth of the

ESOL curriculum and support model differs across states, counties, and schools. Interventions, implemented with fidelity, will support the language acquisition of ELLs. Currently, who and how provides interventions is also inconsistent. In Tam et al. (2006) researchers identified the critical elements for reading instruction intervention program to be focused on vocabulary instruction, error corrections, and fluency building. Skill building with these foci resulted in improved oral reading (fluency) in participants.

Other researchers found, explicit phonological awareness and phonics instruction helped ELLs to outperform their ELL peers who did not receive this instruction too as well as to exceed the reading performance of non-ELLs (Gyovai et al. 2009). Supplying early intervention of explicit instruction instead of waiting on students to fail academically then send students to special education is necessary. When instructing ELLs, Response to Intervention (RTI) is one method of service that could help layer on supports for ELL students. The researchers also find that this could help reduce the number of ELLs represented in special education placements.

Along with the vocabulary instruction, fluency building, and error correction, Gersten and Baker (2000) identify using visuals to reinforce concepts, as well as implementing cooperative learning and peer-tutoring as strong practices for ELLs. Research focuses on many interventions that can be put in place to develop the English language acquisition for ELLs. The researchers also suggest that a strong English literacy program focuses first on the development of proficiency and then fluency in English, then working on formal English use, and finally learning new grade specific academic content. Gersten and Baker (2000) also promote that instructional strategies of explicitly modeling thought for ELLs along with explicit teaching of language.

Martínez, Harris, & McClain (2014) comment that most reading research is based on native English speakers and learners, the researchers strive to look at practices that promote reading development of English Language Learners. The researchers add another layer with their discussion of literacy best practices for ELLs with research suggesting, schoolwide formative assessments to use data that will drive instruction, allowing for restructuring of students to form small instructional groups. These interventions can also be termed best practices as their goal is to foster the language acquisition of ELLs while also supporting reading achievement.

Instructional Grouping Configurations

Research on small group instruction for ELLs and non-ELLs provides that both benefit from small group instruction. Small group instruction acts as a tier two intervention that is facilitated by a teacher or reading specialist which provides targeted instruction. Kamps et al. (2007) note the goal of such targeted instruction is to enable students to catch up on critical reading skills that will provide them the basis to then learn academic content. How small group instruction is implemented and facilitated is like the model of ESOL, being responsive by teacher or school. There is no cookie-cutter small group instruction model. Typically, small group instruction consists of 5-7 students focused on a skill or concept for a short segment or time between 20 and 40 minutes. Within one small group, one or more skill and strategies could be taught and practiced, allowing instructors to direct their focus on the specific needs of the students in their groups.

Brooks and Thurston (2010) found substantial evidence that providing supplemental instruction within small groups to students at risk of reading failure in early grades reduces further reading difficulties and disabilities. English Language Learners can be a part of this group. Baker, Burns, Kame'enui, Smolkowski, and Baker, (2016) found that explicitly teaching

with direct instruction in small groups benefits ELLs by giving them instruction and practice in foundational learning skills. This also allows for a time of academic language instruction at an appropriate level for the students of the small group, not just meeting the middle of the class. Formative assessment can be used to identify areas of weakness' and skills that need development. ELLs do not need to wait until they have achieved a certain level of language proficiency in English before they are included in small groups. The small group does not necessarily need to be made up of on ELLs. While there is limited research on small group instruction for ELLs, Ross and Begeny (2011) did find that both ELLs and non-ELLs provide that both benefit from small group instruction.

Guided Reading as a Measure of Achievement

Guided Reading is one form of small group reading instruction. Schirmer and Schaffer (2010) describe guided reading as a small group lesson with the flexibility to provide students reading instruction with any reading material. Within guided reading lessons, the teacher can tailor their lessons to support students with evidence-based literacy instruction to support students reading growth that can also include their acquisition of the English language. There is limited research on ELLs and their achievement based upon guided reading. However, guided reading is an evidence-based instructional practice widely used to grow students reading ability. The researchers also note,

Because the students' instructional reading level is matched to the readability level of the material, the struggling readers' abilities grow because of learning to read materials that are challenging and that present opportunities for applying newly learned skills and strategies. (Schirmer & Schaffer, p. 57).

A measure of a students' reading growth from guided reading is determined by the Fountas and Pinnell (2012) Benchmark Assessment System (BAS), which uses leveled passages and comprehension questions to determine a students' instructional level. This data drives group and instruction for all students. Instructors use the benchmark assessment system for fall, winter, and spring benchmarks and can use the tool to monthly progress monitor student reading achievement. Fountas and Pinnell has correlated the guided reading levels to grade levels, determining the reading ability of all students measured as relates to their current grade level. The BAS can be used with all children at varying levels, suggested by Fountas and Pinnell to begin at mid-year, Kindergarten. The guided reading level results provides the teacher information on the students' developmental levels and reading progress.

Summary

In summary, there is limited research on small group instruction with ELLs. Although there has been positive research of the effects on student achievement on small group instruction as well as the effects of specific literacy interventions with ELLs. Explicit teaching of ELLs using small group instruction has not been measured in conjunction with guided reading and students F&P benchmark levels. Small group instruction as well as explicit literacy instruction provides positive outcomes for students. Using explicit instruction of literacy skills and strategies in small group settings focused on data-driven instruction may help prevent some mis-identification of ELL students to special education placements. Consistent progress monitoring of student within small groups can determine the effectiveness of small group instruction on ELL students' guided reading levels. Concluding, small group instruction is a model of instruction effective for students to focus on explicit teaching of skills in a customized, direct way, providing avenues for positive outcomes for students.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of small group support on improving guided reading levels of first grade ELL students.

Design

Using the Fountas and Pinnell guided reading system students will be assessed on their reading fluency and comprehension with the benchmark assessment and monthly progress monitoring for students below grade level. Student achievement will be measured on their growth of reading level and the grade-level correlation of their reading level. This study is based on the quasi-experimental design. The independent variable is targeted small group reading intervention. The dependent variable is students' guided reading level growth. The participants will be pre-tested, treated to additional small group instruction, and then post-tested.

Students' initial guided reading levels were determined within the fall benchmark window using the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment. The benchmark assessment determined each student's instructional reading level from a fluency passage score and comprehension score. Students were then assessed again during the winter benchmark window using the same Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. Students read leveled passages based upon their current instructional level to assess their fluency and comprehension and determine if growth has been made.

Participants

The school used within this study is a central area school in Baltimore County. It has a total student population of 511 students with 169 students that are English language learners. This equates to 33% of the school population being ELL students. The racial breakdown of the

school is the following; Hispanic 43%, Asian 26%, African American 16%, White 12%, and 3% Two or more races. The school is in a very populated suburban area of Baltimore County. The mobility rate of students at the school is remarkably high, as the population is very transient with many students bouncing around to 3 other local elementary schools. With over 40 withdraws, upwards of 50% of those are Asian students. Many students withdraw at the beginning of the school year only to return after an extended trip abroad or moving back into the schools' boundaries. During the length of this study 62 students enrolled in this school of that 20 students were Asian, and 24 Hispanic. Even with the high mobility numbers, the attendance rate for the school holds strong at 95%.

The subjects in this study are all ELL students from the same elementary school that are currently in the first grade. Students in this non-random, purposive sample have previously been identified as English Language Learners when they enrolled in the Baltimore County Public School System. This group was selected because they fit the characteristics of ELL learners in the first grade. There are 30 students that are identified as ELLs within the first grade. Within this group of 30 students, they are serviced in separate groups based upon their WIDA scores. Students are given the WIDA ACCESS assessment in kindergarten to assess their competency in the acquisition of the English language in the domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This provides a WIDA score, although this is lagging data from the previous school year. Additionally, within this group of 30 students, 4 have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 3 have Student Support Plans (SST). The participants included were consistently enrolled as newly enrolled ELL students were not counted.

Instrument

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System uses leveled passages in both fiction and non-fiction genres to measure the accuracy, fluency, and comprehension of students. The combination score determines a students' instruction and frustration guided reading level. For this study, the focus of the pre-test and post-test data is to measure the student's instructional level. The fall benchmark completed in late September accounts for the pre-test data. The posttest was administered in January as a part of the Winter Benchmark. The students' levels are measured against grade-level expectations. Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) created a chart for their parent report card guidance document that shows the quarterly breakdown for reading level targets in grades 1-5. For First grade students, BCPS determined for 1st grade an on-grade level 1st grader is reading between a D and a J. An instructional level is determined with a combination score of their percentage of accuracy which is measured by words correct on their fluency passage. Comprehension is scored based upon a 0-7-point scale, 7 is an excellent score. To find a student's instructional level they must achieve 4 on comprehension with at least a 95% accuracy or may have a combination of a 5-7 score on comprehension with 90%-94% accuracy.

Procedures

First grade students in this study were already identified as English Language Learners by Baltimore County Public Schools when they entered the system. The ELL students are split amongst 3 general education classes. They were already in pre-existing groups that remained intact prior to and throughout the duration of the study, the groups were formed based upon their ESOL status. Students were given the fall benchmark assessment, where both their fluency and comprehension were measured to determine their instructional reading level. This is their pretest

score. Small group support is provided by the general education teachers in all 3 classes to all students. The identified participants in this study receive additional small group support from the ESOL teachers. They are double-dosed with small group reading instruction.

During the additional small group treatment, students receive literacy instruction that spans the literacy continuum, focusing on phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The instruction on targeted academic vocabulary helps to build meaning for English Language Learners to boost comprehension of texts. Targeting academic vocabulary as it is traditionally seen in academic setting and texts as well as used in discussion about texts provides an additional layer of support for ELLs. Decoding, is a phonics focus within this additional small group instruction as it aids students on sounding out words to accurately read them works towards students' fluency. Added instruction is built around phonemic awareness and there are comprehension strategies reinforced for students during this additional support time.

This small group support by ESOL teachers was in place for sixteen weeks between the pretest, fall benchmark, to the posttest, winter benchmark. Students received this support, in addition to the small group instruction they received by their general educator with the goal of increased fluency and comprehension scores to advance their guided reading levels and meet the predetermined grade-level guided reading expectations.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study examines the impact of small group reading support on ELL students in the first grade. Data were gathered on four groups of students. Data included the pre-test which is the fall benchmark of students' guided reading levels measured with the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. The post-test data collected was the winter benchmark of student's guided reading levels again measured with the Fountas and Pinnell guided reading level data. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Kit assesses a students' comprehension and fluency to determine their instructional level. The pre-test data was collected in the fall, the post-test data was collected in the winter. Using a score point of a 1 for students currently below grade-level guided reading expectations or a score point of a 2 for students who are at an instructional guided reading level at or above guided reading level expectation. Grade level expectations were determined by a table compiled by Baltimore County Public School's that prescribes the grade level expectation bands that stretch each grade level from the start to finish of each school year. The data was calculated using the score points 1 or 2 for students. For 1st grade students the range is D to J.

A Gain Score was calculated for each subject in each group by subtracting the pretest score from the post test score.

Table 1 below provides the counts and measures of central tendency for the various groups for Gain Score.

Table 1
Measures of Central Tendency

| Small Group ID | Mean | N | Std. Deviation |
|-------------------|--------|----|-------------------|
| A | .3333 | 9 | .50000 |
| B | .4000 | 15 | .50709 |
| C | .2500 | 4 | .50000 |
| D | 1.0000 | 2 | .00000 |
| Total | .4000 | 30 | .49827 |

As can be seen the groups are small, especially groups C and D. Therefore, two different approaches to the analyses were undertaken. First, an independent t test comparing the gain for the two largest groups. There is legitimate concern since the means for these two groups are close, but the other two groups size is below the threshold for meeting requirements of a t test. The t test calculated was not significant.

A second analysis was therefore undertaken using non-parametric statistics that are less sensitive to group size. This was a chi square for independent groups. Results are presented in Table II below.

Table 2
Chi Square Results

Hypothesis Test Summary

| | Null Hypothesis | Test | Sig. | Decision |
|---|---|---|------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | The distribution of Gain is the same across categories of Small Group ID. | Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test | .331 | Retain the null hypothesis. |

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .05.

Based on the two analyses the original null hypothesis stating that added small group support will not affect guided reading of ELL students should be retained. The results and implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study examines the impact of small group reading support on ELL students in the first grade. Analyses conducted in Chapter IV indicated that the null hypothesis that small group reading support does not impact the guided reading level achievement of first grade students should be retained. The data was analyzed using an independent *t*-test, but due to the small group size a second test, Chi Square was used for a measure of non-parametric statistics.

Threats to Validity

All research studies suffer from threats to validity. In educational research, the validity threats are divided into threats to external validity and threats to internal validity. In this study external validity threats specifically involved the sample history, as inclement weather impacted the original number of days the groups received treatment. Overall impacting certain groups dependent on the dates of inclement weather closures and delays. Testing is a threat to external validity is a factor in this study if a student repeats the non-fiction or fiction text at the level they are being tested on. With only a specified number of texts utilized within the benchmark assessment system at each level, a student may encounter the same text in their post-test although using the same text is discouraged, it is likely to happen if a student remains at the same instructional level. Related, the instrumentation of the benchmark assessment kit as a measure of students' guided reading level growth is another threat to external validity as its final assessment of comprehension may be more subjective than the score on the students' reading fluency because it is assessed more concretely.

The threats to internal validity within the design of this study include the added RTI supports put in place for some, but not all the students. Some students included in the study, by

nature of their IEP, 504, EL plan or teacher determined area of need receive additional interventions by the reading specialist or special educators. These additional interventions are long-term events occurring while the students are receiving the treatment. Additionally, the small group instruction within this design was divided over four groups with each teacher instructing two groups. While these teachers plan to provide similar additional focused small group instruction, they are not carbon copies of each other, therefore a threat is that the 4 groups are not receiving the exact same instruction.

Comparison to Previous Research/Existing Literature

Reading is a fundamental skill and thus often studied in educational research. While the actual research on guided reading and ELL students is extremely limited, there are many articles focused on reading instruction and how students benefit from small group guided reading instruction. Spees et al. (2016) quantify the number of ELL students in the United States' school population is about 10%. This is also the fastest growing subgroup within the education population. This group is a high priority focus and need specialized instruction to meet their learning needs. The instruction can be provided by ESOL teachers but can also be provided by general educators. Snyder et al. (2017) focus on the fact that when educational researchers compare ELLs to their non-ELL peers, it needs to be remembered that in the immediate ELLs are working to acquire the English language along with grade-level content presented in their non-native language. This was considered within this study, as academic vocabulary became a focus of the small group guided reading to prepare students for grade level academic content.

A focus on small group instruction for ELLs was supported by Ross and Begeny (2011) as they found that both ELLs and non-ELLs provide that both benefit from small group instruction. The small group instruction within my study allowed for ELL students to receive

guided reading instruction in addition to the small group instruction provided by their general educators. Baker et al. (2016) and Gyovai et al. (2009) supported small group instruction with explicit phonological awareness and phonics instruction as it supported ELL students receiving such explicit instruction and how they outperformed non-ELLs who did not receive such treatment. Phonics and phonological awareness were some components of the guided reading provided but the focus was broader, not as explicitly taught as in Gyovai et al. (2009) study.

Martínez et al. (2014) focus on the best practices that support ELLs in reading. The rationale for their article promotes such a beaming issue, the under-performance of their subgroup academically. They also believe that small group instruction along with a focus on language acquisition is key to driving academic growth in ELLs. They note formative assessment as a necessary measure of achievement. While the instructors involved in my study informally assessed students that is not something that data was collected on.

Implications

The implications for this study lead to need for more teacher support for our ELL students. More face-to-face teacher time is necessary to continue to support this group of students. It is the focus of the teacher time that will drive growth. Many of these students are just acquiring the English language and we are assessing their fluency of a language which they have not yet acquired. As many have said, ELLs are required to acquire the English Language while also acquiring the grade level content. More targeted instruction focused on vocabulary would be a defined focus to truly build the language acquisition of students. A students' English Language Proficiency baseline score would determine their language acquisition stage and would be able to determine the necessary need as related to language acquisition.

While this added small group guided reading, time was not strong enough to make a noticeable impact in the larger group, we must pinpoint if it was the content covered that led to the retaining of the null hypotheses. Questions arise about the number of students being provided with additional small group support, were too many students pulled which minimized the overall time each student received additional support? Is measuring fluency against grade level peers in students whose native language is not English appropriate until they have a more solid command of the English language? Should additional support be provided for either fluency first or comprehension first based upon the needs of the students? Would the data have reflected differences if it was of one teacher and not of two providing the instruction for more consistent implementation? Many implications lead into the need for further research.

Conclusion

There is a need for additional research on small group instruction of ELL students. Specifically, how ELLs achieve when provided with guided reading small group instruction. Additionally, more research should be done on the impact of students working to acquire both the English language and grade level content at the same time. There also needs to be a heightened research focus on ESOL programs and how ESOL pull-out support is implemented across the country, as there appears to be inconsistencies in the service delivery model when it comes to guided reading instruction for ELL students. If this study were to be done again the changes that I would make would be to focus on a direct instruction program, and with only one instructor providing the direct instruction so it is more consistent.

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