

Improving Second Language Acquisition of
English Language Learners

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Abstract

The reading achievement gap between English language learners (ELLs) and English native speakers is increasing due to many factors, including the limited oral language of ELs. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of reading online on oral language for English language learners learning virtually from home and for English language learners learning from a hybrid setting. The differing learning environments (virtual and hybrid) were just one of the many effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The null hypothesis in this action research study was that there would be no difference between the two groups' speaking performances after reading online over time. This study was a descriptive study using survey methodology. The participants were eight second graders from Anne Arundel County, Maryland. All eight participants were English language learners. The research found no statistically significant difference between the two groups' speaking performance after reading online for five weeks.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the process of acquiring a second or new language (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). In recent years, there has been a large influx of English learners (ELs) into the American school systems from all around the world. More specifically, in Maryland, a large percentage of these students are coming from Central and South America. Most of these new students coming in speak Spanish or a dialect from their country and region and will need to learn the English language to be academically and socially successful.

Second language acquisition is composed of four major skills--listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In many different ways, each of these components of language go hand in hand. In order to be successful in school, students have to acquire enough oral language, that is, the use of spoken language to master these skills. Researchers like Rojas et al. (2019) found a correlation between oral language and reading comprehension: students with low oral language performed low in reading comprehension tasks. Having limited oral language becomes a road block into the success of students at all grade levels. Students with this limitation tend to score lower in tests (formative and summative tests and state standardized tests), perform lower in classroom assignments, and are at risk of academic failure. There are many factors that impact SLA but there are also many different strategies, methods, and interventions that help to ensure student success.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a reading strategy would improve second language acquisition of English language learners. The researcher of this study is a second- grade teacher at a majority ELL school. The researcher has experienced the big

achievement gap within the ELs in her classroom and of the school. The achievement gap is even more evident when comparing the levels and achievements of other students in the second grade of different schools in the county and state coming of different populations. This ongoing problem inspired the researcher to study the effect of reading online on oral language.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of reading online on oral language for English language learners learning virtually from home and for English language learners learning from a hybrid setting.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis in this action research study was that there would be no difference between the two groups' speaking performances after reading online over the course of the study.

Operational Definitions

For a better understanding of the study, the following key words are defined:

Oral language- the use of spoken language to express ideas, feelings, and/or knowledge. Oral language mostly refers to speaking and listening skills which have a strong relationship to reading and writing skills.

Online reading- in this study, online reading was done through an adaptive online reading programs called iReady. Students take a diagnostic test during the school year which calculates their levels, strengths, and weaknesses and prepares reading lessons for their needs. Online reading may also be referred to as "reading online."

Second language acquisition (SLA)- the process of acquiring or learning a new or second language by an individual or group.

English language learners (ELLs)- individuals learning the English language. English language learners may also be referred to as “English learners” (ELs).

Achievement gap- the gap or disparity of academic performance between students in comparison to other students in the same grade level.

COVID-19- an ongoing global pandemic due to an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus which affects people in different ways. The pandemic caused school closures around the country/world in 2020 and many changes and regulations for the 2021 school year.

Virtual learning- students learning virtually from home all five days of the week due to COVID-19 restrictions and parent choice using Google sites like Classroom, Meet, Slides, etc.

Hybrid learning- students learning from the school building on Mondays and Tuesdays following COVID-19 regulations (at the same time that the other students in the class receive virtual instruction), and Wednesdays- Fridays learning virtually from home.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review explores different reading methods used in elementary schools. These reading methods, aside from supporting students' reading skills, also support English language learners' (ELLs) second language acquisition (SLA). Section one explains the meaning of second language acquisition, while section two discusses the factors that impact SLA. Section three describes different reading methods and interventions which have been used to enhance second language acquisition. Lastly, section four summarizes these findings and discusses the need for further research of methods that improve second language acquisition of English learners.

Definition of Second Language Acquisition

From the moment children are born, they start acquiring language. This language is called the L1. Any languages learned after the L1 (also called the native language) are called second language(s) or L2; these could be the second, third, fourth or so on. The process of acquiring or learning a new language by an individual or group is called second language acquisition (SLA) (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). A person's first language is typically taught and learned in an informal setting like the child's home. A child born in a multi-lingual family (household speaking more than one language) may also learn a second language informally. Usually, a person's L2 is learned formally outside of the home in schools.

Competence is the ability to do anything successfully. Saville-Troike and Barto (2017) explain that communicative competence is everything a speaker needs to know to communicate and convey meaning appropriately within a group or community. When examining the purpose for SLA, Saville-Troike and Barto break competence into two types of focus: interpersonal and

academic, each of which come with their own priorities. Academic competence is the ability to become successful in an academic setting. The priorities of learning a language for academic purposes start with reading, listening, writing, and speaking, respectively (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). Interpersonal competence is the speaker's ability to successfully communicate with other members of their community; therefore, their focus is different than those learning a L2 for academics. Their focus starts with being able to listen to and then speak the L2, then, being able to read it, and lastly write it (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017). Unfortunately, learning a new language is not a simple task; it is not as easy as checking off the items in those lists above.

Factors that Impact Second Language Acquisition

There are many factors that can impact second language acquisition. Some of these factors can be environmental, physiological and psychological, and/or social. Where English learners (EL) live, who they interact with, what their L1 is (and how similar it is to the L2), among many other things, are all factors that may inhibit or facilitate the SLA of English learners. Furthermore, Saville- Troike and Barto (2017) write that, "language-learning outcomes are influenced by age, aptitude, and motivation. Other factors in individuals' learning styles and strategies correlate with degree of success in SLA" (p. 100).

Moreover, in an academic setting, there are factors that affect academic achievement: oral language and comprehension. Oral language is the use of spoken language to express ideas, feelings, and knowledge. Rojas et al. (2019) expand on oral language and suggest that there is a correlation between oral language and comprehension. Students with limited oral language skills score lower in comprehension tasks and assessments. In the primary grades, there is a bigger emphasis on early reading interventions compared to middle or high school grades. Primary reading interventions have a stronger focus on reading comprehension using linguistic skills

(vocabulary, syntax, and background knowledge) (Vaughn et al., 2019). However, differences in listening comprehension and word reading in ELs influence reading comprehension (Vaughn et al., 2019). Studies also show that ELs are at risk of low academic achievement and score lower in state and national standardized tests (Rojas et al., 2019).

Methods and Interventions

There are many different strategies, methods, tools, and interventions that are being used around the world to support all students but especially students who are at risk of academic failure like English learners. A major focus in education is reading as reading is fundamental and used in most all subject areas throughout a student's academic career. One of the things that researchers recommend is to promote English reading to ELs. Martinez et al. (2014) explain the big three ideas about how to do so in their abstract:

(a) foster academic English at all stages of second language acquisition by explicitly teaching vocabulary, emphasizing cross-linguistic transfer strategies, and supporting ongoing oral language development; (b) adopt a schoolwide collaborative approach to conduct frequent formative reading assessments and use the data to drive instruction by providing accommodations that promote English reading; and (c) implement a variety of grouping strategies to deliver reading instruction within a welcoming and sensitive learning climate. (abstract para 1)

Other methods are commonly seen in elementary school settings, like, read alouds, independent reading, and guided reading. Each has its own procedures. The purpose of interactive read alouds is for teachers to use a text that is typically a higher level than most, if not all, students' reading level to model how to think through the text, to make sense of it, and to practice or review reading skills. According to Senokossoff (2013), picture books are a great

source for rich vocabulary. English learners need that extra vocabulary support in their classes. Recent studies have found that through the use of interactive read alouds and vocabulary activities, ELs improved in their receptive and expressive vocabulary knowledge (Baker et al., 2016). “Acquiring new words is a reading skill that has to be developed to achieve comprehension and fluency” (Norato Cerón, 2014, p. 86).

Choice is often a motivator for young learners. Choice in reading opens up many possibilities for students. Students are able to pick books of their liking, differing in subject, genre, length, among other things. This choice in reading comes with independent reading times. Researchers have found that an increase in allocated independent reading times have demonstrated an increase in reading achievement as it develops reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension skills (Brannan et al., 2020). Independent reading time, though, is only a small part of the reading block. Independent reading time is accompanied by small group reading called guided reading. In a guided reading period, learners experience scaffolded reading instruction in a homogenous group (Chaaya & Goshn, 2010). Students are, as the name suggests, guided through a book with a pre-planned standard at their instructional reading level. This type of small group instruction that is used for non-ELs to teach most reading skills has been found to also be beneficial for ELs as well (Martinez et al., 2014).

Guided reading is composed of three periods: pre-reading, during, and post reading, each with specific tasks (Sholeh et al., 2019). During pre-reading (simply, before starting the book reading), the teacher motivates the students, activates prior knowledge, pre-teaches vocabulary, addresses any new skill to provide comprehension support, and gives this small group a thinking job (Sholeh et al., 2019). Then during portion of guided reading is where students start to independently read the book as the teacher monitors and supports one or two students, one-on-

one. Lastly, students participate in discourse with the teacher's guidance about the book (Sholeh et al., 2019). In this post-reading portion, the teacher is able to monitor the group's, as well as the individual students', comprehension of the reading. Often times, there is an independent follow-up task or activity to practice the standard that was taught.

Studies have found benefits of guided reading in English learners. When comparing pre- and post-assessment scores, Sholeh et al. (2019) found that there was a significant improvement in scores where the students demonstrated "gradual and steady improvement in their reading comprehension (p. 309)."

Conclusion

Within schools, some populations of students who are without proper support are at greater risk of failure. English learners constitute one of these at-risk groups. There are different methods and interventions used in schools to support student achievement that try and close achievement gaps. However, if not implemented consistently and effectively, ELs will fall through these gaps and have a tougher time academically in the future (in middle and high school). Reaching second language acquisition is an important accomplishment in a learner's academic careers (and in their personal lives, too). With proper supports, English learners will be able to acquire enough oral language to support their listening, speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension skills. These skills will lead students to academic success.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This study examines the impact of the amount of time spent reading online to gain vocabulary on the participants' oral language development as it pertains to speaking skills.

Design

This study was a descriptive study using survey methodology. The design was chosen because of the limitations posed by COVID restrictions on in-person/in-class learning.

Participants

The participants in this study were eight second-grade students in an Anne Arundel County elementary school. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's regulations and restrictions, parents and students were given an option to learn in a virtual or hybrid setting. In this study, four of the participants were studied virtually and four were studied in-person, in a hybrid setting. The participants in this study were between the ages of seven and eight. All eight participants were Hispanic, received ESOL services, and also received Free and Reduced Meals, FARMs.

The school where the participants attend serves 565 students, and 36% of students are African American, 59% of students are Hispanic, 2% of students are multi-racial, 2% of students are White, and 1% of students are Asian. 100% of the students in the school qualify for Free or Reduced Meals and 43% of the students receive ESOL services. A total of 124 students were learning in a hybrid setting.

Instrument

Instrumentation was developed by the researcher with the assistance of the research design adviser. A copy of the instrument is in Appendix A.

Procedure

Participants were pre-assessed individually over two days after school hours. The researcher presented a Google Slides presentation through Google Meet for the participants in the virtual group and in-person for the participants in the hybrid group. The pre-assessment presentation had six slides of illustrations (Continental Press Staff, 2016) with background information and a set of questions per slide. As the researcher presented the slides to the participants, she recorded the participants' responses. Then the responses were scored with an oral language development speaking rubric designed by the researcher. The rubric score levels ranged from 1.0-5.5 with clear score level expectations.

During the study, the participants were encouraged to read online using a program called iReady for at least 30 minutes a week. The amount of time that each participant read to gain vocabulary in a week varied based on their personal availability.

After five weeks of independently reading online to gain vocabulary using iReady, the participants were administered a post-assessment using the same format but with different illustrations (Continental Press Staff, 2016), background information, and questions. The participants were presented with the post-assessment Google Slides presentation and asked questions about the illustrations. The researcher recorded the participants' responses and scored them with the same oral language development speaking rubric.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study examines the impact of the amount of time spent reading online to gain vocabulary on participants’ oral language development as it pertains to speaking skills. There were two small groups in this study. One group called Virtual was online. The other group, called Hybrid, was a combination of online and in person instruction.

Data were gathered on pre- and post- speaking tests as well as time spent reading online. Data and statistical analyses are presented in the tables below.

Table 1

Measures of Central Tendency

	Virtual or Hybrid	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PreScore	1	4	4.125	.4787	.2394
	2	2	3.750	.3536	.2500
PostScore	1	4	4.375	.7500	.3750
	2	2	3.000	1.4142	1.0000
Minutes spent online reading	1	4	143.50	57.553	28.776
	2	2	115.50	72.832	51.500

Table 2

Statistical Analysis of the Data

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
PreScore	Equal variances assumed	.667	.460	.961	4	.391	.3750	.3903
	Equal variances not assumed			1.083	2.870	.361	.3750	.3461
PostScore	Equal variances assumed	6.000	.070	1.654	4	.174	1.3750	.8315
	Equal variances not assumed			1.287	1.293	.382	1.3750	1.0680
Minutes spent online reading	Equal variances assumed	.100	.768	.524	4	.628	28.000	53.458
	Equal variances not assumed			.475	1.668	.690	28.000	58.994

Table 2 displays an independent set of t tests of the data. The independent t test was chosen for the data because of the small sample size and the risk of statistical error being small. The F test was run to determine whether the data would meet the requirements of the t test. The non-significant F means that the t test may be used. The t tests that were run were to compare the pre-score and post-score to determine whether they were significantly different at the $p < .05$ level between the virtual group and hybrid group. The test was not significant. The next t test between the virtual and hybrid group was on time spent reading and again the test did not yield statistically significant results. Thus, the null hypothesis that there would be no difference between the groups was retained.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study examined the impact of the amount of time spent reading online to gain vocabulary on participants' oral language development as it pertains to speaking skills. The analysis conducted in Chapter IV indicated that there were no differences between students working online and those working in a hybrid environment.

Implications of the Results

In academic settings, learning the language of the classroom is crucial for success. Students who do not speak that language are at risk of falling behind in comparison to their classmates, academically and socially. General educators and English language teachers work together to prevent these gaps from existing. One way that this is done is through the use of different reading methods, including online reading.

In this study, the researcher found no statistically significant differences in oral language acquisition of the L2 between the participants working hybrid and virtually. However, some of the individual results of the participants demonstrated an improvement in scores from the pretest to the posttest. Four out of the eight participants scored 0.5 higher in the posttest and two participants' scores remained the same. Therefore, although not substantial, most of the participants gained some oral language over the course of the study through the use of online reading.

Threats to Validity

All research studies suffer from threats to validity. The threats are placed into two categories: external threats and internal threats. External threats refer to the type of sample chosen and the size of the sample. The size of the groups and the length of the study was

severely impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. This caused the closing of public schools and then a limited reopening of schools.

With these limitations, the researcher had a small convenience sample of eight participants. A small sample size is less comparable to the whole population and results in a larger margin of error. The researcher was also limited to participants of one classroom; therefore, this study may not be able to speak for the population. With a larger sample size of participants of multiple grades and classrooms throughout the school, the researcher would have been able to portray a more accurate study of the school's population.

Internal validity refers to the design of the study. This pretest/posttest design without randomization suffers from threats involving a lack of a control group, confounding variables, and experimenter bias.

With the limitations to this study, the researcher did not use a control group to compare the results from both experimental groups. Both groups received the same pretest and the same posttest; however, the groups were not randomized. The participants were selected and grouped based on pre-existing factors: hybrid vs. virtual.

Next, we have confounding variables. Confounding variables occur when other variables have an effect on the outcomes of the study. In this study, that variable was the amount of time spent reading online done by the participants due to their setting. The participants in the virtual group appeared to have more time available to read online in comparison to the hybrid group. Both groups had the same learning schedule including a two-hour break between morning and afternoon sessions. However, virtual participants were able to use this time for online reading while hybrid participants, when in the school building, had a scheduled lunch time, recess time, and an activity. The participants' setting over the course of a week may have been a variable

affecting the experimental treatment.

Lastly, this study may have had experimenter bias during the pretest and posttest. When examining the participants' oral proficiency, the experimenter used a rubric with detailed descriptions of each score. However, these scores and the participants' responses to the assessments may have been different if a different experimenter would have graded the participants' performances. The researcher was also the teacher, at the time, of the participants. After working with them for three marking periods (a semester and a half), the researcher was accustomed to the participants and the way they spoke. If this study was conducted with a nonbiased data collector, the experiment would have had a lower internal threat.

Connections to Existing Literature

The literature from previous research reviews the value of different reading methods in elementary school settings for English language learners. Being able to successfully acquire all aspects of a second language is a difficult task. According to Saville-Troike and Barto (2017), in order to achieve academic competence, an EL's priorities of learning a language are reading, listening, writing, and speaking, respectively. Alongside the current study, previous researches studied the effectiveness of reading on second language acquisition. Researchers like Senokossoff (2013), Baker et al. (2016), Brannan et al. (2020), Chaaya and Goshn (2010), and Sholeh et al. (2019) studied different reading methods and how reading improves oral language.

Senokossoff's (2013) study discussed that with picture books' rich vocabulary content, English learners (from elementary school to high school) were able to use the simple and repetitive patterns in the sentences, along with visual-verbal connections to support their L2. Senokossoff also discussed the use of online reading. She described reading online as a different experience than reading an actual book, as different online reading programs include different

features, like highlighted text and dynamic illustrations. In the current study, the participants experienced some of these features as they practiced their reading skills.

Baker et al. (2016) found that interactive read alouds along with vocabulary games helped to build students' oral language. Through iReady Reading, the participants in this study had lessons adapted to their reading level and their needs (based on a reading diagnostic) that included vocabulary games.

As the participants were in different learning environments, hybrid or fully virtual, the amount of online reading done was their choice. Brannan et al. (2020) discuss how choice is often a motivator for students during these independent reading times. From this study, it was observed that the participants who were virtual chose to spend more time online reading than the participants in the hybrid group.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine whether English language learners would improve in second language acquisition by gaining vocabulary through reading. The findings did not indicate significant differences in oral language acquisition between the experimental groups— hybrid learners and virtual learners. The researcher believes that additional research should be done in this area. Future research should use a larger sample size using multiple grade levels, and schools, as well as a control group to better sample the population. The researcher also suggests for future studies to be conducted with a longer timeline to observe more significant growth. Lastly, future studies should also consider conducting a blind study using more than one nonbiased data collector.

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Appendix A



It is important to learn good study skills. As you go through school, you will need to study to remember and understand what you have learned. One good study skill is to keep your schoolwork neat and organized. Then you can find information when you are looking for it. You do not waste time trying to find books and papers.



Jamal is ready to start studying for his math test.
 - _____ how can you tell that Jamal is ready to begin studying?
 - How else?

*tell me more



Mark must also study for his math test.
 - How can you tell if Mark is ready to study or not?
 - What makes you say that?/ how do you know?
 - What in the picture tells you?
 - How does he feel? How do you know?
 - What are some things he can do to help him be ready?



When Allison needs to study at home, she goes someplace quiet. She also makes sure she has plenty of time. Sometimes, she does not understand something. Then she asks her mom for help.



- Why do you think that Alison goes someplace quiet to study?
 - How can this help her?
 - Have you ever needed a quiet space? Why?
 *tell me more



- Why is it a good idea for Allison to ask for help if she does not understand something?
 - Have you ever asked someone for help? Tell me about it
 - What do you think her mom is telling her?
 - Based on what we've discussed, what are some things you can do to study?

Pre-assessment slides with researcher questions



An animal's habitat is the area where it lives. The habitat is made up of the living and nonliving things in that area. An animal's habitat has all the things it needs to survive. Animals need food, water, and shelter. A forest is a busy habitat. In Winter, some animals in the forest, such as bears and snakes, hibernate. In the spring, the snow melts. Birds fly back and make nests. The trees begin to grow green leaves.



- What animals live in the forest?
 - What animal is the biggest?
 - and what does it need in the winter?

*tell me more



- What is one of the small animals you see in the picture?
 - and what does it need in the winter?
 - How do animals find their food in the winter if things are covered with snow?
 - How do they find shelter to live when it gets very cold?

*tell me more



A desert is a habitat that does not get much rain. It is hot and dry. Still, there are many plants and animals that can survive there. Most of the animals search for food at night and sleep during the day. The plants can store water for a long time.



- Explain where you think desert animals go in the daytime.
 - Why do they need to go there?

*tell me more



- Why is it hard to survive in a desert?
 - What animal would have a hard time living in the desert and why?
 - How come living in the desert isn't as hard for these animals in the picture?
 - Based on what we have discussed, which of these habitats would you rather live in? Why?

Post-assessment slides with researcher questions

Pre-assessment and post- assessment illustrations were adapted for virtual use with students from Finish Line for ELLs 2.0 English Proficiency Practice (2016).

Oral Language Development: Assessment Rubric

Score Level	Summary Chart of Score Level Expectations
1.0	Repeat single words; Use gestures; Use L1
1.5	Use memorized chunks of language; Use L1 to fill in gaps; Use highest frequency vocabulary; Yes/No answers
2.0	Use short oral phrases; Restate facts; Groping for vocabulary when going beyond the familiar
2.5	Use basic social language; Simple discourse generally comprehensible; Use general language related to content area
3.0	Simple oral sentences with some detail; When communicating in sentences, generally comprehensible and fluent
3.5	Simple and expanded oral sentences; Emerging complexity used to add detail; Use some specific language related to content
4.0	Use more than one sentence type (<i>simple/compound/complex*</i>); Use words or expressions related to content; Errors don't impede the overall meaning - may reflect first language interference
4.5	Use a variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity; Emerging cohesion to provide detail and clarity; Comprehensible and fluent
5.0	Use a variety of sentence lengths in extended oral discourse; Use technical and abstract language related to content
5.5	Approaching comparability to that of English proficient peers; Errors don't impede communication

***Simple sentence:** I play.

Compound sentence: I like to play and I'm going to the park today.

Linked by FANBOYS: *For And Nor But Or Yet So*

Complex sentence: I will win the game if I try my best.

Independent and dependent clause linked by *because, before, even though, if, since, although, until, and when.*

Pre- and post-assessment rubric modeled after WIDA Speaking Rubric