

**Reading Strategies and Their Impact on Student Achievement for**

**Level I ESOL Students**

**By**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of reading strategies would increase student achievement for Level I ESOL students. This study was quasiexperimental and used a pretest/posttest design. The independent variable in this study was the various reading strategies such as graphic organizers, word walls, and pictures. The dependent variable for this study was the grade achieved on pre- and post-Unit 5 indicator tests. A dependent *t*-test was run to determine whether there was a significant difference in Unit 5 indicator assessment scores from pretest to posttest. Results showed no significant difference between the two tests. If this study were to be replicated, it would benefit from the addition of using a larger sample, incorporating data from multiple schools that have ESOL I students. This study would benefit from additional research in using curriculums other than just social studies. Finally, the study should be replicated after providing additional professional development in the area of teaching Level I ESOL students. The data of this research did not offer the positive outcome that was desired. However, it provides useful conclusions and opportunities for both the Level I ESOL student and his/her teachers. It opens the door for future discussions, research, and much-needed debate on how best to help ESOL students be successful in American classrooms.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview

America is no longer considered the Great Melting Pot where immigrants come and assimilate and blend their cultures with American culture. Instead, America is now known as the Salad Bowl where immigrants are no longer assimilating into American culture but are keeping their own culture and rich heritage and having their own distinct 'taste' in the 'bowl.' For example, when you eat a soup, it is usually made from many different things but has one distinct taste. When eating a salad, you not only see all the ingredients, but with each bite, you taste them. America is no longer many people turned into one type of America but is instead many people combined to make one great America, rich with many different ingredients (cultures, heritages, or qualities).

The growing number of immigrants coming to America all has the task of learning the native language, English. The American educational system is slowly trying to help students attain success in American schools but with limited success. Classrooms across the country are admitting record numbers of English as a Second Language (ESOL) (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005) students, but teachers have not been trained to handle the language barriers, and administrators are lacking the funds for the necessary professional development, supplies, and resources.

The basic strategies for professional development for ESOL teachers consist of buddying ESOL students with an English speaking student (just to make sure the ESOL student is on the right page), providing pictures and images, modeling, giving oral directions accompanied with written directions, and using graphic organizers, concept maps, word walls, and think alouds. These methods offer places to start and are generic at best, but they are not tailored to a specific

subject matter. Each subject has its own vocabulary and complicated content, so professional development should be tailored specifically for that content. Math is more of a universal subject, so its reading strategies would not work in an American Government class. Explaining the types of government using terms such as parliamentary, representational democracy, and confederate to an ESOL student whose English vocabulary consists of “hello” can be quite daunting.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of reading strategies would increase student achievement for Level I ESOL students.

### **Hypothesis**

Implementing various reading strategies will have no effect on increasing student achievement for Level I ESOL students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade American Government class.

### **Operational Definitions**

The independent variable in this study was the various reading strategies such as graphic organizers, word walls, and pictures. The dependent variable for this study was the grade achieved on pre- and post-Unit 5 indicator tests.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review explores effective reading strategies to increase student achievement for Level I ESOL students. Section one provides a description of reading comprehension and provides examples. Section two defines what an ESOL student is. Section three focuses on the relevancy of this topic, addressing the question of why this topic is important. Section four describes the classroom scene and such issues as how the classroom looks when ESOL students are meeting with success and when they are not. Section five lists possible interventions to allow ESOL students to meet with success. Finally, in section six, a summary is provided.

#### **What is reading comprehension?**

In layman's terms reading comprehension is being able to read a text and understand what was just read. According to Ganske and Fisher (2009),

Researchers in the area of reading comprehension maintain that comprehension is dependent on the interaction of four sets of critical variables: (a) reader variables (age, ability, affect, knowledge bases and motivation); (b) text variables (genres, format, features, considerateness); (c) educational-context variables (environment, task, social grouping, purposes); and (d) teacher variables (knowledge, experience, attitude, and pedagogical approach). (p. 37)

In order to be able to comprehend what is read, a student must have all the above variables in place.

There are three methods of reading comprehension: reader response, reciprocal teaching, and gradual release of responsibility (Fisher, Lapp, & Frey, 2011). ESOL Level I students fall

into the category of practicing the first method. This is seen with the use of graphic organizers, questions and answers, word walls, and pictures with words or definitions.

### **Who is an ESOL Student?**

ESOL is an acronym for English for Speakers of Other Languages. There are a few other terms that are used interchangeably, such as ELL (English Language Learners) and LEP (Limited English Proficiency). There is no true definition that defines the term. However, according to Sable, Thomas, and Sietsema (2006),

...in general, ESOLs are those who speak language(s) other than English at home and who learn English as the dominant language of the media and education in the host culture. In a report released by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) these students are defined as individuals who were not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English; or individuals who come from other environments where a language other than English is dominant....” (p. c-5)

### **Relevance of ESOL Instruction**

In the wake of No Child Left Behind and the mass influx of immigrants coming to America (legally and illegally), school systems across the nation have been flooded with a new type of student, the English Language Learner (ELL). Although these students are not considered new in the very sense of the word, they are new to a majority of teachers who have not been properly educated about or trained on how to teach these students their content.

There are approximately 450 languages spoken in our schools today, and it is projected that by 2015 more than 50 percent of all students in K-12 public schools across America will not speak English as their first language (Gray & Fleischman, 2004). In other words, American classrooms and teachers are in line for a major overhaul at lightning speed. This dramatic

change can bring new opportunities for professional growth for the educator as well as newfound stresses of being unprepared or unqualified to meet the needs of their new students.

Administrators may feel some of that angst as well. Due to the accountability requirements of NCLB, including test scores of ESOL students is law. Having the scores for this group of students included in a school's overall scores may play a role in determining whether or not a school makes Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Gray & Fleischman, 2004). Therefore, using these same students' scores when it is time to consider evaluations and salary increases for teachers who have not yet received the professional development to meet the needs of these students could create a grievance for teachers' unions. In addition, using ESOL students' test scores can create a situation of teachers seeing this as yet another task on a very full list of to-dos.

Some public schools across the country have ESOL or ELL programs, but they are fighting for appropriate funding to train their educators through professional development. Looking for funding to purchase resources and the technology needed to incorporate strategies in the classroom is one key to solving the challenge of how best to educate this special group of students.

### **Inside the Classroom**

The successful ESOL student is in a classroom with a multitude of resources and with a teacher who has had significant professional development around how to incorporate strategies to help their students succeed. The ESOL student is actively engaged, participating, and generating and answering questions. He/she is able to make inferences, generalize, visualize, retell, and summarize. The ESOL student is part of the class. He/she has made friendships and enjoys the process of learning. As Chun (2009) states, "For ELL students their increased

engagement can facilitate their entry and apprenticeship into important social networks that amplify opportunities for academic success in mainstream classes” (p. 144). One example of how better to involve ESOL students in the classroom might have students reading and starting book clubs and websites for blogging. That not only incorporates a social aspect, but it then provides a positive intervention for reading and comprehension.

According to Burgoyne, Whiteley, and Hutchinson (2011), just because a student can decode words doesn't mean that he/she is comprehending their meanings. As such, when an ESOL student does not meet with success, the lack of participation from the student may be due to language barriers, not understanding the language, or with incorrect answers. Failing grades may become prevalent, and frustration and class disruptions may occur.

The classroom should be a place for all students to grow socially and academically. The teacher's role is to ensure that both types of growth occur. The ESOL student can grow and learn in a positive learning environment that allows him/her the opportunity to learn the language, curriculum, and culture of the classroom/school.

### **The Problems**

Due to the lack of training the American teacher receives and the language barriers between the student and the teacher, there are several problems that may arise for the ESOL student. One of the problems is the language barrier present between the teacher's frustration to teach and the student's frustration to learn. Another problem is that anxiety levels in ESOL students may rise due to the frustration of not being successful and increasing dropout rates (Garrett & Holcomb, 2005). One more problem could be the difficulty a teacher faces in communicating with the parents. An added problem facing ESOL students is the increase of self-isolation and low self-esteem that are attributed to their lack of understanding. Yet another

problem is the age of arrival (AOA). A study conducted by Roessingh (2008) found that older arriving students ages 15-16 were outperforming students aged 12-14, and students aged 6-11 struggled the most in “developing cognitive academic language proficiency” (p. 88).

### **Interventions**

The old adage, “It takes a village to raise a child,” is best used to describe the interventions used for the ESOL student. Parents (and family members), teachers, school, and community are essential partners in ensuring that an ESOL student meets with success.

Parents play a key role in the success of their ESOL student. They need to be visible and available. They should make an effort to come in and see the classrooms and attend the functions and festivities that the school schedules. According to Gray and Fleischman (2004), it is beneficial to have ESOL parents come into the classroom and share their cultures with the class/school or to attend ceremonies to celebrate in the success of their students. This shows the student that his/her parents are invested in what he/she does and are concerned about his/her success and wants to see him/her do well in school.

The school’s role is to increase multiculturalism around the school. That can be as simple or as elaborate as the budget allows. A multicultural poetry contest, displaying posters of famous people of different ethnicities, including little known facts on the morning announcements, and having multicultural party inviting families to share their culture, clothing and food, invite guest speakers and organizations to speak to the students. Gray and Fleischman (2004) suggest that the school look into having school communication translated into the numerous native languages of the families within the school. The school’s efforts (or lack thereof) demonstrate how much (or how little) the school values and embraces its varied cultures. In addition, the school’s efforts are viewed by not only the parents but the community.

The teacher's role is to seek out professional development that would allow him/her to learn new and not-so-new approaches to use in the classroom. For example, the teacher could incorporate strategies such as scaffolding or visual aids, and use technology to incorporate video storytelling. The teacher can also incorporate the use of word games, music, dance, and visual arts in the classroom (Algozzine, McQuiston, O'Shea, & McCollin, 2008). The teacher's ability to communicate with ESOL students and their families will help in the learning process.

The community has resources that are available if the schools and districts ask. There are foreign language instructors at the local colleges and universities who may offer suggestions or even their services (Gray & Fleischman, 2004). Some communities offer multicultural fairs that are usually free.

### **Summary**

What constitutes success for an ESOL student? Success will not come quickly and will not be easy for anyone involved. For example, when an ESOL I student who speaks no English (other than 'hello') is able to match pictures to words/terms and then answer a true/false question, that is success on a small level. This same student may, at some point, be able to answer three questions on an exit ticket. That can also be viewed as success. The next step might involve asking the student to compare or contrast two ideas. In the end, the goal may be to be able to have an ESOL student write an essay and explain his/her thinking. The progression is slow but attainable if the teacher has the training, resources, and technology.

School systems have to start by revising their budgets to offer professional development to teachers and staff and find the funding needed to purchase resources and technology needed in classrooms to obtain that goal. "The educational priority must be to ensure that teachers and

schools have the tools they need to improve educational outcomes for many diverse learners”  
(Wayman, McMaster, Saenz, & Watson, 2010, p. 329).

When ESOL I students achieve success in the classroom, it will transcend beyond the classroom and into the real world. Teachers will be instrumental in helping transform this special group of students into productive citizens and lifelong learners.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of reading strategies would increase student achievement for Level I ESOL students.

#### **Design**

This study was quasiexperimental and used a pretest/posttest design. The independent variable in this study was the various reading strategies such as graphic organizers, word walls, and pictures. The dependent variable for this study was the grade achieved on pre- and post-Unit 5 indicator tests.

#### **Participants**

The students selected for this study were chosen from a convenience sample. The study was performed at a Baltimore County public high school. The school system has only five ESOL centers, and this particular school has experienced a tremendous influx of ESOL students. This particular 9<sup>th</sup> grade American government class had the greatest number of ESOL students in one setting. In all, seven ESOL students were selected to participate in the research. Four spoke Spanish, two spoke French, and one was an Arabic-speaking student.

#### **Instrument**

The instrument of choice for this study was a curriculum-based Unit 5 indicator multiple choice quiz. This was given to the ESOL students as a pretest. The same quiz was used at the end of the four-week unit. The indicator quiz was deemed valid because it is taken directly from the curriculum and met the researcher's standard for face validity. The terminology and wording that was taught and used in class was also on the indicator quiz. There was no empirical evidence to determine its reliability.

## **Procedure**

To assess students' knowledge, they were given a six multiple-choice question pretest on the judicial system. Afterward, the researcher chose to implement various reading strategies throughout the four-week period to assist ESOL students in their reading comprehension. Graphic organizers were used to illustrate the criminal and civil law proceedings. In addition, the ESOL students took a gallery walk to look at pictures and their definitions which depicted types of civil and criminal crimes. The ESOL students wrote down the definitions and also created an illustration to match the terms used daily. The researcher incorporated multiple choice questions into the daily warm up to align with the pre- and posttest style. Technology was introduced in the lessons through PowerPoint slides on which to take Cornell notes as well as a televised episode of Law and Order to show the students a prosecutor, defense attorney, plea bargain, and warrant. The ESOL students were given short readings and an identical reading with some of the words omitted to fill in the blanks. At the conclusion of the unit, the Unit 5 posttest was again administered to the ESOL students to determine whether the various reading strategies implemented over the four-week period improved reading comprehension for the Level I ESOL students.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine whether various reading strategies could be effective in increasing student achievement for Level I ESOL students. Seven ESOL students were conveniently sampled in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade American Government class in a Baltimore County public high school.

The students were given a pretest, the Unit 5 indicator assessment, followed by the treatment (various reading strategies) which took place over a four-week period. The students finished the unit by taking the posttest, the identical assessment. Table 1 below shows the results of both the pre- and posttests.

Table 1

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre- and Posttest Unit 5 Indicator Assessment Scores for the Group*

Pretest	Posttest
3.29 (1.11)	3.57 (1.51)

A dependent *t*-test was run to determine whether there was a significant difference in Unit 5 indicator assessment scores from pretest to posttest. Results showed no significant difference between the two tests,  $t(6) = -.341, p > .05$ . The null hypothesis was supported since the intervention produced no significant effect on student achievement. These results and their implications will be discussed in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of reading strategies would increase student achievement for Level I ESOL students. Seven students were conveniently sampled and over a four-week interval were given American Government lesson plans that incorporated a variety of reading strategies with the common goal to increase their achievement. The end goal would be an increased score on the posttest. The data was analyzed using a dependent *t*-test, and there was no significant difference found. The null hypothesis was supported in that the various reading strategies implemented had no effect on the Level I ESOL students.

#### **Theoretical Consequences**

One theoretical consequences found throughout this experiment would be application of Erikson's Identity versus Role Confusion theory. Some ESOL students in this study exhibited Erikson's stage of identity moratorium. They are in the process of acclimating into American society as teenagers, and they know where they come from but are trying to figure out who they would like to be. They are questioning how much of their previous culture they want to keep and how much they want to become a typical 'American teenager,' just like their classmates. As they go through the American school system and interact with other students, they develop relationships with American students and are exposed to different ideas, values, and cultures.

While some students find the transition smooth, there are many who struggle and are overwhelmed with the transition. Some drop out, while others refuse to speak in their native language (Garrett & Holcomb 2005). Due to the multicultural nature of American schools, the

school house is a great place for an ESOL student to be exposed to and to feel safe enough to explore his/her identity development.

However, the identity development for some Level I ESOL students may also pose some challenges because of factors beyond their control, such as discrimination or the feeling of being an outcast, different, and/or alone. Some ESOL I students will find themselves stuck in the stages of Identity Diffusion or Foreclosure. If the Level I ESOL student's parents are holding the reigns too tightly, more often than not, the student will reject or rebel in reaction to the family turmoil (Berk, 2006).

### **Threats to Validity**

A threat to the external validity that was present was sample selection; this was not a true sampling of students. Schools generally use a computer that creates class schedules, but the ESOL chair rearranged the schedule of these seven ESOL students and put them into the same class for tracking purposes. For that reason, this study used a convenient sample.

Another threat to the internal validity was the experimental testing. The study took the form of a pretest, the treatment, and a posttest. This is a threat based on the notion that taking a pretest could change (improve) the results of the posttest. This threat is even ominous knowing that the treatment timeframe was four weeks. In other words, the closer the testing window, the greater the threat.

Another threat to validity would be the selection-maturation interaction of the students. Although all of the students were in Level I ESOL, they each are at different maturation rates when it comes to speaking and interpreting the English language. Unfortunately, some of the content that was covered during class was not able to be translated to the Arabic-speaking student. The external threat was treatment diffusion. Whereas the Spanish students would

translate to the other students who didn't understand the content and the same was true for the French-speaking students, since there was no translation at points, some content was never learned by the Arabic student. This would, of course, have an effect on the performance level of this student as well as on the entire sample's performance on both the pre- and posttests.

### **Connections to Previous Studies/Existing Literature**

There are a number of studies that have been conducted on the area of the achievement of the ESOL student. They offer a wide range of approaches to acquire this task. The majority of the research focuses on reading, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Since the same reading strategies are used in a social studies class, that data was used for this research. The researcher was able to incorporate the use of icivics (website) in the lessons which allowed students to hear how the courts were created, how they operate, and their functions in the judicial system. This strategy is similar to what was done in Mills' (2009) study, which focused on used the strategy of using speaking and language to produce achievement in reading comprehension. According to Mills, spoken language is just as imperative as the written word. The current research allowed students to listen to a reading and then work collaboratively to answer questions on the subject. These questions would incorporate the different levels of Bloom's Taxonomy to reach the varied educational levels of the students.

Gray and Fleischman's (2004) study focused on the use of visual aids. According to Gray and Fleischman, presenting content in a visual aid (tables, charts, graphic organizers, etc.) and encouraging students to use the same tools helps with the retention and understanding of material. Gray and Fleischman's study centered around the notion that the same approaches and strategies to teaching lessons we use successfully with native speakers should be used to reach our ESOL students. Gray and Fleischman also mention that it is important to view the ESOL

student as an additional resource and not a problem. They advocate the use of scaffolding strategies, visual aids, small group instruction, and simple and clear language—no slang. Gray and Fleischman indicate that ESOL students will not meet with success if there is not a strong relationship between the family and the school. Gray and Fleischman’s strategies were implemented by the researcher daily in the instruction.

Finally, vocabulary development and development needs to be supported and developed in Level I students in order for them to achieve “higher-order skills of reflection, understanding, and reasoning that are needed for comprehension” (Burgoyne et al., 2011, p. 353). The researcher found that the teaching of the vocabulary was a bit more challenging than the other strategies used to break the language barrier.

### **Implications for Future Research**

If this study were to be replicated, it would benefit from the addition of using a larger sample, incorporating data from multiple schools that have ESOL I students. Using a larger population to obtain data would include other schools and would then include offer a greater variety among Level I ESOL students in terms of ethnicity, values, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and views on education. This would allow the researcher the opportunity to use the data to determine whether certain ethnicities or school populations are meeting with success more than others.

This study would benefit from additional research in using curriculums other than just social studies. To be able to compare the achievements between different subject matters would be invaluable to knowing which content areas and instructors would benefit from additional professional development.

Finally, the study should be replicated after providing additional professional development in the area of teaching Level I ESOL students. Providing teachers with this additional training prior to the performing the research may result in a more favorable outcome.

### **Conclusions**

The data of this research did not offer the positive outcome that was desired. However, it provides useful conclusions and opportunities for both the Level I ESOL student and his/her teachers. It opens the door for future discussions, research, and much-needed debate on how best to help ESOL students be successful in American classrooms.

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