

The Effects of Phonics Intervention  
on Reading Fluency and Decoding Skills  
of English Language Learners in the Fourth Grade.

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of phonics intervention on decoding and oral reading fluency skills for English Language Learners in the fourth grade. This study used a pre-test and post-test design. Participants engaged in phonics interventions during their daily guided reading program. The Beginning Decoding Survey measured basic decoding skills and the Oral Reading Fluency Assessment measured oral reading fluency. There was no statistically significant difference between the mean score of the decoding pre-test (Mean = 31.20, SD = 10.01) and the mean score of the post-test (Mean = 35.0, SD = 10.98) [ $t(4) = 1.53, p = .201$ ]. There was no significant difference between the mean score of the fluency pre-test (Mean = 33.80, SD = 15.09) and the mean score of the post-test (Mean = 31.80, SD = 8.90) [ $t(4) = .32, p = .77$ ]. The overall mean score increased for decoding however it was not enough of a difference to be statistically significant. Due to there not being a statistical difference between the pre- and post-tests for decoding and oral reading fluency, the null hypothesis was supported as the phonics intervention did not increase decoding and oral reading fluency skills. More research needs to be done in the area of which instructional approaches are most suitable for English Language Learners in the intermediate grades to increase overall reading skills.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Overview**

The act of reading is critical in all subject areas. Students need to read throughout the school day, and it is also considered a critical life skill that is needed outside of school. However, many students are still struggling to read in the upper elementary grades. For example, many fourth and fifth grade students may not have developed adequate reading skills to perform grade-level tasks in subject areas such as science, social studies, and mathematics. Students need to develop basic reading skills in the primary grades in order to become fluent readers in the upper elementary grades. Fluency is the ability for a student to read words automatically and without effort in a specific amount of time. Students with learning disabilities and English Language Learners often do not have the fluency rate and skills that would be needed to attain academic success with grade-level curriculum. They tend to read slower than their peers and tend to grasp concepts more slowly than their peers. This may lead to other issues such as poor self-esteem (Rowley, 2015).

According to data provided by the Migration Policy Institute during the 2016-2017 year, there were 9% Limited English Proficient Learners in Maryland schools grades K-12. This percentage equals over 75,000 students who speak over 200 different languages. Many of the students have academic deficits that can remain for up to seven years. Graduation rates in Maryland for students with limited understanding of the English language have also dropped, according to data from 2016-2017 (Sugarman & Geary, 2018). Fluent readers must develop good phonemics awareness and phonics skills to become fluent readers (Rowley, 2015). Research that

aims at identifying the successful instruction for English Language Learners will provide beneficial information for teachers and students. Closing the academic gap and the amount of time students remain English Language Learners should be of most importance. Understanding the importance that reading has throughout the academic day, made the researcher want to research best practices for instruction of ELLs. If English Language Learners can read in English, many academic opportunities will be made available to them. Reading is a critical life skill that English Language Learners must acquire through research-based instruction.

### **Statement of Problem**

This study was designed to determine the effects of phonics intervention on reading fluency and decoding skills on fourth grade English Language Learners.

### **Hypothesis**

There will be no difference in reading fluency and decoding skills of English Language Learners students who received additional phonics interventions during reading instruction.

### **Operational Definitions**

The independent variable in this study is phonics instruction during guided reading lessons to five English Language Learners. Phonics instruction can be defined when letter-sound relationships are taught repeatedly to students. These letter-sound relationships help students decode and read words. The dependent variables in this study are fluency and decoding skills.

Guided reading lessons are comprised of sight word recognition, oral reading with teacher support and strategies to boost comprehension skills. Fluency for the purpose of this study is the amount of words read per minute by students when given an instructional level passage.



Decoding skills can be determined by assessing a student's breakdown of words by letter patterns. Decoding enables students to read familiar and unfamiliar words and make meaning of those words. The Beginning Decoding Survey is an assessment that analyzes basic decoding skills through reading real and nonsense words and is one of the instruments used in this study. This is a diagnostic tool that will show strengths and weaknesses in the area of phonics skills. The other instrument used in this study is an Oral Reading Fluency assessment. This assessment measures reading that is done smoothly and without effort. The number of words read per minute is the fluency score for the students/participants.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This review of literature discusses the impact of decoding skills, fluency skills on comprehension skills on struggling 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students. The introduction of this literature review will define key concepts such as decoding, fluency, and comprehension and provide a brief history of reading instruction. The next section will describe the predictors of reading and then implication for reading instruction, teaching reading English Language Learners, and reading interventions are provided. Finally, a summary of these ideas is presented.

#### **Introduction**

Many students struggle to read fluently, decode and comprehend what they are reading even in the intermediate grades, such as fourth and fifth grades. When students learn to read, research suggests they should develop good phonemic awareness skills and phonics skills to become fluent readers (Rowley, 2015). Fluency is the ability for a person to read words automatically without effort. Fluent readers read with expression and can read at a pace that enables them to read texts in a reasonable amount of time. When students are fluent readers, they understand the words in the text and can then comprehend or make meaning of these words. The student can read at a rapid pace that allows them to decode the words naturally without much effort. Rowley also emphasizes that students in upper elementary grades need to be able to read the text in math, social studies, and science classes, and when too much effort is spent decoding words, the overall meaning is lost. However, teachers need to determine the appropriate rate of fluency for students. Students with learning disabilities need to read at a decent enough pace to be able to understand the full meaning of what they are reading, and many do not. Fluency

strategies need to be taught to the point where students read fast enough to be on grade-level, but at a certain point, the need for them to read faster is not needed (O'Connor, 2018). This means reading a certain number of words for that grade level. For example, a student in first grade will have fewer words to read than a fourth-grade student. Teachers should provide instruction in fluency to allow students with reading disabilities to make gains in words read per minute, but when the target rate has been achieved teachers should focus attention on building other skills, such as comprehension. A study conducted by O'Connor (2018), showed that students who exceeded the expected words read per minute by grade did not always do better with the comprehension of the text. More information is needed to determine the appropriate number of words read per minute that directly correlate to appropriate comprehension skills for a specific grade level. When a student reads at a good pace, they not only build sight word knowledge but vocabulary knowledge as well. So, the more text that can be read by a student, the more words they will know. Students with learning disabilities, especially in the area of reading, tend to read more slowly than their peers and tend to grasp concepts taught across the curriculum at a slower pace.

### **Decoding**

Decoding is the breakdown of words by letter patterns. For example, the “ea” makes the long e sound most of the time. Decoding skills help students read words they have never encountered before. However, there are many oddities to the phonics rules. When decoding abilities for a student are below grade level, that student may fall behind in overall reading gains unless interventions in phonics are provided through daily instruction. Examples of how this is done include explicit phonics instruction incorporated in the reading program.

## **Comprehension**

Comprehension is the ability to read the text and understand it fully to therefore gain knowledge and meaning from it (Clemens, Simmons, Simmons, Wang & Kwok, 2017). Students who lack life skills or background knowledge will have a difficult time making meaning of the text when there is little knowledge of the concepts in the text. According to the Clemens article, students in upper elementary grades who struggle with reading fluency and vocabulary acquisition have deficits in comprehension. Reading information from a book or an article should come naturally. When too much time is spent sounding out words or trying to understand new vocabulary, the overall understanding of the text is missed. This results in poor comprehension. Teachers need to have interventions in place to help struggling readers decode efficiently to read with fluency and better understand the text they are reading.

## **Reading Instruction: Influences and History**

There are varying factors that may cause delays in reading skills. The overall shift in preferred instructional methods from phonics to whole language back to phonics instruction in the 1900s may be partly to blame. Beck and Beck (2013) discuss the history of reading instruction and the inconsistencies in viewpoints from educators and researchers in their book Making Sense of Phonics. The instruction of reading has taken on different forms over the years. There has been a shift in the way it has been taught. In the 1920s, teachers used phonics instruction to teach reading, but many felt as if this was a tedious approach to teach students to read/decode words as children at that time had to memorize many different phonics rules through constant drill practice. Meaningful reading was not taking place in the classroom and the overall feeling of this teaching approach was that children were not challenged with this type of teaching. After that, the whole language approach took over. From the 1930s to the 1950s the

look-say approach and the sight word method replaced the previous phonics skill and drill practice. Sight words are words that are commonly used and need to be known upon sight and phonics rules are not utilized when reading these types of words. When words were taught using this approach, children did not have to learn the sound patterns that make up words. Children were taught to memorize the entire word instead of learning the sounds that make up the word. Around the time period from the 1930s to the 1950s, many educators felt that the whole language/whole word approach was not the best option for teaching students to read. Sometime during the 1950s, the whole word approach was challenged, and Rudolph Flesch supported the return to phonics. Flesch was an American author who was a proponent of phonics instruction and did not support the whole-language approach. However, not everyone agreed with his stance on the return to phonics, due to his lack of data to support phonics instruction as being the best form of instruction. After that, instruction in phonics took over in the classroom and whole language was put off to the side. From the 1960s to the 1980s phonics returned to the classrooms and the education world. (Beck & Beck, 2013). However, there was a debate about how phonics instruction should be taught, and the correct way to teach phonics was still up for debate. It was recognized that explicit phonics still needed to be taught to young readers for them to succeed in acquiring overall reading skills. Explicit phonics instruction is when the letter/ sound relationships are taught to students repeatedly, as opposed to implicit instruction when sounds are learned by the repetition of reading entire words. At the end of the 1980s, a resurgence of the whole language approach made educators re-think the way that reading was taught and whole language made its comeback. There is no formal definition of whole language, but researchers suggest that the three-cuing system used in whole language aids in word recognition (Beck & Beck, 2013). The three cues are the semantic, the syntactic, and the graphophonic. This system

encourages students to learn words by utilizing information from the text to determine a word and how it is pronounced and its meaning. Decoding skills are not emphasized with whole language approaches. By the early 1990s, whole language was looked at closely and scrutinized. Some educators and researchers believed that phonics skills and the mastery of decoding words were not being included in the whole language teaching approach enough as some would have liked it to have been included. Since the late 1990s, phonics instruction has been considered an important part of reading programs, such as Basal Reading. According to Beck & Beck, programs that include explicit phonics instruction are still considered of high importance in the reading world. Currently, there is still debate on the best way to instruct phonics skills in the classroom, however, phonics instruction is generally considered a top priority. Phonics instruction is still a topic of many educators' conversations and debated on a regular basis. Researchers in the late 1990s concluded that some phonics instruction was better than none. According to Beck & Beck (2013), the National Reading Panel supports these findings:

From an initial examination of more than 1,000 studies that dealt with phonics, 38 studies were found that met specific research criteria. From the 38 studies, 66 treatment- control groups comparisons were derived, and those data were entered a meta-analysis. The panel concluded that phonics was the most successful way to teach reading and that instruction that included phonics was more effective than instruction that included little or no phonics. (pp.10-11)

These changes in instruction over the years may have had an impact on reading success. These factors are discussed in the next section.

## **Predictors of Reading Success**

Understanding letters and their sounds and good listening comprehension skills in kindergarten may be a predictor of reading success in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade (Leppanen, Aunola & Nurmi, 2007). Primary age students with good letter recognition skills tend to develop good overall reading skills in later grades, especially in the areas of fluency and comprehension. When young students begin to recognize the letters of the alphabet and sound patterns, this can lead to higher decoding skills. Children who are exposed to literacy-based activities before entering kindergarten are at an even higher advantage. Other predictors may influence a student's reading fluency, decoding and comprehension skills and explain why some students become good, fluent readers and others do not. These predictors in a child's early life may be related to socioeconomic status, phonological awareness skills, mother's education level, overall letter knowledge, rapid naming ability, listening comprehension, cognitive ability and visual attention. Socioeconomic status plays a role in children's overall reading ability if support is not given at home in the early years of life. For example, children that are given the opportunity to look at books or read books at an early age, may demonstrate greater pre-reading skill levels when entering formal schooling. Children who live in households with less literacy exposure are at a disadvantage compared to peers with literacy-rich homes and/or enrollment in high-quality preschool programs. Deficits in these areas of a child's life may result in poor reading skills. A longitudinal study conducted in Finland showed that children with higher phonological skills, overall letter knowledge, the mother's education level, listening comprehension skills, letter naming, and visual attention in kindergarten, showed higher reading rates in fourth grade (Leppanen et al., 2007). Letter naming or recognition was one of the highest predictors of reading success in upper elementary grades. It not only affected reading fluency but

comprehension as well. While many factors impact success in reading skills, the study by Leppanen et al., (2007) showed that early exposure to books, attention to books and a mother's interest in education all played a vital role in reading success. Another study conducted by Johnson, Pennington, Lee, and Boada in 2009, examined results in a longitudinal study from children over three years. They were interested in revisiting previous research to determine if deficits in Rapid Auditory Processing caused a deficit in Phonological Awareness or vice versa. RAP (Rapid Auditory Processing) is the process of using auditory processing skills to rapidly identify information that is presented in quick or rapid success (Johnson et al., 2009).

Phonological Awareness (PA) is the ability to hear sounds that make up words and the ability to manipulate sounds. This is an auditory process that can impact later success in reading. Students with an underlying processing delay may have impacted reading skills. Johnson et al. (2009) observed the causal relationship between RAP and PA in a group of early elementary children over a three-year time period. The correlational study showed that *PA* may have a bigger impact on *RAP*, because children may have issues with sound patterns as a result of a language deficit. Based on these findings, children with reading disabilities may have issues with auditory processing. More time needs to be invested in the early years of schooling on phonics instruction and developing phonemic awareness skills, which may help to boost Rapid Auditory Processing skills as well. Beck and Beck (2013) discuss that children need to have good phonemic awareness skills in order to become good decoders. However, if children are taught using explicit phonics instruction, phonemic awareness skills may become enhanced due to the repetition of letter and sound patterns. Teaching students to understand the sounds that make up a word is important, but so is teaching the manipulation of sounds. Nonsense word reading by a student is a good predictor of decoding skills. This is because nonsense words are words that are not a part



of our English language. For example, “gusps” is considered a nonsense word. The ability to read these types of words shows that the student has good overall phonemic awareness and phonics skills (Beck & Beck, 2013). Interventions in early elementary grades should be geared towards boosting phonemic awareness skills and the processing of phonemes into graphemes which are letter sounds transferred to a written letter or word. This may help with processing issues and delays in upper elementary students.

Lower functioning working memories may also be a predictor of reading struggles in the upper elementary grades. Comprehension of a text requires a good working memory to aid in recall of what has already been read. Children with a poor working memory, may not be able to comprehend as well as their peers with normal working memories (Ronberg & Petersen, 2016). Students may not be able to read and hold on to information for long enough periods of time to fully understand the accurate meaning of the written passage. Vocabulary knowledge or lack thereof, may also predict how well students understand written language, listening comprehension may be impacted by overall knowledge of vocabulary. The more students engage in independent reading activities, the higher the comprehension skills, and this may be due to their higher vocabulary knowledge. Students who read words and can decipher the meaning of those words have a higher level of understanding of books and passages that may be introduced in middle and high school. The actual act of daily reading may be linked again to the parents’ value of education and access to reading materials.

## **Implications for Reading Instruction**

Learning to read is a skill that should be accomplished by the end of third grade, so that reading to learn can be the goal. To know what works there needs to be consistency in the way early reading skills are being taught in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Teachers today may not be providing the same reading instruction as in years past due to the high demands of standardized testing requirements. The need for teachers to introduce new curriculum daily leaves many students with reading issues and many struggling. In an observation study by Ciullo, Ely, McKenna, Alves, and Kennedy (2019), the researchers followed special educators in resource rooms and their role in providing specialized reading instruction. They observed that many special educators need to be providing more remediation in reading strategies. They suggested that special educators were providing more phonics interventions than their general educator peers. General educators were not using phonics interventions daily, especially in the upper elementary grades. Special educators should also be using peer-reading strategies as well to help aid in reading difficulties among 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders. After the data was collected and reviewed in their study, it was found that only one special educator was observed using peer-based reading activities. This lack of consistency in instruction could be due to the lack of up to date professional development for general educators and special educators (Ciullo et al., 2019). Many special educators feel that there is a lack of professional development opportunities and ready to use materials to assist in reading intervention programs. Teachers are often putting together their own materials to assist the students with reading deficits. Educators need to find common ground on evidence-based quality instruction and reflect upon their teaching practices for students with learning differences.

Professional development is a necessary resource that should be ongoing in assisting teachers with the best practices for reading instruction. If teachers are on the same page regarding instruction, students should make adequate progress from one grade or stage to the next or, if they do not, best practices can be adjusted. There are stages that are mapped out to help students become successful readers and should be utilized in the classroom. The first stage begins in Pre-K and the last stage is somewhere from 5<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond (Rowley, 2015). During the Emergent Stage, children ages 3 to 5 begin to understand the overall importance of printed words in a text. They also begin to write words, even though the majority of what they write and read is nonsensical. But this beginning stage of being introduced to books and literacy is important to the overall development of reading. During the early part of elementary school, the Transitional Stage, children begin to understand that letters make sounds and that sounds/sound patterns make words. They also begin to apply these new sounds to writing words. During the next stage, the Intermediate Stage, children learn to read and decode words of a more advanced nature. Children and students begin to read fluently so that comprehension of informational text can enhance their academic experience as they progress into middle school and beyond. In the Advanced Stage, from middle school to adulthood, there is the expectation that students will read and comprehend text from informational to different forms of literature. According to Rowley, writing and spelling also need to advance to the next level. When a combination of instruction incorporates phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and comprehension, students should be able to move from one stage to the next with success. However, if one of these stages is overlooked, students may experience challenges at any one of the stages, and interventions need to be put in place to help the students make progress and advance to the next stage.

## **Phonics and Reading Instruction for English Language Learners**

English Language Learners (ELLs) must be provided rigorous instruction to make adequate progress to be able to graduate with a high school diploma and enroll in college or the workforce as competent readers. The fast rate at which ELL students are entering public schools is forcing educators to examine their teaching practices. Due to *The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004*, schools need to be utilizing research-based intervention programs to provide the highest quality of services to all students (Snyder, Witmer & Schmitt, 2017). Not only do English Language Learners need to learn a new language, but they must also be exposed to appropriate grade-level curricula. It has been noted that English Language Learners are remaining English Language Learners for many years, upwards of six-plus years. Most of the research reviewed by Snyder et al. (2017) discovered that interventions in vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and phonics skills, proved to yield the greatest results towards fluency and comprehension. Interventions need to be put in place to ensure that ELL students are progressing as readers. “Progress monitoring data should be used to inform the modification and adaptation of interventions for ELLs. Specifically, an intervention should change in either intensity or type if student fails to improve as a result of the intervention” (Snyder et al., 2017, p.143). Phonics Interventions/ Phonemic Awareness Training has been reviewed to determine the best outcomes for ELL students currently. As noted, many researchers have debated the correct approach to teaching reading over the years. Some researchers agree that the whole word/whole language approach is best, and others feel the phonics approach is best to instruct ELL students. Phonics instruction provides explicit instruction in letter/ sound relationships. When the sounds are put together words are made. One study suggested extra phonics instruction is beneficial to young English language readers.

Robinson observed three different groups of instruction with English Language Learners in a first-grade classroom. The students who had an extra ten minutes of phonics instruction, compared to those who did not, made better strides than the students in the other two groups (Robinson, 2018). The other two groups were taught using whole language and a phonics approach (minus the extra ten minutes of phonics instruction).

Whole word/whole language versus phonics has been debated for years, and regarding instructing ELL students, educators must choose wisely. However, researchers tend to view the method of their choice as the best one for reading instruction, which may show bias. Whole language is an approach that uses different forms of text to teach the meaning of printed language. No one skill is taught in isolation, but rather skills are learned from being in a literature-rich environment. Educators and researchers define whole language and phonics instruction differently. There are different viewpoints for both, and some will argue that phonics is the best approach, while others will argue the use of whole-language instruction. Maddox and Feng (2013), reviewed a study that was conducted with upper middle school students, and the results found that the groups of students in the phonics group outperformed the whole language group. The study that was conducted by Maddox and Feng (2013) also examined a sample of first graders receiving either phonics or whole language instruction daily. The groups were similar in nature, except for the degree of phonics instruction. The first graders with the extra daily phonics instruction outperformed their peers by showing a 20% mean difference on assessments especially in fluency and spelling. Current research tends to lean towards phonics instruction as being the backbone of reading skills and to promote the idea that it should be a part of any reading program. Perhaps English Language Learners should have phonics instruction incorporated daily into their reading programs to boost overall decoding skills and fluency skills.

## **Format of Phonics Instruction**

However, phonics instruction needs to be taught in a systematic order according to Beck & Beck (2013). Consonants and Vowels need to be introduced in a specific order. For example, the short “a” sound should be introduced first with consonants such as “m” “s” “p” and a few others. This enables students to fully digest sounds that help make up words that may be introduced in the kindergarten and first-grade curriculum. Students will be able to work on phonemic awareness skills while they are building good phonics skills. Students should not move forward with another skill set until the previous one shows mastery (Beck & Beck, 2013). Decoding and encoding need to be an intricate part of daily instruction. Encoding is the process of writing letters for sounds to form words. If students can read the word “map”, they should be able to use the word in their daily writing. As students progress through more challenging phonics lessons, they begin to read books at an automatic pace. The act of decoding every letter and every sound becomes unnecessary. Phonics instruction consists of three types: Explicit, where letter sounds and sounds patterns are taught in a direct manner, Contextual, where students use decoding skills learned from explicit instruction to read texts that focus on using phonics skills and Combination, which involves exposing students to both types of instruction to increase reading fluency and comprehension (Benton, 2016). As noted above, instruction in reading nonsense words is also worthy of discussion. Nonsense words are words that have no real meaning. Students who struggle to read nonsense words will struggle to read(decode) words that they have never been exposed to in text. Educators should use high quality, researched-based phonics programs as a part of their reading curriculum.

## **Summary: Interventions to Help with Improving Overall Reading and Comprehension Skills**

Many intervention programs and concepts are available to help students achieve appropriate reading fluency and comprehension skills. Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) is one of those programs that has been developed to help struggling readers. LLI is a reading intervention program that allows students to read text on their reading level. This program incorporates phonics instruction, sight word instruction, comprehension instruction as well as guided writing. What Works Clearinghouse (2017) reviewed data from a study that found that reading fluency and overall reading achievement was significantly improved by incorporating LLI instruction into the daily reading program. If Leveled Literacy Intervention is used properly, students will not only gain fluency, but increase their overall comprehension due to exposed vocabulary (“Leveled Literacy Intervention”, 2017). The study conducted by Benton, (2016) also showed that when students in grades third through fifth were given direct phonics instruction daily, their overall fluency improved. Results showed that students who were considered below grade level prior to intervention were considered on grade level after explicit phonics instruction. Decoding is essential for students to learn to read fluently. Older students, in upper elementary grades must be given the tools needed to decode and comprehend. Not just one approach needs to be utilized, but many forms of instruction can help students achieve success. However, students must attain the appropriate skills in phonemic awareness and decoding to move forward. There are four essential pieces that make good readers just that-good readers. Those four pieces that should be a part of reading instruction daily are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and comprehension. Phonics instruction needs to be a valuable part of reading instruction daily. Teachers need to be assessing students and thinking of the best instructional

approach for teaching struggling readers in the upper elementary grades. “Struggling readers in upper primary grades need systematic, explicit instruction as much as students in earlier grades, and often they simply do not receive the instruction they need” (Salinger, 2003, p.81). Teachers should be aware if students are moving through the reading phases successfully. Informal assessments can guide teachers and help them plan lessons accordingly. Once teachers are aware of deficits, they can map out the reading goals for each student. The automaticity of reading words needs to be second nature and attained before students can engage in higher-level comprehension skills. Repeated reading exercises is another intervention that may aid in automaticity. Children who struggle with reading need to be the ones reading at home, but that is not often the case. The more students read, the more automatic reading becomes, and the better readers they will become (Beck & Beck, 2013). The research is still split between the best reading approaches for reading instruction. However, the research and data appear to support the need for explicit phonics instruction to be included in the daily reading program to help young readers and English Language Learners readers become confident readers.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to determine if fluency and comprehension skills of struggling fourth-grade students can be improved with phonics interventions. Overall reading skills can be impacted if students cannot decode and read words at a rate that is suitable for their grade level. Comprehension can be affected if students put forth too much energy in decoding words in the text that they are reading. Students who struggle to decode words due to a deficit in phonics skills will struggle in upper grades to decode words unfamiliar to them, read fluently, and comprehend what they are reading (Benton, 2016).

#### **Design**

This study consisted of a pre-test/post-test design. The independent variable in this study was phonics instruction. Phonics instruction is the understanding of letter to sound relationships using the alphabet system. The letter/sound relationships enable students to read words. The dependent variable was decoding and fluency improvement. The study examined reading fluency in English Language Learners. The study followed students in fourth grade for a total of eight weeks.

#### **Participants**

The students in the study included 3 boys and 2 girls, but the majority were boys and they were considered newcomers to the United States. All the students arrived in the country within the past 5 to 7 months. The participants were selected for the study because of their limited ability to understand and read the English language. These students were from South America

and spoke Spanish. They were chosen to be a part of this group since they were reading below the English grade level and needed interventions in reading.

### **Instruments**

Two instruments used in this study were the Beginning Decoding Survey and an Oral Reading Fluency assessment. The Beginning Decoding Survey is a tool that measures beginning decoding skills and was developed by Really Great Reading company and was developed in 2010. This test determines the amount of words that can be decoded by a student. This test has a benchmark score out of a total of 50. The score of the total amount of words read correctly out of the total words gives a grade level in which the student is performing regarding decoding skills. This information is critical in planning phonics instruction. If weaknesses are found in basic reading skills, interventions can be provided to the student to boost fluency and comprehension. Reviews of past decoding surveys claim that the information that is given by decoding surveys should not be used often and may not be of benefit to teachers. According to a review by the Mental Measures Yearbooks, the decoding surveys can be used quickly by teachers and are easy to score, but should only be used from time to time, because it gives isolated information about one specific reading skill, decoding (Schwartz, 1985). The Beginning and Advanced Decoding Surveys are more recent and were developed in 2010 and no reviews could be found for this tool. The one used for the purpose of this study may be a newer version of other decoding surveys reviewed in the past. This a diagnostic tool that measures specific skills in isolation. Diagnostic tests should not be given to all students but to students who are at risk in a specific area. Focusing on a deficit in decoding strategies may increase a student's overall reading fluency and comprehension. The information provided by the decoding survey will guide teachers with appropriate instruction (Kern & Hosp, 2018). The second tool being used in this study is an Oral

Ready Fluency assessment, known as ORF. The Oral Reading Fluency assessment is a tool that requires a student to read a text or passage on grade level to determine the number of words read per minute. The number of words read per minute determines a student's fluency rate and the grade level in which their scores falls. Each student is given a reading passage on their reading level and timed for a minute to determine the number of words read per minute. Oral Reading Fluency assessments have been recognized by teachers as being valid and reliable assessments. They provide teachers with information that is needed to adjust instruction and are reliable in determining future reading comprehension abilities in students (Barth et al., 2012). According to Fountas and Pinnell, there is a target rate of words that should be read for students to be considered fluent readers. The reading rates for fourth-grade students is 120 to 160 words read per minute. This range in scores would be the lowest to be considered acceptable and the highest score would be considered above the average for words read per minute for that grade. The Oral Reading Fluency assessment used in this study was from the Florida Department of Education. There are many Oral Reading Fluency tests available, but to make this test valid, the researcher selected a text that is grade-level appropriate for the student that they are assessing. For example, if a student is on a first-grade reading level, the researcher must use a first-grade reading passage to determine the correct amount of words read per minute.

### **Procedure**

Students in this group were given the Beginning Decoding Survey as a pre-test to determine a baseline for overall basic decoding skills. The researcher was trained as to how to administer this assessment and the proper procedures for scoring this assessment. It was given to students individually on the same day. The date was recorded on each assessment as well. The group of participants were involved in guided reading lessons 3 to 4 times a week. The guided

reading lessons utilized books from the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy program. The books that the participants were reading were on their reading level. Guided reading involved the recognition of sight words, repeated readings of the text, word work or phonics work and guided writing that helped with comprehension strategies. One to two books were read per week. The guided reading group met for 30 to 40 minutes each session. Each day reading activities that involved the text was completed first. After that, phonics interventions were incorporated into each lesson. This group of 4 to 5 English Language Learners came to the school not speaking English. Therefore, the phonics interventions utilized were at the basic level. The skills introduced were basic short vowels and consonants. The students were blending sounds to read and write CVC words. Students received the phonics intervention 3 to 4 times a week for 20 minutes each session during a guided reading lesson for an eight-week period. Following the treatment of the phonics interventions, which involved the introduction of consonants and vowels and short vowel sounds, post-tests were given after the eight weeks of phonics intervention was completed. The Oral Reading Fluency assessment was given, the same grade equivalent, but a different version of the assessment to avoid the risk of exposure. The Beginning Decoding Survey was administered as well. The decoding survey was given in a different form to avoid the risk of repeated exposure. This data was collected and compared to the data that was collected eight weeks prior. Information was provided to teachers regarding phonics intervention and if improvements need to be made with the curriculum.

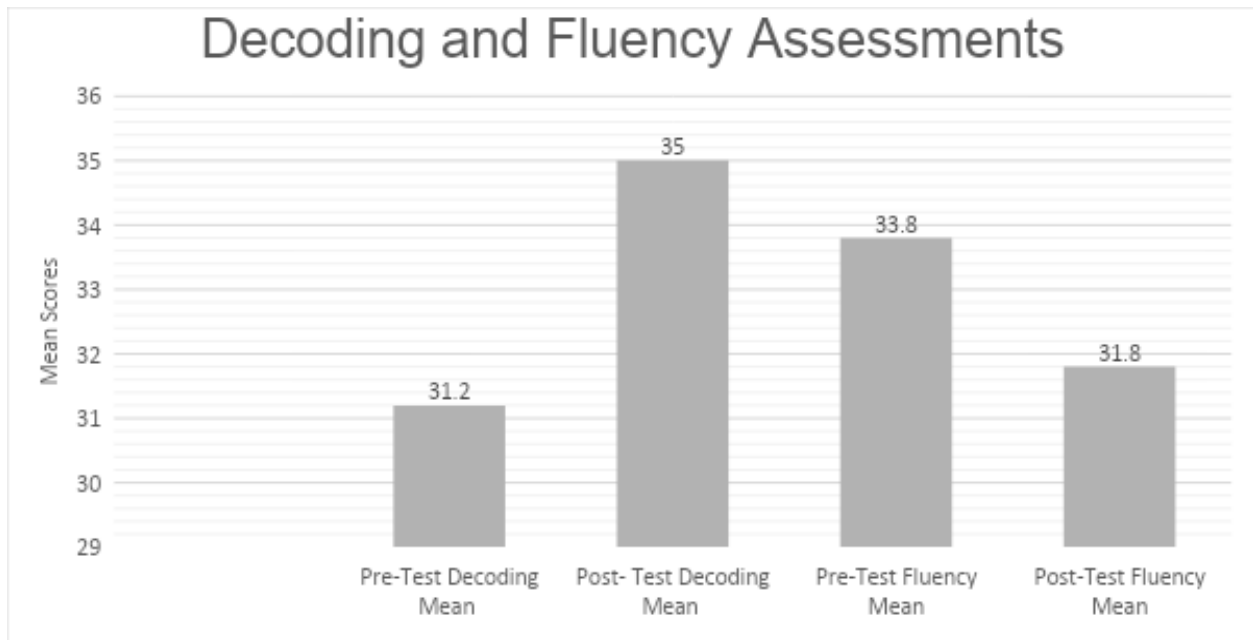
## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

This study examined the effects of daily phonics intervention on reading fluency and decoding skills of English Language Learners in the fourth grade. There were 5 students that participated in this study: all receiving the same phonics intervention four to five times a week for eight weeks. Decoding was measured using the Beginning Decoding Survey. Fluency was measured using an Oral Reading Fluency timed assessment.

The results of a non-independent samples t-test indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean score of the decoding pre-test (Mean=31.20, SD=10.01) and the mean score of the post-test (Mean=35.0, SD=10.98) [  $t(4) = 1.53, p = .201$ ]. Although there was some increase from pre-test to post-test. Similarly, the results of a non-independent samples t-test showed no significant difference between the mean score of the fluency pre-test (Mean=33.80, SD=15.09) and the mean score of the post-test (Mean=31.80, SD=8.90) [ $t(4) = .32, p = .77$ ], although there was a decrease in scores (meaning fluency decreased over time). Due to there not being a significant enough difference in both decoding and fluency pre-test and post-test scores mean scores, the null hypothesis was retained. Graph 1 shows the mean scores for the pre-test and post-test for decoding and fluency. Table 1 shows the results of the statistical analyses.

**Graph 1**



**Table 1**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and t-test Results for Pre-test and Post- Test Decoding and Fluency Scores*

Measure	Mean	SD	t-statistic
Pre-Test Decoding	31.20	10.01000	1.53 (NS)
Post-Test Decoding	35.00	10.97725	
Pre-Test Fluency	33.80	15.08973	.32 (NS)
Post-Test Fluency	31.80	8.89944	

n = 5

NS = non-significant at  $p < .05$ .

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to determine if phonics intervention increased the decoding and fluency skills of below-level English Language Learners in the fourth grade. The null hypothesis was retained since there was no significant difference in decoding skills and reading fluency for the students who participated in the study with the phonics interventions between the pre-test and the post-test. Although scores slightly increased for decoding and went slightly down for fluency, neither difference was significant.

#### **Implications of the Results**

The phonics intervention that was incorporated 4 to 5 times a week for eight weeks into a guided reading lesson for English Language Learners did not lead to significant differences in decoding and reading fluency between the pre-test and post-test. The results show that there was an increase in mean scores related to decoding from the pre-test to the post- test. However, even though there was an increase in scores after the eight-week trial period, there was not a significant enough increase to provide statistical support that the phonics intervention had an effect. The results also show a decrease in scores for the fluency assessment. This decrease also does not reflect a significant enough difference to support that the phonics intervention influenced reading fluency. The guided reading lessons offered an opportunity for students to engage in decoding by reading instructional level texts. The increase in decoding scores could be attributed to exposure to texts daily. Since there was not a control group, it is unclear whether a different approach would lead to significant outcomes. Consequently, while the current results do not provide evidence in support of the intervention, they do not rule out the possibility that the

intervention may be beneficial. Nevertheless, the results indicate that English Language Learners, especially those in intermediate grades, that are in small group intervention-based phonics programs need to have consistent progress monitoring to ensure academic success in the area of reading.

### **Threats to Validity**

Throughout the study there were some threats to internal validity. One of the greatest threats to this study was that attendance among participants was not consistent. The participants' attendance varied due to illness or confusion of school openings and closings. The participants that were in attendance did receive the phonics intervention, and those not present, missed phonics instructions that day. The lack of consistency in attendance among these English Language Learners, most likely affected their overall performance in decoding and reading fluency.

Another threat to validity was behavior or attitude among participants while in small group phonics sessions. Two of the participants displayed off-task behaviors on a regular basis. The two participants had difficulty adapting to schooling in America, and as a result, a negative attitude formed, which took away from instruction time not only for them but the other three participants. It took several minutes most sessions to get them engaged in instruction.

A threat to the external validity of the study was due to the fact the participants in this study were randomly selected and the small population of five participants may not have been representative of a larger population of English Language Learners. Prior background knowledge may have also been a threat to validity. The participants were from different countries in South America and may have had different educational experiences prior to coming to the United



States. Students had also been in the country for only 5 to 7 months at the onset of the study; perhaps the intervention would have impacted students with a greater understanding of the English language and American culture differently. For a variety of reasons, results cannot be generalized to all English Language Learners.

### **Connections to Previous Studies**

Beck & Beck (2013), have been long supporters of phonics instruction to increase overall fluency and decoding skills of children. In their book, Making Sense of Phonics, they provide the history of reading instruction over time. The history explains the shifts between phonics instruction to whole-language and then back to phonics instruction. There seems to be a divide among educators as to the best approach to teach reading even today. However, according to Beck & Beck (2013), the National Reading Panel supports these findings:

From an initial examination of more than 1,000 studies that dealt with phonics, 38 studies were found that met specific research criteria. From the 38 studies, 66 treatment- control groups comparisons were derived, and those data were entered in a meta-analysis. The panel concluded that phonics was the most successful way to teach reading and that instruction that included phonics was more effective than instruction that included little or no phonics. (pp.10-11)

Based on the analysis of this information it could be suggested that including phonics instruction into a daily reading program would benefit students as opposed to providing no phonics instruction at all. However, the current findings were not consistent with the results of the meta-analysis. This may be because the meta-analysis was not focused on the performance of English Language Learners.

Studies like those conducted by Snyder, Witmer & Schmitt (2017) and Robinson (2018) acknowledges that English Language Learners are at most risk for remaining English Learners for several years and that reading instruction must include phonics instruction to yield positive results. The research reviewed by Snyder et al. (2017) supports phonics instruction for ELLs. Most of the research reviewed by them discovered that interventions in vocabulary, phonemic awareness and phonics skills proved to yield the greatest results towards fluency and comprehension. English Language Learners need to learn a new language to be successful in all academic areas as well and reading fluency plays a role in that success. Robinson (2018) conducted a study with three different groups of English Language Learners and found that the group that had additional time for daily phonics instruction out-performed the other two groups that consisted of whole language and phonics instruction that did not include the additional time. However, the current findings are not consistent with those of Robinson, who studied the results of first-grade students; this study investigated additional phonics instruction with fourth-grade students. It is possible that the difference in the age or reading ability between the current subjects and those in the Robinson study influenced the results.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research is needed on phonics interventions with English Language Learners in the intermediate grades and should have subjects assigned to experimental and control conditions. Future research could also assess reading abilities in native language. Phonics instruction tends to be a focus in the primary grades. Attention must be given to students who enter the country while in the intermediate grade levels. Research-based reading programs that incorporate phonics instruction with proven results must be analyzed. Since learning the English language requires reading, writing, and speaking skills, emphasis should be given to immersing

these students in a high-quality reading program that extends past the traditional allotted time for other general education students. This study revealed that the additional phonics instruction, incorporated in the guided reading lesson for 20 minutes a day for 4 to 5 days a week, was not substantial enough to make a significant impact on decoding and reading fluency. The researcher speculates that a more intensive, multisensory phonics program that is taught for at least 45 minutes a day could result in better outcomes for decoding and reading fluency.

### **Summary**

The results of this study show that there was no significant difference between the mean pre-test score and the mean post-test score for decoding and fluency after incorporating the phonics intervention into English Language Learners' guided reading program over a course of eight weeks. The results indicate that continued research on reading interventions and continuous monitoring of student progress is particularly important for English Language Learners. Reading progress will help provide these students with the skills needed to be successful in many other academic areas.

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