HOW DOES BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE BY PREVIEWING VOCABULARY AND CREATING CONTEXT THROUGH PRE-READING ACTIVITIES AFFECT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ READING COMPREHENSION?

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in
Education

by
Jennifer Corwin Lundberg
Summer 2012
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DEDICATION

To Kurt and Ruby,

Thank you for your love, encouragement, patience, and support.

To my family & friends,

Thank you for your caring support and encouragement.
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ABSTRACT

HOW DOES BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE BY PREVIEWING VOCABULARY AND CREATING CONTEXT THROUGH PRE-READING ACTIVITIES AFFECT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS’ READING COMPREHENSION?

by

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Master of Arts in Education

California State University, Chico

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English language learners (ELLs) make up an increasingly large population of students in the United States. While many ELLs come to school with little background in the English language, No Child Left Behind (2001) mandates that they demonstrate grade-level reading skills. This study takes place in a rural Northern California school where a majority of the students are English language learners. The research focuses on a group of seven third-grade students whose reading test scores indicated a need for supplemental instruction.

The intervention took the form of a small group lesson at the start of each day, four days a week. Research pointed to building background knowledge by previewing vocabulary and creating context through pre-reading activities as a way to improve
reading comprehension. These strategies were implemented during the small group intervention.

Data for the study included test scores, anecdotal notes, and feedback from the students. This data was collected throughout the intervention and analyzed using the grounded theory. The results of this research were inconclusive. Triangulation of data did not show significantly that the strategies employed in the small group intervention improved reading comprehension.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

The number of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States public schools increases every year. According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (2011), in the 2008-2009 school year approximately 10.8 percent of total US public school enrollment were ELLs. California enrolled the largest number of public school Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. The California Department of Education shows that the percentage of language learners enrolled in California public schools in 2009 was 24.2 percent. Of that percentage, 84.8 percent speak Spanish (Goldenberg, 2008). Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2010) state that, “the proportion of English learners in the schools is growing even more rapidly than the actual numbers” (p. 6). The rise in ELLs creates a unique challenge for educators who are striving to teach core academic curriculum and also incorporate English language instruction at the same time. Additionally, there has been an increasing focus on improving academic literacy for all students in U.S. schools but with little attention to the literacy needs of ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010). One in three Hispanic students fails to complete high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Literacy is the foundation of education and a critical component to academic success. With this in mind, it is evident that educators
must incorporate strategies that will build literacy skills for ELLs to improve their academic success.

This research study occurred in a 3rd grade class at an elementary school in rural northern California. Hispanic or Latino students account for 61% of the student body, many of whom are first or second generation immigrants from Mexico. English language learners make up 31% of the student population. The research project takes place in a class made up of 26 students: 21 are Latino, 4 are Caucasian, and 1 is Laotian. Seven have been identified as requiring ELD services.

Statement of the Problem

Since the beginning of the school year, I observed a noticeable lack of engagement and participation from English language learners in the classroom. I also observed that these students were struggling in their reading and comprehension. I began to be curious about the various levels of participation, engagement and academic success of our language learners in their English language studies. My co-teacher often asked me to pull aside small groups of students who were struggling in particular areas to provide extra support. I began to pull our ELD students into a small group each morning to provide additional support in the form of previewing that day’s English Language Arts (ELA) lesson. I wondered how providing support for these students with specific emphasis on building background knowledge prior to whole class lessons would affect their engagement, participation, and success in the whole class ELA lesson. My instruction focused on building background knowledge by working with the vocabulary that the students would encounter as well as activating appropriate schema relative to the
upcoming story (Carrell, 1984). I used these strategies to promote reading comprehension among our ELLs. This process led me to the following research question: How does building background knowledge by previewing vocabulary and creating context through pre-reading activities affect ELLs reading comprehension?

Purpose of the Study

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for all students. Students must possess strategies that will enable them to comprehend what they are reading in order to have proficient literacy skills and achieve academic success. Immanuel Kant (1899) claimed more than 200 years ago, that new information, new concepts, new ideas can have meaning for an individual only when they can be related to something the individual already knows. By activating background knowledge prior to the story through pre-reading activities and vocabulary development, students will be provided with tools that might help them to feel more prepared for the day’s lesson and to more fully comprehend what is being read. Carrell (1984) notes that, while one’s knowledge of the world is a necessary element of comprehension, this factor is often neglected by second language teachers and researchers.

The purpose of this research is to provide EL students with an introduction to the vocabulary, context, and related background information for each of the weekly stories in the hope that this information will initiate deeper comprehension. “Much of the meaning understood from a text is really not actually in the text, per se, but in the reader, in the background or schematic knowledge of the reader” (Carrell, 1984, p. 333). Each of our meetings focused on tapping into the background knowledge of our students and
relating that information to the story at hand. After the daily lesson preview, our language learners will take part in the whole class lesson, which will repeat and build upon the information presented.

A typical public elementary school classroom has approximately 30 students. In a whole class lesson, it might be easy for a quiet student, who doesn’t regularly participate in whole class activities to be overlooked or not receive the attention they need. Often this is this ELL student. Schema may be culturally specific, making the content less accessible for the language learner (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). This could contribute to students not raising their hands, volunteering answers, and speaking out in front of the entire class. According to the White House Initiative, From Risk to Opportunity (2003), “…few teachers, including many of those who work in schools with a high proportion of Hispanic and/or English-language-learning students, are adequately prepared to meet the challenge of instructing children of a culture different from their own” (p. 22). The report also notes that many teachers have not received any instructional strategies to help with teaching migrant students. Schools, principals, and parent programs don’t adequately address the language learners’ needs. This study will look at strategies that instructors can implement to improve the literacy skills of English language learners and subsequently, how these strategies affect engagement.

Many classrooms face similar challenges of teaching English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum while incorporating English skills for non-native speakers. A strategy that front-loads these students with vocabulary and background information, if successful, could be implemented in any classroom. On a larger scale, this research could be presented to all teachers who have language learners in their classrooms and are
looking for strategies to improve their instruction. Regardless of the outcome of this research, the support provided to this group of students could be beneficial to their overall school experience.

Theoretical Bases and Organization

Current studies have indicated that previewing material is one way to improve reading fluency (Rose, 1984). According to Scarborough (2001), “The relationship between vocabulary and comprehension is so powerful that there is evidence that vocabulary size in kindergarten is an effective predictor of reading comprehension in later school years” (p. 97). Both previewing material and building vocabulary support schema theory. Schema theory has been defined as the role of background knowledge in language comprehension (Carrell, 1984). Schema theory is not a new idea but it has not traditionally been the focus of second language acquisition. In most cases the emphasis has been on the language, not on the person trying to comprehend it (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). The constructivist approach to teaching suggests that all students come to school with their own set of experiences, or schema, and they use what they know to relate to what they are learning (Tompkins, 2010). According to Fisher & Frey (2010) it is especially challenging for English language learners because talk in school is decontextualized and requires students to discuss events, objects, and people that are not present. Goldenberg (2008) noted that we all comprehend familiar material more readily and that is why reading comprehension is dependent on having wide-ranging background knowledge.
In a small, focused group in my classroom, I am able to front-load our ELLs with vocabulary and background information from our core ELA curriculum and, using the constructivist principles, tap into the background knowledge of our students to create a relationship between what the students know and what they are learning. By previewing this information, our students can begin to form their own schema and create a true understanding what they have learned.

Empirical research on schema theory has shown that reading comprehension involves background knowledge, that is much more than simply knowledge of the language (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). With this in mind, instructors must take the necessary steps to know their students and understand their backgrounds.

Limitations of the Study

This research takes place in one classroom in one rural Northern California school. While the classroom may have similar demographics to many other classrooms across the United States, the data from this small sample size may not be generalizable to all ELLs in all third grade classrooms. In this study, data will be collected over a period of approximately six months. While there are some limitations to the study, the strategies and results may be applicable to other classrooms. Being immersed in this particular classroom affords the opportunity to take a detailed look at the strategies that are being implemented and the effects they have on the students. By being a part of day-to-day activities with the students, I observed subtle differences in students that researchers may not pick up in a large study. Although the sample size is limited, positive results from this study would indicate that continued research would be worthwhile.
Definition of Terms

Terms that will be used throughout this research project are:

- **Previewing** - Incorporating specific, research-based strategies to front-load information for a small group of students prior to the whole class lesson. It includes focused lessons on vocabulary, building background knowledge, and reading strategies that will be taught again in the whole class lesson (Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Hickman-Davis, & Kouzekanani, 2003).

- **Pre-reading** - The use of strategies such as picture-walks, discussions about the story that help to build background knowledge, and reading the story in the small group prior to the whole class reading (Carrell, 1984).

- **Pre-teaching** - The act of providing information and pre-reading activities to the students in a small group prior to the whole class setting. Students will rejoin the whole class having already had discussions about the story and new vocabulary associated with the story (Linan-Thompson et al, 2003).

- **Schema** - Background knowledge as is relates to language comprehension. This theory states that an individual can only create meaning to new ideas, concepts, and information when they can be related to something that individual already knows (Kant, 1899).
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

English language learners (ELLs) make up an increasingly large population of students in California and throughout the United States. Although ELLs often come to school with little background in the English language, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001) mandates that they demonstrate grade-level reading skills. However, statistics show that ELLs are falling behind when compared to native English speakers and that additional language support is necessary to close the achievement gap. Research shows that implementing various support strategies can assist English learners in improving test scores in English Language Arts. In response to our educational system’s current focus on literacy, it is worth considering the support strategies that are being implemented for our ELLs as a means of improving test scores in English language arts. Previewing English Language Arts lessons, which has been implemented in several different forms, has proven to be a successful way of improving reading comprehension, motivation, and participation for our ELLs.

Background

In September 1990 President George H. W. Bush established The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans. The purpose was to,
“provide advice and guidance to the secretary of education on education issues related to Hispanics and address academic excellence and opportunities for the Hispanic community” (U.S. Department of Education, 1990, About Us). The commission continued under President William J. Clinton and President George W. Bush and related valuable information with regard to the causes of the education achievement gap between Hispanic American students and their peers. The commission’s final report to President George W. Bush (“From Risk to Opportunity, ” 2003) stated that Hispanic Americans are now the largest minority group in the nation, but consistently lag behind in educational achievement. The report concluded that,

> Too many Hispanic American families lack the knowledge to fulfill the high expectations they have for their children. And, tragically, too many Americans set low expectations for Hispanic American children. Finally, the federal government does not adequately monitor, measure and coordinate programs and research to the benefit of Hispanic American children and their families, despite the rapidly growing Hispanic American population in the United States. (p. viii)

While the commission dissolved in 2003, the challenge of educational achievement for our Hispanic community continued. In 2010, President Obama renewed the White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanics, once again bringing the issue to the forefront of education in the United States. With this focus and the continued accountability for all language learners required by NCLB, it is evident that the educational support and advancement of our ELLs is critical.

Providing support for ELLs is currently being approached in many ways. One focus of NCLB is to increase the percentage of fourth graders reading at or above proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), students are tested at grades 4, 8, and 12.
These specific three grades represent critical junctures in academic achievement. Limiting the assessment to three grade levels provides valuable data while limiting the testing burden on schools. Studies have focused on improving reading comprehension using several different strategies. Research suggests that working with small-groups, focusing on vocabulary and reading strategies, and building schema can all contribute to improving literacy among ELLs (Anderson, Reynolds, Shallert, & Goetz, 1977; Carrell, 1984; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010; Kant, 1899; Navarro, 2008; Scarborough, 2001).

Building Schema

Theories relating to how individuals relate new information, new ideas and new concepts date as far back as 1781, when Kant (1899) claimed that these new ideas can only have meaning when they are related to something the individual already knows. Anderson et al. (1977) stated more recently, “Every act of comprehension involves one’s knowledge of the world as well” (p. 332), meaning the individual must have a personal point of reference in order to comprehend new ideas. Carrell (1984) states that traditionally, second language comprehension has emphasized the language and not the learner.

In her study, Carrell (1984) suggests implications and applications of background knowledge, or schema theory, to reading pedagogy for language learners. The theory states that text does not have meaning on its own but only as applied to the readers’ previous knowledge. If language learners cannot activate an appropriate schema during reading, they may fail to comprehend the text. According to Carrell (1984), “One
of the most obvious reasons a particular schema may fail to exist for an ESL reader is that
the schema is specific to a given culture and is not part of a particular reader’s
background” (p. 334).

The study by Carrell (1984) suggests two areas of pedagogy that relate
primarily to the building of background knowledge. These are pre-reading activities and
vocabulary development. Some of the pre-reading activities included demonstrations,
class discussions, predictions about the text, and vocabulary that would be encountered in
the text. In addition to building background knowledge, these activities may also serve to
motivate the students to read for a purpose, to see what follows.

Carrell (1984) concluded that the relevance of schema theory to reading
comprehension for ELLs is clear. Building background through pre-reading activities and
vocabulary instruction ought to produce better reading comprehension. To determine if
these theories work in practice, more applicable research is necessary.

A study by Navarro (2008) put similar theories into practice to determine
effective reading strategies to build schema for English language learners to help them
with reading comprehension. Schemata, also known as background knowledge, is an
individual’s previously acquired knowledge (Carrell, 1984). In order to organize
knowledge of the world, a reader uses schema to provide information for comprehending,
remembering ideas, and learning (Anderson et al., 1984). Often the ELL does not have
the background knowledge necessary in a given text to activate their processing of the
information.

The Navarro (2008) study describes several strategies that are used to build
background knowledge. The strategies include: pre-reading, communicative pre-reading,
vocabulary instruction, visual cues, questioning methods, comprehension instruction, and appreciating their culture. While this study identified several strategies that can be used to build schema, it did not include specific research data to support the effectiveness of the strategies. The author cited previous studies that had shown these strategies to be successful, however it is clear that more research is necessary.

Small-Group Strategies

The benefit of working with ELLs in a small group setting as opposed to the whole class setting has been proven by several researchers. Krashen (1981) discusses his Affective Filter hypothesis as a filter, or mental black that prevents those that have acquired language from using it. This can be caused by anxiety, lack of motivation, and self-confidence. According to Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2010), group work reduces ELLs anxiety, and increases their opportunities to speak out more often than in a whole class setting.

In a recent study, Cho, Xu, & Rhodes (2010) examined the effects of employing the small-group strategy in a Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) (Stauffer, 1969). The researchers concentrated on ELLs participation in reading activities. In this setting students read, predicted and discussed books in small groups among their peers. The books were chosen according to three criteria: (1) they helped to build background knowledge in subjects such as social studies, (2) include illustrations and pictures to support the development of predictions and students’ comprehension, and (3) have complete sentences with limited colloquial expressions.
The Cho, Xu, & Rhodes (2010) study focused on qualitative data gathered over two months from trained graduate-student instructors and students. Students were gathered together in a focus group, which represented a demographic range across the participants. After analyzing the data, patterns emerged in the following categories: motivation, engagement, progress of comprehension and prediction skills, and ELLs literacy practice. The study found that one of the key factors to successful reading programs is the instructor’s role in presenting the reading materials and, “facilitating critical reflection on what students have read” (Cho, Xu, & Rhodes, 2010, p. 216).

While the Cho, Xu, & Rhodes (2010) study had several limitations such as the lack of generalizability and limited time frame, it provides insight into several aspects of reading intervention for ELL’s. The small-group setting provided collaborative learning opportunities and increased opportunities for students to speak. The students also made it evident that they could use each other’s common native language as a resource and assist each other with comprehension of the stories. Furthermore, the study indicated that teachers were able to engage the students more when they could discuss information beyond the text, thus creating more background knowledge and interest.

In a study with a similar goal of finding out the effects of supplemental reading instruction for ELLs, Linan-Thompson et al. (2003) examined the instructional components that are most critical to the development of reading skills. The intervention focused on strategies that would, “build reading fluency, develop phonemic awareness, develop vocabulary, and promote the use of decoding, comprehension, and word analysis strategies during reading” (Linan-Thompson et al. 2003, p. 222).
Teachers worked with second-grade students from seven Title I elementary schools who were identified as ELLs and struggling readers, as indicated by the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) (Texas Education Agency, 1998). TPRI is used to measure reading development and comprehension skills. Thirty students participated in the study, which included 58 sessions of supplemental reading instruction for 30 to 35 minutes per day. The intervention took place over the course of 13 weeks.

Each session included the following: fluent reading, phonological awareness, instructional-level reading, word study, and writing. Within each category of the session, instructors used various strategies. Instructors made use of several previewing strategies including previewing vocabulary, defining key words and concepts, activating students’ background knowledge on the subject, and word attack skills. Fluent reading focused on repeated readings, paired reading (student/teacher or student/student), and use of pictures to assist with meanings of unknown words.

The results of National Reading Panel (2000) study showed that most of the ELLs who participated increased outcome measures from pretest to posttest. Gains were statistically significant for passage comprehension and segmentation fluency. It is also worth noting that these gains were made with minimal instructional time.

Pre-Reading Activities

In addition to building background, pre-reading activities include discussion of the story topics as a way to facilitate deeper understanding of the content. According to Carrell (1984), “the more of a content area students are exposed to, the greater will be their building of appropriate background knowledge” (p. 339). Goldenberg (2008) noted
that ELLs learn more vocabulary words when they are embedded in meaningful contexts and when students have ample opportunities to use words repeatedly.

Fisher & Frey (2010) recently studied language purpose as a way to develop conceptual schemas for ELLs. They defined purpose as the statement of the objective, which is constructed by the teacher for students. It is their premise that, “a clearly stated and understood purpose lays the foundation for a schema of concepts, skills, and information” (Fisher & Frey, 2010, p. 316). In addition, when teaching language learners, instructors must consider developing content understanding as well as language proficiency. Clearly stated objectives can be beneficial to all students, but it can be argued that it has a greater impact on ELLs because they are navigating content as well as language. According to Echevarria, Short, and Powers (2006), analysis of the language demand of the task, paired with stated purposes about written and verbal language production, resulted in higher levels of achievement for ELLs.

In this study, 332 teachers from Southern California participated by submitting language purpose statements via electronic survey. Purpose statements were defined as “the spoken and written statements you make to students at the beginning of the lesson so that they know what is expected of them” (Fisher & Frey, 2010, p. 321). Upon analyzing the submissions, categories emerged. Teacher participants were interviewed followed by discussions regarding their own findings and experiences. The majority of the purpose statements focused on vocabulary, which can be a valuable indicator of reading comprehension in later school years (Scarborough, 2001).

The Fisher & Frey (2010) study implies that teachers can create specific language purpose for a lesson in addition to the subject content. With this in mind,
teachers must understand the linguistic demands of the content in order to determine an appropriate purpose for the ELLs. And while teachers can rely on standards as a source of content purpose, this study shows that further research is necessary to identify language purpose.

Discussion

As studies in this literature review show, researchers and teachers have employed many strategies in an effort to aid ELLs with improved literacy and reading comprehension. While the methods are varied, the goal is the same. Our language learners need the support of qualified teachers to help close the achievement gap between native English speaking students and ELLs. The studies that were examined in this chapter reflect the strategies that I felt are most effective and efficient given the time constraints in the classroom. Students need the assistance of extra support but risk falling further behind if they are pulled out of classrooms for interventions. The strategies employed in this research can be implemented in a relatively short amount of time and incorporate the same curriculum as the whole class lesson.

Many common themes have emerged from the research. Several studies focus on small group interventions that preview information as it relates to language for the purpose of improving reading comprehension. It is evident that building background knowledge, vocabulary, and pre-reading activities play critical roles in reading comprehension. The challenge is how to address these components and still allow ELLs to keep up with the pace of scheduled lessons. It is necessary to provide support by embedding it into lessons or to supplement with short, daily instruction that previews
focused language skills and information. This is the course of action that I explored in my research, providing the students with supplemental instruction that parallels the whole class lesson.

Further Research

Although many researchers have focused their attention on this important facet of education, more research is needed to clearly define what specific strategies are the most efficient and effective way to make our classrooms more equitable with regard to the improved literacy of our ELLs.

The following research project will address the literacy needs of our ELLs through a small-group intervention that focuses on previewing components of language that will improve reading comprehension.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The focus of this research was to attempt to improve reading comprehension by previewing lessons with vocabulary and schema building for English Language Learners (ELLs) prior to a whole class lesson. The motivation for this research began with my observation that many of our ELLs did not appear to be engaged in the whole class English Language Arts lessons. What I observed was students off task, often looking away from the instructor, and not actively participating in the lesson. Additionally, their reading comprehension scores were very low. The question was, if these students were prepared in advance of the whole class lesson with vocabulary and background knowledge on the topic, would they become more proficient readers? This was the beginning of my inquiry and led me to research the strategies that support reading comprehension for language learners.

For the purpose of this research I met with seven students, all English Language Learners, in a small group, four mornings a week for 26 weeks. The emphasis during this time was the study of new vocabulary as it occurs in a story selection and building background knowledge using pre-reading activities. The story selections came from the Houghton Mifflin 3rd grade English Language Arts curriculum. The curriculum is broken down into six themes such as, Theme 1: Off to Adventure! Each week the
students read a new story, which also provided the running theme around which all of the English language arts lessons were centered. Additionally, I focused on drawing from the students’ background knowledge to help build schema around the story. These pre-reading activities were implemented in an effort to assist ELLs with reading comprehension. Research cited in Chapter II supports these strategies and their implementation in small group settings.

Initially, when I began the extra support for the small group, I attempted to preview all of the week’s language arts topics, including grammar, spelling, and conventions. However, I found that my time with this group was limited and the main focus of the research was to support these language learners with the strategies that I felt would most benefit them in their reading comprehension. The research from Chapter II pointed to vocabulary and building schema as effective ways to improve reading comprehension for language learners, so the focus of research was narrowed to these areas. I observed that discussions about vocabulary and background facilitated deeper conversation and understanding of the stories.

Design of the Investigation

As noted by Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2010) working with language learners in small groups provides several benefits. It reduces ELLs anxiety and increases their opportunities to speak out more often than in a whole class setting. With this in mind, it seemed appropriate to work in a small group setting.

The students were chosen to participate in the small group according to three criteria. First, my co-teacher and I identified the students who performed at the lowest
levels on their STAR English-language arts test. Second, we looked at the students’ scores on our Curriculum Based Measurement (CBM) for reading rate and accuracy. The CBM score was used as an indicator of reading fluency. While the research did not address reading fluency, the score was considered because it provides an indication of the rate at which students are reading accurately. Finally, we cross-referenced the scores by looking at those students who scored the lowest and were also English language learners but did not have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). We identified seven students that we felt would benefit the most from participating in the small group lesson.

The small group met each morning, four mornings a week, for approximately 15 to 20 minutes. We used this time to preview vocabulary and discuss background information with regard to the selected story for the week. Each week, the selected story was used as a theme for learning reading comprehension strategies, spelling, language conventions, and writing. At the end of the week, the students were assessed on each of these components. For the purpose of this research, I focused on the students’ reading comprehension.

Within the small group setting, a primary focus was building vocabulary. Linan-Thompson et al. (2003) note that previewing vocabulary is one of the components that is most critical to improving reading skills. Reading comprehension requires knowledge of vocabulary. Students have difficulty with reading and comprehension when they have limited vocabularies. With this strategy in mind, I began each week by introducing the vocabulary words that would be part of our upcoming story. I provided each word orally as well as wrote it on the white board for the group, one-at-a-time with its definition. Each student was given an individual Vocabulary Journal, where they
wrote down the words, the definition, and drew a corresponding picture. I gave the
students an example of an image but also gave them the option to draw any picture that
would help them to remember the definition. As a group, we would then discuss the
meaning of the word. Additionally, we discussed how this word was going to be used in
the context of our upcoming story. Linan-Thompson et al. (2003) noted that for language
learners, explicit instruction is one of the practices that is associated with improved
outcomes in comprehending text.

On day two, we began with a review of the vocabulary and then a picture walk
of the story. A picture walk is a strategy used to help students develop an awareness of
pictures as clues to the meaning of the story. As we looked at each picture, I would
prompt the students to think about what might be happening. We also used the strategy of
predicting the outcome based on the pictures. This encourages students to use the story
clues and their own knowledge to guess or predict what might happen next. Using this
strategy, we could begin to discuss events in our students’ lives that might contribute to
building background information. According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) these
previewing activities are particularly important for ELL readers because of potential
cultural differences surrounding text content.

On day three of the week, we began to read the selection story. The story is
always read as a whole class on Wednesdays. Reading the story in advance of the whole
class provides a preview of the story as well as an opportunity to then re-read the story
with the whole class. Both of these activities, previewing and repeated readings are
strategies that help EL learners to understand and analyze the content of the text (Linan-
Thompson et al., 2003).
On Thursdays, we continued with reading the selection story. Due to the limited time we met each morning, we often did not finish reading the entire story. Often I would highlight portions of the story to read and discuss in the small group.

Student Population/Demographics

The research took place at an elementary school located in a rural agricultural area of Northern California. At the time of the research the school had approximately 470 students in third through fifth grade. Of that total, 56 percent were Hispanic / Latino students, 38 percent White students, three percent Asian students, and one percent American Indian/Alaskan Native students. Just over 76 percent received free/reduced school lunch and 23 percent were English Language Learners.

The classroom in which the research took place is a self-contained third grade class made up of 27 students, including 15 girls and 13 boys. Seven of the students have been identified as English Language Learners and two have IEPs. One mentor teacher and one resident, myself, teach English Language Arts and Math five days a week. Several students are pulled out of class throughout the day for reading intervention, math intervention and ELD classes. The students with IEPs are also pulled out throughout the day for support programs.

The school had not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as outlined by NCLB for the five years prior to the research. As a result, the school was in year five of Program Improvement status. With a large Hispanic population of students who are English Language Learners it is important to incorporate proven theories that support learning for ELLs. While differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006), or
multiple learning pathways, are incorporated throughout much of the daily lessons in our classroom, I observed that the language learners might benefit from additional support focused on reading comprehension. Their low-test scores underscored my observations.

All of the students in the small group were also pulled out of class for various reading interventions. The students received different forms of reading and language support according to their STAR reading scores, their CELDT scores and a Curriculum Based Measurement that indicates their reading fluency. However, none of these support programs are aligned with the stories the students read in the whole class English Language Arts lessons.

As much as possible, I attempted to gather background information, both academically and socially, on each of the students. As I got to know our students and reviewed their cumulative files, I found that almost all of the language learners in our class had attended the same local public school throughout their elementary years. While some students had progressed to higher language proficiency levels, others had not. There are many factors that may contribute to the rate at which student’s progress. Among others, one possible factor is the level of support that the students receive from home. While this research does not investigate the effects of parental support, it is clear that this can be a factor. The backgrounds of each of the students in this small group have similar characteristics in that all but one of the students come from a family where Spanish is the primary language spoken at home. While some may consider this to be detrimental to learning English, much of the research shows that bilingual or non-English speaking homes support their students in many ways. There is inherent value in heritage language (i.e. languages other than English) and culture that has been prone to much debate
(Cummins, 2005). Instead of creating fluent bilingual speakers, our schools are attempting to transform, “fluent speakers of foreign languages into monolingual English speakers” (Cummins, 2005, p. 586). It may benefit teachers and students to encourage the mastery of native language in order to become proficient in a second language.

The students chosen to participate in the small group are: Juanita, Aldo, Miguel, Ramon, Wanda, Angelica, and Nestor (all pseudonyms). While most of these students come from homes where Spanish is the primary language, they are not necessarily proficient Spanish speakers. According to CELDT test scores taken in February of 2010, Aldo and Miguel had an overall proficiency level of 3 placing them at the Intermediate level. The other members of the group, Ramon, Juanita, Wanda, and Nestor placed at the Early Intermediate proficiency level. The remaining member of the group, Angelica, is the only student to come from a home where a language other than Spanish is spoken. Angelica is Laotian and was placed at the Beginning proficiency level according to the CELDT test.

Treatment/Data Collection Instruments

For the purpose of this research, three sources of data were collected. Data sources included test scores that indicated levels of reading comprehension, anecdotal notes, and informal conversations and interviews with the seven students who were the subjects of the research.

The initial sources of data were test scores pulled from the district’s annual testing program, which includes nationally normed, standardized tests, criterion-referenced tests, and district-developed assessments. The portion of each of these tests
that measures reading comprehension was used for the purpose of this research. I chose these scores as the initial sources of data because I was curious about the academic achievement of the language learners in our class.

The STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) test measures students’ progress toward achieving California’s state-adopted academic content standards in English-language arts among other content areas (Standardized Testing and Reporting-CalEdFacts, 2011). This test is given twice a year and is aligned with California’s English language arts content standards. Scores describe pupil achievement on the California content standards. For the purpose of this research, students’ California Standards Test (CST) scores were reviewed at the beginning of the school year. Scores were used as an indicator of students’ English language competency at the beginning of the year, but not as a data source to reflect progress after the intervention. Due to the timing of this research, scores from the second round of testing were not available to include as data.

The primary test scores that were used to measure progress on reading comprehension from the beginning of the year until the end of the intervention were the Houghton Mifflin selection tests and theme tests (Cooper & Pikulski, 2003). Each theme includes approximately five selection stories based on the theme. Theme 3, for example, is called Incredible Stories and includes stories such as *Dogzilla* by Dav Pilkey and *Raising Dragons* by Jerdine Nolen. In a whole class setting, students read one story per week and take a selection test at the end of each week. Once students have completed an entire theme, they will take a theme test. Both the selection tests and the theme tests include reading comprehension and language conventions. The theme tests are broken down into 12 sections (A-K), which test students’ performance on reading, language
conventions, and writing. Specific questions are aligned with California State Standards for Reading Comprehension. These questions were the focus of the test score data.

An additional instrument of data collection was anecdotal notes. As I began to implement the small group intervention, I noticed that this practice time had an effect on how students participated in the whole class lesson. I wondered whether the pre-reading activities could affect the reading comprehension test scores, which led me to my research question. With this in mind, I continued to make observations and take notes. After each small group meeting, I recorded notes and reflections on what I had observed taking place during our lesson. I also took note of what was happening when the students returned to the whole class lesson and if and how they participated.

The final piece of data collection was informal interviews and feedback from the students. My hope was that this data would give me the students’ perspective on how they felt about the small group support they were receiving. An informal interview was held at the beginning of the year and at various times throughout the intervention. I compared the feedback to get a sense of how the students felt and if their feelings had changed at all over the course of our meetings. I also hoped to use this information to analyze if the students felt the extra support helped them to achieve more success with reading comprehension. Students were asked if they felt that the small group helped them to do better on tests. The students were also asked questions that provided insight into their feelings about the small group.

An interview with one of the school’s other 3rd grade teachers was included in the research. What made her viewpoint valuable was the fact that she had included a similar pre-teaching approach with her ELLs in years past. She had also experienced
years where this strategy was not included in her curriculum, which provided her with perspective on both approaches.

To inform the various aspects of this research, I chose to collect data from three different sources: test results, anecdotal notes, and student feedback. Each of these sources presents information that supports one another. Test results are a concrete form of evaluating performance but only one summative measure of student achievement. By informally observing the manner in which students perform in the classroom, the questions they ask, and the answers they provide I am able to further and more formatively substantiate the effect of the intervention. Additionally, anecdotal notes were coded and analyzed to help distinguish patterns that impact the implementation of the intervention and its effects on reading comprehension for language learners.

The data collected for this research was part of an action research project that took place over a period of six months. It is important to note that the researcher was an active participant in the intervention and that data collected in the field comes from an emic perspective. The grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) method was used to analyze this qualitative data. Walker and Myrick (2006) noted, that Strauss and Corbin, “crafted a method that enabled the researcher to generate systematically a substantive theory grounded in empirical data” (p. 548). Using this approach, field notes, anecdotal notes, reflections, journals, and informal interviews were gathered, coded, and analyzed to inform the research.

The analyzing process began with data retrieved from the Houghton Mifflin Theme Tests. I chose to look specifically at the theme test questions that focused on three
different reading comprehension standards and compared the test results over the course of four theme tests: Theme 2, Theme 3, Theme 4, and Theme 5.

Using the process described in the method of constant comparative analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), I then coded and analyzed the anecdotal notes that I had taken over the course of the year. I used these notes as a point of reference that I could compare with the test scores. I charted and graphed the test results for each student and looked for patterns in the outcomes. I looked at whether or not the anecdotal notes supported the scores of the tests.

Finally, I reviewed the comments and informal reflections from the students. This information provided insight into their feelings toward the small group intervention. I triangulated using these three points of reference in an attempt to support the theory of building background knowledge by implementing pre-reading strategies and previewing vocabulary to improve reading comprehension for ELLs.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

Findings of the research discussed in previous chapters show there is a critical need for additional language support for English language learners. This study looked at specific research-based strategies that were implemented through a reading comprehension intervention in one rural classroom. The purpose of this study as defined in Chapter I, was to determine if building background knowledge with pre-reading activities and previewing vocabulary affects reading comprehension for English language learners.

One of the challenges addressed in this research was how to provide additional language support for language learners without pulling students out of the class. The instruction needed to be provided as a supplement and in alignment with the content of the whole class lesson. Another goal was to create an intervention that could be achieved with only one instructor in the classroom. This intervention took place each morning, for 15 minutes at the beginning of the day when the rest of the class worked independently on their morning bell work. I met with our small group beginning in November 2011 and continued meeting each morning, four days a week throughout the school year. It should be noted that there were occasions when our group was unable to meet due to various other activities or academic requirements.
The format of these lessons initially included instruction on grammar and language conventions as well as reading comprehension strategies. However, it became more refined over the course of the small group lessons. Due to the limited amount of time and the discovery of research that supports building background knowledge and previewing vocabulary, these latter strategies became the focus of the intervention.

It is important to note that in addition to the small group intervention that took place as part of this research, each of the seven students in the small group received an additional reading intervention later in the day. The instruction varied according to the proficiency levels of the students. All seven students participated in what the school called “book club” in which students were leveled according to their STAR reading scores and a CBM based on reading fluency. The reading instruction during this time did not revolve around the Houghton-Mifflin Theme stories. Additionally, six of the seven students went to an ELD intervention in the afternoon for 30 minutes. The students were placed in different classes according to their CELDT scores. Only one student, Ramon, received instruction that was aligned with the Houghton-Mifflin Theme stories during this time.

Data consisting of test scores, anecdotal notes, and student feedback was collected throughout the year. Each of these data were analyzed using the systematic process as characterized by the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process engages the researcher to generate theory from the data collected. The procedure of coding anecdotal notes was applied to the collected data using the method of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This facilitated the finding of patterns that
helped to build theories. Each of these forms of data created the triangulation necessary to support the results.

Results

Theme Tests

Theme tests are multiple choices, summative assessments, administered every three to four weeks. The tests are broken down into approximately 13 sections (A-M). Each section assesses a different skill and may encompass several content standards. Individual questions on the test were identified as they correlated with specific content standards. The data was collected from Theme Tests 2-5 and included questions that addressed Reading Comprehension Standards 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 on each test.

Table 1, Figure 1, and Table 2 indicate how many points were possible for each of the given standards on each test, the raw points each student earned, and the percentage of correct answers for that portion of the test. The test results for each standard were considered individually and in conjunction with the additional data to triangulate and determine results.

The graphs in Table 1 and Figure 1 show the results of the theme test questions from Themes 2, 3, 4, and 5. The identified questions focused on the California State Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2: ask questions and support answers by connecting prior knowledge with literal information found in, and inferred from, the text. When comparing results from the Theme 2 test (prior to the intervention) to the Theme 5 test, scores remained almost identical. Four of the participants in the small group scored nearly the same on each of the four tests. As students moved on to Theme 5, scores for
Table 1

Theme Tests 2-5. Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2 Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
<th>Theme 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2</td>
<td>Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2</td>
<td>Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2</td>
<td>Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nestor</td>
<td>1(16.67%)</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>2(33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>4(66.67%)</td>
<td>5(83.33%)</td>
<td>5(83.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juanita</td>
<td>2(33.33%)</td>
<td>2(33.33%)</td>
<td>2(33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>6(100%)</td>
<td>4(66.67%)</td>
<td>4(66.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramon</td>
<td>5(83.33%)</td>
<td>5(83.33%)</td>
<td>6(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelica</td>
<td>3(50%)</td>
<td>2(33.33%)</td>
<td>2(33.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldo</td>
<td>3(50%)</td>
<td>6(100%)</td>
<td>3(50%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Theme tests 2-5. Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2 line graph results.
Table 2. Theme Tests 2-5. Reading Comprehension Standard 2.3 Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
<th>Theme 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nestor</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>4(40%)</td>
<td>4(40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
<td>4(40%)</td>
<td>8(80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juanita</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>4(40%)</td>
<td>3(30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>4(100%)</td>
<td>5(50%)</td>
<td>7(70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramon</td>
<td>4(100%)</td>
<td>7(70%)</td>
<td>10(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelica</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
<td>8(80%)</td>
<td>5(50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldo</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
<td>8(80%)</td>
<td>3(30%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

five of the students either went up or remained the same. Two of the seven students went down in scores for Reading Comprehension Standard 2.2 and one student’s scores improved significantly. It is difficult to say that any significant pattern across test scores emerged from the data.

Anecdotal notes from my observations as well as student feedback were also considered in relation to the test results. Many of our small group discussions consisted of asking the students questions about their own lives as they might relate to the story. I observed that students were very involved in these discussions and eager to share whatever knowledge they had on the topic. Additionally, in this setting students were able to ask more questions because of the small size of the group, which increased their ability to participate. This strategy helped to build their background knowledge, which they could then use to connect to the story. The reading comprehension standard being assessed required students to connect their own prior knowledge to information found in
the text. This is a strategy that we practiced often in our small group and may have contributed to the small overall increase in test scores for some students.

One student, Aldo, whose test scores for this portion of the Theme tests decreased significantly, told me that he felt, “sad and mad” when he was asked to read. This attitude may contribute to his performance on the tests.

During the weeks of intervention that coincided with Theme 3 and Theme 4, students showed marked interest and participation in our small group gathering. On several occasions, students asked me eagerly if we were meeting in our group. On the days we were unable to meet in our group, students showed disappointment with such comments as, “aw, why don’t we get to meet in our groups?” This might indicate that they feel less anxiety and have more opportunity to participate in our small group. It may also support the theory that pre-reading strategies help language learners with reading comprehension. The students may have looked forward to meeting in the small group because it was new and different and helped to build a community of learners. There are many possible reasons that the students might prefer to work in the small group setting, but the exact reason was unclear.

Figure 2 and Table 3 show results of Theme tests 2-5 as they relate to Reading Comprehension Standard 2.3, which requires students to demonstrate comprehension by identifying answers in the text. One of the most notable patterns from these results is the fluctuation of scores for almost all students between each test. Only one student made continuous improvements from one test to the next between each of the four tests. All of the other students’ scores moved up and down from test-to-test.
As each student varied from test to test with regard to this reading comprehension standard, so too did the topics of each of the stories. Each student’s schemata may affect the depth of their understanding of the stories (Carrell, 1984). When asked about their favorite stories, students’ opinions were as varied as their test results. No two students chose the same story as the one they liked the best. However, when compared with test results, the students did not necessarily do better on the Themes that included their favorite stories. Therefore, in this case interest level was not indicative of comprehension.

Observations of students indicated that the amount of participation from day-to-day also varied. If participation level was an indicator of how well the students were comprehending the stories, this would support the fluctuation in test scores. Also, the line
Table 3. Theme tests 2-5. Reading Comprehension Standard 2.4 Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
<th>Theme 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Points Possible</td>
<td>2 Points Possible</td>
<td>3 Points Possible</td>
<td>4 Points Possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nestor</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>1(33.33%)</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>2(100%)</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>3(100%)</td>
<td>2(50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juanita</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>1(33.33%)</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miguel</td>
<td>2(100%)</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>3(100%)</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramon</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>3(100%)</td>
<td>2(50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelica</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>0(0%)</td>
<td>1(33.33%)</td>
<td>4(100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldo</td>
<td>1(50%)</td>
<td>2(100%)</td>
<td>3(100%)</td>
<td>3(75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The graph clearly shows that on tests in which some students did well, others did poorly.

Students’ scores fluctuated in opposite directions meaning that what one student understood, another might not. This is again supported by the theory that “every act of comprehension involves one’s knowledge of the world as well” (Anderson et al., 1977). In other words, how a student responds to new information depends on their own background knowledge. In this case, the students may have different background information which effect the degree to which each of students relates to the stories. This might have an effect on how well they comprehended the story.

Table 3 and Figure 3 show students’ test scores for Themes 2-5 on the reading comprehension standard 2.4, recall major points in the text and make and modify predictions about forthcoming information. Four students scored 100% on Theme 4, a significant improvement for most from the Theme 4 test. When triangulating this information with the other sources of data, I found that two of the students chose stories
from Theme 4, Animal Habitats, as their favorite stories. It was also during Theme 4 when the intervention became the most refined to include only building background and previewing vocabulary. During the previous Themes, instruction also included language conventions so not as much time was spent on reading comprehension using the pre-reading strategies of building background information and previewing vocabulary.

It was also noted that, similar to test results for Reading Comprehension Standard 2.3, the line graph shows varied and fluctuating results for Reading Comprehension Standard 2.4. Where some students improved, others scored more poorly.

Information emerged from my memos that may support the decline in test scores for some during Theme 5. During a portion of the Theme 5 selection, our group was unable to meet because of test review in preparation for the District Proficiency
Assessment. Test review consisted mainly of grammar and language convention review, not vocabulary as related to our Theme stories or building of background knowledge. Additionally, I noted an increase in the level of distraction in the students. The eagerness the students showed in the first half of the year was not as noticeable. This indicates that perhaps the novelty of meeting in our small group had begun to wear off.

Conclusion

The data presented in this research informs the use of a specific language acquisition strategy for English language learners. It provides data that addressed the question, how does building background knowledge by previewing vocabulary and creating context through pre-reading activities affect ELLs’ reading comprehension?

The effort to answer this question was achieved through an intervention in which research-based pre-reading activities were implemented with a small group of English language learners. The pre-reading activities focused on building background knowledge and previewing vocabulary as they related to Theme selections from the Houghton-Mifflin third grade curriculum.

Data was collected over the course of the year and included Theme test scores, anecdotal notes, and feedback from the seven students who participated in the study. Overall, test scores showed a variation in results from one student to the next and from one test to the next. This fluctuation in test scores may be attributed to many factors. One theory is that within each child’s background knowledge there is variability (Carrell, 1984). While the students have some similar characteristics in their backgrounds, there are also differences that may affect their individual schemas. Many of the Reading
Comprehension Standards considered for this research require students to use their own background knowledge to successfully answer questions with regard to the stories. While the pre-reading strategy used in this intervention attempted to build background knowledge, each student came to me with a different background to build upon and may, therefore, relate to the new information differently.

Additionally, the same child may perform the same task in different ways from day to day (Willingham, 2008). Generally the students were eager to meet in our small group. When asked about their feelings toward our meetings, all students responded that they liked working in our small group. However, when I compared this information with my own anecdotal notes, I saw that not all days were productive for all students. Some days, especially toward the end of the year, students were more distracted. For some, the novelty of meeting in our small group may have worn off. Outside factors must also be considered with regard to tests when particular students did not perform well. The fluctuation in test results underscores the theory that many factors contribute to the performance of each student.

An additional factor that may contribute to test scores is the limited number of test questions that assess competence for each of the Content Standards. It is possible that these questions may not adequately assess students’ ability to comprehend text. For example, Theme 2 and Theme 3 tests measure Reading Comprehension standard 2.4 with two questions. If the student answers one question incorrectly, their percentage score drops to 50 percent, putting them at the Below Grade Level status. If students had more opportunity to demonstrate this skill, they might show an improved score.
When analyzing and triangulating all of the data collected as well as the additional outside factors, results for this research are inconclusive. The fluctuation in test scores makes it difficult to conclude that the intervention had a positive effect on the reading comprehension with any statistical definitly. Feedback from the students and observations in the field were more consistently positive, but did not support the test results conclusively.

An additional source to consider when measuring the effects of pre-reading activities is the insight of one of the other 3rd grade teachers at the school, Mrs. Williams. Mrs. Williams had experienced classes in which she had taken the time to incorporate pre-reading activities including vocabulary instructions and building background knowledge. She had also experienced years where she did not implement this strategy. She saw a positive noticeable difference in the students’ performance when she was able to support her language learners with these pre-reading activities.

Although this particular study did not generate conclusive results, research supports the use of strategies that implement pre-reading activities including building background knowledge and previewing vocabulary. Additionally, as a beginning teacher, I did not have the same amount of practice in applying these strategies as a more experienced teacher such as Mrs. Williams. I believe that with continued, focused implementation, and more experience implementing these strategies, the students’ scores might begin to improve more consistently.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This action research project addressed the question, how do the pre-reading activities of building background knowledge and previewing vocabulary affect English language learners’ reading comprehension. Over the course of the 2011-2012 school year, an intervention using these strategies was implemented with a small group of language learners in a third grade classroom, located in a rural Northern California school.

The current situation in our nation’s schools, as outlined in Chapter I, shows the need for continued support of language learners in acquiring vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. According to Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2010), the number of English learners is continuing to grow even more quickly than the number of students. Teachers must be prepared to address the needs of these students in their classrooms.

As the White House Initiative, From Risk to Opportunity (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 2011) noted, many teachers are not prepared or equipped with strategies for teaching English language learners. This study is important not only because it addresses the need for additional support for
language learners, but also because it offers a strategy that can be implemented by one teacher in the classroom during each school day.

Research provided in Chapter II describes proven strategies that help language learners to become more successful readers. This research focused on the theory that building background knowledge by previewing vocabulary and implementing pre-reading activities contributes positively to reading comprehension (Carrell, 1984). Building background provides a foundation upon which new ideas and concepts can be related. Additionally, Echevarria, Vogt, & Short (2010) state that providing support in a small group setting can be beneficial for language learners.

The method in which this action research project took place is outlined in Chapter III. The study emerged as an intervention for a small group of English language learners in a third grade classroom. The school was located in a small, rural town in Northern California. Seven students were identified using state testing scores, CELDT scores and curriculum-based measurements as language learners needing additional support in reading comprehension.

I met with these seven students each morning, Monday-Thursday for approximately six months during the 2011-2012 school year. The small group met for 15 to 20 minutes each morning and focused on building background knowledge on the Houghton-Mifflin story that would be the selection of the week for the whole class. Instruction included previewing vocabulary, pre-reading, and discussions that helped to build background knowledge for the students.

During the course of this intervention, I collected data including field notes from my observations in class, test scores, and feedback from students about their
perceptions of the intervention. I analyzed this data using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the method of constant comparative analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), which enabled the data to be categorized and coded in such a way as to provide theories that might inform the research question.

The results of this research were provided in Chapter IV. Test scores for four Houghton-Mifflin Theme tests were charted and graphed in an attempt to show patterns in the outcomes. The results highlighted students’ scores in three areas of Reading Comprehension Content Standards. The first test was used as a reference point prior to the intervention. The remaining test results were measured against the first test to look for growth in reading comprehension.

Once results were charted, I looked for support from anecdotal notes made from observations in the classroom. Additionally, I reviewed student feedback as a final point of reference in the triangulation of my data.

The results of analyzing and triangulating the three sources of data raised several new questions. First, with regard to the test results, I couldn’t help but wonder if the limited number of questions associated with each Reading Comprehension Content Standard really was enough to measure competency in that area. Some tests measured specific standards with only two questions. This means missing only one question puts students at the Below Grade Level status for that standard.

A second question concerned the additional support that the students receive from required English language development (ELD) interventions. Each of the seven students in the small group were also pulled out of class every afternoon for ELD interventions. However, not all students received support in the same form. Some
programs focus on phonics and grammar while others focused on reading strategies. These outside factors may contribute in various ways to the reading comprehension of the students.

Finally, I wondered if a more systematic and longer intervention in the classroom would have been more successful. It was mentioned that this research did not become refined to focus on the strategies of building background with pre-reading activities and previewing vocabulary until approximately two months into the intervention. Additionally, there were several occasions when I was unable to implement the intervention due to conflicts in our daily schedules. What effect did this have on the success of the intervention?

Throughout the process of this action research, I have learned the importance of reflecting on my own teaching practice and adjusting as necessary to improve the impact of my teaching on my students. I have also seen the value of research as it applies to the classroom. Research is not limited to journal articles and books but also includes my own classroom. I have learned that data does not come only in the form of test results but that my own observations and the perceptions of the students are an important link in measuring results. Finally, I have learned that research is on-going. It often breeds new questions and proposes further study.

The questions raised in my study may be answered with further research. Additional studies should be focused on the specific strategies used to build background including previewing vocabulary and implementing pre-reading activities. The study would be implemented from the beginning of the study to the end, throughout the entire school year.
Another question that came out of this study centered on the fluctuation of the students’ test results. I offered several suggestions as to why this may have occurred. One theory was that each student came from a different background, which may have affected how they interpreted new ideas. A new study might approach building background by incorporating more discussion on new topics and eliciting more communication from the students. Further research into this area may reveal more concrete evidence.

Conclusion

It is clear that supporting English language learners in their goal of improving reading comprehension is vital to our schools. It is also well known that school resources are scarce and that all teachers must be equipped to support our language learners. This study responds to that need by researching one strategy for supporting ELLs within a small group intervention within the classroom.

This study used research-based strategies of building background information by using pre-reading activities and previewing vocabulary to improve the reading comprehension of a small group of language learners. During these activities, I could see that the students’ interest was piqued. When we consider our own schema and the way in which we relate new ideas or concepts to help us understand, it makes sense that the more background information we have, the better our chances of comprehending new information. This is not a new idea, but one that has been around since 1781, when Kant (1963) said that new information can only have meaning when it is related to something the person already knows. It is with this in mind that the research attempted to improve reading comprehension for our language learners.
Additionally, when teachers preview and discuss the information in a small group setting, it provides the students with more opportunities to practice language, ask questions, and interact without the anxiety that might come about in the whole class setting (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010). The students all indicated that they liked being in the small group setting and felt that it helped them to understand some of the stories better as well as remember new vocabulary words. One student, Miguel, who indicated at the beginning of the year that reading made him feel sad, felt that our small group helped him to better understand the stories.

While the results to this study are not conclusive, the reflections from the students and the observable participation of the students show promise in this approach. According to Cho, Xu, & Rhodes (2010) academic engagement for ELLs increases text comprehension. With further research, I believe that growth in test scores would also be a result.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research on this topic would be to implement the small group intervention for a longer period of time and more consistently from beginning to end. Had the intervention been implemented over a longer period of time, perhaps from the beginning of the school year to the end, more positive test scores could have resulted.

At the beginning of the intervention, attempts were made to include phonics and language conventions alongside reading comprehension. This instruction was too broad for the short amount of time that the small group was able to meet. Once the focus
was narrowed to the specific strategies outlined in the research, is was easier to measure its impact. Further research would implement these focused strategies from the beginning of the intervention to get a better sense of how successful these strategies can be.

Additionally, using multiple methods of assessment may have offered a different result in the students’ performance. This study limited the students to a specific portion of the Houghton-Mifflin Theme Tests as an indicator of their abilities in reading comprehension. The pre-reading strategies and vocabulary preview related to the Houghton-Mifflin stories and were therefore the main gauge for success. However, the number of questions were limited. If students had a variety of opportunities for proving their abilities, we may have seen a different outcome.

The importance of this study is clear. Although the study takes place in a rural location, the subject matter is relevant in many schools throughout our nation. All students need the individualized support of their instructors and this study offers a way to provide that support within the classroom.
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