Fluency and comprehension process for English language learners

Dolores Judy Vargas

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FLUENCY AND COMPREHENSION PROCESSES FOR
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Education:
Reading/Language Arts

by
Dolores Judy Vargas
March 2008
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3-12-08 Date
ABSTRACT

Mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes a daunting task for English learners as they strive to learn academic English while simultaneously completing content area assignments. Researchers in the field of second language acquisition argue that it can take anywhere from 5-10 years to learn academic English. Yet, English learners are required to compete academically with their native English-speaking peers upon entering school. Later, upon entering fourth-grade, the challenge to master reading comprehension and fluency is far greater as the learning focus shifts from learning to read, to reading to learn content area material.

So, how can teachers help their struggling English learners succeed? Extensive research reveals that there is little evidence that any particular language arts framework reliably produces superior results. Instead, in study after study, the classroom teacher is the critical factor. Therefore, the point to this study is to engage and empower four fourth-grade, low achieving, English learners with the use of alternative tools and strategies to improve fluency and comprehension. This study incorporated strategic meaning-making activities that targeted reading, writing,
listening, speaking, and thinking skills as prescribed by California State Standards.

Furthermore, by focusing on the end product first, a book that would include published stories of fun filled happy moments, about self, family, and friends, it made this endeavor a goal the group embraced. Also, by calling themselves “The Writers Club,” a name the group selected for the front cover of their authored book, worked wonders on their self-esteem. Upon finalizing the study, there was no doubt in my mind that it had been an empowering experience for these four learners, one with more positive ramification than a battery of scripted assessment tools.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Dr. Diane Brantley. You exemplify excellence in the field of education. Your high expectations of my writing ability never wavered. It was reassuring to have you as my advisor. I will never forget your encouraging words, “Take your time and enjoy the process.” Thank you for your support and guidance.

Thank you Dr. Enrique Murillo. Your class, EDUC 605 was an enlightening experience. Through thoughtful lecture and materials presented, I learned to look at educational policy through different lenses and to think critically. By questioning policy, teachers might then begin to give voice to those less privileged.

Thank you to my parents, Tranquilino and Crusita Lucero, my first teachers, for being superb role models. They were my first contact with English language learners. I am forever grateful for the sharing of their childhood stories, including stories of their endeavor to attain literacy in a second language. Ultimately, they made a difficult decision, to abandon their primary language when speaking to their children. Thus, from their stories and from working with English learners, I am more cognizant of the complexity involved in acquiring a second language.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND PROBLEM

Introduction

Mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes a daunting task for English learners as they strive to learn academic English while simultaneously completing content area assignments. English learners are expected to compete academically with their native English-speaking peers. While conversational English takes English learners 1-2 years to master, academic English can take anywhere from 5-10 years. Thus, and this is the crux of the problem; it is academic English the English learner must master in order to succeed in school. Freeman and Freeman (2004) infer that most teachers can see the results of language acquisition (conversational English) in their classrooms fairly quickly without formal instruction. Thus, warn Freeman and Freeman, “[E]xtensive research, (e.g., Collier, 1992; Cummins, 1996) has shown that it takes much longer to acquire the academic language needed for school success” (p. 36). From a word recognition perspective (phonics), Freeman and Freeman suggest proficiency is defined as accurate fluent reading, achieved by using knowledge of
phonics and sight words, and all errors are treated as problems to be corrected. The problem to this approach to reading proficiency, argue Freeman and Freeman, students may become good "word callers" and still not comprehend what they are reading. In particular, English learners may focus so much on reading accurately and rapidly that they fail to construct meaning (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

Therefore, in fourth-grade, where the stakes are much greater for English learners struggling to master reading comprehension and fluency, the task becomes overwhelmingly more difficult as the learning focus shifts from learning to read, to reading to learn content material. How can teachers help their struggling English learners succeed? Allington and Cunningham (2007) argue that there is little evidence that any particular language arts framework reliably produces superior results. Instead, in study after study, the classroom teacher is the critical factor (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Dudley-Marling, 2005; Johnston, 1998).

Rationale for the Study

English learners, of which 85 percent claim Spanish as their first language, are, all too often, categorized as
low performing, at risk of failing, or struggling readers and writers. For these individuals, mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes a continuing struggle as they strive to learn academic English while simultaneously completing course work in all content areas. Johns and Torrez (2001) argue that it is crucial to remember that when students are learning the language of instruction while simultaneously learning the content of instruction, teaching them as if they were native speakers of English is both ineffective and unacceptable. Johns and Torrez state, "Researchers in the area of second language acquisition have discovered that the process is quite complex because language learning is a multifaceted problem solving activity....[P]eople approach language learning using the information and abilities they already have" (2001, p. 31). Freeman and Freeman (2004) caution teachers not to be fooled into believing that one-size-fits-all scripted phonics based programs are the answer to teaching English learners. These "quick fix" highly popular programs, in public schools today, do not work for English learners (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).
Questions to be Answered

In today’s educational arena, the political agenda mandates a scripted language arts program with a heavy emphasis on phonics. As a result, teachers must spend valuable classroom time administering state mandated tests and teaching to the test. Not surprisingly, a one-size-fits-all scripted language arts program, with more emphasis on phonics, leaves very little time for reading and writing. Is too much focus on phonics, with little time for reading and writing, hindering the progress of our English learners? In addition to English learners, are other low performing students experiencing difficulty in fourth-grade where the focus changes from learning to read, to reading to learn? Is it the vast number of English learners in a public school system out of sync in how best to teach them that finally results in teacher referrals of these students to special education? Is it teacher frustration and not knowing how to help the growing number of struggling English learners that contribute to the high number of referrals of these students to special education? Equally important, Spanish speakers make up 85 percent of the English learner student population in California; they also have the highest dropout rate. Why is this? Could
this be an indication that the present one-size-fits-all scripted language arts program is failing to engage English learners in the learning process.

Importance of the Study

In the past three years, while substitute teaching and completing classes for the Masters Reading Program, I have worked with several fourth grade students, tutoring one-on-one and small groups during special fieldwork for classes. What I got out of this experience was a chance to learn from these struggling English learners about the difficulties of acquiring a second language while simultaneously completing content area assignments in the second language. The heart wrenching truth is this: If struggling English learners are already experiencing academic difficulties in K-3 because they have yet to master comprehension and fluency with speed, chances are the 4th grade curriculum will be an uphill battle.

All too frequently low performing students having acquired discreet language skills in the early grades will experience what Cummins (2003) refers to as "the grade 4 slump" (p. 4). Fourth-grade is a difficult period for any struggling, nine year-old learner. However, for the
English learner who has not yet mastered academic English, it is twice as difficult. English learners have not been listening and absorbing English language structures since birth (Parker & Pardini, 2006). The purpose of this study is to reengage low-performing students. This study will incorporate meaningful activities, strategies, and techniques to improve reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Assumptions and Limitations

For this study, I am assuming that I will find research that supports what I see taking place in classrooms today—that there is too much time spent teaching phonics and not enough time for meaningful reading and writing—activities that improve fluency and comprehension. In fact, for those students who have not developed a love for reading on their own, reading, for them, means pronouncing the words. By the time these struggling English learners arrive in the fourth-grade their problems are compounded. Up to this point the focus has been learning to read, now, they are expected to be proficient in reading comprehension and fluency (reading with speed). According to Allington and Cunningham (2007), Cummins
(2004), Freeman and Freeman (2004), and Smith (1997), reading comprehension and fluency is gained only after many hours of meaningful reading and writing. I am confident that the research will guide the study and present alternative tools and methodology to reengage low performing English learners in their pursuit of fluency and comprehension.

The four-week study will involve four struggling English learners that I have never worked with before. However, the school itself, I am familiar with, having spent many fieldwork hours tutoring fourth-grade students. The four-week study will require 40 minutes a day, three days a week. Sessions will take place at the back of the room at the guided reading table during which time Mrs. Estrada (pseudonym) will teach language arts to her 4th/5th grade bilingual class. I expect it will get pretty noisy, so the noise level may present a problem. Also, I am aware that these individuals have varying needs and strengths, so because of the short time frame, four weeks, we may not see substantial improvement in all four struggling English learners.
Organization of the Study

In chapter two, the Literature Review will first look at the various obstacles English learners face as they proceed to simultaneously learn a new language while learning the curriculum. Educators who blame the students or their families for learning difficulties create a barrier to learning. Without sufficient support in their pursuit of academic English struggling English learners will shutdown learning, and finally dropout of school, giving up on the system. As a result of high dropout rates, research will examine the variables involved in second language acquisition and an individual’s background. For some individuals, it can take anywhere from 5-10 years to master academic English. Further on, we look at the focus of the educational system on absolute correctness in comprehension and fluency and the stigma of constant failure creating yet another barrier between learner and achievement. Hence, after falling into a pattern of failure, achievement seems illusive. Finally, we look at intervention and effective teaching methods that have received high marks for turning struggling English learners into successful learners.
Chapter three combines some of the most significant strategies and techniques from the research in conjunction with learner needs and time constraints, to create a four-week curriculum study that will engage four struggling fourth-grade English language learners. By fully engaging the four students, which I refer to as the target group throughout the study, I hope to demonstrate that struggling students benefit from an accelerated intervention, rich in reading and writing activities that improve reading comprehension and fluency. In Chapter four I analyze the data and progress made by each member of the target group. I give an individual assessment of strengths and needs in a final profile. Finally, in chapter five, I summarize the results of the research study. In the conclusion portion, I give a rendition of the group's accomplishments as a result of the study. Further, under recommendations, I discuss the need for more studies to examine the various problems associated with present educational policy and struggling English language learners.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes a daunting task for English learners as they strive to learn academic English while simultaneously completing content area assignments. English learners are expected to compete academically with their native English-speaking peers. While conversational English takes English learners 1-2 years to master, academic English, can take anywhere from 5-10 years. Thus, and this is the crux of the problem; it is academic English the English learner must master in order to succeed in school.

Currently, elementary schools dependent on federal funding must adhere to a mandated scripted language arts program with heavy emphasis on phonics. Teachers must spend valuable classroom time administering tests and teaching to the test. Not surprisingly, a one-size-fits-all phonics based, scripted language arts program leaves very little time for meaningful reading and writing. Thus, the English learner unable to master academic English in a
1-2 year time frame (present policy) begins the inevitable spiral to failure.

Research reveals that without academic support until the English learner can sufficiently compete with native English-speaking counterparts, this student will, unfortunately, continue to struggle academically. If accelerated learning is not forthcoming, the struggling learner will then be labeled low achiever, at risk, below basic, struggling English learner, or learning disabled. Imagine wearing any one of these labels throughout your school years. Research reveals that once the struggling English learner enters middle school, catching up, is nearly impossible.

Is too much focus on phonics, with too little time left for meaningful reading and writing activities, hindering the progress of our English learners? Are other students, in addition to English learners, finding fourth-grade a more difficult endeavor? Also troubling, are the high numbers of English learners referred to special education. Why are so many English learners being referred to special education?

Just as significant, Spanish speakers in California make up 85 percent of the English learner student
population; they also have the highest dropout rate. Is this an indication that the present one-size-fits-all scripted language arts program is failing to engage English learners in the learning process. As educators, we want all students to succeed.

Therefore, the Literature Review will look at reading instruction theories, methods, and models. Also, a good portion of the Literature Review will include the difficulties encountered by struggling English learners as they struggle to acquire a second language while simultaneously learning the curriculum. Finally, the Literature Review will take a close look at effective strategies, activities, and techniques to improve comprehension and fluency for struggling English learners.

Of course, some research may advocate one method as more effective than another, however, no method has been proven to be 100 percent effective for all children. What works for one child may not work for another. In the long run, research reveals that effective teachers make the difference. Teachers play a pivotal role in the outcome of their English language learners, by adjusting lessons to the needs and strengths of individuals, and by placing more emphasis on what the child can do.
Teaching Philosophies

The Masters Reading Program has been fundamental in transforming my view of reading instruction. Although my actual experience in reading instruction for the past eight years has been primarily using the word recognition method (phonics), after entering the Masters Reading Program in 2005, I was struck by the differences of this method to that of the socio-psycholinguistic model. Of course, the word recognition view (phonics) is the popular model of day in public schools. In the word recognition view the focus is reading the words correctly. In contrast, the socio-psycholinguistic view focuses on meaningful reading and writing. On the other hand, phonics instruction stresses isolated skills and drills. By the time English learners get to third grade they become pretty good word callers. However, with so much focus on fluent pronunciation of the words English learners fail to get the meaning of their reading. In contrast, the socio-psycholinguistic model advocates teaching skills and strategies in the context of meaningful reading and writing activities, which according to research is more conducive to the way English language learners acquire literacy.
Johns and Torrez (2001) argue that language acquisition is an unconscious process in the sense that children are not aware they are acquiring a language. They insist, that language learning, on the other hand, requires formal knowledge of explicit rules, forms, and structures. Some research, report Johns and Torrez, also include the thought process, arguing that there is an interactive relationship between language, thought, and social conditions. Johns and Torrez assert that this is the constructionist view of language development and is based on the work of the Russian linguist Lev Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky, children learn by doing and activity is critical to language development (Johns and Torrez, 2001).

Consequently, the word recognition view (phonics), which focuses on getting the word, not on getting the meaning, has not prepared English learners to read comprehensively for meaning. Too much focus on phonics and testing, with little time for reading and writing, has failed to adequately prepare English learners for the challenge of the fourth-grade curriculum, where the focus is no longer learning to read, but reading to learn. Garcia (2004) says, “The burgeoning numbers of English
learners who are also failing academically in alarming numbers force us to review, rethink, and revise what we have been doing instructionally" (p. xi).

Lev Vygotsky (1978) a Russian linguist, famous for his work on language development, argued that activity is critical to language development; children learn by doing, and language is no exception. Cummins (2004) insists that guided by supportive adults within a Vygotskian framework, a socio-cultural responsive learning environment, children are very capable of developing more complex phonological and decoding skills than they have been taught explicitly.

Vygotsky highly criticized what he considered inadequate practices in the educational system, teacher centered instruction, which relied heavily on IQ developmental test scores to design instruction. Vygotsky cautioned against teaching methods that rely on test scores for curricular design. He criticized the highly popular methodology of his day, teacher centered, direct instruction, much like the highly popular one-size-fits-all scripted programs adopted by today’s policy makers. Instead, he advocated for a learner-centered approach, employing his Zone of Proximal Development theory, which he described as, "[T]he distance between the actual [child’s]
development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 131).

Vygotsky urged that under the guiding hand of a knowledgeable, well-prepared teacher, "[W]hat a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (p. 87).

Likewise, Crawford (2003) argues, that in a constructivist framework, language acquisition is embedded in function within a meaningful context, not fragmented. Crawford further states that direct instruction models focus on the disassembly of fragmentation of curricular elements, so that isolated skills and concepts can be mastered along a linear paradigm. This model (paradigm) is teacher centered. Crawford says Krashen's most important contribution, the input hypothesis, concludes that progress in language development, occurs when we receive comprehensible input, or input that contains structure at a slightly higher level than what we already understand. According to Crawford, Krashen's input hypothesis corresponds to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Crawford argues that Krashen's affective filter hypothesis
is also relevant to the many difficulties struggling English learners experience, as their struggle in academia, results in low self-esteem, shutdown, and finally dropout. The affective filter hypothesis concludes that several affective variables are associated with success in second language acquisition. These include high motivation, self-confidence and a positive self-image, and most important, low anxiety in the learning environment. Crawford states, "According to Terrell (1982) and Krashen and Terrell (1983), we should view correction as a negative reinforcer that raises the affective filter and the level of anxiety in a language classroom, whether composed of children or adults" (p. 157). Is it within our power to make reading instruction more meaningful and less anxiety ridden for struggling English learners, so that they too may reach their full potential?

Struggling English Learners

Spanish is the first language of 85.4 percent of English language learners in California public schools (Martinez, 2007). Gangi (2004) says Latino youth have more academic difficulties than any other ethnic group, and they have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group—about 28
percent. Shortly after entering school, they are tested in English, not their primary language, and so starts the labeling of these students who must master a second language within 1-2 years. Next, if the language is not mastered and test scores are low, these students are labeled low performing, at risk of failing, struggling readers and writers, or learning disabled. For these individuals, mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes a daunting task as they strive to learn academic English while simultaneously completing assignments in all content areas. Johns and Torrez (2001) argue it is crucial to remember that when students are learning the language of instruction while simultaneously learning the content of instruction, teaching them as if they were native speakers of English is both ineffective and unacceptable. Johns and Torrez state, “Researchers in the area of second language acquisition have discovered that the process is quite complex because language learning is a multifaceted problem solving activity” (2001, p. 31).

Martinez (2007) says that Spanish is the first language of 85.4 percent of the English language learners in California public schools, and statistics show Vietnamese, at 2.2 percent, is the second most-common first
language. Martinez writes of a court fight that has high stakes for the state, school districts, and children learning the language. Martinez says that California tests all students in English, even those who do not understand the language. Martinez writes of one recent example:

When 11-year old Angel Gallegos Guerrero stepped into his sixth-grade classroom in September, some 23 days after classes began, he entered a new world. "I was afraid because it was a new school and I didn't know English," Angel said in Spanish....Two weeks later, Angel took his first California English Language Development Test, which measures the English proficiency of students learning English. On a scale of 248 to 741, Angel scored 287. He got only a few points in oral vocabulary grammar and word analysis (p. A1, A6).

Consequently, children such as Angel are the reason ten school districts, education organizations, and several families have sued the state of California over its administration of the No Child Left Behind Act, a federal education-reform law (Martinez, 2007). What does the research reveal about misconceptions, if any, on English language proficiency?
English Language Proficiency and The Fourth-Grade Slump

English Language Proficiency. According to Jim Cummins (2003), misconceptions about language proficiency are at the root of controversial policy in both reading instruction and the education of English language learners. Cummins argues that Proposition 227 incorrectly claimed that one year of instructional support was sufficient for English learners to acquire English and successfully integrate into mainstream classrooms. However, the research data overwhelmingly suggests that one or two years may be sufficient for acquiring conversational English but that at least five years (and frequently more) are required, to bridge the gap in academic English between them and their native English speaking peers (Cummins, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Johns & Torrez, 2001; Krashen, 2004; Martinez, 2007).

Diaz-Rico (2004) in Teaching English Learners: Strategies and Methods refers to Vygotsky’s belief that children learn to engage in higher level thinking by learning first how to communicate through social interaction. The more children can use language in the classroom, says Diaz-Rico, the more they will learn how to
think. Diaz-Rico reminds us that many of our English language learners go home and practice a language entirely removed from the academic English we use in school. She also states it is essential to make the students experience of engaging in academic English rich and enjoyable.

Krashen (2003) argues that current theories of second language acquisition are based on years of research in a wide variety of fields, including linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and neurolinguistics. One concept endorsed by most current theorists is that of a continuum of learning—predictable and sequential stages of language development, in which the learner progresses from no knowledge of the new language to a level of competency closely resembling that of a native speaker (Johns & Torrez, 2001; Krashen, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2004). The following table illustrates the four stages of second language development: Pre-Production, Early Production, Speech Emergence, and Intermediate Fluency (see Table 1).
<table>
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<th>Stage</th>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Pre-Production. “The Silent Period.” In this first stage, the learner is concerned with receiving speech, rather than speech production. For most beginning second-language learners, the “translation” process becomes overwhelming because they become preoccupied with the form to the neglect of communication. Since the focus at this stage is on comprehension, the learners responses are usually nonverbal ones, such as pointing, touching, and nodding. Comprehension must come before speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Early Production. Speech emerges slowly but naturally at different rates for different children. At the early production stage children move beyond listening comprehension and begin to communicate using one or two words. This stage follows the theory of one-word, two-word, three-word development in primary language acquisition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Speech Emergence. At the third stage, speech emergence, children begin to speak in simple sentences. At this stage, the emphasis shifts from language reception to language production in the form of simple sentence patterns and short dialogues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Intermediate Fluency. At this stage, the student gages in spontaneous dialogue and composition. Here the emphasis is on vocabulary development. Also, colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions are introduced at this level. At this point the student begins to “think” in the second language, instead of conceptualizing in the native language and then translating into the target language.</td>
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Johns and Torrez (2001) state, “Children move through these stages at their own pace. Forcing language production delays or retards progress. Fluency develops gradually as a subconscious process. Formal learning of grammatical structure comes later” (p. 45).

Another variable in second language development is the difficulty of those students who enter kindergarten not having mastered academically their primary language. Johns and Torrez (2001) argue that these students have greater difficulty than their classmates who attended several years of school in their primary language. Older English learners with academic experience in their primary language are able to transfer knowledge from their primary language to English learning. Unless the teacher is aware of this variable in the acquisition of a second language, the struggling English learner with no academic experience in his primary language may be labeled learning disabled. For example, if a teacher compares one student, Mario, an English learner who began kindergarten in the United States, to Roberto who has been here since the third grade and is now progressing to the fifth grade, the teacher may show her dismay that Mario has not progressed academically as rapidly as Roberto. Frustrated with Mario’s progress
this teacher might be quick to assume that Mario has a learning disability because he is still struggling with academic English, on the other hand, Roberto is showing remarkable progress. Yet, according to research, it is highly plausible that English learners lacking the academic tools from a primary language may lag behind academically if accelerated learning is not forth coming. Without knowledge of this variable in successful language acquisition, teachers may be quick to label the student "learning disabled." Upon leaving school, each school day, many of these struggling English learners return to their primary language. So, all of their academic support comes from within the school environment. Successful acquisition of academic English will depend highly on, how much, if any, home support the child receives, and most importantly, how much school support the student receives. Research shows that accelerated learning administered quickly, efficiently, and until the student can function in mainstream academia, without support, is the most efficient method for ensuring future academic success (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Gee, 2001; Krashen, 2004; Mohr, 2004; Parker & Pardini, 2006;).
The Fourth-grade Slump. The effects of curricular demands of fourth grade can be devastating to English learners. Struggling native English speakers would probably agree that the fourth-grade curriculum is more difficult than third grade, because now he or she must read to learn. However, and this is the crux of the problem, for the English learner it is twice as difficult as he or she is still in the process of mastering academic English (their second language) while simultaneously completing curriculum assignments. At the same time, English learners attempting to master reading comprehension and fluency while acquiring a second language, face a barrage of tests to determine basic skill levels. Research on second language acquisition reveals that if the student experiences anxiety in his learning environment, no learning will take place (Diaz-Rico, 2004; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Johns & Torrez, 2001; Krashen, 2004;). To this effect, Krashen (2004) argues that in order for learning to take place the learner must be "open" to the input or have a low "affective filter." Krashen cautions that when language acquirers are anxious, or put on the defensive, the input may not reach the portion of the brain responsible for language acquisition. Smith (1997) argues
that a great deal of learning takes place when learners consider themselves to be potential members of certain groups, or “clubs,” and expect to learn. So how does one develop such a stance?

Gee (2001), in his study of cultural models, describes a particular situation of an upper middle class, highly educated father approaching his 3-year-old son who is sitting at the kitchen table. The father is concerned because on some occasions the son has said he is “learning to read.” At other times he has said he “cannot read,” and still at other times stated he is “a reader.” The purpose of the father’s engagement at that moment is to encourage “a reader” stance, by the 3-year-old. Gee further explains this point:

We might say that the father is operating with a however tacit theory (cultural model) that a child’s assuming a certain identity (“I am a reader”) facilitates the acquisition of that identity and its concomitant skills. I believe this sort of model is fairly common in certain sorts of families. Parents co-construct an identity with a child (attribute, and get the child to believe in, a certain competence) before the child can actually fully carry out all the
skills associated with this identity, competence before performance. (p. 721)

Gee argues that these are the sorts of models that must be delivered to all children amidst ample practice within socialization in specific discourses, if we are to have true access and equity for all children.

Thus, for the already struggling English learner, fourth-grade reading comprehension and fluency can be overwhelmingly difficult if ample time for success (5-10 years) is not forthcoming. Consequently, beyond fourth-grade, mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes even more complex. The English learner must compete academically with his native English-speaking peers. At the same time, the English learner will get less and less one-on-one from the teacher because in low socio-economic areas, the teacher student ratio changes drastically from 20/1 in K-3 to 34+/1 in 4-6. Consequently, as difficulties persist in mastering reading comprehension and fluency, if adequate support is not available, English learners find themselves caught up in an educational system of labeling. In disproportionate numbers English learners are referred to special education. In this quest for correctness and high test scores, without sufficient school support,
English learners shut down learning, leading many, too many, to dropout of school altogether (Gangi, 2004; Klingner & Artiles, 2006; Paul, 2004)

Learning Disabilities, Shutdown, and Dropout

Learning Disabilities. In a special issue of the Journal of Learning Disabilities, Klingner and Artiles (2006) were challenged, as they explain it, by a dearth of research in the unprecedented growth of English language learner referrals to special education. Klingner and Artiles challenged their colleagues to provide necessary research for the disproportionate representation of English language learners in special education. In the first paper, Rueda and Windmueller review the history of learning disabilities and note continuing problems in the field of special education that remain unresolved. They suggest the overrepresentation is conceptualized as an indicator of underlying difficulties rather than the focal point of remediation and problem solving. In the next paper, Klingner, Artiles, Mendez, and Barletta contribute an analytical synthesis of the empirical research on English learners who struggle with reading and may have learning disabilities. They conclude that more research is warranted to better understand the strengths and learning
needs of subgroups of underachieving English learners and the conditions under which they thrive or struggle. Next, Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, and Kushner describe an exploratory study of eligibility decisions made for 21 Spanish-speaking English Language Learners with learning disabilities who were targeted as needing support in reading. The authors discuss issues associated with referral, assessment, and eligibility determinations for English learners and offer valuable recommendations for improving practice. Next, Figueroa and Newsome investigate the extent to which psychologists' assessment procedures are nondiscriminatory, according to federal regulations and state criteria, when used with English learners to identify learning disabilities. Their findings revealed that in general psychologists did not follow legal or professional guidelines for conducting nondiscriminatory assessments. Last, Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, and Cirino describe a notable experimental study of a response to intervention model for providing early assistance to English learners identified as at risk for reading difficulties. Linan-Thompson and colleagues found that intervention students gained significantly more on reading-related measures than comparison students. In summary, Klinger and Artiles state
that the articles are beneficial and add to the emerging scholarship and research base on English learners who struggle to become literate.

Paul (2007) argues that Latino children are over-identified as "learning disabled" in some states and under-identified in others. Paul cautions that the ways in which these identifications are affected by second-language acquisition factors should be explored and further studied. This designation of "being learning disabled," states Paul, is difficult to determine for students who are native speakers of a language; but that difficulty is compounded for students who are learners of English as a second language. Paul (2007) presents this compelling statement on the designation of "learning disabled":

In many instances, a learning disability is determined by assessing the difference between the student's performance on IQ tests and achievement tests. A significant discrepancy is characterized as indicative of a learning disability. Yet, states Paul, one must possess English-language facility with both the IQ test and the achievement tests. So how does the evaluator truly distinguish between the lack of
English facility and a difficulty in learning if such a distinction is made at all? (p. 648-656)

On the same note, Harley, Allen, Cummins, and Swain (1990) report students may appear to have overcome difficulties in English since they frequently understand and speak English well, however, IQ and other psychological tests in English will show more poorly developed verbal than performance abilities. Unfortunately, says Harley, Allen, Cummins, and Swain, this has led to minority students being labeled as "learning disabled" and getting a one-way ticket to special education classes. Vygotsky (1978) cautioned against educators who rely on special programs that isolate "slow learners" from their teachers and peers through mechanized instruction. In contrast, because he viewed learning as a profoundly social process, he emphasized the importance of dialogue and the varied roles that language plays in instruction and in mediated cognitive growth.

**Shutdown.** Increasing demands for the English learner to master reading comprehension and fluency sometimes results in frustration, leading to disruptive behavior, low self-esteem, and finally shutdown. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory focuses on the learning possibilities of the child, with the assistance of a more
knowledgeable peer or adult. This stance, points to a socio-cultural community of learners in a non-threatening environment, and teacher, as model to learning. Thus, this view, according to research, is how children acquire new knowledge and make greater gains in academic achievement (Crawford, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Gee, 2001; Johns & Torrez, 2001; Krashen, 2004). The teacher focuses on the child's potential. The child, with the help of a more informed individual, in a stress-free environment, experiences learning. This picture also coincides with Krashen's (2004) affective filter hypothesis. When too much focus is on correctness and what the child cannot do, the child's anxiety level rises and learning shuts down. Thus, teaching English learners the curriculum in a language they are learning simultaneously is complicated. Johns and Torrez (2001) caution that for English language learners the experience of acquiring a new language and learning the curriculum at the same time is really quite complicated because language learning is a multifaceted problem solving activity. Johns and Torrez suggest that when teaching second language learners, a helpful native speaker, such as the teacher, uses the following strategies and contextual support (see Figure 1).
STRATEGIES AND CONTEXTUAL SUPPORT
FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

1. Slower rates of speaking
2. Clear articulation
3. Simple vocabulary
4. Repetition and rephrasing
5. Gestures
6. Visuals
7. Para-verbal expressions

Figure 1. Strategies and Contextual Support For English Language Learners

Dropout. Gangi (2004) says Latino youth have more academic difficulties than any other ethnic group, and they have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group—about 28 percent. When helping children attain the academic English they need to succeed in the larger society, Gangi asserts, teachers tend to over correct children who speak a different dialect. Gangi argues, “The constant threat of being corrected by the teacher negatively charges the classroom atmosphere, creates high anxiety, and makes it harder to learn” (2004, p. 120). Klingner and Artiles (2006) offer these compelling statistics of English language learners:

According to Zehler et al. (2003), about 77% of ELLs speak Spanish as their first language....Hispanics are
the fastest growing ethnic group in U.S. schools and have passed African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States (U.S. 2000 Census, 2001). Hispanic groups have higher dropout rates than non-Hispanics (Education Statistics Quarterly, 2000), and although the Hispanic-White achievement gap narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s, it widened in the late 1980s and 1990s and is still sizable (Lee, 2002). An additional concern is that ELLs are often disproportionately placed in special education programs. (P. 386-389)

Intervention, Accelerated Learning, and Effective Teachers

Intervention. Reengaging low-achieving readers was the primary problem explored by members of the Teachers’ Learning Collaborative (TLC), a network of teacher researchers from across southeast Michigan, USA, who teach in settings from the first through eight grades and in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. George, Raphael, and Florio-Ruane (2003) during the summer 1998 worked on a pilot literacy curriculum framework called Book Club Plus. The overarching theme, “Our Storied Lives,” explain the TLC members, provided a context for linking
students reading, writing, and talking about texts.

George, Raphael, and Florio-Ruane go on to explain that the theme “Our Storied Lives,” studied across the year in the Book Club Plus framework, focused on culture, and provided extensive opportunity for students to engage in writing in support of their learning. This interweaving had implications for the learning of all students, but inquiry focused in particular on its role in the learning of students struggling to learn to read and write in English (George, Raphael, and Florio-Ruane, 2003).

Accelerated Learning. Mohr (2004) argues English language learners are commonly expected to become sufficiently fluent in English to take standardized and state-mandated tests in a matter of a few years. Although rapid proficiency is a lofty goal, says Mohr, appropriate instruction has yet to become common practice (August and Hakuta, 1997; Slavin and Calderon, 2001). According to Mohr, we need better programs that are supportive to our English learners. Mohr (2004) makes this dire revelation on the plight of English learners:

Unfortunately, too many Ells in regular public school classrooms are not making sufficient progress to graduate and access the opportunities that are
available to their native-English-speaking peers (Fitzgerald, 1995). The need to provide better instruction for Ells requires an up dated, invigorated approach to their schooling. Related research emphasizes the need for rigorous instruction to maximize linguistic and cultural capital (Chaudron, 1988; Constantino, 1994; Moll, 1988). Better programs are characterized by a campus—or district wide commitment led by well-informed administrators (Tharp and Gallimore, 1991) who seek social, academic, and linguistic development among Ells (Romo, 1999)....To achieve parity with their English-speaking peers and maximize education opportunities Ells should receive consistent, congruent, and comprehensive instruction. (p. 18)

In addition, cautions Mohr, if Ells are removed from their classroom during language arts instruction these students may actually receive less help with reading and writing than the English-proficient students. Mohr suggests that the well-equipped classroom teacher, may, in fact, be the best person not only to instruct literacy but also to actually make English an accelerated language for Ells. So
what does research reveal about the well-equipped classroom teacher (effective teacher)?

Effective Teachers. Johnston (1998) describes a simple test of teacher evaluation expertise that can be used as a self-test. Johnston claims that two features will be most evident in the expert’s description of a particular child’s literacy development. The two evident features, explains Johnston, will be (1) emphasis on processes, and (2) an emphasis on what the child can do. He stresses that unless teachers know their learners well it is not possible to tailor instruction to their needs, particularly in language arts, which requires a supportive, communicative context. Johnston (1998) makes this argument against present literacy testing policy:

The process through which we examine and keep track of children’s literacy development is currently dominated by multiple-choice, product-oriented, group-administered, norm-referenced reading tests. These tests have been developed in the name of science and efficiency by “experts” so that the teacher need only be a technician who administers a test and later receives scores. The goal is to collect efficiently objective data, which can be used for a variety of
purposes such as classification, accountability, and progress monitoring. However, these so-called goals are properly sub-goals. The most fundamental goal of all educational evaluation is optimal instruction for all children and evaluation practices are only legitimate to the extent that they serve this goal.

(p. 46)

Johnston argues that teachers must evaluate individual students' needs and respond to them. In other words, says Johnston, we must help teachers become experts at evaluating the process of literacy development. Furthermore, says Johnston, we must ensure that teachers' hunches and informal observations are as accurate, insightful, and valid as possible.

Dudley-Marling (2005) insists that the teacher is still the most important part of the equation in the classroom. He states, "Narrow conceptions of research that silence the voices of teachers diminish the entire teaching learning enterprise" (p. 130). Dudley-Marling argues that although classroom reading instruction must be informed by appropriate theory and research, theory and research must inform teaching, but should not determine it. Dudley-Marley states, "Research matters, yet teaching must not be
reduced to a technical activity in which teachers are mere conduits for scripted lessons that have been proven to be effective by distant educational research” (P. 128).

Effective teachers know their students’ histories, routines, and dispositions; they create just the right curricular mix, says Dudley-Marley.

On the subject of effective teachers, Allington and Johnston (2002) argue the complicated part of teaching effectively is selecting and organizing the curriculum materials and selecting the appropriate instructional moves that meet the needs of the learners in the classroom. Allington and Johnston state, “Accomplishing this ‘fit’ requires a particular expertise that cannot be packaged by ‘experts’ at some far-off university or publishing house” (p. 7).

Reading Comprehension and Fluency

Is it possible to have fluency in reading and not comprehend the text? Harley, Cummins, Swain, and Allen (1990) insist that what has been considered “full English proficiency” amounts essentially to fluency in English; that is, the ability to function adequately in face-to-face situations and use English appropriately in a
conversational context. In fact, the evidence suggests that children who have exited bilingual into all-English programs continue to experience academic difficulties in English (Harley, Cummins, Swain, & Allen, 1990). On the same note, Freeman and Freeman (2004) suggest that even though the students' oral reading sounds good, these students score poorly on any measure of reading comprehension. They insist phonics does not always benefit students, especially, if they come to believe that good reading is to pronounce the words. They also suggest that students who receive intensive phonics instruction in lower grades, struggle with reading comprehension later on. Freeman and Freeman state, “Evidence from linguistics lends strong support to a socio-psycholinguistic model of reading” (p. 25). When people read texts that are comprehensible and interesting, suggest Freeman and Freeman, they become more proficient readers and writers.

Allington and Cunningham (2007) argue that specific curricular emphases come and go in what appears to be 30-year cycles (Lange & Allington, 1992); however, curricular material can play an important role in shaping classroom instruction, and this is especially true in classrooms where the teacher has little expertise in teaching reading.
Allington and Cunningham state that the classrooms that work best for all children are those that offer curriculum alternatives in a balanced reading and language arts framework. Furthermore, insist Allington and Cunningham, in every classroom, books should be displayed attractively in book centers or classroom libraries. Moreover, because the United States is such a wealthy country no child should ever leave school without a book in his or her backpack (Allington & Cunningham, 2007). So what do other reading experts have to say about the reading process?

According to Gunning (2003) reading is a continuing developing ability, which emerges from a child’s experience with oral language and print. The Gunning text was required reading for two reading language arts courses for the credential program. The text was instrumental in lesson planning for required assignments and I received an “A” in both reading courses. Also, the text provided valuable preparation for the (RICA) Reading Instruction Curriculum Assessment, a California State requirement for credentialed teachers. In the following table Gunning describes the stages of reading development, but one must remember his earlier words (Reading is a continuing developing ability, which emerges from a child’s experience
with oral language and print.) This statement has profound meaning to me because in some cases, the classroom teacher may be the English learners' only opportunity for continuous reading development. English language learners deserve meaningful reading instruction and plenty of opportunity for writing and communicating in their second language. Teachers must be supportive of their English language learners because according to Gunning, reading is a continuing developing ability, which emerges from a child's experience with oral language and print. On the next page I have included a table in which Gunning describes the stages of reading development (see Table 2).
Table 2. The Stages of Reading Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Age/Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One: Emergent Literacy</td>
<td>Children at this stage are egocentric and cannot appreciate another's point of view. They love being read to and cannot hear their favorite tales often enough.</td>
<td>Birth to Five Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two: Early Reading</td>
<td>A key characteristic of this stage is an evolving grasp of the alphabetic principle. Students begin using their knowledge of letter-sound relationships and context to decode printed words. Children should be given lots of easy books at this stage so that they have ample opportunity to practice their developing skills.</td>
<td>Kinder-garten and First Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three: Growing Independence</td>
<td>The main characteristic of this stage is children's evolving fluency. As the process of decoding becomes automatic, they are able to concentrate on meaning. For many, this stage is marked by extensive reading of both fiction and nonfiction. Reading becomes one of their preferred activities.</td>
<td>Grades Two and Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four: Reading to Learn</td>
<td>This stage is marked by the wide application of word-attack and comprehension skills. From about 4th grade on, much greater emphasis is placed on grasping informational text; vocabulary and conceptual load increases significantly.</td>
<td>Grades Four Through Six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five: Abstract Reading</td>
<td>Between 11 and 14 years of age, students enter the stage of formal operations, in which they think abstractly. They can construct multiple hypotheses, consider several viewpoints, and logical alternatives. Approximately one elementary or middle school youngster out of 3 will not reach stage five.</td>
<td>Grade Seven and up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As for literacy achievement of the United States compared to the rest of the world, Gunning states that the literacy status in the United States boasts the second-highest reading scores for nine-year olds, and informs us that "Only Finland’s nine-year olds do better (Elley, 1992)" (2003, p. 14). According to Gunning, today’s students outperform their parents and grandparents, and when test makers remake their tests, they have to make them harder. The top 25 percent of students are achieving higher scores than ever before but the bottom 25 percent are doing worse than ever, says Gunning, and the gap between the best and poorest readers in fourth-grade is widening. Gunning reveals in a study of reading achievement of fourth-graders, only three of thirty-two states showed an improvement in the scores of the lowest 25 percent. Acceptable literacy levels of decades ago are no longer sufficient (Gunning, 2003).

On the same subject of reading achievement, Cummins (2004) argues, "What determines reading achievement in the long term is how effectively we develop students’ reading comprehension—and reading comprehension is overwhelmingly related to the extent to which students engage in extensive reading" (p. 3). Simply put a curriculum that includes
many engaging books works much better than worksheets and drills in developing reading comprehension and academic language (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Cummins, 2004; Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Krashen, 2004; Smith, 1997).

In reference to low-level skills, Allington and Cunningham (2007) argue that the focus on low level skills that has been so popular politically has led to more children achieving the "basic" literacy level. However, Allington and Cunningham insist, that the number of students who achieve the "proficient" literacy level has barely changed over the past 35 years. The proficiency level, say Allington and Cunningham, asks students to read, write, and think simultaneously; also, students must summarize information read, or contrast two characters, but only about 25 percent of students satisfactorily complete such tasks. Conversely, the focus on low-level skills has resulted in too many children who read words accurately but who demonstrate little thinking while reading (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 2003, 2004).

Krashen (2004) argues that one of the most powerful tools we have in language education is free voluntary reading, but in today's language arts programs it is the missing ingredient. He says that it will not, by itself,
produce the highest levels of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached. Krashen states, "The true path to higher test scores is reading" (p. 151).

Smith (1997) says that there is very little we can learn about reading without reading. He states that the teacher's responsibility is to make it possible for children to learn to read. Smith reminds us that teachers learned to read only through the practice of reading. The notion that learning to read, says Smith, is somehow different from reading becomes particularly dangerous with older students experiencing difficulty (or diagnosed as having difficulty). These students, says Smith, may be restricted to activities that make no sense. Smith insists, "Not only does meaningful reading provide the essential clues and feedback for learning to read, it provides its own reinforcement. Learning to read is a satisfying activity" (p. 105).

Why do inner-city children perform so poorly on reading achievement tests than children in affluent suburbs? Weaver (1988) contends researchers seeking to determine why inner-city children typically score lower on reading achievement tests than children in affluent suburbs
discovered, not surprisingly, that inner-city children less frequently have schemas that will facilitate comprehension of passages in such tests. Too often the passages are based on experiences, knowledge, and vocabulary that they do not possess, says Weaver. Reading, argues Weaver, is not merely a psycholinguistic process, involving a transaction between the mind of the reader and the language of the text; instead, reading is a socio-psycholinguistic process, because the reader-text transaction occurs within situational and social contexts.

The Reading/Writing Connection

Graves (1997), Gunning (2003), Routman (2005), and Weaver (1988) substantiate the importance of teaching reading and writing simultaneously; reading supports writing and vise versa. Weaver offers these important words about the reading and writing connection:

Children who hear many stories again and again, and are invited again and again to write, will do so. Children who write stories and are invited to read stories will do so. The literacy cycle is strong and the parts of it are supportive: listening and responding, writing and reading make students better
and avid listeners, speakers, writers, readers—and thinkers. (1988, p. 243)

At this point, in reference to the reading/writing connection, I give credit to Professor Rhoades, California State University, San Bernardino, for my present beliefs about reading instruction. In class, she lectured convincingly on the importance of adopting reading instruction that teaches reading and writing simultaneously for student success. One of the assignments in her class was to apply this new reading writing concept to a case study with a fourth-grade struggling English learner. As Professor Rhoades explained, “Some students must become writers before becoming readers.” As the class progressed the new concept started making sense. What I came away with from this experience is this: When students write about self, family, and friends it transcends into a socio-cultural experience. They are empowered through this process of sharing one’s own stories. Through editing, peer review, and shared readings, students will learn to value and empathize with their peers’ stories. As it became more apparent throughout the course, this strategy worked wonders on reluctant readers. Although, upon first hearing the statement, “some students must become writers
before readers" it sounded incorrect, peculiar, or not quite right. Now, however, the concept makes perfect sense.

In addition, required reading for the course were texts by Gunning (2003), Peregoy and Boyle (2001), and all three authors substantiate this concept that some reluctant readers, through their own writings, develop a keen sense of what sounds right. Eventually, this keen sense of what sounds right spills over into their reading. Of course, key to this positive outcome to writing is allowing students to select their topics (Gunning, 2003). According to Peregoy and Boyle, writing is an excellent way to promote literacy for all English language learners.

Hence, after finally completing the credential courses, and setting out to teach, I was dismayed at the lack of time for writing activities due to hours and hours of teaching a scripted phonics program. How can teachers infuse writing moments into an already over burdened curriculum? Graves (1994) says teachers can conduct mini lessons as students proceed through the writing processes; and good writing can be modeled while involving student participation. Graves says that encouraging students to
read the world will also command more thoughtful writing pieces.

Further, on the importance of writing, Krashen (2004) states that Elbow (1973) noted it is difficult to hold more than one thought in mind at a time and suggested that writing our ideas down enables the vague and abstract to become clear and concrete. Krashen suggests that when our thoughts are written on paper, we see the relationship among them. So simply put, writing can make us smarter (Krashen, 2004).

For too long struggling English learners have had their grammar in writing scrutinized by teachers trained to expect an error free paper. As the students work with the medium of written language, in time, with plenty of practice, they will develop many conventions on their own (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001, p. 155). It is time to value what the struggling writer has to say. Academic English takes time and practice to master, especially for the struggling English learner (5-10 years). Invented spelling is a way for those struggling writers to get their ideas written down quickly. Mastering the conventions comes after many hours of writing and reading practice. Also, written work provides the teacher with authentic assessment. Moreover,
says Johnston (1998) an expert teacher can eyeball the student’s latest writing piece and determine what concepts have been mastered. Once again, as Johnston reminds us, expert teachers focus on student accomplishment, and ineffective teachers focus on what students cannot do.

Thus, print has to have meaning to the English language learner so that he or she will succeed in the academic environment. Smith (1997) invokes, “The learning of words themselves comes easiest with meaningful reading” (p. 56). Peregoy and Boyle (2001) make this statement of the importance of providing writing activities for our struggling English learners:

Beginning ELL writers vary in age, interests, prior literacy experience, and second language proficiency. To repeat a point, the beauty of writing is that it accommodates many of the differences related to age, in that the topics are often selected and developed by the students. (p. 222).

So far, the research substantiates the importance of the reading writing connection and the positive effect it can have on all children’s academic success. Having high expectations and consistently modeling what it is we want from our students, factors in to their future success. In
turn, our students will learn to be excellent writers. In *Writing Essentials* Regie Routman (2005) emphasizes the importance of giving struggling learners many opportunities to practice writing. Routman states, “Almost immediately amazing things begin to happen. Many students cross out words and add more precise ones; others think more about their ending and craft a better one; and everyone writes with more specificity, supporting ideas with appropriate examples” (p. 58).

**Spelling and Word Study**

**Spelling.** Freeman and Freeman (2004) insist two things, above all else, help students become better at spelling. First, students need to be doing writing that they want others to read. When students produce writing they are proud of, they want to present it in the best possible form. Second, students need to understand that the spelling system is logical and does follow rules. Many poor spellers, say Freeman and Freeman, think that good spellers just memorize all the words. It does appear that good spellers develop some sort of visual image of accurate spelling, suggest Freeman and Freeman. However, the best spellers approach spelling as a problem-solving activity,
not as a memorization task (Bear, Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

**Word Study.** According to Bear, Templeton, Helman, and Baren (2003) and Freeman and Freeman (2003), (2004) spelling is important to reading and writing; however, instead of learning weekly word lists, student should devote time to word study by spending quality time on patterns, rhymes, analogy, and root words. They advise word study activities should be based on our understanding of students' development, and these activities are important to students' progress in learning to read and spell. It may seem odd that a look at what children spell is a means of understanding their reading; however, this view of spelling as a window into literacy processes highlights the reciprocal process of learning to read and learning to spell (Bear, Templeton, Helman, & Baren (2003).

**Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and Grammar**

**Phonemic Awareness.** Freeman and Freeman (2004) argue that the research on phonemic awareness is not compelling. Freeman and Freeman share their concerns on the amount of time spent teaching phonemic awareness:

Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1989), for example, found that differences in students' ability to do PA tasks
diminish over time. Kindergarten students trained in PA did better when tested in kindergarten on isolated word identification, spelling, and nonsense word reading than students who received no PA training. In first grade, however, there were no differences between the trained and untrained groups on word identification or spelling, and only a small advantage for the trained group in nonsense word reading. (p. 139)

Freeman and Freeman argue that this study suggests that PA is acquired naturally as long as children are read to and have opportunities to read. They emphasize that phonemic awareness is a result of reading, not a prerequisite for it. Freeman and Freeman question the value of teaching phonemic awareness and phonics directly.

**Phonics.** According to Freeman and Freeman (2003) phonics is an aspect of language that is acquired through meaningful reading and writing tasks. Freeman and Freeman state that knowledge of graphophonics is acquired naturally as children learn to write, and as children move toward more conventional spelling they work out the connections between sounds and spelling. Knowledge gained in writing, insist Freeman and Freeman, transfers to reading, and
reading and writing activities mutually reinforce students' development of graphophonics. On the other hand, phonics can cause a child to over monitor their reading, caution Freeman and Freeman. They also insist that when speakers monitor too much, their speech becomes halting, because it is not possible to think about what one says and how one is saying it at the same time. Freeman and Freeman (2004) give their interpretation of the reliance of phonics:

[D]uring reading, readers rely primarily on subconscious graphophonics knowledge as one of three cueing systems to construct meaning. Attempting to use conscious knowledge of phonics during this process interrupts meaning construction. Students who spend time trying to recode words overload short-term memory and forget what the sentence or paragraph meant up to that point. Many struggling readers focus too much on phonics. They may be able to pronounce each word, but their comprehension is minimal. Monitoring reading by using phonics knowledge is not a good reading strategy. (2004, p. 140)

According to research on second language acquisition, the focus placed on phonics in the primary grades is so great, leaving little time for reading and writing. All
too common in schools today struggling English learners will tend to get more phonics, because the teacher assumes that a lack of phonics knowledge is responsible for inadequate reading comprehension and fluency (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

On the same note, Manning (2007), a reading teacher, explains that after trial and error, she does not teach phonics in isolation. Instead she uses interactive writing during shared reading and many other writing activities. She is sorry she spent so many years feeling incompetent as a reading teacher because she could not find a student who was helped by the schwa. Manning says, "The longer we teach, the more practices we find must be discarded" (p. 61).


Wells (1986) followed the native language development of thirty-two children from about fifteen months of age through their elementary years in an attempt to discover what kinds of language support families, communities, and school provide. Children in the study wore backpacks that contained recorders programmed to record at different intervals. Neither
the parents nor the children knew when they were being recorded. Wells gathered extensive data from the recordings. He focused his analysis on identifying those factors that facilitated language development.

A key finding of the study, report Freeman and Freeman, was that caregivers who controlled and corrected young children as they were developing English inhibited, rather than aided, language development.

Strategies, Activities, and Techniques to Improve Comprehension and Fluency

What does research offer us about the link between phonics/phonemic awareness instruction and reading comprehension? Cummins (2003) says, “There is minimal evidence that such training, in fact, by itself, has any significant or long-lasting effects on the development of reading comprehension (e.g., Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1999; Coles, 2000; Ehri et al., 2001; Krashen, 1999; McQuillan, 1998; Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000)” (p. 8). On the subject of reading, Krashen (2004) argues “Free voluntary reading (FVR) is the foundation of language education” (p. 1). Gunning (2003) insists one of the best strategies for fostering emergent/early literacy is the
read aloud. He suggests setting aside at least 20 minutes a day at a regularly scheduled time.

**Read Aloud, Sustained Silent Reading, and Shared Reading**

**Read Aloud.** Allington and Cunningham (2007) argue that one of the best ways to improve literacy is through the read aloud. The teacher is the best possible model for excellent reading, and by listening to a read aloud the student gains confidence to proceed with his or her independent reading, says Allington and Cunningham. Ray and Cleaveland (2004) insist reading aloud to children also helps students understand the structure of story so students may incorporate these structures into their own stories when writing. When careful thought is given to material selected for read aloud, say Ray and Cleaveland, children’s interest in reading may result solely by the way we present the material; we can make it boring or we can make it come alive.

Ariail and Albright (2006) state that although the practice of reading aloud to older children is less well researched a few studies have shown that the benefits of reading aloud to middle school students are also significant. Ariail and Albright argue that in a study of
more than 1700 middle school students, Ivey and Broaddus (2001), students saw read-alouds as scaffolds to understanding because the teacher helped to make the text more comprehensible and interesting. Once interest in reading is established, the teacher then sets aside at least 15-30 minutes a day for Sustained Silent Reading. Weaver (1988) argues that reading aloud must be part of the reading program every single day. Weaver suggests, “Through the sharing of stories we celebrate and preserve our literary heritage, and we show children that literature is at the heart of their reading program” (p. 241).

Sustained Silent Reading. Krashen (2002) argues that after reviewing scores of studies over the past 20 years he is confident that children who read for pleasure do as well or better than their Sustained Silent Reader deprived peers. He states that studies by Collins (1980) and Hafiz and Tudor (1990) revealed that those who participated in Sustained Silent Reading made better progress in spelling than those who were in a traditional instruction program. Dowhower (1999) argues that compared to independent silent reading, round-robin reading actually decreased comprehension in several studies (Lynch, 1988; Santa, Isaacson & Manning, 1987). In addition, says Dowhower,
results of several studies suggest that silent reading is more effective for learning than oral reading (Armbruster, 1991). Dowhower argues oral reading draws attention to errors and increases off-task behavior, where as, silent reading is more authentic to real life than oral reading.

On the same subject, Gardiner (2005) says dozens of studies show that Sustained Silent Reading can improve students' vocabulary, comprehension and motivation. Gardiner states, "Nagy and Anderson (1984), Trelease (2001), and Krashen (1993) all found strong evidence that regular SSR may be the most effective vocabulary building tool available to educators" (p. 69). On the importance of Sustain Silent Reading, Gardiner states, "To help my students become good adult readers, I give them 15 minutes at the beginning of class each day for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)" (p. 68). Gardiner says his students recognize that time for independent reading is part of a balanced curriculum that develops their literacy skills. He argues that reading is a skill for life, and if students do not learn to enjoy reading, they are cheated of a vital part of their education. Gardiner, an English teacher for 27 years, every fall, shares with his new class, the traits he has seen in friends and colleagues who are good readers.
In the following figure I have included Gardner’s six traits of good readers (see Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gardiner’s Six Traits of Good Readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sometimes read more than one book at a time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sometimes reread part or all of a book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Plan to have a book along when there might be waiting time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. May quit reading a book if they choose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sometimes enjoy sharing things they’ve read with others, and sometimes enjoy keeping things they’ve read to themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Value the freedom to read whatever book they want to read at a given time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Gardiner’s Six Traits of Good Readers

**Shared Reading.** In a communicative approach, a model of reading instruction, Crawford (2003) recommends a strategy such as shared reading because it creates a bridge to second language acquisition for English learners. Crawford suggests a valuable form of written text in the reading process is the Big Book, in particular those big books with predictable or repetitive language patterns. In this activity, teachers read to students, who then read
with them and finally back to them. Using Big Books provides an opportunity for the teacher to model reading, offers Crawford, so that students can observe what they will later do in their own independent reading. Crawford states, “In addition, students begin to notice correspondences between letters in familiar texts and the sounds they represent (Holdaway, 1979)” (p. 174).

Strategies That Show High Success: Talk, Quick Write or Free Writing, and KWL (What Do I Know? What Do I Want to Know? What Did I Learn?)

**Talk.** English language learners have much to say, if teachers allow them the opportunity to express themselves. Asking questions that invite the student to talk about himself, usually works. Dialogue with students is beneficial to the entire class, especially when it becomes a teachable moment (Routman, 2005). How can teachers employ talk and still manage to keep order in their classroom? Allington and Johnston (2002) conducted six observational studies on the nature of good fourth-grade teaching. They concluded that the single most striking feature was the nature of the conversations that flowed in class. What they routinely noticed was that students talked with the teacher and with each other much more than previous research literature has reported. The talk,
report Allington and Johnston, was respectful, supportive, and productive, and was modeled by the teacher in her interactions with students. They observed that talk, in these classrooms, seemed to be, deliberately taught, nurtured, and expected. Most importantly, note Allington and Johnston, teachers used authentic conversations to learn about their students. Allington and Johnston describe the teacher talk as tentative in that all answers were treated as having potential, and rarely was no or wrong uttered by the teachers. Instead, observed Allington and Johnston the teachers identified what was correct, turned attention to the process, and encouraged further thinking or reflection, even about a "correct" answer. Allington and Johnston state, "The teachers readily admitted (1) their limited knowledge of various topics (notably those raised by their students), (2) their mistakes, and (3) their own interests" (2002, p. 206).

Burke (2000) says that using talk for different purposes, in different contexts, allows students the important opportunity to figure out what they think by, hearing what others think. Burke suggests talking also helps a wide range of students whose verbal skills need practice and development. English learners need to hear
how English is used and have the opportunity to practice it for themselves in an authentic academic environment if they are to develop the academic literacy they need to succeed (Burke, 2000).

On the same subject, Gibbons (2002) argues that the development of the spoken forms of language are essential to English learners as a bridge to the more academic language associated with learning in school. Gibbons reminds us that Vygotskian theory, also, points to the significance of interaction in learning and views dialogue constructing as the resource for thinking. Of course, suggests Gibbons, the quality of the dialogues that children are engaged in must therefore be looked at critically, as the dialogue must stimulate “thinking aloud.” Gibbons says that Wegerif and Mercer (1996) refer to this as “exploratory talk.” It is the kind of talk, says Gibbons that allows learners to explore and clarify concepts or to try out a line of thought through questioning, hypothesizing, making logical deductions, and responding to others’ ideas. At the same time, argues Gibbons, “Classroom tasks must also provide the conditions that will foster second language development” (p. 14). Too often, argues Gibbons, the interaction in which teacher and
students commonly engage in, is not supportive of second language development, in that children get fewer chances to speak, and say little when they do. English learners may not always find it easy to explain clearly to others what they have done or learned. This may be a daunting task that pushes them beyond what they are able to do alone in English. Gibbons suggests, "In teacher-guided reporting, the teacher provides scaffolding by clarifying, questioning, and providing models for the speaker, so that the learner and teacher together collectively build up what the learner wants to say" (p. 34).

**Quick Write or Free Writing.** Peregoy and Boyle (2001) state that free writing is a strategy developed by Peter Elbow (1973) in which writers let their words flow freely onto the page without concern for form, coherence, or correctness. Peregoy and Boyle suggest, that in the same way journals provide opportunities for daily writing, free writing assists with fluency. Using free writing students write quickly to get their ideas on paper. After free writing for several minutes, students may select a phrase or sentence and write about that for five minutes. Along with the use of journals, say Peregoy and Boyle, free writing assists students with fluency, with automaticity,
and with developing ideas. Free writing, suggest Peregoy and Boyle, prepares students to move into the intermediate level where they will pay more attention to refining and editing their ideas. English language learners, insist Peregoy and Boyle, will move on from developing fluency to developing form in their writing and to revising and correcting their work.

Graves (1994) states, that by helping children to read their own work, we are in fact helping them with their reading development. Graves insists that when children learn to read their own work they become better critics of what sounds right; they learn to write for an audience, thus acquiring a higher level of learning. In A Fresh Look At Writing, Graves gives an example of a teacher writing for ten minutes straight, modeling before his class, about a personal incident. Graves describes how the teacher literally involves the students in the step-by-step writing process, including, how to effectively critique the piece and improve it.

KWL (What Do I Know? What Do I Want to Know? What Did I Learn?). According to research, this strategy gets high marks. Dowhower (1999) says that use of KWL has a classroom research base that addresses a range of strategic
processes, and can be used with varied types of text and genres, and can be adapted to various reading levels, content areas, and student needs. Dowhower also states that there is ample evidence that strategic processes can be transferred to independent reading.

For example, on the use of KWLS, part of my fieldwork for my credential required that I spend 60 hours in a fourth-grade class tutoring small groups, conducting a case study with an English language learner, and demonstrating one whole class lesson plan. For the whole class lesson plan, I chose a 30-minute KWLS lesson. I used a KWLS form Professor Sue Rhoades, a reading specialist, had distributed to the Reading class, after she carefully modeled its use. I was impressed by the demonstration and could visualize this tool being beneficial for those students struggling with reading comprehension. The fourth-grade teacher critiquing my 30-minute KWLS lesson plan gave me high marks. I also credit this 4th grade teacher future well-organized lesson plans during subsequent fieldwork. Early in my fieldwork assignment, this teacher shared her concern over the time spent conducting the case study with a struggling English learner. She was concerned her student was missing out on
valuable math lessons. Awareness of this dilemma forced me to take a good look at my own schedule. I switched my case study work to the afternoon when the fourth-grade teacher taught language arts. This change worked out better for everyone. This insight into the concerns of another teacher, of one of her struggling students missing out on valuable math lessons, was enlightening. She had also shared with me the principal’s concern for improved math scores. I appreciated her honesty, and I worked harder and planned better. I rearranged my schedule so as not to interfere with math. Later, she evaluated my KWL lesson plan, gave me high marks, and let me know she was genuinely impressed. She revealed that she had never used a KWL chart but would now consider it. Of course, I give credit to Professor Rhoades for her excellent demonstration of how to present a KWL lesson plan.

Multicultural Literature

Can the use of multicultural literature make a difference to struggling English learners? George, Raphael, and Florio-Ruane (2003) insist classrooms in which all voices are celebrated help students become more aware and appreciative of their individual culture and heritage, be open to cultural ideas shared by others, and appreciate
Likewise, on the subject of how to improve Latino achievement, Gangi (2004) suggests teachers incorporate Latino culture and traditions into the classroom when possible, particularly at the elementary level. Waiting until middle school may be too late; the factors that lead students to drop out have their antecedents in the elementary school, says Gangi. Curricular invisibility, says Gangi, negatively affects these children, who need to feel welcomed and respected.

Norton (1990) argues that one of the most important tasks of educators is to incorporate multicultural literature in the curriculum. Norton insists, “Through carefully selected and shared literature, students learn to understand to appreciate a literary heritage that comes from many diverse backgrounds” (p. 28). Norton suggests multicultural literature helps children expand their understanding of geography and natural history, increase their understanding of historical and sociological change, and improve reading, writing, and thinking skills.

Conclusion

The Literature Review research revealed numerous strategies, techniques, and methods to improve reading
comprehension and fluency for our English learners. Thus, by implementing reading and writing instruction within a Vygotskian socio-cultural framework, sensitive to English learner needs, we provide the support they need to master comprehension and fluency. In contrast, over correcting and over testing lead to labeling. Moreover, labeling leads to anxiety, shut down, and finally drop out. English language learners lag behind academically as they follow scripted reading programs, programs that are linear and simplistic in nature and are unable to meet their needs. On the other hand, a socio-psycholinguistic model of reading instruction offers English learners a low-anxiety cooperative learning environment, which is more conducive to how they acquire new information. Finally, research acknowledges that it is effective teachers who make the difference in classrooms that work (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Dudley-Marling, 2005) by scaffolding learning, so all students reach their potential and no one gets left behind.
CHAPTER THREE
DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Mastering reading comprehension and fluency becomes a daunting task for English learners as they strive to learn academic English while simultaneously completing content area assignments. Researchers argue that it can take anywhere from 5-10 years to learn academic English. Yet, English learners are expected to compete academically with their native English-speaking peers. Research reveals too much focus on phonics (word recognition) may hinder comprehension. With so much focus on getting the word right, English learners are unprepared for fourth grade where now they must read to learn (comprehension). Research shows, there is no one strategy, method, or technique that works best for all children all of the time. The point of this study is to re-engage low achieving English learners in a curriculum rich in the elements of reading and writing, listening, speaking, and thinking. During a highly strategic forty-minute session, three days a week, I will incorporate teaching methods, strategies, and techniques from the research. This study specifically
incorporates one-on-one teaching, cooperative grouping, writing to read, mini-lessons on spelling and word study, quick write, and finally art activities that promote writing. Many of the methods, strategies, and techniques get high marks for improving comprehension and fluency of English learners.

**Student Profile**

Jason, Selena, Maria, and Robert (pseudonyms) are the four students I will be discussing in this section. On our first meeting, Mrs. Estrada (pseudonym) gives me background information on all four of the nine year-old students. Jason and Selena were both born in the United States. Maria has been in the United States for two years and Robert has been here for five years (Robert does not have the benefit of having attended school in his primary language). All four students are at the same independent reading level, which is Beginning Reader/Below Basic. Jason has recently attained a satisfactory grade in Language Arts, and the others are still working towards a satisfactory grade. Selena, Maria, and Jason are working toward a satisfactory grade in writing, while Robert has been given an unsatisfactory grade. One of the four students, Robert, Mrs. Estrada informs me, after five years
of bilingual support will no longer be eligible. She does not know why he is doing so poorly. Once the students and I commence working in our group at the back of the room, I learn more about them by observing and listening. Soon, I learn that Robert’s primary language at home is Spanish, more so, than the others. His sisters and mother work all day, and his father lives in Mexico, so, there is not much academic support for Robert to rely on, such as, older siblings from the same school. Since his primary language at home is Spanish this makes school his only source of acquiring academic English. No wonder he is struggling behind the others. The others have siblings in school that they can rely on for help and practice. Even Maria, who has been in the United States for only two years, has an advantage over Robert. Maria, because she has some academic school years in her primary language will be able to transfer academic primary language to second language acquisition. According to research in second language acquisition, children who have academic school experience in their primary language have already learned to read and write and must now transfer what they already know to the second language. Research in second language acquisition reveals that children like Maria are more successful in
second language acquisition and therefore more successful in school than are children like Robert (Freeman & Freeman, 2003; Johns & Torrez, 2001; Krashen, 2003). On the following page I have included the students' most recent language arts grades (see Table 3).
### Language Arts Grades

#### Table 3. Language Arts Grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Language Arts</th>
<th>Independent Reading Level</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>BR/BB</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher’s Comments:** Two years in United States/Primary language Spanish

| Selena  | W             | BR/BB                     | W       | W        |

**Teacher’s Comments:** Born in the United States/Primary language Spanish/Other siblings in this school

| Jason   | S             | BR/BB                     | W       | W        |

**Teacher’s Comments:** Primary language Spanish/Older siblings in this school

| Robert  | W             | BR/BB                     | U       | U        |

**Teacher’s Comments:** Five years in bilingual education—no longer eligible/No other siblings in this school/Primary language Spanish

| Grade: W=Working Toward S=Satisfactory U=Unsatisfactory | Independent Reading Level: BR=Beginning Reader BB=Below Basic |

75
Four-Week Curriculum

For children like Robert, Jason, Maria, and Selena, struggling English learners, an accelerated intervention rich with meaningful reading and writing, is the most effective method. The research guiding this study highly recommends mini lessons to teach phonics, skills, and strategies which leave more time for reading, writing, and rich dialogue. Freeman and Freeman (2004) express concern that in too many cases teachers determine that because the student is not progressing, he must have missed out on phonics and now requires more phonics. Freeman and Freeman caution that isolated phonics lessons do not help English learners. Instead, class time should be engrossed in rich meaningful reading and writing activities. On the following page I have included an outline of the four-week schedule (see Figure 3).
Four-Week Schedule

All elements should be present in each lesson: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking

Four-Week Study Conditions
- Four struggling English language learners
- 10:40 a.m. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday
- Bilingual 4th/5th combination class

Students Names: Jason Castillo, Maria Gonzalez, Robert Jimenez, and Selena Ortiz

First Week
Start writing (model writing process and editing)
Word List (Bader Reading and Language Inventory (3rd ed.))
Assess spelling to determine phase (prephonetic, phonetic, transitional, or conventional)
Writing Process/Assess writing

Second Week
Continue to model instruction for each new activity
Spelling and Word Study
Writing Process/Assess writings
Start Read aloud

Third Week
Spelling and word study
Continue to model instructions for each new activity
Continue writing process
Read aloud

Fourth Week
Spelling and Word Study
Continue writings
Read aloud
Assess final spelling
Assess final writing

Figure 3. Four-Week Schedule
Informal Assessments

Next, gathering informal assessment data will help structure lessons according to individual needs. Because the Target Group will be writing extensively in order to publish stories for our read aloud, I must assess whether they are having problems with lower and upper case letters of the Alphabet. So this will be our first informal assessment, knowledge of the Alphabet. The next informal assessment will be a "quick write" which should give me valuable information of each student’s spelling stage, and their knowledge of writing conventions and grammar. According to Smith (1997) and Gunning (2003), extensive reading supports good writing. I plan to celebrate what they know and incorporate mini lessons to correct needs as we approach them.

Finally, I used the Bader Reading and Language Inventory (3rd ed.). I was surprised at how well each student read the word list from each grade level. Most read to the fourth-grade level with 0-2 errors, and one member, Jason, read words from the sixth-grade list. I could tell by the Target Group’s enthusiasm they all wanted to succeed. If you set high expectations, students will meet those high expectations. While I completed the word
inventory on each student, the others were busy working on their writing. This group adjusted well to the routine. This particular assessment was administered the first week and was helpful in determining spelling and word study activities.

Initial Writing Assessment

For the initial writing assessment, I had the Target Group write about their favorite weekend. I knew this first paper would give me valuable information about students’ writing and spelling stages. Upon this first writing session a crucial problem came to my attention. I observed that Robert’s confidence to spell correctly was interfering with his writing process. He would barely start to write a word or two and then start erasing unable to get his thoughts on paper. At this point Robert was spending more time erasing than composing. After noticing his over concern for incorrect spelling, I said to him, after making eye contact, I wanted to make sure he understood what I was about to say, “Robert do your best and write the letters of the sounds of the word you are having trouble spelling. I’ll know what you are trying to say.” This helped him a little. He was so concerned over his inability to spell that he could not focus on the
enjoyment of writing about a favorite weekend. The others were well into their writing. Then I remembered his grades for spelling and writing, both unsatisfactory. The Target Group’s Language Arts grades were in my folder and I referred to them often. Mrs. Estrada had written each student’s Language Arts grades, including spelling and writing on a form I had prepared the first day she and I met. Some schools prefer that only staff teachers handle student files. Mrs. Estrada said it was no bother and by the next day she had the form ready. At that moment, I was concerned with Robert’s inability to get his ideas on paper. According to research in this study, writing supports reading. So, for now, I was determined to get him more involved in the writing process. Mastering the conventions of writing takes practice and it will not happen without plenty of practice. Instead of expecting perfection, I would be using writing as a tool to inspire them to want to write, in a sense to allow them to find their voice through their stories. Eventually their stories would become the source of our read aloud.

Writing/Reading Connection

For many students becoming writers first is the catalyst that turns them on to reading. I still remember
Professor Rhoades’ words from the credential program stressing the importance of providing more writing time in class for struggling readers and writers. Her words, “Some students must become writers before they become readers,” are still with me. I applied what I learned from Professor Rhoades, and research from the study that lends strong support for incorporating reading and writing simultaneously, into the language arts four-week curriculum. The research overwhelmingly supports a curriculum rich in reading and writing activities (Freeman & Freeman, 2004; Graves 1994; Gunning 2003; Routman, 2005).

Quick-Write Theme

Later, after reading their first writing assignment, I noticed a real affection for family and friends. So, I decided to base their topic list around the theme “Things that make me happy and put a smile on my face.” The next day I encouraged them to think about this theme and write three topics they might want to write about. I had them write three topics on an index card, I also contributed three to form the quick-write topic list. However, it was their contributions, topics about self, family, and friends that inspired the writing process. Following is the list, which is also in Appendix C (see Figure 4).
Quick-Write Topic List
Theme: Things That Make Me Happy
Stories of Self, Family, and Friends

Topic
- Playing with my special friend makes me happy.
- Christmas makes me happy.
- Spending time with my dad makes me happy.
- Getting presents makes me very happy.
- My brother makes me laugh.
- I have fun at school with all my friends.
- When I play with my friends, they make me laugh.
- I’m very happy when my team wins a soccer game.
- Learning something new in school makes me happy.
- I get a smile on my face when I see people helping to keep Mother Earth clean.
- When I see a beautiful rainbow after a long rain, I smile.
- Seeing a butterfly always brings a smile to my face.
- Following safety rules keeps me safe, and this makes me smile.

Figure 4. Quick-Write Topic List
The list was placed directly in front of the group, where they could all see it, and because they had already watched as I modeled the procedures of writing and editing a quick write, they knew exactly what to do. The topics were things they wanted to write about, so every writing session moved along quite efficiently. Their stories, while providing reading material for the group also provided a window into their potential growth. This group of struggling learners was now part of a special club. For three days a week, forty-minute sessions, they belonged to “The Writers Club.” Also, because the group adapted so well to the routine, I was free to take advantage of those teachable moments, as I did with Robert.

Composing and Spelling

Let me revisit Robert’s frustration over not being able to compose and spell at the same time. I could see he was struggling with the first writing assignment that would give me valuable feedback of his knowledge of conventions, word patterns, and developmental spelling stage. At the moment, I thought about an earlier alphabet assessment in both lower and uppercase, specifically given for writing purposes, he had done an outstanding job. He had not mixed upper and lowercase letters and he had not omitted letters.
So having this information, I quickly made eye contact with Robert, as he erased once more with an exasperated expression. The others were totally involved in their writing. So, I said to Robert, while still making eye contact, “Robert, write the letters you hear as you pronounce the words, and I’ll know what you’re trying to say in your story when it’s time to publish it. Just do your best.” He seemed relieved. Robert needs many opportunities to write, but it will not happen if the affective filter prevents him. After this incident, I noticed he was more willing to write, no longer erasing. Later, I overheard Jason offer to help Robert with his spelling. The day before, Robert had offered to help Jason with his alphabet, when Jason had become so frustrated for having missed a letter and mixing lower and uppercase letters. Robert seemed a foot taller as he quickly intervened to help Jason correct his mistakes. It was great to see Vygotskian theory in motion, the more advanced learner helping the less advanced reach his Zone of Proximal Development. All students have their individual areas of strengths, given the opportunity. What these struggling learners need is a cooperative learning environment that allows them time for success.
Activities That Promote Writing

Art Activity (1) Self-Portrait

For fun, and to learn a little more about each student, I brought in a box of crayons, and asked them to draw a self-portrait. On the guide, I had prepared for this assignment, I wrote, draw from the neck up or from head to toe, how you think others see you. I really wanted the students to have fun. In the following figure, I have included the outline for the art activity (see Figure 5).

Art Activity (1) Self-Portrait

- Do your best
- This is to be a drawing of how you might look to others.
- The portrait can be from the neck up or from head to toe.
- Have fun with this.
- Be kind to yourself.
- You have ten minutes.
- Next, write a paragraph to your audience, telling them something interesting about yourself.
- You have 10 minutes to write ½ to 1 full page.
- Then read your work, make corrections, and turn in for publishing.

Figure 5. Art Activity (1) Self-Portrait

Art Activity (2) Draw What You See

For this activity, I brought in two miniature grand pianos and two miniature hot rods with great detail. I had the objects wrapped in tissue paper in a plastic box. I
displayed them at the center of the table and asked them to draw only one of the items. The students enjoyed this so much, discussing the miniature pianos, and the various parts of the cars, the doors and hood, how they really open and close. To my surprise, do to all the questions and discussion over the miniatures, there was not much time left for writing. Overall, I noticed something interesting taking place over these miniatures, an abundance of dialogue (talk), and it was taking place in academic English. What more could I ask for from the Target Group. According to Gibbons (2002) creating opportunity for talk with and among English language learners is pertinent to their endeavor to acquire academic English. In the following figure I have included an outline of this art activity (see Figure 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Activity (2) Draw What You See</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Select one of four miniatures on display, (two Hot Rods and two baby grand pianos).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pretend it is just you and the object you are drawing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You are the artist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You have ten minutes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Now discuss your drawing with your neighbor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Next write about your drawing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Read entire writing and make corrections before turning in for publishing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Art Activity (2) Draw What You See
According to Professor Joe Gray, from the Masters Reading Program, incorporating art activities as prompts to promote writing is a great way to motivate students to write, especially when you allow time for students to interact and discuss their art. After the discussion, they are better prepared to write about their art activity because of the interactive exchange of ideas. According to Professor Gray, activities such as these enable struggling students to become writers.

In the following figure, I have included a rendition of the quick-write routine that also helped to keep the group focused and on task (see Figure 7).

Quick Write Routine

- Ten-Minute Quick Write
- Read and Make Correction (First Edit)
- Peer Partner Review (Share Comments/Edit)
- Final Read and Edit
- Publish for Read Aloud and Shared Reading

Figure 7. Quick Write Routine
Of course, we relied on the quick write list for most of the writing sessions when time was of the essence. The list was helpful because the topics were their own ideas. Sometimes they borrowed topics from one another. Interestingly, not one selected any of my contributions. That piece of information was very revealing. According to Gunning (2003) when students write about topics that are meaningful to them, there is greater investment in the writing process. Having a ready-made list of topics they cared about saved valuable time for writing. It left us with more time to spend on peer review, which gave the students time to read someone else’s work; then, they shared ideas.

Peer Partners

After each "Quick Write" each member would pair up with their assigned peer partner and read each other’s story. I learned a valuable lesson from the students about reviewing your partner’s story. I learned that I must have a guide for them on how to read his or her peer partner’s paper. Giving Selena and Jason, the more advanced of the four, a chance to critique their partner’s story, automatically meant to them, that they were to circle all the misspelled words. This was too much responsibility for
these two. So, I quickly corrected the problem with an explicit outline of the duties of the Peer Partner. On the following figure I have included an example of the Peer Partner Guide (see Figure 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer Partner Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria and Selena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert and Jason</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a Peer Partner:

- I will read my peer partner's story carefully.
- I will let my partner know if I liked his or her story.
- I will let my partner know if he or she stayed on topic.
- I will not circle errors or make any marks on the story.
- I will let my partner know if something was not clear.
- Only the writer can make corrections on his or her paper.
- Return story to writer for last correction.
- Writer makes final corrections.
- Writer turns in finished story to Mrs. Vargas.
- Story is now ready for publishing.
- Stories will be part of read aloud.

Figure 8. Peer Partner Guide

The guide made a huge difference on how they interacted. The more advanced students, Selena and Jason, were now kinder and more helpful with Maria and Robert. In fact, after reading the guide, Maria sat up straight, her shoulders no longer drooping, as they were earlier, upon
receiving a paper covered with circled errors. How many times had Selena experienced the same treatment by teachers focusing on conventions not mastered? As the more proficient student, she assumed the teacher role, making Maria aware of all her mistakes. For this teacher, it was a monumental learning experience. Students learn from the best modeling of behavior in the classroom, the teacher. It was my responsibility to correct this problem immediately. The Peer Partner Guide quickly alleviated this dilemma from occurring again. During the writing process, routine was quickly established. At the same time, Jason, the more advanced speller, voluntarily started helping Robert spell during the ten minute “Quick Write.”

**Strengths and Capabilities**

Because the focus of the four-week study was to engage four struggling English learners, their abilities would take precedence over their inabilities. We all have areas of strength and we are all capable of learning, but first we must lower the affective filter that permits learning to take place. After all, the “quick write” activity had developed from the question, “What makes me happy and puts a smile on my face?” This theme focuses on the positive, not the negative. This will be an anxiety free learning
experience that will not only engage, but will give voice to four learners, for whom I hold high expectations. For example, within the first week each student had shown an exceptional ability in some academic area. Jason is more advanced in spelling, while Robert writes his alphabet, lower and uppercase, neatly and correctly, with little effort. Maria does a terrific job of getting her thoughts on paper, while Selena has a flair for drawing. Appreciating each learner’s unique capabilities, and making ample time to commend each one for their accomplishments, paid off in the long run. The Target Group came to see themselves as a group of capable learners.

Encouraging Signs

Later, Mrs. Estrada shared a particular incident that I took as an encouraging sign. One morning, she confided, “Robert looks for you on those two days you are not here, and I have to remind him, it’s not your day to come in.” Earlier, within the first couple of days of the study, I had to ask Mrs. Estrada for one more day. I realized immediately, I would need three days a week for this intensive curriculum study. So this comment, of hers, was highly noteworthy, in the sense that, someone actually misses our sessions. Well, this is good news! At least
these were not uninterested participants. I was grateful that they were always ready for me the minute I arrived. Mrs. Estrada always made sure of that. From my observation, not one student displayed a lack of enthusiasm; instead, I was always greeted with an incredible eagerness to learn. For three days a week, this group belonged to a special club, "The Writers Club."

Furthermore, there was a camaraderie developing among these four. The group had established pride in their own capabilities and those of the others. For example it was Maria’s excellent stories for the group project that encouraged the others to write their own great stories. During talk and art activities, Selena shared her dreams of wanting to learn to play the piano. She also showed a special skill for drawing. Jason, the most advanced, enjoyed helping Robert with his spelling, and Robert showed great pride when he was able to help Jason (the most advanced student) with the specifics of lower and uppercase alphabet letters, an important skill for writing activities.
The Writers Club

During the second week I started publishing their stories for read aloud. All of their stories and art activities can be found in Appendix C. Each day, their first question at the start of each session, was always, "Will we get to listen to our stories today?" I always answered, "Yes, at the end of our session." The name of the book, we decided, would be "The Writers Club" and all of their names would be placed below the word authors, on the front cover. Later, upon hearing the first two stories, the Target Group was in awe of these narratives that they themselves had composed. The topic list for their writings, which they contributed to, was instrumental in helping the group transition right into the writing process. There was never any time wasted trying to think of what to write about. According to research when students write about topics that are meaningful to them there tends to be more investment in the quality of the piece (Graves, 1997; Gunning, 2003; Routman, 2005).

At the same time, from the very first "Quick Write," the students' actions in each activity helped determine what would be taught, how it would be taught, and what strategies and tools would be best suited to the group and
individual. The small group of learners made it possible to target individual needs, address the need, and continue working to their potential. As is evident in Appendix C, the stories flowed. So, during the last two weeks, the students were on pins and needles, anxiously awaiting a story to be shared by the entire group. Expressions of pride and excitement on their faces said it all. The effort to publish as many stories as time allowed and make two notebooks (one for their class) took quite an effort, but with only four students it was manageable. For a large class I would not publish as much and there would be much more time devoted to writing. Now, the primary focus was to help each student work to his or her potential.

Spelling for Readers and Writers

Research shows that word-study activities that focus on spelling patterns, rhymes, and analogies are more beneficial than trying to memorize weekly spelling lists (Bear, Templeton, Helman, and Baren, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2003, 2004; Gunning 2003). The spelling inventory I used was another tool recommended by Professor Rhoades. This particular spelling inventory targets words carefully selected to assess salient features of English. It helped
me determine each member’s spelling stage: pre-phonetic, phonetic, transitional, or conventional. After assessing spelling and determining their stage of spelling, I chose 5 x 7 index cards for writing patterns from the Major Word Patterns list from *Creating Literacy Instruction for All Children*, Gunning, 2002. I kept the mini spelling/word study activities 10-15 minutes at the beginning of each session. To improve spelling, I used sentences that included their names. Strategies such as these can make spelling more meaningful. As a result of using both the sentences and patterns on index cards, during word study, I saw marked improvement in the final spelling test.

Thus, careful observation of the Target Group as they worked on their assignments, helped determine instructional needs of each individual. I knew I would have to implement strategies to help Robert with his spelling. Spelling and word study were integrated into the four week study as a vital part of the reading/writing connection. Research reveals that spelling in a word study format is an integral part of reading and writing (Bear, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2003, 2004). To help improve spelling, I devised word patterns on index cards. The index cards provided patterns of analogy and rhyme, crucial to building confident
spellers (Bear, Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003; Freeman & Freeman, 2003, 2004). Earlier, the grade level word list assessment revealed that the words most difficult for most group members were those with irregular and low frequency patterns. In the following I included sentences with target spelling words that feature irregular and low frequency patterns (see Figure 9).
Maria, Selena, Robert, and Jason hiked up the mountains.

Selena chose not to wear her new dress on the hiking trip.

Robert found footprints on the hiking trail that did not appear to be made by a human.

The footprints were those of a rabbit.

Selena bumped into a large cactus when she turned around to look at a butterfly.

Jason took a picture of a beautiful bald eagle.

Another type of bird appeared.

When they got to the bottom of the mountain, the four were tired and hungry.

Maria decided to close the lid to her lunch box so the birds would not eat her lunch.

In our Writers Club we make a united effort to practice academic English.

Figure 9. Target Spelling Words
When we completed reading the sentences the target group was amused, because all of the sentences combined turned out to be a story about them. Using this strategy makes spelling words more meaningful and hopefully the Target Group will show improvement on their final spelling test. It may seem odd that a look at what children spell is a means of understanding their reading. Bear, Templeton, Helman, and Baren, (2003) write, "Spelling provides a conservative measure of students' decoding or reading of words. Students' spelling errors show us the edge of their learning, and these spelling inventories show us where to begin word-study instruction (Bear & Templeton, 2000)" (p. 76).

Conclusion

From these four students, I learned that no matter how much I planned and prepared for our forty-minute reading, writing, spelling, and sometimes art session, I had to remain extremely aware of what was taking place each moment and take advantage of those all important teachable moments. In retrospect, there were many I was able to capitalize on because there were only four students. Thus, due to the favorable environment, I was able to enlist mini
lessons that targeted the immediate problem at hand. The research shows that for intervention to be effective it must take place on a one-to-one basis or within a small group of students.

For example, with Robert, I might have missed the very important teachable moment when during our first Quick Write I noticed that he would erase immediately after writing one or two words. Then, I remembered his grades in writing and spelling; they were unsatisfactory. So, I determined from observing Robert, not being a perfect speller or writer, and expecting him to write, created anxiety for him, which raised his affective filter (Krashen, 2003, 2004). According to Krashen, no learning takes place when the affective filter is in place. Too much focus on getting it right was making it impossible for Robert to get his thoughts on paper quickly (the whole point of the quick write). Gunning (2003) says that children should be encouraged to write as best they can in whatever way they can, whether by drawings, letter-like forms, or invented spellings.

At the same time, remembering his grade of 100% on the alphabet task revealed that Robert knew more than he realized. With all the writing expected of the target
group, this was significant. At the time of the assessment, Robert helped Jason get through his frustration over missing one letter and mixing lower and uppercase letters. I felt this was a milestone for Robert. He had just discovered he could help someone else, and he proceeded to calmly help Jason. This had a positive effect on Jason. I gave Robert recognition for this milestone because he needed to believe in his own capabilities.

Just as significant, is the concept of becoming writers to improve reading. The "quick write" activity is as much about reading as it is writing. So, both the reading and writing part of this activity will benefit struggling English learners. First, they read their story before they exchange papers with their peer partner. Next, they read their peer partner's story and discuss its interesting points. Finally, they must still read their own story once again and make corrections before submitting final story for publication. Gunning (2003) says that when children write about topics that interest them there is a special investment made in the quality of the work. This is exactly what I saw taking place. Though there was much time spent on reading the written piece before publishing, the reading provided badly needed reading practice. As
Smith (1997) argues, teachers learned to read only through the practice of reading.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Description of the Assessments

For the first assessment, I requested that the Target group write the alphabet, first in capital letters, then in lower case. Meaningful writing would require knowledge of lower and uppercase letters. Of course, their individual writings provided an abundance of assessment data. Next, I tested each one individually on the Bader Reading and Language Inventory (3rd ed.). Noticing that spelling was such an issue, I pulled out my spelling inventory list from EELB 425, Language Arts. Again, I have Professor Rhoades, to thank for helping to make me aware of the important role spelling plays in reading instruction. She highly encouraged the use of this tool with Struggling 4th grade English learners. I found this tool helpful because I could better understand the students' invented spelling after learning which stage of spelling they were in. With this spelling inventory in mind, I designed word-study mini lessons that focused on word patterns, analogy, and rhyme. In addition, I used their names, along with the target spelling words, and constructed meaningful sentences for
word study/spelling. This view of spelling as a window into literacy processes highlights the reciprocal process of learning to read and learning to spell (Bear, Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003, p. 72).

On the following pages I have included the target group’s informal assessment scores. First, I assessed lower and uppercase alphabet, immediate information that proved beneficial to Jason and Selena. The four-week curriculum would focus heavily on composing during quick write. It was imperative that the target group be knowledgeable of the alphabet and the differences between upper and lowercase letters. As it turned out, Jason and Selena, for whom, writing out the alphabet appeared to be a problem, quickly recovered after correcting their mistakes with the help of their peers (see Tables 4 and 5). Subsequently, the post-spelling test revealed marked improvement for the entire group (see Tables 6 and 7). Later, the pre-spelling assessment along with the Bader Word List assessment revealed information that continued to drive our mini lessons during word study (see Table 8).
Alphabet: Lower and Uppercase

Table 4. Lowercase Alphabet Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Lowercase Alphabet</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salina</td>
<td>Lowercase Alphabet</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Lowercase Alphabet</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Lowercase Alphabet</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Uppercase Alphabet Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Uppercase Alphabet</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salina</td>
<td>Uppercase Alphabet</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Uppercase Alphabet</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Uppercase Alphabet</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pre and Post Spelling Test

Table 6. Pre-Spelling Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Spelling Stage</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>Phonetic/Transitional</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Phonetic/Transitional</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Phonetic/Transitional</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Post-Spelling Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Spelling Stage</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>Transitional</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>Phonetic/Transitional</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Phonetic/Transitional</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Phonetic/Transitional</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The post-spelling test results revealed marked improvement. Employing spelling and word-study activities that target complex patterns, and using a story frame structure for target words, contributed to improved final spelling scores. The most improved in spelling was Robert, who had a first score of 3/10 correct and a final score of 7/10 correct. Indeed, I was very proud of the entire group for their never-ending dedication and hard work in "The Writers Club." On the next page I have included scores to the Bader Inventory Grade Level Word List. This inventory was integral to selecting word-study activities. The assessment revealed that words with low frequency and irregular patterns were more difficult to identify. Freeman and Freeman (2004) suggest using rhyming word patterns such as light, fight, night to help solve, by analogy, words like might or flight.
Word List

Table 8. Word List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Grade Level Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Final Writing Assessment

The target group's writings and art activities can be viewed in Appendix C. In Appendix A, I included the spelling stages that guided spelling assessments. Also, in Appendix B, I included a fourth-grade writing rubric that I referred to now and then, always keeping in mind their language arts grades provided to me by their teacher. Although corrections were made to the final published story, the integrity of the story remained and original papers were never marked. Students' writings provided a wealth of information for authentic assessment (a window
into potential growth). After analyzing their writings, I kept thoughtful notes on what needs had been met and what needed further attention. The following individual profiles include informal assessments, anecdotal notes, observational and authentic assessment.

Jason:  This student stays on topic and can easily fill an entire page when writing his story. He is in the transitional stage of spelling. The Bader Word List Inventory indicated he has a good grasp of many irregular patterns and sight words. I see a slight problem with the use of present and past tense verbs, a common problem at this learning stage. Plenty of meaning-making activities like reading and writing will solve this problem.

Selena:  This student is at the phonetic/transitional stage of spelling. She stays on topic and has no problem writing an entire page for her story. The Bader Word List Inventory indicates Selena would benefit from word study to improve recognition of irregular patterns and sight words. This student would do well with meaning-making activities such as reading, writing, and word study (patterns, rhymes, and analogy). Her self-portrait revealed a talent for drawing. It also inspired a memorable piece of writing.
Maria: This student is also at the phonetic/transitional stage of spelling. She enjoys writing and stays on topic. Once the noise level in the classroom was no longer an issue, Maria was able to get her thoughts on paper quickly. Maria can easily write a page or more during a ten minute “quick write.” She found her voice through her writing and definitely inspired the others. The Bader Word List Inventory indicates Maria would benefit from word study to improve recognition of irregular patterns and sight words. This student would also benefit from meaning-making activities such as reading, writing, and word study (patterns, rhyme, and analogy).

Robert: During the first writing assignment, this student spent more time erasing. He was frustrated over not being able to spell correctly. During an early assessment on upper and lower case alphabet I determined that Robert knows his letters and is able to write lower and uppercase neatly and accurately. So the fact that he is not confident enough to write words and sentences, merely says, he has not had enough practice. He does not need more phonics. Carefully planned sessions allowed for more reading, writing, and word study (meaning-making activities) at an accelerated rate, which resulted in
improved writing, spelling, and confidence. He is at the phonetic/transitional stage of spelling. Robert can benefit from meaning-making activities such as reading, writing, and word study (patterns, rhymes, and analogies).

Memorable Moments

For example, during our first week, Maria could not concentrate with all the noise in the room. After picking up on this, I made eye contact with Maria and calmly explained, as I held her hand, “The stories you write are more important than the noise in the room.” Maria understood. Once she stopped focusing on the noise, she was able to write, and the noise was no longer a problem.

Similarly, once I told Robert to write the letters he hears (in other words stretching the word out) it allowed him to let go of the anxiety and write his thoughts on paper quickly. Also, Jason’s offer to help with spelling made a big difference. Of course, Robert’s enthusiasm was contagious and that motivated the others. Robert does not have siblings who can assist him with reading and writing. In Robert’s case, educational support will have to come solely from school, and now, possibly, from the friendships formed as a result of the study.
There was definitely a camaraderie developing among group members, especially between Jason and Robert. When Jason struggled with correcting his lower and uppercase alphabet, it was Robert who offered to help him, which in turn, had a calming effect on Jason. They quickly helped each other, which allowed me to give one-on-one mini lessons that moved us along our journey as writers. Smith's (1997) words ring true about students having to see themselves as belonging to a literacy club first, in order for them to excel. This group of learners started to see themselves as "The Writers Club." Robert now spent more time writing instead of erasing. Within the first week they chose the name "The Writers Club." This was definitely a unique group of learners. They had come to believe they were "The Writers Club." Right from the beginning, their ability to help one another was apparent.

Equally important, when Robert learned that Jason stumbled on his alphabet, he immediately offered to help Jason make corrections. Jason accepted Robert’s help and I was able to prepare for our next activity. That one incident was very revealing. Robert was able to help the highest achiever in the group. For Robert, that was a turning point; his enthusiasm was contagious. Even today,
I still remember Mrs. Estrada’s words: “Robert keeps looking at the door at 10:45, and I have to remind him, Mrs. Vargas doesn’t come in today.” Robert was eager to learn.

Conclusion

As a result of state testing, all four English learners are categorized Beginning Readers/Below Basic. So, according to research presented in this study, they need plenty of exposure to reading and writing activities. What better way to get the Target Group interested in writing and reading than to have them author their very own book. The Target Group would always ask with anticipation, “Are you going to read today?” The Read Aloud was always saved for the last part of the session when work was finished and we could truly enjoy the story. Though, these English learners are still considered Beginning Readers/Below Basic, their enthusiasm throughout the study proved remarkably inspiring.

The use of “Quick Writes” worked particularly well for this group. Of course, allowing students to contribute three ideas of their own to our Quick Write list factored into their enthusiasm. Children are more involved in their
own writing and care about how it is presented to their audience when they are involved in the selection of their topic (Gunning, 2003).
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Working toward the Master’s Reading Language Arts degree has enabled me to take a closer look at the word recognition view (phonics) a skills based, scripted reading program, highly popular in today’s school districts. There are great differences between this view and the socio-psycholinguistic view advocated by researchers who hold firm that reading is a meaning-making endeavor. For the past eight years, first, as a reading tutor/teacher assistant, later as a student teacher, and last as a substitute teacher, I have assisted English language learners in their literacy development. In particular, for several years now, I have worked with forth-grade struggling English language learners, tutoring these students, one-on-one and in small groups. What I learned from these struggling English language learners is this: If English learners are already struggling before reaching forth grade, chances are, the fourth-grade curriculum will be overwhelmingly difficult. The frustration of not being a successful learner can have several devastating outcomes
if accelerated intervention is not forthcoming. Some students find themselves in special education class where they fall further and further behind. Soon the student may shut down learning, eventually giving up and dropping out of school, disenfranchised by the educational system.

Conclusion

From ongoing observational and authentic assessments each student from the target group warranted exceptional praise for their contribution and for never missing a session. It was not apparent upon first meeting the four students that they were friends outside of class, but by the end of the study it was refreshing to witness the camaraderie forged by hard work and acceptance of one another’s needs and strengths.

I somewhat expected work with my Target Group to be complicated, primarily because the needs of low achievers call for one-on-one teaching. In addition, because of the short time frame for the study, four weeks, there was the possibility that there would be no gains made by any of the students. However, to my surprise, what took place among group members was exactly what Vygotsky (1978) advocated when he wrote, what a child can do today with the help of
an adult or a more capable peer, he can do tomorrow by himself. When Jason volunteered to help Robert with his spelling, it left me free to intercept an important struggle Maria encountered while trying to compose in the noisy environment of Mrs. Estrada's 4th/5th bilingual classroom. Because each student willingly helped the other reach his potential, I was free to give a one-on-one mini lesson on tuning out background noise. Also, because these four revealed academic strengths, they were capable of assisting their peers when the need was warranted. Because of this nice little bonus, due to cooperative grouping, I was able to accomplish more than I had originally planned. The extra help resulted in valuable time for one-on-one mini lessons, altering lessons when necessary, and most important, capitalizing on teachable moments. I also had more time to observe and learn about their individual needs and strengths. From day one, until our last session, the target group was up for the challenge of total immersion in academic English, 40 minutes a day, three days a week. Their enthusiasm was remarkable and their accomplishments, in this short time frame, unforgettable.

Looking back on the four-week endeavor, it proved to be an enjoyable learning experience for the Target Group.
and the teacher. By carefully planning lessons to individual needs and by expecting the highest degree of engagement from the target group, wonderful things happened. When students belong to a group of learners that call themselves, "The Writers Club" strange things start to take place. Instead of identifying with the term "low achiever" the identity changes. These students, now calling themselves "The Writers Club" were responsive to a mission to publish their stories.

It was evident the target group enjoyed reading each other’s stories and often borrowed ideas for future stories. Although spelling and word study lessons were minimal, always in a mini lesson format at the beginning of each session, they were enough to support more important meaningful reading and writing activities. Freeman and Freeman (2004) argue that it is more beneficial for students to practice skills and strategies by devoting more time to reading and writing (meaning-making activities). In the socio-psycholinguist framework, phonics is embedded in the language arts curriculum. It is not the curriculum. Because of the meaningful reading and writing activities, used in this study, the Target Group invested more of themselves in the reading and writing process. Skills such
as reading, writing, listening, and speaking were developed each session. It was truly a remarkable journey, one in which they learned from example, one another, and along the way, discovered the joy of writing their own stories about self, family, and friends.

At the end of the session, I would read aloud one of the published stories, and to watch them captivated by every word of their stories was a wonderful sight. These were their stories, their chosen topics about friends and family, happy times, smiles, and laughter. For these young writers there was no hesitation to tell their story, and when one writer threw in a little fantasy, this really perked up their interest. Everyone could hardly wait to write their next story and make it as great as the one they had just listened to.

In the end, the work they produced in such a short time frame was amazing and warranted praise. From their drawings, writings, informal assessments, and dialogue, I saw another aspect to these students. An enthusiasm for learning was apparent from day one. Maybe, just maybe, the accelerated learning, strategies, and tools they experienced in this short four-week study would motivate them to keep working, and to keep excelling. I was so
pleased with how well they worked together and how much they had accomplished in only four weeks. What took place in four short weeks was cooperative learning. According to research in this study, the Vygotskian model for language development is highly recommended for struggling English learners. This group of learners accomplished so much because they were totally involved in the writing process.

Establishing a routine was part of the group’s success. For the first ten minutes of each session we tackled mini lessons on spelling pattern, analogy, and rhyme. The rest of the session was devoted to writing, editing, sharing. Having a goal, a book with all their stories, for our read aloud activity, this is what they looked forward to. This schedule allowed me to give one-on-one mini-lessons when necessary. They did everything that was asked of them, because their personal stories would become our shared reading for the whole group and this was important to them. I was inspired by their enthusiasm and proud of their contributions to the book, stories and drawings that opened a window into their colorful lives. This was the motivational factor. They all had fun stories to tell of self, family, and friends. They voices were heard.
Recommendations

More studies of English language learner achievement or lack of achievement in low socioeconomic areas are necessary if we are to find solutions to the high numbers of special education referrals, shut down, and drop out. Studies that compare politically popular scripted, language arts programs, to a framework curriculum that utilizes rich socio-psycholinguistic accelerated programs, are also necessary. Due to word recognition reading instruction (phonics), we now have a student population of English learners who are excellent “word callers” when reading aloud but cannot comprehend what they are reading. Longitudinal studies would be ideal because according to research by experts in second language acquisition, it takes 5-10 years to master academic English. If we want English language learners to succeed, then we must provide support until they can adequately compete with their native English-speaking peers. Next, the criteria used to refer English learners to special education must be investigated using several lenses. If this is the only solution to getting more help for the student because the homeroom teacher does not have time for one-on-one tutoring, then this problem needs to be addressed.
Another area of great concern is the testing methods of English learners who are not cognizant of academic English. As educators, we must ask ourselves this question: If it became necessary to suddenly move to another country, would we want our children thrust into an educational system that mandates testing in the new language, upon arrival at the new school? Next, the one-year limit to master academic English must be closely evaluated. Research in this study reveals that rushing English learners to become proficient in their second language leads to anxiety, which in turn, shuts down the learning process. Consequently, when students begin to see themselves as helpless failures, then it is the educational system that has failed English learners. Finally, by exploring alternative reading instruction we can support English learners succeed academically: we can do this by (1) adopting reading models that support accelerated learning and intervention, (2) recognize English learners' strengths and accomplishments, and (3) accept, that given the opportunity, English learners are intelligent individuals with great potential. Standardized testing cannot measure English language learners' academic potential, only effective teachers can do that.
APPENDIX A

SPELLING STAGES
Developmental Stages of Spelling
(Creating literacy instruction for all children, Gunning, 2003)

Prephonetic -

The prephonetic spelling stage begins with children learning to scribble before learn to write simple letter names and sound representations.

Phonetic -

The phonetic stage begins when children write the dominant sounds heard in words (e.g., "car" as "kr").

Transitional -

The transitional spelling stage reflects the child’s attempts to spell words with complex letter combinations (e.g., spelling "bread" as "brade").

Conventional -

The highest stage is conventional spelling, where over 90 percent of the words are spelled correctly.
APPENDIX B

WRITING RUBRIC
Grade 4 Scoring Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4 Scoring Rubric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narrative writing</strong>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ provides a thoroughly developed sequence of significant events to relate ideas, observations, and/or memories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ includes vivid descriptive language and sensory details that enable the reader to visualize the events or experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary writing</strong>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ is characterized by paraphrasing of the main idea(s) and significant details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response to literature writing</strong>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ demonstrates a clear understanding of the literary work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ provides effective support for judgments through specific references to text and prior knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **4 The writing**—  |
| ▪ clearly addresses all parts of the writing task.  |
| ▪ demonstrates a clear understanding of purpose.  |
| ▪ maintains a consistent point of view, focus, and organizational structure, including paragraphing when appropriate.  |
| ▪ includes a clearly presented central idea with relevant facts, details, and/or explanations.  |
| ▪ includes a variety of sentence types.  |
| ▪ contains few, if any errors in the conventions of the English language (grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). These errors do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing. |

| **3 The writing**—  |
| ▪ addresses all parts of the writing task.  |
| ▪ demonstrates a general understanding of purpose.  |
| ▪ maintains a mostly consistent point of view, focus, and organizational structure, including paragraphing when appropriate.  |
| ▪ presents a central idea with mostly relevant facts, detail, and/or explanations.  |
| ▪ includes a variety of sentence types.  |
| ▪ contains some errors in the conventions of the English language. These errors do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing. |

| **2 The writing**—  |
| ▪ addresses only parts of the writing task.  |
| ▪ demonstrates little understanding of purpose.  |
| ▪ maintains an inconsistent point of view, focus, and/or organizational structure.  |
| ▪ suggests a central idea with limited facts, details, and/or explanations.  |
| ▪ includes little variety in sentence types.  |
| ▪ contains several errors in the conventions of the English language. These errors may interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing. |

| **1 The writing**—  |
| ▪ addresses only one part of the writing task.  |
| ▪ demonstrates no understanding of purpose.  |
| ▪ lacks a clear point of view, focus, and/or organizational structure.  |
| ▪ includes no sentence variety.  |
| ▪ contains serious errors in the conventions of the English language. These errors interfere with the reader's understanding of the writing. |

| **Narrative writing**—  |
| ▪ lacks a sequence of events to relate ideas, observations, and/or memories.  |
| ▪ lacks descriptive language and sensory details that enable the reader to visualize the events or experiences.  |
| **Summary writing**—  |
| ▪ is characterized by substantial copying of indiscriminately selected phrases or sentences.  |
| **Response to literature writing**—  |
| ▪ demonstrates little understanding of the literary work.  |
| ▪ fails to provide support for judgments.  |
APPENDIX C

THE WRITERS CLUB
The Writers Club
Hillside Elementary
4th Grade

Authors
Jason Castillo
Maria Gonzalez
Robert Jimenez
Selena Ortiz
Initial Writing Activity

"My Favorite Weekend"
My Favorite Weekend

By

Jason Castillo

On my favorite weekend we went to Disneyland and it was so much fun. We got on all of the rides. Some were fun but some were scary. It was so nice there. We took pictures with Pluto. Disneyland is my favorite place and it is so beautiful. I wish we could go there again.

It was my first time there and I didn’t know it was going to be so beautiful and so much fun. There were a lot of people there and they were screaming so loud. I wish we could go there everyday. We could have so much fun. The castle we went into was great and we had fun inside. I love this place and I didn’t want to leave because it was the best.

My favorite ride was the roller coaster. At first I thought I was not going to like it, but I saw a lot of little kids getting on. So I bravely got on the roller coaster and it was great. My best friend took my picture as I waved to him from my favorite ride at Disneyland.
My Favorite Weekend

By

Maria Gonzalez

I went to Disneyland with my aunts and cousins.
First, I went on a boat. I could see everything. The
captain blew his whistle and it was so loud, I had to cover
my ears. Next, I saw a pirate's boot and it was so cool.
I wanted to jump in the water and swim. I wanted to drive
the boat and get to the island. Near the island there is a
bridge that leads to a house. It was the haunted house.
When I heard a loud sound, I decided not to go there after
all.

Splash Mountain was next. There was a long line. We
had to wait five minutes to get on the ride. It was fun on
the ride. Water splashed on my face, and I got a little
wet but that was okay. Then I saw fireworks, and it was so
beautiful. I wanted to fly up there and get closer to the
fireworks. Finally, it was time to go home. At home, I
looked at all my prizes from Disneyland, and I was so
happy. I want to go back soon.
My Favorite Weekend

By

Robert Jimenez

My favorite weekend was when I went to Knotts Berry Farm. I went there with my sisters and cousins. We were having a good time on all the rides. Then we went walking around. Next, we noticed that this man was following us. Okay, we were a little scared. We stopped and looked at each other. Some of us in the group were bigger than the man. Of course, we didn’t know for sure if he was really following us. Pretty soon we all realized he wasn’t there any more, following us. Whew! What a relief! Now we could go back to having fun at Knotts Berry Farm.
My Favorite Weekend

By

Selena Ortiz

My favorite weekend was when I went to my uncle's house to visit him and my cousins. I had lots of fun with my cousins playing soccer. We won the soccer game. I was proud of myself, and my parents and uncle were proud of us for winning the soccer game. We won the championship because I made three inside goals. My family was very happy and proud of me. Then I went home to take a shower.

When I finished my shower, I went back to my cousin's house. We all decided to walk over to my house. The game was still on our minds. It was a tough game, but our team played hard and we won. This was the best game our soccer team had ever played. I'm just so ready for the next game. As we talked about the next game, we decided to walk back to my cousin's house.
Quick-Write Topic List

Theme: Things That Make Me Happy

Stories of Self, Family, and Friends

Topic

- Playing with my special friend makes me happy.
- Christmas makes me happy.
- Spending time with my dad makes me happy.
- Getting presents makes me very happy.
- My brother makes me laugh.
- I have fun at school with all my friends.
- When I play with my friends, they make me laugh.
- I’m very happy when my team wins a soccer game.
- Learning something new in school makes me happy.
- I get a smile on my face when I see people helping to keep Mother Earth clean.
- When I see a beautiful rainbow after a long rain, I smile.
- Seeing a butterfly always brings a smile to my face.
- Following safety rules keeps me safe, and this makes me smile.
Playing With My Special Friend

By

Jason Castillo

Playing with my special friend makes me happy. He is very funny and always makes me laugh. I always have a smile when I am with my special friend. My special friend is a smart student. He is a good writer, and he writes as fast as a machine. If I need help with my work, he is there to help me. When he finishes his work, he always asks the teacher if he could help someone. My special friend is the funniest kid in the classroom.

We ride the bus together and he always says funny things to me. Sometimes I can’t stop laughing until he stops saying those funny things to me. He likes to make funny faces. Some of the faces are weird.

When we play together, I’m happy because he makes me laugh. Other kids don’t make me laugh and smile like my special friend. He is my best friend in the classroom, and he is the best soccer player in the school. We always win when my special friend plays soccer. I always smile when my best friend is around because he is the funniest person I know.
I’m Happy When My Team Wins Our Soccer Game

By

Maria Gonzalez

When I play soccer I always pass the ball to others from my team. Sometimes I make some of the goals and it makes me very happy. When we win, I’m even happier.

One day we played a very good team and we lost. We were so mad after losing the first game. The second time we played this team we won because the whole team kept making goals. Our team made six goals and the other team made only one goal. We played so good that we even played against the adults. The adults made three goals and we made six goals. Soon our team had fifteen trophies, and we were the best team in America. We all got to keep a trophy.

Next, we played in Paris. The Paris team almost beat us but in the last minute we won. Back in America, the president gave us one billion dollars. We bought a mansion and I had the biggest room. There was so much room at the mansion, so we practiced everyday. Soccer teams from all over challenged us but we were so good, we won every game. Playing soccer with my friends is fun.
I have fun with all my friends playing soccer and tag ball. We don’t fight, and we always help one another. Because we are friends, we never fight over who gets the ball. Soccer is always fun when I play with my friends.

All my friends attend the same school. It’s nice to have friends. We are always there to help one another in any way we can. Away from school if a man tries to hurt my friends, I come running to see if I can help. My friends are the best friends in the whole world.
Christmas Makes Me Happy

By

Selena Ortiz

Christmas makes me happy because we get presents and things, and I just love it. It’s always fun because you get the things you want. My family gives me lots of presents. I love my family very much. We have so much fun on Christmas because the whole family enjoys celebrating the holiday.

My whole family, cousins, aunts, and uncles come to my house on Christmas. We exchange presents. Opening presents is fun. Everyone has a fun time on Christmas day. I love Christmas and I love my family.
My Brother Makes Me Laugh

By

Jason Castillo

My brother makes me laugh because he always makes a funny face. I start laughing then he starts laughing. Then my mom has to tell us to be quiet because neither one of us can stop laughing. I like the faces he makes to make me laugh. He is the best brother and I will always be with him because he makes me happy.

When we go to the store, we look at the books together. My brother looks at the cover of the book and something on the cover makes him laugh. Then I start laughing and he has to cover my mouth. We have a lot of fun. I want him to be my brother forever.

Every time he leaves for work he always says, "What do you want me to bring you?" He comes home very late from work, but he always brings me something. My brother is the best, and he makes me very happy.
Getting Presents Makes Me Happy

By

Maria Gonzalez

My mother and dad went to Wall-Mart and they bought me a cotton candy machine, toys, and lots of clothes. Then we went out to buy a Christmas tree and lots of decorations for the tree. So, when it was finally Christmas, I couldn't wait to open my presents. To my surprise I had more presents than my sister. How did that happen? I was so happy I played all day with my presents. This was a happy Christmas.
Spending Time With My Dad Makes Me Happy

By

Robert Jimenez

Spending time with my dad makes me happy. He is fun to be with and always nice to me. We went to knots Scary Farm and we got on all the rides. When we stopped to get food we called my mother and sisters before they left for work to let them know we were fine.

Someday my dad wants to take me to Mexico on an airplane trip. I’ve never been on an airplane. The airplane trip will take us far away. I love my dad very much. He said he’s going to take me to Disneyland soon. This was a very happy day for me spending time with my dad.
I'm Very Happy When My Team Wins Our Soccer Game

By

Selena Ortiz

I am so happy because my soccer team just won. My family was so proud of me and my team. The team, America JS Chitas, made five goals. I still can't believe it. Our team is the best. We played hard and we won the other team. I am so proud of my team. I am so proud of me. This was a very happy day for me, a day I will never forget.
Art Activity (1)

Self-Portrait

And

Getting To Know The Authors
Something Your Don’t Know About Me

By

Jason Castillo

In my picture I have a blue shirt and black pants like always. I am big for my age, and I am happy, that is just how I feel. When I grow up I will still be a happy person. I always feel glad to go to school. I have many friends there and I learn new things.

See the spiked hair. That’s me sometimes but not always. I like to look my best in the morning when I go to school, nice hair and nice clothes. When I’m not going to school, but going other places, I like to wear my hair spiked. I like looking nice with my hair spiked then nothing worries me. So, you see, I am the boy in the picture with the spiked black hair and that’s my story.
You don’t know that I like boy stuff and girl stuff. I like soccer, baseball, and kickball, and I like to watch movies that the boys like. I really like the scary movies the boys like. When I watch the movie Chucky it makes me afraid of the dark. Also, I like the movie Blade, but one time after watching it I had scary dreams about the movie. Then I woke up crying and it was so dark I couldn’t stop crying. My mother heard me and came to my room. She hugged me for a long time and I stopped crying. I went back to sleep, but I still like the scary movies boys like.
Something You Don’t Know About Me

By

Robert Jimenez

The boy in the picture with black spiked hair really is me. I look very different because of the spiky hair in the picture and the shirt and pants. The black hair is the same as mine but not the spikes. The clothes are different colors because I like drawing. I like using crayons to draw. I have fun when I draw. So, maybe some things in the picture are different, but some things are the same. Okay, my hair is not really spiked, but it was fun making the spikes in my drawing, and it was fun using all the different colors for my shirt and pants. Yes, I really enjoy drawing.
Something You Don’t Know About Me

By

Selena Ortiz

Just in case you haven’t noticed I have a great smile.

Maybe it’s because I have a lot of great friends at school. I play soccer with them and many other games during recess and lunch. When we get together we always do interesting things. This is why I like my friends because I have so much fun with them. So this is probably why I have a great smile. Oh, and I also have long curly hair that I like fixing. Yes, I like my smile and my long curly hair.
Art Activity (2)

Draw What You See

Talk About It

Write About It
I would like this hot car to be mine. Then I could drive it everywhere. Other persons could ride in my yellow hot car with me. My car is so cool. The rims are the best and I really like the doors. Yes, it would be so great if this was my car.
Draw What You See

By

Maria Gonzalez

What I see is a yellow car. I'm changing the color and making my car so cool. I really do like all my cool colors. This is my cool car.
Draw What You See

By

Robert Jimenez

Robert had cafeteria duty and was unable to complete his drawing or even write about his drawing. By the looks of what he accomplished with so little time, I know he would have had something fascinating to say about his incredible car.
Draw What You See

By

Selena Ortiz

Looking at my picture of a black piano makes me very happy. The picture makes we want to play the piano. I wish I could learn to play the piano. It would make me very happy if I could learn to play the piano.
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