

EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE
CLASSROOM AND ON THE HOME FRONT

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Abstract

Effectively Supporting English Language Learners in the Classroom and on the Home Front

Education has long been known as the “great equalizer.” However, all students have different needs; therefore, to provide a true opportunity for equalization, some students need more support in the classroom and at home.

Furthermore, there is an ever-growing gap in achievement rates. Students with proficient English are performing at higher levels than those who come from homes speaking other languages. Therefore, it has become clear that in an effort to provide an English Language Learner (ELL) with a proper education, additional support will be required throughout the education process.

Through this study, I provided additional support in the classroom as well as extra at-home resources for ELLs. As a reading specialist, I partnered with the classroom teachers and families to provide ELLs with need-specific instruction and meaningful resources.

After providing additional services throughout the school year, the ELLs that I worked with all achieved benchmark levels according to school and state standards. There is still much growth to be had, but by providing extra support both in the classroom and at home, these students were able to not only make annual growth, but were able to make “catch-up” growth.

Therefore, it is clear that by providing ELLs with additional support both at school and at home, education can be restored as the “great equalizer” as it will truly equip all students for successful living in our American society.

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Introduction

Yeng, Toua, Chong, Ia, Lor, Tiffany, and Sarah are from a typical Hmong family. The first-born is daughter, Yeng, who is currently in middle school. Toua, the oldest son, is in the sixth grade. Chong is the second daughter in the family and is a fourth grader. The third daughter, Ia, is a second grader. Lor, the second son and last child born to the family while in Thailand, is in kindergarten. The family also has one set of twins. The twin girls, Tiffany and Sarah, were born in America and are currently one and a half years old. Each of these siblings will assimilate into the American culture through their education at James Elementary School in Seattle, WA. (All names, including the school, have been changed to protect participant identity.)

While at school, the children are expected to speak in English and act according to American expectations. However, once at home the standards shift to the Hmong culture where the children are responsible for assisting in the family business (farming and flower selling), caring for the siblings, and speaking Hmong. They live in a small apartment where the children share rooms and are left unsupervised for many hours a day. They do not own a computer and their parents speak very little English.

These siblings must juggle two cultures under a roof that only understands one. The transition requires additional effort from the older siblings; they must assist with homework sent in English, explain expectations from an American culture, and attempt to balance the traditions of home with the integration of new and exciting norms of which the parents are unaware. In the case of this family,

the gap is not a result of a lack of effort or interest, but rather a genuine barrier of language and culture. When working with Hmong families, the children express how the family dynamics vary from their culture to the American culture. It is quickly learned in interacting with many Hmong families that the parents are not responsible for a child's education, but rather it is the responsibility of the older sibling to make sure a child is learning adequately.

When Toua and Chong first began school at James, neither spoke English. Through additional literacy services, both have developed their fluency in English though at different rates. Toua came to English slowly and with great difficulty; however, he is very intelligent and now as a sixth-grader has managed to develop many skills. While Chong is still developing her English skills, she was quicker to gain comprehension and fluency in English. For Ia, English is fairly easy to speak as she has two siblings to converse with; however, the class setting can be overwhelming and cause her to get lost in the English at times. Lor is currently a kindergartener. He began the year speaking almost no English and struggled to create English sounds. He is very bright, enjoys school, and tries his best. Throughout the year, Lor has been able to comprehend most oral English, but has difficulty in retelling or answering questions in complete English.

While the five oldest siblings have been attending American public schools for multiple years now, they do not use English at home and therefore when a younger sibling enters kindergarten the learning begins. As a result, each of these children are at times, if not currently, labeled as failing according to standardized tests and basic grade level goals. However, if labeled by progress,

each of these students would show significant growth in comprehension and fluency.

Grade level standards are skills identified as necessary for all students to master within a specific school year (OSPI, 2010). Each state outlines these overarching goals and then school districts assign more specific requirements to ensure students meet the state standards. To track the growth students need to make in order to reach benchmark or grade level standards, educators, including myself, often use aim lines which focus on a skill and combine a student's current achievement levels with the end goal to create a graph showing the rate at which the student will need to progress throughout the year to meet the final standard. While these standards and even the use of aim lines are all designed to ensure each student receives a quality education some students need more supplemental assistance to reach the pre-set goals. This Hmong family is a perfect example. If it were not for the consistent and need-specific resources these students received at James, they would not be performing at the levels they are today. Therefore, the goal should not change; all students need to reach national, state, and school standards. However, schools need to be able to provide adequate support for students in need so that each child may achieve the standard. Students not making benchmark standards need to receive immediate and regular support to aid in developing necessary skills.

Through my study, I focused on the impact at-home resources and additional support to English Language Learner (ELL) families have on a student's success in the classroom. Supporting students like Toua, Chong, Ia,

and Lor with appropriate and applicable tools will enable them to develop their English skills while at home. Research supports providing ELL families with at-home resources in effort to increase the student's exposure to English and the probability of parents and younger siblings becoming familiar with the English language.

Finding ways to assess ELLs accurately can be difficult in the classroom, but identifying and using strategies that do so effectively will lead to more appropriate instruction. Connecting at home is pivotal in the success of all students, but especially for ELLs, and therefore much research has gone into finding effective ways to bridge the gap between school and home. Parents seem to be the key. In addition, research proves that implementing research based teaching strategies and styles increases student learning. Therefore, I begin this project with a review of the pertinent research that speaks to the realities of ELLs.

From extensive research, four main themes tend to rise to the top when addressing ELLs. These four concepts are appropriately gauging the abilities of ELLs, identifying the real ELL gap, connecting with ELL families, and using research based teaching strategies. Through these outlined concepts, educators may glean ideas for improving the connection between an American education and ELL homes. Therefore, the research that addresses these pivotal topics will be further divulged in an effort to provide educators with ample tools for successful differentiation.

Literature Review

Appropriately Gauging Abilities of ELLs

Assessing an ELL accurately can be a frustrating process for educators, as most English tests do not provide a true reflection of the ELL's knowledge. Educators have long been looking for ways to authentically and accurately assess the abilities of ELLs. Much effort has gone into identifying how to best support these learners and "after several years of increased funding for research focusing on ELLs, the knowledge base on their instructional needs has grown exponentially [...] therefore, [educators] are now better poised to provide ELLs receiving English reading instruction in the early grades instruction that is research-based" (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, Vaughn, 2007, p.186).

Over the years, the ELL population in the United States has grown exponentially and is expected to continue increasing at a rapid pace. Therefore, addressing the needs of ELLs has become of great importance in the education world. Cities across the country are encountering enrollments with record-high levels of ELLs. New York City, for example, has thousands of students enrolling every year who have some educational experiences from their home countries, yet are severely behind in English skills (Zehr, 2009). Seeking to accurately assess these students, NYC educators created and sampled different tests to show the students' genuine abilities. Through Zehr's research, it is apparent that there are different ways to gauge academic abilities of ELLs effectively (2009). Creating different ways for ELLs to reveal their knowledge and abilities is crucial as "findings suggest that ELLs may have the knowledge and skill to demonstrate

academic competency in their native languages; however, they have not yet acquired the language proficiency it takes to be academically successful in English” (Betts, Bolt, Decker, Muysjens, Marston, 2009).

As the ELL population continues to spike, educators will need to find more ways to accurately assess these learners. Implementing different teaching and assessment strategies could lead to increased accuracy in identifying the abilities and needs of ELLs, which would enable educators to develop instruction more effectively geared toward these students.

Along the same lines, other researchers tested Spanish-speaking students using both an English test and a Spanish test and then compared the results. The goal of this study was to see if student success was contingent on the content or the language in which the content was presented. Looking at how each student performed, the researchers noted that students tended to do significantly better on the test in their native language (Abella, Urrutia, Aleksandr, 2005). This is a very applicable concept for educators. While the goal is for ELLs to develop proficient English skills, allowing students to complete tests covering the same content in their native language can give an authentic reflection of learning and comprehension that may be hindered through a language barrier.

In support of using both a native tongue and developing English, Mari Haneda seeks to help educators understand the literacy skills ELLs gain from becoming literate in multiple languages. Haneda suggests that some ELLs will develop English at the loss of their native tongue, others will develop English and as a result improve their literacy skills in their first language, and a few will fail to

develop either language fully (Haneda, 2006). For educators, Haneda presents the notion that various types of literacy affect students differently and she reveals the importance of integrating diverse literacy into the classroom in an attempt to develop students with well-rounded literacy skills (Haneda, 2006).

Therefore, Haneda shares a model created by advocates of critical literacy, which emphasizes four necessary skills students must develop. As Haneda cites in her work, Luke and Freebody's model reveals the four skills and refers to them as: code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst/critic (Haneda, 2006). Through these skills, ELLs will develop literacy strategies helpful in every language they speak. Using these skills and asking higher-level questions, regardless of student age, will aid students in developing critical thinking skills. Through the integration of diverse forms of literacy, Haneda encourages educators to involve the school, home, and social aspects of student life into the classroom for an effective learning experience (Haneda, 2006). Using these aspects of literacy may help ELLs bridge the gap from failure to success in an American classroom.

Identifying the Real ELL Gap

Further research only proves the difficulty in accurately assessing ELLs as it also reveals the true gap from which ELLs suffer. The National Literacy Panel's chair concluded after the panel's research that "one of the most important findings of the ELL panel, and recent research, was that oral proficiency may be the most important component of reading comprehension" ("Vocabulary," 2007, p. 5). Reading fluently may appear as a requirement better suited for higher

achieving students rather than an element that is truly necessary; however, current brain research shows the importance of fluency when reading as it correlates to one's working memory.

In David Sousa's memory model, a clipboard represents immediate memory, which is one component of short-term memory (Sousa, 2006). This clipboard in the brain can only hold information for thirty seconds (Sousa, 2006). In order to be passed from the clipboard to the table, which represents one's working memory, the information must be deemed of value or importance (Sousa, 2006). If incoming data makes sense and/or has meaning, the brain shifts it to working memory (Sousa, 2006). For students in kindergarten, working memory can only hold 3-7 chunks of information at a time (Sousa, 2006). Therefore, kindergarten students can only keep an average of 5 chunks in their working memory at a time, after that, the new data is lost.

When analyzing a study on oral reading fluency and comprehension in ELLs, Betts et al. concluded that "perhaps ELLs are more likely to demonstrate high levels of achievement on measures of oral reading fluency earlier, whereas it takes them longer to develop achievement in reading comprehension, which is often considered more closely related to [academic vocabulary]. It may be the case that ELLs are able to develop skills for decoding without necessarily having fully developed the vocabulary or prior knowledge necessary to understand what they are asked to read" (Betts et al., 2009, p. 147).

Connecting the response of Betts et al. (2009) with the evidence presented by brain research, it is easy to see how ELLs may achieve higher oral

reading fluency rates quicker than higher comprehension scores because of the vocabulary gap. It is clear that if the student does not know the vocabulary, he/she will not be able to make sense of the reading and therefore, it will be rejected in working memory and not be retained. Therefore, the student may be able to easily decode the text using the direct instruction in phonics, yet not be able to prove comprehension since the vocabulary is foreign.

Therefore, the true gap that ELLs must conquer is an insufficient vocabulary. Current research conducted on ELLs shows that “1. ELLs should get explicit vocabulary and oral English instruction. 2. Bilingual instruction shows limited benefit. 3. Standard literacy practices also benefit ELLs” (“Vocabulary,” 2007, p. 5). The ELL panel’s research shows that there is some benefit to bilingual instruction; however, the growth does not justify adding bilingual instructors. Instead, educators should seek opportunities to integrate bilingual instruction in the classroom.

John Medina stresses the importance of repetition in his work on memory (Medina, 2008). Medina claims the key to short term memory is to repeat the information (Medina, 2008). Furthermore, Kevin Feldman and Kate Kinsella have spent much time researching vocabulary acquisition and found that “students benefit greatly from brief, daily classroom opportunities to use academic language in speaking and writing” which supports the idea of repetition leading to successful storage and quick retrieval (Feldman & Kinsella, 2005, p. 9). Therefore, educators should practice vocabulary with great repetition so that the new terms have a greater chance of being stored and remembered. Connecting

new vocabulary with pictures and even the term in a student's first language can aid in giving meaning to the term in English. With this in mind, educators must plan meaningful lessons that aid students in developing a strong vocabulary.

In accordance with Sousa and Medina, it is clear that educators can close the ELL gap best through direct instruction of vocabulary. Supporting the notion that the gap is one of lacking vocabulary,

Hirsch (2001) wrote about the 'the reading gap' between middle class and low-income students, a gap that widens as students move from first grade through third and fourth grade. Hirsch believes that this gap is really a 'vocabulary deficit' and comes about because the lower class children do not have the broad range of knowledge and language that middle class students have. One solution to this deficit is extensive reading.

(Rosenshine, 2002, p. 282)

Guiding students to find meaning and make sense of the new vocabulary will help them store the new terms in their long-term storage and therefore the students will be able to access, use, and manipulate their new vocabulary in a way that lends to greater success in an English-based system.

Furthermore, vocabulary is not only the central link in the gap, but it is a complex two-fold puzzle piece. Betts et al. share Cummins' theory on how people acquire a second language and in their work they highlight Cummins' focus on the

development of two different types of language skills: basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency

(CALP). Cummins suggests that 2 to 3 years are necessary for a student to develop BICS [...whereas] 5 to 7 years are necessary for a student to develop CALP. (Betts et al., 2009, p.146)

According to Betts et al., it is clear that ELLs have in essence two separate yet related learning curves, one of which consists of acquiring conversational language skills and the other of academic language skills (2009). This is important to note, as it proves the importance of direct instruction in both conversational and academic vocabulary.

Furthermore, as a result of research proving the importance of fluency, it is pertinent that educators take note of the time necessary to master the different types of vocabulary. This research would suggest that while educators should not change the standards and expectations of what students acquire, the timeline for the learning, or what is often referred to as aim lines, might need adjusting to appropriately accommodate the ELL. Vocabulary instruction should be vital from the very first day in kindergarten since “it is well known that, on average, students who enter first grade behind other students never catch up with their more advantaged peers (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997)” (Good & Nichols, 2001, p.114).

Connecting at Home: Engaging Parents

Not only is it important to help students in the classroom, but educators must also find ways to connect with the families. Finding ways to impress upon families the importance of education will enable educators to provide students with the most effective schooling experience possible. In her research, Borba

(2009) contends that involving parents of ELLs will increase student achievement. The relationship between school and home is crucial in a student's success; therefore, finding ways to bridge the cultural divide will pay off in the end and along the way as parents are able to better support and reinforce learning at home (Borba, 2009). Gaining parent buy-in and helping the parents gain understanding of American ideals and expectations can help the entire family be successful.

Ramirez and Soto-Hinman also focus on how educators can make all students and parents, regardless of ethnicity, welcome in the classroom (2009). Parent involvement in the education process is encouraged as an effective way to support both the student and the family as a whole (Ramirez & Soto-Hinman, 2009). In an effort to make families feel welcome, educators need to find ways to make an American education relevant and valuable to the diverse families represented in that class.

Promoting a similar approach to partnering with families of ELLs, Cheng-Ting and McIntyre also encourage educators to involve the parents in the education process (Cheng-Ting & McIntyre, 2008). Seeing ELL parents active in the classroom and at home adds to the value of the education each student receives. As a result of these studies, it is clear that educators should find ways to welcome ELL families into the classroom as well as providing means for families to practice skills at home.

Research Based Teaching Strategies and Styles

York-Barr, Ghere, and Sommerness (2007) joined forces to see the effect of collaborative teaching on ELLs. Compiling the research and results of a collaborative teaching case study in an urban setting, the researchers prove that supporting ELLs in a collaborative team setting aids in student acquisition of language and skills (York-Barr et al., 2007). Based on these outcomes, it would be beneficial for districts, schools, and grade level teams to look at how they operate and support students through effective collaboration. Since the team approach is proven effective, schools should consider providing outlets for students to receive support in the most meaningful mediums.

Vaughn, Mathes, Linan-Thompson, and Francis provide a very helpful source about first grade ELLs (Vaughn et al., 2005). The researchers encourage the use of reading interventions practiced in conjunction with research-based tools to provide students with the most appropriate education (Vaughn et al., 2005). Therefore, educators should consider the affect of implementing research-based interventions with fidelity in an effort to see the research-proven results.

Mays provides educators with a quick read on the labeling ELLs suffer from in public schools (2008). Through her research, Mays encourages that educators need to gain understanding on diverse cultures and find ways to better support them in the classroom rather than labeling the students "at risk" and calling on them less (Mays, 2008). Mays challenges that calling on ELLs less does not help them in their language acquisition nor does it help them gain confidence in their skills. Therefore, to provide all students with an effective and

applicable education, teachers should strive to understand the cultures represented in their classes rather than ignoring them.

These four concepts compose the crucial elements that make up the current ELL gap in education. The affects of these components create an issue that needs to be addressed in effort to develop an effective education system for all students. Considering the additional needs of ELLs brings about many concerns and questions about current efforts in the education field.

Research Questions

In light of the above review of literature, the following primary question drove this project: How can educators better support ELLs within and outside of the classroom setting? Supporting this main question brings about an array of follow-up questions. For example, what programs can teachers implement to encourage student growth at home? In addition, how can educators involve ELL parents into the American education experience?

Methodology

Method/Rationale

I executed a qualitative case study. This type of study “ is one of the most popular, and usually respected, forms for studying educators and educational programs” (Stake, 1997, p. 401). Through this study, I aimed to find connections between providing additional at-home resources and the success rates of ELLs. This was an effective approach to answering both my primary and secondary research questions as it focused on the affect that implementing specific programs had on individual students.

Sample

As a reading teacher, I am privileged to work with various small groups throughout the day. While I spent the year taking note of every student and found great evidence in each individual's growth, I focused my research on my morning kindergarten group. In this group, I implemented various strategies to connect with families and to provide adequate additional resources for supplementing in-class work at home. Through the year, I monitored and took anecdotal notes on the progress of each student. Keeping track of the effectiveness or lack thereof with the different resources sent home, I was then able to assess the impact additional at-home tools had on my students and more specifically on my ELLs.

With the exception of one, all of the students in this small group were students of low-income, limited-English families. Therefore, this group was a prime candidate for the resources I offered as well as an ideal group for testing the genuine effectiveness of such at-home resources and family communication options. Through my case study on this group, the effect of additional at-home resources and involving families in the education process is evident through the improved performances of each student.

Instrumentation

I collected data throughout the school year. This included both summative and formative assessments. When appropriate, I also kept student samples to track evidence of growth. Since I work with students performing below grade level standards, the school district mandates regular progress monitoring via a program entitled Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)

(DIBELS, 2010). Therefore, I progress monitored all of my students who had not achieved a benchmark score on the mandated assessments (beginning of the year and then the middle of the year assessment windows) in the specified grade-level categories. For my kindergartners, this progress monitoring occurred every two weeks with summative assessments focusing on the ability to identify initial sounds, segment phonemes, name the letters of the alphabet, and sound out nonsense words. The DIBELS assessments are stored on a palm pilot for the teacher and there are corresponding assessment booklets for the students. The data was recorded and distributed to the grade-level team, other reading specialists, and principal every two weeks as required by our school and district guidelines for remediation services.

In addition to regular progress monitoring and collecting work samples, my students completed regular unit assessments that determined if the group was ready to proceed to the following unit or if review and re-teaching is necessary. Through these unit assessments, students received a quick reading assessment in which they were asked to produce the sounds of specified letters, sound out words, and read a portion of text within a certain time limit in order to pass with desired fluency into the next unit.

In addition, I hosted a literacy night for the Spanish-speaking families at our school. This event was held on a weeknight at our school. Families came and enjoyed dinner together and then attended a presentation in Spanish. We had a local non-profit group lead an interactive workshop in Spanish about families reading with their young children. This event provided the opportunity to welcome

families on our campus as well as provide families with an educational training. At this event, I asked families to complete a survey and I also had the opportunity to interview a few parents throughout the evening. The findings from this event will be shared later in this paper; however, this is just another example of how I attempted to bridge the gap with ELL families.

Analysis/Validity

The data I tracked consists of student performance levels as set by district grade level expectations and curriculum benchmark assessments. Throughout the year, I compared individual student scores to their previous scores to monitor improving, constant, and/or declining performance rates.

The data collected is valid because it tracked student growth individually throughout the grading period. Comparing student growth throughout the year provides reliable data, as it shows how each individual progressed based on personal performance. The alternative approach is to compare individual performance rates against those of other students. However, this is an invalid option as students face diverse life circumstances that equip them for different levels of success.

To ensure identity protection for all participants in this study, the names of the individuals as well as the school were changed to pseudonyms. No personal information will be presented that could identify any member of the research. In addition, all audio/video recordings were deleted at the conclusion of this study. This enabled participants to feel safe and able to participate without negative repercussion therefore adding to the validity of my study.

Data

Kindergarten Group - Support at School

DIBELS outlines different skills to be mastered and assessed at specific times throughout the year to measure adequate growth. Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 show student achievement on the DIBELS' benchmark assessments throughout the year. Using these graphs, individual as well as cohort growth can be clearly noted as well as specific needs addressed.

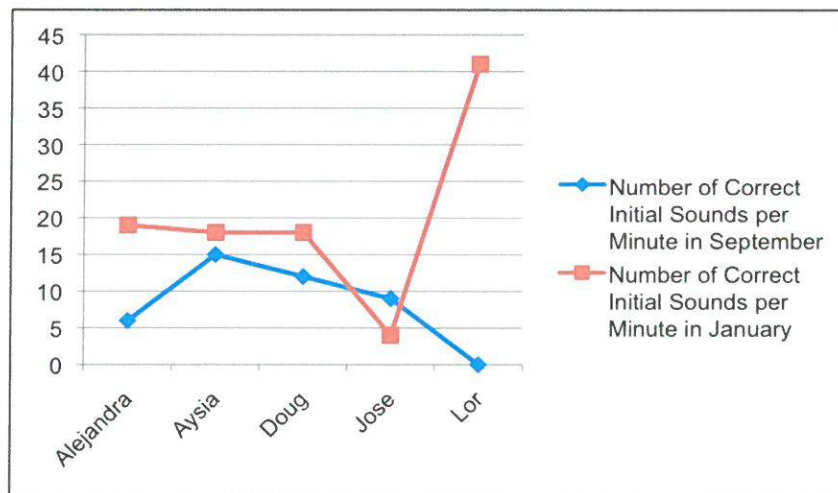


Figure 1. Initial Sound Fluency Benchmark Scores

There are two assessments on Initial Sound Fluency. One is in September, on the beginning of the year (BOY) assessment when the goal is 8 initial sounds produced correctly per minute. The next assessment is in the middle of the year (MOY) and the goal on that test is to produce 25 initial sounds correctly in one minute. Figure 1 shows student achievement on both the BOY and MOY assessments.

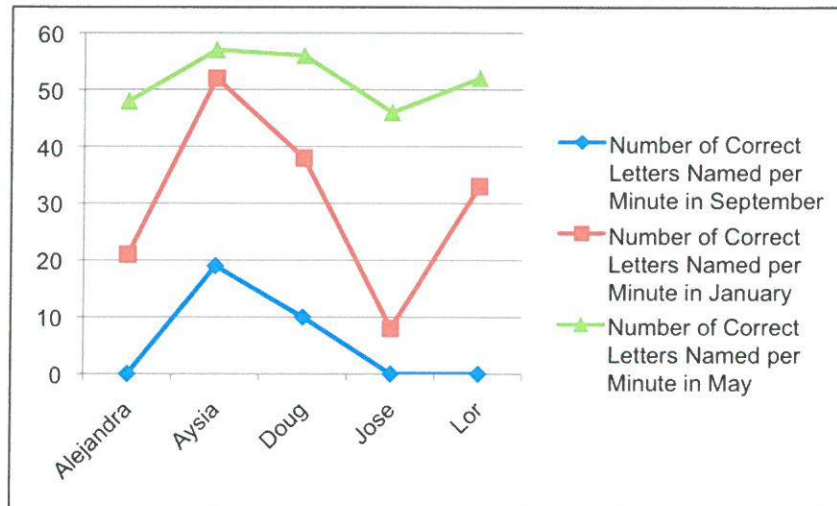


Figure 2. Letter Naming Benchmark Scores

The BOY goal for letter naming fluency was 8 correctly named letters per minute while the MOY goal was 27 and at the end of the year (EOY), the goal was 40 letters named correctly per minute. Figure 2 clearly shows significant growth for each of the students between the benchmark assessment periods.

For phoneme segmentation fluency, the first goal was not until the MOY assessment and the goal there was 18 correct phonemes produced per minute while the EOY goal was 35. Figure 3 again shows the consistent growth in each student from one benchmark assessment period to the next.

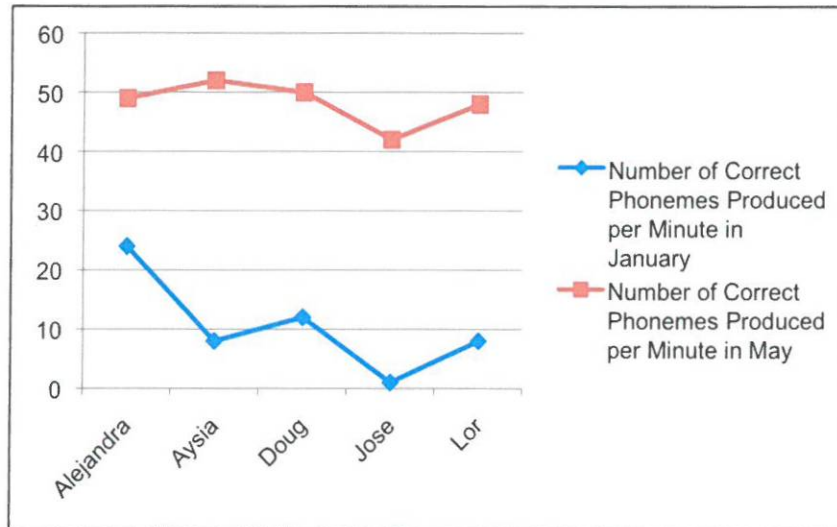


Figure 3. Phoneme Segmentation Fluency Benchmark Scores

Based on student performance on the DIBELS' benchmark assessments and ELL district assessments, students were placed in need-specific groups for direct instruction throughout the school day. Therefore, Figure 4 shows the time breakdown for remediation services received by kindergarten students at James. The times provided are for regular hour school days. Half-days and early-release days follow a different format for all services.

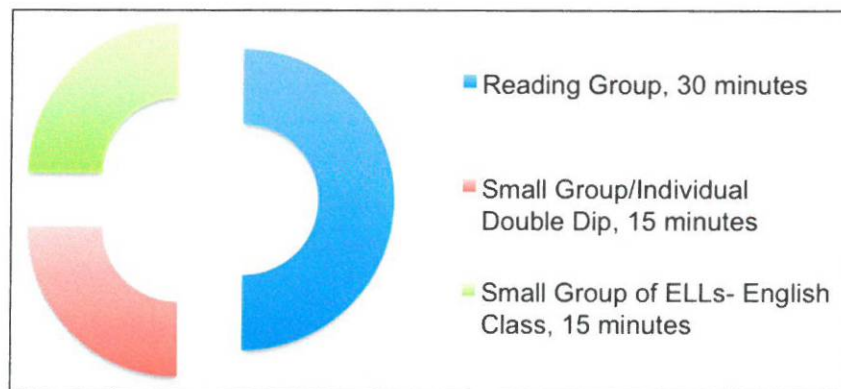


Figure 4. Remediation Services in Literacy Instruction

The 15-minute English class is taught by the ELL teacher for students who qualified for ELL services per our district and state standards. On the other hand, the double-dip groups were scheduled for students who did not achieve benchmark scores of the MOY DIBELS assessments. These students were divided into homogeneous groups and focused on the areas that were not at benchmark. The double-dip groups began in mid-February and the effectiveness of these small groups (1-3 students: 1 teacher) is evident in the growth shown after receiving this additional support. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show the progress monitoring scores achieved every two weeks by students in this study who received a double-dip.

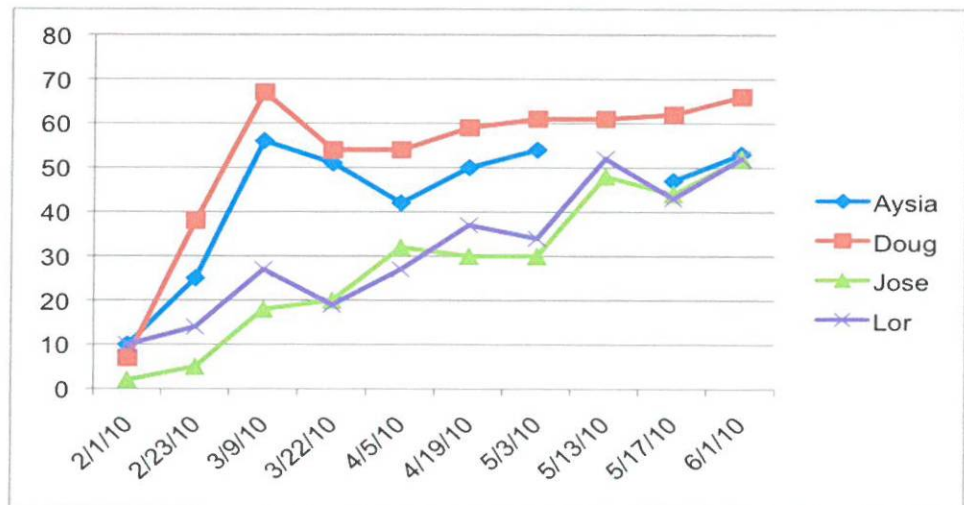


Figure 5. Phoneme Segmentation Fluency Progress Monitoring Scores

Students developing Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF) practiced breaking apart words. For example when given the word “cat” students needed to produce each sound: /c/ /a/ /t/. Please note that not all of the students focused on in this study are seen on this graph. That is because the students were only

progress monitored if they did not achieve the benchmark goal. The MOY benchmark goal was 18 and the EOY benchmark goal was 35. Students receiving this direct instruction show a consistent upward trend of growth for throughout the progress monitoring as evident in Figure 5.

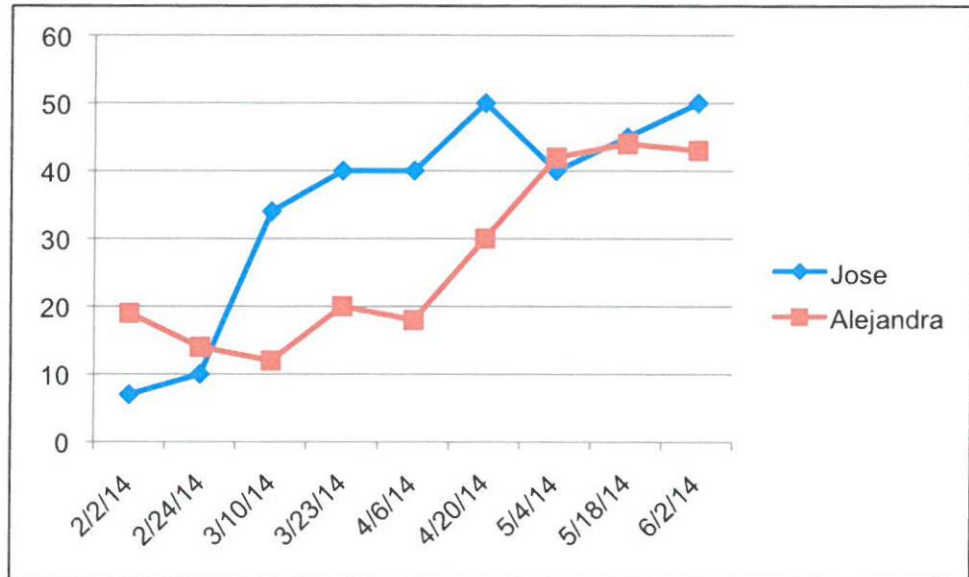


Figure 6. Letter Naming Fluency Progress Monitoring Scores

Students developing Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) practiced naming the letters of the alphabet when presented capital and lowercase letters mixed together and out of order. When being assessed, these students are given one page with rows of mixed letters. The student then had one minute to name as many letters as possible. Again, not all of the five students focused on in this study are seen on this graph as only two of the five students scored below the benchmark goal on the MOY assessment. The MOY benchmark goal was 27 and the EOY benchmark goal was 40. Figure 6 shows the student achievement on the progress monitoring assessments and while each student had dips

throughout, the final scores are significantly higher than the scores earned prior to receiving the direct instruction.

Kindergarten Group - Support at Home

At conferences, the parents of the students in this study chose to receive additional materials to implement further practice at home. There were neither costs nor consequences either way.

Throughout the year, students took home flashcards, games, and books. The materials were sent home as appropriate with the curriculum and student need. Family members were contacted and given appropriate instruction. When applicable, older siblings were also informed of the tasks.

When asked if they practiced their work at home, all 5 students confirmed that they practiced the flashcards, played the games, and read the books on a regular basis. Families were checked-in with at conferences, meetings, and when present at the school. All of the families also said that the additional resources were being implemented at home. Some of the students had older siblings at James and each of the siblings who helped make sure work got done at home agreed that the work was being practiced every day.

Literacy Fiesta at James for Spanish Speaking Families

Nine parents representing five families were in attendance. The parents attended a presentation after dinner while the children played games in the gym. All of the parents filled out an anonymous survey for this study as well as a survey for the non-profit presentation.

Each question was answered unanimously as all of the parents claimed to feel supported by the staff at this school, supported by the teacher(s) of their child/children, welcome in the classroom, as well as provided with adequate support and resources. None answered the final question of the survey asking what the school could do to better support their family.

At this event, the families expressed a great interest in attending more events for Spanish speaking families. The content and purposes of these events would vary from social to educational. The parents desired to have the opportunity to meet families at James as well as times to come and be educated about parenting, English, and using the computer.

Analysis

Discussion of Kindergarten Group - Support at School

All kindergartners at James were put into homogeneous groups for thirty-minute reading groups that met daily. The group I worked with consisted of five students, four of which were ELLs.

When I began working with this group, we used Read Well for kindergarten (Sopris West, 2010). However, this curriculum began with blending and therefore was too advanced for students who had not mastered letter naming. Therefore, I switched our curriculum from Read Well to Scott Foresman's Early Reading Interventions (ERI) (Pearson, 2010). I chose this curriculum as it takes a research-based approach to literacy; since research shows that phonics is a taught skill, this curriculum consists of direct instruction in letter naming, phonics, and eventually led to blending and reading books.

After switching to the ERI, my students began and continued to show exponential growth in their literacy abilities. They quickly learned all of the letter names and began to develop a great sense of phonemic awareness. This growth became evident in the students' speech skills, reading abilities, and even in writing activities. Bi-monthly progress monitoring showed consistent upward growth throughout the year.

In addition to the thirty minutes of direct instruction received through this reading group, these five students were pulled later in the day for 15 additional minutes of direct instruction in need-specific areas. For example: letter naming, phoneme segmentation, nonsense words, and initial sounds. During these times, I also used many real pictures (not clip art) to help students develop their vocabulary. Pictures were easily integrated into all of these skills. For example, when working on the initial sound, I would show the students many different pictures and tell them the name of the picture as I showed it to them; then, the students would determine what the initial sound was while at the same time building their vocabulary. This seemed like a natural way to teach these skills, but after reading all of the research on ELLs and their vocabulary development, this became of great importance in my instruction time. Using the pictures, I saw the students build their vocabulary rapidly as well as the specific literacy skills.

Along with the two separate times of intense direct instruction in literacy, these students were provided with flashcards, games, and books to practice at home. These tools were used regularly at home and in the classroom. This

consistency in practice led to great catch-up growth in each of these students as evident in the huge jumps of growth tracked through the progress monitoring.

Discussion of Kindergarten Group - Support at Home

In addition to providing extra support at school, I worked to connect with the individual families. Partnering with families effectively, required learning about the cultures represented in the group and how the family systems operated as well as learning how those cultures valued education.

I quickly learned that the Hmong families greatly value education, but the best way to see something implemented is to work with older siblings rather than parents. It is not that the parents are uninvolved, but rather that the culture expects the eldest sibling(s) to care for the needs of the younger. Therefore, I learned to approach the older siblings of my Hmong students with needs that pertain to the younger ones. This approach was very effective. Therefore, I continued to keep the parents in the loop via conferences and notes home for the siblings to share information with the parents, but the older siblings took responsibility for making sure homework was done, extra practice was implemented, and needs were efficiently communicated and met.

The Spanish speaking families represented in this specific group were all from Mexico. Family is their highest priority and they have all come to the United States to provide their families with a better chance at successful living. Therefore, these families desired to see their children receiving the additional resources they received through homogeneous reading groups, ELL classes, and double dip small group times. One of the students had two older brothers at

James and I would often pass off activities for the brothers to practice with their sibling in kindergarten. The other student from Mexico did not have any other siblings at James so the best way to contact the family was at conferences and through calling home in Spanish. All of the materials sent home were practiced and immediate growth was evident as the families partnered with the teachers to see maximum catch-up growth.

The Caucasian family represented in this group who did not require a translator was happy to see their child receive support. The most effective way to communicate with these parents was when they were at conferences. Therefore, I would send home additional resources at those meetings. This family was eager to implement extra resources at home and often sought out how they could best support their child. Once given specific ideas or needs, the family immediately practiced those skills and the growth was phenomenal.

The final ethnicity represented was undisclosed. The family spoke other languages at home, but did not want to identify the language nor receive any ELL support. The student was capable of achieving without ELL classes, but the additional language support would have provided vocabulary instruction that could have been a catalyst for even greater growth. However, regardless of the ethnicity and the support allowed or not, the family did appreciate the additional literacy support provided for their child as well as the extra resources sent home. At home practice occurred regularly and the growth was evident throughout the year.

Overall, it was not difficult to bridge the gap and connect with the families. However, it took time to build rapport and trust with each family. No matter what ethnicity or SES a family represents, all of these families want their children to become successful human beings. Therefore, all of these families were excited to partner with the classroom teachers and myself to provide their children with the most effective education possible. Learning how the specific cultures represented at James value education and the family system was key in connecting education with the families.

Discussion of Literacy Fiesta at James for Spanish Speaking Families

In previous years, additional events have provided support for families who speak other languages. However, there are numerous languages represented at our school so providing additional nights in each language is near impossible. However, for the purpose of providing another culture with an effective evening of promoting literacy, I hosted an additional literacy night for Spanish speaking families. All of the parents were willing to participate in an anonymous survey and the findings were insightful. It was unanimously stated that they felt welcome at James; this is a huge compliment to James, as many ELL families do not feel welcome to come into the schools their children attend as the language barrier can in some places create insurmountable differences. Therefore, my team was encouraged to see that our families feel welcome and support by the staff at James. However, though it was across the board that they felt supported and welcomed, many do not come and volunteer. No parents shared additional ways in which the staff at James could further welcome or

support them; therefore, we know they feel welcome, but we do not know what it would take to make them feel welcome enough to come participate more closely in the education process.

Discussion of Other Interviews

While I only did an extensive interview with a couple of parents, throughout the year I spoke with numerous families and gathered their impressions and desires along the way. Transcripts of these interviews can be found in the Appendix. Comparing the reflections of the parents is interesting. Most express a positive feeling toward the school and the teacher; however, most do not get involved.

When asked how our school staff could better support them, all of the families requested more of what we already do for them, meaning more school events, more nights for families that speak their language, and more resources. It was frustrating to not get specific needs or wants from families, but the idea that they desire more of what we already provide at least reveals that we are providing events and resources that are meaningful to them.

In the future, I will use what I have learned from these families from the first day. I will strive to learn the families and cultures represented in my classroom. I will look for opportunities to welcome families into the classroom as well as ways to provide meaningful school events for them. Encouraging open communication with the families is huge and I will make a point of initiating communication so that the families know I desire to partner with them. In

addition, keeping in mind the expectations of education and the different family roles will affect how I approach working with the families.

Implications/Recommendations

After completing this study, I have gained much insight into the families I work with on a daily basis. My respect for the cultures represented in my room has grown as I have taken the time to learn about their values and needs. As an educator, I have gleaned much through this study that I will implement throughout the rest of my teaching career.

First of all, the ELL gap is so obvious to me now both in its problem and solution. The problem being a lack of vocabulary and the solution being direct instruction full of pictures, emotion, and even native languages so that students can find meaning and sense in the new words.

In addition, adjusting aim lines from one-year goals to span from kindergarten through second grade will be beneficial for many ELLs. This will be effective since it does not lower the standards, but it shows the needs over a longer period of time. If educators do this and take the time to look at what students need to learn over a span of a few years, they will be able to identify ways that they can start building schema early. Since research makes it clear that ELLs need more time to develop both the conversational and academic vocabulary, effective educators should be making aim lines that cross grades to make sure the education they are providing is one of meaning for each individual.

As researchers continue to dive deeper into the needs of ELLs, there are still many questions to ponder. For example, how can educators help ELLs build

vocabulary quicker? If bilingual instruction shows some benefit, how is that best integrated into the classroom? Also, how can American schools make ELL families feel welcome enough to volunteer? Finally, what are the most effective ways to accurately assess ELLs?

Conclusion

Supporting ELLs and their families is of paramount importance to a successful teacher. Finding ways to bolster the learning of ELLs and accurately represent their comprehension is difficult, but worth the added investment as it results in well-developed English skills. If educators can implement effective classroom and at-home activities to encourage and stimulate learning, ELLs will be better prepared for success in the American society. It is with the goal of improved student learning that I carried out this research and will continue to develop effective strategies to help bridge the growing gap between school and ELL families.

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Appendix A

Consent Form: Effectively Supporting English Language Learners in the Classroom and on the Home Front

I am conducting research on better supporting ELLs through the implementation of various in-class strategies and at-home resources. If you decide to participate in this study, your child will continue to participate in class as usual. You and your child will receive additional at-home resources in effort to better support your child's learning. This study will last throughout the school year.

All your child's work and progress will be kept anonymous. The school name, teacher names, and your child's name will never be identified. All audio/video recordings will be deleted at the conclusion of the study. If you choose to take part in this study you will benefit by receiving at-home resources in addition to the homework and games currently available. Taking part in this study is up to you, and your child will not be penalized in any way if you choose not to participate. If you do take part, you may stop at any time. This project has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Board at Northwest University.

If you have any questions or comments about this study please contact me at (425/936-2640) or the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board at (425/889-5248).

You will receive a copy of the form.

Sincerely,

Janelle Jamison
Safety Net Teacher

I agree to allow my child to take part in this project. I know what my child will have to do and that my child can stop at any time.

Parent Signature

Date

Student Name

Appendix B

Family Survey

Please complete this anonymous survey so that we can better serve you and your family.

1. Do you feel supported by the staff at this school?

Yes

No

2. Do you feel supported by your child's/children's' teacher(s)?

Yes

No

3. Do you feel welcome in your child's/children's classroom(s)?

Yes

No

4. Do you feel provided with adequate support and resources?

Yes

No

5. How can we better support your family?

Thank you for sharing your opinions with us.

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. How many children do you have currently attending this school?
2. How many years have you lived in this area? In the United States?
3. What language(s) do you and your family speak at home?
4. Do you feel welcome at this school? Why/why not?
5. What would make you feel more supported by the staff and teachers?
6. What at-home resources do you wish you had access to for your child?
7. Do you feel that your child/children enjoys/enjoy school?
8. What would you like your child/children to learn this school year?
9. How can we partner with you to make you and your family feel welcome at this school?
10. What do you consider to be the most important thing your child/children needs/need to know to be successful in America?

Appendix D

Interviews

The following are transcriptions of formal interviews.

This is an interview of a Spanish-speaking mother.

Interviewer: "How many children do you have currently attending this school?"

Mother: "One. I have a daughter in the first grade."

Interviewer: "How many years have you lived in this area? In the United States?"

Mother: "My whole life. We have lived in this area for about seven years."

Interviewer: "What language(s) do you and your family speak at home?"

Mother: "Usually, Spanish. Sometimes, English."

Interviewer: "Do you feel welcome at this school? Why/why not?"

Mother: "Yes, very"

Interviewer: "What is it that makes you feel welcome?"

Mother: "The staff and my daughter's teacher are helpful and nice."

Interviewer: "What would make you feel more supported by the staff and teachers?"

Mother: "Nothing more. I feel supported."

Interviewer: "What at-home resources do you wish you had access to for your child?"

Mother: "We have a computer, so we have access to some of the district and school sites."

Interviewer: "Do you feel that your child enjoys school?"

Mother: "Yes, my daughter can't wait to come every morning."

Interviewer: "What would you like your child to learn this school year?"

Mother: "How to read better. How to be a friend."

Interviewer: "How can we partner with you to make you and your family feel welcome at this school?"

Mother: "Keep doing what you are doing. I like the newsletter. More events like this [Literacy Fiesta]. My husband and I can speak and read in English, but many of these families cannot so more information sent home in Spanish for the families who cannot read English."

Interviewer: "What do you consider to be the most important thing your child needs to know to be successful in America?"

Mother: "She will need to read and speak English well."

This is an interview of a Hmong Volunteer.

Interviewer: "How many children do you have currently attending this school?"

Mother: "None until next year. I have two boys."

Interviewer: "How many years have you lived in this area? In the United States?"

Mother: "My whole life. I grew up in California and my husband grew up here. We have lived here for about 5 years now."

Interviewer: "What language(s) do you and your family speak at home?"

Mother: "Usually, Hmong. Growing up, my family spoke both, but my husband's family only spoke Hmong. So we speak both, but mostly Hmong."

Interviewer: "Do you feel welcome at this school? Why/why not?"

Mother: "Yes, very. I enjoy translating for the families and hope to help more in the future. The teachers are so happy to help parents get involved. I really like that."

The following are summaries of informal interviews.

Summary of Interviews with a Hmong Mother.

At conferences, the Hmong mother wanted to know how her child was performing, what needed improvement, and if summer school was an option. The mother is the only one who comes to the meetings and claims she feels very welcome at James. However, she only comes when she is asked to attend a meeting or for special school events such as Literacy Night. She appreciates the additional time and resources her children are receiving.

Summary of Interviews with a Hmong Big Sister.

The big sister is often given homework and letters to parents on behalf of her little siblings. Once given a task, this sister makes sure it is taken care of quickly. After working on her own homework, this sister oversees all of her younger siblings as they complete their own work. This sister is responsible for relaying English messages to her parents in Hmong. She says that she enjoys helping her family in this way. Often, this sister is pro-active and seeks out teachers for the needs of her younger siblings.