INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

SUSAN HAYNER
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Elizabeth Smolcic
Assistant Professor of Education (English as a Second Language)
Thesis Supervisor

Carla Zembal-Saul
Kahn Professor in STEM Education
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.
ABSTRACT

As an intern with the Professional Development School I worked extensively with English language learners in the classroom. Reading proficiently in English is one of the most important goals for all students in elementary school, and it is a crucial key to academic progress in school years and in future endeavors. While student teaching I observed reading comprehension challenges among my English learners and I wanted to learn more about how I could support their reading development and comprehension in the classroom. This paper synthesizes current research in the area of instructing English learners to read in English. Through a process of analyzing my own teaching insights through journaling and, reflecting back on my experiences in the classroom, I have identified specific teaching strategies that can be beneficial to improve the reading skills of English language learners. Finally, I include data and findings from a cooperative learning strategy I that implemented during my student teaching experience.
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Introduction

For the past three years, I have been fortunate enough to have multiple experiences working with students who speak English as a Second Language. Through my pre-service student teaching observations at Penn State University in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, I was able to work and observe in a second grade classroom in which twenty-five out of twenty-seven students spoke Spanish as a first language. I was interested to know more about culturally and linguistically diverse learners and what resources such as, textbooks, audio recordings, and technology, are available to them. I also wanted to know how teachers are able to support those students in the classroom. Throughout my experience at Hazleton, I kept a journal in which I recorded observations about the students that I worked with and my own questions and thinking about what I observed. Specifically I recorded the different instructional strategies my guiding teacher used to support students’ learning in the classroom. She included pictures in her lessons, actively engaging lessons for students to relate to, and she created lessons that focused on cooperation among students. In order to create actively engaging lessons my guiding teacher learned about the culture of her students’ and what their interests were. She then created lessons that were relevant to her student’s experiences by offering them a chance to research about immigration, create a project about their own community, and work together with peers in the classroom.

Out of my experience in Hazleton, I decided to pursue my passion working with English learners by participating in a study abroad program that led me to earn my teaching certification in English as a Second Language. I wanted to gain experience of my own teaching English
learners, and also to develop cultural competency and appreciation, so that I would be able to effectively teach, and engage with learners who are culturally and linguistically diverse.

During the time in Ecuador, I participated in a teaching practicum, where I taught college aged students for five weeks. All of my students were at a beginning level of proficiency, and had one common goal and that was to learn English. In Ecuador, I co-taught with another teacher, and I was able to implement instructional strategies that were designed especially for beginning level students to communicate orally with each other and in writing. A teaching approach that our teacher mentor encouraged us to try was cooperative learning because of the idea that English learners need to use English to understand and make meaning from their interactions. We created cooperative learning strategies daily and worked with them in our classroom, and we provided linguistic scaffolding for our students. We included pictures, and other visual aids in our lessons, and we also made sure to create lessons that were engaging for students, but they were also relatable to their own lives. The strategies that my co-teacher and I used in Ecuador were supportive of increasing vocabulary development for my students. They were able to use vocabulary that they had learned throughout their lessons in their final projects, and they gave an oral presentation on their project topic.

Finally, after returning from Ecuador I received an internship with the Professional Development School (PDS) Partnership at Penn State. During my internship year I had the opportunity to work in a small group situation with three English learners in my fourth grade classroom. Throughout the year I kept a journal of my observations and also data from reading instruction in the classroom. From my data I began to pursue the question, *What reading strategies are beneficial for fluency development and reading comprehension among English*
This paper will explore how students learn to read, and what strategies can be used for English learners to increase reading development in the classroom.

**Teaching Context**

As an intern with the Professional Development School during the 2015-2016 school year, I worked in a fourth grade classroom at Easterly Parkway Elementary School. My classroom consisted of nineteen students, thirteen boys and six girls. Among those nineteen students, I also worked with three students who spoke a first language other than English. As a result of the elementary school being relevantly close to Penn State University, the student population changed frequently throughout the year. Many students had parents who worked at the University and they often moved frequently.

The English learners who moved to the school more recently, during the month of January, were both Asia, but from different cultures, and one spoke Indonesian and the other spoke Arabic. The other English learner was from Africa and he spoke French as his first language. Throughout the school year I observed that each of my English learners were at different reading levels, and they required distinct types of modifications and support from me as the teacher. Two of my students had a higher comprehension level, and they were able to not only read chapter books for enjoyment, but they were also able to describe vocabulary they were learning and orally discuss what they had learned from a text. For the English learner who spoke Arabic, literacy was a great challenge for him throughout the day. He struggled to identify all of the letters in the alphabet, and he only was able to recognize half of the letter sounds in late February.
All three of the English learners received English as a Second Language instruction throughout the day. They were offered pull-out ESL instruction, about forty minutes each day and they also went to English language arts instruction with the other fourth and fifth grade English learners, which meant that there were about ten to fifteen students in the group. In a pull-out instructional model, English learners are pulled out of the classroom during a specific time period everyday to receive intense, and explicit English instruction from a teacher who is certified to teach English language learners. The English learners in my classroom worked very hard in the classroom, but after observations during reader's workshop I recognized that they were all least confident in was reading instruction. In my journal observations I also recorded that when they were given a choice during reading instruction the English learners would very frequently choose to read with another peer. They were comfortable with reading with a partner, and wanted to have the opportunity to work with a peer, instead of reading individually during reading instruction. From my observations I began to wonder, Are there specific cooperative strategies that are beneficial for fluency and reading comprehension development for English learners? This became a second focus that propelled my investigations in this project.

**Literature Review**

**Learning to Read and Write in English**

One of the biggest challenges facing English learners today is the ability to read and write in English. There are not enough support systems in place and many teachers are not qualified to teach learners from different cultural and language backgrounds with their specific learning needs. Harper and de Jong (2009) found in a study reporting from seven US states that fewer
than 8% of professional teachers who are working with English learners have eight or more hours of professional development about effective teaching of those learners (Harper & de Jong, 2009, p. 140). They also found that “despite the success of bilingual programs and bilingual education, many teachers are not equipped to teach English learners in a supported classroom, and almost 50% of English learners received less than 10 hours of special services in a year” (Harper & de Jong, 2009, p. 137). As a future educator it is my responsibility to determine what learning needs my students have, and what I can do to support them in the classroom for them to be successful.

A report from The National Literacy Panel (NLP) (2001) which was based on a meta-analysis of over 100,000 reading research studies, identified the different reading components and strategies that are effective to teach young learners to read. The NLP found five components of literacy that students need to master in order to achieve language acquisition and understanding (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn, Adler, & Noonis, 2001). Students need to develop phonemic awareness, phonics, oral language fluency, vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. The report found that too many students struggle with reading in schools, and the report was created as a guide for teachers during reading instruction.

The first instructional strategy to teach when beginning literacy is phonemic awareness. Phonemes are the “smallest parts of sound in a spoken word that make a difference in a word’s meaning” (Armbruster et al., 2001, p. 1). Before students can understand what a word means, they must understand the sounds that a word produces. When a student understands how sound works in a word that is given to them, they can then start to understand phonemic awareness, which is “the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words” (Armbruster et al., 2001, p. 1). Once a student has mastered phonemic awareness and
they are aware of blending sounds together they can then start to read words and understand their meaning.

The second component of literacy is phonics instruction, which is the ability to learn the relationships between the letters of a language, and the sounds of a language (2001, p.(17). The report found that the goal of phonics instruction is to learn the alphabetic principle, the relationship between written language and the sounds of the language (2001, p. (11). To effectively teach students the relationship in phonics instruction they need to offer ample opportunities for students to read and write in the classroom. These opportunities include reading sentences with beginning words and letter sounds, worksheets with letter blending sounds, and beginning level words.

The third component for developing literacy skills among students is oral fluency. To support language development and oral language skills, students need to be able to read with fluency, which is the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and expression (Armbruster et al., 2001). Fluency is always changing for a reader and depending upon the text a student is reading, their fluency may be higher or lower. The NLP (2001) found that almost 44% of fourth graders cannot read fluently, and they suggest that there is a connection between reading fluency and comprehension. Students who scored lower on the fluency test also scored lower on the comprehension tests (2001). Therefore being able to read fluently is an important skill students need in order to achieve reading comprehension. Colombo (2012) suggests readers “must know at least 95% of the words they encounter to read for pleasure” (p. 189). Students who can comprehend what they read, are able to enjoy what is presented to them.

Vocabulary acquisition matters to learners. Colombo (2012) states, “Vocabulary size is related to comprehension and conceptual understanding, and it is a predictor of reading ability
and overall academic achievement” (p. 123). Students who have a greater vocabulary are able to understand more of what they read, and comprehend overall main ideas from the text. Growth in vocabulary encourages reading comprehension and an enjoyment for reading among students (2012). Developing a strong vocabulary from the beginning will help students understand reading and they will begin to read for pleasure.

Finally, once students have mastered reading fluency and they are able to read with expression and accuracy, they can also comprehend, or understand, what they are reading. “Comprehension is the reason for reading. If readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not really reading” (Armbruster et al., 2001, p. 41). Students who understand what they read are able to make connections, and actively respond to the text. Graphic organizers are a resource that can be used to encourage understanding and they also provide illustrations and key ideas for a text. They also encourage students to ask questions and think responsively about what they are reading. According to Goldenberg and Coleman (2010), the research for text comprehension instruction for English learners is limited, but teachers can still support students in the classroom. For example, we know that “primary-language support improves comprehension” (p. 47). Students still need to be supported in their home language and the first language needs to grow and develop in order to serve as a foundation for developing literacy skills in a second language.

The NLP published their report as a guide for teachers to utilize when teaching reading to native English speaking students. All students learn to read and achieve literacy by learning phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, oral fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension. English learners need extra or differentiated support to learn to read and write in an additional language, and in the next section as a teacher of English learners I will offer
strategies that teachers can utilize when working with English learners to support their learning needs.

**Instructional Strategies to Develop Reading Abilities of ELLs**

What differences, if any, exist when trying to learn a second language when students have knowledge in a first language? Jim Cummins has stated for many years “Being able to read in one’s first language is one of the most important factors in learning how to read in a second language” (as cited in Gibbons, 2002, p. 82). One of the most beneficial things a teacher can do for an English learner is to support their first language and culture. Strong literacy skills in a first language transfer to a second language, so it is very important to make sure the reading skills are maintained in the first language. Teachers should, if possible, include resources in a student’s first language such as books and photographs. Teachers can also support reading development by encouraging students to read text in their native language to build knowledge and literacy in the first language.

Many teachers and educators may believe that immersing students in English instruction as much as they can will promote English development. However, Goldenberg and Coleman (2010) found that “students’ primary language (L1) promotes their achievement in English (their L2)” (p. 25). Teachers need to take the students first culture and language into focus and make sure that students continue to be exposed in both their L1 and L2 to achieve literacy and understanding in both languages. A concept encouraged by Jim Cummins and other scholars includes the idea of transferring a language, meaning that instruction in the first language can
help and promote learning in a second language after students “transfer” their academic proficiency from one language to another.

A student’s first language proficiency is very beneficial in promoting fluency in a second language. Students learn to read and write in a second language in very similar ways to learning a first language. Goldenberg and Coleman (2010) examined the findings from the National Literacy Panel report, and recorded their findings on how to teach the five components of literacy that will be beneficial for English learners. They found that in the beginning stages of literacy “word-level skills are particularly important, and instruction should target phonological awareness, decoding, and word recognition” (p. 51). August and Shanahan (2006) also conducted a study based on the NLP report and found that “instruction that provides substantial coverage in the key components of reading—identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) as phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension—has clear benefits for language-minority students” (p. 3). Focusing on word-level skills and letter sound recognition will benefit English learners and begin to improve phonemic awareness.

**Phonemic Awareness & Phonics Instructional Strategies**

The first component of achieving literacy is phonemic awareness, as addressed by the NLP report. Modeling for students the sounds of the language, especially for English learners, and how words are separated into sounds will show results in learning phonemes. For example, taking apart the word hat and dividing it into sounds to show students how the sounds form into the word. Hat broken up into sounds is h/a/t. In order to see if a student understands phonemic awareness have them list other words that start with the same letter sound, or tell what letter sound the word starts and ends with. Phonemic awareness is important for students to understand
because “effective phonemic awareness instruction teaches children to notice, think about, and work with (manipulate) sounds in spoken language” (Armbruster, et al., 2001, p. 4).

A different strategy that can be used is “phoneme isolation” (Armbruster, et al., 2001, p.4). In this strategy students recognize each individual letter in a word. They know that the word bat starts with the letter /b/. They also know that the same word ends in the letter /t/. Sounding out each letter in a word will show students the relationship between the letters and the sounds that they make. Isolation should be the first strategy teachers use, because it is taking each letter sound and teaching students to sound out each individual letter. After isolation students can begin to blend sounds together. Then after blending letters together students can then break apart words to distinguish how many sounds are in each word, and they can also substitute sounds with other phonemes.

**Oral Language Fluency**

For English learners, strategies that can be used to help encourage reading fluency and enjoyment in reading include, orally reading aloud, reading with a group, and also using storytelling from children’s literature. August and Shanahan (2006) found that “oral proficiency and literacy in the first language can be used to facilitate literacy development in English” (p. 5). Teachers can also encourage students to read orally in their first language to support language development. Additionally students who orally read and then reread passages become better readers with more comprehension skills (Armbruster, et al., 2001). Rereading a story provides students a chance to improve their vocabulary development, and improve their reading oral fluency. In addition, by rereading a certain text students are focusing in on key vocabulary words that could be beneficial for reading development.
Storytelling is a strategy used to support fluency and improve oral language skills in English. In storytelling the teacher, or student can share the story together by reading the text aloud with expression, and creativity. Teachers can also preview the book before reading with students. This opens up student’s background knowledge of a topic before reading and students are also more likely to be engaged if they are asked to think about what the story is about before reading. Gibbons (2002) suggests that if a student is struggling with English then storytelling can be done in their native language. This is a time when a teacher can open up the classroom community to parents and have parents come in to tell stories in their native language. It can also be beneficial for native English speakers too because they will be more culturally aware of their peers’ culture and language and they will also be able to look at language learning from their perspective.

A final activity to do before reading is to create a chart of words or topics students already know. If they are reading a book about baseball, have students create a list of all of the vocabulary terms they know that are associated with baseball before learning. This activates student’s knowledge and engages them with the lesson before reading has taken place. During reading instruction teachers should model the text. A very beneficial way for students to learn from reading is from a read aloud. The teacher or students read and model the story aloud by acting out the different scenes from the story and also reading aloud the text multiple times.

To help develop fluency among students, teachers should read aloud daily to English learners, that way they are able to experience a good model of how to be a fluent reader. Orally reading aloud to students has many benefits. Students develop oral language skills by reading aloud to others and having other peers and teachers read aloud to them. As a teacher it is important to do a read aloud with enthusiasm for students. I was excited to read aloud for my
students and my enthusiasm transferred to them and they were all excited to hear about it. Have students orally reread passages with guidance and support, to encourage their reading fluency and word recognition. Educators understand that oral reading is critical for future success, and English learners who read aloud daily are increasing their oral language development and also their fluency in reading (Magruder, Hayslip, Espinosa, & Matera, 2013, p. 10). While developing fluency when reading, students will also simultaneously acquire new vocabulary words.

**Vocabulary Acquisition Strategies**

Vocabulary acquisition plays an important role in acquiring a second language. The stronger vocabulary a student has, the more benefits they will find from reading instruction, and they will have a greater reading comprehension in a second language. Similar to learning vocabulary in a first language, when building vocabulary in an L2 there should be very clear definitions and different examples of words. Also, teachers can make sure that words are relevant to students, and that they are teaching vocabulary through meaningful lessons, and engaging activities.

Teachers need to explicitly teach vocabulary words because “Students are more likely to learn words when they are directly taught, and in the case of students old enough to read, vocabulary instruction helps improve reading comprehension” (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010, p. 45). In order for students to learn meaningful vocabulary it must be taught in a relevant way for students. Teachers need to think about the student’s interests and learning styles and develop lessons based on student choice and student learning. Literature should be meaningful for students and should appeal to their interests. Even if a literature book contains only words and vocabulary in English, if it appeals to student’s interests it will be very beneficial for that student.
A key component of teaching vocabulary is for a teacher to explicitly teach words “using instruction that goes beyond the traditional practice of giving a definition and an illustration with a sentence” (Goldenberg & Coleman, 2010, p. 46). Have an oral discussion using new vocabulary words, which can also be used to increase fluency by having students read aloud new vocabulary words. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2013) also found in a study that “the use of photographs, images, and word walls to introduce new concepts and vocabulary deepen comprehension” (Magruder, et al., 2013, p. 12). To support vocabulary development among students, teachers need to go beyond traditional teaching in the classroom and provide explicit instruction in vocabulary that includes student-friendly language, and real life words and experiences that students can connect to their own lives (Colombo, 2012). Vocabulary development is also encouraged from literacy by having students reread words and texts to develop better understanding for words that they are reading.

Huckin and Coady (1999) questioned the role of reading in incidental vocabulary acquisition, or when students accidentally learn new words but they may not have a full understanding of the words. They found “Vocabulary learning requires a precise and effortful coordination of form and meaning it may not optimally occur with an activity like extensive reading” (p. 183). They also recorded the importance of learner’s attention. They found that when students are more engaged and focused on a task then they are more likely to gain more vocabulary. Textual reading needs to have text-related tasks that students can complete while reading. Intensive vocabulary instruction should be included within a reading program. Finally Huckin & Coady (1999) report “Three hours a week on intensive vocabulary instruction accompanied by a moderate amount of self-selected reading was more effective for learning and vocabulary than just reading alone” (p. 188). Teachers need to guide instruction to support
vocabulary development by including many activities that support students’ learning needs in the classroom.

**Reading Comprehension Strategies**

Finally, reading comprehension is still the most important reading component for students to master in a second language, as it is in the first language. Studies on reading comprehension development for English learners are weak, as the NLP report found, which indicates that they will most likely need great support from teachers in the classroom. Primary language support and vocabulary acquisition both support reading comprehension for students. Some strategies Goldenberg and Coleman (2010) suggest teachers use in the classroom are “previewing English reading material in the primary language, and pointing out differences between English and the student’s home language” (p. 54). Teachers also need to include relevant content material for students, because comprehension improves when students are able to connect learning to their own experiences and background knowledge.

A step to make sure content is meaningful for students is to ensure that students are reading material that is familiar to them. “The NLP (2001) found that when ELLs read texts with more familiar material, their comprehension improves” (Ambruster, et al., 2001, p. 55). Encourage students to read literature that is interesting to them, and also literature that supports their culture and their experiences so that they are more familiar with the content. In order to find out what is interesting to the student, teachers can provide literacy surveys, and learn about the student’s home culture and what they value in school, play, and elements of their home life. It is also beneficial to consider providing students with literature that relates to their experiences, such as immigration, moving to a new school, or joining a new sport team.
A strategy that can improve student’s comprehension as well as their oral language proficiency is shared book reading. Students who are learning English can read with another partner. As a teacher to help make sure shared book reading is beneficial for English learners set up a time for English learning students to only to work together and have the teacher choose the book. They will be able to work specifically on fluency when reading. Also, it is good to have students choose their partners, but it is also beneficial to choose partners so that students are at the same reading level, and can pick a good book that will benefit both students. A beneficial aspect about reading with a partner is that if students do not know what a word means they can ask their partner and their partner can explain a definition to them. If there are students who speak the same language in a classroom it can also be really beneficial to pair those students because they share the same culture and will be able to help each other with new vocabulary acquisition. From shared reading different collaborative reading strategies can be presented to students.

Cooperative Learning Strategies for Instructing Reading to ELLs

One reading strategy that has been researched for many years is cooperation or small-group instruction. Cooperation among students encourages the development of all five component areas addressed in the NLP report. In cooperative strategies students read orally to one another to promote oral fluency and vocabulary development, they practice blending sounds and words together, and working in a group supports student’s reading comprehension. Teachers can approach classroom management through social learning and interaction. Freeman and Freeman (1998) claim “English language learners need opportunities for functional use of the
language they are developing, and classroom organization plays an important role in determining the possible interactions students can have” (p. 149). In many reading classrooms the teacher will be at the front of the classroom and will offer whole group reading instruction that typically involves reading a selected text from a textbook. If the textbook does not meet student needs then the teacher must modify the text in a way that supports the learning of individual students.

One strategy for social learning is group and partner work. Group work increases interaction between students and also gives them more opportunities to speak with one another. It also improves the quality of student talk, and students are more likely to share ideas when they are in smaller group (Freeman & Freeman, 1998, p. 152). In group work students are also able to receive more individualized and modified instruction from the teacher because there is a smaller group to communicate with. Finally, group work motivates learners and they all want to have a part in the group work, or a role that they are responsible for. In order to teach with group work however, “careful organization, thoughtful selection of groups, and the active role of the teacher” are required (p. 153).

In social learning cooperation is expected and needed from students. There are many benefits from cooperation among students but three are “increased academic achievement, improved ethnic relations, and prosocial development” (Freeman & Freeman, 1998, p. 166). Cooperative learning strategies can stem from group work, partners, or shared reading. There is a difference between cooperation and collaboration though. In cooperative strategies students “may spend time in their groups memorizing spelling words or practicing math facts” (p. 167). In these strategies it is also more teacher centered and the teacher will decide how the lesson will go, instead of being student centered. In collaborative strategies “teachers follow the student’s lead and view curriculum as inquiry” (1998, p. 167). Students have more of a free choice and
they are also led to question their learning and pursue what they wonder through collaboration
with other students. Students read and learn together, and then as a group they work through a
lesson and orally present what they are learning. After researching different strategies to support
reading development among English learners I took my interest in social learning and designed a
group project with my English learners.

Design of Literature Groups

To answer my main question, *Are there specific cooperative strategies that are beneficial
for fluency and reading comprehension development for English learners*, I wanted to collect a
range of data from my internship experience. Throughout the year as a novice teacher I kept a
journal of my thoughts on my English learner’s interactions, reading comprehension and their
progress learning to read. From my journals I noticed that during reading instruction they always
preferred to read and work with a partner or in a small group. I also gave a literacy survey to my
students to gain information on their feelings toward reading, and what challenges they thought
they faced during reading instruction. After conducting baseline data and research I had gathered
about cooperative learning strategies, I decided to implement a literature group.

Observations/Journals

I began collecting data using my own journals and the observations that I had in the
classroom. Everyday my students have two reading rounds during reading instruction. I
encourage student choice in my classroom, and my students had the opportunity to choose what
their reading rounds would be everyday. After observing and collecting observations I noticed
that my English learners preferred to select activities that allowed them to work with other
students. They would select an activity to read to a partner three to five days out of a week, and would often select individual reading as one of their last choices. I was curious as to why they preferred working with other students frequently, and I began to conference with partners as they were reading. When I conferenced with students I would ask questions such as, *Can you tell me what you are reading together? Is it easier to work with a partner?* When my English learners were with a partner they were more willing to answer those questions because they had someone to help and guide them. Another key factor in reading with partners is that they chose books that were relevant to them, and books that were engaging and on level for each student.

Working with a partner encouraged their oral language development and they were able to talk about what they were reading and share their responses with one another. Reading with a partner helped them to increase their fluency and they also supported one another when in a smaller group. I noticed that my student’s confidence in reading also grew when they were in a small group rather than during whole group instruction. I encouraged them to continue working in partnerships as the year progressed.

**Reading Survey**

To gain more insight on my student’s thoughts and feelings toward reading instruction I gave my three English learners a reading survey in late February (see Appendix A). I wanted them to show what they already knew in reading and what they found to be a struggle in reading. Two of the students were able to complete the survey on their own and write complete sentences to answer the questions. With the English learner who struggled and found challenges in reading, I read the questions aloud to him and then he orally told me the answers to the questions, which I wrote down for him. With the survey I asked students how frequently they read at home, what
genre of books they like to read, and what challenges they find when reading. I also asked students if they prefer working in a group or by themselves. From the survey data I found all of the students said they read at home three to four days a week, but they only read at home when they are asked to and not voluntarily. From the survey I also learned that they all thought reading was very challenging because “words are hard to read” and they “wish books had more pictures in them.” I realized from the survey that I wanted to find more resources in the classroom that provided visual images for my students to use as a resource. Finally, from the survey all of the students expressed interest in working with other students, and they all said they prefer working together, rather than individually.

**Implementation of Literature Group**

From the survey I conducted with my students and my observations as a new teacher, I recognized that the English learners I had in my classroom preferred to work in small groups. I began the literature group with my students at the end of February. I wanted to see the benefits of cooperation and group work among my students, and to improve their reading comprehension and also increase their fluency by reading the same story in a small group. The book we chose to read was *Sable* by Karen Hesse. It is a beginning level chapter book and it seemed to be a very good fit for my students because of the easier vocabulary in the book, and the images that were available to my students.

The story of *Sable* (2010) is about a young girl who finds a stray dog on her doorstep. Throughout the story she continually tries to find ways to persuade her parents to let her keep Sable. It is a very relevant topic to fourth grade students because they enjoy reading about young
children getting a pet and taking care of it. In our first lesson we looked at the book and learned how to preview a book to see if we like it. We started to read the book aloud, with each of us taking a turn reading aloud during the instructional period. They enjoyed being able to read the paragraph on the inside cover before reading the book, so that they knew they would like it. They also previewed the book by flipping through the chapters and found visual images that could be used as resources while reading the book.

A main reason we all thought Sable would be a good fit for my students was because of the pictures that were in the story. Pictures and images are very important for ELLs because images can “ignite students’ connections with existing background knowledge about the topic, concepts, and academic vocabulary of the lesson” (Herrera, Perez, Kavimandan, & Wessels, 2013, p. 13) The pictures in the story depict a young girl caring for a dog, and many students have experience with pets or taking care of animals. I also recorded in my journal that for my student who did not speak English fluently the pictures in the story were a great resource for him. He orally told me a story based on the pictures and it did help support his vocabulary learning and his participation in the group. I asked him questions such as, Who is the main character in this book? What was this paragraph about? What is the dog, Sable doing during this paragraph?

In our first lesson we focused on character traits and how to describe the main character of the story. They were able to provide me with different traits to describe Tate, the main character. They told me she was “nice because she went to get food for the dog,” and she was “responsible” because she was trying to help the dog. They provided me with more examples, but as we continued to read the book we added more traits for Sable. In the second meeting we worked on summary. Students wrote down a sentence or two, sometimes with a picture about what each chapter, or section we read was about.
Together we read the story. I would read a paragraph and then they would each have a chance to read a paragraph after me. All, except for one, were willing to volunteer to read, and they wanted a chance to show the others how well they were doing with English. I was very happy to see that they offered to read and volunteer answers in a small group. As a teacher this tells me that they are more comfortable in a small group than they are in front of the whole class. I have noticed that when I teach whole-group instruction only one of my English learners will raise their hand to offer answers to questions. However, in our literature circle and in other small group settings they raise their hand almost every time to offer an answer. Being in a small group makes them confident in reading and they are also more engaged with the lesson.

Harvey Daniels (1994) studied literature groups and found that they “turn traditional reading instruction upside down in almost every dimension” (p. 6). He says that in a literature circle “the students are the ones making the choices, raising the questions, and making the meaning” (p. 7). Cox and Boyd-Batstone (2009) define literature circles as being formed when “students have a shared interest in a book or topic or they like to work together” (p. 61). In my literature circle I modified this slightly because I was only conducting a project with my ELL students. As a teacher, teaching to a larger classroom, if I were to do literature groups with my students then they would be able to work with another group and they would have more choice. I provided my students with choice, but I was also there to guide instruction and questions when my students were stuck. Literature circles can be very complex, and Daniels states that careful planning must be taken into consideration. They also have similar characteristics in that they allow “children to choose the books they will read, small, temporary groups are formed, groups meet to discuss their reading on a regular basis, and discussions are open, natural conversations” (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 2009, p. 63). Literature circles also are not a replacement for the reading
curriculum, they are just an added engaging activity for students to look at reading in a different way.

After planning for a literature group the next question is, *How does a teacher teach a literature group?* Students have more choice and responsibility in a literature group and the teacher is seen more as a guiding mentor. In order for students to understand what they are reading and learning the first step is to respond. Cox and Boyd-Batstone (2009) state that the first step “in responding to literature in the classroom comes through discussions and conversations about a book with the teacher and with other students” (p.58). After reading a paragraph, a chapter, or a book, the first thing an English learner should do is talk about what they just read. In literature group I implemented the first question I asked after every chapter was, “What did we just read?” This gave me a chance to know if my students really understood what they were reading, and it was also a chance for them to share with one another what they thought was just read. I always asked my students to respond orally because they are very comfortable talking in English, and I also wanted to improve their oral language skills.

Cox and Boyd-Batstone (2009) also state that students can write their responses to literature. Keeping a journal is a very powerful way for students to write down their immediate responses to literature (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 2009). As a teacher I keep a journal throughout the year and I know how powerful and important it can be. Students have to be proficient in English enough though to write a responsive journal, and I would have modified my expectations for their journal writing this year for my students with limited English proficiency. Keeping a journal does not need to be confined to *writing* in a journal, students can draw pictures, write notes, and also write definitions in their journals. It is also a strategy that can be used as the next step in improving their comprehension and it will also increase writing skills.
One point that Cox and Boyd-Batstone (2009) make is that “knowing the English learner is a key to differentiating instruction in literature circles” (p.75). I knew in my group that I had two students who were fluent in English and they were at a higher comprehension level and one student would benefit from additional scaffolding and visual input as well as distinct ways to show that he understood and was engaging with the text we were reading.

Along with differentiated instruction for individual students there are also two different ways to differentiate instruction of a literature group. I ran a teacher-managed literature group which Cox and Boyd-Batstone (2009) say is when the “teacher is responsible for instruction” (p. 86). I asked students questions and I led most of the activities we were doing together. I also did offer student choice in giving students two to three choices for them to choose from. I also knew these students would need more support from me as the teacher, and I would have to meet each of their individual learning needs. If I were to teach a literature group with the whole class then I would again offer student choice and I would differentiate the groups again to make it student-initiated. In a student-initiated group “the students can choose from an array of appropriate instructional activities matched to language levels” (p. 86). The ultimate goal for a literature group is for students to be self-directed and that they will take responsibility and choose activities to go with their book, and they will also have meaningful discussion about what they are reading.

**Conclusion**

Overall I saw great achievements from all of my students after working together in a small group. Each one of my English learners was able to increase their fluency rate. Before the
literature group my students would only read one to two pages aloud to me when I asked them to read aloud. After conducting the literature group, they now will offer to read an entire chapter, or they will read more pages without me having to ask them to read aloud. They will also voluntarily raise their hand to read when they are in a small group, and I can see that working in a smaller group gives them more confidence to share answers. The English learner I had the struggle with reading throughout the year also made significant gains, and now after the implementation of the literature group he is able to voluntarily raise his hand to answer questions, and he is able to read a Scholastic sight word book with fluency and he identifies all of the words in the book.

Working in a small group offered me the chance to create engaging lessons for the group I was working with and also provided me an opportunity to work more individually with students on struggles they were facing. I found that my English learners were more confident with reading and they were more engaged with a lesson if they were in a small group. Working in a small-group gives them the confidence they need to share out answers and not be afraid to make mistakes. My students did not have as much pressure to be right if they were in a small group and not in front of the whole class. As a future teacher an implication for me is to try and create small-group instruction as often as I can because it is so beneficial for students with limited English. It is challenging to put students into groups and as a teacher it is an area that I would like to continue to research. There are certain challenges that arise with groups such as off-task behaviors, and student arguments arising from group work. Even though group work has been beneficial for me I would like to continue to research how to implement and plan for reading groups.
I also found that working in a small group has very beneficial results for English learners’ fluency and also their reading comprehension. In small group lessons I created journals for students to write in, and we recorded our ideas and responses in the journals. The students in the group wrote down their responses to what they were reading, and also drew pictures in their journals. After working in a small group the English learners in my class take notes when they read, and they have developed oral fluency when reading. Finally, the English learners have improved their reading comprehension and volunteer answers to questions during reading instruction. From this experience as a teacher, I learned that cooperative learning among students is very beneficial for English learners, and as a future teacher I will continue to incorporate different cooperative strategies in my classroom to promote oral fluency and reading comprehension among my students.

Recommendations for Teachers

Throughout this project I researched different strategies that teachers can put into place in their classroom to support reading development for English learners. While my focus in this project was supporting literacy skill development for English learners, the strategies that were suggested throughout this paper can be utilized as resources by teachers of all students. As the NLP report (2001) found, native English speaking students, and English learners learn to read by being supported in the same components including, phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, oral language fluency, vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. Teachers of English learners should keep in mind to provide resources to maintain a student’s first language when
they are learning to read because continued development in the first language can transfer to a second language and provide more benefits to students.

When teaching English learners, teachers should also utilize all resources that are available to them. Strategies and lesson plans that include visual images and aides, audio recordings, and engaging content that is relevant to students will be very beneficial for literacy development among English learners. Cooperative strategies and small group work among students also encourages their literacy development. Literature groups provide students a chance to expand their vocabulary, practice oral fluency, and lessons in a literature group also support reading comprehension among English learners. The strategies in this paper can be used as suggestions for future teachers, and as resources for teachers who have English learners in the classroom. It is important to remember though, as teachers the most critical thing that we can do for our students is to learn about them individually and their own learning needs, so that we can better implement strategies in the classroom that are beneficial to our students.
Appendix A

Student Literature Survey

Reading Survey
Do you like to Read?
Yes_________ Sometimes_________ No___________

Do you like to listen to stories and read alouds?
Yes_________ Sometimes_________ No___________

Do you like to read and work with a partner?
Yes_________ Sometimes_________ No___________

Do you like to read and work in a small group?
Yes_________ Sometimes_________ No___________

How often do you read?
Every Day________ Often _________ Sometimes________

What genre books do you like? Check all that you like!
Fantasy________ Mystery________ Comic________
Picture________ Realistic Fiction________ Nonfiction____

What is the easiest thing about reading?
What is the hardest thing about reading?
Why do you like/dislike working in groups?
REFERENCES


ACADEMIC VITA

Susan Hayner
haynersusan@gmail.com

EDUCATION:
Bachelor of Science in Childhood and Early Adolescent Education (PK-4). Graduation: May 2016
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania
Certification: PK-4 & English as a Second Language
Schreyer Honors College Graduate

Professional Experience:
Professional Development School Intern: Grade 4 August 2015-June 2016
Easterly Parkway Elementary School, State College, Pennsylvania
Student Teacher, Fourth Grade, 19 Students including 3 ESL, and 1 with an IEP.

Chosen as one of 56 Penn State University Elementary Education majors to participate in a collaborative 185 day, full time elementary student teaching internship in a K-4th grade setting in the State College Area School District (Pennsylvania). This nationally recognized program received the 2011 Spirit of Partnership Award and the 2009 Award for Exemplary Professional Development School Achievement from the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS), the 2004 Holmes Partnership Award for the best partnership between a university and a school district, and the 2002 Distinguished Program in Teacher Education Award from the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE).

- Designed an inquiry based reading and math approach for English language learning students with multiple collaborative strategies to help encourage English language development.
- Prepared and implemented lesson plans for 19 fourth grade students with multiple learning needs.
- Collaborated and co-taught in a partner kindergarten classroom, with 24 students, once a week.
- Engaged kindergarten students in small group (4-5 students) literacy centers.
- Implemented collaborative strategies for English Language Learning students that included small-group instruction, read aloud books, and shared reading.
- Differentiated instruction in all subject areas to support student needs and learning styles in a diverse classroom.
- Integrated state and national standards in all subject areas.
- Guided lessons using multiple technologies that included, MAC Air books, SMART Board, and Document Camera.
- Actively participated in division and faculty meetings, unit-planning meetings, IEP meetings, in-service meetings, and parent-teacher-student conferences.
- Cooperated in a school community with a mentor teacher, paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, support staff, ESL teachers, and other teachers in the intermediate division.
- Actively participated in afterschool events such as, the Easterly Parkway Read-In, and the Helping Hands community service fair.

Related Experience:
Student Teaching Abroad-Cuenca, Ecuador June 2015-August 2015
Pennsylvania State University TESL Ecuador Program Cuenca, Ecuador
- Supervised and Implemented lesson plans for college-aged English Language Learners in Cuenca, Ecuador
- Instructed, guided, and mentored students through a literacy themed unit to promote English language development among my students
- Created relevant lesson plans with other teachers in the immersion program.
- Cooperated and co-taught lesson plans with a group of two other teachers.
- Received 30 hours of Advanced Spanish Instruction at the Universidad de Cuenca, and also received 12 credit hours from Pennsylvania State University.

**Volunteer in the Hazleton Area School District**
West Hazleton Elementary School, Hazleton, PA
September 2013-June 2014
- Assisted with various lesson plans throughout the year, and cooperated with a supervising teacher.
- Maintained a professional relationship and mentored 25-second grade students in a predominantly English Language Learning classroom.
- Observed on a weekly basis throughout the year.
- Tutored individual students based on special learning needs with limited English.

**Teacher at Daydreamers Child Care Center**
Newton Ransom, Pennsylvania
June 2014-Current
- Teacher and aide in various classrooms (Infants-School Age).
- Organized daily routines and worked in a team with other professionals.
- Small group work supervision with Pre-K aged students.
- Individual tutor and mentor for some children (Ages 4-12)

**Teacher at Kidsworld Daycare Center**
Albany, Georgia
May 2011-August 2011
- Teacher for school-age (6-12 years) children in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood
- Implemented and supervised lessons to meet all needs and learning styles
- Co-taught with other teachers and communicated with parents on a daily basis

**Activities/Honors:**
- Schreyer Honors College (4/8 Semesters)
- Penn State Hazleton Campus Honors Program (4/8 Semesters)
- Dean’s List Standing, Pennsylvania State University (8/8 Semesters)
- Penn State College of Education Student Council Member and Ambassador (4/8 Semesters)
- Invitation to join Pi Lambda Theta Educational Honor Society
- Online Tutor for an ELL student at Isaac Sheppard Elementary School in Philadelphia, PA.