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AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL READING PROGRAM FOR ADVANCED ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: BEYOND THE ESOL PROGRAM

An evaluation of the effectiveness of a reading program for intermediate and advanced English Language Learning (ELL) students was conducted at an elementary school in suburban South Florida. This language program was designed for advanced ELL students in third, fourth, and fifth grades. The typical advanced ELL student has basic interpersonal communication skills (social language) but lacks cognitive academic language proficiency (academic language). Seventy percent of the advanced ELL students at this elementary school demonstrated below grade-level reading on the Scholastic Reading Inventory. The aim of this study is to evaluate the benefits of this model reading program and its effect on reading improvement for advanced ELL students in third, fourth, and fifth grades. The results of this study encourage the implementation of reading programs for advanced ELL students to improve reading skills and to further research the area of advanced ELL reading achievement.

Introduction

Throughout the United States, the number of linguistically and culturally diverse students continues to increase rapidly. According to 2000 census data, over 2.6 million foreign-born children were enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. The number increased to over 12 million students when children who were born in the United States to foreign-born parents were included (Ernst-Slavit, Moore, & Maloney, 2002). Consequently,

36% of the total student population in United States public elementary schools came from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (National Center of Education Statistics, 2000). In public schools, these students were classified as English Language Learner (ELL) students and differed from the mainstream population in ethnicity, primary language spoken at home, and social class (Au & Raphael, 2000). According to Title VII of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Public Law 103-382 (Improving America's Schools Act, 1994), students were classified

ELL if they had sufficient difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language and those difficulties might deny them an opportunity to learn successfully in classrooms where the language is English.

The growing number of ELL students enrolled in schools across the nation is of concern for teachers, school administrators, and the community as the growth of minority languages has had a significant achievement effect on American schools. The need to provide meaningful instruction to students who are not proficient in English has created difficulties for educators, as ELL students tend to have multiple education needs. Specifically, students from culturally and linguistically diverse populations are often at risk of school failure due to limited exposure to literacy (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Even students who come from countries with developed school systems may have limited English literacy skills, as academic expectations of schools in the United States demand more rigorous English preparation.

A wide range of skill levels among ELL students can be found among students who generally are classified as either a beginner ELL student or an advanced ELL student. A beginner ELL student is defined as by the State of Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), as a non-fluent English speaker who has significant difficulty speaking, reading, and writing in English. Conversely, an advanced ELL student may be defined by the FLDOE as a fluent English speaker who displays limited ability to read in English but can participate adequately in discussions in English. The advanced ELL student speaks clearly and is comprehensible to the native English speaker, yet pronunciation errors are still present. Furthermore, these students have difficulty with complex structures. In summary, advanced ELL students are fluent English speakers, but lack a complex vocabulary, academic understanding, and grade level English literacy.

Research has shown that many teachers and educational leaders fully recognize the needs of beginner ELL students, but often fail to recognize the needs of advanced ELL students because they are able to verbally communicate in English (Peregoy & Boyle,

2000). Consequently, the advanced ELL student may be viewed by teachers as being idle or not trying hard enough due to an apparent lack of academic effort and low achievement; however, it is often the lack of English language proficiency that negatively impacts their effort and achievement in the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout Florida, elementary advanced ELL students consistently have scored below grade level on the reading portion of the state's mandatory standardized assessment test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) (Florida Department of Education, 2002). The state of Florida requires all ELL students to take the FCAT after 2 years of ELL instruction. Test results have indicated that many ELL students take the FCAT unprepared for the content rigor. On the 2004 FCAT, only 30% of ELL students achieved reading proficiency, compared to 52% of the general student population in the state of Florida (Florida Department of Education). This reality is reflected in a southeastern Florida school district where only 29% of ELL students reached proficiency on the 2004 reading FCAT, compared to 51% of the entire student population in the district. In this southeastern Florida school district, administrators expected that ELL students would read at the same level as native English speakers following two years of ELL instruction. However, the school district consistently reported a lack of reading proficiency for students who had been in the ELL program for more than two years (Department of Multicultural Education, 2003).

With the growing population of students who spoke other languages and corresponding low achievement scores, reading teachers in the school district are challenged constantly to address the academic needs of ELL children. To help achieve educational parity for ELL students, research findings have recommended that educators adjust reading programs to include second language acquisition information, cross-linguistic transfer, and the integration of cultural aspects (McLaughlin, 1992). Although the FLDOE had not implemented widespread reading programs for advanced ELL

students, one elementary school in southeastern Florida recognized the need and had created a reading program for advanced ELL students enrolled in third, fourth, and fifth grades. The goal of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of this advanced ELL reading program on the reading achievement of advanced ELL students in the aforementioned third, fourth, and fifth grades.

Background and Significance of the Problem

AAA Elementary School (AAAES), located in a suburban city with a population of 100,000 students, opened in August 2002. One year after opening, AAAES became a Title I school, indicating that 40% or more of the students were from low-income families. In 2003, a total of 1,180 students were enrolled at the elementary school with 61% of them qualifying for free or price-reduced lunch. The school had a mixed racial population with 36% of the students being White, 17% Black, 36% Hispanic, and 11% from other ethnicities. AAAES had a large number of ELL students and families who were from foreign countries, and had a primary language other than English. The primary ethnicities of the students were Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and South American, and these students spoke Spanish as their first language. On the 2003 FCAT reading test, only 23% of the advanced ELL students enrolled in third through fifth grade at AAAES scored at grade-level ability, compared to 66% of the mainstream students enrolled in third through fifth grade. Furthermore, students at AAAES also were assessed using the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) test. The results of the spring 2004 test showed that only 30% of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade advanced ELL students scored at or above grade level compared to 74% of the mainstream English-speaking students.

Importance of Reading for ELL Students

Reading proficiency is the most important factor relating to academic competency due to its integral

role in academic learning (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Throughout the literature, numerous studies and data revealed that reading proficiency for ELL students plays a fundamental role in academic learning and subsequent social and economic opportunities (Gertsen, 1996; Goldenberg, 1994; Lemberger, 1996, 1997; Massey, 2002; Peregoy & Boyle; Reyes et al., 1999). Teaching reading to ELLs is a challenge that has been addressed by a variety of programs, instructional practices, and methods (Moll, 1988). Specifically, Spanish-speaking students comprise 14.4% of the student population in public schools and have presented educators with crucial concerns about teaching ELLs to read (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

Methodology

To address the large population of ELL students and the corresponding low reading achievement, in August 2003, AAAES created a reading program for third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders with advanced language proficiency. This program consisted of 90 minutes of pullout instruction utilizing the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) to teach English language skills while simultaneously teaching reading skills. The program teacher was ELL certified by the State of Florida, and trained to use ELL strategies that included paraphrasing, minimizing text, and providing native language support to assist the learning of ELLs. The program was unique because it targeted advanced ELL students who still lacked reading proficiency after 2 years in the ELL program, an initiative not previously attempted in the school district.

The advanced ELL reading program operated over the course of the 2003-2004 school year. Reading achievement of the ELL students in the advanced reading program would be measured by pretest and posttest scores on the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) and compared to the pretest and posttest scores on the SRI of the advanced ELL students who did not participate in the program. The ELL Coordinator of the school chose students to participate in the program. The students were chosen based on the number of years they had been in the ELL program and for

their lower test scores on the Florida Comprehensive Reading Test.

Program Description

For the 2003-2004 school year, the southeastern school district in which AAAES was located allocated additional funds to Title I schools for a certified ELL teacher who would specifically teach reading instruction to advanced ELL students. Each individual school had the opportunity to utilize the ELL teacher as a resource teacher, inclusive teacher, or a pull-out teacher. Regardless of the teacher assignment, each school was required to have the ELL teacher instruct advanced ELL students in reading with the desired outcome of improving FCAT reading scores and reading proficiency.

AAAES chose to utilize a bilingual ELL teacher for instruction of advanced ELL students in third, fourth, and fifth grades, thus creating a new program for advanced ELL students. The advanced ELL program was designed to meet the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1994), needs of ELL students and provide an intensive, instructional process that would reinforce reading skills assessed on the FCAT. The program provided intensive, academic reading instruction to 24 advanced ELL students in third, fourth, and fifth grades and functioned for 90 minutes daily over a period of 9 months. During the 2003-2004 school year, the program staff consisted of a certified Spanish/English bilingual teacher, a supervising ELL coordinator, a Spanish/English paraprofessional, and a Spanish/English language facilitator. While in the program, students were able to communicate in Spanish or English and all written correspondence to parents was provided in both languages. A number of instructional techniques and strategies were utilized to teach reading primarily. A small group, pull-out program was implemented for 90 minutes each day for reading instruction that included several instructional methods. The daily reading block began with 20 minutes of Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), during which students chose a book at their independent reading level to read at their own pace. Following SSR, the teacher conducted a 20-minute teacher read-aloud session,

critically questioning students about the grade level curriculum reading selection. Next, students participated in guided reading for 20 minutes as the teacher listened to each student read out loud at his or her desk; the teacher provided corrective feedback while implementing reading strategies. The teacher also applied a 20-minute direct instruction session using designated FCAT skills including comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling. At the conclusion of each 90-minute instructional lesson, the teacher conducted a 10-minute review and summary of the reading lesson.

The Scott Foresman reading curriculum for third, fourth, and fifth grade curriculum was used in the advanced ELL program in 2003-2004. This choice was made by the school district in which AAAES resides and is used by all of the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students for reading. The Scott Foresman reading curriculum was used by the treatment experiential group during the 2003-2004 school year, and was used by the control group during the 2004-2005 school year. The Scott Foresman reading curriculum included grade level standards for reading, basal reader textbooks, grammar workbooks, phonics workbooks, FCAT practice workbooks, audio cassettes of the reading selections in the basal reader textbooks, leveled readers, written assessments, overhead transparencies for skill lessons, and graphic organizers. This reading series was organized around the Sunshine State Standards used for FCAT testing in the state of Florida. No other curriculum or materials was used in the treatment or control groups for reading.

The ELL coordinator at AAAES selected the 24 students to participate in the advanced ELL reading program based on several criteria from the individual ELL plans of each advanced ELL student in third, fourth, and fifth grades. Students were evaluated on five elements including their SRI Lexile level, norm referenced test reading score, FCAT reading scores, diagnostic test reading score, and language proficiency levels on the ELL plan. All fifth grade ELL advanced students and, all third and fourth grade advanced ELL students not meeting grade level expectations were chosen to participate in the program. Based on

the identified needs of students, the ELL coordinator selected a total of 24 third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students for the program.

Subjects

To investigate the effectiveness of the advanced ELL reading program on reading achievement, a treatment and a control group were established. Participation in the advanced ELL reading program for 2003-2004 was considered the treatment. Advanced ELL students who did not participate in the advanced ELL reading program in 2004-2005 were considered the control group. The total population consisted of 50 advanced ELL students ranged from 8 to 12 years old, who were enrolled at AAAES. All students spoke Spanish as their first language. None of the students were classified as exceptional student education, and 100% of the students were classified as ELLs.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an interventive reading program on advanced ELL students in third, fourth, and fifth grades during an entire school year. Specifically, this study compared the reading achievement of ELL students in a treatment group to ELL students in the mainstream reading program in the regular classroom. We hypothesized that students who participated in the treatment experiential group would demonstrate greater reading growth, as measured on pre- test, 2003, and post- test, 2004 SRI scores, than that of the

control group as measured on pre-test, 2004, and post-test, 2005 SRI scores, who did not participate in the treatment. Reading growth was measured by comparing the data of the SRI pretest and posttest scores of the treatment group of ELL participants in the advanced ELL reading program to the data of the SRI pretest and posttest scores of the control group of ELL students who did not participate in the treatment. An experimental design, with a treatment group and a control group, was used to test the hypothesis in this study.

Data Analysis

Results

Research question: Did a significant difference in the reading achievement of advanced ELLs who participated in an interventive English language program exist, compared to advanced ELLs who did not participate in the program? The Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the means of the pretest SRI to the means of the posttest SRI to determine if significant differences emerged in the growth of reading achievement between the two sample groups. Statistical analysis ($Z = -.758$, $p < 0.05$) indicated that no significant difference appeared in the reading achievement growth between the treatment and control groups. Therefore, it does not appear that participation in the advanced English intervention-reading program made a significant impact on the reading achievement growth of advanced ELLs. The complete statistical results are listed in the in the following two tables.

Reading Achievement SRI Pre scores and Post scores

	Participant Status	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
SRI Fall Pretest				
	Non-Participant	26	28.62	744.00
	Participant	24	22.13	531.00
	Total	50		
SRI Winter Posttest				
	Non-Participant	26	24.00	624.00
	Participant	24	27.13	651.00
	Total	50		

Mann-Whitney Test for Reading Achievement

	SRI Fall Pretest	SRI Winter 2004 Posttest
Mann-Whitney U	231.000	629.000
Wilcoxon W	531.000	624.000
Z	-1.575	-.758
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.115	.449

Discussion

After analyzing the results of this investigation, we have deduced several implications that may explain our findings.

The most important implication of this study was the change in the mean reading achievement of the treatment group following participation in the advanced ELL program. Prior to the beginning of the treatment, the mean reading achievement of the advanced ELL students in the treatment group was lower than the mean achievement of the control group. However, following participation in the advanced ELL program, the mean reading achievement of the treatment group was greater than the mean reading achievement of the control group, indicating that the treatment group demonstrated greater reading achievement gains. Although the gain in reading achievement was not statistically significant, the results nonetheless revealed that participation in the advanced ELL program had a positive impact on the reading achievement of the participants. The results showed that the average mean score of the advanced ELLs in the treatment group for the pretest was 340, while the average mean score for the control group for the pretest was 443. Following the implementation period of five months for both groups, the average mean posttest score for the treatment group was 551 compared to 459 for the control group, indicating that the treatment group experienced greater reading achievement over the course of the study. Although the increase in reading achievement was not statistically significant on the Mann-Whitney test, we believe that the change in mean scores was directly related to the effective teaching practices provided in the advanced ELL program. The change in reading achievement by the ELLs in the advanced ELL reading is consistent with research on ELL programs (Cohen, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Krashen, 1993; Ur, 1996).

The writers recommend that advanced ELL programs be evaluated further by conducting a longitudinal study utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data, a more diverse group of advanced ELL students, and a randomly assigned sample of at least 100 subjects in each of the sample subgroups.

To conclude, although the results of this study

did not demonstrate statistically significant results to support the original hypothesis, the researchers still maintain confidence that the advanced ELL reading program contributed to improved reading achievement of advanced ELLs. Additionally, we believe that the potential to improve the reading achievement of advanced ELLs is greater in the advanced ELL reading program when compared to regular mainstream reading program due to the smaller class size and the more intimate learning environment.

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