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## Using Phonics to Increase Reading Comprehension in English Language Learners

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Using Phonics to Increase Reading Comprehension

in English Language Learners

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3

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... 3

Chapter One ..... 4

    Subjects and Settings..... 5

        Description of subjects. .... 6

        Description of Setting..... 6

        Informed Consent ..... 7

    Review of Literature..... 8

    Definition of Terms..... 8

Chapter Two..... 10

    Statement of Purpose..... 10

    Phonics in English..... 10

    The Secondary EL Student..... 11

    Statement of Hypothesis..... 12

Chapter Three..... 13

    Research Questions ..... 13

    Research Plan ..... 13

        Methods and rationale. .... 14

        Assessment. .... 15

        Schedule..... 15

        Ethical issues. .... 15

        Anticipated response..... 16

Chapter Four ..... 17

Chapter Five..... 24

References..... 27

### Abstract

This paper discusses the implications phonics has on reading comprehension in the older English Language Learner. The subjects for this study were in the same Language Arts class in the Sheltered-Instruction Observation Protocol classroom, and they ranged from 15-20 years old. They were all in the same class because they were all Level III or IV with their language proficiency based on the WIDA ACCESS score in Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing. The study used Lexile scores from the Reading Inventory test used in the READ 180 classroom as the summative assessment of reading comprehension abilities. The focus for data was on pronunciation, fluency, and reading Lexile scores. In order to gather this information, they were received lessons based on phonics using the articles in READ 180, read those as fluency passages, and their common mispronunciations were assessed for whether it impeded comprehension. The conclusion of this study found that there was a decrease in comprehension with the group that focused on phonics and an increase with the vocabulary focus group.

*Keywords:* phonics, secondary ELL, EL, reading comprehension, Lexile

## Chapter One

The idea of teaching English as the national language is a relatively new idea. It “emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as a reaction to the massive influx of immigrants from non-English speaking parts of Europe (Bybee et al., 2014, p. 139). It is now commonplace for the education system to “Americanize” their newest citizens by teaching them English. In the earliest part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a sink or swim approach. “Few or no remedial services were provided and students generally remained in the same grade level until enough English was mastered to advance in subject matter understanding” (Bybee et al., 2014, p. 139). It was not until the 1970s that any progress was made in this area, and the fight continued throughout the century. Some legislation was proposed to make English the official language of the United States in 1981 and in 2004 (Bybee et al., 2014, p. 140). It has not passed, but the stringent standards for English Language Learners (ELLs) has not diminished but increased. The problem is that ELLs are not receiving enough language supports.

With the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the early 2000s, more testing has been made mandatory for ELLs. There has, in effect, been more attention paid to these students, but “accountability measures – and assessments – need to be better tailored to the needs of ELLs” (Colorin Colorado, 2017). All state testing became required of an EL student no matter when they had arrived. Some newcomers were taking the math test just months after arrival. The testing standards were not lowered for their lack of English language knowledge.

In much of the United States, the public education system currently follows the Common Core State Standards, whose motto reads “Preparing America’s students for success.” But, what do teachers do when those standards are written in English and their students’ first language is not English? Teachers must remember that “students learning to read in their first language have

more knowledge of grammar and vocabulary than ELLs learning to read in a second/subsequent language” (Farrell, p. 2). When so many educators teach to the required standardized tests in fear of jeopardizing their schools, districts, and even their jobs, it creates issues because the EL student does not know how to decode an unfamiliar language. It especially complicates the situation when the ELL does not know how to read in their native language because they do not know how to decode text in any language. We have high standards for success, but there is a gap between our general education students and our English Language Learners.

To close the reading gap between the two groups, there must be an approved method of teaching in the most effective manner. It is true that teaching phonics is necessary in the WiDA level II because otherwise stagnation is a probability; however, once the students reach level III and level IV, it’s unclear whether phonics continues to play an integral role to their English development.

English Language Learners are the minority in most school districts, and especially, the district in which this study takes place. According to Colorin Colorado, it may be that school districts in an economic downturn will look for ways to cut funding and the EL program is one of the possible programs. In the high school under study it is often observed that administration does not include the ELL teachers on the major curriculum decisions that affect both general education and the EL population. With this in mind, the teachers become advocates for their ELLs, and so best practices need to be observed and studied.

### **Subjects and Settings**

The subjects of this study are students attending a high school in the Midwest. They are from various parts of the world and fit the criteria of this study because of their English

Language Learner status. They were chosen because of placement within the English Learner program in this particular school and will be made aware of their participation.

**Description of subjects.** There are 12 participants in this study ranging from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in a Midwestern high school. Of the participants, all were immigrants or refugees from Nepal, Congo, Zambia, Somalia, Kenya, Liberia, and Iraq. All students are part of the English Learners Sheltered-Instruction Observation Protocol (EL SIOP) and are on an Individualized Language Plan (ILP). There are no students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). One student is an Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM). Three students live with both of their parents. Four have a parent still living in their home country, four are living with family members – parents' situation is unknown. There are six females ranging from age 15 to 18 years, and there are seven males ranging from 15 to 19 years old. Based on the WIDA ACCESS test scale, all students scored between 3.0 and 4.9. A 5.0 is needed to exit the EL SIOP. The Reading Lexile of these students range from 375 to 985. The student who has a 985L has moved through the program at an extraordinary rate and still struggles with pronunciation and vocabulary, which, at times, impedes comprehension.

### **Selection Criteria**

These students were chosen because they have taken the ACCESS test and scored in the Level III and Level IV on the WiDA language rubric. The instruction that they have received in the past has been a combination of phonics and higher level thinking processes in order to prepare them for general education English classes. Because of their struggles in comprehending academic language, these students were a logical choice.

### **Description of Setting**

The study takes place in a Midwestern city that has, within the past ten years, seen an influx of refugees and immigrants move to the area because of certain groups who work specifically with refugees and displaced people. The school is mostly known for its sports, specifically soccer, of which the EL population plays a large role. Basketball is also a major sport. There are also a few play productions put on throughout the year, and many clubs and groups to join, including a leisure ping pong club.

The student population consists of 71% Caucasian, non-Hispanic students, 16.3% African American, 6.2% Hispanic, 5.1% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.4% American Indian students (Sistad, T. February 5, 2018. Email). 178 students are a part of the English Language program, and except for the Newcomers through Level 2 students, most take 1-3 general education classes (Breen, D. September 12, 2018. Personal interview). All standardized tests that general education students take, including ACT are also extended to EL students often with language and time supports.

### **Informed Consent**

Permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Minnesota State University – Moorhead and from the school district to conduct this study. The school district's IRB procedure was followed to obtain permission to conduct research. This involved receiving permission from the Director of Instruction as well as from the building principal at the school where the research was conducted.

Protection of human subjects participating in research was assured. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and any procedures required by the participant, including disclosure of risks or benefits. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms without identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time was outlined

both verbally and in writing. Since some students were not eighteen, their parents were informed of the nature of the study – some through interpreters – and they were asked to give their consent for their child to participate in the study.

### **Review of Literature**

Phonics has been supported for the Reading classroom for the past 50 years or more (Henbest & Apel, 2017). According to Henbest and Apel (2017), there are two types of phonics: “...synthetic and analytic phonics ... were developed to support the word-level reading of young struggling readers (i.e., early elementary grades), or those who are at risk for reading failure” (p. 1). Ample research has been conducted as to whether or not phonics is a viable method of instruction. The general consensus is that phonics and the ability to “manipulate morphemes, the smallest units of meaning in language, is a powerful contributor to an individual’s success with word reading” (Apel & Henbest, 2017).

Much of the research focuses on beginning readers and struggling readers. However, the question for teachers of English Language Learners must consider what is best for their secondary learners, especially because “Students of lower English ability and with less L1 background *are not ready to learn from text* [sic]” (Gunderson, p. 48). However, another work suggests that providing cognitively complex work to English Language Learners in a Sheltered Instruction setting increased conceptual knowledge and academic language level with their general education peers (Giunco, et al, 2017). In a secondary classroom where the focus is to teach content and not knowledge, it is unclear which method teachers should use to continue fostering reading comprehension in English Language Learners.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined:

English Language Learners (ELL): The English Language Learners in United States schools are made up of students who have been immigrants and/or refugees. On the home survey, the parents have indicated that another language other than English is spoken at home. To determine if the student requires services in English language acquisition, the student takes the WiDA screener exam. If the final score is below a five in Reading, Speaking, Listening, and Writing, the student is placed in the EL program, whether it means having pull-out instruction or Sheltered Instruction. In the latter, the student receives all instruction with other English Language Learners and from EL teachers who specialize in a subject.

Phonics: Phonics is the study of the smallest parts of language – morphemes – and how to identify through hearing, identifying, and manipulation letter sounds and order.

Sheltered English Instruction: A method of teaching that requires an English Language Learner to take core classes with a teacher who is certified to teach the core subject and English as a Second Language. The student is not separated from the main school, but the majority of the Learner's classes are with other ELLs. Special classes, such as P.E. and music are taught by a general education teacher.

WiDA: The acronym stands for World-class Instructional Design and Assessment. It is a consortium of states who require higher standards for teachers of ELLs and higher standards of English Language Learners. WiDA sets the assessments that place the students within their learning level. The lowest level is Newcomer, followed by Level I. Students need to test at a Level 5 or higher to be placed in a general education classroom outside of sheltered instruction.

## Chapter Two

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the effect of phonics instruction on reading comprehension for English Language Learners who have tested into Levels III and IV of the WiDA ACCESS test scale. Specifically, authentic tasks will be used with students to decode words. Therefore, phonics will not be absent from instruction because it is essential to recognize the varying sounds that different formations of letters creates. Phonics will be melded within lessons that focus on words and sentences, versus letters and sounds. However, increased reading comprehension is the ultimate goal. Pronunciation is secondary.

### Phonics in English

Phonics instruction has been a part of English reading curriculum for years because English is taught as a phonetic language. "...[T]he role of phonic instruction and its corresponding effectiveness of reading development and comprehension attainment is unresolved" (Brooks & Brooks, 2005, p. 273). One of the reasons it's unresolved is because English has 9 variations of vowel phonemes, and how they are put together to create sound is completely arbitrary (Womack, 1957, p. 387). This creates problems when teachers attempt to teach reading through phonics because with the way English has evolved over the course of history, "There is no inherent connection between the marks on paper and the sounds we make in our mouths" (Womack, 1957, p. 387). There are always exceptions to the rules when it comes to the English language, whether it is in grammar, phonics, or emphasis on syllables, i.e. photograph vs. photography. Knowing the way that letter combinations are mostly pronounced does not always help when the pronunciation can change in a different word. English is not a truly phonetic language the way that other languages, such as Finnish, are a phonetic language.

## **The Secondary EL Student**

In the elementary years, particularly K-2, much of the focus is on learning how to read. An elementary EL student, while they can struggle, will not have as many demands as the secondary student. The academic burden a secondary student experiences are more strenuous because the content teachers are required to present are at an advanced level compared with elementary. On top of learning English, they are learning secondary core subject content. To compensate for lack of reading or higher level thinking skills, “many teachers, in attempts to promote success for ELs, keep cognitive demands low through use of simple text as their primary literacy curriculum” (Giunco, et al.) The same standards are taught to and expected of the EL student to master, so the teacher should be sure that “complex activities are effectively scaffolded to afford ELs such access” (Giunco, et al., 2015, p. 8).

The phonics studies concentrate on elementary grades, and with each, the same idea was iterated: “Reading acquisition and its instruction are very critical components of elementary education” (Kotaman, et al, 2015, p.1). There is not much literature on the effects of phonics in the secondary EL classroom. However, Boyd-Batstone speaks about EL students at the Intermediate stage of language acquisition and defines them as a student who is “highly functional for a wide range of tasks, such as communicating needs, deciphering text, retelling events, and writing brief forms of communication” (2013, p. 89-90). Based on this information, the students would be a Level II on the WiDA scale of language acquisition, and at that stage (a stage or two lower than the level under study), the students “need systemic support in developing oral and written fluency across academic disciplines in order to succeed in school and society” (Boyd-Batstone, 2013, p. 90).

Systemic linguistics requires the study of several topics, mostly semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology. Phonics, at Level II, is integral for students' mastery of the language. If they do not receive the correct instruction at this stage, they are in danger of stagnation. Gunderson says, "They must be brought to a level of English proficiency that is Limited or Limited-Fluency before they can begin to face the challenges of content reading" (p. 48).

Content reading is easier when the EL student reaches Level III and IV on the WiDA scale. These levels equate to the Early Advanced Stage according to Boyd-Batstone. At this level, a student "appears to be orally fluent, uses limited academic vocabulary and language, needs to attain grade level reading and writing in academic areas, and analyzes, compares, and contrasts" (Boyd-Batstone, p. 122). These students are extremely fluent in oral communication, but must be moved to writing and using more academic language. If the student is learning in the comfort zone – or using their cultural prior knowledge – more academic buy-in will occur.

### **Statement of Hypothesis**

Students measuring at Levels III and IV on the WiDA scale of English Language assessment and have a Lexile score between 300-550 who are receiving Phonics instruction will see more significant reading comprehension gains than students at the same levels who do not receive explicit instruction in Phonics.

## Chapter Three

### Research Questions

As a high school Language Arts teacher, I never bothered to use phonics in the classroom because my students, for the most part, were fluent readers and did not need the extra help. However, when I became a teacher of English Language Learners, it became apparent that most of my students were in need of phonics instruction. This did not apply to every student because I had a lower level class and a higher level class. The higher level – those about to bridge from the EL program to general education – seemed incredibly bored by the phonics instruction in the scripted curriculum. There were times when it appeared to be needed because they were all pronouncing a group of words incorrectly, or they could not decode a word's pronunciation when reading independently and their comprehension was interrupted. If the students heard the word or sentence, they could create meaning. Therefore, I began to ask the following questions:

- What role does phonics have in an English Language Learner's continued education in English once they have reached Level III or IV in Reading on the WIDA scale?
- How much of the text content is not understood because the students cannot make sense of the word's pronunciation?
- Could they create more meaning for themselves as readers if they were able to decrease these types of misunderstandings?

It seemed clear to me that teaching the English Learners phonics may be a necessity for our more advanced students.

### Research Plan

**Methods and rationale.** The intervention will require three groups of students. The classroom will be set up for reading, small group, and computer station work, and when the class works in the stations, it will be understood that they are taking part in the research work, or their phonics instruction. There will be three stations that will receive the reading instruction with phonics exercises built into the lesson. The other two station-groups will receive a reading lesson without phonics instruction.

The students who will not directly learn phonics (Group A) will receive instruction that has a focus on vocabulary enrichment. The vocabulary offered in the Read 180 curriculum (that Group B will learn with phonics) will be integrated with the vocabulary from the short stories and articles. Vocabulary enrichment, for our purpose, will include taking part in rich discussions that include rephrasing the vocabulary and phrases, drawing pictures to represent meaning, and completing sentence stems.

Within the Read 180 curriculum, phonics is absent. If a student tested on the Reading Inventory with a Lexile of under 200, they would be placed in System 44, which places emphasis on phonics. The students with a higher Lexile will be placed in an age-appropriate Read 180 classroom, and phonics no longer plays a role in the curriculum. However, phonics content will be incorporated into the short stories and articles under study in our Workshop (unit). The phonics group (Group B) will receive a lesson on the corresponding phonemic sounds. Then, they will read the story or article and will be required to find and underline words that contain those sounds. Group B will follow protocol as outlined in Read 180 curriculum concerning vocabulary and in the case of phonics, no instruction given. This group will not be given the task of drawing pictures, sentence stems, or original sentences.

Both groups will receive best practices in reading comprehension, which include the following: asking questions, synthesizing, inferring, making connections, visualizing, and determining importance.

**Assessment.** Assessment for Group A will include quality of discussion contributions based on a discussion rubric, quality of pictures and ability to rephrase the vocabulary, or reuse the word in an original sentence or completion of a sentence stem. Students will be given a short summative assessment after each story, and a unit assessment at the end to test their knowledge on academic vocabulary, new vocabulary from fiction, and comprehension of stories and articles. Questions will be identification, multiple choice, or short answer.

Assessment for Group B will include the mid-workshop and end-of-workshop assessment from the Read 180 computer system. These quizzes include multiple choice questions on vocabulary.

**Schedule.** The instruction will take place over the course of one workshop in the Read 180 curriculum, which takes approximately six weeks. The class is 100 minutes a day. The workshop has other topics which are not the focus of the study. There are six nonfiction texts and one annotated Shakespeare play. It will take approximately two days to complete each text, and because of writing tasks and other curriculum requirements (and other known interruptions such as registration and ACCESS – WIDA standardized testing for EL students), the workshop will take the entire six weeks.

**Ethical issues.** One ethical issue that may be raised is the researcher's role in the teaching process. I, as the teacher and researcher, have created teacher-student relationships prior to the study, and so some might suggest that I could show bias for one method of instruction over another. Therefore, a student could learn to not take their lessons seriously because of my

attitude toward it. Another is a parent, student, or a staff member who may feel that there are some who are not receiving the same, quality education. The reason this might occur is because there may be those who believe that each child should receive both vocabulary and phonics instruction. There even may be a student who wants to receive both methods of instruction to increase knowledge and comprehension. However, both groups will have a sound comprehension of materials by the end of the workshop. Additionally, it may cause some students in the experimental group some stress to perform better than the control group. However, I plan to set the tone at the beginning that this study, while adding some additional lesson components, is not meant to cause more stress to achieve high standards. It is a study to see what the effect these instruction methods have on reading comprehension, and that I would like for them to be as honest and truthful in the process as possible, even if they feel they have not seen positive effects. I will never, in any way, show anger or resentment toward the students because of results.

**Anticipated response.** In case ethical concerns were raised, they will be dealt with accordingly. All lesson plans and assessments have been planned fairly and without bias. Both groups will attain mastery for the standards under study. Nothing has been taken away from the original lesson. Vocabulary components have been strengthened and phonics has been added. So, results will still meet state standards. Students were told about the study and the effects phonics instruction may or may not have on their education. They were invited to share any concerns and ask as many questions as possible in order to clear up any confusion. They, and parents, will be assured that the goal is the same, but the method of teaching will be the only component which will be different.

## Chapter Four

The purpose of this study is to assess the role of phonics instruction on reading comprehension in an English Learner who has measured at a Level III or IV on the WIDA scale *and* has a Lexile reading level starting at 300.

### **What role does phonics have in an English Language Learner's continued education in English once they have reached Level III or IV in Reading on the WIDA scale?**

At the beginning of the study, Group B were given a Phonemic Awareness and Phonics pre-test to identify areas of struggle. The phonic groups included: short vowels, silent final *e*, long vowels, diphthongs, and r-controlled vowels.

It came as no surprise that English Learners, even at their higher proficiency level would need additional education in phonics and their role in reading. The results may not be entirely complete because one factor that greatly influenced the research was that most of the students took several weeks in returning the permission forms. It was not because parents did not want them to take part or that they did not understand. It was because the students kept forgetting. I attempted to contact parents multiple times with no results, and I sent multiple permission forms. The time factor of this research became an issue, and there was not enough time to complete all areas that were laid out within the research. Of those subjects not studied were diphthongs and r-controlled vowels. Therefore, there is no data for these two subsets after the pre-test.

Table 1.1 indicates the results of the Phonemic Awareness and Phonics pre-test given to Group B.

Table 1.1

*Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Pre-Test, Group B*

Student	Short Vowels	Silent Final e	Long Vowels	Diphthongs	r-controlled Vowels
1B	5/6	5/6	14/21	12/14	5/5
2B	3/6	4/6	11/21	10/14	3/5
3B	1/6	3/6	13/21	7/14	3/5
4B	4/6	5/6	13/21	7/14	5/5
5B	4/6	6/6	15/21	11/14	4/5
6B	3/6	3/6	11/21	9/14	3/5
7B	2/6	6/6	13/21	9/14	4/5

From this data point, the areas of instruction were tailored to fit the needs of this group of students. We read three different texts within the READ 180 curriculum. Before reading, they were given a lesson on the corresponding skill. Group B were then given copies of the text without the vocabulary enhancement READ 180 provides. The teacher listened to the students read the text as a fluency passage. Afterwards, students were to circle words they did not understand and underline words with the area under study and indicate whether it was a short or long vowel. Students 2B, 3B, and 7B had a success rate of 45% - 55% on the different activities with identifying the correct sounds. The remaining students, though their pre-test scores were mainly higher than 2B, 3B, and 7B, but not perfect, received 95% - 100% on these activities. It may be important to note that 3B and 7B have been in the United States the least amount of time – approximately three years – and have both moved through the Sheltered English program at an accelerated rate.

Table 1.2 indicates the results of the Phonemic Awareness and Phonics post-test given to Group B at the end of the study. The students were never given correct answers from the pre-test, and so the same test was administered as the post-test.

Table 1.2  
*Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Post-Test, Group B*

Student	Short Vowels	Silent Final e	Long Vowels	Diphthongs	r-controlled Vowels
1B	5/6	6/6	18/21	12/14	5/5
2B	4/6	5/6	16/21	10/14	3/5
3B	3/6	4/6	14/21	7/14	3/5
4B	5/6	5/6	13/21	7/14	5/5
5B	5/6	6/6	19/21	11/14	4/5
6B	3/6	4/6	15/21	9/14	3/5
7B	3/6	6/6	15/21	9/14	4/5

Throughout the year, the students in READ 180 are given a Reading Inventory assessment to test their reading Lexile. This test has been used for this study to see the growth or decline of students’ Lexile number because of this study’s goal of improving reading comprehension through phonics.

Table 2.1 shows the Reading Inventory scores of Group A, those who have not been included in the phonics group. The test was given within the first two weeks of school, the second at the end of the first semester, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> given toward the end of the second semester. There is one student in this group who did not begin the year in this course but transferred in shortly after the second test was administered. Additionally, student 6A was removed from class rosters during Week 5 of the study, and so did not take the final Reading Inventory test.

Table 2.1

*Reading Inventory Scores and Growth, Group A*

Student	Date	Lexile	Date	Lexile	Growth	Date	Lexile	Growth
1A	09/05/18	219L	12/14/18	481L	+262L	05/07/19	535L	+54L
2A	09/05/18	581L	12/14/18	551L	-30L	05/07/19	641L	+90L
3A	09/05/18	743L	12/14/18	794L	+51L	05/07/19	763L	-31L
4A	09/05/18	177L	12/14/18	375L	+198L	05/07/19	405L	+30L
5A	N/A	N/A	12/19/18	626L	N/A	05/07/19	851L	+225L
6A	9/05/18	632L	12/14/18	640L	+8L	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 2.2 shows Reading Inventory scores of Group B, those who have been included in the phonics lessons. In this group, there is one student who transferred from another class in January, so there is no data for Reading Inventory from the beginning of the year.

Table 2.2

*Reading Inventory Scores and Growth, Group B*

Student	Date	Lexile	Date	Lexile	Growth	Date	Lexile	Growth
1B	09/05/18	181L	12/14/18	465L	+284L	05/07/19	516L	+51
2B	09/05/18	230L	12/14/18	721L	+491L	05/07/19	920L	+199
3B	09/05/18	622L	12/14/18	661L	+39L	05/07/19	752L	+91
4B	N/A	N/A	01/09/19	898L	N/A	05/07/19	855L	-43
5B	09/05/18	743L	12/14/18	871L	+128L	05/07/19	1004L	+133
6B	09/05/18	688L	12/14/18	698L	+10L	05/07/19	822L	+124
7B	09/05/18	860L	12/14/18	985L	+125	05/07/19	905L	-80

Based on these data sets, it appears that the average Lexile increase of Group A by the end of the year and having received constant instruction in vocabulary enrichment and other reading comprehension techniques was approximately 73.6%. By contrast, the average Lexile increase of Group B was 67.85%.

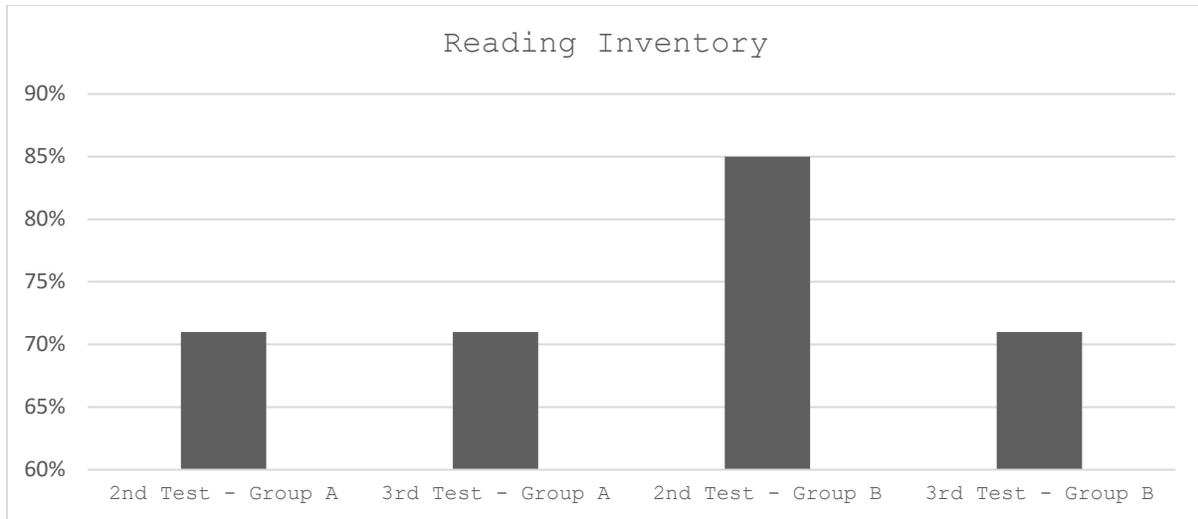


Figure 1. Reading inventory overall growth for groups A and B between tests 2 and 3.

Group A remained stagnant while Group B appeared to decrease in ability. There is very little reason to believe that these two students from Group B lost reading ability. The study must consider that on May 6, all students had taken the STAR reading test, and student 7B received a 995. The following day, the same student received a 905 on the Reading Inventory. The tests are very similar, and it’s likely the student has not made many gains in Lexile range; it is unlikely that there has been a loss. However, this study is basing results on data, and the data from this test shows a loss in reading comprehension in the phonics group.

**How much of the text content is not understood because the students cannot make sense of the word’s pronunciation?**

Table 3 indicates the seven words the students struggled with in their fluency reading and were also based on the phonics subject area. The table shows what percentage of students pronounced it correctly either on the first try or corrected themselves immediately after saying it incorrectly. Following is the percentage of those who pronounced it correctly, but also could explain what it meant without looking back for context. The same data follows for those who did not pronounce it correctly.

Table 3  
*Fluency, Pronunciation, and Comprehension*

Word	Correct Pronunciation	% Knew Meaning with Context	Incorrect Pronunciation	% Knew the Meaning Without Context
picturesque	29%	100%	71%	0%
piebald	86%	16%	14%	0%
vied	58%	0%	42%	0%
galloping	58%	100%	42%	100%
whale	58%	100%	42%	100%
orchard	86%	60%	14%	0%

After reading the research, the results were not unexpected. There was not a problem with the instrument used for the experiment, so the study can reasonably rely on the results. There were several words that students mispronounced the first time, but always went back and corrected themselves upon reading a little more context. As already mentioned, the student in the WIDA levels III and IV “appears to be orally fluent, uses limited academic vocabulary and language, needs to attain grade level reading and writing in academic areas, and analyzes, compares, and contrasts” (Boyd-Batstone, p. 122). Therefore, the data from this study supports the research. The words the students did not know were, mostly, new vocabulary they had never heard, such as ‘vied,’ ‘piebald,’ and ‘picturesque.’ Otherwise, the errors were decoding errors.

Additionally, the reading errors did not interfere with overall comprehension. The students were asked the following questions after reading:

- “Can you tell me what the passage was about without looking back?”
- “Where there any words that interfered with your comprehension of certain parts or the entire text?”

The answers were overwhelmingly positive to the former and negative to the latter. When asked to explain how they moved past the unknown word without losing meaning, they all replied that they looked to context. While everyone could not always explain what the word itself meant and, therefore, could not tell what meaning it added to the text, their overall comprehension of events was not affected.

**Could they create more meaning for themselves as readers if they were able to decrease these types of misunderstandings?**

The top three words in the list ‘picturesque,’ ‘piebald,’ and ‘vied’ were previously unknown words to all students. Those who were able to figure out the meaning did so based on context as they read for fluency. Those who were not able to pronounce it correctly or tell the meaning were given the correct pronunciation and asked to reread the sentence. All students who were given this task still could not figure out the meaning. So, it is logical to conclude that students at this level of English education would benefit more from vocabulary and vocabulary in context lessons.

However, as previously mentioned, there are two students who were accelerated through the program because of proficiency. These two students had the lowest scores on the pre and post-test. When they attempted the word ‘orchard’ they could not pronounce it correctly, nor could they understand the meaning. However, when finally given the correct pronunciation, they knew exactly what the word meant. This was the only instance of phonics clearly influencing comprehension. These two students may have missed the phonics education afforded to Level I and Level II students because they were acquiring proficiency in most areas so quickly. For all other students who had come to be at a Level III and IV in the normal time period, there were no decoding errors that led to lack of comprehension.

## Chapter Five

The most impactful idea this study has given is that even though I, and we, as a team, are teaching high school students, phonics is so important in the early levels of language acquisition. It is as though we are teaching elementary brains in high school bodies. Indeed, I believe phonics is important even for the higher levels because as I experienced, there are still students who need either the extra reminder or others who need the additional lessons because they, for some reason, have not seen enough to acquire the skills for language proficiency.

One other important concept that came to me as I conducted this study is that it seems that high school EL teachers become so wrapped up in their content that they forget that we are teaching students who are learning a language. There are times when we must step back and assess why they are not understanding their texts or words we thought they would know already. As a department and within content areas, we have become experts on aligning our curriculum. However, it seems we are overlooking one part of the content that is proven to work with young readers.

In order to ensure that my practice changes to reflect how important the study of phonics is to early readers and to language learners, I will set forth an action plan to implement new content.

Table 4 outlines the plan and deadlines for implementing phonics within the classroom. It will also list when I plan to share the information from this study. I will attempt to involve my colleagues in the EL department, specifically to those who teach Language Arts. There is at least one EL Reading teacher who focuses on phonics for a part of the year, but it is my hope, with this plan, to begin the process of aligning this curriculum.

*Table 4*  
Phonics Teaching Action Plan and Plan for Sharing

<b>Action Plan and Plan for Sharing</b>		
<b>Goal:</b> I will implement phonics instruction into my Level II Language Arts class, as well as focused higher-level phonics lessons in my Language Arts III and IV (Read 180) class.		
<b>Steps to achieve goal</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Deadline</b>
Research and find materials	Time during curriculum writing in the summer to research, materials (perhaps Words Their Way)	August 21, 2019
Meet with Level I, III, and III Language Arts teachers (and likely our Assistant Principal)	Oral Defense PowerPoint, materials found to use within lessons, time during mutual work time on PD days the week before school	August 24, 2019
Meet with instructional coach to discuss approach and how to most effectively teach phonics	Mutual meeting time and any resources already established	September 2019
Meet again (and on a regular basis on Wednesdays) with EL colleagues to discuss possible implementation within all lower level classes.	Time during Wednesday PLC, materials, and action plan	end of September 2019
Teach two weeks of phonics within already established curriculum. Videotape if needed.	Camera, 10-15-minute lessons 2-3 times per week.	end of October 2019
Meet with instructional coach to discuss progress and next steps	Video footage	November 2019

The number one recommendation I will make to the EL Language Arts team is that there should be, at least, 1-2 phonics lessons per week. Specifically, the easiest way to incorporate these lessons is to use the fluency passages they already use and discover areas of struggle for individuals. On how to further that area of study will, ultimately, be up to them. However, with the instructional coach, I hope to create a way to have a, at minimum, one day a week station rotation where students work on various skills. Within those stations would be phonics work, and

teachers can group students based on the current skills needed or even the skills the teacher chooses to focus on.

There is such a focus on testing our English Learners' reading proficiency, and it is important to understand the progress they have made, but it's also important to remember that we must, first, "teach our students how to read" (Farrell, p. 2).

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