Recreational Reading: Useful Tips for Successful Implementation
  Katherine Wiesendanger, Ph.D., Gretchen Braun, Ph.D., and Jeannine Perry, Ph.D., Longwood University

Understanding the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in American Classrooms: Language Learning Strategies for a Diverse Student Population
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The Effects of Word Walls and Word Wall Activities on the Reading Fluency of First Grade Students
  Joanne Jasmine, Ed.D., Caldwell College, and Pamela Schiesl, Mansfield Township Elementary School

Good Books for Good Times
  Terrell A. Young, Ed.D., Washington State University, and Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D., Tallulah, LA
Recreational Reading: Useful Tips for Successful Implementation
   Katherine Wiesendanger, Gretchen Braun, and Jeannine Perry...... 269-284

Understanding the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in American Classrooms:
   Language Learning Strategies for a Diverse Student Population
   Kerry P. Holmes, Susan Rutledge, and Lane Roy Gauthier............ 285-300

The Effects of Word Walls and Word Wall Activities on the Reading Fluency
   of First Grade Students
   Joanne Jasmine and Pamela Schiesl........................................ 301-314

Good Books for Good Times
   Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward.................................... 315-323

Article Index.................................................................................. 324-326

Author Index.................................................................................. 327-328

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From the Editor

A few weeks ago I led my Secondary Content Literacy class through a Process Drama, an activity that involved them in imaginary, unscripted, and spontaneous problem solving (Schneider & Jackson, 2000). Each student assumed a different perspective (teacher, student, parent, or community member) to discuss and create an action plan to address a fictional school shooting from the book *Just One Flick of a Finger* (Lorbiecki, 1996). Listening to the groups talk about the event and how they felt and thought about it was fascinating as they had actively taken on the demeanor, voice, and thinking of their perspective. It was obvious that these were no longer undergraduate, pre-service education students at Western Michigan University rather they were concerned and frightened high school students, teachers, parents, and members of the community. When debriefing the Process Drama, they expressed how difficult it was to take on these different perspectives and yet at the same time, they were fascinated at how their own thinking changed as they looked at a school shooting through someone else’s eyes.

Changing our perspective can be a challenge; there is comfort and certainty in knowing what we know, in seeing things as we’ve always seen them. Looking at something from another perspective can cause dissonance as that which was certain and secure becomes unsure and unclear. But isn’t that often how change and growth happen? When reading a book, we frequently ask our students to “think about an event in another way,” or ask “how do you think (some character) felt when that happened?” Certainly, a change in perspective can lead us to new insights and knowledge.

In this issue of *Reading Horizons*, the authors present us with the known and ask us to look at it through a different lens. Katherine Wiesendanger, Jeannine Perry, and Gretchen Braun researched Sustained Silent Reading, a common classroom practice that was called into question by the National Reading Panel (2000) report. The authors surveyed 90 practicing teachers asking how they experienced SSR in their classrooms. These educators shared their perspectives on the physical, teacher, student, and program factors that determined the success of this recreational reading program. Based on this information, the authors make recommendations for those who might want to improve an existing or implement an effective SSR program.

Kerry Holmes, Susan Rutledge, and Lane Roy Gauthier present the issue of how English Language Learners are frequently perceived in our classrooms. The authors maintain that the majority of ELL’s spend their days in English speaking classrooms
with little acknowledgment of the language skills and strengths they can offer. Based on an asset model of instruction, their article describes the five stages of language acquisition and proposes effective learning strategies meant to support the literacy learning of this vibrant population.

Word Walls, frequently found in classrooms, can be valuable tools for teaching vocabulary and spelling. Joanne Jasmine and Pamela Schiesl propose that we think about them in another way — as useful tools for supporting reading fluency. This article, based on an action research project, found that leading a class of first grade students through a variety of word wall activities led to increased high-frequency word recognition and fluency.

Terrell Young and Barbara Ward present us with the joy of browsing bookshelves in our local libraries and bookstores as they highlight many of the newest titles for readers of all ages. Their suggestions include a mosquito dressed in a tuxedo, looking at the many sleeping creatures under the snow, and bigotry in 1899 rural Louisiana.

Perspective. What is yours? What might you notice if you assumed another’s? How might your teaching or research change if you looked at it differently? As always, Reading Horizons is looking for new perspectives in literacy theory and practice and I encourage you to consider us when seeking a venue for your scholarly work.

Allison L. Baer, Editor
Reading Horizons
Kalamazoo, MI


There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of education than reading.
Reading Horizons

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Recreational Reading: Useful Tips for Successful Implementation

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Abstract

This study analyzed characteristics of classrooms where recreational reading is being implemented. It scrutinized those classrooms that housed successful programs and looked for common elements among them. Specifically, we explored the physical, teacher, student, and program factors within these classrooms that contributed toward their success. Focusing on the responses from 33 participants, the article summarizes the elements most frequently mentioned under each of the four major components. Finally, we discuss how these factors contribute to the successful implementation of recreational reading.

For decades, educators have theorized that incorporating recreational reading into classrooms sets the structure for children to practice reading, as well as supports their literacy development. While the format and implementation of recreational reading programs may vary, several follow the same basic principles. SSR (sustained silent reading), DEAR (drop everything and read), SQUIRT (silent, quiet, uninterrupted individualized reading time), and USSR (uninterrupted sustained silent reading) merge fundamental elements of modeling, self-selection, and self-pacing. The incorporation of recreational reading into the total reading program is based largely on the thesis that reading is an accrued skill. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that practice makes one more proficient. The popularity of these programs has been supported by research (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Nagy, Campenni, & Shaw, 2000)
showing that there is a positive correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement.

Additional studies have lent support to establishing recreational reading programs. Research has demonstrated that those students who read by choice read more than others (Aranha, 1985; Dully, 1989; Dymock, 2000; Wilmont, 1975), and that children who engage in recreational reading programs perform better on standardized reading tests and achieve higher academically (Block & Mangieri, 1996; Fisher, 2001). In essence, they concluded that SSR enables children to develop their ability to concentrate for longer periods of time. There also appears to be a positive correlation between the amount of time children spend on recreational reading and scores on standardized comprehension tests and vocabulary development (Block, 2001; Gallik, 1999; Krashen, 1993). Further, children engaged in recreational reading for only 15 minutes a day improve in both ability and attitude toward reading (Collins, 1980; Taylor, Fyre, & Maruyama, 1990; Wiesendanger & Bader, 1989).

In 1985, The National Academy of Science’s document “Becoming a Nation of Readers” supported advocates of recreational reading programs enthusiastically when the panel recommended the practice stating that “research suggests that the amount of independent, silent reading children do in school is significantly related to gains in reading achievement” (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 76). This did much to reinforce the idea that recreational reading programs improved reading achievement, resulting in more programs implemented in countless American school districts. Educators reasoned that since large numbers of students rely on the school day for their recreational reading, it should therefore be incorporated into the curriculum (Fisher, 2001).

However, not all the research supports the implementation of recreational reading programs. There are a number of studies (Collins, 1980; Dwyer & Reed, 1989; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Langford Allen, 1983; Manning & Manning, 1984; Summers & McClelland, 1982) whose findings reveal that SSR has no positive impact on attitude or achievement. The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) report also challenged the claim that SSR has positive effects, and noted the absence of quantitative evidence supporting its implementation. While the panel concluded that beginning reading instruction should include phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, guided oral reading, use of computer technology, and comprehension strategies, they failed to advocate the use of sustained silent reading as a sound educational practice. The panel suggested that replacing the use of the silent reading time in the classroom with direct instruction should produce better test results.
Many leading literacy researchers and educators have debated the findings of the NRP (2000) report. The results have been the basis of numerous controversial discussions that accuse the panel of ignoring existing non-experimental findings favoring recreational reading. There is evidence that the NRP report has impacted the literacy curriculum in American schools, resulting in less emphasis on recreational reading in the classroom (Fisher, 2001). In spite of the numerous studies favoring recreational reading programs and the acknowledgment of the importance of children engaging in the reading process, since the NRP report many teachers have forfeited silent reading altogether in favor of implementing more direct instruction into the classroom. Teachers and administrators want to implement a research-based literacy program that aligns with state and federal guidelines, and are not eager to incorporate a practice that the NRP report does not completely support. While we acknowledge that instruction in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and guided reading are important components of a complete reading program, we feel that eliminating recreational reading from the classroom entirely may be the equivalent of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Knowing that the value of incorporating recreational reading has come into question, it nonetheless seems prudent to assume that reading books independently is a valuable component of reading instruction. Educators can not ignore the evidence that providing a framework for recreational reading in classrooms might give students their only opportunity to apply what they have learned and develop a love for reading. Literacy experts agree that children need to participate in the process of reading in order to become better readers, and that reading silently develops their proficiency.

Further, the limitations of basal readers support using trade books as reading materials for students (Block & Dellamura, 2001; Duke, 2000). Advantages include the wide variety of books available to teachers, ensuring that each student will find a book that matches his or her interests and ability level and that trade books offer a wealth of vocabulary, and sophisticated sentence structure because they use authentic language. Additionally, the research that has shown the positive effects of recreational reading simply cannot be ignored. Further, while the NRP (2000) report did not endorse recreational reading programs, a closer scrutiny reveals that it does not negate the positive influence independent reading may have, nor the possibility that wide independent reading impacts vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Rather, the report called for better designed studies.

Consequently, because of the importance many professionals attribute to recreational reading, this study analyzed characteristics of classrooms where it is
being implemented despite the NRP (2000) report. However, instead of focusing on programs as a whole, we scrutinized classrooms that housed recreational reading programs and looked for common elements. By having classroom teachers describe the aspects that they felt contributed to its success, we sought to determine their common threads and key elements. Specifically, in this study we explored how the 1) physical factors, 2) teacher factors, 3) student factors, and 4) program factors within classrooms that housed recreational reading programs contribute toward making them successful.

Method

We used the multi-site case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) that explored the viewpoints of teachers who were implementing successful recreational reading programs. Duke and Mallette (2004) advocate using case studies as a way to situate findings within a specific context. The instrument (Table 1), developed by the authors, focused on four factors: 1) program, 2) physical, 3) teacher, and 4) student. We felt that these contributed toward making recreational reading successful in the classroom. It was given to a six-person panel of literacy experts for their feedback and the authors made changes based on their input. The instrument yielded a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .9, which exceeds the .7 minimum required for the reliability to be acceptable (Pallant, 2007). Incorporating the multi-case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), we sought to determine common elements among these four factors that contributed to the successful implementation of recreational reading programs.

Table 1. Recreational Reading Survey and Interview Questions

General Questions:

1. Number of years I have implemented a recreational reading program _____.
2. Number of years I have taught ______.
3. Grade level I am currently teaching ______.
4. Circle one: I am implementing a recreational reading program (a. by choice, b. not by choice). Please explain.
5. Circle one: I (do, do not) feel that all children participate in the recreational reading program and that it benefits their literacy development.
Survey and Interview Questions:

Directions: Please answer the following eight statements. There are two under each of the four categories.

Physical Factors
1. The physical factors in the classroom are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.

2. List the physical factors in your classroom that you feel contribute to the success of the recreational reading program.

Teacher Factors
1. The teacher factors are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.

2. Explain how the teacher can facilitate the success of the recreational reading program.

Student Factors
1. The student factors are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.

2. List three things students can do during recreational reading to improve their time on task behavior.

Program Factors
1. The program factors are (a. important b. neutral c. unimportant) in determining the success of a recreational reading program.

2. Explain how the program factors can facilitate the success of the recreational reading program.

98 teachers from middle class school districts in western New York and central Virginia, who were enrolled in a graduate program in Literacy, were given the survey (see Table 1) which took approximately 60 minutes to complete. Of the 98 teachers, 90 finished the survey, a 92% completion rate. Of these 90 respondents, a total of 33 teachers indicated that they were implementing recreational reading programs that incorporated the basic elements of seeking, self-selection, and self-pacing in their classrooms as children selected their reading material from appropriately leveled text and read at their individual pace. The participants’ grade levels ranged from teaching first grade through sixth grade. Their average length of teaching was five years, all indicated they had voluntarily implemented the program, and the average length of implementation was four years. These teachers perceived that all of their students participated in a program that helped children’s
literacy development. Focusing on the responses from these 33 participants, we conducted follow-up interviews within each of their classrooms to clarify statements or elaborate on ideas. They also opened their classrooms for us to observe and interact with their students.

We next established a list of codes (see Figure 1) and developed a form to use when assessing each teacher’s response to the questions on the survey. With the assistance of graduate students, information was entered into a database and sorted by criteria. All responses were recorded and summarized to analyze each of the four factors on the survey. In order to gain a deeper insight into the process, we included excerpts from the teachers’ report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program factors (PF)</th>
<th>Physical factors (PHF)</th>
<th>Teacher factors (TF)</th>
<th>Student factors (SF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Balanced program (BP)</td>
<td>Classroom libraries (CL)</td>
<td>Independent level (IL)</td>
<td>Buddy modeling (BM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule (S)</td>
<td>Book walk (BW)</td>
<td>Text selection (TS)</td>
<td>Setting goals (SG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location (L)</td>
<td>Material placement (MP)</td>
<td>Pretend read (PR)</td>
<td>Book marks (BM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (E)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher modeling (TM)</td>
<td>Student response (SR)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** List of Codes

**Data Analysis**

We used an inductive approach for analysis and assigned codes to data segments that either addressed our research questions or that raised important issues or ideas about the implementation of recreational reading programs, and assigned codes to transcript segments that captured remarks shared by multiple participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Seidman, 1991). We then constructed matrices that included highlights of data drawn from interviews that illustrated common elements across the classrooms. Each of the four factors related to recreational reading programs included representations of the categories yielded by the data.

**Results and Discussion**

Our results are based on the four factors: 1) program, 2) physical, 3) teacher, and 4) student, which guided our research question. For a deeper understanding of
and the teachers’ viewpoints, we discuss each factor individually, and include comments drawn from the interviews. Based on teachers’ feedback, we summarize the elements most frequently mentioned under each of the four major factors. Finally, in order to assist those who want to develop a program that meets the needs of their students, we discuss the contributing factors that participants felt were important to the successful implementation of a recreational reading program.

**Program Factors**

Participants (91%) stressed that recreational reading is not a stand-alone activity, and emphasized the importance of teaching decoding as well as comprehension strategies for students to develop the ability to read successfully. They acknowledged that incorporating recreational reading into the total literacy program gave children the opportunity to practice reading in an authentic situation, but felt it should be one element of a balanced reading program. In order to develop their reading ability, children need explicit instruction, and recreational reading programs enable children to improve and expand newly acquired skills. As one teacher wrote, “If children are experiencing difficulty with basic reading fundamentals, they need instruction in how to read, in addition to time and books.” The standard amount of time these teachers implemented recreational reading was for a 20-minute period within a two-hour block for literacy. The remainder of the time included guided reading, word building, vocabulary, reading to children, and writing activities. The general consensus of opinion among these teachers was that the disabled reader will suffer if recreational reading is not part of a total reading program, and they stressed the importance of children being given time to practice reading, as well as receiving instruction in how to read.

Other important elements in SSR implementation included scheduling and location. Results (82%) from the interviews strongly suggest children are more likely to develop the reading habit if they read daily for an appropriate length of time. For example, responses indicated that the program was more effective if teachers spread a reading time block into five daily shorter sessions, rather than fewer longer ones. Their rationale was that children could more easily resume reading and were better able to remember information about the material if the time interval between sessions was shortened. As one teacher summarized, “The experience of reading daily is what develops their skills.”

All (100%) of the teachers recommend adhering to a consistent daily scheduling pattern, emphasizing that time for recreational reading be established at the
beginning of the class and never sacrificed. This is particularly important for high needs children because predictability contributes to their success. One teacher wrote that “establishing the time as important and worthy of protecting allows for a more even transition and minimizes off task behavior.”

Participants (61%) also advised that changing the physical environment for recreational reading signifies its importance and children responded better when they moved their location. Suggestions included moving to the cafeteria, school library, outside lawn, or a different classroom. If remaining in one’s own classroom was the only option, allowing children to select their favorite reading place within the room may motivate them. They did stress that the location change should be consistent because children are more productive and comfortable when working in an environment that has an established routine.

Physical Factors

All (100%) of the responding teachers noted the importance of establishing classroom libraries housing a wide array of reading material, including books, magazines, and succinct, pertinent articles from newspapers and magazines that students could completely read in one sitting. This less restrictive philosophy is particularly successful when trying to motivate the reluctant reader. As one teacher noted, “Children are more likely to become engaged when they can select from a variety of materials.” One idea that surfaced was to cut out the individual stories from old multi-leveled reading series, and place each story between colorful papers in a loose-leaf binder.

Many teachers (82%) noted that asking children to bring in books from home or another source is effective only if they are already readers, but unsuccessful if they have not developed the habit of reading. One teacher emphasized that “for many of these children, there are no books at home and they do not have access to other resources.” In addition to having a sufficient amount of interesting, readable text available to help maintain children’s curiosity, teachers stressed the importance of rotating and adding new material to the classroom library. Seventy-six per cent (76%) suggested the importance of introducing the material through a book walk to increase children’s interest. One teacher wrote, “Children gravitate toward the material when I briefly discusses the book’s cover, title, author and content.” Another stated, “I use book walks to make easy material acceptable by explaining how I enjoy reading these books.”
Accessibility and placement of the reading material is also important. Teachers (79%) noted that children tended to select materials that were easily accessible, with visible covers and placed in a convenient location, rather than hidden on bookshelves difficult to retrieve. In order for a child to make significant progress independently, it is also crucial for the reader to select materials that are not only enjoyable and exciting, but readable. Most teachers (94%) mentioned the importance of developing a system whereby children could easily select appropriately leveled material at their independent reading level. One commented, “Each child must choose reading material that is both enjoyable and easily readable.”

**Teacher Factors**

Most participants (82%) stressed the importance of teachers knowing the independent reading level of each student in their classroom and helping children make appropriate book selections by taking a supportive role. They suggested that by giving students guidelines for book selecting strategies, a high percentage were able to choose appropriately leveled, interesting material. For children who have difficulty choosing text that matches their ability level, 61% recommend that teachers model a strategy for text selection. One mentioned frequently was The Goldilocks Strategy (Ohlhausen & Jepsen, 1992) based on the folklore tale “The Three Bears.” In this strategy, teachers guide children to use criteria such as text length, size of print, familiarity, illustrations, and readers background, to determine whether the text is too easy, just right, or too hard. By modeling this strategy, teachers show children the importance of considering these elements when determining the difficulty level of a text. Although time consuming, participants felt it was worthwhile to implement, because it enabled children to select appropriate material.

While the aforementioned strategy facilitates the material selection process for the vast majority of children, 61% of the participants stressed the importance of closely monitoring and giving additional guidance in material selection to children who either “pretend read,” or simply hold the book. The following comment summarized many responses. It is important to “not allow the pretend readers to fall through the cracks, because they are the very ones who benefit most from recreational reading.” One suggestion for determining the suitability of text is to privately have the child read a brief excerpt from the selected material to the teacher. If it is too difficult, the teacher should allow the child to keep the material, but supplement it with an appropriately leveled text for the student to read. This
approach offers an alternative to the scenario where the teacher takes the “too difficult” material from the child and instructs him to find something easier.

Participants stressed that the pretend reader needs close monitoring and easier, interesting reading material, and that, following the session, it was important for the teacher to solicit brief feedback about the text from the student. As one stated, “I solicit a verbal critique following reading from these children and let them know I value their feedback.” Many commented that when they ask children for their opinion on the appropriateness of the material for a project, upcoming unit, or other classroom use, children had much more incentive to read it. As one teacher summarized, “The child feels important because he is reading the appropriately leveled material for the purpose of giving feedback, and understands his opinion is valued, rather than because he is incapable of reading anything more difficult.”

Responses (73%) indicated that teacher modeling is crucial, and that children and teachers must read together for the program to be successful. One teacher summarized the comments of many when she wrote, “Children learn by following the modeled behavior of others.” Participants extended the crucial influence of modeling to include before and after the reading time, and suggested that teachers should demonstrate their interest in and enjoyment of reading by commenting upon and discussing books they personally read. As one response indicated, “Children in my classroom know I love to read because I discuss enthusiastically the book I’m reading. My love for reading is contagious.”

**Student Factors**

Feedback from 61% of the participants stressed the importance of buddy modeling which incorporates coordinating the recreational reading program with a teacher from a different grade, and pairs an older child with a younger child to read silently from their own materials. One teacher stated that the “success of this model was apparent because the younger children wanted to sit next to their older buddies, who were given the important duty of modeling silent reading behavior for their younger partner and showing them the value of reading.” An additional benefit to this model was that it became acceptable for older students to read material that was below their grade level. Participants emphasized that the purpose of buddy modeling was not for the older student to assist the younger children in their reading, but rather uninterrupted practice for both.
About half of the participants (51%) suggested that having children set goals by predicting the number of pages they anticipate reading during the upcoming session was beneficial. One teacher commented, “Allowing children to determine their own goals gives them ownership of their own learning, which is a strong motivator.” Also mentioned was the importance of having children use bookmarks as they enabled children to readily find their place from the previous session, making for a smooth transition from one day to the next.

While the participants did not advocate giving grades or incorporating certain follow-up activities that focused on heavy accountability, they did recommend that students react to what they have read. However, they stated that children responded favorably when they implemented non-threatening follow-up activities, and that encouraging students to engage in discussions about text increased their participation and motivation. Follow-up activities included sharing responses with a partner or small peer group, journal writing, or a whole-class discussion revolving around a common theme.

**Conclusion**

The main goal of a recreational reading program is to provide an opportunity for children to read for pleasure. This can contribute toward enabling children to become lifelong readers by providing them with a safe, caring community, and a significant degree of choice about what, how, and why they are reading. The fact that there are literacy experts with opposing viewpoints indicates that implementing a recreational reading program in the classroom is more complicated than previously thought. Instead of debating the merits of recreational reading, the purpose of this article is to concentrate on classrooms where teachers are implementing the program and search for commonalities that contribute to its success. By focusing on the common elements, others may gain insight into how to modify their programs to improve reading attitude and promote reading engagement. Using these suggestions, teachers may then modify the original design and refine the individual aspects to meet the needs of all their students.

Within a total reading program, having children read independently as part of the daily routine may be valuable. Teachers must first determine what they want their children to achieve from the recreational reading program, whether it is fluency or more time reading silently for improved comprehension. The objective
will vary, depending on each student’s individual needs. For example, goals for the more reluctant readers might include spending the entire time reading a very easy book, but for the more gifted student the goal might be to select books that are more challenging. It is imperative to understand that there are gifted, average, and struggling readers in most classrooms and the recreational reading program could help meet their literacy needs.

The results of this study indicate that there are certain factors that are common among these exemplary recreational reading programs. Within program factors, teachers stressed the importance of implementing a recreational reading program in conjunction with targeted instruction. They also noted the importance of implementing consistent scheduling and location patterns. The physical commonalities teachers noted included the importance of establishing classroom libraries that include a wide variety of reading material that rotates periodically. These findings are substantiated by Fisher (2001) who stressed the importance of classroom libraries for use as a springboard into wider reading. Additionally, participants felt that the teacher modeling a strategy for students to use in their book selection process helps ensure a positive match between the student and the material. Results also showed the importance of teachers knowing the student’s independent reading level, and giving additional guidance in book selection to those students who require it.

Buddy modeling, sharing during follow-up sessions, setting goals, and using bookmarks are student facts teachers mentioned that contribute to the success of their program. These findings are substantiated by research that suggests providing students with opportunities after SSR to share their reflections aloud with their peers for discussion and feedback is valuable (Dymock, 2000; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Widdowson, Moore, & Dixon, 1999).

This study addressed the program, physical, teacher, and student factors (see Table 2) of successful recreational reading programs. In order to develop as readers, students need to read and teachers must ensure that all of their students spend time reading every day. By understanding the common elements, teachers are more likely to develop a program in which all students participate in reading and rereading text. The findings from such an inquiry improve our understanding of how to design effective recreational reading programs. These programs take planning and thought, and teachers need guidelines if programs are to succeed. Hopefully, by expanding this knowledge base, more classroom teachers may be
encouraged to develop and implement successful recreational reading into their classrooms.

**Table 2. Summary of the Four Factors Related to Recreational Reading (RR)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Factors</th>
<th>Physical Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make RR one element of a balanced reading program.</td>
<td>Establish classroom libraries with a wide array of reading material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporate teaching word identification and comprehension strategies to supplement RR.</td>
<td>Rotate and add new material to the classroom library.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read daily for an appropriate time length.</td>
<td>Introduce the material through book walks to increase children’s interest in reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule RR at the same time daily.</td>
<td>Develop a system where children can easily select appropriately leveled material.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Factors</th>
<th>Student Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Know the independent reading level of each student.</td>
<td>Buddy modeling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help children make appropriate book selections by taking a supportive role.</td>
<td>Set goals by predicting the number of pages to be read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give additional guidance for material selection to children who pretend read.</td>
<td>React to readings through non-threatening follow-up activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate interest in and enjoyment of reading by commenting upon, and discussing books.</td>
<td>Engage in discussions about text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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Understanding the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in American Classrooms: Language Learning Strategies for a Diverse Student Population

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Abstract

This article addresses critical factors that impact learning for a growing population of students in American classrooms, the English Language Learner (ELL). Even in the smallest school districts, it is common for teachers to have one or more students with limited or no command of the English language in their classrooms. Many students in schools with specialized ELL programs spend the majority of their day in regular classrooms trying to fit in with their peers as they struggle to learn a new language. This article focuses on the five stages of language acquisition and proficiency along with corresponding research-based strategies teachers can use at each stage. Elements of an effective language program described in this article are based on an asset model of instruction where students’ differences are valued, respected, and utilized. When cultural-linguistic differences are used as assets rather than problems, all students, native and non-native English speakers, benefit.

Introduction

Students in the United States do not speak with one voice; they come to school speaking more than 149 different languages (National Virtual Translation Center, 2007). Less visible than language and race are the differences in home cultures and prior experiences that shape the thoughts and language of each student. This individualized knowledge base provides the foundation for oral and written
language learning. Students’ prior world knowledge, experiences, and fluency in their native language, when different from the mainstream, have translated into the infamous achievement gap that spurred major educational reforms and is at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. According to the 2007 National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP), the mean achievement gap in reading between white and Hispanic students is 27 points; the gap between white and Native American students is 28 points. This is of particular concern because the NAEP assessment was based on three different contexts for reading comprehension: 1) reading for literary experience (story grammar, the structure of narrative text that includes setting, characters, and plot); 2) reading for information (nonfiction, real world learning); and 3) reading to perform a task.

To help close the reading gap, teachers must know how to bridge the differences between their students’ native language and their acquisition of oral and written English. Research has shown that the teacher has a far greater impact on student learning than any one specific method or approach to teaching (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). Responsive teachers view nonnative speakers as an asset to their classroom where they use these students’ knowledge to develop a richer and more authentic curriculum for all students.

The purpose of this article is to 1) describe the stages English Language Learners (ELL) go through as they learn a new language and 2) to provide strategies teachers can use to help their students successfully progress through these stages. The first part explores schema theory and the effects of cultural diversity on vocabulary and background knowledge essential for listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The second part describes five language acquisition and proficiency stages ELL students go through to learn a new language and provides effective instructional strategies matched to each level.

**Part I: Culture, Language, and the Formation of Schema**

Every student has unique cultural experiences, types and amounts of schooling, varied interests, and preferred ways of learning. As students learn, they approach each task with the beliefs, values, and information acquired through their respective backgrounds and knowledge of the world. Reading is a “socially constructed pursuit” based on the students’ interactions with their world and the people in it (Koda & Zehler, 2008, p. 4). Cognitively, the sum of students’ experiences is stored in memory in individual categories (schema), “a collection of organized and interrelated ideas, concepts, and prior knowledge” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 468). A
person’s schema is most useful when it is activated before exposure to new learning. Prior schema activation facilitates reading comprehension by enabling students to discriminate between important and unimportant information and make inferences to fill in non-explicit information with their own prior knowledge (Clark, 1990). Students read for a variety of reasons that are influenced by participation in their respective sociocultural groups, and, ultimately, the combination of schema formation and activation in social and academic settings influences and supports reading comprehension.

Topics have their own specialized background knowledge and vocabulary. Consider the topic of baseball with its specialized vocabulary. The words “steal,” “plate,” “out,” “strike,” and “foul,” have multiple meanings and nuances that can lead the reader to misinterpret the text. For example, “stealing a base” does not mean that a thief is running away with a “base” and being hunted by the police, rather, “stealing a base” is cheered and celebrated by fans of the player who did the stealing.

In their meta-analysis of reading comprehension studies, the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) reported that students must be taught how to use their prior experiences to aid reading comprehension. Genesse (2008) extended the NRP’s (2000) and the National Literacy Panel’s (August & Shanahan, 2006) earlier findings on the importance of prior experience on reading comprehension. Genesse found that first and second language learners are fundamentally the same in that reading competence in the first or second language involves multiple abilities (phonological awareness, decoding skills, and comprehension). However, second language reading development is different because ELL learners draw on their first language experiences and competencies to inform and influence their reading in the second language. Therefore, students from diverse backgrounds may need even more encouragement and opportunities to apply their prior experiences to reading and language learning because they are so different from their school and neighborhood culture.

**Barriers and Challenges to Schema Formation and Reading Comprehension**

First and foremost, teachers must recognize that ELL students are fully capable of learning despite their lack of the English language. They bring a wealth of experiences, knowledge of vocabulary and concepts, and hopes and dreams to the classroom. What they lack is a way to express this knowledge and their aspirations in English. Teachers’ perceptions of nonnative speakers significantly impact
their curriculum materials, pedagogy, assessment, and expectations for their ELL students. Scanlon (2007) states, “A fundamental barrier to conceptualizing linguistic diversity from an asset-based perspective is the capacity of teachers to teach students who are ELL” (p. 3). Teachers who hold to the Deficit Model (Scanlon, 2007) do not give ELL students credit for the language and academic skills they already have but are unable to communicate in English. Rather than capitalizing on their strengths and assets, teachers with a deficit view erect barriers to learning that fulfill their expectations of low student performance. Such barriers can include the lack of appropriate seating, visual cues, stimulating material, modified material, and the overuse of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions.

The flip side of the Deficit Model is the Asset Model in which teachers remove barriers to learning and replace them with sound pedagogical practices (Scanlon, 2007). Students’ differences are viewed as assets and respected when planning quality instruction and ELL students have opportunities to make connections between prior knowledge and new learning, build on existing schema, be active participants in a community of learners, and have numerous opportunities to converse and interact with peers. Above all, in an asset-driven classroom, ELL students, like their English-speaking counterparts, are provided numerous opportunities to experience success.

Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones, and Whelan-Ariza (2007) found that ELL students face many challenges as they develop their ability to form relevant schema necessary for reading comprehension in the second language. The first challenge is acquiring proficiency in the second language in which students may lack relevant cultural knowledge. Second language learners may also be challenged by the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the new language, and therefore transfer their first language grammar and vocabulary knowledge incorrectly. Furthermore, Zainuddin, et al (2007) discuss how different spelling systems challenge word recognition and comprehension in the student’s second language. Still another challenge second language learners have with reading is pragmatics, “the social contexts of literacy use in their first language” (Grabe, 1991, p. 388). Additional challenges facing ELL students in English speaking classrooms include being fearful of participating, unfamiliar regional dialects, and difficult imagery and symbolism within texts (Haynes, 2008).

ELL students must also accommodate differences between the written code of their native language and English. For example, Spanish speaking students are accustomed to a phonetically stable alphabetic spelling in which each letter represents a sound, whereas English readers use less consistent letter and word cues to
determine the meaning and the grammatical function of a word. During reading, they apply up to four cues or signals that help them glean meaning from the text: phonics, syntax (word order), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (the use of language in communication). Each cue unlocks words and may, individually or in combination, divulge their meaning if students have some advance knowledge of the words. The Chinese character system, on the other hand, has no link between speech sounds and the written symbol. Reading directionality also varies among languages. Languages such as English and Russian are read left to right, top to bottom, while Arabic is read right to left. Making inferences, where students challenge or reinterpret text, is a critical reading comprehension skill for American readers, but is considered inappropriate and even disrespectful, in other cultures. These differences in cultural expectations for literacy can have a profound impact on ELL students’ ability to comprehend and use the English language.

Part II: Ways to Scaffold Reading Instruction for English Language Learners

Exemplary reading programs for both ELL and English-speaking students include developmentally appropriate instruction and materials that focus on intensive systematic phonological awareness, phonics, intensive vocabulary instruction, oral language instruction, and cooperative learning to increase comprehension (Cheung & Slavin, 2005). Teachers should make sure that the quality of the program they use and the quality of the instruction they deliver is excellent and based on current research. The following is a synthesis of key elements that provide an instructional framework to guide teachers when choosing a program:

- Help students make connections between their prior knowledge and new learning. Students must be encouraged to think about and use the wide range of experiences they possess, even if they cannot yet express them in their second language.

- Communicate clear, measurable, and attainable goals for students. Learning a new language is a complex and daunting task. Choose goals that break down this task into identifiable pieces where students can track and celebrate stages of their progress.

- Incorporate students’ cultures into the curriculum. ELL students’ cultural experiences can be used to highlight their areas of interest and strength. Provide visuals and artifacts from their own cultures that they
can use as a support for sharing information at their level of linguistic development. Including people from the students’ countries that have contributed to the fields of math, science, history, literature, music, and art expands everyone’s world knowledge.

- Create a community of learners to encourage ELL student participation and interaction with others. Include numerous opportunities to talk with peers, with a partner, or in small groups in informal and structured settings.

- Assess English language learners through formative assessments of phonological processing, letter knowledge, and word and text reading. All students should be assessed to determine these foundational skills.

- Plan intensive, systematic, and direct instruction interventions in small groups for ELL students who lack proficiency in any of the foundational reading skills. Based on assessment results, seek systematic ways to build on students’ linguistic strengths rather than patch up their weaknesses.

- Provide high-quality vocabulary instruction throughout the day. Essential words, taken from the core reading program, content area textbooks, and everyday words should be taught in depth with opportunities to explore the various nuances of meaning. (Levine, 2007; IES, 2007)

With the above elements in mind, students with limited English proficiency must be taught academic content and reading comprehension strategies that support both skills-based learning and higher level thinking. Students need opportunities to isolate aspects of their new language in order to analyze individual sound and symbol features as well as opportunities to hear, see, and use language in context, where pieces of the language puzzle come together into a coherent whole.

The following section describes the stages of language acquisition as well as effective learning strategies recommended by ELL researchers and classroom teachers for each stage.

**Stages of Language Acquisition and Barrier Busting Strategies**

Research indicates that academic literacy can take from four to seven years to acquire (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Consequently, the stages non-English speakers go through are important to consider when developing a reading/language arts
curriculum. These stages do not relate to age or grade level rather they are correlated to the students’ previous linguistic and life experiences. Moving through each stage is a developmental process that varies in duration for each student. Levine (2007), Chen and Mora-Flores (2006), and Lightbown (2000) agree that ELL students go through predictable, linguistic stages as they become proficient in English. The Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Pre-K-12 Proficiency Standards (2006), Levine (2007), and the WIDA Consortium’s (2008) “can do” descriptors shape and inform the stages and proficiency descriptors described below. These stages and strategies are listed in the order of second language acquisition to help teachers knock down barriers and promote language learning. It is important to note that strategies introduced at earlier stages of language development are building blocks for additional, more complex strategies used at the later stages of language development. Furthermore, carefully planned assessment provides data teachers can use to move ELL students through the stages of English language learning. Law and Eckes (1995) suggest that teacher-made checklists be used to monitor student progress as they can be created to document specific learning from each of the activities listed in this section.

Stage 1: Pre-Production

Students are active listeners during this stage where they take in the sounds, words, and nonverbal cues of those around them. These students rarely use English and rely heavily on pictorial and other nonverbal representations of the language. During this receptive stage students may be silent which may be mistaken for slowness, dullness, or shyness. As their oral language increases, these students tend to use memorized chunks of language such as “My name is...” Creating meaning from text is often incomplete because they may not have the vocabulary, syntax, and the cultural knowledge to interpret the assigned reading. In this stage, students need multiple opportunities to hear English being spoken, read, and written well.

Strategy: Total Physical Response (TPR)

Total Physical Response (TPR), as described by Herrel and Jordan (2004), is an engaging way to help the least proficient ELL students actively and physically understand vocabulary and concepts. The idea is for the teacher to choose words or concepts that are easily demonstrated physically such as commands, movement directions, prepositions, and body parts. The teacher develops a list of words or concepts to teach, writes or draws them on cards, and then physically demonstrates what she needs understood such as “sit down” or “stand up.” The objective is for
ELL students to learn commonly used English words and concepts. As the teacher observes students understanding what is demonstrated and asked, she is able to lessen the physical modeling. With TPR, teachers can gradually add more and more vocabulary and concepts for students to practice and demonstrate.

**Strategy: Word and Concept Sorts**

It is helpful for ELL students to see abstract words, concepts, and ideas represented through pictures. Through visual organizers students are involved in vocabulary development as they sort pictures into categories such as beginning, middle, and ending sounds, attributes of size or color, straight edges versus round edges, or topics such as mammals and reptiles, favorite and non-favorite foods. Begin with words students know, and build on these words. They should work with the teacher or a peer to name, in English, each of the pictures and the categories (Bear, Helman, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 2007) to increase word learning and depth of meaning. Teachers should first model how to sort pictures into categories on graphic organizers such as Venn diagrams and T lists and then support students as they categorize pictures and use words to name or describe them.

**Stage 2: Early Production**

When students feel secure in the classroom they will “try their wings” by uttering a few words or short phrases. Their reading ability may depend on their literacy development in the native language as well as their alphabetic knowledge. Students at this stage can use simple memorized phrases correctly, but they may still make errors that impede understanding. They are able to locate and use predictable information and require lots of repetition. Oral questioning should initially require brief answers with the goal of moving students toward more complex answers as they become comfortable speaking in the classroom. Questions should help students recall their prior experiences related to the words they are learning. Ask more open ended questions like, “What do you understand?” versus yes/no questions such as, “Do you understand?” Asking a question with “what” allows the student to show, tell, or indicate in some way his understanding of the task. Many students from other cultures simply answer “yes” to avoid the embarrassment of not knowing and being unable to accomplish the classroom task.

**Strategy: Interactive Word Wall**

Teachers may create several word walls (Gunning, 2010) in addition to the traditional A,B,C... word wall as ELL students encounter words from a variety of oral and written sources that include the words of their peers, teacher, books, and
labeled pictures. To overcome information overload, word walls can be interactive, tailored to students’ interests and academic needs, and include very specific labels that are easy to identify. For example, word walls or charts can contain collections of words with corresponding pictures related to various content area topics, parts of speech, figurative speech, synonyms, word families including onsets and rimes, and letter clusters such as “ology” and “ough.” The key is to have students contribute to and interact with word walls frequently through speech and writing. To target each student’s needs and interests, tailor the number and complexity of words to the individual student’s level of learning by involving them in the word selection. Individual lists of words can be given to students to keep at their desks to study and use as a reference. This strategy enables ELL students to recognize, analyze, and utilize words necessary for academic content learning. The goal is to have ELL students actively involved with the word walls as they find, read, classify, and use the words easily in their daily tasks.

**Strategy: Picture and Sentence Match**

Herrell and Jordan (2007) emphasize the importance of visual scaffolding through the use of pictures to support word learning through conversation and written text. This strategy teaches vocabulary and sentence structure through pairing pictures that illustrate written sentences. Teachers can choose which elements of sentence structure to emphasize such as word order, nouns and pronouns, functions of verbs, and punctuation. Teachers should model how to read the sentence, identifying each word as it is read, and match the sentence to the corresponding picture. Students should then do this independently or with a partner. To promote academic language development and interaction, students should frequently work with the teacher, a peer or small groups of students to name, in English, the pictures and determine the sentence it matches.

**Stage 3: Speech Emergence**

As students gain confidence and language skills, the teacher can begin to ask open ended questions to stimulate language production. During this stage, while students may still have difficulty expressing themselves because of limited vocabulary and command of the language they may be able to understand and utilize stock phrases and academic language that is highly familiar to them. At this level, students are most successful in building meaning from text when they have extensive background knowledge. Students’ reading proficiency may vary upon their experiences with the genres, themes, and concepts explored by the classroom teacher.
Strategy: Dual Language Alphabet or Concept Books

As ELL students gain word and language knowledge, it remains critical that they interact with others on planned tasks to further support language learning. Students rely on their experiences from their native country as they learn language and experiences unique to their new country. The creation of dual language books is one way to literally combine the best of both worlds (Schecter & Cummins, 2003). Planning and implementing the creation of these books require students to communicate with each other to facilitate learning in both languages on a variety of topics. For example, students can write books to describe themselves, their classrooms, an experience or hobby, as well as themed content area information related to the curriculum. See Figure 1 for an example of a student created dual language book. Simultaneous engagement in reading and writing helps students to not only learn the conventions of the second language, but gives them ownership of their new language. English speaking and non-native speaking students benefit as they learn literacy practices of other cultures, with each student having the opportunity to be the teacher. These books can be shared with their parents and caregivers to extend language learning to the home.

Figure 1. Example of an English and Chinese dual language book (Patricia Chow, Early Literacy English Language Learner Teacher, Clifton & Cosair Public Schools, Peel District School Board, Mississauga, Ontario).

Strategy: Schema Stories

Schema stories enable ELL students to activate and use related schema in order to capitalize on the prior knowledge and experiences they bring to the classroom. Reutzel and Cooter (2007, citing Watson & Crowley, 1988, p. 263) describe
schema stories as, “...a reading strategy lesson that helps readers reconstruct the order of a text based on meaning and story grammar” (p. 336). The goal is to have students use their prior knowledge and experiences to comprehend meaning and develop an understanding of story grammar as they put chunks of a story into proper sequence according to the context of the book, i.e. beginning, middle, or end, and give a rationale for that decision. Teachers should repeatedly emphasize student understanding by having them explain how they identified their part and why they placed it where they did.

**Stage 4: Intermediate Fluency**

Intermediate students may be able to read with considerable fluency and will be able to locate specific facts within texts. Grade-level literacy may still pose challenges as reading comprehension may be hampered when information is presented in a decontextualized manner, vocabulary has multiple meanings, and the sentence structure is complex. However, their oral and written structures begin to approximate native speakers.

**Strategy: Student Self-Monitoring**

Student self-monitoring teaches metacognition and reading fluency, an essential goal for any student seeking to improve comprehension. Fluency cannot be achieved if a student’s reading efficiency is impeded by continuing to read a passage which progressively eludes that student’s grasp. This strategy, explicitly taught and modeled by the teacher, provides the student with a means to self-reflect, identify problems, and follow a course of correction when necessary. As she reads a book aloud the teacher frequently stops and thinks out loud, first modeling how to determine the purpose for reading (i.e. information, enjoyment, directions) and then verbally explaining her thinking as she seeks to understand the meaning of a passage. Students should then be given texts that match a self-chosen purpose for reading and encouraged to do the same by asking and answering questions such as “why” am I reading this, and “how” can this help me. ELL students will benefit greatly from this strategy, since they, more so than native English speakers, may find themselves losing touch with the ideas on the page.

**Strategy: The K-W-L Chart**

The KWLS is an effective strategy for student self-monitoring (Carr & Ogle, 1987). When working with ELL students it is most effective with small groups of two to five children. With a partner, or in a small group, students list what they
Know about a topic, generate a list of questions about what they want to know, and finally discuss what they have learned. An obvious benefit of this strategy is that the requisite group work calls for engagement in the four communication skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although all learners stand to gain from an exercise which utilizes these inextricably connected facets of language, those students who are still engaged in learning the basic tenets of English will receive more practice, within an interactive context, in how each of these skills supports the other three. As an extension, students can do a K-W-L Plus (Ogle, 1987) in which they ask what they still want to know opening opportunities for further research and enrichment.

Stage 5: Advanced Fluency

It takes years for English learners to move beyond the Intermediate Stage to an Advanced Stage of fluency where they have learned a wide range of vocabulary and have a solid grasp of synonyms, inflections, and colloquialisms as well as academic content. Research indicates that academic literacy can take from four to seven years to acquire (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). At this level, ELL students demonstrate a complexity in their written and oral language comparable to their native English speaking peers. Strategies at this level capitalize on everything Stage 5 ELL learners already know and are capable of doing and are not different from strategies for native English speakers. This stage, which lasts a lifetime, is the ultimate goal, the culmination of years of carefully crafted lessons and language experiences.

Strategy: Closed-Captioning Television

Watching a movie using closed-captions offers a novel experience for students to interact with the spoken and printed word simultaneously as meaning is supported through the animation and movement, pictures, and sound effects in the movie. It is important to preview films and select ones that are suitable for the ages, interests, content, and language needs of ELL Students. Reutzel and Cooter (2007) suggest that teachers alert students to listen for, or read targeted speech sounds, letter patterns, or punctuation during the film. Teachers should also help students learn key words they will encounter in the captions. Before viewing the film, teachers must help students make connections between the plot of the film and their prior knowledge and background experiences. Before, during, and after the film, teachers have numerous opportunities to engage students in making and discussing predictions. Teachers can also give students cards with words printed from the
movie and ask them to watch for the words. As they see a word, they are to put it in a basket or stack. Teachers must review and reinforce the pronunciation, spelling patterns, and the meaning of the targeted words immediately after the film and throughout the school day and year.

**Strategy: Foreign Films with English Subtitles**

Watching subtitled movies is another way teachers can engage ELL students with print. Unless the film is in the students’ native language, students must rely on the printed English subtitles and visuals for meaning. The voice modulation, action, and music all support the message conveyed through print (Holmes, 2005). As when watching closed-captioned films and programs, teachers should provide an overview of the film, introduce the characters, and pre-teach select vocabulary. In addition to words, teachers can write selected phrases or sentences on cards and instruct students to place them in stacks as they see them in subtitles. After viewing, teachers can use the cards to teach word meaning and structure, sentence structure, and cognates. As an extension, after watching the film, turn off the sound and have students follow the story, or parts of the story by reading the words with no auditory support. At this point the film should be familiar to them and the continuous action should sustain attention. Students can use their understanding of the plot to read and comprehend words at a deeper level. Foreign films offer numerous opportunities for students to explore geographical regions, cultures, historical events, ethics, and interpersonal relationships.

**Conclusion**

Language and culture are an interactive and interwoven part of a child’s life. According to Lue (2003), a child’s patterns of communication are developed through multiple means such as family, socioeconomic status, dialect, and education. These language and cultural factors impact student learning. The growing population of ELL students in American classrooms makes it essential for the regular classroom teacher to know how they learn and use systematic, targeted strategies that lead to English proficiency. Instruction planned from an asset perspective acknowledges that English Language Learners are language experts. As an expert, non-native speakers are empowered as they share and teach their classmates their native language. Depending upon the level of the ELL students’ English proficiency, they can simply point to objects and say the non-English word or translate oral and written words and phrases into their native language. As language experts, ELL students
are elevated to the status of teacher where they teach their native speaking classmates aspects of their language and knowledge about their country and culture.

The strategies introduced in this article can be adapted for use by the regular classroom teacher for different levels of language proficiency because they tap into the fundamental components of language: pragmatics, semantics, phonology, orthography, and morphology (Chen & Mora-Flores, 2006). An asset-based curriculum recognizes the students’ interests and strengths, enables them to make connections between their life experiences and the new curriculum, and provides important language interactions with peers and teachers on a regular basis (Levine, 2007). To recognize and work through their students’ strengths, all teachers must be informed, tenacious advocates for non-native speakers.

References


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The Effects of Word Walls and Word Wall Activities on the Reading Fluency of First Grade Students

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Abstract

Reading fluency is the ability to read orally with speed and efficiency, including word recognition, decoding, and comprehension (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Able readers achieve fluency as they recognize words with speed and build upon them to aid in comprehension (Pumfrey & Elliott, 1990). One way to help students achieve fluency is through the use of word walls and word wall activities (Callella, 2001). Word walls are bulletin boards that contain a collection of high-frequency or theme-related words and their activities include games that focus on using the word wall to learn sight words. This article describes an action research project designed to improve reading fluency of first grade students by investigating the use of word walls and word wall activities during station time over a four-week period. It was found that word wall activities might have been one factor that strengthened high-frequency word recognition resulting in an increase of words read per minute.

Introduction

Reading fluency is a primary element in the reading process. It is the ability to read orally with speed and efficiency, including word recognition, decoding, and comprehension (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Able readers achieve fluency as they recognize words with speed and build upon them to aid in comprehension (Pumfrey & Elliott, 1990). Contrarily, struggling readers often have difficulty decoding unknown
words affecting their ability to comprehend text (Huebner & Bush 1970). Research has shown that one effective way to help students achieve fluency is through the use of word walls and word wall activities (Callella, 2001).

A word wall is a collection of high-frequency sight words that are age appropriate, classified into groups or categories, and is located on the wall of a classroom for children to easily see and learn (Brabham & Villaume, 2001; Copper & Kiger, 2003). High-frequency words are words that occur more times than other words in the spoken or written language (Cooper & Kiger, 2003). For example, the words “at” and “it” are considered high-frequency words. These words are mostly chosen from the Dolce List of 220 Basic Sight Words (Cooper & Kiger, 2003) which consists of over half of all the running words that children read in an elementary-level text (Huebner & Bush, 1970). The main purpose of a word wall is to help students build sight word recognition so they can recognize them at a glance (Huebner & Bush, 1970). In addition, word walls are also a visual that help students remember connections between words (Callella, 2001), retain knowledge of the word, and ultimately read them with automaticity (Ehri, 2005). Word wall activities encourage the applications of these words. Ideally, in the primary grades, about five high-frequency words are added weekly to word walls until there are between 110 and 120 words.

When observing classrooms, we frequently saw students unable to use a word wall after the initial introduction of the word as they would read a text and stumble on sight words that had been introduced and were on the word wall. Even when prompted to look at the word wall, students could not read the word. In addition, as students completed independent writing assignments, they were often directed to the word wall for help while the teacher was working with other students. Once again, they stared at the word wall and could not locate the word they needed to write. It became apparent that the word wall was not effective in helping students read because follow-up activities and reinforcements were not part of daily lessons. Consequently, structured word wall activities were created to aid in the comprehension and fluency of the sight words. These activities were taught during center time and the daily reading instructional period.

Utilizing word walls and word wall activities may help students develop a sight word vocabulary that further allows them to retain the words (Hall & Cunningham, 1999) and read text. When students are able to retrieve the words from long-term memory, they can become more fluent (Ehri, 2005) and achieve success in reading (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to improve read-
The Effects of Word Walls and Word Wall Activities

Literature Review

Reading Fluency

There are four stages of reading development: 1) pre-alphabetic stage, 2) partial alphabetic stage, 3) fully alphabetic stage, and 4) the consolidated alphabetic stage (Chard & Pikulski, 2005; Ehri, 2005). The pre-alphabetic stage occurs prior to any alphabetic knowledge; therefore, students have no appreciation for it (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Identification does not involve making any letter and sound connections and, in this stage, connections are made by visual cues (Ehri, 2005). In the partial alphabetic stage, the reader has learned that letters and sounds are related (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Readers use the beginning and ending sounds to try and pronounce words (Ehri, 2005) and as they become more familiar with the letters and the sounds, they progress into the full alphabetic stage (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Ehri (2005) believed this was the most important stage because this is when sight word recognition develops. Finally, readers enter the consolidated alphabetic stage where they can identify whole words instantly (Chard & Pikulski, 2005) and recurring letter patterns become consolidated (Ehri, 2005). For example, the word chest is broken into ch and est, instead of ch —e-s-t, which would be the case in the full alphabetic stage (Ehri, 2005).

Within these four stages, students slowly develop whole word recognition. The four stages are designed as a scaffold and build upon each other. Therefore, mastering one stage leads to the next stage with the reader ultimately recognizing whole words (Ehri, 2005). Readers at the consolidated stage of reading development can progress toward efficient fluency (Chard & Pikulski, 2005). Knowing that fluency is often dependent upon recognition of high-frequency words, word walls can be the core of many phonics and spelling programs (Bush & Huebner, 1970).

Word Walls and Word Wall Activities

High-frequency word walls are usually located on a bulletin board or wall above or below the alphabet (Cooper & Kiger, 2003) as this location allows the words to be a focal point of the classroom assisting students while reading and writing independently (Brabham & Villaume, 2001). The words are written with thick
black marker or colored paper and are placed under the initial letter of the word (Hall & Cunningham, 1999). Students practice new and old words each day by looking at them, saying them, clapping, chanting, snapping the letters, writing the words on paper, and self-correcting the words with the teacher (Hall & Cunningham, 1999). Word walls also serve to teach word analysis and to build vocabulary from units of study. Teachers may also use these words to focus on spelling rules (Brabham & Villaume, 2001). Overall, the word wall focuses on mastering high-frequency words that are in texts (Cooper & Kiger, 2003).

Word wall activities are incorporated to give students the opportunity to use these words in various ways. These words then become anchored in long-term memory allowing quick and easy access, promoting detection of patterns, and encouraging connections between words (Hall & Cunningham, 1999). Therefore, word wall activities provide interactive ways to learn high-frequency words as they build word recognition by providing a visual and active engagement with words (Callella, 2001). The word wall activities in this study are listed in Table 1. Upon practice and completion of these activities readers may begin to recognize basic sight words rapidly and independently improve fluency in reading (Almasi, 2003).

**Table 1. Word Wall Activities Used in Study**

- Be the Teacher — students make up a quiz and quiz their partners on the word wall words through a spelling test
- Guess That Word — students give hints to what word they are thinking of by describing the formation of the word
- Let’s Be Creative — students write a story that consists of as many word wall words as possible
- Letters in My First Name — students write their name vertically and then match two word wall words to each letter in their name
- Letters in Words — students pick ten word wall words and then find two or more words that have the same letter as the original word
- Rainbow Writing — students write the words from the word wall in different crayons focusing on the configuration of the word while writing
- Shape of Words — students focus on letter formation (tall, small, and dropped letters) in the word wall words and write the words that are tall, small, and dropped
The Effects of Word Walls and Word Wall Activities

- **Word Wall Toss** — student passes a beach ball to another student and asks him or her to say and spell a word that is currently on the word wall
- **Wordo** — similar to Bingo, but with word wall words in the game squares
- **Words in ABC Order** — students pick ten words and place them in the correct alphabetic order

**Related Studies**

Studies on fluency development often begin with children in the third grade and with primary aged children, most assessments measure word reading accuracy (Speece & Ritchey, 2005) thus, fluency studies are limited. Speece and Ritchey (2005) studied 276 first graders to determine the development of oral reading fluency during the initial stages of reading acquisition and identify predictors of growth throughout first grade and into second grade. This study suggested that along with an introduction to word recognition, often taught in first grade, skills related to fluency development may need to be taught concurrently. Student levels of fluency in the first grade will affect second grade reading performance; therefore, teachers need to incorporate overt instruction of fluency skills into reading instruction (Speece & Ritchey, 2005).

Harmon, Wood, Hendrick, Vintinner, and Willeford (2009) found that word walls have the potential for enhancing vocabulary learning in seventh grade students in conjunction with other instructional methods. Forty-four seventh graders participated in this study. Twenty-three students, working in small groups or as a class, self-selected words from the word wall and were engaged in specific word learning activities. The second group consisted of 21 students engaged in word learning activities from a vocabulary book. Harmon, et al. (2009) found that students who self-selected words enjoyed that process and were more likely to complete activities because they were working collaboratively. Finally, students in the self-selected word group appeared to have a deeper level of understanding of vocabulary meaning as measured on a vocabulary assessment portion of a standardized test (Harmon, et al., 2009).

In an action research project, May (2004) conducted a study designed to improve the reading of high-frequency words with first grade students. Students first practiced reading words on flash cards for three weeks and then for another three weeks, with different words, students participated in word wall activities. Upon completion of the word wall activities, students showed greater levels of growth...
while reading the words, finishing sentences with the words, and taking spelling tests than they did when working with the flash cards (May, 2004). In addition, students enjoyed the word wall activities, which may have further impacted learning.

Walton (2000) conducted an action research project in which 63 first grade students in three different classes were interviewed to understand how they used word walls. This study revealed that students thought the word walls were useful as writing tools because the teachers had used them for writing activities. This suggests that teacher emphasis may affect student use of word walls (Walton, 2000).

**Description of the Action Research Project**

**Methodology**

This action research project employed a case study approach using multiple data collection strategies to establish credibility of the findings (Hendrick, 2009). Using multiple forms of data helps fill any gaps that may occur if only one data method were used (Hendrick, 2009; Mills, 2007). In addition, using triangulation to compare different data sources and to cross check data (Mills, 2007) improves the reliability and validity of the outcomes (Pine, 2009). One primary goal is to reach dialogical validity where action research may encourage reflective and critical dialogue among educators to discuss the literacy program and its use of word walls (Mills, 2007; Pine, 2009).

Two teacher researchers designed this study. One researcher was a college professor and field supervisor of student teachers who had observed ineffective use of word walls in primary classrooms. The other was a first grade teacher who experienced similar concerns and, as a result, implemented the study in her classroom. They collaboratively created the study, analyzed the data, and wrote the final report.

Twenty first grade students, 11 boys and nine girls, attending a rural public K-6 elementary school participated in this study. The students were six and seven years old with varied reading levels based upon the implementation of running records using the *Treasures* (MacMillan, 2009) reading series.

The teaching of reading in this classroom included a comprehensive literacy program that was integrative as skills and strategies were taught in context (Weaver, 2002). Stories were literature based and lessons incorporated phonics, spelling, grammar, and fluency throughout the daily reading and language arts period.
Read-alouds, shared reading, and independent reading were also regular activities. Writing was a daily activity and students were encouraged to use the word wall. In addition, center time was literacy based as students worked under teacher guidance. The teacher used whole class instruction when new concepts were introduced and small group instruction with students working collaboratively for reinforcement. The teacher also followed the process of scaffolding by providing support for learners until work could be completed independently (Weaver, 2002). Ultimately, reading and language arts skills and strategies were reinforced throughout the school day, and it is understood that each of these activities might have had some impact on reading fluency for each child.

One method of data collection used was the administration of a pre-running and post-running record. The purpose of a running record is to determine whether student reading materials are on the proper level and to obtain information about the word recognition processes students are using (Gunning, 1996). The pre- and post-running records consisted of recording miscues, self-correction rate, and words per minute. Pre- and post-tests were implemented to determine if growth could be assessed (Glanz, 2003) and were summative in nature (Hendrick, 2009). These assessments were administered to determine the fluency of individual children at a specific time. The pre-running record and post-running record used the same text and were age and grade appropriate for first graders.

The second method of data collection was teacher observation of five students completing word wall activities in the learning center. Because action research is meant to be used by practitioners during classroom instruction (Glanz, 2003), it would have been difficult to observe all students effectively, thus, the decision was made to focus on a random sample. Five student names were randomly chosen to be observed to see whether they were engaged in the specific word wall activities. In addition, the researchers observed a word wall learning center because that was the sole focus of student activity and student engagement could be more easily identified. These observations took the form of a three-point checklist, allowing the recording of instances of a behavior, activity, or practice (Glanz, 2003; Mills 2007). This three-point checklist consisted of a score of three, mastering the word wall activity; a score of two, completing it satisfactorily, defined as making one or two mistakes but understanding the assignment; or a score of one, defined as having many errors, resulting in lack of understanding of the assignment. This kind of data can help determine why an intervention was successful and how the setting impacted the study (Hendrick, 2009). The third method of data collection was interviews with
six students to gather information from participants about their experiences with word wall activities (Glanz, 2003; Hendrick, 2009). A sample was chosen because interviewing all of the students would not have been practical within the school day. The interview process was carefully explained as first graders often have not experienced interviews and their responses would most likely be repetitive. Once again students were chosen at random. The 10-minute interviews were based on a qualitative approach as questions were open-ended, but structured allowing the interviewer to ask all participants the same questions (Glanz, 2003; Mills, 2007). Anonymity was protected throughout this project and participant names were not used on the interview questionnaire or the observation checklist as they were assigned a number to assure confidentiality.

Framework of the Study

This study occurred over four weeks. In groups of four, students participated in one 40-minute learning word wall station a week and a 20-minute whole class activity three times a week. During the first week, a 40-word pre-running record was administered to all the participants. Following the completion of the pre-running record, the entire class did a 20-minute Wordo word wall activity. Other whole class word wall activities included at this time were Word Wall Toss and Rainbow Words (see Table 1 for explanation of word wall activities). Students then rotated through one 40-minute word wall station, which included Words in ABC order, The Shape of Words, and Be the Teacher. Other activities in this rotation were a reading station, a writing station, a poetry station, and a word building station.

During the second week, the students continued with their thrice weekly, 20-minute whole class instruction by playing the games Wordo, Guess That Word, and Word Wall Toss. During the one 40-minute station work, students completed Letters in Words, Letters in My First Name, and Words in ABC order.

The third week, students continued with their station work once a week and whole group instruction three times a week. They participated in Wordo and Word Wall Toss as a whole class. In the word wall station, they completed the activities of Be the Teacher, The Shape of Words, and Letters in Words. Within the third and fourth weeks, one teacher researcher observed five randomly chosen students to examine how accurately they were completing word wall activities during the 40-minute station time. In the fourth week, the participants were engaged in Wordo and Word Wall Toss as a whole class three times. For the 40-minute station work,
students completed Let’s Be Creative and Words in ABC Order. At the completion of the study, students were administered the post-running record. Once again, the focus was on student miscues, self-correction, and words read per minute. At the completion of this project, six randomly chosen students were interviewed.

**Data Analysis**

As can be seen in Table 2, the results of the pre- and post-running records indicated that reading fluency for these students increased by the end of this project. Students increased words read per minute as the mean increased from 41.4 to 63.7; indicating that at the completion of this project, participants read more words per minute. The relatively stable standard deviations, 21.4 and 20.9 respectively, suggest that improvement with all students did occur. However, the high standard deviations also indicate that even though most students improved, some students still struggled with reading fluency and reaching the 40-word per minute expectation for first grade students. When administering the post-running record, some students still struggled because they were focusing on sounding out the sight words.

**Table 2. Results of Pre and Post Running Record**

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>n =</th>
<th>Mean Words per Minute</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Running Record</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Running Record</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the three-point observation checklist, used to record student ability to complete the assignments, were mixed (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Observation Checklist**

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>n =</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words in ABC Order</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shape of Words</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be the Teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter in Words</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters in My First Name</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s Be Creative</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The mean scores on the activities Be the Teacher and Letters in My First Name were 3, with standard deviations of 0. Students had mastered these activities resulting in high-frequency word exposure. With the activities The Shape of Words, Letters in Words, and Let’s Be Creative the means were 2.8, 2.4, and 2.2 respectively and the standard deviations were 0.45, 0.55, and 0.45 respectively. Compared with the previous scores, the lower means and higher standard deviations may suggest that some students did not master the skills presented in these activities, but most participants did complete the work on a satisfactory level, showing understanding and recognition of most word wall words.

The activity that appeared to be the most challenging was Words in ABC Order, with a mean of 2.2 and standard deviation of 0.84. This indicated that only a couple of the participants might have completed this activity with a level of mastery. Because students needed more reinforcement with this activity, teacher observations suggested that the students might not have understood the directions, thus affecting performance. Many students made the same errors when completing this particular activity and, as the words were in alphabetical order on the word wall, students seemed confused as to how to take them out of such order and then place them back in ABC order. This resulted in the participants not completing the assignment accurately. Overall, this data revealed that a few students did struggle with some of the word wall activities. However, the checklist also showed activities in which the students were actively engaged and, therefore, may have helped to increase the use of high-frequency words.

Results of the interviews indicated that all students enjoyed word wall activities because “they were fun” and they believed that the activities helped them to learn the words. Most of the participants considered Be the Teacher their favorite activity because they liked to play school and enjoyed playing the role of a teacher. Contrarily, many students indicated that their least favorite activity was Words in ABC Order. As discussed above, students were confused by this activity and thought it too challenging, and, therefore, were less engaged. However, teachers should not be deterred from using an activity because students think it too challenging. This activity may have been better suited at a later time or been more clearly instructed. Overall, the enthusiasm presented by the participants indicated that their perceptions of word wall activities did help them to learn sight words which might have increased reading fluency.
Limitations

The participants in this study were first grade students. Therefore, the age of the students along with their distractibility could have affected performance. Also, student absenteeism may have affected the continuity of word wall activities as frequent absences did not permit the students to become familiar with the directions, as possibly seen through the results of the Words in ABC Order activity. Next, the small sample size affected the ability to generalize such results. Finally, a limitation within the project was that the observation checklist only measured the six activities students completed in the work stations. It did not address the whole group activities and their impact. Data collection was restricted to students at the work station to enable the occurrence of direct observation and anecdotal record keeping. Consequently, student learning may have also been influenced by whole class word wall activities as well as daily language arts and reading lessons.

Discussion

As seen in the triangulation of this project, word wall activities might have been a factor that helped to build and strengthen high-frequency word vocabulary resulting in the increase of words read per minute. Pre- and post-running records did indicate growth. Students increased words read per minute as the mean increased from 41.4 to 63.7 and the relatively stable standard deviations, 21.4 and 20.9 respectively, suggested that improvement with all students did occur. In addition, participant enthusiasm was expressed during interviews. This enthusiasm for the word wall activities might have positively affected the post-running record scores. The activity that proved to be most successful, as seen in the interview and observation checklist, was Be the Teacher. The participants indicated that “This activity was fun.” Many also said that they enjoyed this activity because, “I like to play teacher.” Overall, the participants did show growth in reading fluency and word walls and word wall activities might have supported this increase. The observation checklist helped to indicate which activities were most helpful and engaging to the participants. Because reading and language arts comprise a large portion of a primary student’s day, it is understood that daily lessons may have also impacted the results of this study. However, adding activities that relate to the word wall may result in positive student engagement and could be considered one more effective instructional strategy for teachers.

Results of this study suggest that word walls and word wall activities might be one strategy to help increase reading fluency. Teacher observations and running
records showed that all students read more fluently and could identify more high-frequency words. The specific activities that possibly further helped the participants to increase reading fluency were Be the Teacher and Letters in My First Name. These two activities had a mean of 3, and a standard deviation of 0, and most of the participants agreed that Be the Teacher was their favorite activity.

Although the post-running records indicated that some participants increased reading rate by only a couple of words per minute, others increased by a significant amount. This coupled with the interview and the observation checklist highly suggests that word walls and word wall activities might have influenced the increase of high-frequency word recognition. In addition, students were very enthusiastic about utilizing the word wall. Therefore, learning high-frequency words by using a word wall might have provided a context for active and ongoing learning (Callella, 2001).

The word walls and word wall activities used in this study might be effective in increasing reading fluency and this teacher will continue to utilize them as important components of the reading program. At the conclusion of this study, teacher observations revealed that students independently used the word wall without teacher prompting as an everyday tool for reading and writing. Additionally, this teacher saw improvement with student ability to recognize sight words in books, directions, and activities. For example, a student encountered a word that was on the word wall in a story and said, “I know that. It is on the word wall.” The students also helped each other by indicating to their peers that a particular word was on the word wall showing that they appeared to be using the word walls as a tool for reading and writing activities.

Conclusion

This project was designed to assess the impact of a word wall and word wall activities to help build reading fluency with first grade students. Results suggest that despite student varied academic abilities, the word wall activities were one factor that might have helped to build high-frequency word vocabulary. With the development of a more extensive high-frequency word vocabulary through the use of word wall activities, students might further increase reading fluency ultimately enhancing their reading comprehension.
References


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Dr. Joanne Jasmine is an Associate Professor of Education at Caldwell College in Caldwell, NJ. She is also the coordinator for the M.A. program in Curriculum and Instruction. Dr. Jasmine was formerly a language arts teacher.

Pamela Schiesl is a first grade teacher at Mansfield Township Elementary School in Port Murray, NJ. In addition, she has earned her M.A. degree in Curriculum and Instruction.
A quick trip to the local bookstore or library quickly dispels any notion that reading for pleasure is something of the past. In either place you’ll find tables and shelves filled with appealing books as well as patrons browsing for the latest offerings from their favorite authors or looking to catch the newest trends in publishing. Good books are once again starting to fill the book shelves as publishers send out their latest offerings. The tempting glossy covers and fresh topics force us to put aside last year’s favorites in favor of new ones. Among the new offerings, we have no trouble finding several interesting titles with a wide range of themes, many helping us examine issues with different lenses so that we see the world anew. We hope you’ll find much food for thought and many pages to browse among these new books that caught our attention. Clearly, these are good books for good times.

Grades K-2


Henrietta the hen loves to read so much that she reads every book on the farm a dozen times. Then she starts checking out books from the library. Her love of reading leads to a desire to write, prompting her to share a book about fiction writing with the other hens. Together they brainstorm the perfect elements of a story, and she writes and publishes a book. Although she is devastated when it receives a terrible review in *The Corn Book,* the story hour children love it! Teachers will find that this poultry parody goes a long way in teaching children about fiction writing!

Eldon Hog loves to watch the royals ride by in their splendid carriages. One day an overworked fairy explains that he is the Hog Prince and if he kisses the right woman he will become a prince. Smooches abound as Eldon seeks his royal soul-mate, but later he realizes that the best things in life are often close by. Jason Wolff’s enchanting illustrations add to this wildly funny transformation of the “Frog Prince.”


Cars zoom across the pages in this simple and unique picture book. With each flip of the page, the skies grow increasingly crowded, becoming more polluted until all traffic comes to a halt. With simple rhymes—“Save the planet, Janet”—a four-page spread reveals exactly what each of us can do to make a difference. The illustrator used recycled materials to create the engaging collages that effectively deliver her crucial message about more thoughtful consumption.


As salsa, mariachis, and Tejano melodies greet his ears, a young boy notes the beauty that surrounds his home in the barrio. Parties, parades, bodegas, dancing, food, and worship help him celebrate his culture and traditions. Diaz’s mixed media paintings and collages dance with the text, enabling readers to experience vicariously the joys of one neighborhood.


Coffelt introduces young children to the language of comparisons, synonyms, and antonyms in this fun read-aloud. Bright, colorful pictures of animals grace the pages and make vocabulary-building even more
appealing. For instance, a cheetah bounds across a two-page spread, and the text notes: “I’m fastest! I’m fleet. I’m meteoric. I’m hypersonic.”


Ramadan is coming, and 10-year-old Leena is excited to take part in the fasting. Since she is too young to fast every day, she decides to fast the day her aunt will be with her family. That same day she attends a friend’s birthday party but wonders if she will be able to maintain her fast when she sees the chocolate cake and lemonade. Later that evening, a special surprise more than makes up for her sacrifices during the day. Leena’s maturity is manifested in ways that go beyond her first fast.


The queen bee is having a royal ball for all of the insects. Dressed in their finest raiment, they are all having a splendid time when they both feel and hear the approach of a large creature. Will it destroy the insects and their party? This rhyming story explains how the mosquito earned his distinguished title by which we know him today.


In a story set many years ago, Yohei, a poor Japanese boy, sells fish to help his family earn their living. When his father becomes sick and needs both medicine and care, life becomes even more difficult as Yohei needs to sell enough fish to pay for his father’s medicine. When a stray cat appears at his door, he shares his meager meal with the cat and cleans the mud from her fur. The boy’s kindness to the feline is rewarded when the cat leads people who want to buy fish to Yohei’s home, making it possible for him to sell enough fish to pay the family’s bills and to care for his father at the same time. Eventually, Yohei is able to open his own store. This tale explains how the beckoning cat became a good luck symbol in Japan.

In watercolor illustrations and simple but informative text, this book describes different types of mountains such as the Tetons with their spreading ranges as well as Mount Kilimanjaro with its lonely cone. Readers will also note the species that have adapted in order to survive in the different types of mountains. Back matter includes detailed explanations of each of the 17 mountain images as well as a glossary, bibliography, and websites, all of which are sure to prompt readers to long for a trip to the nearest mountain peak. This title, with a preservation message that threads throughout its pages, is part of the “About Habitats” series.


Who knew that under all those icy flakes of winter a whole other world lives? This simple picture book shows readers the colorful ladybugs huddled close, the dormant snakes and woodchucks, the restive voles, the strangely quiet chipmunks, and the colorful salamanders and bluegills, all of whom take life a little bit more slowly during the winter while they wait for spring. This unique perspective on the natural living world beneath the white surface, coupled with elegant watercolor illustrations that almost seem to pulse slowly and highlight the vividness of the creatures that rest nearby, is engaging.


Life seems to be different when Ava Tree wakes up on her eighth birthday. It is more than the special backwards and inside out birthday party her older brother
has planned for her. Ava Tree thinks she has developed wishing power. As she experiments with this new gift, she realizes that some wishes bring lasting joy to her friends, and some bring only temporary results; others are not at all what she had hoped for. Is it possible that she is taking advantage of this new found power?


War erupts in Allie Finkle’s fourth grade class when a new student transfers from Canada. More worldly than the other girls, Cheyenne leads the attack on the playground as the girls chase the boys so she can kiss them. Social pressure forces all the girls in Allie’s group to start going with boys, and Allie grows increasingly uncomfortable with the peer pressure that changes her classmates and friends, one by one. In the third of a series, each chapter heading is a rule that Allie lives by to make life run smoothly. Allie is refreshingly independent and not afraid to remain a kid, but it isn’t easy. Once she understands the situation, Mrs. Hunter, the class teacher, takes a firm stance on fourth graders trying to grow up too soon.


Fourth grader Sassy Simone hates being the smallest member of her class and family, and she really dislikes being called Little Sister. She is, after all, more than just a little sister, and her own Sassy Sack contains everything needed during any emergency. When the family is trapped on an outing, Sassy uses her diminutive size to their advantage. Readers will smile at her sassy personality, fashion sense and style, and her dreams of having a color for every day of the week. As she asks her friends, why can’t they wear cool colors such as fuschia, guava, or persimmon instead of their drab school uniforms? The relationship between Sassy and her storyteller grandmother is especially strong. Readers will look for more books about this original character with a personality that matches her name.

The eye-popping visuals in this essential title on today’s ever-changing technology, combined with just enough description to intrigue readers, make this a must-have for any school or library collection. Web-savvy readers are sure to delight in quoting interesting facts about wave farms, nanorobots, and graphic games, just to name a few of the topics covered in this offering, part of the new Navigators series. Look closely at this one when it arrives because it won’t be on the shelf for long.


Ten-year-old Isabelle’s life changes when she receives an apple from a large elephant seal. First, she is rescued from a dismal life in a rainy, boggy town where she stayed at a horrid boarding house and worked at a dreary factory. She then learns that she is the only surviving member of a family that tends the world’s only remaining magic-producing farm. As she discovers her new powers and gifts, Isabelle is torn between staying at the magical farm and returning to help her friends in the boarding house and factory.

**Grades 6-8**


Looking for a way to save the family’s Vermont farm after an injury in 2005, Tyler’s father hires a migrant Mexican family, the adult members who are in the country without proper papers. Tyler, 11, is upset that his father is breaking the law, but over time, he becomes close to the children, particularly the oldest daughter, Mari, who writes letters to her mother who has returned to Mexico because of an ailing relative. There are many subplots woven skillfully throughout the book, allowing the author to show the complexity of immigration, the injustice of some
laws, and the ability of people to change. Readers will fall in love with Mari who keeps hoping everything will work out fine.


At her twelfth birthday party Rissa, who has been feeling increasingly disconnected from her mall rat friends, finally stands up for herself and lets her friends know that she doesn’t approve of the way they treat others. What she regards as herd behavior prompts them to tease others and dress and behave exactly the same. Not even Rissa’s mother or older sister can understand why she chooses to unlink herself from her group of friends at the start of middle school. Her declaration of independence is not smooth sailing either. Rissa finds it even harder to fit in since just about everyone in middle school already seems to have their own set of friends. She soon realizes that independence comes with a price, and that even her new friend isn’t perfect. How can Rissa be true to herself when she’s not even sure who that is? Readers will identify with this portrait of group-think mentality, bullying, and courage, with a few humorous missteps along the way.


Grandma Dowdel, who gained her fame in *A Year Down Yonder* and *A Long Way from Chicago*, is back! It is now 1958, and this time it is an entire family of five that she helps instead of easing a single person’s transition to her small, bully-filled town. Mrs. Dowdel’s gifts help them all - from 11-year-old Bob who finds himself tied up, naked and dangling over her outhouse hole to his older Elvis-obsessed sister, Phyllis, who has not made the best choice of friends or boyfriend to their father who is a new minister trying to get his first church started. Readers will discover that some gifts are only for the moment while others can last an entire lifetime.

In the fifth outing for the younger sister of detective Sherlock Holmes, Enola must come to the rescue of Mrs. Tupper, her landlady, who has been kidnapped. Following clues found in a crinoline in the woman’s wardrobe, the enterprising Enola traces the kidnappers’ path to the home of Florence Nightingale, who was engaged in secret communications during the Crimean War. Nightingale has taken to her bed, and commands a vast volunteer army of social activists from her home. Readers will be particularly taken by the protagonist’s personality and the close calls she has as she and her more famous brother’s paths grow ever closer. While the plot and the war may be of little interest to some, they will surely clamor for more from Springer as Enola herself just keeps getting more interesting.


Seventh grade certainly can be confusing, and what’s a level-headed girl to do when all her friends are swooning over boys, and love is in the air? Briefly, Emma-Jean, the quirky individualist first introduced in 2007’s *Emma-Jean Lazarus Fell Out of a Tree*, finds herself responding to the call of love, and she contemplates inviting her friend Will Keeler to the seventh grade dance. Complications arise, and Emma-Jean comes to her senses in the nick of time, realizing that friendship just may be more important than a crush. There is romance afoot at home as well, and as she did in the first book, Emma Jean adds her own ingredients to make things go smoothly.
Grades 9-12


Freed from responsibilities by a snow day, 17-year-old Mia and her family leave their Oregon home to visit friends. A car wreck kills her parents and brother Teddy, and Mia lingers in a coma, trying to decide if she should go or stay. As her family and friends visit her bedside, reminding her of their love, Mia reflects on her life so far and what she considered to be a difficult choice about whether to leave her boyfriend for musical training as a cellist at Juilliard in New York. The writing is elegant, and Mia’s ruminations on her past life and future pain are thought-provoking.


Set in 1899 in rural Tallulah, Louisiana, this riveting account of bigotry along the bayous is based on a true story of the lynching of five Sicilians, recent immigrants to the country. The family grows and sells produce to blacks and whites alike, staying to themselves for the most part, but misunderstandings and ignorance are simmering just below the surface. Fourteen-year-old Calogero is at the heart of the tale, and the author uses his innocence about racial and ethnic mores and boundaries in the South to trace the town’s growing hostility to his family, a hostility that ends in tragedy and leaves readers pondering how quickly we can become caught up in mob justice.

About the Authors:
Terrell A. Young is on the faculty at Washington State University in Richland, Washington and Barbara A. Ward is an eighth grade Language Arts teacher in Tallulah, LA.
## Articles Index

### Volume 49

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An Analysis of Feedback Given to Strong and Weak Student Writers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|   Janet L.D. Dinnen  
|   Rachel M.B. Collopy                                                 |       |      |
| An Exploration of University Students’ Spelling Ability                | 1     | 53   |
|  
|   Mary Jo Fresch                                                    |       |      |
| Books that Especially Appeal to Boy Readers                           | 2     | 191  |
|  
|   Terrell A. Young  
|   Barbara A. Ward                                                    |       |      |
| Brave, Determined, and Strong: Books for Girls (and Sometimes Boys)    | 3     | 257  |
|  
|   Barbara A. Ward  
|   Terrell A. Young                                                   |       |      |
| Fluency, Text Structure, and Retelling: A Complex Relationship         | 2     | 101  |
|  
|   Lynn Cohen  
|   Rosanne L. Krustedt  
|   Maria May                                                          |       |      |
| Going Green: Books that Invite Wonder and Action about Earth’s Endangered Environment | 1     | 89   |
|  
|   Terrell A. Young  
|   Barbara A. Ward                                                   |       |      |
| Good Books for Good Times                                             | 4     | 315  |
|  
|   Terrell A. Young  
<p>|   Barbara A. Ward                                                   |       |      |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Volume</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten Teachers Speak Out: Too Much, Too Soon, Too Fast!</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia A. Gallant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension Strategies in Secondary Content Area Classrooms: Teacher Use of and Attitudes Towards Reading Comprehension Instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly K. Ness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading the Past: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Reading Methods and Materials</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlene L. Barry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational Reading: Useful Tips for Successful Implementation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine Wiesendanger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gretchen Braun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannine Perry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ Perceptions of “Fun” Suggest Possibilities for Literacy Learning: “You Can be Entertained and Informed”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandi Gribble Mathers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects of Word Walls and Word Wall Activities on the Reading Fluency of First Grade Students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne Jasmine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela Schiesl</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reading Experiences and Beliefs of Secondary Pre-service Teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy Daisey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Relationship of Drawing, Writing, Literacy, and Math in Kindergarten Children</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Steffani</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula Selvester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the Cultural-Linguistic Divide in American Classrooms: Language Learning Strategies for a Diverse Student Population</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry P. Holmes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Rutledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lane Roy Gauthier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Untapped Cultural Support: The Influence of Culturally Bound Prior Knowledge on Comprehension Performance
Ruanda Garth-McCullough

What Does TV Viewing Have to do with Internet Reading?: Readers, Television “Texts,” and Intertextual Links to Companion Websites
Rachel Brown
## Author Index

### Authors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barry, Arlene</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Kansas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braun, Gretchen</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longwood University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown, Rachel</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syracuse University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen, Lynn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Island University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collopy, Rachel M.B.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Dayton</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisey, Peggy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Michigan University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinnen, Janet L.D.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheyenne Mountain Charter Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresch, Mary Jo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ohio State University at Marion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallant, Patricia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Michigan - Flint</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garth-McCullough, Ruanda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyola University of Chicago</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauthier, Lane Roy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmes, Kerry P.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine, Joanne</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caldwell College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krustedt, Rosanne L.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fordham University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathers, Brandi Gribble</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geneva College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May, Maria</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherry Lane Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ness, Molly</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fordham University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perry, Jeannine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longwood University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutledge, Susan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Mississippi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schiesl, Pamela</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansfield Township Elementary School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selsey, Paula</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of California</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steffani, Susan</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of California</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward, Barbara A.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington State University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiesendanger, Katherine</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longwood University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, Terrell</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington State University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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*Reading Horizons* began in 1960 as a local newsletter and has developed into an international journal serving major colleges, universities, and individual subscribers across the United States and Canada as well as a host of other countries. The journal serves as a forum for ideas from many schools of thought dedicated to building upon the knowledge base of literacy through research, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies, and syntheses of best practices. *Reading Horizons* seeks to bring together school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents, and community leaders as they work collaboratively to widen the horizons of literacy and the language arts.

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Recreational Reading: Useful Tips for Successful Implementation
Katherine Wiesendanger, Ph.D., Gretchen Braun, Ph.D., and Jeannine Perry, Ph.D., Longwood University

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