Meeting the Need: A Look into Academic Supports to Maximize Reading Development of ELL Identifying Students

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Abstract

This study examined the reading development of emergent bilingual students given varying combinations of academic support services. Participants were divided into three study groups: Group A consisting of students only receiving small group instruction; Group B consisting of students receiving small group instruction and after school tutoring; and Group C consisting of students receiving small group instruction, after school tutoring, and ESL pull-out services. The reading level of participants was measured using a Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment, and participant's progression in their reading examination scores was observed through analysis of their MAP reading test scores. Results from this study showed that a larger amount of academic support services can be more beneficial for student achievement on reading examinations; however, providing students with solely small group instruction may be more effective for improving students' reading ability.

Keywords: Emergent Bilingual, English Language Learner, Small Group Instruction, Tutoring, ESL Pull-out Services

1. *Introduction*

Over the past several years, the Emergent bilingual (EL) student population has become one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States and continues to increase. Although learning a second language, EL students have been expected to complete tasks using the English language and have been held to an expectation of producing the same quality work as non-EL students. For many English Learners, this expectation may not be one that is realistic for them at the current point of their academic journey. A common notable theme over the past several years, both pre and post covid, has been that ELL students are experiencing lower academic achievement, specifically lower reading achievement for both testing scores and general reading level.

A major goal in education is to close the achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs. "In 2022, the average NAEP reading score for 4th-grade EL (English Learner) students (190) were lower than the score for their non-EL peers (222). This pattern was true for every assessment year since 1998, when NAEP reading scores disaggregated by students' EL (English Learner) status first became available." (National

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Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This trend can also be seen in the reading scores for 8th grade and 12th grade EL students according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

variety of research studies have been conducted to better support ELLs (English Language Learner) in their reading development. These studies examined instructional strategies and elements of reading that can better help English Language Learners succeed academically in the classroom. The goal of this research is to close the achievement gap between ELL identifying students and non-ELL students, as well as maximizing the proficiency of ELLs (English Language Learner) in conversational and academic language.

So how do educators close this achievement gap? Polat and Mahalingappa express that "the public school system must ensure that the quality of education provided to ELLs matches the quality provided to English speaking students" (Polat&Mahalingappa, 2013, p. 58). Studies have looked at teaching strategies and learning skills that are most effective for helping ELLs learn to read and dominate academic language. Research has "found that explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, oral reading, fluency, and reading comprehension strategies is beneficial to students;" and more recent research has shown the importance of explicit instruction in "word study, fluency, and writing" as well. (Swanson et. al, 2017, p.199-200).

Many academic support services have been established to help students reach academic goals, including ESL services, tutoring services, summer school services, and a variety of others. Research has shown that academic support services, such as tutoring, can be beneficial for students. For example, studies have concluded that "Individualized tutoring has been found to be one of the most effective ways to improve educational outcomes with non-professional peer tutors" (Haynes, Coneway, and Meador, 2021). This study will examine how a combination of these support services impacts the reading progression and reading goal attainment of ELL identifying students.

This research allowed for greater understanding of why ELL students may struggle with their reading, and additional understanding of instructional strategies and supports that can be used to improve the reading development of ELL students. This added to existing knowledge by examining the correlation between the number of support services received and academic achievement. Through this study, it is hoped that gathered information will lead to greater awareness of effective utilization of academic support services for ELL students; and increase access to such services for ELL students.

1.1 Purpose Statement

This study focused on the academic support services being received by ELL students. This study's purpose was to understand how a combination of academic support services affects the rate at which students develop in their reading and the magnitude of their overall reading progress. The guiding question for this study was asking: Will English Language Learners experience greater reading development given more support services? For example, can ELL students reach their target goals through solely small group intervention, or is it necessary for additional support to be used?

This study will examine the following problem, statement, and research question:

- Problem: Students are struggling to read on grade level
- Objective: To improve the reading ability of students
- Research Question: How does being an Emergent Bilingual affect a student's reading development during an academic school year and which combination of supports (small group, tutoring, and pull-out services) best assists Emergent Bilinguals?

This research allowed for greater understanding of why ELL students may struggle with their reading, and additional understanding of instructional strategies and supports that can be used to improve the reading development of ELL students. This added to existing knowledge by examining the correlation between the number of support services received and academic achievement. Through this study, it is hoped that

gathered information will lead to greater awareness of effective utilization of academic support services for ELL students; and increase access to such services for ELL students.

For the purpose of this study, reading development is defined as a student's ability to read increasingly more difficult books with fluency and minimal errors. Academic achievement is defined as the improvement of a student's reading level on a Fountas and Pinnell reading scale, as well as the improvement of a student's reading test scores on their MAP examinations. Lastly, academic support services are defined as additional instruction that takes place in order to aid students with their reading ability.

2. *Literature Review*

Literature about supports for Emergent Bilinguals in reading consist of a mixture of results regarding the effectiveness of academic support services on improving student achievement in the content area of reading. In this literature review, the focus is on small group instruction, tutoring, and ESL pull-out services, and how these support services impact the progression of the reading ability of students.

2.1 English Language Learners

English Language Learners can be defined as "students who speak a native language other than English and are in the process of acquiring English language proficiency" (Brooks and Thurston, 2010, p.46). Research has shown that "ELLs differ from non-ELLs in that they must learn grade-level content while also acquiring the language used for instruction. Moreover, developing English reading skills tends to be an area in which many ELLs struggle" (Snyder, Witmer, & Schmitt, 2016, p. 136). When it comes to learning a second language, "students have two levels of language proficiency: 'basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS)' and 'cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)'" (Bolos, 2012, p.14). For English Language Learners, the basic interpersonal communication skills tend to be picked up quicker through the continuous exposure to the world around them. However, cognitive academic language proficiency skills are essential for students as they learn to read in a new language.

2.2 Small Group Instruction

Past research on academic interventions and their impact on student academic achievement has encountered varying results in terms of their effectiveness. A variety of studies have found particular academic supports to be effective in improving academic achievement of students, whereas other studies have gathered results showing the opposite. One intervention that has shown itself consistent in its effectiveness is small group intervention. In Dussling's(2020)study on small group reading intervention and its impact on student achievement,Dussling found that "individuals taught in small reading groups composed of ELLs from a variety of language backgrounds and native English-speakers benefited from the code-oriented intervention, reinforcing the use of evidence-based instruction and more inclusive classroom teaching practices" (p. 256).

In a study examining "the relative effects of an evidence-based, time-efficient 1/1 intervention and SG intervention for ELLs with reading difficulties", Ross and Begeny (2011) found small group instruction to be an effective intervention for improving the reading fluency of English Language Learners (p. 615). In their literature review, Ross and Begeny found a number of studies whose findings "suggest that [Small Group] interventions successfully improve students' oral reading fluency and have the potential to improve other reading skills, such as comprehension" (p. 605). Findings from past research studies examined by Ross and Begeny also suggest "that some students may benefit as much, or even more, from SG instruction compared with 1/1 instruction" (p. 605).

2.3 Tutoring

Tutoring is another intervention utilized throughout education to support students in closing learning gaps in their academics. In Beck and Pace's book, the authors discuss the benefit of offering extra learning opportunities throughout the day's a way to help ELL students be successful in their academic journey.

Beck and Pace recommend giving ELL students opportunities that allow them to be in more personalized settings where they can receive interventions for concepts or assignments directly from the teacher, such as what can be seen through tutoring.

Hock et al (2001) describe three different styles of tutoring: Instructional Tutoring, Assignment-Assistance Tutoring, and Strategic Tutoring. Hock et al describe Instructional Tutoring as tutoring in which "the dominant nature of the tutoring activities is aligned with" instructional practices such as direct instruction, scaffolding, and constructive feedback; "and that primarily targets instruction in literacy skills" (Hock et al, 2001, p. 173).Assignment-Assistance Tutoring is described as a model of tutoring in which "a tutor meets with either an individual or a small group of two to six students...to help each student with the assignments or tasks the student brings to the tutoring sessions. Thus, assignment-assistance tutoring is generally a model in which a tutor provides small-group or one-to-one homework assistance" (p. 173). In Strategic Tutoring, "strategies for learning how to learn and perform are taught to students while they receive help with class assignments" (p.173). In Strategic Tutoring, "tutors combine the elements of assignment-assistance tutoring (i.e., help with pressing homework demands) with elements of instructional tutoring (i.e., direct instruction in skills and strategies)" (p.173).

For their study, Hock, et al. (2001) conducted two studies examining the effectiveness of using strategic tutoring as a means to increase the academic performance of students. Hock, et al. express that past research has shown mixed results from tutoring; for example, some studies have concluded "that tutoring works sometimes and under certain conditions" whereas other studies "have reported that one-to-one tutoring has been an extremely effective intervention" (p. 172-173).Hock, et al. explain that different models of tutoring (instructional tutoring vs assignment-assistance tutoring vs strategic tutoring), differing expected outcomes associated with different models of tutoring, and the training undergone by tutors may contribute to mixed results seen in past results studies evaluating tutoring as a means to increase academic achievement (Hock, et al., 2001).

Through their study Hock, et al.(2001) found strategic tutoring to be "effective in improving the quiz and test performance of students" as well as improving their overall semester grades for their class (p. 178).Haung (2013), similarly, gathered results supporting after school tutoring as a method of improving student performance in both math and science for 4th grade and 8th grade students in their 2013 study.Results from Zimmer,et al. (2010), on the other hand, showed that student participants saw improvement in math achievement as a result of tutoring, however, significant improvement in reading achievement was not seen. In their article, Zimmer, et al.examined the effect of after school tutoring on student academic achievement in reading and math. Past research explored by Zimmer, et al. also showed mixed results on the impact of tutoring on academic achievement; however, in contrast to the studies of Hock, et al. (2001) and Haung (2013), results from Zimmer, et al.contributed to themixedresultsfound in past research studies.

2.4ESL Pull-out Services

Another intervention purposed to support English Language Learners in their academic achievement is ESL (English as a Second Language) services. The effectiveness of Pull-out services has also seen mixed results through past research studies. York-Barr, et al. (2007) discuss the use of collaborative instruction in which educators partner together to combine instructional practices and knowledge in order to increase student learning. York-Barr, et al.reference past findings of pull-out services being less effective for improving learning for ELL students. The article quotes "Even though federal law requires students receiving special education and ELLs to access the general education curriculum, such students often experience limited access and low expectations given the disconnect between what is taught in general education and what is taught through specialized services" (p. 303). Through their findings,York-Barr, et al.were able to conclude collaborative instruction as a positive teaching strategy in contrast to pull-out services. Teachers who used collaborative instruction as part of York-Barr, et al. study reported seeing student progress in areas of reading and math.

Han and Bridglall(2009) also discussthe relationship between academic services and student achievement in their research article.The researchers, again, voice the trend of the United States to utilize more ESL pull-out services although content area programs have been shown to be more beneficial for ELL students. Through their study, Han and Bridglall examined the reading and math testing results of kindergarten, first grade, third grade, and fifth grade students in relation to student background information, school environment, and ESL instruction services. Results from the study showed that students experienced improvement in their reading performance through the use ESL instructional services, but were unable to match the reading assessment performance of English-speaking students. The article verbalized"that schools with more language-related instructional services (e.g., ESL or bilingual programs) may help promote ELL students' academic achievement. However, recent research suggests that such language programs need to be implemented for at least six to eight years in order for the long-term benefits on ELL students' academic performance to become apparent" (p. 446).

3. *Study Design*

The study population for this study included first grade students ranging from ages 6-7 years old, and all participants we reclassified as English Language Learners in the Ellevation Education online system used by their school. The study consisted of 5 English Language Learner identifying first grade students who each received small group instruction and the general phonics curriculum instruction as a baseline. These students received differing academic support services focused on their reading development, in addition to small group instruction and the general phonics curriculum facilitated in their homeroom. Quantitative data was used to address the research question of this study. Reading test scores from participants' seasonal MAP exams and the reading level progression based on leveled books used during students' small group instruction time were examined. Study participants were divided into three groups:

- [Group A]: Students receiving only small group intervention from their homeroom teacher.
- [Group B]: Students receiving small group intervention from homeroom teacher and additional tutoring services after school.
- [Group C]: Students receiving small group intervention from homeroom teacher, ESL pull out services, and additional tutoring services after school.

Using the groups above, the test score progression from Fall-Spring and the reading level progression using leveled readers were tracked and compared. For each seasonal period of the academic year (Fall, Winter, Spring), the reading level of each student participant was assessed using a Fountas and Pinnell (F&P) benchmark reading assessment. During this assessment, students were asked to read a Fountas and Pinnell leveled book. Thestudentsability to comprehend the book being read, as well as the number of mistakes the student committed while reading the book,were tracked. Students that displayed appropriate comprehension of the book read and were able to read the book with the minimal amount of mistakes allowed according to the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessment guide, were considered proficient in reading on the level of the particular book.

4. *Results*

Results from this studyconveyhow students performed given the academic services they were provided. Listed below are graphical representations depicting how participants performed given their combination of academic support services (Figure 2 andFigure 3) anda Fountas and PinnellInstructional Level Expectations for Reading graphic (Figure 1) depicting how Fountas and Pinnell letter levels align with grade level expectations in terms of students reading ability. Results for this study suggest a positive correlation between students receiving academic interventions of small group instruction, tutoring, and ESL pull-out services and their reading progression.

Figure 1. Instructional Level Expectations for Reading (Fountas and Pinnell, 2016)

Fig 2. Individual Reading Growth Progression on Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

	Fall Reading Level	Spring Reading Level
Group A		
Student A	A	E
Student B	B	J
Student C	B	G
Group B		
Student D	B	F
Group C		
Student E	A	E

Fig 3. Individual and Group Average MAP Reading Test Scores Based on supports received

	Fall Reading Score	Winter Reading Score	Spring Reading Score	Fall-Spring Growth (± Points)
Group A				
Student A	138	149	154	+16 points
Student B	160	153	163	+3 points
Student C	146	155	165	+19 points
Group B				
Student D	149	166	171	+22 points
Group C				
Student E	141	150	163	+22 points

4.1 Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment

Figure 2 shows that students who received only small group instruction (Group A) experienced the most growth in their reading level on a Fountas and Pinnell scale. Students from Group A grew an average of 5.66 reading levels, whereas Group B grew 4 reading levels, and Group C also grew 4 reading levels. Growth was similar across each study group however, student B displayed the most growth, growing 8 reading levels.

4.2 MAP Test Scores

For MAP test scores, Figure 3 suggests a positive correlation between reading test performance and students receiving small group instruction interventions, small group instruction with additional tutoring services, and small group instruction with both tutoring and additional ESL pull-out services. Findings from this study show that students who received small group instruction with additional tutoring services (Group B), and those who received tutoring and ESL pull-out services in addition to small group instruction (Group C)displayed the highest growth on their reading MAP test, each growing 22 points from Fall to Spring. Students who only received small group instruction (Group A) did display growth in their reading MAP score, averaging a growth of +12.67 points for their study group; however, this was the lowest growth seen from each of the three study groups. These results suggest that each grouping of academic interventions is beneficial for student progression in their reading test scores; however, receiving tutoring and/or ESL pull-out services in addition to small group instruction may be more effective for academic improvement than small group instruction alone.

5. *Discussion*

Analyzing the results from this study, similarities were seen with the conclusions drawn from previous research studies that observed mixed results on the benefits of differing academic interventions. Interpretations of this study's results allow for inferences to be made on the effectiveness of varying combinations of academic support services in increasing student achievement in their reading ability and reading test performance.

5.1 Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

Based on the results found in this study, our findings show that a combination of support services does not contribute to additional growth in a student's reading level in comparison to only receiving small group instruction as a sole intervention. Figure 2 gives a depiction of reading levels of student participants and how they progressed from Fall to Spring. Each student participant showed growth in their reading level regardless of the intervention being used. On average, students who only participated in small group instruction (Group A) displayed the most progression in their reading level, supporting the findings from Ross and Begeny whose dive into literature found that small group instruction may be a more effective intervention strategy than one to one intervention (Ross and Begeny, 2011).

As mentioned, all interventions (small group instruction, tutoring, and ESL pull-out services) led to growth. A question that arises is if all students received small group instruction during the study, why did students that received additional academic supports not exhibit more growth than those who only received small group instruction? There are a variety of possible reasons for this question. In the case of tutoring, Hock et al (2001) found that Strategic Tutoringwas the most effective form of tutoring. In this study, Instructional Tutoring was used. In the case of ESL pull-out services, York-Barr et al (2007) mentioned that there is a possibility of disconnect between the instruction in the classroom and the instruction that occurs in the ESL intervention setting.

5.2 MAP Test Scores

Figure 3 shows that each grouping of academic supports led to improvement in participants reading MAP test scores. Results from this study suggest that additional intervention services in combination with small group instruction may be most effective for helping students maximize their performance on their reading MAP test. These results seen from participants MAP test scores raise a second question being why was a combination of support services more effective for students in terms of their MAP test scores, but less effective in terms of their reading level?

A possible reason could be that the skills students were learning during additional interventions of tutoring and ESL pull-out services may have been more aligned to what is assessed on the reading MAP test. Ross and Begeny's (2011) study mentioned that small group instruction allowed students to progress in their reading fluency; and because reading fluency was the primary skill being targeted during the small group instruction time for study participants, those who only received small group instruction in this study may not have obtained enough exposure to other skills being tested on the reading MAP exam.

5.3 Limitations

A variety of limitations were present in this study. One limitation for the study included that recruited participants came into the study with varying English proficiency levels. This enabled some participants to enter the study reading at a higher level than others. Further limitations of this study included the sample size; the sample size of this study was a small number at five students, which can affect the significance of the results found. In addition, each study group did not consist of the same number of participants; for example, Group A consisted of three students, whereas Groups B and C contained only one student each.

Other limitations of this study included uncontrollable factors such as the emotional state of students during their testing session, which has the potential to affect student performance on an examination; the school attendance of study participants; and the family engagement in the academics of study participants while at home. Some participants were absent for more instructional days than others, which reduced the overall amount of time that they were present to receive their respective academic support services throughout the school year. Additionally, it is possible that the varying levels of growth exhibited by participants could be a result of differing levels of family involvement in the participants academics, such as homework help or reading instruction.

MAP test scores did fluctuate up and down for some participants throughout the academic year. This also could be for a variety of reasons; a few reasons being that students may not have received the appropriate instruction needed to improve their MAP test score, or other factors presenting themselves during the testing session such as rushing, confusion of directions, etc.

6. *Conclusion*

Results from this study support what has been found in other studies that providing English Language Learners with learning supports can benefit their learning. Findings from this study showed that small group instruction alone may be a more effective option in aiding the development of a student's reading level; however, small group instruction by itself may not be enough to allow students to achieve their highest potential on reading examinations such as the MAP test. All combinations of utilizing the academic support services examined in this study proved to be beneficial for assisting students in their reading level progression and improvement of their reading examination scores.

These results contradict findings from past research studies whose results found ESL pull-out services and tutoring to be ineffective interventions (Zimmer, et al., 2010; York-Barr, et al., 2007). However, results from this study do support past research findings claiming ESL pull-out services and tutoring to be less effective options in comparison to small group instruction alone in terms of developing the reading level of students (Han and Bridglall, 2009). Overall, results from this study showed that a greater number of academic support services can be more beneficial in particular areas of a student's academic development and less beneficial in other areas. For a student's reading level, results from this study show that providing more academic supports does not correlate with greater reading progression in a student's reading level; however, more academic supports do correlate with improved reading test scores.

In the future, a larger sample size should be used, as well as an equal number of participants for each study group, in order to increase the validity of the results gathered from this study. Collaborative instruction could also be an option for educators to utilize as a tool to improve academic achievement of students. Classroom teachers could use collaborative instruction in conjunction with ESL teachers to reduce the disconnect between general classroom instruction and instruction provided through support services.

Going forward, an additional factor to investigate would be how families of English Language Learners could become involved to further improve reading progression of their students. An additional question to explore could be how applying what is currently known about effective instructional strategies could improve the reading ability of students when that knowledge is given to families of ELL students who only read to their child in Spanish.

Regardless of the support used, any aid to student learning is a step in the right direction to improving the academic achievement of English Language Learners and continuing to push towards closing the achievement gap between ELL students and non-ELL students. This study may serve as further reason for educators to advocate for English Language Learners to be provided as many academic support services as possible throughout their learning day.

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