CALL FOR PAPERS

The Publications Officers are now accepting submissions for Volume 2, No. 1 of *Texas English Language Teaching* (TexELT), an online journal, a publication of Texas Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages-Region V (TexTESOL V).

This is a peer-reviewed electronic publication which will be posted on the TexTESOL V website and will be available free of charge to members through email Newsletter link and to the general public through the public access portions of the TexTESOL V website. **Submissions are due March 15, 2013.** It is anticipated that manuscripts selected for consideration will be sent to members of the peer jury of readers by March 25, 2013 and returned to the Publications Officers with Level One Protocol advice by April 20, 2013. Online publication is tentatively scheduled for August, 2013.

All submissions should be sent electronically to ritadeyoe@yahoo.com. If you do not receive a return email confirming receipt within three days, please send a follow-up email.

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**TexTESOL V Mission and Purposes (from TexTESOL V Constitution)**

**MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of TexTESOL V is to provide information, direction, and support to its membership in promoting excellence in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

**PURPOSES**

1. Work cooperatively toward the improvement of instruction in all programs that seek to provide learners with an opportunity to acquire English language skills and proficiency.
2. Provide opportunities for study and research.
3. Encourage professional development, participation, and leadership at the local and state levels.
4. Promote intercultural understanding and effective cross-cultural communication.
5. Cooperate in appropriate ways with other groups having similar concerns.

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**Editorial Process**

Manuscripts that meet the specifications listed will be reviewed by the Publications Coordinator and one other member of the TexTESOL V Board and/or other qualified readers, who will be selected for relevant background and interest in the topic.

If approved by both first readers, the manuscript will be assigned to a Peer Jury Reviewer for general editing advice and review.

If approved by only one person, it will be submitted to an additional reader and the majority decision will be final.

If neither of the first readers supports further development of the manuscript for this publication, the author will be notified accordingly.

If only minor editing is needed, the Publications Officers will make minor corrections. If substantial changes are needed or missing information is required, the author will be given the option to revise as requested or to withdraw the manuscript from consideration.
Publication Priorities

Action Research Reports
Brief reports on action research where the writer developed a plan to do something in a particular way to try to improve student outcomes and gives some evidence of having compared that approach with previous or simultaneous alternative approaches, evaluates the outcomes, and critically examines both implementation issues and outcomes. This does not need to be at the level of an experimental or quasi-experimental design, but ought to present evidence of thorough planning of details, and be based on a review of relevant available literature.

Critical Reviews of Textbooks, Teaching Materials, and Teacher Preparation Texts and Resources
Brief critical reviews of new textbooks and materials for teaching English or preparing teachers of English as a Second Language at any of the levels (elementary, secondary, adult, and higher education), pointing out personal experiences in using the text or materials—positive and negative—and/or detailing benefits and defects, as perceived by the reviewer, for the sorts of student populations our membership serves, within the North Texas context. TexTESOL V members work in both urban schools and colleges with extensive bilingual, newcomer and ESL programs and in rural districts with limited programs and few ESL-qualified professionals. The reviewer should state clearly his/her own context and experience and the settings for which the text or materials reviewed were considered.

Research Syntheses for Application
Well-structured syntheses of the best practices for our regional needs or the needs of a particular type of situation that exists in our region, according to research from a wide variety of sources, but with critical attention to "applicability", and the perceived quality of the research cited, whether qualitative or quantitative.

Criteria for Consideration

1. The research topic should be of fairly general interest to practicing ESL teachers at one or more of the levels addressed by our Interest Sections: Elementary, Secondary, Adult and/or Parent Education, Higher Education. This includes post-secondary ESL students and Bilingual/ESL Teacher Preparation.
2. The manuscript should be in Times New Roman 12pt font and should follow APA format 6th edition for citing all sources. You may request information on this format from the Publications Coordinator.
3. The manuscript should be sufficiently edited with regard to errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, idiomatic usage and document format to resolve all errors identified by Spell Check.
4. All sources should be cited properly and completely so that the reader can easily consult the original source or access it electronically if it is available online.
5. All authors are solely responsible for ensuring that no plagiarism occurs in their submissions, and authors whose work is selected for publication will need to sign a statement to that effect. At their option, the editors may submit papers to an anti-plagiarism service for originality comparisons.
6. No specific length is required because the online publication format does not create arbitrary limitations on the quantity that can be published. However, our members (and our peer jury) will prefer brevity with substance and simplicity with sufficient detail to comprehend fully the contexts and applications discussed.

Peer Reviewers and Editors for TexELT Texas English Language Teaching, Volume 1, Issue 1

Publications Coordinator for TexTESOL V; Editor, TexELT, I(1) Rita Deyoe-Chiullán, Ph.D.
Publications Copy Coordinator for TexTESOL V; Copy Editor, TexELT, I(1) Jey Venkatesan, Ph.D.
Technology Coordinator for TexTESOL V; Webmaster, TexELT, I(1) Angela Landt, M. A.
Primary Composition and Style Reviewer, TexELT, I(1) Margaret Redus, M. L. A.
Content Reviewer, TexELT, I(1) Mary Peacock, M. A.
Content Reviewer, TexELT, I(1) Les Brinkerhoff, M. A.
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Welcome to the first issue of Texas English Language Teaching (TexELT)

Several factors compelled me to ask the Board of TexTESOL V to give their blessing to this enterprise. As a college professor engaged in preparing bilingual and ESL teachers over many years, I have encountered difficulties in providing useful readings for my students that would encourage them to do action research in their classrooms and then offer the results in a public forum for others to learn from. Also, as a professor with the obligation to produce research worthy of publication, I found the competitive challenge of seeking to share my voice in major journals often was not compatible with modest research efforts. Only the few and the famous seemed to regularly secure a place at those tables. In addition, publications that welcomed practical applications of research to teaching were often print-only venues with limited dissemination. These venues did not permit access to the work without purchase, fees, or memberships that were typically too costly for students, teachers, or faculty with an interest in a particular article who lacked the funds required for access.

The solution, to my mind, was to provide a legitimately peer-reviewed publication, available only online and without fees or membership requirements. This would assist college professors seeking to present more practical applications of research than what is frequently selected by major professional journals that are published in print and thus incur costs for editing and publication. It would allow these professors to submit well-edited manuscripts to a jury of peers representative of the profession—other university and community college professors, classroom teachers, and graduate students. In turn, this online journal, given the limited time and resources of the peer reviewers and editors, none of whom receive released time or payment for their services, would accept only a few articles for publication each year. For non-selected work, the authors would be given encouragement and suggestions for further developing their articles for consideration in other publications or in a subsequent issue of TexELT.

In addition to our Publications Copy Coordinator, Jey Venkatesan, three other current or former TexTESOL V Board members volunteered to support and assist me in this effort as reviewers. As we worked together to review the manuscripts submitted, it became clear that one particular reviewer, Margaret Redus, had the skills, the time, and the willingness to make an extraordinary contribution as a Primary Composition and Style reviewer. Based on many years of teaching writing, she had the ability to guide the authors in shaping specific portions of their manuscripts so that their messages would be as clear and understandable as possible for the audience we are anticipating. For the always-important copy-editing issues such as spelling, syntax, redundancy, and word choice, we were fortunate to be able to call on an expert who is serving on the TexTESOL V Board as our Publications Copy Coordinator. What allowed me to bring these talented individuals together to produce a valuable contribution to our profession is probably just the good fortune of finding in my professional organization incredibly talented and dedicated teachers and scholars who are willing to let me ask much of them in the name of our readers and their students.

--Rita Deyoe-Chiullan, Ph. D., Publications Coordinator TexTESOL V and Editor, TexELT, 1(1)
Introduction to the contents of this issue

The three articles that were selected for publication in this issue of Texas English Language Teaching (TexELT) represent the current work of action researchers who bring depth and breadth of professional experience to their task. Each article addresses a different age group of young language learners from PreK through third or fourth grade. However, the issues addressed may also be applicable for teachers of older learners who are recent immigrants with limited or no previous English learning opportunities or who were unschooled due to conditions in their homelands. Readers will gain fresh insights into the structuring of research projects and find ways to adapt the researchers’ findings to their own teaching contexts. In addition, they will be rewarded with current bibliographies so that they can further pursue specific points of particular interest.

The first article focuses on the difficulty of helping beginning readers gain automaticity in reading high-frequency words. These words are challenging due to their phonetic diversity. Dr. Raine and Dr. Szabo report on a recent study of the 300 high-frequency English words in the Fry Instant Sight Words list. Their purpose was to determine syllable patterns and consonant phonemes most troublesome for English-instructed and Spanish-instructed second-graders as they begin to read in English. When early readers reach automaticity with these words, they have access to 50-70% of the words in general text and can accelerate in reading fluency. With fluency comes the possibility of focusing on full comprehension of what is being read. The discussion of linguistic dimensions within the 300 words provides a helpful review for all teachers of beginning readers, and the breakout of results offers focus to readers for looking for ways to differentiate patterns in troublesome words and develop targeted instruction for Spanish-speaking and other ELLs.

Well-trained teachers of prekindergarten students can have a significant impact on the children’s developing language skills. Dr. Nerren and fellow researchers Dr. Abel and Dr. Wilson report on their 2-day training model with a research-based approach that helps teachers converse with young children in more specific ways. The goal is stronger language growth, especially in children’s expressive language. They developed and field-tested this instruction that involves indirect language stimulation techniques and discuss here the methods they used. To measure the effectiveness of the training, they proceeded in two phases. The first phase surveyed the teachers at the end of the workshop. The second phase, extending over the course of a year, involved researchers’ visits to the teachers’ classrooms at random intervals to evaluate the level at which the teachers were implementing the training. Pre- and post-test surveys for the workshop revealed significant gains in teachers’ understanding of the techniques, and post-test surveys of the children’s language skills showed notable growth in ELL and in SES students. The authors offer readers concrete strategies they can adapt for implementation in their own professional contexts.
Assessing vocabulary growth in elementary students, native-speaking and ELL, is vital to tailoring their reading curriculum, and writing samples can reveal specific dimensions of vocabulary development. However, not all language samples are equal. In her article, Dr. Roessingh investigates the design of prompts to highlight attributes that yield a full range of productive vocabulary. In doing so, she provides a variety of field-tested prompts, both pictorial and textual. In addition, she discusses effective protocol procedures for preparing the child for the writing activity, offering a case history of her work with an ELL student. She then offers readers a step-by-step guide to reading the results yielded by the free online profiling tool at www.lextutor.ca/va/kids. Researchers and classroom teachers alike will find resources for the design and administration of prompts as well as guidance for evaluating the resulting writing samples.

--Margaret Redus, M. L. A., Primary Composition and Style Reviewer for TexELT, 1(1)
Transitioning from Spanish to English reading:

Using the Fry Instant Words to compare the sight word reading
of students first taught to read in English and those first taught to read in Spanish

by

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Abstract

English-instructed and Spanish-instructed second grade students were asked to read the Fry list of the 300 most frequently used English words. It was found that the patterns most troublesome for Spanish-instructed students were consonant digraphs, closed syllable pattern, and open syllable patterns. Both groups missed developmentally appropriate words containing the VCe pattern, the VR patterns and the vowel team patterns (vowel digraphs, long and short oo, and diphthongs). Implications and future research are discussed.

Key Words: Fry Instant Words, ELLs, English-instructed, Spanish-instructed, high frequency words, sight words

Citation

Raine, L. & Szabo, S. (2012). Transitioning from Spanish to English reading: Using the Fry Instant Words to compare the sight word reading of students first taught to read in English and those first taught to read in Spanish. TexELT: Texas English Language Teaching, 1(1), 7-21.

Introduction

According to the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (NCELA, 2010), the number of English learners (ELs) enrolled in pre-K through 12 in American public schools is approximately five million students. Five states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois currently account for 68 percent of ELs (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwantoro, 2005). In Texas, over 94% of English language learners speak Spanish (NCELA, 2010).

Research in the field of bilingual education includes investigating the effectiveness of including first language (L1) instruction in the education of ELs. With thirty years of research exploring bilingual education, some researchers believe that the most effective initial reading instruction is done in the first language of the learner (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Cloud, Genessee, & Hamayan, 2000; Cummins, 2000; Peregoy & Boyle, 2001; Vogt, Echevarria, & Short, 2010). However, this does not mean that all schools should provide bilingual education with first language reading instruction. Thus, to address the needs of teaching English to ELs, there is a need to investigate how to bridge the language gap when initial reading instruction is in English.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify which linguistic dimensions of high frequency English words make their automatic recognition easier or harder for Spanish-speakers. The Fry Instant Sight Word List (Fry, Kress, & Fountoukidis, 2004) consists of the 300 most frequently used words in the English language. They comprise from 50% to 75% of the words in general text; so learning to recognize them at an automatic level is a component of reading fluency. Many of these words are abstract words, function words, or structure words and may break phonic generalizations (Clymer, 1996; Johnston, 2001). Each word, however, does contain some alphabetic features that can be helpful to gaining word recognition. This research study was guided by the following questions:

1. When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which syllable patterns do English-instructed, second-grade students make the most miscues?
2. When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which syllable patterns do Spanish-instructed, second-grade students make the most miscues?
3. When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which consonant phonemes do English-instructed second-grade students make the most miscues?
4. When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which consonant phonemes do Spanish-instructed second-grade students make the most miscues?
Conceptual Framework

The automaticity theory (LeBerge & Samuels, 1974) is defined as the effortless ability to recognize the words being read. The theory states that readers need to have the ability to decode words effortlessly in order to spend time on comprehension. Therefore, if a reader spends too much time on figuring out the word, there will not be energy left to give to the comprehension process.

Walberg and Tsai (1983) coined the term “Matthew Effect” to describe the fact that without intervention, some students quickly develop literacy foundations while others lag behind. As early intervention is better than later intervention (Clay, 2001), it is important to understand which of the orthography features are problematic for dual language speakers (Estes, & Richards, 2002). This particular study focused on English/Spanish speakers. Because of its common usage, the Fry Instant Sight Word List was used to assess reading performance on a word list, yielding information leading to implications for intervention. Analysis of the common errors and unique-to-the-language-spoken errors could be helpful to inform explicit word recognition instruction to help the students that may lag behind.

Literature Review

First Language Influences on Second Language Learning

Jim Cummins (1979) theorized that bilingual individuals have “common underlying proficiencies” that facilitate transfer of knowledge and skills from L1 (first language) to L2 (second language) and vice versa. Skills that appear to transfer from L1 to L2 for reading include the emergent reading skills such as directionality and concepts of print. Also both languages have the alphabetic principle (letters represent phonemes). However, Spanish is a consistently alphabetic language with good grapho-phonemic correspondence (sounds are matched to letters reliably and consistently) while English is not. English has other orthographic layers that have to be considered in learning to read (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008).

Comprehension skills such as the ability to summarize and make inferences are basically the same in L1 and L2 reading. Another aspect that supports transferring between English and Spanish is the use of cognates. Cognates are words in two languages that have common etymological roots, are spelled the same or close to the same, and have similar meanings. English and Spanish have many cognates because of the many words with common Greek or Latin roots.

In their meta-analysis of studies on the literacy development of Spanish-speakers, Denton, Hasbrouck, Weaver, & Riccio (2000) examined the role that phonological awareness plays. They found that the development of phonological awareness, which is the ability to identify and manipulate units of speech (syllables, phonemes, onsets and rimes), can be used to predict Spanish reading achievement and development. A skill within phonological awareness is phonemic awareness, which is taught by blending and segmenting individual phonemes. They also found evidence of cross-linguistic transfer of Spanish phonological awareness to English reading.
This finding of cross-linguistic transfer was supported by several later studies of Spanish speakers learning to read in English (Cárdenas-Hagan, Carlson, & Pollard-Durodola, 2007; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003; López & Greenfield, 2003).

**Similarities and Differences**

Falk-Ross and Carrier (2005), in speaking of how to better prepare classroom teachers to meet the needs of ELs learning to read in English, talk about the transfer and non-transfer of skills and strategies, the “connections” (similarities) and “disconnections” (differences). Disconnections for reading included the differences in the oral languages such as phonemic/sound perception, phonemic/sound production, syntactic/structural form, and semantic/meaning categories. They advocated for focused instruction for ELs that highlights the similarities and differences between English and Spanish when learning to read in English.

Analyses of the two languages at the alphabetic layer show that the majority of the consonant sound/letter correspondences are the same or very similar, but that the vowel systems are quite different (Green, 2008; Rosado, 2008). Spanish vowels are alphabetic, but English vowels follow pattern rules to designate the corresponding phoneme.

For consonants, the few letters that represent different sounds in the two languages can pose difficulties. Examples are the double *ll* that makes the /l/ sound as in *ball* in English, but the /y/ sound as in *lluvia* in Spanish, and the *h* that makes the /h/ sound as in *help* in English, but is always silent in Spanish as in *hoy*. Of even greater difficulty are those graphemes that represent sounds in English that do not exist in Spanish such as the /v/ of *valley* and the /z/ of *zoo*. These two letters exist in Spanish, but the sounds do not; the Spanish *v* is pronounced /b/ as in *vaca* and the Spanish *z* is pronounced /s/ as in *zapato*. Other examples are English voiced and unvoiced *th* in *that* and *think* and the *sh* as in *ship*. These digraphs exist neither as letter combinations nor as sounds in Spanish.

As for vowels, both languages use the same five letters, *a, e, i, o*, and *u*, to represent vowel sounds, although at times English also uses *y* and *w*. Spanish is basically an alphabetic language even in the use of vowel letters and the phoneme that letters represents, as there are only five basic vowel phonemes in Spanish. However, English has 20 different vowel phonemes in several different categories (short, r-influenced, long, l-influenced a, long and short double o, diphthongs and schwa). Additionally, in Spanish the vowel phonemes are spelled only one way whereas in English the same phoneme can be spelled many different ways. For instance, the English long *e* sound (/i/) can be spelled six different ways: *e* as in *me, ea* as in *bean, ee* as in *see, ei* as in *receive, ie* as in *piece*, and *y* as in *baby*. Further comparison of the English/Spanish *e* and *i* shows the Spanish *i* makes a sound similar to the English long *e*; the Spanish *e* sounds more like the English short *e*.

Another key difference in the two languages involves syllable patterns. In English, the most common syllable pattern is a closed syllable (a syllable with one vowel followed by at least one consonant; CVC/VC). Beginning reading materials for native English speakers often focus heavily on word families with this syllable type, assuming the reader will hear and make final consonants easily.
In Spanish, although closed syllables do exist, by far the most common syllable pattern is the open syllable (CV). In English, because vowels are influenced by whether the syllable is strongly or lightly stressed, beginning readers and writers often pay more attention to the consonants. Beginning reading in Spanish typically focuses heavily on highly predictable one and two-syllable words with CV patterns. Since the vowel is a “pure” vowel, which is pronounced and spelled the same way in all contexts, it is the central key to decoding.

In English another very common syllable pattern is the vowel-consonant-silent e pattern (VCe), which usually codes the first vowel into a long vowel sound with the e remaining silent. However, there is no such syllable pattern in Spanish since Spanish vowels are pronounced consistently with the phoneme they represent, and the letter e is never silent.

**Rime Units**

In English, the 37 most common word families (also known as phonograms or rime units) are useful for building sight vocabulary for beginning readers. Of these 37 units, 22 are a closed syllable pattern (CVC/VC). The word family unit is defined as the vowel and what follows. Some of those that follow the closed syllable pattern are: _ack, _ell, _it, _op, and _ump (see Appendix A). By using different consonants or consonant clusters as “onsets” at the beginning of the unit, multiple words can be formed. Learning to recognize these relatively consistent onset/rime combinations greatly expands English reading vocabulary for beginning readers.

For Spanish, on the other hand, *el método silábico* (the syllabic method) is the most commonly used method of introducing Spanish speakers to Spanish reading. Students learn to combine initial consonants with vowels to form syllables such as ma, me, mi, mo, mu, and then combine those to make words, eg. *Mi mama me ama* (The literal translation is “My mother me loves”). The vowel following the consonant corresponds to the English open syllable pattern (CV). While some high frequency English words follow this pattern, none of the 37 phonograms typically used for onset/rime practice have the CV pattern. In addition, the syntax of the two languages has some differences, as seen is the above literal translation.

**The Fry Instant Word List**

Since the Fry Instant Word List is designated by frequency usage in print rather than a graded word list, there is a need for all of the word attack skills to be employed to read, as it is not a sequential difficulty level. Additionally, many of the words do not follow the phonic rules. Both usage of contextual sentence structure and a firm grasp of the phonetic system are important to decoding the words.

The first 100 words are one syllable except for seven words. The one-syllable words include pronouns such as he and we, as well as a few basic verbs such as give and have. In the second 100 words, the quantity of nouns and verbs is increased, sequential words such as first and next are added, as well as present and past tense verbs like read and ran. These words are also mainly one syllable except for thirteen words. Because so many of the most frequent words are single syllable, it makes the use of syllable patterns important to the learning of the English vowels.
Even in the third hundred words only twenty-three are not single syllable. The fact that the highest frequency words in English include so many single syllable words highlights the fact that the readers are only dealing with one vowel pattern when reading the majority of the words. Furthermore, since the most frequently used words are the ones least likely to have been regularized over time, many of these words are pronounced differently from words with similar spellings that conform to regular sound/spelling patterns in English. For example, contrast the vowel in have with gave, save, pave, and rave.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis used frequency counts and descriptive statistics to examine the miscues on the Fry Instant Sight Words. Separate spreadsheets for the miscues were created for the English-instructed students and the Spanish-instructed speakers. Counts for each participant were made of the number of words attempted that were miscued. This count was divided by the number of words attempted to provide a percentage of words that were miscued. In addition, patterns of sound/symbol correspondence miscues were analyzed for the English-instructed students and the Spanish-instructed students to determine which correspondences were most often missed by the two groups of subjects. Comparisons were then made between the two groups.

**Methods**

We secured the cooperation of a local school district that has a long history of collaboration with our teacher preparation program for the study. This Professional Development Schools (PDS) center is located in a school district that accepts approximately 50 undergraduate students to complete their two-semester student teaching requirements.

**Setting**

The campus where the study occurred is one of two elementary schools within the district, which has a bilingual program. There are a total of 479 students of whom 59% are Hispanic, 29% are African-American, and 12% are White. Eighty-seven percent of all students are economically disadvantaged, and 48% are coded as Limited-English Proficient. Twenty-one percent of the teachers are Hispanic, 8% are African-American, and 72% are White.

**Participants**

A total of 31 second-grade students participated in this study. Two intact classrooms were tested. The English-instructed group consisted of 16 students who were in an English-only classroom although several of these children were bilingual. The Spanish-instructed group consisted of 15 Spanish-speaking students who were in a bilingual classroom. The Spanish-instructed students were learning to read primarily in Spanish, with some English reading instruction. The English-instructed students were learning to read only in English. All of the Spanish-instructed and some of the English-instructed participants came from homes where the Spanish language dominates the adult conversations.
In these homes, the adults often speak Spanish to each other and the children, but the children may speak English or use extensive code-switching due to the influence of popular music, television, video-games, Internet usage, and experiences with peers at school and elsewhere.

**Procedures**

The words on the Fry Instant Word List were randomly scrambled within the first, second, or third hundred words. Word strips were created that contained ten words. The word strips were then put together on a ring to make the strips easier to turn. The format of the word ring was used because it was a familiar procedure for the students, since this is how they accomplished word study in their regular classrooms.

Each student was taken individually to the library or to a nearby empty classroom by the researchers to provide them with a quiet environment with few distractions. The Spanish-instructed students were tested by a Spanish/English-speaking researcher and the English-instructed students by an English-speaking researcher.

The students were asked to read aloud the Fry word list. Students read the words aloud as the researcher recorded miscues and watched the student for signs of frustration or discomfort. The students were stopped when they mispronounced 5-7 words consecutively.

**Results**

The results for the English-instructed students followed a typical bell-shaped curve pattern of achievement that ranged from low to high with a majority of subjects in the middle. The results for the Spanish-instructed students were distributed in two distinct groups.

**English-instructed students**

These students attended an English-speaking class where they were taught only in English even though only six students came from an English-speaking home. Ten of these students spoke a mix of Spanish and English at home.

As a whole, more words were read by this group of students than by the Spanish-instructed students. One student was eliminated from the study as she could not read any words. The other students were able to read all 300 words with 92% accuracy. In addition, all their miscues resulted in real English words, rather than pseudo words. Table 1 lists the 24 words that were mispronounced the most often.

**Spanish-instructed students**

These students were divided into two groups according to their proficiency in reading the words. As seen in Table 1, the high group had five students who read from 150 to 300 words and used mostly the English phonics and syllables systems in decoding. However, the low group had ten students who were only able to read 50-70 words before showing signs of frustration and began using the Spanish phonics and syllables patterns to decode the unknown English words. For example, the one-syllable word *some* would be pronounced by them as the two-syllable “word” *sō-mey*. Their miscues often resulted in nonsense or pseudo words.
Table 1: Words Missed by both Instructional Groups out of the Words Attempted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish-instructed students</th>
<th>High Group of Spanish-instructed students</th>
<th>All English-instructed students</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First 70 words missed in Rank Order</td>
<td>Words #76-300</td>
<td>Read 1-300 Words</td>
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<tr>
<td>N=10</td>
<td>N=5</td>
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<td>1. were</td>
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<td>3. this</td>
<td></td>
<td>15. same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. his</td>
<td></td>
<td>16. even</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. has</td>
<td></td>
<td>17. men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. him</td>
<td></td>
<td>18. study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. like</td>
<td></td>
<td>19. could</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. make</td>
<td></td>
<td>20. should</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. about</td>
<td></td>
<td>21. now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. other</td>
<td></td>
<td>22. place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. do</td>
<td></td>
<td>23. great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. which</td>
<td></td>
<td>24. world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. an</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. said</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 1 was *When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which syllable patterns do English-instructed, second-grade students make the most miscues?* To answer this question, we examined the 24 words that were missed by the English-instructed students. Table 2 shows the miscued words sorted for syllable pattern.

Table 2: Syllable Patterns missed by English-instructed 2nd grade student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words with th digraphs</th>
<th>VC closed syllable</th>
<th>VCe pattern</th>
<th>VR teams</th>
<th>Irregular Words</th>
<th>2-syllable Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>through another these than thing</td>
<td>men than</td>
<td>came same these place</td>
<td>form world</td>
<td>our sound</td>
<td>want</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 2 was *When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which syllable patterns do Spanish-instructed, second-grade students make the most miscues?* To answer question 2, we examined the 55 words that were missed by the Spanish-instructed students, which are listed in Table 3. Words that follow phonogram patterns include *kind, most,* and *all.* Words that contain two or more syllables include *many, idea, enough, about,* and *other.*

Table 3: Syllable Patterns missed by Spanish-instructed 2nd grade students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VC Closed syllable</th>
<th>open syllable</th>
<th>VCe pattern</th>
<th>VR</th>
<th>Vowel Teams</th>
<th>Irregular Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>then</td>
<td>by</td>
<td>these</td>
<td>were</td>
<td>would</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>write</td>
<td>her</td>
<td>how</td>
<td>one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them</td>
<td>she</td>
<td>make</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>about</td>
<td>have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>use</td>
<td>their</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his</td>
<td></td>
<td>like</td>
<td>other</td>
<td>each</td>
<td>some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>through</td>
<td>said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>should</td>
<td>does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>our</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>but</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>which</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>than</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 3 was *When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which consonant phonemes do English-instructed second-grade students make the most miscues?* In response to this question, we found that words containing the consonant phonemes with the digraph *th* were the most missed by the English-instructed students. These words include *through, another, these, than,* and *thing.*

Question 4 was *When reading aloud the Fry Instant Sight Words, on which consonant phonemes do Spanish-instructed second-grade students make the most miscues?* In examining our results for the final question, we determined that the consonant phonemes most frequently missed by the Spanish-instructed students were in words containing the *th, ch, sh,* and *wr* digraphs. These words include *they, these, then, there, with, them, their, this, that, other, she, each, write, which, than, thought, through,* and *should.* Words that begin with /w/ include *were, would,* and *with.* Words that begin with /h/ include *her, how, his, has, him, have,* and *he.*
Discussion and Implications

It is important to look at the Fry Instant Word List, as the first 100 words make up 50% of all written material and the first 300 words make up 65% of all written material (Fry, Kress, & Fountoukidis, 2004; Fry, 1998). Thus, effective instruction that focuses attention to particular features of those words is key to students’ use of word identification skills.

Consonants

The consonants that were the most troublesome, particularly for the Spanish-instructed students, were the digraphs. Of these digraphs, words containing *th* were most missed. This is to be expected since *th* does not exist either as a letter combination or as a sound in Spanish. When teaching words containing the *th* digraph, one should also identify the vowel patterns in the words to aid recognition. This will help give auditory and visual clues for the entire word and foster recognition. This same instructional process would apply to other words that have difficult consonant features.

Closed syllable patterns

Examining the closed syllable pattern words showed that the English-instructed children missed two words while the Spanish-instructed children missed 17 words. Because the closed syllable pattern is such a dominant pattern in English words, but is uncommon in Spanish, students should receive specific introductions to and practice with the short vowel sounds that occur in this context. This study reveals how important that instruction is for Spanish speaking children so they can gain an understanding of the English phonics system. Since few words end in consonants in Spanish, special attention must be given to hearing and producing final consonants in English. Instruction with short vowel sounds should include rime units or phonogram patterns as much as possible (see Appendix A).

Open syllable pattern

Only Spanish-instructed students missed words with the open syllable pattern. This appears to be because of their lack of understanding that long vowel sounds in English say the name that is assigned to the letter when reciting the alphabet. (In Spanish, the name of the letter is the sound the letter makes, and the sounds are always the same for vowels.) Or it may be because they do not hear or make distinctions between the long and short vowels in English because that distinction does not exist in Spanish.

Vowel-consonant-e (VCe) pattern

Both groups missed words containing the vowel-consonant-e (VCe) pattern. The VCe pattern words have various reasons for their difficulty. This is the first awareness of the usage of a silent vowel to mark the sound of the other vowel. While there are several usages of a final silent *e*, the most prominent one is the marking of a long vowel. As stated previously, a silent vowel *e* does not appear in Spanish. This ending syllable pattern should receive ample instruction through word sorts because of the large number of high frequency words containing this pattern.
Vowel-r (VR) syllable pattern

Several of the words missed by both groups contain the vowel-r (VR) syllable pattern. Each of the words needs to be discussed for the particular vowel phoneme that it contains. Words with VR should be sorted first for the vowel phoneme and then attend to the spelling of those phonemes. The more complex VR patterns were the words that were predominantly missed.

Vowel teams pattern

The syllable pattern known as vowel teams includes the following: vowel digraphs, long and short oo, and diphthongs. Of all the syllable patterns, this one is the most complex because of the variety of vowel patterns and the phonemes that they represent. The visual of two vowels besides each other working together to represent one vowel phoneme is the common feature. Each vowel pattern needs to have separate instruction as to the variety of spelling patterns that represent the associated phonemes.

Irregular words

The Spanish-instructed students missed more irregular words than the English-instructed students. Although these words are classified as irregular due to the lack of a decodable vowel pattern, they do have identifiable consonant sounds. Individual instruction in these words is aided by their high frequency usage in text. Rereading or repeated reading at the independent level is essential to recognition of these irregular high frequency words. It seems reasonable to expect that the higher performance of the English-instructed students in all the syllable patterns might make their independent practice in reading more productive in retaining recognition of the irregular words.

Future Research

For the most part, the findings are what would be predicted if one knows the similarities and differences between the two languages. Knowledge of the characteristics of the two languages would lead one to anticipate which of the Fry Instant Words would be likely to cause problems for readers who are English learners. The English-instructed second-grade students had more exposure to these words, both in their reading and their writing activities. Due to this repeated exposure, one would expect the English-instructed students to score higher.

However, to find out if teaching ELs to read in their first language is truly beneficial, these second-grade students should be asked to repeat the reading of the Fry Instant Word List when they are in 5th grade or have become fluent readers. If there is still a difference in the recognition of these common words, this might call for some rethinking.
References


### Appendix A

**Building Rhyming Words: Phonograms/Rime Units/Word Families**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOWELS</th>
<th>SHORT VOWEL PATTERNS</th>
<th>LONG VOWEL PATTERNS</th>
<th>OTHER VOWEL PATTERNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VC</td>
<td>VCC</td>
<td>VCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>ab, ad, ag, amb, acc, amp, and, ace, ade, ake, aine, ail, ain, ay</td>
<td>ar, ark, /ər/</td>
<td>a as /əː/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>an, ap, at</td>
<td>ash</td>
<td>une, ate, ave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>ed, en, et</td>
<td>ill, end, ent</td>
<td>unusual pattern for long e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ast, ess</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>id, ig, in</td>
<td>ick, ill, ice, ide, ime, ine, ice</td>
<td>light, ind,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lift, isk, itch, idge</td>
<td>le, ike, ile, ipel, ilet</td>
<td>ire (fire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>ob, od, og, op, ot</td>
<td>ock, ong</td>
<td>oke, one, ope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>oss</td>
<td>ode</td>
<td>ow (snow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>ub, ug, un, ut</td>
<td>luck, uff, ump, ung</td>
<td>uch, unk</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Use single consonants, consonant blends, and consonant digraphs as onsets to build word families from the rime units above. Example: bat, cat, scat, mat, flat, sat, mat, fat, that, scat, rat, etc. (And then there are those interesting words that take a different vowel sound as what and thus are not included in this word family). The ock word family: clock, dock, mock, rock, lock, stock, nock, shock, etc.

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Authors’ Biographies

LaVerne Raine, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A & M University-Commerce. Her research interests include pre-service teacher education and reading methods relating to word analysis skills. She teaches reading and word analysis courses to undergraduate students. She also works in the field-based program while undergraduates are working on their student teaching.

Susan Szabo, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A & M University-Commerce. Her research interests include reading in elementary and secondary education and teacher education (both pre-service and in-service teachers). She teaches reading courses, social studies, and language arts courses to graduate students working on their master’s degrees. In addition, she teaches theories and statistical classes to doctoral students. Currently, she is co-advisor for the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program and is co-editor for the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers yearbook.

Citation

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Language stimulation techniques for prekindergarten English language learners

by

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Abstract

Because of the growing number of U.S. students who are English Language Learners (ELLs), a university research team collaborated with a public school prekindergarten program and a Head Start prekindergarten program in rural east Texas to implement and investigate the effectiveness of a two-day professional development workshop for teachers on indirect language stimulation techniques to help facilitate English language development in prekindergarten settings. To measure the impact of the training, teachers in each study were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Treatment teachers received and implemented the training, and control teachers continued to teach as usual. The teachers’ understanding of the techniques as well as student language gains was measured. Teacher gains were measured using a researcher developed pre- and post- survey. Students’ language gains were measured using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4) and the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT). In both studies, the teachers showed significant gains in understanding of the strategies. Post-test results for the students indicated gains in the language skills of the ESL students in the treatment classrooms, particularly in the area of expressive language. Of equal importance, the studies indicated a significant impact for students from low socioeconomic homes (SES) as well as the ESL learners.

Key words: prekindergarten, Early Childhood Education, Head Start, language development, ESL, English Language Learners (ELL)

Citation


Introduction

By 2021, it is projected that one in four U.S. students will be native Spanish speakers and that these English Language Learners (ELLs) will struggle academically if not provided additional language support (Gandara, 2010). Currently, many ELL students are in early school programs to help bridge the gap. In an effort to support prekindergarten teachers in assisting their young language learners, a university research team collaborated with two preschool programs to implement and investigate the effectiveness of a two-day professional development workshop for teachers on indirect language stimulation techniques in prekindergarten settings.

Purpose

The purpose of the research was to explore a professional development option that could be beneficial for prekindergarten classroom teachers seeking strategies to enhance the language development of their students, particularly children whose native language is other than English. To measure the impact, teachers in each study were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Treatment teachers received and implemented the training, and control teachers continued to teach as usual. It is worth noting that the control teachers may have had limited exposure to the techniques through observation of the treatment teachers over the course of the school year. While this is unavoidable, teachers who received the training were asked to refrain from discussing the training or sharing the techniques with the teachers in the control group.

The trained teachers were asked to integrate the strategies into their daily classroom interactions in anticipation of positively influencing the English language development of their ESL students. In the two studies, post-test results indicated gains in the language skills of the ESL students in the treatment classrooms, particularly in the area of expressive language. Of equal importance, the studies indicated a significant impact for students from low socioeconomic homes (SES) as well as the ESL learners (who, in this study, also fell into this category). This finding suggests the techniques are beneficial for teachers of students from low SES backgrounds as well as ESL learners. Gains made by the students in each study are explained in the Results section of this paper.

Both of these studies took place in rural east Texas, where schools are seeing high numbers of ELL students. East Texas school districts tracked over the last five years indicate a “stable” to “significant” increase in Hispanic students in virtually every district (PASA, 2011). The studies described both took place in districts with a high percentage of Spanish speaking students in the public schools. According to school demographics reports, the first study took place in a school district with approximately 31% Hispanic students, and the second had an enrollment of approximately 43% Hispanic students.
Three researchers were involved in the investigations. All of the researchers are professors with terminal degrees in the field of education and have been actively involved in pursuing a research agenda involving early childhood and language interventions for ELLs and children from backgrounds of poverty for the past five years (Nerren & Abel, 2010). The classroom teachers involved in each study had varying levels of education and experience. In the first study, which took place in a public school prekindergarten program, each teacher had at least a bachelor’s degree and ESL teacher certification. In the second study, which took place in a Head Start program, none of the teachers had ESL teacher certification, and the education levels included teachers with high school diplomas, associate’s degrees in child development, and one with a bachelor’s degree. In both studies the range of experience was vast, with some teachers just entering their positions, and others having over ten years of teaching experience. This is typical of the range of experience levels one might find in many Head Start and public school settings. Thus the studies provide a good representation of how the training might impact teachers with diverse education and experience levels.

In each study, the teachers who received the training gained new knowledge about indirect language stimulation strategies and ways to integrate these into their classrooms. This new knowledge was both self-reported through post-training discussion and also quantitatively measured through pre-testing prior to the training and post-testing at the conclusion. The trained teachers were enthusiastic about the simplicity of the techniques and gave positive feedback about the new way of talking with children that they had learned. When the teachers took these strategies into the classroom, their students reaped the benefit. Data gathered through pre- and post-testing of the students indicated an increase in English language skills over the course of the school year.

This article provides detailed information about the strategies the teachers learned and used and the specific outcomes for both teachers and students. The research reveals that the two-day training workshop presented in these studies, coupled with ongoing teacher support, can make a meaningful difference in language gains for ESL prekindergarten students’ English language learning. This is important because strong language skills are a foundational component for learning in school (National Research Council, 1998).

**Conceptual Framework**

English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly in immigrant populations, often experience impoverished home environments, reducing their level of exposure to language-rich experiences and the stimulation necessary for sound language development (Hart & Risley, 2003). This can occur in their first language (L1) as well as in the second (L2). As language holds the key to future learning and success (National Reading Panel, 2000), opportunities to develop a strong foundational language (in either or in both L1 or L2) becomes of critical importance.
Teachers cannot directly control the development of L1, as its foundation begins at birth and is established before the child enters school; therefore, they need to consider ways to improve L2 with the expectation that “reverse transfer” will occur, thus improving skills and knowledge in both languages (National Literacy Panel, 2006). This research investigated whether a positive impact could be made for ESL prekindergarten students when simple indirect language stimulation techniques were used by their teachers to encourage them to learn and use English. It was hypothesized that developmentally appropriate language techniques that work well with English speaking preschoolers (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, 1983) might also work well with older ESL students who are just learning to understand and speak English. These techniques, grounded in the social theory of language acquisition (Bohannon & Bonvillian, 2000), were illustrated in the Educational Productions (1987) language training videos which were integrated into the two-day teacher professional development workshop offered to the treatment teachers in this research.

The Training Model

The language stimulation techniques offered in the training are grounded in social interactionist theories of language acquisition that recognize language learning is facilitated through social interactions with mature language users (Bredekamp, 2011; Bohannon & Bonvillian, 2000; National Reading Panel 2000). The videos in the training demonstrate how to stimulate language development in normally developing and language-delayed children who are three, four, and five years of age. These techniques are developmentally appropriate for young children because they use strategies that relate directly to the interests and activities of the child and extend what the child says or attempts to say in a way that is targeted to the developmental level (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998; Snow, 1983).

Pitfalls of conversation with untrained adults

Knowing how to develop language appropriately in young children is not necessarily intuitive. For instance, if a child says, “I MAKED a car!” the uninformed adult might say, “NO, say MADE.” This correction, framed as a negative response, might thwart a child’s language attempts or perhaps cause confusion about the meaning, rather than the form, of the verb choice. Or, if the adult were to ignore the child altogether, the opportunity to encourage the child’s attempt at language while providing a clear example of the correct form of the verb would be lost. An appropriate response would be “Yes, you MADE a car!” An overly complex response would involve correcting and then adding too much new information, or adding information at a higher vocabulary level than the child could process. For example, “No, you MADE a car. It is a big, bright, shiny car! Where is it going? Now, draw a truck!”

These training techniques in the video share similarities with studies using “recasting” with ESL students (Tsybina et al, 2006). Recasting involves repeating and rephrasing the child’s language attempts in a corrected or extended format. Recasting can take a variety of forms, including the
revision of the child’s grammar or vocabulary or the providing of additional information, such as including elaboration on the topic raised by the child. In any form, the recast keeps the central meaning of the child’s original statement intact. Recasts may involve grammatical or vocabulary revisions, or provide additional information, such as the inclusion of adjectives, all while keeping the central meaning of the child’s original statement intact. However, the recasts in the Tysbina et al (2006) study were thought by the research team to be too complex for new language learners, as they presented too much new language for the child to process all at once.

Examples of the type of responses developed in the workshop

The present study attempts to demonstrate effective ways for teachers to promote language development. For instance, using the previous example, if a child says, “I MAKED a car!” the researchers teach the workshop participants to respond, “Yes, you MADE a car!” Or, if the child is ready for slightly more information, they could respond, “Yes, you MADE a car! You made a red car!” In the workshop, Teachers learn to follow the child’s lead closely, so as to extend the child’s language using indirect and less complex techniques. For instance, if a child who is just learning to talk says, “He GOTS hair,” the informed adult would recast, “Yes, he HAS hair. It is brown hair.”

In addition to developing the teachers’ skills in meaningful recasting, the training is also intended to make teachers cognizant of the number of questions and commands they typically use with their students. According to the Good Talking with You video series (Educational Productions, 1987), questioning and commands frequently account for nearly 85% of teacher language. In contrast to this, the training emphasizes scaffolding of language. It demonstrates for teachers how to build upon children’s existing language schemata and teaches methods for capitalizing on attempts to communicate to help facilitate English language development.

Indirect language stimulation via SPEAK techniques

Another important element of the training model involves the techniques of indirect language stimulation represented by the researcher-created acronym SPEAK. Indirect language stimulation can be thought of as a form of encouraging children to use language and increase their language skills and vocabulary without explicit teaching. By recalling the SPEAK acronym, workshop trainees can easily remember the techniques they have learned.

Used daily, these simple SPEAK techniques can become second nature to the teacher, and will go a long way in assisting the youngest learners with their language skills. This, in turn, supports academic success overall.
Seek opportunities to talk with children. The first step in incorporating SPEAK is to create an active learning environment that allows children to construct knowledge as they learn through play. As children move about the classroom, teachers sit alongside and converse with them at an appropriate level, providing children with opportunities to hear and use descriptive language.

Personalize the talk. Converse with children about what they are doing or seeing. As teachers of ELL students move through the day with their students, it is important to be descriptive about children’s activities and the materials they use. An example of this is a teacher sitting with a child as he constructs a block tower. The teacher simply says, “You are building a tower!” When the child processes this information, the teacher might add, “You are building a very tall tower!”

Engage with open-ended questions. When ELL students begin to make attempts at using the English language, it is helpful to increase their use of language by asking questions that have no correct answer. This provides a risk-free environment in which children can practice newly acquired words. Often, well-intentioned teachers squelch fledging attempts at language in an enthusiastic attempt to keep the child talking. Rather than asking “What color is it?” “How many are there?” and other questions that might intimidate the child, ask open-ended questions where any answer is correct. An example of this might be “You made a tower! Who lives there?” If the child chooses not to answer, the teacher, without pressuring the child, might eventually comment by saying something such as “Such a big tower! A giant could live there.”

Assist by expanding. When children attempt language, saying for instance, “Tower,” the teacher simply follows the child’s lead with, “Yes, it is a tower.” This expansion, where the teacher adds information to the words the child says, reinforces the child’s speech, while providing new words. Expansion can also be used to help children hear the correct syntax and grammar of language. An example might be a child at the lunch table holding up his food and announcing, “I eat sandwich.” The teacher can indirectly correct the grammatical error and add additional information by saying “You are eating a sandwich! It’s a peanut butter sandwich.”

Keep it simple. Refrain from bombarding language learners with too much information at once. If you have had the experience of traveling to a country where you did not speak the language, perhaps you remember feeling overwhelmed by the seemingly constant chatter of the unfamiliar words. Now imagine that experience with a patient teacher alongside you, describing in short conversational sentences all that you see and do. What a difference!

*SPEAK acronym created by Dr. Jannah Nerren, 2011.
Methods and Participants

The training and techniques have been implemented and studied in two settings to date, with a third study in progress at the time of this writing. The initial pilot study was conducted in a public school prekindergarten program in a rural east Texas independent school district. The funding which permitted establishment of this prekindergarten option for parents is the result of a law that targets children who are at risk of future academic failure in school (Texas Education Code 29.153).

In this study, the eight teacher participants were all ESL-certified. From this group, four teachers were randomly selected to participate in the training and intervention. The ESL students in each classroom were classified as economically disadvantaged 4-year-olds, based on eligibility for free or reduced lunch. Children in ESL classrooms received all their instruction in English because the parents of these students had chosen this option of six hours of daily instruction in English over the bilingual option, in which students received half of their instruction in Spanish and the other half in English. All classrooms had a Spanish-speaking adult in the room.

According to the school district ESL director, all other students enrolled in the program (who spoke English in the home) were evenly distributed across all three types of classrooms in that school district—ESL, bilingual, or regular—in an effort to create a balance of gender, ability level, and socioeconomic status (SES) in these rooms.

The second study took place in a rural east Texas Head Start program. The sample for this study consisted of four classrooms. Again, half of the classroom teachers were randomly selected and trained, and the students in those classrooms comprised the treatment group. The remaining two classrooms made up the control group and the teachers continued to teach as usual. The teachers in the study all had at least three years of teaching experience in the prekindergarten setting and none spoke Spanish. Unlike the pilot study, these teachers were not ESL-certified. Approximately twice as many students came from English-only speaking homes (n=49) as Spanish-only speaking homes (n=25). Approximately equal numbers of students participated in the treatment group (n=37) as the control group (n=39).

In each study, a quasi-experimental design was used to determine the effect of teacher training on the development of English among their ESL students. During Phase 1 of the initial pilot study, a 2-day language-training workshop was provided to a random half of the teachers. During Phase 2, the teachers who received the training integrated the newly learned techniques into their regular classroom teaching. The impact on students was measured by pre- and post-assessment using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-IV) in both studies. In the second study, the Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT) was also administered.
To establish fidelity to the treatment and provide support to the teachers, random visits were made by one researcher for approximately 15 to 30 minutes per visit over the treatment period. The treatment period occurred over the course of the academic year. A researcher-constructed field-tested scoring rubric was used to determine the level of implementation on a scale of zero (no implementation) to five (excellent use of strategies).

Phase 1

During Phase 1, the research team provided a 2-day workshop in language training for treatment teachers (Abel, Gottshall, Nerren, 2008). This included viewing, discussing, practicing, and mastering skills from five sequential training videos that demonstrated and discussed indirect language stimulation techniques from Educational Productions’ program, *Good Talking with You* (Educational Productions, 1987). An overview of these materials can be found at [http://www.tkwconsulting.com/goodtalking.htm](http://www.tkwconsulting.com/goodtalking.htm) (Watcher, 2011). Participants discussed and practiced using the techniques with each other first, simulating classroom conversations, and then moved into university lab school classrooms to observe the classroom teachers using the techniques. This also provided an avenue for the participants to practice the techniques themselves with children in the lab school classrooms. As the participants observed and interacted in the lab school classrooms, the researchers were able to draw attention to the usage of the techniques by the classroom teachers, model the techniques themselves, and point out opportunities for the participants to practice the techniques with the lab school students.

Phase 2

During Phase 2, teachers in the treatment group began integrating language stimulation techniques into their daily instruction. Participants were observed intermittently during the school year to document fidelity to the treatment and to determine the level of integration of the new techniques. All students in treatment and control classrooms were pre-tested at the beginning of the school year and post-tested at the conclusion using the PPVT-4 to measure the receptive English language development and determine the impact of treatment. In the second study, the addition of the Expressive Vocabulary Test was utilized in order to measure the expressive language growth of the students.

Instrumentation

**Language Stimulation Techniques**

During Phase 1, treatment teachers were assessed for knowledge of language stimulation techniques before and after the 2-day training. This instrument was developed by the researchers, with input from experts in the field, to measure the objectives that were presented during the training. An anonymous survey was used to determine treatment teachers’ subjective perceptions of the level of training received.
Classroom Observation Inventory

Random visits were made to treatment teachers’ classrooms during the school year to check on implementation of strategies and to confirm understanding and use of the language stimulation techniques. The Classroom Observation Inventory instrument was created by the researchers and tested to gain instrument reliability.

Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test of receptive oral language development (PPVT-IV) was selected for its recognition and popularity in the field of early childhood education and research. This instrument focuses on lower level receptive oral language and has the ability to inform instructional decisions for ELLs. The instrument is attractive to young children because of its format. It uses easy early-level high frequency words particularly designed for ELLs and is relatively easy to use. As a nationally normed assessment, the reliability ($\alpha=.97$) of scores and validity of the test as compared to other measures remains quite high (Dunn & Dunn, 2007). An outside professional with experience in PPVT assessment administered the tests during the fall and spring semesters.

Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT)

The Expressive Vocabulary Test of expressive language development (EVT-2) was selected because of its validity and reliability as a measure of the development of expressive oral language and its appeal to young children. As a nationally normed assessment, the reliability ($\alpha=.94$) of scores and validity of the test as compared to other measures remains quite high (Williams, 2007).

Results

Phase 1 – Effect of Teacher Training

Pre-testing indicated the treatment teacher group in the initial study (public school, ESL-certified teachers) had some prior knowledge of the techniques taught during the pre-treatment training workshop. Pre-test treatment scores ranged from 40% to 95% with a mean of 70% correct, demonstrating understanding of language stimulation techniques before the training began. In this study, all treatment teachers improved; post-test scores revealed a mean score of 96% with a smaller range of 80% to 100% correct. Half of the participants scored 100%. Feedback from the follow-up anonymous survey indicated all participants felt they had benefited from the training and had increased their understanding of how to support language development in young students. Discussion about test answers following the post-testing supported the conclusion that participant understanding of training techniques was solid.
In the second study (Head Start), the training workshop was successful based on participant pre- and post- test scores, anonymous survey responses, and direct feedback from participants during discussions about answers on the assessment following post-testing. Pre-test scores ranged from 35% to 55% with a mean of 45% understanding of language stimulation techniques before the training began. Post-test scores revealed a mean of 78% and a smaller range of 75% - 80%, indicating participants had improved 33% in their knowledge of the strategies in the two days of training.

**Phase 2 – Effects on Student Language Development**

The results of the data analysis revealed that the intervention had a significant effect on the expressive language of the 4-year-old students in the treatment group for the second study. The impact on their receptive language was not as high, indicating the need to pursue investigation of these techniques with a larger sample size. To address this, a subsequent study is currently underway in a larger, urban Head Start program. The current study replicates the previous investigations but involves a sample size of over 300 prekindergarten students and their teachers. Data is currently being analyzed in this study.

**Intervention Results – Study 1 (Public School Prekindergarten)**

The pretest scores on the PPVT-4 scores of all of the students showed a low mean standard score (M=77.7), with a large increase over 6 months for both treatment and control groups (M=90.4). As a whole, the Spanish-speaking students showed the lowest pretest scores as compared to the English-speaking students. Results for the students in the control classrooms (n=12) and the students in the treatment classrooms (n=29) indicated there was a significant difference in the PPVT means for the control and intervention groups. Because the intervention group means were significantly higher than the control means (p = 0.035), researchers determined effect based on mean group standard score growth.

Results of the post-intervention PPVT standard scores were used for mean comparison tests between ESL control students and ESL intervention students. These comparisons indicated that the ESL intervention means were higher than ESL control means (93.24 and 84.60, respectively). This indicates that the intervention was positive.

Next, researchers looked for a difference in control and treatment pre- and post-treatment PPVT standard score mean growth. While the growth scores showed no significant differences between the groups (p=.718), the intervention showed a moderate effect (Hedge’s d=.13) with a large confidence interval [-.59, .86], indicating uncertainty as to the effect of the intervention. The inconclusive results indicated by this prompted the second study, in an effort to determine if the strategies were effective in a similar, but different setting.
Similar results are seen for the tests of expressive language on the EVT-2, with a low mean standard score in the pretest results ($M=78.8$) and a large increase over 6 months for both treatment and control groups ($M=85.6$). Again, the Spanish-speaking students had lower pretest scores as compared to the English-speaking students. This would be expected, as the test is administered in English to determine English language ability, underscoring a need for the intervention.

The effectiveness of the language intervention on receptive vocabulary for students with diverse language backgrounds was analyzed. The independent variables were participation in the intervention and language spoken at home (English or Spanish). The dependent variable was the score on the PPVT administered after the intervention program. Scores on the PPVT prior to the commencement of the intervention were used as a covariate to control for individual differences.

After adjusting for the PPVT scores prior to the beginning of the intervention, there was no significant interaction between receiving the intervention and home language [$F (1, 62)=1.99, p=.163$]. Neither of the main effects were statistically significant [intervention: $F (1, 62)=.02, p=.891$; language: $F (1, 62)=.09, p=.764$]. These results suggest that the intervention did not have an effect on the receptive language of either students from English speaking or Spanish speaking homes.

The analysis of the effectiveness of the language intervention on expressive vocabulary for students with diverse language backgrounds was insightful. The independent variables were participation in the intervention and language spoken at home (English or Spanish). The dependent variable was the score on the EVT administered after the intervention program. Scores on the EVT prior to the commencement of the intervention were used as a covariate to control for individual differences.

After adjusting for EVT scores prior to beginning the intervention, there was no significant interaction between receiving the intervention and home language [$F (1, 60)=.09, p=.772$]. After adjusting for prior EVT scores, both of the main effects were statistically significant [intervention: $F (1, 60)=6.64, p=.012$; language: $F (1, 60)=9.86, p=.003$]. However, they both represent a small effect size (language partial eta squared=.141; intervention partial eta squared=.100). These results suggest that the intervention is equally effective for students from diverse language backgrounds and supports expressive language development. After controlling for pre-test scores, students in classrooms in which the teacher received the language training ($n=31$) had significantly higher expressive language scores ($p=.012$) than students in classrooms with teachers who had no language training ($n=34$). This is notable data, indicating that the strategies positively impacted the children’s expressive language abilities.

**Implications**

The professional development training used in this research has been shown to be an effective way to communicate the information to the teachers. In addition, the training has enabled teachers who received the training to implement the intervention effectively in their classrooms, as evidenced by the observations.
The studies have indicated that when teachers are trained in practical ways to facilitate language development through scaffolding children’s existing language and are taught these methods for integrating meaningful conversations using indirect language stimulation techniques with their students, they can positively impact children’s English language development, particularly their expressive language skills. Training sessions that involve presentation of the techniques utilizing the videos such as the *Good Talking with You* (1987) series, supplemented with discussion and practice of the SPEAK strategies can provide preschool teachers with an opportunity to learn and practice the techniques. The *Good Talking with You* series is no longer available; however, the researchers involved in this study are currently developing similar materials that will provide a user-friendly, updated alternative. Interested readers may contact the authors via email (nerrenjanna@sfasu.edu) for updates on the new materials after May 2013.

Once teachers are presented with the material, implementing the strategies on a daily basis will create a pattern of talking with children that can become second nature. Teachers trained in the strategies should create classroom environments where children have many opportunities to practice language with peers and adults. Teachers should constantly seek out opportunities to talk with their language learners, and when engaging in conversation, should remember that the most effective interactions scaffold language skills, restate children’s verbalizations correctly, and add detail when the children appear ready to process more information.

This research has implications for policy makers, administrators, and teachers in the field of early childhood education. As our population increases in its linguistic diversity, it becomes important to find ways to develop the language skills of prekindergarten children who are at-risk in their language development before they begin school. This study demonstrates a language intervention for prekindergarten classrooms and offers a simple and easily replicated two-day professional development training solution that appears to support English language learning for prekindergarten students. Because of the minimal expense and the ease of integrating the techniques into regular classroom routines, training teachers in these indirect language stimulation techniques is both economical and effective.

It is important to note that the current study in a large, urban Head Start program includes the assessment of both receptive and expressive language with a much larger sample size. While the current study replicates the previous projects in terms of the training model utilized and the instruments for data collection, the researchers are interested in analyzing data gathered from a much larger sample (n=300). They hope this will allow them to more accurately measure gains in expressive and receptive language of the students and to identify more closely additional patterns of growth for students.
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The importance of the prompt for eliciting language samples:

Insights from research and considerations for practice

by

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Abstract

Research in the study of children’s productive oral and written vocabulary concludes that the key to obtaining a rich language sample is the design of the elicitation prompt and protocol. This article examines the utility of different types of prompts to elicit the full range of children’s productive vocabulary in oral and written mode and illustrates the outcomes by way of lexical profiling using web based tools. Suggestions are made for classroom applications of the prompts, protocols, and vocabulary profiling tools to glean insights into children’s evolving vocabulary development. These are especially salient in addressing the language learning needs of ELLs since they identify and target gaps in vocabulary knowledge that teachers must include in their instructional planning.

Key words: ELLs, language sampling, prompts, profiling, vocabulary

Citation


Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is increasingly recognized in the research community as the key factor in reading and writing achievement, and by extension, in longitudinal educational success. There is a growing body of recent research concerned with gleaning insights into students’ productive oral and written vocabulary from kindergarten to grade 12 and beyond (Uccelli & Paez, 2007; Roessingh & Elgie, 2009, Flinspach, Scott & Vevea, 2010; Douglas, 2010). These studies have a variety of research goals specifically related to vocabulary development. They include establishing baseline information on vocabulary use among children, gaining longitudinal and developmental understandings for individuals, establishing group norms, comparing outcomes between learner profile groups such as English language learners to native speakers (NS), and designing and determining the impact of curricular interventions intended to focus on vocabulary development.

Advances in computational linguistics and corpus methodologies, as well as technology and web based tools for analyzing linguistic output have allowed for this emergent research field to evolve among young learners (Roessingh, 2010). Key to the success of these studies, however, is the ability to elicit samples of linguistic data that align with the stated research goals. Of crucial importance are the prompt and the protocol used to obtain rich data reflective of the child’s best efforts to retrieve and produce their optimal vocabulary knowledge, whether orally or in written mode. This topic has not been adequately addressed in the design of many research endeavors with the result that language samples obtained may not provide the nuanced insights needed to fully understand children’s unfolding language development.

Purposes

In the response to the lack of studies that specifically address issues of the use of appropriate prompts that elicit the full repertoire of skills possessed by the student, this article seeks to address the following questions:

· What are the characteristics of prompts that have the potential to elicit samples of students’ best efforts in oral and/or written discourse?

· What are some related considerations to take into account in gathering language samples for analysis, especially among younger learners?
Following a review of the relevant literature on language sample analysis (LSA), the article describes features of prompts, whether written or visual, that must be taken into consideration in the design phase of research work. Prompts that have been successful with various learner profiles, including English language learners (ELLs), in differing teaching, learning, and research contexts are presented, along with outcomes data illustrating the usefulness of these prompts for their intended purposes of focusing on vocabulary. Further considerations are then highlighted in undertaking a holistic evaluation of the language sample.

This work is of interest and practical use to those in the research community, including practitioners who are undertaking embedded design based research in the context of their K – 12 classrooms or who seek to implement informal classroom teaching strategies for enhancing vocabulary learning. Several of the prompts presented have been field tested for the span of the K-12 student population. They are useful for comparing data for different ages in cross-sectional studies, as well as for longitudinal tracking of growth over time among individual students or cohort groups. Other prompts are suggested for informal implementation with children, together with ideas for pre-writing tasks that can enhance the language sample by lowering the cognitive load of the writing task itself.

**Literature Review**

Language sample analysis has grown in acceptance as a research strategy for gleaning insights into children’s productive vocabulary as measured by various indices of lexical diversity (Hadley, 1998; Hewitt, Hammer, Yont, & Tomblin, 2005). These include the total number of words in the sample (TNW), the number of different words in the sample (NDW) and vocabulary richness or the distribution of words from high frequency to low. Public domain web-based tools for vocabulary profiling (such as [www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids](http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids)) generate reports that include the indices of lexical diversity noted here (Roessingh, 2010). In contrast to administering a standard vocabulary test, language sampling allows for an ecological, naturalistic approach to eliciting data for analysis. Despite the promise of this approach, however, there are distinct limitations that will arise in the data if the research design does not account for various factors known to influence the quality and quantity of the sample.

Everyday conversation can be realized using only a few hundred high frequency words of the estimated 5,000 words (or 2500 word families: run, runs, running, ran counts as one word family) known to youngsters at age five (Murphy, 1957; Hopkins, 1979; Moe, Hopkins, & Rush, 1982). Research evidence suggests there is a common sequence within and across languages relating to the acquisition of this early vocabulary as children learn to name, organize, control, and understand their immediate surroundings and daily needs (Biemiller & Slonim, 2001). There is research consensus that just 500 word families provide 85% coverage of children’s spontaneous talk in contexts such as the
playground, school, and home. The remaining 15% coverage represents knowledge of the 2000 lower frequency word families that are central to future vocabulary growth, especially as these represent the foundations for unfolding academic literacy in the upper elementary grades.

Grade four is a pivotal year in transitioning from conversational modes of discourse to academic modes in an accelerating pattern. Biemiller and Slonim (2001) suggest that after age five, children acquire approximately 1,000 additional word families each year, meaning that by grade four, the gap between oral (conversational) vocabulary knowledge and the reading demands of curriculum reflects significant growth to perhaps 9,000 word families. Increasingly, the new vocabulary is encountered in books and acquired through wide, extensive reading.

Hadley (1998) notes that the vast majority of research on LSA uses only conversational prompts and, thus, falls short of really gaining the insights into the full range of vocabulary children can muster. Hadley (1998) and Biemiller (2003) both underscore the importance of reaching beyond a child’s conversational discourse, while noting that as much as 82% of the research involving language sampling is limited to tapping only conversational language. As children age and develop, their growing vocabulary for academic purposes may remain hidden and undetected if prompts used for language sampling target only their conversational level of vocabulary. A study undertaken by Smith and Ungersoll (1984) allowed for children aged 6–14 to write on a topic of their choice. However,

In both quantitative and qualitative analyses, the compositions were disappointing. Quantitatively, most written output was made up of a very small subset of types. Qualitatively, the compositions lacked spontaneity or originality. By and large, they were boring and banal in the judgment of the raters. (Smith & Ungersoll, 1984, p. 26)

A type is the number of different words, not a total word count. Thus, run, runs, running, runs would be 4 tokens or words, 3 types or different words, and one word family (headword: run). Smith and Ungersoll's (1984) article laments the poverty of types (or different words) while also noting that the length of their samples, at just around 100 words (or tokens), was also short. The vp profiler tool used in this study generates a report that gives figures for tokens, types and word families, as well as the ratio of different words to total words (the type-token ratio). This study found that the average length was around 150 words, with better writing being longer, at least 200-250 words.

It becomes clear that if the research goal is to glean insights into children’s range of vocabulary knowledge and use, the elicitation task must challenge the youngster to marshal and mobilize his optimal linguistic resources. Corson (1984, 1997) refers to the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and use as the lexical bar. ‘Knowing a word’ is a gradual process that requires multiple exposures and opportunities to actively engage with, manipulate, and practice a word with the goal of retrieving the word from memory rapidly and using it correctly in an uninstructed context (Hirsch,
2003; Stahl, 2003). For example, narrative discourse rendered by way of story-telling, and expository discourse involving descriptions, recounts, explanations, and persuasion are more cognitively demanding than conversational discourse and require the language associated with making predictions, hypothesis, and inferences. Conversations tend to be concerned with the ‘here and now’ or the ‘lived experiences’ that can be achieved by all children with just a few hundred word families, whether orally or in written mode.

Raising the lexical bar involves the thoughtful design of an elicitation task that will invite the learner to produce her best by taxing the full range of lexical resources available.

**Designing a Good Prompt**

The foregoing review of the literature highlights the importance of cognitive challenge to set the lexical bar at its optimal height for the child in order to obtain insights into the full range of lexical knowledge brought to bear on the task. In addition to providing cognitive challenge, however, the prompt and the protocol must produce enough language output for meaningful analysis. Hewitt, Hammer, Yont, and Tomblin (2005) and Chipere, Malvern, Richards and Duran (n. d.) note the limitations of analysis as a consequence of insufficient data generated by the prompt.

Quality and quantity of output can be facilitated by designing tasks that engage children in authentic-like uses of language that are motivating and that tap experiences and topics with which they are familiar. In today’s culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, a wordless picture book such as Mercer Mayer’s (1969) *A boy, a dog and a frog* has universal appeal and recognition, and it is available in many different languages.

*A boy, a dog and a frog* has been used in many research studies as an elicitation task, yielding both quantity and quality of language suited to the intended purposes of the research including studies with bilingually developing children. The book has 29 delicately sketched images of a boy in pursuit of a frog. The story encourages children to make predictions, recognize problems and solutions, and see the humor. Children may simply be prompted to tell/make-up the story as they see it unfold page by page. However, the task reaches a ceiling effect at around age seven, when it appears that the story no longer requires further sophisticated language use (Roessingh & Elgie, 2009). Samples of NS and ELL children’s language samples can be found at the following site: [www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids](http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids)

Obtaining tape-recorded language samples and then transcribing them can be onerous work. Few classroom practitioners are able to undertake this type of endeavor. However, by age eight, children are generally able to produce written discourse that reflects automaticity and flow (Alston, 1983, 1985) as well as accuracy in spelling (Gentry, 1982). Consequently, by this age, it becomes far easier to collect and assess language samples. Indeed, many school systems conduct large scale
writing assessments; however, the challenge of designing the elicitation task remains. The following prompt was field tested before being chosen for research purposes, with the goal of gleaning insights into vocabulary use among students K-12 (Roessingh, Elgie, & Kover, 2012).

Imagine that there is a large undeveloped space in your schoolyard. Every student in the school has been asked for ideas about what to put there. A committee of teachers and parents will choose the best suggestion.

Write a proposal for the committee to read. Describe what you would put in the space. Then, convince the committee that your idea is the best way to use the space.

A planning page should be provided that encourages younger children to sketch out their ideas for the empty space in the school yard, followed by further space for making notes and recording key vocabulary. In assessing the children’s written work, these pages provide insights into the need for and the strength of the sketching and note taking phase of the work in scaffolding the written efforts, especially among younger children in grades three and four who have reached the stage of concrete thinking and are able to transform visual information into written mode with good results.

Another prompt that Roessingh, Elgie, and Kover (2012) field-tested for their research is as follows:

We know that many young people today are not as physically active as they need to be. Every student in the school has been asked for ideas about what to do to get students to become more active. A committee of teachers and parents will choose the best suggestions.

Write a proposal for the committee to read. Describe what you would do to promote physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. Then, convince the committee that your idea is the best way to make it happen.

These prompts have been shared with classroom teachers who may use the prompt and the online profiling tools mentioned earlier for a variety of instructional purposes. It is important that children’s writing efforts be given sufficient time. The author found that a period of 45-60 minutes seemed to generate a written response that was useful for research purposes. The aim was to obtain samples of at least 150 running (total) words; better writing was even longer, generally over 200 words. Classroom practitioners often report that they need to allow children more time for the writing of the language sample.
Another prompt that has proved successful in terms of elicitation of language follows. As is the case throughout the United States, many provincial jurisdictions in Canada, including Alberta, have instituted standardized reading and writing testing programs across various grade levels. In Alberta, the Provincial Achievement Tests (PATS) are administered in grades 3, 6, and 9 every spring. In 2011, the grade 3 writing prompt consisted of a picture of a young boy dressed in a bird costume, staring intently at a bird’s egg he is holding. One egg in the bird’s nest has cracked, and there remains one more egg yet to hatch. The prompt simply asks children to look at the picture and write a story about the picture (Alberta Education, 2011).

Figure 1: Prompt for 2011 Alberta Provincial Achievement Test, grade 3

Analysis of the downloaded exemplars of the standards of writing on this prompt reveals a distinct differentiation in the vocabulary profiles at the three standards: excellent, proficient, and satisfactory: 92% of the grade three writing in the province met the satisfactory benchmark in 2011. This finding suggests that this prompt might be useful for further classroom writing practice.
Protocol for Administering a Designed Prompt

In the classroom, teachers are concerned with engaging children in much more writing activity in efforts to raise writing standards. In the pre-writing phase, it is worth providing an array of tasks that will help children access prior knowledge on the topic and organize their thinking about the prompt.

What follows next is a narrative of the author’s personal research experience that illustrates strategies that proved successful in tutoring a nine-year old Urdu-speaking ELL student. Emphasis was on vocabulary development. In the sections that follow, prewriting activities and results determined from analysis of the closing writing sample are discussed in detail.

The tutoring context

Recently I worked one-on-one with Isha for two hours each Tuesday evening for six months. At the start of our work together, Isha was about one year behind on her vocabulary measure, Gates MacGinitie. Additionally, my purpose was to promote Isha’s academic skills and strategies and to guide her shift to tier 2 words. While tier 1 words are basic vocabulary, tier 2 words include more descriptive language and may include words with multiple meanings, although they are less context-sensitive than tier 3 words. They include the basic academic vocabulary that is needed in schoolwork. The success of this work was measured via the vocabulary profile results of her writing sample shown in Figure 4.

Key to my work was the selection of an appropriate prompt. I chose a sketch of a fawn resting peacefully behind some trees in a woodland scene that I found among classroom materials collected from diverse sources over many years of teaching. Currently, I do not know the source of this particular coloring book page. In the distance is a bear taking a stroll. I introduced the sketch as a story-telling task a week before the actual writing sample was to be taken, so it provided a concrete starting point for the writing. It served as a scaffold, engaging Isha in pre-writing activity that included planning, organizing, and thinking about key words.

Pre-writing vocabulary enrichment activities

As I began my work with Isha, I focused on subject and vocabulary content that would lead to the woodland scene in the prompt drawing. The topic of wild animals provided an interesting context for introducing vocabulary, making predictions, seeing cause and effect in predator-prey relationships, problem solving, and academic discourse. There was an abundance of current media coverage on this topic as a result of an early spring in Alberta, the pre-mature arousal of the grizzly bear population, and their search for food with scarce resources available so soon. We talked and read about abandoned young animals, including Pippin, an abandoned fawn in a magazine story (McKinnel, 2012) and in the
book entitled *Kate & Pippin: An unlikely love story* (Springett & Springett, 2012) that was published soon after the article appeared. We discussed what to do if you find a fawn. We used the Internet to research information about abandoned baby animals.

I drew upon materials from a variety of sources. I adapted or rewrote magazine and newspaper articles. I used traditional types of written materials like crossword puzzles, flash cards, and sentence frames. In addition, I located Internet resources, including YouTube clips, and Isha and I read for information from various websites. The diversity of these resources worked together to ensure exposure to and recycling of the key concepts and vocabulary that Isha would need for robust learning and the raising of her lexical bar.

**Pre-writing coloring task**

A week before administering the writing sample, I gave Isha this sketch to color for homework. The following week I wanted to obtain a writing sample, using the colored sketch as a scaffold. With no preliminary discussion, Isha was simply prompted to think and write about ‘what happened before this picture was taken, what’s happening now, and what will happen next?’

Figure 2: Isha’s pre-writing task.
Obtaining the writing sample

Upon arrival at her home for our weekly tutoring session, Isha proudly produced her colored drawing of the forest scene. With no preliminary talk, other than to acknowledge her fine attempt in completing the sketch, I set her to work. When Isha was ready to start her writing sample, I gave her the sketch she had colored previously, a pencil, notepaper, and lined paper for the writing itself.

I allowed for an open-ended amount of time for Isha to complete her work. Within 45 minutes she had accomplished her task and we spent time looking at her strengths, especially her use of the target vocabulary from the last few weeks of work, the overall length and development of the writing sample. She then asked to type the sample for me on her computer and email me a copy for lexical profiling, a procedure she was familiar with from previous work we had done. She was thrilled with this piece of work! [To reproduce the writing sample full size it appears on pages 47-48.]

Analyzing the writing sample

Once Isha had completed her language sample, the next step was evaluation of her performance, and the author/researcher’s tool of choice was the online lexical profiler at www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids. The screen below shows Isha’s vocabulary profile, and the discussion of her results follows.

Figure 4 shows the vocabulary profile generated from submitting Isha’s writing to the online tool available at www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids (Permission to reproduce granted by parent, 2012.)

[To permit full size reproduction Figure 4 appears on page 49.]
There once was a deer and her fawn. The deer ran into a bear and he had frightened her. The deer ran away and she had abandoned her fawn. The deer’s fawn was right in front of the bear. Then the bear was chasing him. The fawn hide behind the bushes the bear could not find her. The bear was searching for her but he could not find her. So the bear found a bird and ate him. The fawn say him eat the bird and she got scared. The fawn was very hungry so she ate a few leaves. The bear was getting mad and that was dangerous. The fawn lade perfectly still. They were in the forest. The mom abandon the fawn because she was scared and thought maybe the fawn could run away. There was know one there to protect her from the bear. She was mad and got after animals to help her kill the bear. The fawn was adorable. She got a big deer and a fat goose and a moose to help her defeat the big scary bear. They got the bear to run away. The fawn was not a fawn anymore. She had new spots. The deer met another deer and they got married. She found a hotel baby fawn and got her to be her best friend. The deer was so happy she did not get eaten by the scary bear. The bear did not find her because she
Figure 3: Isha’s writing sample (Permission to reproduce granted by parent, 2012.)

was camouflaged in all the leaves and the grass. The bear could hardly see her. The fawn does not give off any scent. The bear did not discover her in the bush.

She lived happily ever after.

Did you know that the bear was a grizzly bear

The End.

Very dangerous
Figure 4 shows the vocabulary profile generated from submitting Isha’s writing to the online tool available at www.lextutor.ca/vp/kids (Permission to reproduce granted by parent, 2012.)
In language sample analysis, as discussed earlier in Literature Review, researchers draw on various indices of lexical diversity. Key indicators of note in this profile include the total number of words in the text (TNT) of 273 and the number of different words (NDW) of 106. In terms of vocabulary richness, Isha’s profile showed coverage at Band 1, the first 250 words of English, at 67.8% and coverage at Band 4, the first 1,000 words of English, at 87.6%. The Off-list number of known and unknown words was 8.

Isha’s Off-list words stretched beyond the corpus of the children’s vocabulary, indicating their reach into the adult corpus of the British National Corpus (BNC) and a shift to more mature vocabulary choices. Her spontaneous writing included the following key words from thematic work on wild animals and the story of Kate and Pippin: abandoned, perfectly, adorable, fawn, camouflaged, moose, dangerous, grizzly. It is notable also that Isha chose the word ‘searched’ rather than ‘looked for,’ and ‘adorable’ rather than simply ‘cute,’ ‘nice,’ or ‘pretty,’ words she would have used when her tutoring began.

These are indicators that Isha is shifting into mid-frequency vocabulary (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2012), also known as tier 2 words (August, Carlo, Dressler & Snow, 2005) as well as moving toward more academic word choices.

This overall profile, though generating a good quantity of discourse and some very good word choices that reflect independent retrieval of key vocabulary Isha had been working on, nevertheless also indicates an overdependence on the high frequency bands (Band 1 – 4) of vocabulary that constitute the first 1,000 words of spoken English (Roessingh, Elgie, & Kover, 2012). Thresholds to look for that are indicative of a shift to more advanced vocabulary include 60 – 64% coverage at Band 1, 80% at Band 4, and a good distribution to the Off-list known words (to 95%) with no visible holes in the profile. Using this profile, the author/researcher was able to determine that Isha made very strong growth in the six months of her tutoring sessions. Her profile reflected good writing that, with a small upward shift in the profile and with further vocabulary work, showed promise that she could reach the standard of excellence she appeared to be capable of.

**Considerations in Evaluating Students’ Writing**

Language sample analysis via vocabulary profiles cannot tell the entire story of a child’s language development. One problem is that most trait-based assessment rubrics place far more emphasis on organization and content than on vocabulary. In addition, within the dimension of vocabulary choices, the teacher must read the child’s writing to ascertain the appropriateness and correctness of the vocabulary used in terms of the context that the prompt or task required. As noted earlier, the journey to accuracy and nuanced uses of language is a long, protracted one.
Along the way there are markers of children taking risks with vocabulary that tell the teacher of the need for instructed support: mixed metaphors, inaccurate use of idioms, orthographic irregularities, to name a few. In reviewing vocabulary profiles, teachers must understand the role of vocabulary mistakes generated by the risk-taking associated with the process of language growth. Biemiller (2004) further underscores the importance of ongoing direct and explicit instruction in vocabulary to support the development of tier 2 words: the mid-range words that play a key role in precision of meaning making.

A final and very important consideration is the use of handwriting in obtaining language samples. Young children under the age of eight (grade three) may not yet have achieved executionary control over the kinesthetic demands of writing. In short, they may not have achieved the skills for putting pencil to paper with sufficient automaticity, fluency, and flow to free the working memory resources required to attend to the writing task. Medwell, Strand, and Wray (2007) write that “handwriting is indeed a language act and that orthographic-motor integration, that is automatic letter production, is . . . significantly related to composition” (pp. 12-13). Christensen (2009) explains writing in terms of cognitive load and indicates that working memory places constraints on the act of composition. If writing is slow and belabored and if children are not confident about their spelling, the quality as well as the quantity of the writing is compromised. Alston’s (1983) framework for assessing handwriting gives important guidelines to the quality of writing to look for at age eight.

**Conclusions**

The assessment of vocabulary knowledge through written output is only in embryonic stages; the insights, tools, and frameworks needed to make progress in this domain are in the early evolutionary stages. Researchers are using language sample analysis and lexical profiling as a strategy to obtain quantitative insights into vocabulary learning trajectories of different learner profile groups, including ELLs. Classroom practitioners, too, can begin to use these tools for assessment and instructional planning purposes.

The prompts used to elicit the language samples are central to realizing the goals of the research agenda. Teachers can develop prompts for their own use and share them in professional development activities with their colleagues. Creating good prompts that will work across age groups and learner profiles requires careful thought and design. The criteria discussed in this article provide useful guidance.
In sum, the lexical bar must be set high enough to generate sufficient quality and quantity of discourse. Also, thought must be given to the protocol used to elicit the sample. Time allocation, pre-writing activity by way of encouraging planning, identification of key words, and even sketching are ways to enhance the writing sample. To select topics for prompts, teachers can search Google images for young, orphaned wild life, for example, that provoke an emotional response from K-12 with visible differentiation of vocabulary use in the profiles. As children mature, related vocabulary choices from the mid-range of vocabulary might include: environment, natural, habitat, starvation, formula, nutrition, hibernation, refuge, rehabilitation, protection, reintroduction, and release.

Teachers and researchers must also look holistically at the writing produced by students, using a trait-based rubric that can place vocabulary use into the larger context of quality writing standards. Often missing from these rubrics is the important consideration of handwriting, perhaps the first and easiest dimension to look at. Researchers link automaticity, fluency, and accuracy in transcription to quality of writing at all ages.

This article provides suggestions for prompts that have been field tested, and can fulfill the needs of researchers and practitioners alike. Informal classroom-based research using the profiling tools demonstrated here can help teachers track growth by noting changes in the shape of the vocabulary footprint or profile over time.

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References


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**Citation**

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Dr. Rita Deyoe-Chiullán has taught bilingual students of all ages in the U.S. and Colombia over the past forty years. Currently she teaches undergraduate courses at Texas Woman’s University and graduate online courses for the American College of Education. Her scholarly efforts focus on preparing qualified bilingual and ESL teachers. Her next publication is entitled “What is language fossilization and why does it matter?” in English Language Learners in 21st Century Classrooms: Challenges and Expectations (Eds. M. Cowart & G. Anderson) [in press]. Rita’s most exciting recent project has been developing and editing a new peer-reviewed online journal, Texas English Language Teaching (TexELT) under the sponsorship of the TexTESOL V Board where she serves as Publications Coordinator.

Dr. Jey Venkatesan has taught English as a Second language and college composition in the U.S. and India for several years. She has taught in many local colleges such as Texas Wesleyan, Texas Christian University, Tarrant County College, and Northlake College. Currently, she is a Professor of ESL at Collin College. She is also an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examiner. She continues to faithfully contribute her excellent copy editing skills as the TexTESOL V Board’s Publications Copy Coordinator. Fortunately, she also agreed to serve as a reviewer for TexELT in addition to providing her copy editing skills at various levels of the publication process.
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Margaret Redus has been a member of TESOL International since 1998. She has also been a member of TexTESOL V, where she served as treasurer and later membership officer. She holds a B.A in elementary education with a minor in English and an M.L.A with a specialization in bilingual education. She began her career in education by teaching primary grades for Dallas ISD for 6½ years, where many of her students were Spanish-speaking, and all were of low socioeconomic level.

More recently she has taught ESOL credit courses in all skills areas to adults at two local community colleges, with a focus on the skills of writing/grammar. At Collin College, she also served as co-author, under Dr. Don Weasenforth and with Nancy Megarity, of a chapter in Effective Second Language Writing, TESOL, 2010. Its content was based on their action research in building autonomy in ESL student editing. At Richland College, she served under Dr. Barbara Dogger as teacher trainer and prompt developer for the Portfolio writing assessment program.

Primary Style and Composition Reviewer’s Biography

Angela Landt has taught academic ESL to adult learners in the Intensive English Language Institute (IELI) at the University of North Texas in Denton for six years. She also taught in South Korea for one year (1997) and in Thailand for nine months (2008). Previously, she worked in the IT industry in Minneapolis for six years as a technical writer/web developer. She has an M.A. in ESL from the University of Minnesota and a B.A. in Music (piano performance) from Geneva College in western Pennsylvania.

Margaret dedicated many hours reading manuscripts, suggesting revisions to make the messages clearer and more accessible and patiently re-reading after revisions were made to be sure the next draft was more effective. Other members who had offered to serve as reviewers had unexpected situations arise that prevented them from sharing the review tasks this summer, so she became the Primary Style and Composition Reviewer for all the papers published in TexELT, Volume 1, Issue 1.
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