Supporting comprehension among English language learners

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Supporting comprehension among English language learners

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

M.S. Literacy Education

Supervised by

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Abstract

This action research project based in sociocultural theory and Critical Race theory focused on how teachers are using socially based strategies to support comprehension among English language learners (ELL). Research for this study took place at Harmony Elementary School (pseudonym) located within the Rochester City School District. During the completion of this study, the primary focus was based on observations within an ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) teacher’s classroom. This classroom environment included eight first grade ELL’s at the beginning stage of English language proficiency. The findings suggest that English language learners comprehension is supported through teacher modifications of socially based strategies, modeling, and connections made explicitly to these students home and/or cultural experiences outside of school.
Introduction

The topic of English language learners is crucial as the population of ELLs is one of the fastest growing groups among the school-aged population. This diverse group of students consists of “individuals whose language backgrounds are other than English and whose English proficiency is not yet developed to the extent where they can benefit fully from English-only instruction” (p. 307). The growing number of ELLs present in our schools today is evident as there are “over 9.9 million ELLs of which 5.5 million are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP)” (Taboada, 2009, p. 307). In order to account for the vast array of ELLs within our schools today, teachers must design their instruction with effective strategies for teaching these diverse learners. Additionally, these strategies should not only account for individual needs among students, but teachers should also consider students backgrounds in order to enable these students to successfully participate in American schools.

According to Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, and Vaughn (2004), English language learners are one of the largest groups of students who struggle with literacy instruction. Vocabulary and comprehension serve as particular troublesome areas for these individuals. Typically, the language experience and skills of ELLs are heterogeneous. Explicitly, the prior knowledge, home literacy practices, language skills, language flexibility, and language proficiency of each learner not only varies, but these differences influence the learning and instruction that occurs within the classroom (Hickman et al., 2004). Additionally, August and Hakuta (1998) inform that these individuals are “twice as likely as native English-speaking peers to have reading achievement levels significantly below average for their age” (as cited in Calhoon, Al Otaiba, Cihak, King, & Avalos, 2007, p. 169). Improving reading outcomes for ELL children, regardless of their English proficiency is crucial and should be a goal for all educators (Pritchard & O’Hara,
Explicit instruction needs to occur in regards to reading comprehension for ELLs so that these individuals can understand the literacy materials taught within the classroom.

It is evident that immediate attention must be drawn to the comprehension of English-language learners. This issue on how to appropriately instruct ELLs in terms of comprehension strategy instruction must be considered and used within the classroom at the present time. According to Pritchard and O’Hara (2008), “the solution to the language and literacy development challenges English learners face cannot be found in a specific set of instructional materials but depends instead on teachers capable of delivering strategic instruction and developing strategic readers” (p. 637). More specifically, since comprehension is a key component in the process of reading, it is essential that educators are aware of the best practices and ways to teach this skill. Educators must examine their instruction and take into account the needs of all of their learners in order to provide ELLs with strategies that will guide their comprehension through the present and into the future.

In order to further investigate the use of comprehension strategy instruction used with English language learners within the classroom, I plan to conduct observations within an ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) classroom. Throughout these separate observations I plan to focus on one teacher’s interactions and strategies used with a small group of students. As I observe this teacher I will pay specific attention to her incorporation of each student’s cultural backgrounds. Additionally, I will be looking for social interactions that occur between students in order to enable them to enhance their understanding or comprehension while learning. Following these observations, I plan to interview the teacher in regards to her instructional strategies used within the classroom.
Theoretical Framework

English language learners are a highly heterogeneous and complex group of students with diverse gifts, educational needs, backgrounds, and languages. For example, some ELL students come from homes in which English is spoken, some come from homes where no English is spoken, and others have been exposed to or use multiple languages. As ELL students enter the classroom, they represent a race or ethnicity that is different from their White or Caucasian peers; therefore, ELL’s may suffer from oppression. Since ELLs language varies from that of the dominant English language they may be stigmatized for the way they speak English or for speaking a language other than English.

Early in the history of the term, literacy was simply referred to as the ability to read and write. However, as time has progressed, literacy has come to serve as an individual’s ability to develop, critique, and manage a variety of texts. In addition, a major portion of literacy includes an individual’s ability to participate through social collaboration with others. Williams (2008) accounts for the social views among literacy as he concludes that “literacy is not a stand-alone set of skills but social practices influenced by context and culture” (p. 683). Through this social constructivist perspective of literacy it becomes apparent that social experiences contribute to each individual’s knowledge of literacy. In addition, it is through these experiences that individuals position themselves according to the social practices of their culture, background experiences, and literacy skills that they bring to the culture as well (Larson & Marsh, 2005).

Another similar perspective in terms of literacy as a social practice is presented among the work of Lankshear and Knobel (2007). These scholar’s define literacies as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating content through the medium of encoded texts” (p. 224). Within this definition of literacy, Lankshear and Knobel highlight the
significance of social practices through what they term “socially recognized ways”. As individuals engage in social practices they are directed towards socially distinguished goals that involve shared knowledge. In addition, individuals also engage in the text as they form their own interpretations based on their experiences.

The provided definition of literacy is equivalently important to the issues in diversity that relate to English language learners. One of the issues in diversity that correlates with literacy instruction and ELLs includes Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT’s connection to literacy involves acknowledging and valuing the cultures, knowledge’s, languages, and abilities of students of Color. Moreover, this theory believes that every student’s culture brings something to the classroom; each culture is important and should be accepted and incorporated. Evidently, literacy is important in the lives of English language learners and teachers need to be respectful of each student’s cultures without placing stereotypes. Therefore, as teachers follow CRT within the classroom they create an environment in which ELLs are recognized for their strengths and for the knowledge and experiences that each student brings into the classroom as a powerful contributor to the learning environment.

As teachers create a culturally supportive classroom environment for English language learners they not only build upon their backgrounds, but teachers implement specific instructional strategies to enable ELL’s to be successful. These strategies incorporate social construction as interactions occur within the classroom between teachers and peers alike. Dialogue is a crucial element among these approaches as through highly social, interactive, and holistic dialogues, students acquire the use and generalizations of specific strategies. This dialogue enables the individual to partake in social interactions with his or her teachers and peers as they engage in “socially recognized ways” of using these strategies. As these dialogues occur
between individuals, power is exchanged between English language learners and their peers and teachers through social interaction. The power shifts among these individuals as they engage in learning (Rex & Schiller, 2009). Specifically, according to Rex and Schiller (2009), the circulation of power has an influence on each student's learning as it “circulates within the social conditions in which a person is acting. It’s a movement of energy between teachers and learners who are working together” (p. 42). It is evident that as teachers implement specific teaching approaches within their classrooms and incorporate each student's backgrounds, power shifts will occur as ELLs engage in social interactions with their peers and teachers.

**Research Question**

If literacy is a social practice and learning occurs through social interaction, then how are teachers using socially based strategies to support comprehension among English language learners?

**Literature Review**

**English Language Learners and Comprehension**

The purpose of reading is to connect the ideas on the page to what an individual already knows. Providing for this connection enables the reader to understand the text and to possibly gain new knowledge. Additionally, comprehending throughout the reading of a text will also enable an individual to socially engage through dialogue with their teachers and peers in relation to this text. However, if one does not know anything about a subject, then they he or she not be able to understand the material with ease and independence. In order to enable English language learners to gain knowledge and to engage in social practices within the classroom, teachers must
provide adequate support for these individuals throughout their educational experiences. This idea can be directly related to the wealth of literature involving English-language learners and reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension falls within a category known as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Unlike basic communication skills, CALP skills “take place without the immediate or explicit context of an interactive social situation, and thus, rely more on the background information and details necessary to convey the message in a meaningful way” (Taboada, 2009, p. 308). Compared to basic communication skills which provide for the language that we use within everyday language situations, CALP provides for language that is less contextualized and more abstract. According to Hashey & Connors (2003), Hickman et al. (2004), Gersten & Baker (2000), Klingner & Vaughn (1996), Saenz et al. (2005), and Taboada (2009), ELLs typically exhibit more problems with reading comprehension than fluent readers of English of comparable ability, because of the differences in background knowledge relevant to what is read in school and limited English proficiency. Specifically, the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth reviewed five studies that concluded that the reading comprehension development of language-minority students was lacking in comparison to English-speaking peers (Taboada, 2009). In addition to their lack of background knowledge, many ELL students are unaware of their own cognitive processes or how to determine the particular task demands within a learning situation. Therefore, these students have difficulty “receiving comprehensible input, producing comprehensible output, and negotiating meaning of utterances of text, which have not been comprehended” (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996, p. 233). During whole-class lessons teachers may have the opportunity to provide an abundance of comprehensible input through sheltered instruction, but students have limited opportunities to
produce comprehensible output or to negotiate meaning due to their unique situations (Beckman Anthony, 2008; Hite & Evans, 2006; Kim, 2008). Evidently, in support of the work of Calhoon et al. (2007), Hashey et al. (2003), Hickman et al. (2004), Klingner & Vaughn (1996), Saenz et al. (2005), and Taboada (2009), in order to enable ELL students to improve through learning opportunities, particularly in regards to reading comprehension, teachers must use comprehension strategy instructional approaches.

**Instructional approaches to support English language learners**

Although research has failed to provide a succinct answer as to what characterizes a high quality instructional program for English language learners, various approaches exist. When the school population includes ELLs, the school should consider its unique language and academic needs. According to Vialpando, Yedlin, Linse, Harrington, & Cannon (2005), “in order to specifically meet the academic needs of these students, schools should design a program with specific goals in mind” (p. 13). These goals should include helping ELLs develop grade-level academic proficiency, reaching high academic standards, and integrating sociocultural content that is associated with each learner’s lives outside of school. Research indications that no single program model works favorably in all situations (Gersten & Kaker, 2000; Lesaux, Lipka, & Siegal, 2006; McIntyre, Kyle, Chen, Munoz, & Beldon, 2010; O’Day, 2009; Taboada, 2009; Yoon, 2007). However, the instructional approach must be chosen to reflect the school’s language educational goals for the learners. Despite the large array of instructional approaches used to support English language learners, the approach of my focus includes sheltered instruction.
Sheltered Instruction

Through sheltered instruction and its modified forms, students receive instruction solely in English. In having English as a common language, children are able to engage in literacy activities and socially interact with their peers and teachers within the classroom and school environment (Carlisle & Beeman, 2000). However, although this approach focuses on the English language, modifications are made through the implementation of this instructional method. For example, McIntyre et al. (2010) report that through this type of instruction, “teachers highlight key language features and incorporate strategies that make the content comprehensible to students, strategies that have been widely accepted as key to improving reading comprehension of all learners” (p. 336). According to Gersten & Baker (2000), Lesaux et al. (2006) providing ELLs with sheltered instruction offers positive effects specifically relating to their reading comprehension. Lesaux et al. (2006) looked at the effects of using sheltered instruction with a group of ELL students over a five year time period. Their findings convey that as a group, ELL students can perform at similar levels as their English speaking peers. When these students were provided with sheltered instruction from kindergarten through fourth grade, they were able to improve their reading comprehension scores to be equivalent to those of their English speaking peers.

Despite the gains in reading comprehension that were shown through this study, it is evident that using sheltered instruction within the classroom is time consuming (Gersten & Baker, 2000; McIntyre, 2010; O’Day, 2009). Specifically, Gersten & Baker (2000) received teacher feedback through professional working groups within their study in which this limitation of sheltered instruction was apparent. Through teacher interviews, the common consensus was that sheltered instruction did not provide adequate time for both language acquisition and content
instruction. Above all, these teachers reported that the tendency was to cover the entire content of science, social studies, or mathematics curricula, which did not provide adequate time for English language development (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Since using sheltered instruction is time consuming, it is the teacher’s responsibility to use specific strategies that will enable English language learners to learn and to support their reading comprehension. Due to the restrictions provided through sheltered instruction, teachers may choose to implement specific strategies that will support the learning of English language learners.

Instructional strategies to support English language learners

**Reciprocal teaching**

Although there is an abundance of strategies that have been proven effective when teaching ELLs, the instructional approaches of my focus concern those that support comprehension development. As previously stated, ELL’s typically exhibit more problems with reading comprehension than their fluent speaking peers because of the differences in background knowledge applicable to what is read in school. Therefore, the development of literacy in children is hindered on reading comprehension. If a student is unable to “unlock the meaning” of a given text, they will not have the opportunity to understand what they are reading or to enjoy the reading (Migyanka et al., 2006).

The first teaching comprehension strategy that holds promise for ELLs is Palincscar and Brown’s reciprocal teaching model (Fung, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2003; Hashey & Connors, 2003; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999). In 1984, Palincascar and Brown developed this instructional strategy which was originally designed to enhance student comprehension. This procedure is best characterized as a dialogue between teachers and students...
as they engage in four strategies known as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. Through the dialogue that occurs within this procedure, students and teachers are responsible for engaging in what O’Day (2009) terms, “accountable talk”. This talk emphasizes student’s use of evidence from text to support their ideas and to respond or elaborate on their peer’s contribution to classroom discussion. Additionally, due to the name of this strategy, the term ‘reciprocal’ describes the nature of the interactions as each person acts in response to the other(s) (Hashey & Connors, 2003). This give-and-take nature of reciprocal teaching requires the teacher to scaffold the use of specific strategies and to provide support when needed so that the student eventually assumes most of the thinking responsibilities. Thus, through practice using reciprocal teaching, the student will come to recognize the four strategies and be able to use these independently and therefore construct their own meaning after scaffolded instruction is provided (Hashey & Connors, 2003).

According to Fung et al. (2003), Hashey & Connors (2008), Klingner & Vaughn (1996), and Sollars & Pumfrey (1999), providing ELLs with reciprocal teaching has shown to have positive effects on their comprehension development. Specifically, in a study by Klingner and Vaughn (1996), in which researchers tested the efficacy of the reading comprehension of ELL seventh and eighth grade students with learning disabilities, their engagement in both social and cognitive processes enabled for their reading comprehension to improve. The strategy of reciprocal teaching recognizes that cognitive development occurs when concepts first learned though social interaction become internalized and made one’s own (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996). Through this study, reciprocal teaching was combined with either cross-aged tutoring or cooperative learning. Due to these combinations, not only did students engage in various social interactions, but linguistic differences were also accommodated for in a way that was more
conducive to student learning. For example, through the cooperative learning groups, ELL students had an opportunity to draw on native language support from their bilingual peers in order to learn and thus comprehend the material. Therefore, instead of merely abandoning their native language, this instructional strategy of reciprocal teaching in combination with cooperative learning enabled for students to work together within a social situation in order to appropriately implement comprehension strategies that proved to enhance their ability to comprehend (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996). Similarly, Fung et al. (2003) researched sixth and seventh grade ELLs over the course of twenty days of using reciprocal teaching. Through this study, students learned how to foster and monitor their comprehension by using cognitive and metacognitive strategies involved through the process of reciprocal teaching.

Sollars and Pumfrey’s (1999) research relates to the findings found within the studies conducted by Klingner and Vaughn (1996) and Fung et al. (2003) as these researchers found that a reciprocal model of teaching was beneficial and advantageous for the language comprehension of ELLs. These researchers maintain that “children’s experiences of linguistic interaction have some influence on their learning” (Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999, p. 153). Sollars and Pumfrey (1999) emphasize that language learning is an active process occurring naturally in communicative situations which emphasize social interactions and cognitive skills. Through the reciprocal teaching used with this study, Sollars and Pumfrey (1999) found that “older children did better than younger one’s because their cognitive abilities were more developed” (p. 153). As opposed to the cross-aged tutoring used within the study offered by Klingner and Vaughn (1996), this reciprocal teaching only approach concludes that it is easier for older children to apply their cognitive and social skills acquired in their first language to the second language situation. Older children have more experiences with cueing and making sense of what other people are saying in
their first language and therefore it is easier for them to apply these various skills (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996, p.153). Evidently, as these older ELL children engage in the process of reciprocal teaching they have already developed more significant cognitive and social skills than their younger peers which therefore enables them to become more successful in developing their comprehension through reciprocal teaching.

In addition to the significance of the social and cognitive processes associated with reciprocal teaching, this approach is also beneficial for ELL students as they have the opportunity to engage in genuine dialogue between their peers and their teachers (Fung et al., 2003; Hashey & Connors, 2008; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999). Reciprocal teaching provides an environment in which students with the assistance of their teachers and/or their peers become increasingly proficient at applying comprehension strategies while reading text passages (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996). Evidence of the importance of this dialogue that occurs within reciprocal teaching is found within the results of Klingner and Vaughn’s (1996) study in which “students in both the cross-age tutoring and cooperative learning groups continued to exhibit improvement in comprehension even when the teacher provided minimal support” (p. 288). Through the dialogue that occurred within these unique situations ELL students had the opportunity to engage in dialogue either within their native language(s) or in English to truly make sense of the English text passages of focus. Similarly, the success of teacher and student dialogue is represented through Sollars and Pumfrey’s (1999) study especially when using this approach with younger children. Since the younger children within this study were in their first year of formal exposure to English, their knowledge of English was rather limited. Therefore, the teacher acting as the exclusive role model through dialogue and interaction with the students was more beneficial at this point in their development
Although reciprocal teaching includes dialogue among teachers and peers, these two studies account for the success of this talk as it vastly improves the quality of overall classroom dialogue as students oral language proficiency improves along with their increased comprehension (Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999).

**Peer-assisted learning strategies**

The second teaching comprehension strategy that holds promise for ELLs includes a reciprocal class wide peer-tutoring strategy known as Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) or Kindergarten Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (K-PALS). PALS and K-PALS are recommended as a supplement to classroom core reading instructional programs and typically takes up to 25% of the 90-minute reading block for approximately half of the academic year (Calhoon, Otaiba, Cihak, King, & Avalos, 2007; McMaster, Kung, Han, & Cao, 2008). Various grade level versions of PALS exist, but through the research articles of focus for this literature review, the purpose of grades 1-6 PALS activities are to “increase strategic reading behavior, phonological awareness, reading fluency, and comprehension” (Calhoon et al., 2007).

Additionally, K-PALS provides for a purposeful strategy in which kindergarten ELLs practice skills identified as crucial for beginning reading. These skills addressed through K-PALS include phonemic awareness, letter-sound recognition, decoding, and fluency (McMaster et al., 2008). Through both grade-level versions of this strategy, PALS is reciprocal in nature just like the previous instructional strategy. Through the reciprocal process associated with PALS, students switch roles, but during each lesson the higher performing student performs the role of the coach first. Additionally, once students learn how to follow PALS procedures, sessions follow a structured instructional routine following teacher modeling, student practice, teacher feedback,
and finally cooperative learning practice (Calhoon et al., 2007).

According to Calhoon et al. (2007) and Saenz et al. (2005), providing ELLs with PALS as a supplement to existing reading programs has been shown to improve their overall reading comprehension. For ELLs, scaffolded or supported reading experiences in English are particularly important because of the memory load required in second-language reading processes. Additionally, for learning to take place, ELLs also need instruction that provides contextual cues that enable these students to tackle cognitively demanding tasks. PALS provides for an instructional strategy including peer tutoring which could play an important role in ensuring that the meaning of the text is understood by ELLs while still confirming that native speakers needs are meet (Calhoon et al., 2007). Evidence of the positive effects of PALS is represented in a study by Calhoon et al. (2007). Through this study researchers examined the “effect of a supplemental peer-mediated reading program on the reading achievement of first graders in a two-way bilingual immersion program” (Calhoon et al., 2007). Based on the support from their teachers in terms of their cognitive abilities and their peers through social interaction, first grade ELLs performances from this study improved, including increased fluency, comprehension, and engagement in the reading process (Calhoon et al., 2007, p. 178). Additionally, the results of this study also conclude that the student and teacher enjoyment of learning PALS and working in collaboration with others through this task, may lead to sustained program implementation in the future. Finally, similar findings are evident among a study led by McMaster et al. (2008). Although the research within this study was conducted with younger ELLs, the results prove that fostering beginning reading skills provides for continued school success, specifically in the area of reading comprehension once they enter first grade.

In addition to the cognitive and social benefits of implementing this peer-mediated
strategy, PALS has also been used successfully with ELLs with learning disabilities. Through a study conducted by Saenz et al. (2007), PALS was shown to improve the reading comprehension of ELL students with and without learning disabilities. As Saenz et al. (2007) conclude, “PALS is well suited for their learning needs and it is a strategy that is closely aligned with theories of second language proficiency” (p. 244). It is evident that PALS directly relates with these theories of second language proficiency as PALS provides ELLs with multiple opportunities to practice English within a positive learning environment. Additionally, PALS allows for individualization of instruction for students who may have different levels of English language proficiency or various learning needs. Finally, as students participate in PALS, teachers assign these learners with peers who are at a different learning level. Therefore, through the peer interaction and tutoring that occurs in these unique situations, ELLs are hopefully able to learn from each other within a cooperative learning situation.

**Collaborative strategies**

As conveyed with the previous two strategies, dialogue is an important attribute to include within daily instruction when teaching with English language learners. Specifically, “dialogue is a primary tool for learning, and when used skillfully can help children achieve new understanding” (McIntyre et al., 2010, p. 336). Additionally, the collaboration that exists between ELLs, their peers, and teachers within the classroom is also essential. In terms of interaction within a whole group setting, small groups have been found to be the best way to provide needed scaffolding and reading instruction for second language learners in a mainstream classroom setting (McElvain, 2010). Strategies that address these specific components and that relate to reciprocal teaching and PALS or K-PALS are prevalent among the research. One
strategy known as Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) is similar in scope to Palincscar and Brown’s method of reciprocal teaching. Through CSR, students have the opportunity to engage in small-group, peer-mediated instruction (Vaughn, Klingner, & Bryant, 2001). Although the overall goal is working towards students becoming independent readers and thus be able to comprehend on their own, the teacher begins instruction of this strategy through demonstrations. Explicitly, the teacher must implement think-alouds in order to enable the students to understand the directions and purpose for each step in CSR (Vaughn et al., 2001). The think-aloud procedure not only shows success through CSR, but it also has been an effective strategy by itself as well. Think-alouds were implemented as a strategy in a study conducted by Migyanka, Policastro, & Lui (2006) in which both ELL and English speaking students improved through their ability to comprehend. Through this study, students engaged in a think-aloud in which their teacher read aloud the popular children’s book, *Chrysanthemum*. During this procedure students had the opportunity to engage in the read aloud of a popular text, think-aloud, and have discussions based on this text, which led to improved comprehension for all of the students involved (Hickman, Pollard-Duorodola, & Vaughn, 2004; Migyanka, 2006). These collaborative strategies can be attributed to sociocultural theory as through their participation in these strategies, ELL’s may collaborate with their peers and teachers while engaging in socially meaningful ways. Specifically, these strategies enable ELL’s to use dialogue among different settings and with various individuals to form a better understanding of the task at hand.

**Content area strategies**

Through sheltered instruction with English language learners, the goal is for these learners to acquire English and to comprehend content that is taught within the classroom.
However, according to Jazen (2008), “a discouraging aspect of the number of rapidly increasing presence of ELLs in American schools is that these students are at high risk for academic failure” (p. 1010). Specifically, one critical issue that is evident within the classroom is that teachers are not prepared to teach with English language learners (Jazen, 2008). Additionally, teacher’s lack of knowledge in relation to second language learning has also led to associating these bilingual students with a disability (Rodriquez, 2009). In order to enable ELLs to achieve in the content areas and to be provided with adequate instructional supports, teachers need to implement strategies that will enable them to succeed. One strategy that was used within a three-year summer school program involved the partnership of various educators working together to best meet the needs of English language learners (Silva, Weinburgh, Smith, Barreto, & Gabel, 2008). Several individuals collaborated in this study including three professors, an ESL coordinator, classroom teacher, two science education doctoral students, and one curriculum studies master’s student. These individuals researched and collaborated on the teaching methods and content to be covered with third-fifth grade students over the course of the summer. All of the researchers and the ELL students benefited from these partnerships as everyone had the opportunity to learn. Most importantly, Silva et al. (2008) report that content and ELL teachers within all educational settings would benefit from creating partnerships. Through their findings in this study, these individuals also agree that these partnerships will help close the achievement gap for immigrant ELLs. Evidently, it is through the collaboration that exists within these partnerships that teachers will gain new strategies for teaching ELLs within the classroom. These teacher partnerships enable for a common ground to be established in terms of the content and strategies to be covered with English language learners. Although these students need to be provided with a variety of strategies, this collaboration is also essential as teachers must be able to tie in student’s
cultural backgrounds into the content as well.

Another strategy which teachers can implement includes what is known as the Partner Reading and Content Too routine (Ogle & Correa-Kovtun, 2010). The starting point for this routine is to locate informational reading materials that are accessible to students at a range of reading levels. Then, a specific content area is determined, such as social studies or science in which a unit set of books is developed. The teacher then assigns partners to each student and they participate in a collaborative reading experience. Through this experience, students change roles as the reader and the listener and they come to comprehend the content found within each book. Above all, this strategy provides a scaffold for ELLs developing skills through reading text from the content areas. Based on the findings of this observational study, through the support that the students receive from the teacher and their peers through Partner Reading and Content Too, their academic talk enables them to comprehend at a higher level. As ELLs engage in this strategy they have the opportunity to become socially engaged in the text alongside a peer. Through this collaboration, students may find commonalities or differences in their understanding of the text based on their own background knowledge. However, through the dialogue that exists between these students, hopefully they will come to not only understand the text, but they will have the chance to engage in a social practice.

Methods

Context

Research for this study occurred at Harmony Elementary (pseudonym) located within the Rochester City School District. As of the 2009-2010 school year, Harmony Elementary had an enrollment of 560 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Of these students, 51% were African American, 28% were Hispanic, 10% were White, 10% were Asian, 1% were American
Indian, and 1% were Multiracial. The number of students who received free/reduced lunch was 469 (84%) (“Rochester City School District Report Card”, 2011). Harmony Elementary follows the ATLAS school-reform model. This model allows “educators to look through the macro lens at a student’s learning experiences and build on what students have learned in previous years to prepare them for achievement (“Rochester City School District”, 2011). Additionally, ATLAS supports student achievement through shared decision making and focused study of learning.

Within the 2009-2010 school year, the number of students at Harmony Elementary who were considered limited English proficient included 120 students (21%) (“Rochester City School District Report Card”, 2011). Due to the demographics of this school, programs have been put in place to support students. English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) is available for students of all grade levels. ESOL services help students from other language backgrounds develop language skills for success both in school and beyond. One specific program that involves ESOL services at Harmony Elementary includes the Learning English through Academics Program (LEAP). This program is available to students in kindergarten through third grade. Through sheltered instruction in English, the LEAP program supports the simultaneous development of English language proficiency and content-area concepts in English to students whose native language is other than English.

Participants

The participants in this study included eight first grade English Language Learners (two females and six males). All of these students receive LEAP services two hours a day in addition to their regular classroom instruction. Although they are at various independent levels, all eight students are currently at the beginning stage in terms of English language proficiency. Within the
beginning stage, ELL’s will process, understand, and use general language related to the content areas. Furthermore, these students will also use phrases or short sentences when communicating with others (Vialpando, Yedlin, Linse, Harrington, & Cannon, 2005).

In addition to the students that were involved with this study, one ESOL teacher was also of main importance. Ms. Sikes (pseudonym) started teaching at Harmony Elementary at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year. Prior to teaching at Harmony Elementary, Ms. Sikes taught within another school within the Rochester City School District. Ms. Sikes, who is Caucasian and in her early thirties, has a passion for teaching ESOL. Throughout the school day, Ms. Sikes instructs three small groups of first grade ELL’s through LEAP in addition to co-teaching within fifth grade classrooms throughout the remainder of the day.

Researcher’s Stance

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher working towards a Master’s Degree in Literacy Birth-12th grade. In May 2005, I received a Bachelor’s Degree from SUNY Brockport in English with a concentration in Childhood and Special Education, grades 1-6. As a researcher, I served as a passive observe within Ms. Sikes classroom. My role throughout these observations was to focus solely on my purpose of collecting data. Since I was unfamiliar with the students in this classroom, I relied on information provided by Ms. Sikes in terms of each student’s progress. Therefore, through these observations I had no teaching responsibilities, but this type of observation enabled me to have the opportunity to experience and observe the classroom setting and the dynamics within the classroom as well (Mills, 2011).

Method
During this study I focused primarily on Ms. Sikes instructional approaches that she implements within the classroom. Specifically, I was concerned with the peer-assisted learning strategies that Ms. Sike’s used with her small group of students. As I observed these various approaches I was also concerned with how the students collaborated and responded to these strategies. Most importantly, my observations revolved around how Ms. Sike’s uses socially based strategies to improve the comprehension of her small group of English language learners. Finally, through my observations I paid attention to the ways in which sociocultural theory was applicable through Ms. Sike’s instructional methods.

In order to conduct this study, I passively observed within Ms. Sikes classroom during four small group LEAP lessons. Each of these lessons lasted for 40-45 minutes. Throughout each lesson I recorded my observations through field notes and video recording. In addition, following my last observation, I conducted a formal interview with Ms. Sike’s within a private location. This interview consisted of ten questions in relation to Ms. Sike’s students and the specific teaching strategies in which she implements with her English language learners (See Appendix A).

**Quality and Credibility of Research**

In doing this research it was important to ensure specific characteristics including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the study. The first characteristic, credibility, is defined by Mills (2011) as the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that may occur during a study and to deal with patterns that may be difficult to explain. To help ensure credibility during this study I applied specific strategies towards my research. First, I completed persistent observations throughout the course of two
weeks in order to identify specific qualities of Ms. Sike’s instruction and the student’s responses to her methods (Mills). Additionally, I also collected video recordings of each observation so that I was able to account for all of the details within Ms. Sike’s instruction. The second characteristic, transferability, was also ensured throughout the completion of this study. Transferability refers to the researcher’s belief that everything is context bound. Moreover, through transferability, it is important not to develop statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people outside of the study (Mills). To ensure transferability I collected detailed and descriptive data that was specific to the study. Through the collected data I had the opportunity to make comparisons between different contexts as well.

Dependability, which refers to the stability of the data, was also a characteristic of importance throughout the study (Mills, 2011). Through dependability, I overlapped methods as I not only took field notes and video recorded each observation, but I also interviewed with Ms. Sike’s in order to enhance my understanding of the observed lessons (Mills). The final characteristic known as confirmability was also addressed throughout this study. Mills (2011) defines confirmability as the neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected. In order to provide for confirmability I cross-checked my field notes with my video recordings at the end of each observation in order to confirm all of the data. Finally, my field notes provided for a journal with reflections made within the margins and further reflections that I made upon reading these observation notes.

**Data Collection**

As previously discussed, there were multiple forms of data collection used within this study. I performed observations within Ms. Sike’s classroom four times over the course of two
weeks for 40-45 minutes during each observation. During these observations, I took careful field notes on both Ms. Sike’s instruction and the student’s reaction to her teaching methods. Each of the lessons was video recorded to provide for another piece of data for this study. Finally, after my fourth observation I conducted a formal interview with Ms. Sike’s featuring ten questions about her teaching methods and the strategies that she uses with her English Language Learners.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis occurred through initially reviewing my multiple data sources that were collected for this study: field noted from classroom observations and a formal interview with Ms. Sikes as well as video recordings of these classroom observations. When reviewing these sources, I looked for common themes that were prevalent. However, the field notes played the most significant role in developing my findings due to the wealth of information that I gathered during each of my observations. Furthermore, the formal interview field notes and video recordings enabled me to confirm the themes that emerged from my initial field notes as both of these data sources served as critical pieces to this study as well. In addition, I also compared my data source findings to the literature that I collected prior to my observations in order to gain further perspective in terms of socially based strategies used within the classroom to support comprehension among English language learners. Fundamentally, all of the data sources together played a vital role in the development of my findings as well as through implications for instruction with English language learners.

**Findings and Discussion**
The multiple sources of data used throughout this action research have revealed four consistent themes that have been successful in supporting the comprehension of English language learners. These four themes include modifications of instructional teaching strategies, modeling, collaboration, and making connections to home. Each of these themes was prevalent throughout my action research and will also have a significant impact on my own instruction in the future.

**Modifications of instructional teaching strategies**

Through my observations within Ms. Sikes first grade ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) classroom, I found that English language learners benefit from modifications made through the implementation of instructional strategies. The instructional strategy known as reciprocal teaching has shown to have positive effects on student’s comprehension development (Fung et al., 2003; Hashey & Connors, 2008; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Sollars & Pumfrey, 1999). However, based on this action research I have found that English language learners comprehension increases when a modified form of reciprocal teaching is used within the classroom. Reciprocal teaching involves both the teacher and students as these individuals engage in dialogue based on the four strategies known as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. Additionally, this instructional strategy eventually enables students to become independent with these four strategies. Based on my observations within Ms. Sikes classroom, I found that Ms. Sikes implements reciprocal teaching with her students, but in a modified form. Through my observations, Ms. Sikes held the thinking responsibilities initially as she asked the students to predict and question. However, she provided clarification for these students based on her own ideas. Student and teacher dialogue was prevalent, but Ms. Sikes support enabled
conversation to flow.

Specifically, during two of my observations, I experienced a discussion between Ms. Sikes and the students about the topic of family. First, Ms. Sikes posed a question to the students. Following this question, the students raised their hands and provided for various responses to this question. During this time, Ms. Sikes would ask students to clarify as well. Ms. Sikes provided for peer interaction through one specific activity. Through this activity, a student provided for an answer to the question posed by Ms. Sikes. Once the student shared their response, Ms. Sikes would ask the remaining seven students to participate by putting their thumb up or down in agreement or disagreement with this student's answer. This activity enabled Ms. Sikes to recognize whether the students were engaged and to informally assess their comprehension as well. Ms. Sikes would always question students who disagreed with their peer(s) so that they could provide some sort of clarification for the class concerning their thinking. Throughout all of my observations, although students did not acquire independence through their social interactions with various individuals, all students were able to participate and thus comprehend. Comprehension was evident when the students were not only able to participate in a dialogue with Ms. Sikes, but especially when they were able to relate to a comment made by one of their peers.

Another modified form of an instructional strategy known as K-PALS (Kindergarten Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies) was also evident through my observations of Ms. Sikes teaching. Through K-PALS, kindergarten ELL’s practice skills, including phonemic awareness, letter-sound recognition, decoding, and fluency which are identified as crucial for beginning reading. This strategy is also reciprocal in that students switch roles of a coach and tutor in order to comprehend these skills and thus learn (McMaster et al., 2008). Through my second
observation, I observed the students engaged in a game entitled *Around the World*. During this game, the students would play against a peer to read a word previously selected by Ms. Sikes. If the student read the word correctly, this individual would move around the table (world) to the next peer.

A modified form of K-PALS was prevalent during this game when both students were unable to read the word. When this situation occurred, Ms. Sikes would call on another student to assist in reading the word and thus this student would fulfill the role of a tutor. These students provided for various beginning reading skills and strategies when they correctly read these words. For example, one student tapped out each letter of the word on their fingers in order to correctly pronounce the word and to provide for a strategy of reading this word. Although Ms. Sikes directed this game, the students were able to interact with their peers and thus increase their comprehension of words and strategies for reading difficult words based on this social interaction.

**Modeling**

Another theme which was prevalent during my observations within Ms. Sikes classroom was the use of teacher modeling. Ms. Sikes would model the procedure of thinking aloud before, during, and after reading a text in order to enable her students to increase their comprehension. Above all, the think-aloud procedure provided for a sequential framework for Ms. Sikes to use in order to support her struggling readers through making meaning from the text. The before reading think-aloud activities enabled the students to become engaged in the vocabulary that would be found in the text. For example, through a lesson on family, Ms. Sikes asked the students, “Who do you think is in a family?” (Field Notes, 3/10/2011) in order to focus on some
vocabulary words of focus throughout the text. At first, the students did not participate in this think-aloud, but once Ms. Sikes modeled an answer by writing about her role, mom, on the whiteboard, the students became engaged and participated in a dialogue about family. The think-aloud procedure continued during this observation as Ms. Sikes stated to her students, “We are going to read a book about family and you need to have your thinking caps on while we read” (Field Notes, 3/10/2011).

As Ms. Sikes used this dialogue with her students throughout each of my observations it was evident that the students clearly understood what she was referring to when she mentioned “thinking caps”. After Ms. Sikes stated this reference to thinking caps, the students all put on their imaginary caps and sat up straight in their chairs to listen to the text of focus. Ms. Sikes continued to model and engaged the students in thinking aloud during the reading of the text and after reading as well. During the reading of the text, Ms. Sikes shared how the text related to her family and she then asked the students to think about their own families. Finally, after reading the text, Ms. Sikes asked the students to think about new things that they had learned, including vocabulary and/or information that they had learned about their peer(s). Ms. Sikes followed a similar routine of modeling and implementing the think-aloud procedure during my remaining three observations. Through all of the think-aloud sessions within Ms. Sikes classroom, all ELL’s were provided with the opportunity to socially interact, relate to one another, and practice the skills learned, which enabled for an increase in their comprehension of the text or topic of focus.
Collaboration

Collaboration with various teachers was a third theme that arose based on this action research as a benefit to English language learner’s comprehension. The collaboration that exists between the teachers at Harmony Elementary became evident within both Ms. Sikes interactions with her students and through my formal interview with Ms. Sikes. Throughout each of my four observations I would often hear Ms. Sikes reference other teachers and their classroom activities to the students. Ms. Sikes would reference these teachers instruction in order to engage her students in a dialogue about specific topics of study. Each time this dialogue occurred, the students were excited about sharing their various learning experiences in these classrooms. Additionally, through one particular observation, a student even made a connection between Ms. Sikes instruction and the instruction implemented within their general education classroom. By engaging the students in this genuine dialogue, Ms. Sikes was able to quickly assess each student’s comprehension of other teacher’s instruction and to enable them to make possible connections based on what they were learning in Ms. Sikes classroom as well. I was also able to gain a view of the importance of collaboration based on my formal interview with Ms. Sikes (Appendix A). Through this interview Ms. Sikes shared that she collaborates with the first grade teachers because “we all believe in whole language, thematic teaching for ELL, and as such we feel planning and collaborating is best for our students” (Formal Interview, 3/22/2011).

Collaboration was a relevant theme through my action research as through the collaboration the occurred among the teachers at Harmony Elementary, ELL’s were able to have repeated practice learning about the various topics and texts which enabled for an increase in their comprehension.
Making connections to home

The final and most significant theme that was evident through this action research includes Ms. Sikes instructional choice of making connections to ELL’s home lives to order to increase their comprehension. Through the social constructivist perspective of literacy it becomes apparent that social experiences contribute to each individual’s knowledge of literacy. In addition, it is through these experiences that individuals position themselves according to the social practices of their culture, background experiences, and literacy skills that they bring to the culture as well (Larson & Marsh, 2005). These ideas associated with sociocultural theory were prevalent within Ms. Sikes instruction. During each of my four observations, Ms. Sikes always engaged students in dialogue to form a comparison between the text and/or topic of study and ELL’s home and/or cultural experiences. Specifically, Ms. Sikes related to each students home or cultural experiences during three of my observations. During these observations, Ms. Sikes focused on text and dialogue that revolved around family. The genuine dialogue that occurred during these observations did not merely abandon ELL’s home and cultural experiences, but embraced these differences.

Ms. Sikes provided for connections to her home life and culture based on the text in order to enable the students to provide for a comparison to their individual experiences. Additionally, as Ms. Sikes made a connection between her home and cultural experiences, she enabled her students to think about their experiences particularly outside of school. As these ELL’s had the opportunity to think and share about these differences, student comprehension increased. One specific example of an increase in student comprehension was evident through dialogue that occurred based on the book entitled, All Families are Special. Throughout this book Ms. Sikes engaged the ELL’s in discussions about the different families found in the book. However, when
the students learned about particular family situations such as gay and lesbian families, the
students immediately became confused and questioned Ms. Sikes. These students were not
accustomed to these family situations within their own home and/or cultural experiences.
However, once Ms. Sikes engaged the students in a social conversation about these various
families, the students understood what the text and picture representations were conveying. The
theme of making connections to ELL’s home and cultural experiences was prevalent among this
action research and of importance through the modifications Ms. Sikes made to her instructional
teaching strategies and modeling that was evident not only within the classroom, but through the
collaboration that Ms. Sikes values at Harmony Elementary.

**Implications and conclusion**

Based upon my findings, there are several implications that can be offered to teachers and
their instructional planning in order to support comprehension among English language learners.
As the literature indicated, English language learners present in our schools today are one of the
largest groups of students who struggle with literacy instruction, particularly in regards to
reading comprehension (Hickman et al., 2004). Although there is a vast array of comprehension
strategies that have been proven effective when teaching ELLs, my research looked at how
socially based strategies are used to support comprehension among English language learners.

Based upon the literature reviewed and my own findings, teacher’s instruction must
include modifications of specific strategies. Instead of merely finding a specific comprehension
strategy and implementing this strategy within the classroom, teachers may need to modify these
strategies based on the needs and stage of language development of their learners. Through the
modifications made to both reciprocal teaching and Kindergarten Peer-Assisted Learning
Strategies (K-PALS) shown in both my research and the discussion of literature, English
language learners were able to participate in a dialogue with their teachers and peers and to thus increase their comprehension. However, through the modifications made to these initial strategies of reciprocal teaching and K-PALS, it is evident that teacher questioning and support is essential throughout the implementation of any strategy with ELLs. Although these strategies provide the students with the opportunity to acquire independence, teachers must recognize that this independence may not occur due to the student’s stage of language acquisition and grade level. In summary, based on the literature and my research, comprehension of English language learners is best supported with the direction of the teacher as the leader and role model through the implementation of various comprehension strategies.

Another implication that I found based on the literature and my research is the significance of teacher modeling. Student participation and thus comprehension increased once teacher modeling occurred as the ELLs were able to understand what was expected of them based on the modeling that took place. Additionally, through these various situations, the ELLs were not only able to see what was expected of them, but they were also able to socially interact with the teacher by engaging in questioning and conversation about the topic at hand. Through the use of modeling within the classroom, teachers are able to appropriately convey their expectations and process of a given activity and thus support the comprehension of English language learners.

Although I had previously recognized the importance of teacher collaboration, the literature reviewed and my own research demonstrates the value of collaboration among teachers to help support English language learners comprehension. Teacher partnerships enable for a common ground to be established in terms of the content and strategies to be covered with ELLs. As this collaboration takes place, teachers are able to provide their students with repeated
practice of skills or information learned with additional teachers throughout the school day. This repeated practice also enables ELLs to increase their comprehension as they engage in social interaction based on their previous experiences. In all, it is evident that teachers should form collaborations with their fellow teachers in order to further support the comprehension of English language learners and these learners social interaction within the classroom as well.

The most substantial implication I have gained from the literature reviewed and from my own research is the importance of making connections to English language learner’s home and/or cultural experiences. It is evident that in order to enable ELLs to gain knowledge and to engage in social practices within the classroom, teachers must provide adequate support for these individuals throughout their educational experiences. Through my research, I had the opportunity to experience a culturally supportive classroom environment. Within this environment, ELLs were able to engage in genuine dialogue about their home and/or cultural backgrounds in order to provide for a comparison to topics of study. Additionally, through this environment, ELLs were able to comprehend various situations that occurred within the text that had originally appeared unfamiliar based on their own experiences outside of school. Based on these findings, it is essential for teachers to establish a culturally supportive classroom environment in order to not only enable these individuals to feel comfortable, but so that these learners can have a successful learning experience as well.

Within my future teaching experiences, I hope to utilize socially based strategies in order to help support comprehension among not only among English language learners, but all learners within the classroom. Through modifications made to specific instructional strategies, ELL’s comprehension increases as they become engaged in teacher modeling and discussion that enables them to provide for a connection between new information and their own home and/or
cultural experiences.

This action research project based in sociocultural theory and Critical Race theory focused on how teachers are using socially based strategies to support comprehension among English language learners. The educational theories reviewed support the use of social practices as well as acknowledge and value the cultures, languages, and abilities ELLs bring to their various literacy learning experiences. The literature further discussed the importance of socially based instructional approaches and strategies to support the comprehension of ELLs. In alignment with the literature (Hashey & Connors, 2003; Hickman et al., 2004; Gersten & Baker, 2000; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Saenz et al., 2005; Taboada, 2009), my own findings further revealed the positive value of using socially based instructional strategies to support the comprehension of English language learners by providing modifications to these strategies, teacher modeling, and by making connections to ELLs home and/or cultural experiences.

As a researcher, I would have liked to have the opportunity to observe within another Learning English through Academics Program (LEAP) classroom at a higher grade level. By observing within this classroom, I would be able to provide for a comparison between the teaching strategies implemented with English language learners across two grade levels. Additionally, I would gain more understanding of the teacher’s instruction as I would be observing the same teacher that I had the opportunity to observe during the course of this action research project. Finally, since I was only able to observe over the course of two weeks, I would like to experience ELLs learning about a different topic of study other than the topic that was implemented during my time observing. Since the topic of study, family, was implemented throughout my four observational periods, I feel as if this may be a limitation to my study as I was unable to experience the students dialogue or engagement to other topics or concepts of
study.

As a teacher and future literacy specialist, I believe that the findings and implications from this research are important for all professionals in the field of education due to the growing number of English language learners present in our schools today. It is imperative that teachers are aware of the most effective strategies to implement with these learners so that they do not fall further behind their native English speaking peers. Above all, in order to make a difference all teachers must take initiative in providing more effective reading instruction within their classroom in order to enable all learners, including English language learners to succeed.
References


Appendix A

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. What did you complete your undergraduate and graduate degrees in and where?

3. Specifically relating to the students:
   - What stage of ELL acquisition are the students currently in?
   - What ethnicities does each of the students bring to the classroom and what is their primary language at home?

4. What are the language goals for the school?

5. LEAP is implemented within your classroom for first grade students. Does this program occur throughout the school year? How does the rotation of LEAP work? Do students switch into different groups if necessary or are the groups set at the beginning of the year and remain the same?

6. Throughout your instruction with the LEAP students do you collaborate with other teachers in order to inform your instruction? If so, do you feel that you and the students benefit from this collaboration?

7. I noticed throughout my observations that you bring forth your students home lives or culture within your instruction? Do you feel that it is important to be aware of your student’s cultures and to tie this into the curriculum? Why?

8. Throughout my research of English Language Learners I have researched socially based strategies that have been implemented to help improve reading comprehension (reciprocal teaching: predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing, PALS, and think-alouds). Have you heard of these strategies and/or implemented these with your LEAP students?

9. I have observed your use of questioning, predicting, clarifying, and summarizing in order to enable your students to comprehend. However, is there any specific model of focus that you and/or the school has in place in terms of comprehension instruction?

10. What is a challenge that you have faced with this small group of students in terms of comprehension instruction or their ability to engage in discussions and dialogue with you and their peers?