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SIPPS Impact on English Language Learners Reading Success

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Abstract

This mixed-methodology study explores the impact of the Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS) program on the reading success of English Language Learners (ELL) at a Title 1 public school in the Southeastern United States. The literature review emphasizes the importance of educator training and professional development, understanding the foundational reading skills needed for ELL students, and the positive impacts of small group instruction on reading success. The paper concludes that early literacy experiences are critical for language development in children and that the ability to read can provide a multitude of opportunities for ELL students.

Keywords

monolinguals, reading proficiency, SIPPS, English language learners

Introduction

The COVID pandemic has altered our world in a variety of ways. One drastic effect would be on the education system in the United States. Students of all grade levels and ages were impacted as well as their educators that stand before them. As a teacher I saw these dramatic changes occur right before my eyes. My first-grade class missed critical components of learning how to read, especially our English Language Learners. ELL students not only missed vital instruction time, but they also missed time to acquire conversational and academic English skills that can only be found in an in-person setting. The reading skills developed in these foundational years are imperative for future success in all areas of life. Wagner (2018) explains, “The inability to read not only poses a serious challenge to their future education, but will also have an impact on their potential for economic growth” (p. 2).

I chose to investigate this issue in my own classroom, located within a Title 1 public school in the Southeastern United States. During the time of this study, there were a total of 446 students enrolled in the school site, with 255 identified as Hispanic. Of those 255 Hispanic students, 121 were labeled as English Language Learners. Within my classroom, I had four ELL students that would benefit from small group interventions to accelerate their learning and help them successfully learn how to read. I identified two female and two male students that come from various backgrounds to participate in this study (Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba). According to i-Ready data from their fall and winter diagnostics, they have the potential to move up a grade

level in their reading achievement. This led to a search for an intervention tool that could help my students. Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words (SIPPS) Interventions was introduced to the school district as an additional resource in the year this study took place. While still a new program, existing research highlighted the importance of the foundational skills that SIPPS helped with (Bondus, 2018). Bondus (2018) mentions in her research that, “Results suggest that implementation of the SIPPS curriculum in the studied district’s classrooms had a positive, albeit small, impact on the literacy achievement of a culturally and linguistically diverse group of students” (p. 82). She also mentions that there should be more research completed, which pushed me to use SIPPS interventions in the current study. This led me to believe that perhaps the students in my classroom could obtain their reading potential using SIPPS interventions.

By the end of the intervention, I hypothesize that, when taking the next growth monitoring test on i-Ready, the participants should show growth within the categories of phonological awareness, phonics, and high-frequency words. This leads to my research question: “How does the SIPPS program impact English Language Learners’ reading success?” This is an important question because early literacy experiences greatly impact the language development of children (Wagner, 2018). Without the basics of reading, these students may struggle for the rest of their schooling. But, with the knowledge and ability to read, it can open doors for these students that are unlocked with the power of reading.

Literature Review

Students need to read proficiently to be successful in their future endeavors. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to get pre-service training and professional development throughout their careers to meet the needs of their ELL students (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021). Additionally, educators must understand the foundational reading skills that are needed to acquire the necessary skills to become fluent readers. Furthermore, the last piece of the puzzle is understanding how to differentiate instruction, especially in a small group setting.

The Importance of Educator Training

Culturally responsive teaching gives all students a safe space for them to be who they are and bring their background knowledge to the table. “It requires teachers to create a learning environment where all students are welcomed and provided with the best opportunities to learn regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Rizzuto, 2017, p. 185). But, even as a popular phrase in the realm of higher education, it does not mean that it has trickled down to the current educators in the K-12 public school system and to all of the college professors molding those pre-service teachers.

It is important to build rapport with ELL students and create a welcoming, safe space for them to learn. Without students feeling genuinely safe in their classrooms, no real learning will ever occur. This means that the assumptions teachers make of ELL students need to be challenged head on. For instance, researchers Lumbrears and Rupley (2017) state, “Consequently, by investigating the educational experiences of ELL educators, it is anticipated that an understanding of school and schooling will emerge and provide insights into how to best serve

the ELL student population” (p. 22). It is important for teachers to understand how difficult it must be for students who know an answer but just cannot relay the information in the language being taught (Lumbrears & Rupley, 2017). Additionally, it is paramount to comprehend that learning a second language takes time. Some teachers assume that in a year a monolingual student will develop the skills necessary to read, write, speak, and listen (Lumbrears & Rupley, 2017).

The responsibility of the lack of preparation for the future teachers of ELL students not only falls on the preservice teachers but their professors. Roy Campbell (2013) says, “One of the reasons for this insufficient instruction would appear to be that educators who prepare these teachers do not provide them with this knowledge because they themselves have not received this preparation” (p. 256). Also, the same may be said about the lack of practical and helpful professional development for those currently teaching in the public school system. Teachers and administration should advocate to their districts for more comprehensive ELL instructional training so they can put their best foot forward in the classroom and feel prepared to teach this group of students.

The Building Blocks of ELL Reading Success

To become fluent readers, ELL students must tackle the foundations of reading. The very building blocks that create the path to fluent readers. These building blocks are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (Antunez, 2018). While some of these concepts add on to each other, others work together. As educators, it is our responsibility to understand the ins and outs of these components to be able to teach it to a high degree. Understanding what these parts are individually can help teachers lead whole group instruction, small group instruction, and one-on-one assistance throughout the course of the school year.

Additionally, these main parts take time to teach thoughtfully and carefully. Students learning such skills need time to develop such skills. But, when done correctly, ELL students in lower primary grades get the opportunity to learn as quickly as their native counterparts. At these grade levels, they are being taught the basic principles of reading which gives all students a space to grow into the readers they have the capability of becoming.

Furthermore, Dussling (2020) makes a clear point in her research that small group instruction that hones in on phonemic awareness and phonics for primary grade students can positively impact those ELL students and their native speaking peers. She goes on to state, “Specifically, instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics is essential as they play a pivotal role in the development of early reading in monolingual English speakers” (p. 242). Having their native English-speaking peers at the same table with them can not only help them with the reading components but help build up their oral language skills. Overall, if educators take time to truly assess their students and divide them into small groups not just based on English proficiency levels, ELL students may develop reading skills as quickly as their peers.

The Positive Impacts of Reading Small Group Instruction

Small group instruction is beneficial in a multitude of ways. The main goal of the responsiveness-to-intervention approach used during small group intervention in many school districts is to get students meeting their grade level standards (Gilbert et al., 2013). During small group instruction, educators are given the opportunity to differentiate instruction for their students. It gives the educator a chance to meet with a smaller portion of students in a more intimate setting that can highlight students' strengths and weaknesses. Baker et al. (2016) remind us that, "Substantial evidence exists that providing supplemental instruction in small groups to students at risk of reading failure in the early grades reduces future reading difficulties and disabilities" (p. 226). Lastly, it gives students the chance to work cooperatively with fellow classmates and help them reach similar goals.

To summarize, there are numerous ways to help guide ELL students to reach reading proficiency. The first step is to ensure that preservice teachers are getting the adequate training required to teach ELL students how to read and keep current educators up to date. Additionally, educators need to be fully aware of how to teach the building blocks of reading instruction. Lastly, educators who use small group instruction can benefit greatly. With these three elements put in place, ELL students are set up for greater success.

Methodology

Timeline

The data for this research study was collected over a four-week period with the exception of the diagnostic tests which were taken in the fall, winter, and spring (see Table 1).

Table 1

Timeline of Data Collection

Data Collection Frequency
easyCBM Progress Monitoring Once a Week (Fridays)
i-Ready Diagnostic Three Times a Year (Fall, Winter, Spring)
i-Ready Growth Monitoring Three Times a Year (Fall, Winter, Spring)
Exit Slips Daily (Monday – Friday)
Research Anecdotal Notes Daily (Monday – Friday)

Data Collection

The data collected for this study included diagnostic tests scores, progress monitoring scores, exit slips, and research anecdotal records. The first progress monitoring tool used was easyCBM. According to the National Center for Intensive Intervention (n.d.), it is defined as:

EasyCBM is a web-based district assessment system that includes both benchmarking and progress monitoring assessments combined with a comprehensive array of reports. The assessments in easyCBM are curriculum-based general outcome measures, or CBMs, which are standardized measures that sample from a year's worth of curriculum to assess the degree to which students have mastered the skills and knowledge deemed critical at each grade level. (para. 1)

Students are tested on either letter recognition, letter sounds, word reading, or passage fluency at the beginning of the year. The tests were formatted by letters/words recognized or read in a minute. Each student took the first three forms of tests to determine their end of year goal which was decided by obtaining the average score.

The second progress monitoring tool was the i-Ready diagnostic and growth monitoring scores provided by the online curriculum platform of i-Ready. Vagenas-Bischoff (2021) describes i-Ready as a program that, "...combines a valid and reliable growth measure and individualized instruction in a single online product" (p. 23). After completing the initial diagnostic test, students receive a score that signifies what grade level they are on. The student's goal is to reach their typical growth goal by the end of the year.

Additionally, exit slips were created to measure how successful they felt after each small group session. The exit slip was modeled after traffic light colors and the students were instructed to color either green, yellow, or red based on their understanding. Furthermore, a research journal was kept for active notes throughout the lessons as well as reflections about each lesson.

Data Analysis

The first step of my data analysis process was to review my research journal that was kept throughout the four-week data collection. I went through the journal and manually coded the information. From the nineteen entries of the research journal, I began by creating annotations throughout the journal and looking for any clear patterns or connections. On the second round of coding, I highlighted, in green, positive feedback provided by students or myself that I recorded. Then I proceeded to highlight, in orange, any negative comments made by the students and myself.

Next, I analyzed all the exit tickets from the students. Each student completed their exit ticket at the end of the small group session. I compiled their data into a table for each week and had the total amount of each traffic light color in the last column. The goal was to see if the students felt as if the SIPPS curriculum was beneficial to their learning experience. Then I compiled their easyCBM scores into another chart (see Table 2) to look for particular trends and investigated if

their scores showed overall growth. Lastly, I compared all four students' midyear diagnostic test scores with their growth monitoring scores (see Table 4) that they took after completing the four weeks of the study. The last column in Table 4 shows the typical growth scores that students are supposed to reach as their end of year goal.

Results

EasyCBM: Some Progress is Good Progress

The first finding that was clear after organizing and analyzing the data was that the SIPPS program did not have a significant effect on the students' easyCBM scores weekly, but overall had a significant impact over the course of the month. Three of the four students improved their overall score by the end of the four weeks. Furthermore, the anecdotal notes taken provided an insight on the students' overall progression. During the second week of data collection I wrote, "I thought DV would have the short vowels down pat by now. Waiting to see how he will do with the next easyCBM progress check." After compiling the data in a table format, seeing that three students showed growth from their original scores was a step in the right direction (see Table 2).

Table 2

EasyCBM Data Results

Progress Check Dates:	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
DV (letter sounds per min)	22 out of 110	24 out of 110	27 out of 110	26 out of 110
AR (letter sounds per min)	21 out of 110	18 out of 110	22 out of 110	27 out of 110
AL (word reading per min)	22 out of 120	23 out of 120	22 out of 120	25 out of 120
AD (word reading per min)	14 out of 120	16 out of 120	11 out of 120	13 out of 120

Note. This table demonstrates students' scores based on their easyCBM progress monitoring tests. Two of the students took the letter sounds per minute assessment which was out of 110 letter sounds. While the other half took the word reading per minute assessment which had a total of 120 words.

SIPPS Curriculum Positive Student Reviews

The second finding that emerged would be that the students found the SIPPS curriculum to be engaging and helpful. Within my research journal, I coded, in green, positive comments made by the students. For instance, on at least 11 different days there were positive notes. There were 6 comments from myself noting positive feedback about the program. Students also filled out an exit slip after each small group activity. Table 3 shows that the total amount of green outnumbered the yellows and reds for each student.

Table 3

Exit Slips Results

	Week 1 (4 day school week)	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Total
DV	R- 0 Y- 0 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 2 G- 3	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 4 G- 15
AR	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 3	R- 1 Y- 1 G- 3	R- 2 Y- 1 G- 2	R- 0 Y- 2 G- 3	R- 3 Y- 5 G- 11
AL	R- 0 Y- 0 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 0 G- 5	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 0 G- 5	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 18
AD	R- 0 Y- 0 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 0 G- 5	R- 0 Y- 1 G- 4	R- 0 Y- 2 G- 17

Key: R – Red, Y – Yellow, G – Green

Growth Monitoring Scores Show Improvement

The last finding would be that the SIPPS curriculum was linked to ELL students' growth monitoring scores on i-Ready. Table 4 shows what students scored on their mid-year spring diagnostic test and their most recent growth monitoring test. The last column shows their individual typical growth score. Three out of four students were on track to meet or surpass their typical growth score of the year. Overall, the SIPPS program seemed to be a catalyst for increased student achievement.

Table 4

i-Ready Data Results

	Spring Diagnostic (1/19/22)	Growth Monitoring (3/28/22)	Typical Growth Score by End-of- Year
DV	404	427	430
AR	408	351	413
AL	373	440	428
AD	388	413	408

Key: First Grade On Level Score = 434

Discussion

This study sought to answer the research question of, “How does the SIPPS program impact English Language Learners reading success?” SIPPS did impact English Language Learner’s reading success. The data showed that using SIPPS as a reading intervention supports students’ growth as readers. Additionally, as an educator using the SIPPS program, it was very organized and laid out for educators to use in a proactive way. It can also be worked into small group instruction in a seamless manner. But more research needs to be conducted with using SIPPS in lower primary grades and over a longer period of time to determine if SIPPS could be even more beneficial to ELL students.

The first important implication would be the amount of training it would take to be well versed with the SIPPS curriculum. When beginning this journey, I had heard of the SIPPS curriculum and worked with it briefly. But, after some assistance from my ELL resource teacher, I realized that this program is more extensive than I had anticipated. Ensuring that the teacher is trained adequately with this program before having them use this during small group instruction would be the most beneficial way of implementing SIPPS.

Also, since this program is lengthy, it is imperative that teachers modify their schedules to fit the instructional needs of the district and of their students. Understanding how to manipulate all curricula provided by the district while simultaneously ensuring that the students are getting the help needed to become successful readers is essential. Furthermore, the collaboration needed working with the ELL department of your school when teaching ELL students is such a crucial part for the success of your students and for you as an educator. The tips and tricks they have with the SIPPS curriculum, because many ELL students are learning to read in English for the first time, gives them the experience needed to mentor others.

Furthermore, this research project was more informative than I could have ever imagined. I learned that as an educator, research should play a significant role in how we teach and what we teach our students. This project shed light on how consistently searching for a “research problem” in our work can help us become better teachers and, more importantly, better informed educators. Knowledge is truly power, especially in our field, where we have the power to mold minds from such a young age. Research is an imperative part of the learning process and helps guide our practice into a more welcoming and multicultural minded light.

All in all, with data behind our ideas to incorporate inclusion and diversity into our curriculum nationwide, we have a greater chance of achieving equity. Teachers in the K-12 public school system really have access to some of the brightest minds in our country. Learning how to teach all students no matter their background can lead to a more diverse group of citizens in higher education. Research is a key component to opening those doors to building true relationships with our peers and students.

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