

Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners with a Specific Learning Disability

Abstract

English language learners (ELLs) with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) demonstrate below grade-level skills in spelling, vocabulary and reading comprehension. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of differentiated instructional approaches through multiple modalities on the overall reading performance of ELLs with SLD.

Statement of the Problem

U.S. Schools are becoming increasingly diverse. One of the primary educational dilemmas facing educators in the United States is the need for effective instruction for all children including those who come from diverse backgrounds and who may struggle with learning disabilities. Second language learners with learning difficulties and disabilities constitute a substantial population requiring specialized programs and strategies (Hart, 2009). Students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) who are English language learners (ELL) experience difficulty mastering grade level expectations in the general education setting. Existing research shows that the majority of ELL students who are struggling academically have reading difficulties and approximately 66% of ELL students who receive special services are classified as LD (Solari, Petscher & Sidler Folsom, 2014). Longitudinal and cross-sectional data suggest that students who are identified as both ELL and SLD have a high risk profile. Learning English as a second language places students at risk for poor language skills and academic failure (Tabors, Paez, & Lopez, 2007).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore whether the use of differentiated instruction strategies can positively impact the results of weekly spelling and vocabulary tests as well as the overall reading performance of ELLs with SLD in the inclusive setting. The following research question will be investigated: How does differentiated instruction through multiple modalities impact the overall reading performance of ELLs with SLD?

Literature Review

August, Carlo, Dressler, and Snow (2005) discovered that ELLs who experience slow vocabulary development are less able to comprehend text at grade level than their English-only peers. They conducted a study that consisted of 75 language-minority Mexican American third graders who received 20 minute daily oral instruction in word meanings, focusing on compound words, synonyms, antonyms, and multiple meanings for about three months. One group received instruction in pronunciation of the words and memorization of definitions. A second group used the same list of words and focused on making semantic maps with the words. The group that constructed visual semantic maps outperformed the group that worked on pronunciation and memorization of definitions.

Taffe, Laster, Broach, Marinak, Connor and Dalhouse (2012) found the use of flexible groupings to be an effective strategy for teaching ELLs. The authors tested small group instruction in two classrooms, one in Massachusetts and one in Pennsylvania. In order to create small groups, the teachers had to learn as much as possible about the students and the ways they learned best. Results of the study showed that students made greater gains in word recognition and reading

comprehension when the teachers differentiated instruction, using small, flexible learning groups; than did students whose teachers provided high quality but primarily whole group instruction.

Albers and Hoffman (2012) used sight-word flash cards to teach new vocabulary as part of a reading intervention research that included three male Latino Spanish-speaking ELL students. A total of 210 sight words were recorded on 3 x 5-inch index flash cards. The corresponding word definitions were written on the back of each card. Results of the intervention showed improvements in the students' sight word recognition as evidenced by each participant reading more words correctly and demonstrating an increase in their reading fluency rates.

Garcia and Tyler (2010) found a positive correlation between vocabulary acquisition and the use of technological approaches. The use of visuals to explain new vocabulary, as well as supplementing the textbook with audio-taped recordings and DVD's proved to be effective strategies for teaching vocabulary. Results of their study demonstrated that teaching new vocabulary through visual and auditory modalities assisted ELL's in becoming less frustrated by difficulties with decoding words and more motivated to engage in learning.

Research involving second language learners with learning disabilities appears to concentrate on a few essential topics. ELL students with a learning disability need instruction that focuses on their individual needs. Teaching new vocabulary with the use of visual strategies proved to be successful. Additionally, the use of small group instruction as well as incorporating technology with the use of visual illustrations and sound allow students to retain information quicker.

Research Methodology

The study will take place in a Miami-Dade public elementary school. Three second grade students identified as Specific Learning Disabled (SLD) who are second English language learners (ELL) will participate in the study. The special education teacher will collaborate with the general education teacher to implement differentiated instruction activities in the class with the use of visual cues and individual accommodations listed on each student's Individual Educational Plan (IEP). The special education teacher will collect data on a weekly basis to monitor progress and effectiveness of the procedures. Other participants will include 15 second grade regular students.

Results

Research findings will be available in time for the conference. Data collection is still taking place and will end March 31st, 2016. At the end of the study, data will be analyzed to demonstrate the effectiveness of the interventions.

Implications

English language learners with SLD may have a greater challenge meeting the demands of the general education curriculum due to their limited knowledge of the English language. These students fail in school because they do not have access to effective bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) instruction. The difficulties ELL students with SLD experience may become more serious over time if instruction is not modified to address students' specific needs. The current action research will demonstrate how differentiated instruction techniques through different modalities in small groups can improve the reading performance of ELLs with SLD.

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