

# Implementing Reading Strategies for Second Grade Immigrant Students to Increase Reading Proficiency and Help Them Enjoy Reading

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study was to describe the effect on reading proficiency by using diverse reading strategies to improve ESOL student reading achievement. Twenty-five second grade students in a Reading/Language Arts located in Miami, Florida were the participants. The methods included a questionnaire that assessed students' reading habits, strategy use, and reading problems. Results indicated that less than half the class enjoyed reading, about 52% of the class read less than two days a week, 57% of the students were not independent readers, and more than half of the class was reading below their level. As part of the intervention students were taught several reading strategies, including think alouds, context clues, making predictions, making connections, asking questions, rereading, finding the main idea and key details, self-monitoring, drawing inferences, and visualizing. While test scores did not increase significantly, interest in reading was enhanced.*

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## Introduction and Statement of the Problem

As immigrant children arrive in the United States and are placed in public school classrooms they are often confused and afraid due to their new surroundings and their inability to speak English which inhibits communication with teachers and classmates; individual's that can help them navigate the educational system. Understanding the school language helps demystify the immigrant experience within the governing society. It is estimated that in the United States there are about 4.6 million English language learners in the public school system and it has been documented that English language learners (ELLs) have difficulties comprehending what they read (NCES, 2014). This fact stresses the importance of teaching proven reading strategies that increase reading comprehension for ELLs. Thaise Mustelier, one of the authors of this article states, "I think back to my childhood when I first arrived in the United States at seven years old, I remember feeling confused and scared because I did not speak English. I could not understand my teachers or classmates when they spoke to me. This is the same feeling, I imagine, the lower level English speakers of other languages (ESOL) students experience when they are placed in an all-English speaking class. Therefore, it is understandable when they struggle with the grade-level curriculum that is taught to them. Although we are unable to change the situation, we wanted to provide students with the tools that they needed to become better readers while learning English as a second language; we also believed that becoming better readers would help them develop good reading habits. In meeting their needs we believed that we were giving each student an equal opportunity to learn".

In this study, we describe a reading intervention developed for a densely Hispanic immigrant classroom of 25-second grade students at diverse ELL proficiency levels that were struggling with reading in the English language. This was a challenging situation since ESOL levels ranged from one to five and while struggling readers deserve to learn at their own pace, more advanced readers deserve increased opportunities as well. With this in mind the intervention focused upon reading strategies that had the potential to benefit all of the students, regardless of reading level. The specific goal of this intervention was to impact reading proficiency by using diverse ESOL strategies to improve ELL reading achievement.

## Literature Review

Research on this topic indicated that the reading strategy and type of instruction used have a positive impact on students' reading performance. According to Noursi (2014), students score very low on reading tests, especially English Language Learners (ELLs) that tend to have problems understanding what they read. Researchers stress the importance of teaching students to use several cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies. According to the research, the most positive outcome of teaching reading strategies is that it increases students reading comprehension (Aghaie & Lawrence, 2012; Choo, Eng, & Ahmad, 2011; Latawiec, 2010; Noursi, 2014).

In addition, research indicates the importance of teachers becoming knowledgeable in reading and pedagogy pedagogies in order to be able to teach students appropriate reading skills and strategies (Noursi, 2014). According to Noursi (2014), teachers need to know about reading comprehension, basic cognitive knowledge, comprehension strategies, how to motivate students to read, quality instruction, and to assess reading comprehension to ensure that their students become better readers. Furthermore, it is important to teach various reading approaches and make students aware of the strategies that they are using, especially low level readers, with the intent of helping them become more successful, independent readers (Griva et al., 2009). For instance, modeling and think-alouds are effective ways of helping students become more aware of the strategies that they use (Lawrence, 2007).

Specifically, it was found that teaching comprehension strategies, such as predicting, questioning, summarizing, and clarifying, enables students to construct meaning from the reading passages (Choo et al., 2011). Similarly, Griva, Alevriadou, and Geladari (2009) found that using a combination of cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies, enables students to construct meaning from texts. In addition, strategies such as problem-solving, planning, and translating, enabled learners to understand and decode reading passages (Jafarigohar & Khanjani, 2014). Finally, Noursi (2014) asserted that teaching students the appropriate skills and strategies will enhance their performance and engagement in reading classes as well as improve fluency and reading comprehension, which are vital skills for ELL learners.

## Method

An action research plan was developed by the researchers in order to focus the literature and to develop steps to accomplish the study to align with the literature and practices of other educators. The goal was to increase the ELL students reading proficiency using diverse reading strategies which were developed for use during specific reading lessons while addressing the research question:

Action Research Question: Will the implementation of specific reading strategies increase reading proficiency for a group of second graders made up of a predominantly immigrant population and help them enjoy reading?

The classroom had 25 second grade students, 23 of the students ranged in ESOL levels one to five, five being proficient and one being not very proficient, two were non-ESOL students. Originally, the study was to focus on ESOL levels one and two, thinking that these two low proficient groups would benefit most from the targeted reading strategies. Yet, since the range of proficiency varied in the group, it was decided to use targeted reading strategies so that all of the groups could benefit from this type of intervention. Student levels were determined by the Florida Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment which is administered once a year and it measures the progress of proficiency in English, these scores allowed us to place the students in group by proficiency.

Table 1.1 *Student Level of English Language Proficiency*

Level 1	9
Level 2	5
Level 3	6
Level 4	2
Level 5	1
Non ESOL	2

Additionally, a questionnaire was developed and administered (Appendix A) to learn about students' reading habits, the strategies that they used, and problems that they encountered while reading. This questionnaire would help to target specific needs in the development of reading strategies; it was designed to help us comprehend each student's needs. The idea was to learn about students' reading habits and whether they were already using reading strategies. It was also created to learn about the kinds of strategies that have been helpful to them and what else could be used to help increase their reading proficiency. In addition, the questionnaire was kept simple with some pictures for the low level students who are still learning English as a second language. The questionnaire also included simple open-ended and closed questions, it had a multiple choice format where the students were able to choose as many answers that applied to them, while still being able to provide their own answers using the "other" multiple choice option. This design was chosen over other instruments because it was easier to answer and it took less time than an interview.

The questionnaire was administered in the regular classroom setting during Reading and Language Arts period. Each question and answer choice was read to the students and they were given enough time to provide their responses. The students were told that the questionnaire was to learn a little more about their reading habits and the strategies that help them read. They were also told that it would not be graded and that their answers were not going to be shared with the class. The reasoning behind this was to make them feel comfortable and to encourage honesty. Twenty-one second grade students participated and the assessment took place in the regular classroom setting, four were absent. The questions and answers were read to each student. Following the reading of the sentence, each student was asked to circle or write in their answer the space provided. Students were given enough time to answer each question. The assessment was collected and the class proceeded to the reading lesson for the day.

## Intervention

Once completed, the questionnaire along with the test scores helped the researchers understand the level of student proficiency and level of engagement in reading. Based on the results of this assessment we predicted that the ESOL levels 1 and 2 students were going to need intensive instruction in ESOL strategies because their test scores were very low on both the state exam and the assessment created for this study. The data also indicated that about 57% of the group were not independent readers. Overall, these students required help understanding what they read, identifying the meaning of unfamiliar words, and reading with fluency. Later on in the study we learned that even the students who spoke English needed to learn to use reading strategies to help them become better readers.

With the baseline data we developed various interventions that consisted of introducing students to a variety of genres (fantasy, realistic fiction, fiction, expository text, fable, poetry) through stories. Scaffolding techniques were used during "think alouds" to explain and model how to self-monitor, make connections, ask questions, draw inferences, make predictions, and summarize. Then the students practiced these skills as they read. For example, students were taught that looking at pictures gave them information about a story. Also, participants were taught to use context clues to identify unfamiliar words. Additionally, participants were taught to activate

prior knowledge and ask themselves questions about how the events in the story were similar to the events that they have experienced in real life.

Throughout the study, students used reading journals to write down main ideas and key details using the graphic organizers. They wrote sentences using the new vocabulary words and were assessed each week. Interventions included think alouds twice a week, graphic organizers twice each week, context clues and vocabulary once each week, making predictions for three weeks over the course of the study, making connections once each week, asking questions throughout the study, rereading one week, finding the main idea and key details over six weeks, self-monitoring each week, drawing inferences throughout the study, and visualizing throughout the study (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2 *Student Level of English Language Proficiency*

Interventions and Frequency of Use

Think Alouds	2x Per Week
Graphic Organizers	2x Per Week
Context Clues	Weekly
Vocabulary	Weekly
Making Predictions	3x Over Course of Study
Making Connections	1x Per Week
Asking Questions	Ongoing
Rereading	1 Week
Finding Main Idea	6 Weeks
Self- Monitoring	1x Per Week
Drawing Inferences	Ongoing
Visualizing	Ongoing

The school principal provided us with another second grade reading teacher to act as a sounding board for the methods being developed and to help in developing the curriculum content in the home language of the students. This was extremely helpful because this teacher was able to work in a small group with the ESOL level 1 students that spoke little to no English at all. The teacher gave them the one-on-one time they needed and helped to reinforce the reading strategies taught in each lesson over the three months. Field notes were taken through observations each week during the various activities and interventions developed in order to reflect on the practices being implemented and behaviors of the students. This helped to inform how we could further help to improve their English language learning and reading habits. Portfolios were kept for each student which contained all of the weekly skill building activities and reading strategy interventions along with assessments. Progress reports for each student included all of these documents.

In order to encourage independent reading, the plan of intervention also included a new book display in the classroom library, the implementation of a reading log that tracked students reading at home for at least fifteen to thirty minutes each night (Appendix B), time allowed in the classroom to read while students used the reading strategies they were taught, and a book of their choice was read to them each week as a reward for good behavior. At the end of each week, students volunteered and talked about a book that they enjoyed reading during that week. The students were motivated to read a book of their own when they saw and heard their peers talk about their favorite books. We found that more students needed to read books that were at their level, they

needed to be challenged a little more and encouraged to read more books. Small groups were created to assist these readers.

## Results and Conclusion

While the intervention plan had a positive influence on students' reading habits, it has not had a significant impact on their reading test scores. The reading strategies implemented have demonstrated to improve student reading habits and attitudes, students are more interested in books and want to think and talk about the stories. Another important outcome was that about 60% of the students were reading on their own after the intervention as opposed to 43% when the study began. The remaining the students chose to read with a partner which increased interaction in the reading and comprehension process since students would ask each other questions, point to the pictures while they discussed a story, and built comprehension through these collaborations. This finding is supported by research conducted with third graders involved in a study on how discussions around reading influence comprehension (Gruhn-Tomczak, 2014). They also looked for context clues when they came across a word they did not know. They talked about the characters in the books and how the events reminded them of something they have seen in real life. This really helped the students understand the story and enjoy reading when they had a partner to share it with

However, the grades have remained about the same after three months with the ESOL levels 4 and 5 performing the highest and the ESOL levels 1 and 2 the lowest. However, we know that the students are still adopting the new strategies and some still need time to learn the English language. We are also aware that the exams are more challenging for the lower ESOL levels because they are in alignment with the grade-level curriculum. The lessons learned for our teaching practices include being patient and providing student's time to learn; encouraging interaction among students in reading practice, and that some need time and practice to process the information. Working with these children in small groups has been very helpful. It gives them the opportunity to understand the lesson when they can practice at a slower pace. Also, reading strategies need to be introduced one at a time and students need to be given enough opportunities to practice those strategies inside and out of the classroom. Modeling and guided practice are extremely important when teaching; as educators we should never assume that students already know the information. Research is still needed to understand the long-term effect of reading strategies on reading achievement. The study helped clarify practices that have the potential to work, increased the feeling of community in the classroom, and further helped us understand the student's strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, we expect our students to learn enough reading strategies that they can apply outside the classroom in their everyday lives that help them make sense of their world.

## About the Authors

**Dr. Floralba Arbelo Marrero**, Assistant Professor of Education at Carlos Albizu University in Miami has been involved in education for over a decade. Dr. Arbelo Marrero has had the privilege of teaching and collaborating with NGO projects in Puerto Rico, Haiti, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and in the United States in the areas of curriculum development, social justice research, immigration policy, action research methods, instructional design, and grant writing. Research interests include: the academic success of Hispanic students, academic persistence, retention, and the socio-cultural factors that impact achievement for Hispanic students. Dr. Arbelo-Marrero has earned degrees from Brooklyn College, Milano School for International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy, and a doctorate from Liberty University. Dr. Arbelo-Marrero has presented her research and work at the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Alliance of Hispanic Serving Institution Educators, and the National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies.

**Thaise Mustellier** is an elementary school teacher in south Florida and has earned a Master of Science in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. She completed her graduate degree with a 4.0 grade point average and chose TESOL as her major because she wanted to master the appropriate strategies to help her

students gain English language proficiency. Her focus is on immigrant student education and helping them reach their maximum potential and succeed beyond their own expectations.

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## Appendix A

### Needs Assessment Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Do you like to read?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Sometimes

2. How many days a week do you read books? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. Usually, do you read by yourself or ask someone to do it for you?

By myself



With someone



If you prefer someone to help you, whom do you usually ask? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Where do you most often read?

Home



School



Library



Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you read books that are easy, just right, or difficult? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you have problems when you read? What are they?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Check all that apply**

7. When I don't understand what I am reading I

- Look at the pictures
- Read it again
- Look for familiar words
- Underline
- Ask the teacher
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. I want to learn to

- Read faster
- Understand the meaning of words
- Understand the main idea
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

9. I learn best when

- I see pictures
- The teacher speaks slowly
- I hear the story aloud
- Other \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix B**

Reading Log

Week of _____	Book Title	Author	Time Read	Parent Signature
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				