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## **Examining English Language Learners' Motivation of, and Engagement in, Reading: A Qualitative Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*With a growing concern about English language learners' (ELLs) reading achievement, this study explored issues related to a reading intervention study with a particular focus on ELLs' participation. Drawn upon interviews with instructors and a focus group of students who participated in the reading intervention program, this study sheds light on a significant impact of motivation and engagement on reading activities. High interest, yet challenging reading materials, an interactive and collaborative learning environment, and the quality of instruction and attitude proved to be critical for student engagement in reading. Furthermore, ELLs' particular challenges in oral reading and participation in making predictions were revealed. An ELL's unconventional literacy practice that had received little recognition was also discovered and discussed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Public schools have experienced a rapid growth in the English Language learners (ELLs) population in recent years. It is reported that approximately 10% of the K-12 school population in the US are identified as English language learners (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). The NCLB (2001) policy mandating that all students demonstrate grade-level reading skills without an exception for ELLs has drawn public attention to their academic engagement and success more than ever. Since reading skills are a critical foundation for academic success, the magnitude of reading education should not be underestimated. A number of studies (Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Denton, Anthony, Parker, & Hasbrouck, 2004; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Gunn, Biglan, Smolkowski, & Ary, 2000; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999; Slavin & Cheung, 2005) investigated the efficacy of reading intervention programs, and agree that

accurate evaluation of effectiveness of interventions for ELLs is far more complex compared to their native-speaking counterparts. This study, therefore, explored issues related to a reading intervention program with particular attention to ELLs' participation in reading activities.

### **Research Background and Context**

This study originated from a reading intervention study conducted with 26 Fourth Grade non-ELL remedial readers ( $n = 15$ ) and Spanish-speaking ELLs ( $n = 11$ ). The students who scored below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile in the most recent standardized reading test, and/or who were recommended by their teachers, participated in the intervention program. This study adopted the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) (Stauffer, 1969). The DR-TA strategy is a "problem-solving discussion strategy designed to support comprehension" (DeVries, 2004, p. 164). During reading, students pause at predetermined stops and generate hypotheses in regard to what the story is about or what will happen next. As they continue to read, students' predictions are confirmed, rejected, or modified. Through this cycle, students are encouraged to make a prediction and are asked to reason their predictions. Students do most of the talking, and their ideas are valued to facilitate students' thinking and reasoning skills. Another potential benefit of the DR-TA strategy stems from its small-group setting. Group work reduces ELLs' anxiety, and increases their opportunities to speak out more often than in a whole class setting (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

This reading intervention program was implemented at Elis Garden Elementary School (pseudonym), located in central Virginia. The total student population was 537 at the time of the study. The ELL population was 135, constituting 25% of the total student population. The large ELL student population in this school reflects a burgeoning immigrant population in the surrounding community. The majority of ELLs are from Hispanic backgrounds, and most of the students' families are of low socio-economic status. Almost 64% of students attending Elis Garden receive free lunch in this school. The school administration hoped to reduce the academic gap among students through participation in this study. A curricular feature of the school, a built-in small-group activity time, allowed this reading intervention program to be implemented without interrupting students' regular class time. The small-group instruction was created by the school to serve individual students' needs efficiently. During the small-group activity time, the participating students were pulled out from their classrooms and placed into five small intervention groups. Each group consisted of 5-6 participants including both non-ELL remedial readers and ELLs. For two months, trained graduate-student instructors led small-group sessions three times per week for 30 minutes, for a total of 24 sessions.

Four story books and a chapter book were selected for the DR-TA instruction. The school reading specialist initially provided a list of books that are appropriate to Fourth Grade remedial readers. Two of the researchers for this study—a reading specialist and an ESL specialist—selected five books from the list based on the following three criteria: the books that (1) help students build background knowledge in subjects such as social studies, (2) include illustrations and pictures to support the development of predictions and students' comprehension, and (3) have complete sentences with limited colloquial expressions. Although the original study adopted a mixed method, this paper focuses on qualitative data, especially instructors' and students' perspectives with regard to the reading intervention program.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A majority of reading intervention studies (Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Siverman, 2007; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999; Klingner & Vaughn, 2000; Gunn, Biglan, Smolkowski, & Ary, 2000; Giambo & Mckinney, 2004; Denton, Anthony, Parker, & Hasbrouck, 2004) compared pre-and post-test results to examine the efficacy of intervention programs. While the subjects' native language (ELL or non-ELLs), grade level, intervention tools (e.g., phonetics, word and sound identification, vocabulary, comprehension, oral reading fluency), the length of intervention, and measures of efficacy are varied, a common thread of these studies is that intervention programs have a positive effect on students' reading to some degree. Furthermore, Slavin and Cheung (2005) speculated that even the reading programs that did not result in a positive impact on student achievement measures might affect student interest level and reading behaviors. The studies that quantified post-intervention test results in order to measure the efficacy of reading intervention, however, often overlooked an affective aspect of the intervention, such as student motivation and engagement. Affect, on the other hand, has been identified as one of the most critical factors in student reading engagement (Connor, Jakobsons, Crowe, & Meadows, 2009; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie, Wigfield, Barbosa, Perencevich, & Toboada, 2004).

Guthrie and Wigfield (1999) maintained that there is interaction between affective and cognitive processing. They further postulated that the coordination of motivational and cognitive processing increases text comprehension. This claim leads to a question in regards to what motivates readers to read. Asselin (2004) and Schiefele (1999) pointed out the importance of intrinsic motivation in reading. Typical intrinsic motivators in reading are interest, curiosity, challenge, social connections, and self-efficacy. Similarly, a number of studies suggested that reading instruction that engages students in reading (1) links outside literacy activities to reading, (2) uses diverse texts, (3) provides authentic reasons to read, (4) promotes collaborative learning, (5) offers choices and options, and (6) challenges students (Asselin, 2004; Brozo & Flynt, 2008; Gee, 1999). Consequently, students' situational interest which is linked to student intrinsic motivation is likely to increase. Thus, motivation and engagement, though they are different, can feed and influence each other. Pertaining to significance of student interest in reading, Connor, Jakobsons, Crowe, and Meadows (2009) and Guthrie, Wigfield, Barbosa, Perencevich, and Toboada (2004) claimed that the effectiveness of reading instruction depends not only on students' language and literacy skills but also on the level of interest. Elley and Mangubhai's (1983) intervention study also found that high interest story books helped the intervention group gain reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate.

Another key factor influencing student reading engagement is instructors' perception or expectation. Worthy (2003) highlighted how teachers' enthusiasm about reading could have an affirmative effect on student interest in reading. The quality of instruction is critical for engagement. For instance, Many, Dewberry, Taylor, and Coady (2009) claimed that teachers who had a good understanding of language and literacy development provided more responsive and meaningful reading instruction to students' needs. Some of the scaffolded instruction that was demonstrated included making connections to students' experiences and prior knowledge, making the most of teachable moments, and using multiple resources to support students' reading.

Given the findings of previous studies, student motivation increases student engagement in reading activities. Among a variety of factors that motivate students to read, high interest books, engaging instruction, collaborative learning environment, and connection between inside and outside school literacy activities are particularly relevant to this study.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A majority of published studies (Denton et al., 2004; Giambo & McKinney, 2004; Gunn et al., 2000; Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Prater, & Cirino, 2006; Schorzman & Cheek, 2004) related to reading intervention programs are heavily dependent on quantitative data analysis, mostly comparing pre-and post-test results. As a result, critical information that entails the processes of reading intervention programs and perceptions of participants of the reading intervention is rarely described. In order to address this gap, the current study adopts a qualitative approach.

### Research Design and Procedures

As a primary method of collecting data, interviews with five instructors and a focus group of students who participated in the intervention study were adopted. Interviews were designed to include instructors' points of view, while a focus group of children was adopted to understand students' perspectives. Interviewing is a legitimate way of collecting data especially when an inquiry involves participants' perceptions, feelings, and recollection of the past events (Merriam, 1998). Focus groups, on the other hand, can be used in an exploratory manner to discover links, categories, relevant issues of which researchers inquire (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). A focus group can also allow each participant to express opinions in the group that may disagree with or concur with the other's views and thoughts.

Upon completion of the reading intervention, interviews were conducted with the five instructors who led the small-group DR-TA sessions. Each interview lasted from 40 to 50 minutes. A semi-structured interview with a set of questions guided interviews with instructors (Merriam, 1998). However, the interviewer did not limit participants' responses or interrupt their responses. For the focus group, six students total—one or two students from each reading group—participated in the interview. While the focus group did not represent a sample of population, it is recommended to include a demographic range across the participants (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). The children's focus group interview was conducted by one of the researchers at the school and lasted approximately 50 minutes.

### Research Participants

#### *Students in the Focus Group Interview*

Among all participating students, six volunteered to participate in the focus group interview at the end of the reading intervention period. Two of these students were receiving ESL services. One student, Jose (pseudonym), had very limited skill with spoken English. He

was considered by his peers as very quiet and shy. However, Jose spoke Spanish fluently when another Hispanic student, Alberto (pseudonym), helped him by translating English into Spanish. Alberto, who was translating, had some trouble in participating in the interview. He often looked away or turned his head whenever he spoke; while the other students readily volunteered to share their opinions, the focus group moderator had to solicit Alberto's opinions a few times. Later, the researcher found that Alberto was in trouble in the school due to behavior issues.

### *Instructors*

Five instructors—Deborah, Rosemary, Miranda, Anna, and Heather (all pseudonyms)—implemented the DR-TA strategy in a small-group setting throughout the study. They also participated in the interviews after completion of the intervention study. All instructors were graduate students in education. Four of them were white female students with Elementary education backgrounds, while one instructor was from a non-white Hispanic background and majored in Spanish education with an ESL endorsement. The instructors' ages ranged from early to late 20s. The instructors did not hold formal teaching positions, but had participated in practicum experiences that were part of the teacher preparation programs in which they were enrolled. All instructors had taken a reading instruction course as a requirement of their graduate coursework.

### **Research Stance**

Qualitative research requires transparency of the research process including limitations of the study and the research interpretive stance that the study espouses. Qualitative studies must inform readers of any research bias and partial views so readers can take this information into account (Seale, 2004; Shank, 2002). The underlying paradigm for this research is postpositivism. Phillips and Burbules (2000) stated that, “[t]he postpositivist sees knowledge as *conjectural*. These conjectures are supported by the strongest (if possibly imperfect) warrants we can muster at the time and always subject to reconsideration” (pp. 29-30). Employing this framework, we researchers admit the possible fallible nature of knowledge based on incomplete or imperfect evidence (Phillips, 2005; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Nevertheless, we hold the value of scientific inquiry and the evidence that supports our interpretation and claims.

### **Data Analysis**

The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through inductive analysis. Shank (2002) explains the inductive analysis as “reasoning to a probable conclusion” (p. 130). The inductive analysis seeks a conclusion which may reject or confirm what was assumed or known (Shank, 2002). Specific to this study, through the process of coding and categorizing, patterns were identified and themes were built (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Shank, 2002). In order to increase validity and reliability of the data, two researchers cross-checked the categories and compared the identified themes (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## FINDINGS

Four major themes were developed from the emerging patterns in the data including motivation, engagement, progress of comprehension and prediction skills, and ELL's literacy practice. Specifically, while students' motivation was highly related to the content of stories, the process of DR-TA instruction, and the collaborative learning situation, their engagement in reading was subject to oral reading/participation, teacher attitude, and the quality of teacher instruction.

### Motivation to Read

#### *Content of Stories*

The students were motivated by the high-interest yet challenging reading materials. An instructor, Heather, stated that when her group was reading *Pink and Say* (Polacco, 1994), students could not wait until the next session to learn how the story ended; they went to the school library to check out the book and read it through. Although Heather realized that it made the following prediction activity impossible, she was thrilled to discover how highly motivated her students were to read the story. The student focus-group interview data also corroborates the students' high interest in the story of *Pink and Say*. The students at the focus group interview particularly pointed out how *Pink and Say* made them upset:

Student A: Victor (a student who was not in a focus group) said he didn't like *Pink and Say* because it's sad.

Student B: It was sad because at the end it killed the brown dude.

Students' strong emotional reaction to this story suggests their attachment to the story, though they expressed they did not like how the story concluded. Other students claimed that *Pink and Say* and *Encyclopedia Brown, Boy Detective* (Sobol, 2007) were the most popular stories among those they read.

Another instructor, Miranda, described a similar enthusiasm displayed by her students: "When we started *Encyclopedia Brown*, they [students] couldn't wait to find out what happened. They started looking in the back because they just couldn't wait to find the solution...and then at the end, they were like, they wanted more!" A student at the focus group confirmed this by stating that he did not like to take a break from *Encyclopedia Brown*. Similar to Heather's and Miranda's experiences, Anna witnessed a strong motivation among students when they read *Babe and I* and *Encyclopedia Brown*: "When the time would be up, and we would be at the end of the chapter or the end of the story, they would be like, 'Let's just read one more page.'" The student focus-group interview also echoes these instructors' comments. Some students expressed that reading is fun, "more fun than going outside," and, "yeah, I don't want to go to recess when I'm reading."

*Encyclopedia Brown* includes not only problem-solving based stories, but is also a chapter book. Miranda mentioned that students were proud of reading the chapter book. She described, "They were excited about a big book. I think that really excited them, *Encyclopedia*

*Brown*. But I think overall they would have liked to see more chapter books. That was one thing that came out, ‘Could we read more chapter books?’” Miranda further added that the reading program had a positive effect on students’ confidence. Similarly, Rosemary stated, “Because like in *Encyclopedia Brown*...It boosted their confidence and they wanted to read more. They’re like, ‘Look at this thick book I read!’” These examples showed improvement in students’ self-efficacy because they felt capable of reading difficult books and this success increased their motivation to read more.

Thus, findings indicated that what motivated students to read was the story content rather than linguistic simplicity that makes the reading effortless. The two books that were the most popular did not have simple linguistic forms or structures that could lessen reading difficulties. For example, *Pink and Say* has a number of colloquial expressions that students rarely encounter in their daily lives and *Encyclopedia Brown* is lengthy with complicated story plots. An advantage of reading challenging books was that it allowed students to build confidence about reading, enhancing their self-efficacy.

### *Collaboration and Interaction*

The findings indicated that collaborative learning not only creates more opportunities to listen and speak, but also provides opportunities for students to help each other comprehend stories. Deborah described how her students helped each other. In particular, a student was occasionally pulled out for Special Education services, and as a result, she could not always follow the stories. Deborah assigned her students to take turns in sharing with the student key points of the previously read stories: “Then, they would talk about what she remembered and then what they remembered so they actually corroborated each other.” Anna also stated that she noticed how the group work benefitted students. She noted:

If they discovered something new like when they would listen to someone else make a prediction and they would be like, ‘Oh, I didn’t realize that!’...They can appreciate each other’s perspectives and points of view. And, especially the English language learners, they can learn too from, like, to see where they’re coming from and how did they make that prediction or what did they read. So I think having them together is definitely beneficial to both.

Another benefit of group work was using ELLs’ native language. For example, Rosemary had an ELL student with very limited English skills, and she described how another student helped the first: “A lot of times she couldn’t communicate. She had to get another one of the Spanish-speaking students and they would translate for her—what she was trying to say—because she didn’t know how to say it.”

Thus, the interactive DR-TA process in small group instructional settings turned out to be greatly instrumental in student progress because students were not only able to learn different perspectives but also able to assist each other in comprehension of stories. Students’ spontaneous chorus at the focus group, the “reading is fun,” corroborates a positive result of collaborative learning.

## Engagement in Reading

### *Oral Reading Skills and Participation*

Instructors reported that ELLs particularly showed difficulty in oral reading which discouraged students from getting engaged in reading aloud. Miranda described how ELLs responded to oral reading practice:

My three ESL students, they were very reluctant to read. They didn't want to read, I had to persuade them. They start reading—they'd maybe read two sentences and they'd give up. That was frustrating to me because I wanted them to succeed. I didn't want them to feel frustrated. I didn't always make them read. I didn't want them to feel like they were forced.

Miranda also noticed that ELLs read ahead to make sure they could read. She reasoned this was the case “because they were afraid if they started reading and didn't know the vocabulary, then they'd be embarrassed.” Miranda further noted that the other two non-ELLs “felt held back from ESL kids.” Similarly, Anna, reported difficulty in oral reading among ELLs, saying, “Yeah, like, a couple of students, they would, it would be like, very choppy like, word for word. . . . so it's hard to comprehend what you're reading when you're just trying to figure out what the words are.”

Some students at the focus group expressed a concern about oral participation in making predictions. Students' concern centered on shyness and a fear of being laughed at. A student stated, “They'd be laughing at each other.” Another student said, “I agree with you.” When the focus group moderator asked why they laughed at each other, a student responded, “Because they'd be taking [too] long sometimes.” Thus, oral reading and oral participation in making predictions inadvertently created a disconcerting learning situation to those students whose oral reading and speaking skills were limited.

### *Instructor's Quality and Expectations*

The quality of instructors and their attitude toward reading appeared to make an impact on students' engagement in reading. Specifically, teachers who were well-prepared and knowledgeable about the background of stories were able to engage students further beyond the text. As already stated, one of the selection criteria of reading materials was background knowledge that integrates subject matter such as Social Studies. For example, *Pink and Say* involves slavery and the Civil War, while *Molley's Pilgrim* (Cohen, 1998) can help students understand pilgrims and the Thanksgiving traditions. *The Babe and I* (Adler & Widener, 2004) is set in the Great Depression of the 1930s. When instructors had background knowledge related to these time periods, they were able to expand on the students' predictions.

Two instructors, Miranda and Deborah, showed a striking contrast in their instructional approach, and demonstrated how the quality of instruction and attitude could result in different effects on student reading involvement. Miranda, particularly, expressed her frustration over her students' lack of background knowledge. She expected that students had already learned about the pilgrims and slavery. To her surprise, however, she stated that her students “did not really

understand” and that they had numerous questions. In particular, students’ interest in slavery became palpable while they were reading *Pink and Say*. She described the situation:

It had to do with slavery and they knew a little bit but they asked a lot of questions about slavery. ‘Why did they do that to a person in that book?’ ‘A white person?’ They had a lot of questions about that book. I don’t want to say too much because—I don’t know, you know. Because they are supposed to comprehend the book as well as fill out what they already learned in school and I didn’t want to go too far with what they’re not supposed to know yet.

Miranda’s group consisted of three Hispanic ELLs and two African American students. Miranda is the only white female graduate student, and had very little experience. Notable are Miranda’s remarks, “I don’t know,” and “not much to say,” as she was trying to focus on the story as opposed to discussing slavery issues in a historical context.

In contrast to Miranda, Deborah approached the background information of *Pink and Say* differently by transforming students’ interest into a critical moment of learning. According to Deborah, her group discussed main events in the book: “Sometimes, we’d stop at a point where there would be a couple of extra minutes so we’d talk about the history of the book.” Her following description is noteworthy:

When we read *Pink and Say*, we talked about racial differences, which is always a topic that is really a little bit hard to discuss. But they really provoked the conversation. So we talked about it. One boy in the group actually said, ‘Well, that’s racism, what that person did!’ So we talked about it and I thought it was a good discussion about the topic of the book... Actually it helped the white student to become more interested in what was going on.

In this fashion, Deborah utilized the story to advance students’ knowledge and their critical thinking skills. She stated that while she could not observe the same kind of stimulating conversation when they read *Molly’s Pilgrim*, she found some connections to students’ lives:

They were interested to see how that girl did adapt to the environment. One girl was a new student to the school so she could relate to having people pick on her and like that. So we got a little deeper into that issue than actually talking about the book.

As these examples have shown, instructors could assist their students in engaging in reading beyond text comprehension by exploring social and historical issues. Therefore, the findings indicate that the teachers’ ability to provide responsive instruction to students’ needs can make a significant difference in students’ engagement in reading. The focus-group interview confirmed this finding.

One of the concerns that were raised by the instructors was related to applying the routine of DR-TA instruction. Some instructors expressed that this routine created boredom, and that more variety was needed. Miranda stated,

They [students] wanted to do something when they were a little bored. They were like, ‘Aren’t we going to write anything?’ I think they enjoyed it but every day it was the same thing, so it was a little boring for them.

However, none of the students at the focus group interview expressed boredom. Rather, they showed how much they enjoyed making predictions, saying things like, “It’s fun to guess,” or “Reading is fun.” It is interesting to note that Heather and Deborah, who were vastly involved and enjoyed the reading instruction, did not mention boredom. Deborah described how she made DR-TA activities more creative and fun by dancing around when students’ predictions were accurate. She further added, “It was a chance for us to be ourselves and read the books and kind of enjoy it rather than be a structured reading group.” Heather pointed out another important quality of teachers and their attitude for reading:

I think the only thing—the people who are actually doing it, they’ll be better off if they actually enjoy reading. If they actually enjoy the fact that reading can do so much, even if it’s not in educational setting, even if it’s just for enjoyment purposes, they need to have that love for the written word in order to pass it on.

Heather further noted that some instructors did not like to read and suspected that their lack of passion for reading might contribute to students’ lack of engagement in reading. Heather’s view is in agreement with Worthy’s (2002) claim that instructors’ interest in reading could make a positive impact on students’ reading.

Another salient point was related to instructors’ expectations for student reading level. Instructors stated that they were surprised when they discovered ELLs performed much better in the post-test than they had expected. During their instruction, ELLs struggled with oral reading and made less accurate predictions and displayed comprehension difficulties. Surprisingly, however, students showed much better comprehension skills in their post-tests as the following excerpts evidenced:

Miranda: I post-tested both my English native and one ESL, and he is doing a lot better than I thought he was in the comprehension. But he’s doing really well....I don’t know what his previous scores were. But he, from what I thought, from just hearing him read, and then over the sessions, he got a lot better than I thought he would.

Anna: I think that even his [an ELL student] predictions, I’m not sure how he was before, like pre-test, but predictions were, I think, they were really good....no, I thought maybe he did do a little bit better than what I would have thought he would have.

Heather: My, one of the kids that I thought was going to be the worst reader, he’s not the worst reader. But I thought he wasn’t going to go up as high in the predictions but he proved me wrong today. I thought that, with him, I was going to get to Level Two and he was able to go to Level Three with Two being an independent and I was just very astonished about it.

These instructors’ comments divulged that instructors had low expectations based on ELLs’ limited oral reading skills, yet, the students’ comprehension skills proved to be better. While it is not known how the instructors’ low expectations may have influenced their reading instruction and the students’ learning process in this study, it is crucial for teachers to hold the same high expectation for all students. The teachers’ role, manifested through quality, attitude, and expectations, can play a central role in students’ engagement in reading.

## Progress in Prediction and Comprehension Skills

Instructors expressed that they noticed students' improvement in prediction skills over time. Specifically, predictions were more relevant to stories as time progressed during the intervention period. More accurate prediction, according to the instructors, signified an increase in student comprehension skills. For example, students seemed to be very confused. Consider below how Heather and Miranda described their experience:

Heather: In the beginning, their predictions were really broad, they would just go all over the place.... After we went to the end and to the *Encyclopedia Brown* book which really requires you to follow the story, they were able to pick up faster and they really, it made them proud every time that they made a good prediction.

Miranda: They definitely got better as we continued. At first, they were really weak and not really substantial and then, as time went on, I felt like predictions were more on target and related more to the story as time progressed.

Rosemary expressed a concern about an ELL who had limited comprehension skills as well as speaking skills. Rosemary described this particular ELL's struggle: "She would say random things that didn't make any sense and have anything to do with the story." Similar to Rosemary's experience, Anna stated that ELLs' predictions in her group sometimes were not based on the story as she noted: "Their predictions were off, not based on the comprehension of the story. Rather, their predictions were a wild guess but based on their imagination." She attributed the lack of accuracy in predictions to students' lack of comprehension of the stories. Furthermore, some instructors noticed that ELLs experienced challenges in verbally expressing their thoughts and opinions. Thus, the findings indicate that there is a close connection between the ability to make an accurate prediction, and comprehension skills. When students had difficulty in comprehending stories, their predictions were less relevant to the stories.

## Unconventional Literacy Practices

Alberto, the Spanish-speaking ELL who helped Jose by translating English to him during the focus group interview, helped his little sister with reading by specifically teaching her how to predict stories. Alberto explained it:

I told her [little sister] about *Pink and Say*... I read a book and sometimes I read a book to her. Sometimes when I got [go to] the library, I'll pick out a book for my sister. I don't tell her the title. I just get a hard book or an easy book for her. And, I help her read it too... Every time I learn something in reading, I go to her and tell her, 'Look what I learned.' And she starts to learn, like every time I first started to predict, I always made her predict what she thought was going to happen next. So she predicts. But sometimes she doesn't get it right and she gets mad when I say it's just a prediction, you just have to guess. You don't have to get it right.

Although Alberto did not voluntarily share his thoughts during the focus group interview until his opinions were solicited, he applied what he learned in providing instruction to his sister.

As was mentioned earlier, he also struggled in school with some behavior problems. Alberto, in this study, is reminiscent of Miguel in Rubinstein-Ávila's (2003/2004) study. Both boys were identified as students with behavioral issues in their schools, yet they played the role of language broker for their family members and friends. However, mainstream literacy conventions and norms do not recognize brokering as an important literacy practice (Jiménez, 2001).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While a number of tantalizing issues emerged from the study, a few salient themes need further discussion. First, high-interest and yet challenging reading materials made a positive impact on students' motivation to read more. Second, teachers' quality, attitude, and expectations played a crucial role in engaging students to read. In addition, this study challenges a notion of a connection between oral reading fluency and comprehension skills, especially whether or not this application is a fair judgment of ELLs' comprehension skills. Another question that this study called forth is students' literacy practices across different contexts which have received very little recognition and appreciation by mainstream literacy standards and conventions. Let us illustrate by making connections with the existing body of literature.

First, students' interest and their motivation in reading are not necessarily contingent upon the text difficulty. Rather, their interests are dependent on how compelling and interesting the stories are. This result resonates with the claims of Connor et al. (2009), Guthrie et al. (2004) and Elley and Mangubhai's (1983) in their respective studies. The finding of this study particularly validates the benefits of high-interest books as Elley and Mangubhai (1983) state: "Good story books provide strong intrinsic motivation for children and an emphasis on meaning rather than form. When read often, these books increase exposure to the target language" (p. 56). Thus, reading materials that pique students' interest and motivation are one of the most significant factors for successful reading programs.

Another key factor to help reading programs to be successful is qualified instructors, which none of the reading intervention studies specifically emphasized. The findings of this study suggest that an instructor's role is pivotal not only in presenting reading materials but also in facilitating critical reflection on what students have read. While one instructor's approach was restricted to instruction of text comprehension and oral reading (e.g, Miranda), another instructor used stories as a point of advancement through discussions of critical social and historical issues (e.g., Deborah). Specific to instructors' expectations, findings suggest that instructors' low expectations based on ELLs' lack of fluent oral reading and inability to express themselves orally when making predictions appeared to be groundless. What this result implies is that the connection between oral reading skills and comprehension skills are not necessarily tightly knitted. Denton et al. (2004) suggested a somewhat confirmatory claim regarding this issue. The study could not determine the relationships between the two variables—oral reading fluency and comprehension skills. Lack of oral language proficiency of ELLs is, however, susceptible to teachers' bias or low expectations. A caveat of a teacher's low expectation or prophecy of language minority students based on surface level mistakes is that it may have a negative effect on students' performance. Conversely, other studies address a positive impact of teachers' advocacy, affirmative attitude, and rapport with language minority students on student

involvement in learning and academic achievement (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2003/2004; Suárez-Orozco C., Suárez-Orozco M., & Todorova, 2008; Yoon, 2007).

Collaborative and interactive learning not only prompted student interaction but also created a venue for students' shared native language as a resource. For instance, a student who had very limited English skills, and kept silent at the beginning, was able to express her opinions in Spanish assisted by another student. Her gradual progress from silence to her first language, from first language to second language, is another great example of collaborative learning. Similarly, Saunders and Goldenberg (1999) intervention study showed that limited-English-proficient students benefited considerably from the combined effects of a literature log and instructional conversation in a reading program, indicating the importance of verbal interactions. According to Klingner and Vaughn (2000), collaborative readers "assisted one another in understanding the meaning of challenging words, getting the main idea, and formulating and answering questions about what they read" (p. 92).

Finally, Alberto's literacy practice questions a mainstream view: Alberto not only played a role of translator for his friend but also a conduit of new knowledge to his family members. However, as previously mentioned, mainstream literacy conventions recognition and appreciation of this type of literacy practice is limited (Jiménez, 2001). Likewise, the Rubinstein-Ávila (2003/2004) study reported that ELLs who "may be viewed as 'at risk' in the school setting, their role of cultural and linguistic brokers may turn them into 'saviors'" (p. 299). Arzubiaga, Rueda, and Monzó (2002) similarly claimed that "paradigms that attempt to explain complex processes such as motivation to read by looking solely at the individual are limited" (p. 11). Thus, non-mainstream literacy practices displayed by ELLs allow us to begin critical dialogues.

While this study explored the issues that occurred during the reading intervention study especially with focused attention to ELLs, it has limitations. First, the findings of this study are not generalizable. Second, it was difficult to delve into issues through a limited number of interviews and a focus group of children. In particular, moderating a focus group was somewhat challenging, as the students giggled and talked simultaneously rather than participating in engaging discussions related to topics. Observation data could have made the findings of the study more solid and reliable. Having stated this, the data presented in this study was initially designed to triangulate the original study through different channels such as pre-and post-tests, instructor interviews, and a child focus group. Third, because the interview language was English, it is possible that ELLs who had limited English skills were not able to express their experiences fully. Thus, we also suggest that future research should use students' native language to fairly and fully capture language minority students' points of view in the future studies. Finally, in order to understand ELLs' literacy practices, a holistic approach of including cultural dynamics stemming from family and community is recommended. Despite these limitations, the study's findings illuminate and provide valuable insight into reading intervention programs with ELL students.

The findings of this study suggest a few pedagogical implications for teachers and teacher educators. First, it is important to choose interesting and yet challenging reading materials to motivate students to read. Second, teachers should be well-prepared to be able to connect student reading to grade-level curriculum. It is of note that building and activating students' background knowledge is highly dependent on teachers' knowledge and skills to

engage students further beyond text comprehension. Third, a collaborative and interactive reading program is recommended as students can learn each others' perspectives while enhancing language learning processes. Another advantage of group work is using shared native language which increased ELLs' engagement in reading. Fourth, it is encouraged for teachers to have realistic yet high expectation for students. Their expectations for student reading on the basis of student oral reading fluency need to be questioned and reexamined. Fifth, additional non-verbal activities such as silent reading and writing predictions are suggested. Some students did not feel comfortable about read-aloud and oral prediction activities. Finally, a different literacy practice should be equally valued by mainstream school literacy practices as "Their [ELLs] literacy needs are not theirs alone; these needs encapsulate those of their families and their communities" (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2003/2004, p. 300).

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