

Research Overview

Adaptations of Peer-Assisted Learning for English Language Learners: Application to Middle-School Social Studies Classes

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This project was designed to address the learning challenges of EL learners by focusing on practices that enhance students' understanding of social studies content and of expository text by providing them opportunities to learn and use the language associated with social studies. Our model of instruction shares various features recommended for high quality instruction for all students including peer mediated learning, research-based practices for vocabulary instruction, the use of media to build comprehension, and the development of background knowledge.

The use of structured pairing enhances instruction in three ways. First, paired activities increased students' access to and practice with the language associated with content area instruction. Second, pairing students to read and work together provides an interactive and motivating structure for learning. Third, through the use of paired activities, English language learners have the opportunity to participate in class discussions by providing modeling and practice. Peer mediated learning has the potential to allow students to be actively engaged and can give them more opportunities to respond to meaningful academic content.

Vocabulary words were chosen to build students' academic language. Practices that were included expanded students' understanding of word meanings by providing them opportunities to encounter new words in texts and/or videos after they received explicit instruction of word meanings. The explicit instruction of word meanings included several components: a student-friendly definition, a Spanish cognate if appropriate, an illustration, two sentences to contextualize the target word, and examples and nonexamples.

Instruction was also enhanced with the use of visuals. Vocabulary and background content instruction was enhanced with the use of video and graphic organizers. Traditional teaching of history depends heavily on students being able to independently read textbooks. Video provides access to challenging content for ELLs. Short video clips were used to create meaningful access to the content by providing students with an alternative to grade-level text. In addition to providing access to content, the video provided opportunities for additional exposure to key vocabulary and concepts, and opportunities for discussion.

Additionally, graphic organizers were used to organize information that was read, watched in videos, and discussed, into meaningful conceptual groupings. The graphic organizers facilitate ELLs' comprehension of the "big ideas" by helping students discuss and write the most important information from their lessons.

Research Questions

- What are the effects of a seventh grade social studies intervention based on specific instructional and learning strategies, supplemental materials, and mixed grouping arrangements on students' content knowledge?
- What are the effects of a seventh grade social studies intervention based on specific instructional and learning strategies, supplemental materials, and mixed grouping arrangements on students' vocabulary and comprehension skills?

Participants and Setting

Seventh-grade students were randomly assigned to fifteen sections of social studies classrooms in two participating junior high schools (N=384). Then the class sections of four social studies teachers were randomly assigned to either a control (N= 155 students) or intervention (N= 131 students) condition. Of the original 384 students, 117 were English language learners (46 in the intervention and 48 in the control condition).

Design Procedures

All four teachers were trained by the researchers to implement the instructional strategies. They received materials and coaching to assist them in delivering the intervention with fidelity to intervention class sections. Students in the intervention classes received the intervention during their regularly scheduled seventh grade social studies class between February and April. Students in the control sections received typical instruction. The intervention was implemented for 50 minutes a day, 5 days a week for approximately 9 weeks.

Intervention

Four intervention components were identified for year 2 of the study. These were *structured paired grouping arrangements, explicit vocabulary instruction, the use of video and purposeful discussion to build concepts, and the use of graphic organizers to build comprehension and vocabulary*. Intervention practices were designed to enhance the delivery of instruction and student opportunities to discuss the content.

Data Collection

- Researcher-developed content specific pre- and post-tests and the GRADE reading assessment were administered to all students in control and intervention sections.
- To determine the effect of the intervention, the research team developed weekly curriculum-based measures for students in intervention classes.
- The fidelity measure was developed to document the instruction in the intervention classrooms.
- Thirty-minute interviews were administered to a sub-group of ELL students in intervention sections to inquire about lesson components they found helpful.
- A teacher focus group discussion was held to ask teachers about their experiences with the lessons and to listen to suggestions for future implementation.