

How Does Explicit Vocabulary Instruction in ESL/HILT Third Graders Affect their PALS Scores?

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Abstract

As students enter third grade, they are evaluated using Virginia's Phonological Assessment and Literacy Screening, better known as PALS. At Randolph Elementary School, 74% of the students are second language learners. Due to their language gap for acquiring English, many students are still not able to pass the PALS by the time they get to third grade. This failure can be related to a lack of English vocabulary. The focus of the action research was to emphasize vocabulary development during language arts and throughout the rest of the third grade curriculum. Ten third graders from Mrs. Dash's class were involved in the study. Three major strategies, which emphasize vocabulary development, were implemented over the course of the year including Word Study (based on *Words Their Way*), Flip Flash Cards and Wacky Word worksheets. Spring PALS scores and reading levels from second and third grade were analyzed. The results indicate that despite two individuals failing PALS, exactly half of the students in Mrs. Dash's class showed at least a year's growth in reading level.

Background

Randolph Elementary School is located in South Arlington, Virginia. This urban region of Arlington sits inside the 395 Beltway that encircles the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Randolph is truly a community school. All of the students come from the surrounding residential neighborhood. They either walk to school or are driven by their parents. One school bus picks up special education students that are unable to walk to school on their own due to a disability. Randolph is home to 519 students, which makes it the sixth largest school (out of 21 schools) in Arlington County. Class size in Arlington County is smaller compared to the national average. At Randolph, the average class size is 18 students. Over half of our students have been designated as second language learners. Of those second language learners, approximately 60% are Spanish-speaking. The remaining students have a plethora of ethnic backgrounds including Arabic, Urdu, Bengali, Amharic, Vietnamese, Tigrinya, Tagalog, French, Somali, and Laotian. Families of these students are mostly working-class or low-income families. Many have recently immigrated to the United States and live with their native-speaking relatives. Randolph accommodates these families by providing a free or reduced lunch to 79% of its student population. It has also been designated a Title One school because of its population. Despite Randolph's best efforts, sometimes families choose to return to their native countries. As a result, Randolph's staff has become accustomed to the transience of the school's population but continues to do their best to provide whatever services are needed (financial, emotional, social support) while families live in the neighboring community.

The attitudes and goals of Randolph ES reflect its multicultural make-up. The school provides a variety of programs aimed to support its student population. For

example, many of our students participate in the English as a Second Language (ESL) or Higher Intensity Language Training (HILT) program. Throughout their school career, teachers monitor these students' level of English proficiency. In fact, this year, under the new *No Child Left Behind Act*, established by President George W. Bush, all teachers are required to inform parents of ESL and HILT students about the program and what it means for their child in terms of reading, writing and speaking English. At Randolph, students that are still learning English are part of a regular education classroom but may receive special services for reading.

What is PALS?

No matter what their status under the law, all students attending Randolph are given the Phonological Assessment and Literacy Screening (PALS) test in kindergarten, first, second and third grade. The only exception being that students who met the benchmark score on the second grade spring PALS do not have to be re-tested in third grade. According to the revised PALS website (<http://pals.virginia.edu>), PALS is defined as a test measuring "young children's knowledge of important literacy fundamentals, including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, knowledge of letter sounds, spelling, concept of word, word recognition in isolation, and oral passage reading." In addition, PALS is meant to identify those students who fall below grade level and will require additional support during the year with their literacy skills (<http://pals.virginia.edu>).

There are two PALS tests including the PALS – K for kindergarten and PALS 1-3, obviously for grades one, two and three. The PALS 1-3 test, used in this action research, is divided into three major tasks: the Spelling Inventory, Word Recognition in Isolation and Oral Reading in Context. The Spelling Inventory is based on developmental spelling programs such as Words Their Way. The results from the inventory reveal the student's word study stage and the spelling features they have not mastered. Next, the Word Recognition in Isolation asks students to read a random list of vocabulary words. If students are unsuccessful reading the list from their grade level, they are asked to go down a level until they can read 15 out of 20 words successfully. Finally, based on the grade level of the word list, students are asked to read a written passage aloud while the teacher takes a running record. Then, they must answer six comprehension questions related to that passage. They are scored on their number of reading errors, fluency while reading and comprehension questions answered correctly. Once completed, the PALS acts as a valuable assessment tool for teachers because they can use the results to establish and guide their literacy instruction early on in the school year.

Interest and Purpose

Having taught at Randolph last year as a Professional Development School (PDS) intern, I was already aware of the challenges of teaching to ESL/HILT students. The gap between their social language and academic language was quite clear to me. I also knew I would be faced with the challenge of preparing my class for the social studies Standards of Learning (SOL) test. I was naturally interested in implementing strategies that would emphasize vocabulary for my ESL and HILT students. I hoped that these strategies would not only improve their academic language and prepare them

for the SOLs, but more importantly, improve their overall reading level. I decided to measure their reading progress by their scores on PALS 1-3. The purpose of my action research is to examine what affect explicit vocabulary instruction has on PALS scores for my third grade language arts class.

Connections to the Literature

Vocabulary development in the primary grades is crucial. In fact, some research has shown that elementary school students add about 3,000 words to their vocabulary per year (Nagy 1988 in Fountas & Pinnell, p.376). When teaching ESL and HILT students, vocabulary development becomes even more critical because those students lack the background knowledge of native English speakers. Authors Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell write, "Students must know a huge number of words just to be able to read texts at progressive grade levels" (p.376). In other words, a basic repertoire of vocabulary words is necessary for students to make progress at any reading level. A major part of my action research was to build up their vocabulary repertoire, placing the most emphasis on word families and academic words.

Other researchers have studied the effectiveness of using different strategies for vocabulary instruction. The consensus among the research is a variety of strategies work the best. Fountas and Pinnell cite researchers Beck and McKeown (1991), and Stahl and Fairbanks (1986), "...you should employ a variety of techniques to ensure that students have repeated exposures to words and to present opportunities for students to make connections between words and concepts" (p.376). This statement supports my action research methods of using *Words Their Way* Word Study, Wacky Word Worksheets and Flip Flash Cards to address the needs of my students. Research into the importance of word study has also been conducted. According to the authors of *Words Their Way*, "When teachers do word study with students, they are addressing learning needs in all areas of literacy because development in one area relates to development in other areas" (p.13). In other words, using word study as part of my action research will allow me to make the important link between the vocabulary students know and their reading capabilities.

Participants

This study examines ten third graders in the same language arts class. The class consists of five ESL students, two HILTB students and three students that are not identified as having any English language deficiency (Figure 1).

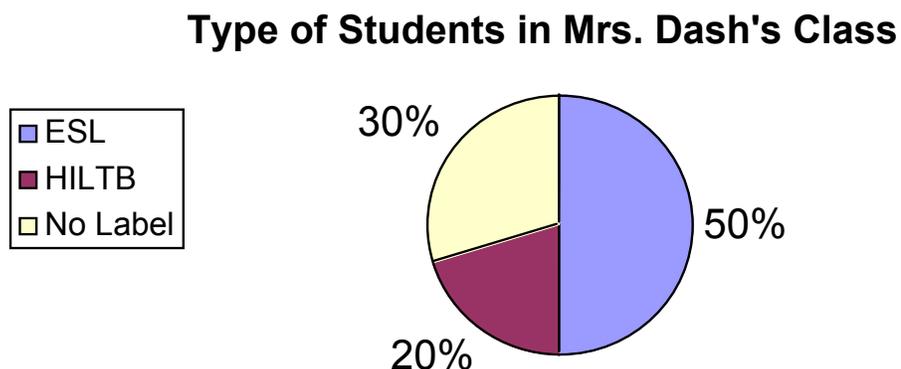


Figure 1. Class make-up pie chart

This class is evenly split by gender. Reading levels were assessed for each student based on their second grade spring PALS score and the QRI (Qualitative Reading Inventory) given at the beginning of the year. Two students started the year at a 1-2 reading level, two started at a 2-1 and the rest were 2-2. None of my students were entering third grade at a third grade reading level.

Methods

Three instructional strategies were used in this study to emphasize vocabulary for the ESL/HILT students. *Words Their Way* Word Study and Wacky Word Worksheets were both implemented as part of the language arts block. Flip Flash Cards were created to help students master tough and often developmentally inappropriate content vocabulary. (Content areas include math, social studies and science.) All three strategies exposed students to new vocabulary words which they were expected to be able to spell and define.

The Word Study program was the most invasive strategy used throughout the whole year. At the beginning of the year, I placed students in flexible reading/word study groups based on the Spelling Inventory and second grade test results. Each week, all groups followed the same classwork and homework routine with a reading extension teacher (Appendix A). Word sorts were developmentally appropriate for each group.

Weekday	Classwork Activity	Homework Assignment
Monday	Introduce sort by discussing meanings and verbally using words in a sentence.	Write Your Sort
Tuesday	Buddy Writing Sort	ABC Order
Wednesday	No Language Arts	Sort & Tell
Thursday	Word Hunt	10 Meaningful Sentences
Friday	Spelling test created from student sentences	No homework.

Students keep word study notebooks, in which they store their words and complete all word study homework assignments.

Another instructional strategy I implemented this year is called the Wacky Word Worksheet. It is loosely based on a worksheet I saw in the Scott Foresman materials for third grade. The Wacky Word worksheet allows students to focus in on one word, usually an unfamiliar word. Wacky Word asks students to predict definitions and use the word in a sentence before they discover its true meaning. I used Wacky Word strictly for emphasizing and introducing vocabulary directly from the stories we read in the Scott Foresman and Rigby series as well as some chapter books. After hunting and recording where the “wacky word” is in the text, students are asked to verify the definition of their word or check their predictions using the dictionary. The final step of Wacky Word involves using the word in another sentence (knowing its true definition) and drawing a picture that will serve as an associated symbol or an easy way to remember the new word. (The drawing helps visual learners). Wacky Word Worksheets were usually kept in student accessible file folders during that particular unit

Finally, Flip Flash Cards were introduced starting in the first social studies unit, Geography and continued through subsequent units. Flip Flash Cards come in sets of ten and serve as a study tool or self-assessment for students. Social studies, science and math Flip Flash Cards are glued into the students' notebooks for that corresponding subject or into their "Study Buddy." (Study Buddy is another type of study tool that students can take home throughout a particular unit). Flip Flash cards show the definition on the outside and open to reveal a matching vocabulary word on the inside. Students are encouraged to use Flip Flash Cards as a fun and engaging way to test themselves on new vocabulary words.

Data Collections and Findings

Second grade PALS scores were collected from my students' second grade teachers. The graph illustrates that three students missed the benchmark score for second grade (Figure 2). These students are categorized as "failing" PALS. Bars for the ESL/HILT students are highlighted in yellow.

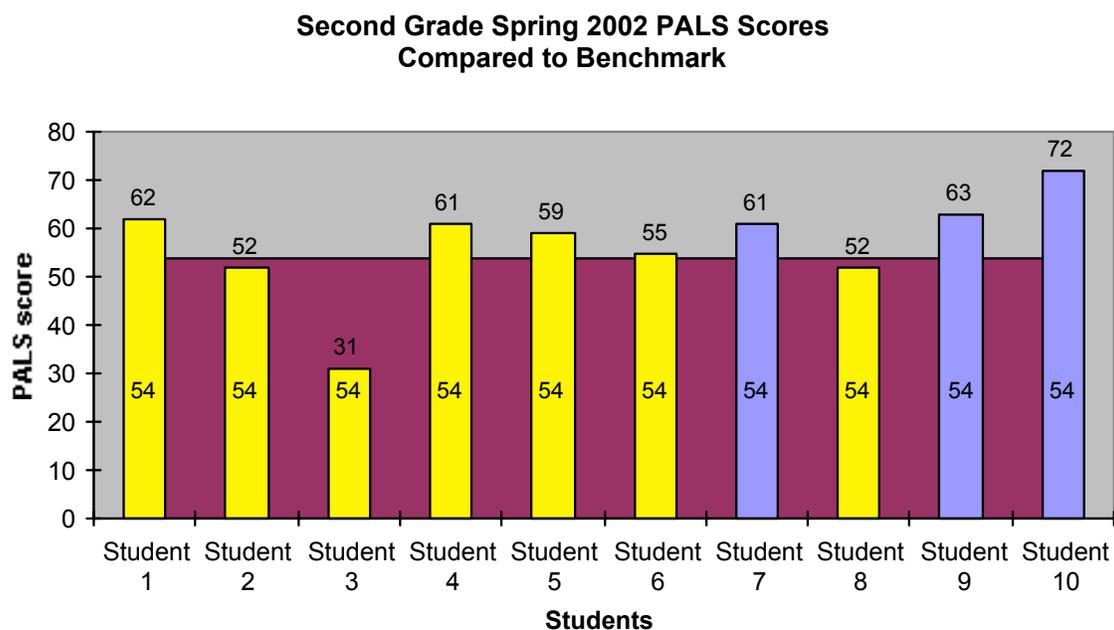


Figure 2. Second grade PALS graph

One year later, in May 2003, I administered the PALS test to my language arts class. The results were graphed against the benchmark score for third grade. (Note: the benchmarks are different in second and third grade.) The same two students that failed in 2002 also failed in 2003 along with Student 6 (Figure 3).

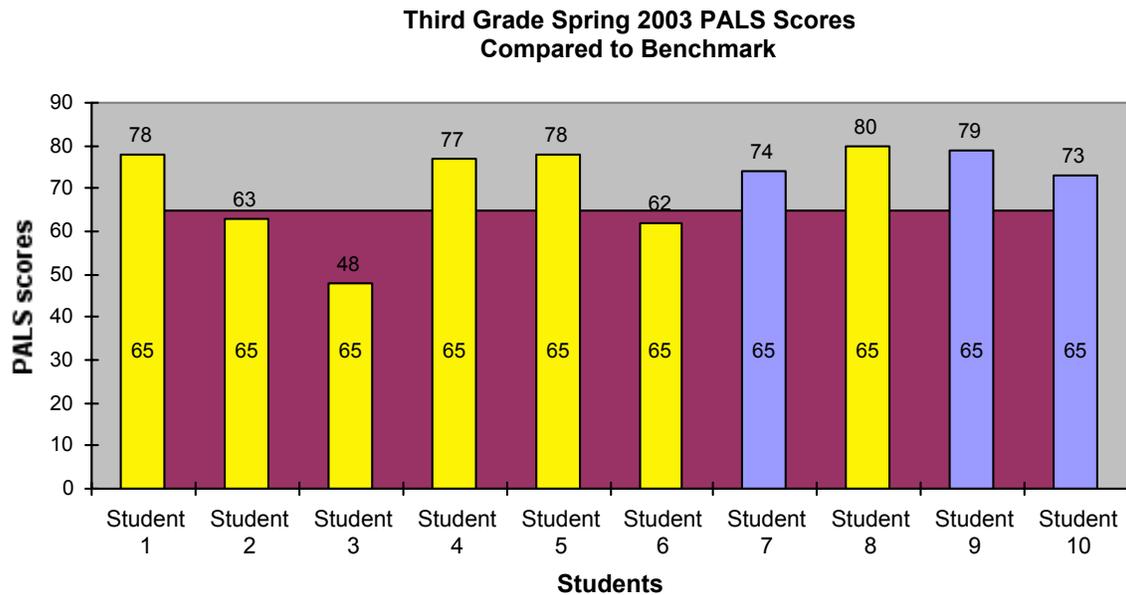


Figure 3. Third grade PALS graph

According to the graphs, Student 2 missed the benchmark both years by only two points. It can be concluded that this student continues to learn but falls just short of performing at the expected grade level for literacy skills. In 2002, Student 3 missed the benchmark by 23 points, which would indicate the student has difficulty with skills related to literacy such as spelling and reading. However, by 2003, Student 3 fell short of the benchmark by 17 points. This student continues to perform below grade level when assessed on literacy skills.

Along with analyzing PALS scores, I also examined changes in reading levels for all my students (shown in the following Table).

Table 1 Student Reading Levels

Students	Identification	2nd Grade Reading Level	3rd Grade Reading Level
Student 1	ESL	2.2	2.2
Student 2	ESL	1.2	2.2
Student 3	ESL	1.2	2.2
Student 4	ESL	2.2	3.1
Student 5	ESL	2.2	3.1
Student 6	HILTB	2.2	2.2
Student 7	None	2.2	2.2
Student 8	HILTB	2.1	3.1
Student 9	None	2.2	3.2
Student 10	None	2.1	3.2

I was pleased to see that 70% of my students showed some progress in their reading level. However, the most exciting conclusion as a result of this action research was that 50%, or exactly half of my class, made a year's worth of progress in their reading level. For example, Student 10 went from reading level 2-1 to 3-1. A 2-1 reading level indicates the first half of second grade. By the end of third grade, the expected reading level for all students is 3-2. Students 9 and 10 are the only students to achieve this expectation. However, it is important to notice that Students 9 and 10 do not carry the ESL or HILT label.

The students carrying the ESL or HILT label also showed progress despite the fact that they did not end up reading at the 3-2 level. In fact, five out of seven ESL/HILT students showed at least a semester's worth of reading level progress. It is reasonable to assume these students are just moving at a slower pace compared to their peers because they are slower to acquire the necessary English vocabulary. I feel it is likely that in the next two to three years, these students have the potential to "catch up" to their peers and be reading on their expected grade level.

Reflections and Implications

I am excited about the results of this action research. By taking a closer look at my students' academic performance through PALS testing, I feel I have a deeper understanding of and a deeper appreciation for allowing assessment to guide my instruction. This experience has helped me recognize that achieving the "benchmark" should not always be the focus. What is more important, especially with my ESL/HILT

students is the progress that they have accomplished. To achieve a year's worth of growth in reading level makes me feel more confident in my teaching.

At the beginning of the project, I was overcome with emotions and motivation. I thought that I would be able to have all my students reading on grade level by the end of the year. Much of the motivation stemmed from being a first year teacher. Naturally, I was enthusiastic about my project and molding my students into excellent readers. As the year carried on, my reading groups were not moving as fast as I would have liked. On the other hand, the students were enjoying all the stories and they appeared to be more confident as I challenged them with more difficult text.

Overall, I think my action research was successful because I learned from my own teaching. Yet, there is always room for improvement. Throughout the year, I kept thinking that the students should have a way to keep a record of the new vocabulary words they are learning. For example, if I were going to repeat this project in the future, I would have the students create Word Banks for their own personal use. Every time they learned a new vocabulary word whether it was through Word Study, Wacky Word or Flip Flash Cards, a copy of the word and the definition would be stored in their Word Bank for future reference.

This research project has also taught me more about how to address the needs of my ESL/HILT students in the classroom. It is important to remember that ESL/HILT students need exposure to English vocabulary. In addition, vocabulary instruction is the most successful if presented using a variety of teaching strategies. My research also reminds teachers that ESL/HILT students' accomplishments should not always be directly compared to their native English-speaking peers. Instead, teachers should focus on the progress of their ESL/HILT students, not whether or not they have met expected benchmarks for their grade level.

References

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