

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

Laura Catherine Grisso

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of Requirements for the Degree
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this quantitative correlational research study was to test the threshold hypothesis as it applied to the performance of English language learner students on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT) in third grade reading and the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English language learners assessment, also known as the ACCESS for ELLs. The OCCT assesses student performance on third grade reading content and the ACCESS for ELLs assesses the English language proficiency levels in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This study specifically proposed to analyze the relationship between the ACCESS for ELLs reading proficiency level and the student performance on the OCCT third grade reading assessment. Additional analysis was proposed to determine if the relationship in student performance on the assessments was influenced by the number of years in which the student had been receiving English language development services. The participants in the study were third grade English language learner students enrolled in a large school district in Oklahoma for the 2014-2015 school year.

Keywords: English language learners, ACCESS for ELLs, Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests, literacy, retention, assessment, threshold hypothesis

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first to my amazing husband, Keith, who was a constant source of encouragement, accountability, and laughs as I pursued this goal. I would not have been able to achieve this dream without his partnership, support and effortless ability to care for our children, the house, and me while I hid away to write. I further dedicate this work to my children, Kalil, Kylee, and Kady, who were so patient and understanding when mom needed to work just a bit longer before I was able to join our family adventures. I am so blessed that I get to do life with my favorite people.

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A huge thank you to my family. To my Searcy family, thank you for the encouragement and reminding me that "your best will do just fine." To my Grisso family, thank you for the joy and the laughs along the way. I am blessed with an amazing family and I love you all so very much. To my children, Kalil, Kylee, and Kady, thank you for being my tribe, for your patience, your understanding, your flexibility and your love. Thank you for your laughs and hugs. I am so proud of all of you. To Keith, thank you for your encouragement and accountability. Thank you for being an incredible and dedicated partner. You are my love, you are my home, you are my favorite.

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List of Abbreviations

Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State for English Language

Learners (ACCESS for ELLs)

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)

Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)

Dual Language (DL)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

English Language Development (ELD)

English Language Learner (ELL)

English Language Proficiency (ELP)

English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA)

Limited English Proficient (LEP)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Oklahoma Alternative Assessment Program (OAAP)

Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT)

Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS)

Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA)

World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One examined the background of English language learners, standardized testing, and high-stakes outcomes that have significant impacts on the education of students. The problem was that currently in Oklahoma, English language learner students may be subject to grade level retention if they scored below the satisfactory level on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading in the third grade. These students also took the ACCESS for ELLs 2.0 English language proficiency test to assess the growth and proficiency level of their English language ability. This study examined the relationship between the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading. This information may be used to identify a more effective and equitable way to provide interventions for English language learners who are also identified as struggling readers on state standardized testing.

Background

As the population of students identified as English Language Learners (ELL) students has increased across the country, many states have implemented practices to ensure that all students, including English language learner students, are performing academically at levels that will ensure readiness and success as they prepare for continued learning experiences grounded in college and career readiness standards as they progress through school (Bornfreund, Cook, Lieberman, & Lowenberg, 2015). A primary focus of this achievement lens rests on the necessity of students' abilities to read at or above grade level, which is most commonly presented within the medium of the English language (Baker, Al Otaiba, Ortiz, Correa, & Cole, 2014). To ensure that students who did not have the necessary reading skills were not promoted

into the next grade level, many states have implemented policies and procedures regarding grade retention or promotion gates, based upon students' reading skills as measured by a standardized test in reading (Schwerdt & West, 2013). For English language learner students, those policies create a double-edged challenge of reading at grade level and reading content in the English language, or being penalized for their status as a Limited English Proficient (LEP) student.

In 2001, the Oklahoma legislature passed the Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA), which established procedures and interventions to support struggling readers beginning in kindergarten. In 2011, the Reading Sufficiency Act was amended to include a grade retention procedure for students who were not reading at grade-level by the third grade. Six exemptions were included in the amendment to address the needs of various, diverse learners, including students who were identified as English language learner students and students who received special education services. The exemption for students identified as English language learner students states that "English language learner students who have had less than two years of English Language Development services" may be exempted from the mandated retention in third grade if they receive a score below proficiency on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of Reading (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2015, p. 11).

In the fall of 2014, the Oklahoma legislature conducted an interim study to measure various impacts of the Reading Sufficiency Act amendments on students following the first year of mandated grade retention protocols. Within the study, the question regarding the impact on students on individual education plans (IEPs) or who participated in special education services was "what additional resources are needed to support special education students learning to read?" The question included in the study to review information on the impact of the grade retention amendment on English language learner students was "how can English language

learner students learn English faster?” The discrepancy of the two questions included in the interim study show a lack of understanding on the part of legislators drafting this high-stakes guidance on the process of second language acquisition, specifically the threshold hypothesis, as well as research-based instructional practices for educating English language learner students (Cummins, 1979).

Cummins’ (1979) threshold hypothesis established a threshold, or benchmark, at which English language learner students have attained a level of language proficiency in the target language at which they can successfully perform academic tasks using the target language. Below this threshold, students may be able to perform the academic task, but lack the language proficiency to perform the task successfully in the target language, let alone in the academic language of the target language (Cummins, 1979). Additionally, research has repeatedly shown that it takes seven to 10 years for English language learner students to reach that threshold needed to proficiently perform academic tasks in English (Fuhrman, Perry, & Shinn, 2013; Slama, 2014; Thomas & Collier, 1997). However, these research-supported theories were not addressed within the Reading Sufficiency Act legislation in regards to equitable impact on English language learner students in Oklahoma.

At the federal level, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 enacted similar achievement accountability policies for schools and districts across the country. Within NCLB, a specific component addressed the learning needs and achievement of English language learner students, Title III, Part A: English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act. A requirement of this section included the adoption and implementation of English language proficiency assessments by each state education agency (USDE, 2015). Oklahoma joined the World-class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium and

began using the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS), or ACCESS for English language learner students, test to assess students' English language proficiency. The ACCESS for English language learner students test was developed by researchers and test developers based upon literature and studies specific to the language acquisition process of English language learner students (WIDA, 2014c).

Despite the research and studies that detail the language acquisition process of English language learner students, Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act grade retention amendment was implemented with no consideration for the unique research-based needs of this population of students and their literacy skill development in a second language. This study proposed to analyze the correlational relationship of English language proficiency scores in reading and the scores from an academic reading performance assessment. The outcomes of the study provided insight on the appropriateness and effectiveness of high-stakes policies, such as Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act, on accurately assessing reading performance of students identified as English language learner students.

Problem Statement

Current research has confirmed that it is important for students to be proficient readers in order to continue learning academic content as they advance through grade levels (Allington, McCuiston, & Billen, 2015; Swanson et al., 2017). Various protocols and procedures have been implemented to ensure that students have the necessary literacy capacities to continue in their learning experience. However, additional research is needed to address factors that may present challenges to discrete groups of students, such as English language learner students, who are learning how to read in a new language (Tong, Irby, Lara-Alecio, & Koch, 2014). The extent of the correlation between English language proficiency in reading scores and academic

performance in reading in English was evaluated to determine the impact of limited English proficiency on academic performance in English. Therefore more research was needed to determine the relationship of the performance of English language learner students on various standardized assessments in light of the high-stakes outcomes and impacts on their educational careers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this quantitative correlational study was to determine the extent of the correlation between the ACCESS for English language learner students English language proficiency in reading and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading in English based upon the scores of third grade English language learner students. Variables that were examined included the predictor variable of English language proficiency was defined, for the purpose of this study, as the ability of a person to perform tasks using the English language. Often the level of language proficiency is ranked on a scale of no proficiency in English to near-native English language proficiency (WIDA, 2014a). The criterion variable of academic achievement was defined, for the purpose of this study, as the demonstration of academic knowledge on a standardized assessment. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established a benchmark of academic achievement requiring all students to take grade specific content based assessments in multiple content areas to ensure that all students were performing on par. This benchmark established the performance level of proficient based upon the performance expectations of English speakers, and was not differentiated for English language learners. Additionally, these required content assessments were administered in English in the vast majority of states, including Oklahoma (Menken, 2010). Further, the variables were analyzed within cohort years of English language development instructional services. The population sample for this study

was comprised of third grade English language learner students attending school in a large urban district in the state of Oklahoma.

Significance of the Study

During the implementation of the Reading Sufficiency Act and its amendments, there was the discussion of the impact on Oklahoma students and schools. There has been an ongoing discussion of the equity and accuracy of the impact of the grade retention protocol on the discrete class of students identified as English language learner students (Oklahoma House of Representatives, 2013; Oklahoma Senate, 2014). Per federal and state regulations, students who have a language other than English in the home are assessed for English language proficiency and, based upon the assessment outcomes, potentially identified as being Limited English Proficient. The Office of Civil Rights considers people possessing Limited English Proficiency to be of a discrete class and subject to potential discriminatory practices based on such status (Civil Rights Act, 1964). These students in Oklahoma, as well as English language learners across the country, are expected to perform academically and meet the rigorous demands of college and career readiness standards as well as perform satisfactorily on standardized testing (Hopewell & Escamilla, 2014).

In effect, Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency Act and its amendments may possibly be discriminatory in nature to students who are identified as English language learner students (Huddleston, 2014). Studies have shown the negative, long-term effects of grade retention on minority students, including English language learner students (Appleton, Burns, Jimerson, & Silbergliitt, 2006; Boulerice, McDuff, Pagani, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2001; Connell & Pierson, 1992; Hughes, West, & Wu, 2010; Martin, 2011; Westbury, 1994). Grade retention is most often perceived as a negative penalty for subpar performance. Students who are identified as

ELL, by definition, have limited English proficiency. The consideration included in the Reading Sufficiency Act provides an exemption for English language learner students with less than two years of English language development services, although research has shown that it requires in excess of seven years to achieve native English-speaker parity (Fuhrman et al., 2013; Reading Sufficiency Act, 2015; Slama, 2014).

The significance of this study was grounded in the examination of acquisition of English and the English language development process with the performance of students who have been identified as limited in English on academic performance standardized tests with high-stakes outcomes. Based upon potential trends in the correlation of scores on the two assessments, insights and information can be gleaned regarding the equitable practice of assessing reading skills in English of English language learner students who are developing proficiency in the English language. These findings should have significant impact on current or future legislation regarding the education of English language learner students, district and school services and interventions for English language learner students, and perceptions of principals and classroom teachers in gaining a stronger, research-based understanding of the intertwined relationship of English language acquisition and the demonstration of learned academic content.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between English language proficiency as measured by the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment and academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading for third grade English language learner students?

RQ2: Can the number of years in which an English language learner student has received English language development services predict academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading?

Definitions

1. *ACCESS for English language learner students* - Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State to State, is an assessment of English language proficiency developed by the WIDA Consortium. The ACCESS for English language learner students is administered to all English language learner students across Oklahoma and 36 other states annually (WIDA, 2014c).
2. *Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)* – Basic interpersonal communication skills refers to the level of language required in common, social situations. It is often said to be the everyday, or “playground,” language within educational contexts (Cummins, 1999).
3. *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)* – Cognitive academic language proficiency is the academic language required to perform grade-level instructional tasks at native speaker parity. This can include tasks that involve speaking, listening, reading, or writing and often requires performance at a higher level of academic skills including comparing, synthesizing, and evaluating (Cummins, 1999).
4. *Dual Language (DL)* – Dual language is an instructional format in which literacy and content instruction is presented to students in two languages to encourage the development of bilingualism, biliteracy, and bicultural skills (Howard, Sugarman, Christian, Lindholm-Leary, & Rogers, 2007).

5. *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* – The Elementary and Secondary Education Act is federal legislation which was originally enacted in 1965. It has been reauthorized multiple times at the federal level and most recently as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. As the current iteration of NCLB has continued beyond the standard reauthorization cycle, many have resorted to referring to the legislation once again as ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
6. *English Language Development (ELD)* – English language development is instruction that focuses on the explicit teaching and learning of the English language in a pre-kindergarten through 12th grade school setting (Saunders, Goldenburg, & Marcelletti, 2013).
7. *An English Language Learner (ELL)* – English language learner is a term that is applied to anyone who has limited English proficiency. In Oklahoma, a student in kindergarten through 12th grade is identified as an ELL if their ACCESS for English language learner students composite English language proficiency is below a 5.0 or literacy English language proficiency is below 4.5 (Bilingual and Migrant Education Office of Oklahoma, 2012).
8. *English Language Proficiency (ELP)* – English language proficiency is the ability of a person to perform tasks using the English language. The level of language proficiency is often described along a scaled range of levels beginning at a level of no proficiency and continuing to native English-speaker proficiency. Proficiency is used to apply to all domains of language including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (WIDA, 2014a).
9. *L1* – L1 is the first language one learns. Additional languages learned are numbered in sequence, *L2* as the second language, and *L3* as the third language (Krashen, 2003).

10. *Limited English Proficient (LEP)* – Limited English proficient is a term used to describe a person who is a non-native speaker of English and has a limited ability to speak, listen, read, or write using the English language (LEP.gov, n.d.).
11. *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* – No Child Left Behind is federal legislation enacted in 2001 which established and expanded a number of federal education programs, including Title III Part A, Limited English Proficient Students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
12. *Oklahoma Alternative Assessment Program (OAAP)* - The Oklahoma Alternative Assessment Program is the alternative standardized assessment of content areas in third through eighth grades, which is administered annually to students who have severe cognitive disabilities in lieu of the standardized assessment (Office of Special Education of Oklahoma, 2015).
13. The *Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests (OCCT)* – The Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests are a series of grade-level standardized assessments aligned to the state’s content area curriculum standards and are administered annually to measure student performance in third through eighth grades, and course-based levels in high school (Oklahoma School Testing Program, 2015).
14. *Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS)* - The Priority Academic Student Skills are the content area learning standards for students in grades pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in Oklahoma. The standards are in the process of revision. However, the OCCT tests administered in the spring of 2015 were based on PASS content standards (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2015).

15. The *Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA)* – The Reading Sufficiency Act is Oklahoma legislation that focuses on grade-level literacy of skills of students in grades kindergarten through third grade. In 2011, this legislation was amended to include a mandatory third grade retention policy based on grade-level literacy skills measured by the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading (Office of the Reading Sufficiency of Oklahoma, 2015).
16. *World-class Instruction Design and Assessment (WIDA)* – WIDA is a consortium of 36 states who have adopted the WIDA English Language Development Standards and the ACCESS for English language learner students English language proficiency assessment (WIDA, 2014b).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between English Language Proficiency (ELP) in the language domain of reading and the standards of performance on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT) of reading for English language learner students in the third grade as well as the impact of high-stakes outcomes based on achievement of English language learner students on standardized tests. In analyzing the complex relationship between learning to read, learning to read in a new language, and techniques for the assessment and effective support of these learners, one must first become familiar with the standards that guide the instruction and learning goals, the factors and learning needs the students bring to the learning experience, the process of learning to read in a new language, and the ways that the learning is assessed. This is all framed by the socio-cultural and political context in which the learning and assessment occurs. The following theoretical framework provides the foundational belief in how English language learners progress through this process of learning to read in a new language with conceptual resources to guide and support instruction and assessment along the way.

Theoretical Framework

Cummins (1979), a professor of language and literacy, developed the threshold hypothesis as an answer to the capacity of an English language learner to proficiently interact within the realm of cognitive academic language and demonstration of related academic skills in a second or new language. This hypothesis has served as a critical component in the theoretical understanding of how language proficiency and performance involving academic language

intersect, interact, and impact academic learning and demonstration of learned knowledge and skills in English for English language learner students.

Within the hypothesis are two embedded thresholds which have a unique impact on the academic language learning of English language learner students. The initial threshold for an English language learner is established at a lower level of bilingual competency in which the learner can interact and use the second language (L2) at a proficiency level that, while not fully proficient, negates any negative effects or language transference on the cognitive task (Cummins, 1979). This initial level of proficiency enables the English language learner to use the English language proficiently in completing tasks requiring common, standard, non-academic language, including linguistic concepts of language control, vocabulary, and linguistic complexity.

To discuss language proficiency, these components must be defined. Language control refers to the syntax or grammar used in the discourse. Vocabulary can range in complexity from simple, basic words to technical or even scientific terms. Linguistic complexity describes the amount and style of the language used. This can include concepts of how much language was produced as well as concepts of register, tone, and voice used in the language sample provided (WIDA, 2014a).

The higher threshold within the threshold hypothesis is believed to be necessary to support the English language learner's attainment of accelerated cognitive growth in that the combined bilingual competence possessed by the learner uses both languages to maximize cognitive academic language growth (Cummins, 1979). This means that the student accesses their knowledge in both languages to produce a combined, cumulative, comprehensive, and higher level of language capacity leading to greater academic understanding and application produced in the new language. This requires advanced linguistic skills and academic language

competencies within the linguistic components of language control, vocabulary, and linguistic complexity as described previously (WIDA, 2014b).

The foundation of the threshold hypothesis is grounded in the concepts of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Basic interpersonal communication skills is the concept describing social language that is used on a routine basis for common tasks and interactions. This also includes the basic language skills, word knowledge, phonological, syntactical and lexical components, which Chomsky (1965) stated are universal across native language speakers. However, basic interpersonal communication skills is not strongly related to cognitive or academic performance. Educators unfamiliar with basic interpersonal communication skills often mistake English language learners' use of these basic language structures for advanced language proficiency rather than social or playground language ability. In comparison, cognitive academic language proficiency refers to the dimension of language proficiency which is strongly related to literacy skills using academic language. Requiring a higher level of bilingual language performance, cognitive academic language proficiency is the type of language used in "decontextualized verbal-academic tasks" (Cummins, 1980, p. 86). This language use is advanced linguistic capacity that is often unique within a context or content area and, in some cases, cannot be extended or generalized across academic language areas.

It is important to note that researchers have used opposing terms to describe the similar act of production, application, and use of language. Cummins (1980) used the term competence to refer to this concept of language use. In contrast, MacSwan (2000) and Lechner and Siemund (2014) employed the term performance to refer to the same language production construct. The rationale in this change of term was based upon a perspective that the theories and concepts that

describe how dimensions of language and types of language interact and is applied represent a function of production or performance rather than knowledge or competence. In this research study, the term performance will be used to refer to the production and application of the dimensions of language and types of language.

The concepts of basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency are directly related to the two thresholds embedded in the structure of the threshold hypothesis. Basic interpersonal communication skills, the basic level of common language usage, is seen in the initial threshold. As stated previously, the initial threshold represents a level of limited performance in both languages, which does not significantly impact cognitive effects. Basic interpersonal communication skills is most often used in situations which are highly contextualized and require only limited cognitive performance. The second threshold requires the learner to have a higher level of bilingual language performance. This language proficiency performance is known as cognitive academic language proficiency. The use of cognitive academic language proficiency typically occurs in linguistic exchanges which are decontextualized, require some level of prior knowledge, and include a higher level academic language proficiencies (Cummins, 1979).

Cognitive academic language proficiency also can address the benefits of language-specific skill transfer across languages. If a learner has attained a high level of cognitive academic language proficiency in their dominant language, but possesses low language proficiency in English, it is possible that the language-specific skill or concept can still transfer, thereby enabling the learner to understand and interact within a familiar academic concept in a language reduced environment. This is also known as the interdependence hypothesis. It is important to note that this transferability of language-specific skills across languages is reliant

upon additional factors including student motivation, affective or emotional state, and level of prior experience with the content and learning setting (Cummins, 1980). This means that students with adequate development of their dominant language can effectively and strategically apply that knowledge to enable them to decipher the same concept framed within the new or target language.

In applying the threshold hypothesis to concept of language performance in the second language, as defined by the concepts of basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency, it is critical to understand that the hypothesis identifies a bridge or performance-based concept which explicitly impacts educational performance and attainment. The differentiation between educational or academic attainment and language proficiency is critical to ensure valid and accurate assessment outcomes when working with English language learners who, by definition, are limited English proficient and in the process of developing the language proficiencies required at each level of the respective thresholds (Cummins, 1979, 1980).

The threshold hypothesis, when applied to the academic performance of second language (L2) or new language learners, has been shown consistent and supportive in the assessment of English literacy when the learner has a high level of literacy attainment in their dominant language. Similarly, learners with low literacy attainment in their dominant language were only able to achieve comparatively low literacy tasks in English as well (Lechner & Siemund, 2014). This, in turn, also supports the interdependence hypothesis, of the transferability of language-specific skills when the learner possesses a high level of achievement in their dominant language. These theories, in tandem, underscore the impact of English language proficiency on the capacity to demonstrate academic learning and knowledge on performance assessments.

While the threshold hypothesis provides a substantive foundation to address the levels and types of second language performance, MacSwan (2000) highlighted that it also falls short in addressing the additional and complicating factor of socio-economic status (SES). Regardless of the first language, or L1, and second language performance on the part of English language learners, socio-economic status remains a constant and predictable variable, which in some studies has been shown to play a larger role in academic language performance (MacSwan, 2000).

Another potential challenge to the threshold hypothesis is based on a recent study in which preschool-age English language learners outperformed their monolingual peers on measures of beginning literacy skills including symbolic representation, attention control, and basic problem solving challenges. These results highlighted the concept of bilingual advantage rather than biliteracy skills as a potential lever within the threshold hypothesis (Ardasheva, Tretter, & Kinny, 2012). This means that knowledge of more than one language may have a greater positive impact on student academic performance than literacy skills in more than one language.

The threshold hypothesis provides a solid foundation of understanding the language performance levers and interdependence of first language and second language proficiency levels as well as the various types of language proficiency dependent upon task and context. This theoretical framework will be used in this study to examine the relationship between the performance of third grade English language learners on the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading. The framework gives the research-based understanding needed to determine the efficacy of the performance benchmarks and policy in practice when analyzing the performance of English

language learners on these standardized tests and the related high stakes outcomes that are applied based upon these test results.

Related Literature

English Language Learners

Students identified as English language learners are filling an increasing number of seats in classrooms across the United States in all grade levels. In 2004, there were an estimated 4.3 million students in public schools identified as English language learners. By 2014 that number had increased to an estimated 4.6 million students (NCES, n.d.).

Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), formerly the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, defines English language learner students, also referred to as Limited English Proficient students as a student who is:

- (a) age 3 through 21;
 - (b) who is enrolled or preparing to enroll in an elementary school or secondary school;
 - (c) (i) who was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English;
 - (ii) (I) who is a Native American or Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas; and
 - (II) who comes from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the individual's level of English language proficiency;
 - (iii) who is migratory, whose native language is a language other than English, and who comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant;
- and

(d) whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language may be sufficient to deny the individual

(i) the ability to meet the state's proficient level of achievement on state assessments described in section 1111(b)(3);

(ii) the ability to successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English; or

(iii) the opportunity to participate fully in society. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 43)

English language learners in Oklahoma. The student populations of English language learners is increasing across the state of Oklahoma. In 2004, 33,508 English language learner students were served in public school districts in Oklahoma (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2014). The latest data shows that in 2012, that number had increased by over 10,000 students for a total of 43,657 English language learners in public schools in Oklahoma (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2014). The primary languages spoken by English language learners in Oklahoma are Spanish, Cherokee, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Chinese (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017).

The state of Oklahoma follows federal guidance and legislation in serving English language learner students as there is no state-specific legislation or guidance. The office of federal programs at the Oklahoma State Department of Education provides oversight and technical assistance to schools and school districts under the federal guidance of Title III of the Every Student Succeeds Act (United States Department of Education, 2015).

The state of Oklahoma uses the instructional models as identified by the United States Department of Education for English language development services. Those models for serving English Language Learners in Oklahoma are:

- (a) *Dual language or two-way immersion* are programs which serve English proficient speakers and English language learners in the same classroom in which the students receive content area and language instruction in both English and the primary language of the English language learners.
- (b) *Transitional bilingual program* uses the primary language of the English language learners in instruction while they acquire English until the students attain a level of proficiency in which they will be successful in English instruction only.
- (c) *Developmental bilingual program* uses the students' primary language as the mode for grade level content area instruction.
- (d) *Heritage language instruction* uses the students' language background as the primary language of instruction in order to renew or reclaim that language. This program may also include instruction in and through English.
- (e) *Sheltered English instruction* programs provide instruction in English that is adapted to the students' English language proficiency level through the use of modified curriculum-based content.
- (f) *Sheltered English immersion* programs in which English language development teachers provide linguistic and academic support to English language learners in the general education classroom through a co-teaching model.
- (g) *Content-based English as a second language* in which scaffolded English language development is taught through content area instruction.

(h) *Pull-out English as a second language* programs remove English language learners from general education classes to pre-teach, teach or re-teach English language skills and/or academic content covered by the general education classroom teacher. (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017)

Language Acquisition

When assessing English language learner students on standardized academic tests of content knowledge in English, it is critical to understand the process of language acquisition, dimensions of language required to perform various tasks within multiple contexts, and related factors impacting language acquisition. Acknowledging a research-based, established timeline for the process of language acquisition and learning is also an important factor within the assessment conversation. When the timeline is augmented with challenges such as the technical level of academic content language, language control, linguistic complexity, age of the English language learner, and type of English language development instruction provided, the timeline can become even more complex and individualized.

Thomas and Collier (1997) demonstrated that depending on the age of arrival and dominant language proficiency, the length of time required for learners to acquire English proficiently ranged from seven to 10 years. Specifically, their earlier research showed that three fundamental factors impacted the time required to attain English language proficiency (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Students between eight and 11 years old who had two to three years of dominant language education took five to seven years to master English. The level of prior education revealed that students with little to no formal education who arrived before the age of eight years old took seven to 10 years to reach grade level norms in English literacy. Finally, the level of literacy in the dominant language played a role in that students who performed below

grade level in literacy in their dominant language took seven to 10 years to reach the 50th percentile with many of these students never achieved grade level norms in English achievement (Thomas and Collier, 1997).

Similar research in school districts in California showed that oral language proficiency in English demonstrated through basic interpersonal communication skills was achieved in three to five years of structured English language development instruction. However, the academic English language proficiency required to perform tasks requiring cognitive academic language proficiency-level proficiency took English language learner students seven years of instruction to attain proficiency (Hakuta Goto Butler & Witt, 2000). Research by Thomas and Collier (1997) and Hakuta et al., (2000) indicated that English language learner students required a minimum of seven years of English language development instruction to attain the level of academic language proficiency in English required to perform at academically acceptable standards.

English language learner students have also shown varying levels of content area achievement assessed in English when factors including age of arrival and length of residence in the United States were included in the analysis. Fourth grade English language learners who arrived at the age of eight years old demonstrated high levels of achievement in math after one to two years in schools in the United States. However, that achievement quickly dissipated as they progressed in grade levels and the demands of the academic language of math proportionately increased annually. Those same students showed the lowest level of achievement in reading during that same time period. The same peak and decrease evidenced by the math achievement was also seen in reading with the achievement never reaching the 50th percentile (Collier, 1987).

In contrast, fourth grade English language learners who arrived at the age of five years old with four to five years in schools in the United States demonstrated lower levels of

achievement in social studies and science than in reading with math remaining at the higher level of achievement. Similar patterns of performance were also evidenced in the achievement data of sixth, eighth, and 11th grade English language learners (Collier, 1987).

Fry (2007) found similar trends in an examination of the National Achievement of Educational Progress assessments. Specifically, he highlighted the widening of the achievement gap of English language learner students between grades four and eight on both the math and reading assessments. In fourth grade math, English language learner students were performing at 35 points below their native English speaking peers. By eighth grade, that gap had widened to show that English language learner students were performing 50 points below their native English speaking peers. He determined that as higher achieving English language learners attained English language proficiency and were removed from the identified subgroup, they were replaced by recently arrived immigrants who had little to no English language proficiency levels.

In general, for all grades studied, math showed the highest level of achievement, followed by language arts, science, social studies, and reading, respectively. It is important to note that science and social studies alternate in achievement levels based on the age of arrival and length of residence, but that with few exceptions, reading achievement is constant at the lowest level of achievement for these students (Collier, 1987). The achievement data of these students, when analyzed by age of arrival and length of residence, support Cummins's (1979) threshold hypothesis in that students with a minimum of two years of instruction in the dominant language, L1, were able to successfully employ their language and academic knowledge to achieve higher levels of academic performance in English.

Additionally, a critical aspect of the timeline required to acquire English proficiently must also acknowledge that both common and academic languages are dynamic in nature and not

static upon students beginning the process of language acquisition. This means that the demands by level of language proficiency proportionately increase as students make progress through grade levels and academic content. This is true for both native English speakers and English language learner students. However, this magnifies the challenge which English language learner students face to not only acquire the language needed to approach the proficiency level of their native English-speaking peers but to also maintain the growth and momentum to decrease that achievement gap as grade levels and academic content require advancing depths of language proficiency.

Reading in a second language (L2). The interdependence theory established that English language learner students employ knowledge, skills, and language understandings from their first language, L1, as they begin to acquire literacy skills and learn to read in the second language. Due to the interrelated nature of this process, it is critical that educators understand how to effectively and successfully teach English language learner students how to read in English. Learning to read in the first language does not follow the same process and procedures as learning to read in the second language (Klingner, Artiles, & Mendez Barletta, 2006; Krashen, 1981). Moreover, the proficient use of literacy skills by an English language learner does not imply that the student possesses the transformational understanding to apply the skill as a metacognitive strategy within their personal reading processes (Krashen, 1981).

In fact, English language learner students often struggle to correctly and consistently apply cognitive strategies to aide and assist their comprehension and understanding of text throughout their reading (Fitzgerald, 1995a; Klingner et al., 2006). Not only would English language learner students benefit from strategic instruction in metacognitive literacy strategies,

they also require literacy instruction that strategically maximizes their first language literacy proficiencies to benefit from transference of existing literacy skills and conceptual knowledge.

Moreover, the threshold hypothesis, which states that English language learner students need to reach a minimum threshold of language performance in the second language in order to maximize first language skills and knowledge in the second language, is evidenced clearly in the research on the reading performance of English language learner students. A critical finding of this process is that in the early stages of the second language reading instruction, English language learner students are reading to learn the language rather than to comprehend the text (Lee & Schallert, 1997). This process can occur at any grade level. It is dependent upon the grade and age at which an English language learner begins to increase their reading proficiency in English. Therefore, the academic achievement gap widens as the urgent need of English language learner students is to acquire English language proficiency in order to more effectively engaging in academic content learning presented in English.

Academic language. As highlighted in the review of research concerning the time to acquire a new language and the factors involved in learning to read in a new language, the role of academic language plays a critical but challenging role in both issues. Cummins's (1979) concept of cognitive academic language proficiency, also referred to as CALP, presents a large hurdle for many English language learner students as they strive to continue their English language development process. Academic language can be defined as the technical and advanced language of learning. This includes multiple linguistic aspects such as language control, or syntax, vocabulary, or semantics, linguistic complexity, and conceptual understandings (WIDA, 2014a).

Academic language is manifested in all language domains, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In addition to the linguistic and cognitive features identified, there is an additional contextual layer of sociocultural and psychological dimensions that play a role in proficiently understanding and applying academic language (Scarcella, 2003). This means that possessing proficient understanding and language performance involves learning to an extremely deep level of all of the various factors that impact the meaning of a single word framed by rich meaningful language.

An example of the socio-cultural dimension of language on a simplistic level is the concept of time. Time is either polychronic or monochronic. Polychronic implies a flexibility in the concept of time. Monochronic expects the time to be respected as stated. English functions on a monochronic framework; whereas, most other languages and countries function on polychronic time which is based on a socio-cultural understanding. If a given invitation distributed in English in the United States or the United Kingdom says the event starts at 6:00 PM, then it is understood that the event commences at 6:00 PM and the invitee is expected to be there at that time (The LanguagePoint, 2015).

However, if the same invitation were distributed in the language spoken in another country, with the same start time of 6:00 PM, the event may start sometime around 6:00 PM and attendees may show up sometime around 6:00 PM. In some cases, attendees may not show up at the event until closer to 8:00 PM. This extreme variation in the understanding of the starting time of the event would still be acceptable within a polychronic socio-cultural framework. In both cases the language communicates the same facts regarding the start time. Their respective meanings are implied and understood within the socio-cultural framework of the language (The LanguagePoint, 2015).

While the example given above is a simplified version of how socio-cultural dimension impact language, it presents a valid concern within the concept of academic language that is implied and understood within varying socio-cultural frameworks. Such variance can also be observed within a single language, but impacted by various socio-cultural understandings driven by regional, geographical, or other sociological factors. This underscores the need for intentional and developmentally appropriate academic language to be taught to English language learner students in a manner that encompasses all of the factors, visible and invisible, of language.

English Language Learners in the Classroom

English language learner students come from a variety of language, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds. These factors, in addition to age, learning styles, language distance, language attitudes, and acculturation status, can all provide roadblocks and challenges for educators in ensuring effective instruction and support to promote the development of language proficiency and academic achievement. Grant and Wong (2003) highlighted external factors that also impacted the planning and provision of effective English language development instruction to support language and literacy development, such as political English-only movements, limited resources and personnel within English language development instruction, and divergent perspectives on the most effective pedagogy for English language learners. However, within this heightened focus on instruction and achievement, universities, educators, advocates, and researchers are beginning to align on consistent and effective pedagogy to concentrate the focus on literacy development and language development in order to provide effective instruction to this growing population of English language learner students sitting in classrooms across the United States (Grant & Wong, 2003).

Effective instructional practice. A proficient reader in a second language or new language uses a variety of strategies to build literacy comprehension and read efficiently and successfully in the target language. The literacy strategies that English language learners use in their first language are not necessarily the same as the ones used in their second language or new language (Pritchard & O'Hara, 2008). In fact, the more proficient an English language learner becomes in reading, the more the literacy strategies applied resemble that of a proficient reader reading in their first language (Fitzgerald, 1995b). August and Shanahan (2008) found that “strategies of various types are unlikely to help students who have not developed the requisite language proficiency to comprehend the text” (p. 202). This research supports the concept that English language learners must attain a set level of language proficiency in English in order to support their continued language and literacy development as described in Cummin’s (1979) threshold hypothesis.

Lems, Miller, and Soro (2010) suggested that there are strategies that support effective English literacy skill development for English language learners which are specifically divided into categories focusing on word learning, phrases and sentences, and paragraphs and discourse. At the word learning level, the instructional focus centers on pre-teaching, or frontloading, of vocabulary which builds oral and sight familiarity to support the English language learner as they encounter the new vocabulary within the text. Other strategies that support word learning include creating a word bank reference tool, such as a word ring or word walls. Finally, there is an emphasis on repetition both orally, within text, and within context to support the development of comprehension and understanding. Connecting the word learning to background knowledge and active learning experiences further build the familiarity and understanding of new vocabulary for English language learners (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009).

Reading at the phrase and sentence level require not only understanding at the semantic level but also at the syntactic level. Punctuation, signal words, transitions, and connectors are very useful and intentional strategies to support English language learners in building comprehension and understanding of the text they are reading (Lems et al., 2010). This focus supports not only the development of comprehension skills, but also that of reading fluency which is required in effective literacy practice. Linan-Thompson and Vaughn (2007) stated that silent reading in an independent text is a valuable method for students to apply and practice this skill. Inferencing supports comprehension development at the phrase and sentence level, and can be enhanced for English language learners when explicitly included in interactive dialogue and conversation during reading (Lems et al., 2010).

The paragraph and discourse level is where English language learners make connections and apply the comprehension built from words, phrases, and sentences to develop the overall idea and understanding of the message of the text. Previewing the body of the text, leveraging the visuals and graphs included in the text, and graphic organizers play important roles in supporting English language learners reading at this level. At this level, a variety of unique words and phrasal ideas and inferences are connected to form a complete idea or story from the text (Lems et al., 2010). Higher level literacy skills, such as recognizing the author's purpose, distinguishing fact and opinion, drawing conclusions, and creating new learning or understanding from multiple texts, occurs at this level and is a vital skill for English language learners to support their continued academic learning through literacy (Linan-Thompson & Vaughn, 2007).

Lems et al. (2010) emphasized the development of metacognition as a simultaneous skill that English language learners must use and apply as they develop the aforementioned literacy

skills. Metacognitive strategies support English language learners in monitoring their understanding as they read. Through monitoring use of literacy strategies and comprehension, English language learners are empowered to take an active role in developing their active reading comprehension and learning.

Assessment techniques. Assessment of the literacy skills of an English language learner student can be very challenging due to the interdependence of literacy and language proficiency. Cloud et al. (2009) highlighted different considerations that need to be applied to effectively assess the literacy skills of English language learners in the classroom and on high stakes assessments. For classroom-based assessments, the content should be familiar to students, and within their range of cognitive development in order to provide fair and appropriate information. When assessing expressive skills that involve language and literacy, it is important to use close-ended responses and limited-response formats. Close-ended responses lower the requirement of expressive skills while providing the opportunity for English language learners to demonstrate their comprehension skills and understanding. Limited-response formats include a selection of pictures or free drawing that also support demonstration of comprehension when language skills may prove challenging to an open or expressive response.

It is also important to use assessment language appropriate for the English language proficiency level of the English language learner or permit native language responses. Both of these classroom-based assessment techniques permit the English language learner to demonstrate content knowledge and understanding without limiting or minimizing responses due to lower English language proficiency (Cloud et al., 2009).

Compared to classroom-based assessments which can be appropriately customized, English language learners face a number of challenges within standardized tests. These include

various levels of English language proficiency across language domains (speaking, listening, reading, writing, comprehension), different levels and quality of previous educational experiences, various cultural backgrounds and influences, and varying overlap of content education in their first language and in English (Cloud et al., 2009). Coltrane (2002) stated that “the vast majority of high-stakes tests are written and administered only in English, often leaving English language learners at a disadvantage and raising questions as to how the test results should be interpreted” (p. 3). Therefore, it is critical to minimize the influence of these factors on standardized tests in order to achieve a true level of content area achievement of English language learners.

Test accommodations on standardized tests should be designed to individually correspond to English language learners’ needs including English language proficiency, previous educational experience, and cultural distance between their home culture and mainstream culture (Kopriva, Emick, Hipolito-Delgado, & Cameron, 2007). Additionally, the language of the assessment should be adjusted so that it does not interfere with an English language learner’s opportunity to demonstrate what they do know (Wolf, Herman, Bachman, Bailey, & Griffin, 2008). It is important to note that not all English language learners possess the necessary academic language proficiency required to demonstrate their content area knowledge on a standardized assessment administered in their first language.

Therefore, Short and Fitzsimmons (2007) highlighted multiple methods that can be applied within standardized testing to reduce language interference and support English language learners in demonstrating their content area knowledge and ability. Some of the accommodations include recommendations to: (a) replace low-frequency words with common words, (b) replace culturally-biased words and contexts with culturally neutral words, (c) use familiar contexts and

settings, (d) repeat nouns, (e) avoid indefinite pronouns and synonyms, (f) make presentation more concrete and personal, (g) remove unnecessary expository material, (h) replace conditional clauses with separate sentences, (i) replace verbs in the passive voice with verbs in the active voice, (j) reduce the number of words in a sentence or separate long sentence into shorter ones, (k) use bulleted lists instead of paragraphs, (l) reduce number of modifiers in a noun phrase, (m) replace complex question phrases with simple question words, (n) remove or recast relative clauses, (o) rephrase negatives in a positive form, and (p) rephrase sentences that can confuse the order of math operations to eliminate reversal errors.

These structures in both classroom-based and standardized test formats work best when tailored to meet the individual needs of English language learners. These structures should be applied on a regular basis in instruction and assessment and adapted as English language learners demonstrate success or challenge in appropriately demonstrating what they know on the assessment.

Academic Standards

The concept of standards for learning has been around for centuries. Greek and Latin scholars established curricula for learning and study. In the 1800s, colleges and universities in the United States based their focus of learning on similar readings from the Greek and Latin scholars. As the population of scholars began to increase and the concept of public education expanded, colleges and universities identified entrance standards which new students must satisfy in order to be accepted into the school (Rury, 2002). This created a domino effect and was shortly followed by the National Educational Association creating high school academic standards for instruction to support the instructional alignment and student preparation for the new college admissions standards (Kleibard, 1982).

Access and inclusion increased dramatically for all students in public schools during this time. By the late twentieth century, both the College Board and the National Commission on Excellence in Education released concerning reports regarding the state of student performance and preparation across the country (Goldberg & Harvey, 1983). This concern, aligned with the birth of standardized testing, fostered alarm for the learning outcomes, student performance, and college preparation of students in public schools. This focus has evolved into a highly politicized topic that has brought tight scrutiny to academic standards and preparation of students based on the outcomes of standardized testing (McDonnell, 2012; Parkison, 2009).

Oklahoma academic standards. The state-approved content area standards in Oklahoma from 1993 to 2014 were known as the Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS). This series of content area focused instructional standards covered areas including: (a) language arts; (b) mathematics; (c) health, safety, and physical development; (d) science; (e) social and personal skills; (f) motor skills and lifetime activity development; (g) the arts; (h) world languages; (i) personal financial literacy; (j) information literacy; (k) instructional technology; (l) technology education; and (m) social studies (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017).

The Priority Academic Student Skills were originally adopted in 1993, first revised in 1997, and then again in 2003. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were approved by the state legislature with expectations for instructional implementation in the 2010-2011 school year. However, in 2014 the Oklahoma state legislature repealed the Common Core State Standards and passed legislation that instructional standards would revert back to the Priority Academic Student Skills previously implemented until 2016. The two-year time period was designed to allow the State Department of Education adequate time to research, draft, and present a set of instructional

standards to the state legislature which were to be “solely approved and controlled by the board <State Board of Education>” (Thomsen, 2014, p. 14).

The state department, through the use of working committees comprised of educators and educational specialists statewide, drafted a new set of instructional standards, the Oklahoma Academic Standards. These standards were approved by the Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education in 2015 as college and career ready, and later approved and adopted by the state legislature (Thomsen, 2014). These new instructional standards were implemented by school districts statewide during the 2016-2017 school year.

WIDA English language development standards. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 required that states adopt English Language Development standards to support the increasing student population of English language learners in schools across the country. The assessment had to be aligned to the content area assessment adopted by the State Department of Education and assess English language learners on an annual basis in the language modalities of listening, speaking, reading, writing, comprehension, and provide an overall composite proficiency level score (United States Department of Education, 2015).

In 2006, the Oklahoma State Department of Education selected to join the WIDA consortium and adopt the WIDA English language development standards and implement the related English language proficiency assessments. The WIDA consortium was originally created through the United States Department of Education Enhanced Education Grant in 2003. The original member states were Wisconsin, Illinois, Delaware, and Arkansas; however, Arkansas later withdrew. WIDA currently stands for World-class Instructional Design and Assessment. (WIDA, 2017). However, the consortium has recently adopted WIDA as the commonly used and referred to name of the organization.

WIDA's framework for language development includes five English language development standards:

- (1) English language learners communicate for social and instructional purposes with the school setting
- (2) English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts
- (3) English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Mathematics
- (4) English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Science
- (5) English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Social Studies. (WIDA, 2017, p. 4)

The five standards encompass all content concepts of language from basic language used in social and informal settings, similar to the concept of basic interpersonal communication skills, to language required to be successful in academic literacy and content areas, similar to cognitive academic language proficiency. The core language development framework of WIDA surrounds these standards along with performance definitions which provide details and descriptors related to the type of language use designated by proficiency levels on a scale of 1.0, with little to no English language skills, to 6.0, native English parity (WIDA, 2012).

The performance definitions are further extrapolated into three types of language use, which are then defined at each proficiency level with descriptors and exemplars of the English language capacity required. The types of language include considerations of linguistic complexity, language forms and conventions, and vocabulary usage. Linguistic complexity refers

to the discourse or quantity and variety of oral and written text that the student is able to produce. The language forms and conventions address the types, ways of usage, and application of language structures in a grammatical sense. The vocabulary usage examines the choice of words or phrases used (WIDA, 2012). These performance definitions provide the descriptor level data of the various proficiency levels and their respective level of English language use. Individually, these proficiency levels provide the ordered scaffold to support Cummin's (1979) threshold hypothesis, as they lead to increased levels of academic language proficiency use in the English language.

The standards, performance definitions including proficiency levels and types of language, comprise the core of the WIDA framework of English language development. This core is then surrounded further by a structure of expectations of age-appropriate academic language in sociocultural contexts as well as WIDA's *can do* philosophy. Both of these supports provide exemplars of language across academic areas but framed by grade-level content area language type and use in all domains, speaking, listening, reading, and writing (WIDA, 2012).

Standardized Achievement Tests

Within the increased accountability focus, brought by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), all educational stakeholders must acknowledge and understand the unique assessment needs of English language learners in order to develop valid and reliable achievement assessment measures that accurately assess content knowledge without the impact of the students' potential limited English proficiency status. Tests that are developed to assess the content knowledge of native English speakers are not valid and reliable assessments to gain achievement data of English language learners, due to their lack of or limited English language

proficiency which affects their academic achievement performance when the test is administered in English (Lopez, 2004; Tsang, Katz, & Stack, 2008).

In addition to language proficiency, and similar to the underlying features of academic language, socio-cultural features of language present an additional factor that must be addressed in assessment design (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011). These factors present a linguistic bias that is detrimental to accurately assessing the academic performance of English language learner students when the assessment is presented in the second language.

Accountability frameworks and achievement data should be gathered to ensure that English language learner students are gaining English language proficiency and academic content knowledge and skills simultaneously. Those assessments, however, must consider the English language proficiency of English language learner students and employ multiple measures in order to accurately determine the achievement level of these students (Tsang et al., 2008).

Considering the increasing number of policies and legislation tied to the achievement outcomes of students on standardized achievement testing, stakeholders must also ensure that high-stakes decisions, such as graduation or grade retention, are not based on a single point of achievement data as that is not always an accurate measure, specifically in regards to English language learner students (Lopez, 2004).

While guidance is included on standardized assessments in regards to testing accommodations for English language learners in an attempt to address the equity concerns for these students, multiple studies have shown that the standard and common allowable accommodations are not effective enough to accurately assess content knowledge while

supporting limited English language proficiency (Abedi, Huie Hofstetter, & Lord, 2004; Acosta, Rivera, & Shafer Willner, 2008; Shafer Willner, Rivera, & Acosta, 2008).

Assessments presented in one's native language are also problematic as valid measures. If the assessment measure was designed for native English speakers, a translated test may not adequately account for accurate translations of words or concepts. For example, if the math question asked what action would be taken on a shape to create the symmetrical shape, or a mirrored image, and the answer options given were flip, rotate, turn, and slide, this would be problematic in a Spanish language translation. While flip and rotate are two unique terms in English, they are the same represented by a single word in Spanish. In this example, the translation of the test would require unique options for each word choice, but due to the single word option in Spanish, this would present a problematic challenge in translation. Another challenge to providing the assessment measure in the native language is that if the language of instruction which the students have received is in English, the translated test assumes a level of native language proficiency in an academic content area (Solano-Flores & Li, 2008). This also presents an issue of equity within the assessment framework.

English language proficiency assessments. Over the past decade, legislation has been implemented that brought a strategic focus within English language proficiency assessments. While English language proficiency assessments were used in previous decades to identify and monitor students who were identified as English language learners, it was not until the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, now referred to as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2015), that these assessments began to refine and deepen the understanding and English language data available regarding a student's English language development process. Currently, Oklahoma and 36 other states are members of the WIDA Consortium which developed and

implemented the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency assessment for English language learner students in partnership with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL).

The ACCESS for ELLs assessment measures the English language proficiency of English language learner students across four language domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Additional scores are provided for comprehension, oral proficiency, and literacy. The test framework is built on a scale of six language proficiency levels: entering (1.0), beginning (2.0), developing (3.0), expanding (4.0), bridging (5.0), and reaching (6.0). The proficiency levels are further explained by performance definitions that identify the language features found in both receptive language, listening and reading, and expressive language, speaking and writing. The development of the assessment included a study of content standards nationwide. General content concepts and related academic language were identified by content area and grade level.

These language features, vocabulary, and content specific academic language are integrated in the assessment to measure not only the language proficiency, but also the academic language proficiency of English language learner students across language domains and within the English Language Development standards of social and instructional language, language of language arts, language of math, language of science, and language of social studies (WIDA, 2014a). This comprehensive linguistic and academic language framework was strategically designed to ensure that students' language proficiency was assessed at both the initial threshold, or basic interpersonal communication skills level, of language as well as the advanced, or cognitive academic language proficiency level, of language to ensure adequate proficiency to support academic achievement and performance of the learner.

Retention as an Intervention

As the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 brought a spotlight onto high-stakes accountability and improvement in public education, an immediate and reflex need to identify quick and effective interventions for struggling learners boomed overnight. Under this lens of accountability, achievement gaps between various student subgroups gained attention and interventions for low performing students quickly became a focus of practice and policy. While the use of grade retention as an academic intervention tool had fallen from popularity, the age of accountability brought it back to widespread use as best practice and, in many cases, legislated policy (Appleton et al., 2006).

One of the areas of in which grade retention has been believed to be of positive impact was that of academic performance. Many states and school districts have enacted grade level performance assessments in which students who are not able to meet specified standards are retained in the current grade level. These grade level retention performance measures are also known as performance gates (Nagaoka & Roderick, 2005). The common belief is that if students are allowed additional time in academic content in which they are struggling to perform at acceptable levels, they will learn the material and perform at the expected level in the repeated grade year.

Multiple studies have proposed examining the academic performance of struggling learners following the second year in a repeated grade level. These studies have consistently shown that there were no significant academic gains for these students in the repeated year (Appleton et al., 2006; Connell & Pierson, 1992; Hughes, Moser, & West, 2012). Additionally, in a study of first through eighth grade students who were both retained and promoted based on a

literacy performance assessment, Appleton et al. (2006) found no significant gains for students who were promoted to the next grade when compared to students who were retained in grade.

In Hughes et al.'s (2012) study of first grade students retained in grade, retained students showed an immediate increase in academic achievement in the second year of the same grade level. However, that noted increase in academic achievement dissipated over the following three years as students continued to progress through elementary school. In a related study, when the impact on academic achievement of English language learners who were retained in grade was considered, no significant long-term literacy gains in academic achievement were determined when students were assessed in their dominant language, either English or Spanish (Hughes et al., 2012). This aligns with the threshold hypothesis in relation to the necessary level of English language proficiency as well as considerations of the language development of basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency and their respective interplay in effective demonstration of academic achievement in English.

In addition to the academic achievement factors that have been highlighted as a focus of the use of retention as an intervention, another factor that must be considered is that of social impact to the students. Social impact tied to grade retention includes decreased student efficacy, high absenteeism, poor motivation, increased anxiety, and lack of engagement as related outcomes (Boulerice et al., 2001; Connell & Peirson, 1992; Gleason, Hughes, & Kowk, 2007; Hughes et al., 2010; Martin, 2011;). The long-term impacts as described can lead to devastating impacts for student achievement that have a larger impact on the community and schools.

Many states and school districts have analyzed the long-term outcomes of grade retention and promotion gates. In light of their findings, many have moved to reverse the legislation, policies, and guidance in favor of more effective interventions and outcomes for struggling

learners. In 1999, the state of Texas passed legislation implementing promotion gates at grades three, five, and eight, aligned to prescribe performance on a high-stakes achievement test. The longitudinal study commissioned by the state legislature showed that the local education agencies with the highest number of students impacted by the promotion gates served diverse student populations comprised of more 40% minority student populations. This disparate impact of promotion gates on minority student subgroups, in addition to the long-term negative impact on social factors for retained students, caused the state of Texas to repeal the retention legislation in 2004 (Anagnostopoulos, Bali, & Roberts, 2005). The findings of the legislation study demonstrated the ineffectiveness of grade level retention as an intervention in addition to the issues of equity and appropriateness within a civil rights lens.

Reading Sufficiency Act

The Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA) was originally adopted into legislation in Oklahoma in 2001. The intent of the legislation was to establish a protocol for students who demonstrated a level of literacy skills that was identified as at-risk for future and continued success in academic learning. The primary activities implemented due to the initial legislation included early assessment, progress monitoring of skill development, and intervention strategies as needed (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2016).

In 2011, the original Reading Sufficiency Act legislation was amended to include a requirement that if students in the third grade did not achieve a minimum score on the state content assessment in reading or meet one of six exemptions, the student would be retained in the third grade. The amended legislation went into effect in the spring of 2014. Due to concerns raised across the state, the legislature added an additional option and exemption, in addition to the established exemptions, that would allow a school based committee to determine if the

student should be probationary promoted to fourth grade rather than repeat the third grade in the following school year. The probationary promotion included additional stipulations such as continued progress monitoring, interventions, and committee review on future promotion or retention considerations (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2016).

The six exemptions included in the Reading Sufficiency Act are:

- (1) Limited-English-proficient students who have had less than two (2) years of instruction in an English language learner program;
- (2) Students with disabilities whose individualized education program (IEP), consistent with state law, indicates that the student is to be assessed with alternate achievement standards through the Oklahoma Alternate Assessment Program (OAAP);
- (3) Students who demonstrate an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading assessment approved by the State Board of Education;
- (4) Students who demonstrate, through a student portfolio, that the student is reading on grade level as evidenced by demonstration of mastery of the state standards beyond the retention level;
- (5) Students with disabilities who participate in the statewide criterion-referenced tests and who have an individualized education program that reflects that the student has received intensive remediation in reading for more than two (2) years but still demonstrates a deficiency in reading and was previously retained in prekindergarten for academic reasons, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, or third grade;
- (6) Students who have received intensive remediation in reading through a program of reading instruction for two (2) or more years but still demonstrate a deficiency in reading and who were previously retained in prekindergarten for academic reasons,

kindergarten, first grade, second grade, or third grade for a total of two (2) years;
and

(7) Students who have been granted an exemption for medical emergencies by the State Department of Education. (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2016, p. 11)

The first exemption listed was included to provide consideration for the impact that a student's limited English proficiency may have on their ability to perform on a standardized test of reading administered only in English. This exemption acknowledges that students who have been receiving English language development services for less than two years may be eligible to be exempted from retention if their achievement scores on the standardized assessment fall below a set performance band (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2016).

Summary

As the student population that identifies as English language learners is one of the fastest growing subgroups of students in public schools in grades kindergarten through 12th grade nationwide, it is coming to a critical point in which educators and policy makers must equitably and effectively address the instructional and assessment needs of this student population. Cummins's (1979) threshold hypothesis states that English language learners must possess a higher level of academic language proficiency, or cognitive academic language proficiency, in order to be able to effectively participate in academic learning tasks. The related literature supports this hypothesis as evidenced in the review of the characteristics of English language learners, language acquisition factors, instructional and assessment practices in the classroom, academic standards, standardized testing, intervention practices, and policy challenges such as the Reading Sufficiency Act.

Similar to Cummin's (1979) threshold hypothesis, this is also true of producing the academic language required to demonstrate content skills on standardized assessments in English. This concept also aligns with WIDA's English language proficiency levels which define the sequential levels at which English language learners possess incrementally advancing language skills in English in which to demonstrate their academic knowledge by using advancing levels of English language proficiency.

Without equitably addressing the assessment challenges and needs of students identified as English language learners, the performance outcomes of English language learner students are inaccurate and invalid measures of their academic content learning. Within this era of accountability and high-stakes assessments, there are an increasing number of critical outcomes and decisions made based on student performance of content achievement demonstrated via the English language. Some of these decisions have crucial impacts on English language learner students, such as high school graduation and grade retention, and are being implemented through policy or legislation which are dependent on the achievement scores demonstrated on tests administered in the English language. This creates a double-jeopardy situation for English language learners, in which they must become proficient in English quickly in order to demonstrate academic performance at a level prescribed for native English speakers or face the consequences of high-stakes outcomes. Research has documented the process of language acquisition, the time required for such process, the relationship of language proficiency and demonstration of academic achievement in the English language. If educators, leaders, and policy makers want to assess the academic achievement of English language learner students then assessments must be reframed to provide English language learner students a true opportunity to demonstrate their content knowledge and performance equitably and accurately.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Three is to provide the details and research framework which was used in the study. By providing an overview of the procedures, design, and analysis of the study, the study could be replicated for validation or purposes of further study. An ex post facto correlational design was used in the study. This allowed existing data to be examined to determine the extent of the correlation between the English language proficiency levels in reading and the English Language Arts performance of third grade English language learners in Oklahoma. English language proficiency, the independent variable, was defined, for the purpose of this study, as the reading proficiency level score on the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment. Cummins (1979) classified English language proficiency into two divisions based upon purpose and type of language involved, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). These two language classifications included all the various domains, ability levels, and technical language aspects required to engage in a language with the parity and fluency of a native language speaker. The ACCESS for ELLs language assessment measured the cognitive academic language proficiency in English of English language learners (WIDA, 2014c). Academic achievement, the dependent variable, was defined, for the purpose of this study, as the reading performance score of a student on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 established a benchmark of academic achievement requiring all students to take grade specific content based assessments in multiple content areas to ensure that all students were performing on par. This benchmark established the performance level of proficient based upon the performance expectations of English speakers, and was not differentiated for English language learners.

Additionally, these required content assessments were administered in English in the vast majority of states, including Oklahoma (Menken, 2010). This chapter will provide further details on the research design, research questions, hypothesis, participants, instrumentation, and data analysis technique.

Design

A quantitative correlational design was employed to examine the correlation between the English language proficiency levels in reading and the English Language Arts standardized test performance of third grade English language learners. Correlational studies have a simple design grounded upon the application of a sound theoretical framework in which the research goal is to model the relationship between two or more variables by gathering data on two or more variables for each individual in a sample and calculating the correlation coefficient (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In this study the predictor variable was English language proficiency and the criterion variable is academic achievement. English language proficiency is the ability of a person to use the English language to perform tasks (WIDA, 2014b). Academic achievement is the level at which a person demonstrates a level of mastery of academic knowledge (Menken, 2010). As discussed in earlier chapters, Cummin's (1979) threshold hypothesis provides the theoretical framework for this study. The threshold hypothesis states that a student must attain a minimum level of language proficiency in the target language, or L2, in order to be able to competently perform at a high level on academic tasks in the second language. Additionally, considerations of years an individual student has been participating in English language development will be included in the analysis.

The Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT) in English Language Arts required that students demonstrate academic knowledge of English Language Arts on a grade-level

standardized test. The ACCESS for English language learner assessment assessed the English language proficiency of English language learners in the four domains of language: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The correlational design determined the extent and direction of the correlation of language proficiency in reading on the ACCESS for English language learner students and academic performance in English Language Arts on the OCCT.

Additionally, multiple research studies have shown that attainment of cognitive academic language proficiency, the advanced language competency required to perform academic tasks on standardized tests and textbooks, can take approximately seven to 10 years for English language learners (Cummins, 1980; Hakuta et al., 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Therefore, this study also examined the relationship between language proficiency in reading and academic performance on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test within cohorts based upon years of English Language Development (ELD) instruction, zero to six years. By studying the correlation of assessment data within smaller cohorts, further findings were examined in regards to the impact of years of English language development instruction on the correlation between language proficiency in reading and academic performance on a standardized test in English.

Both ACCESS for English language learner students and OCCTs were taken in the spring of each academic year. This study examined the ex post facto data of assessment scores from the spring semester of 2015. A correlation analysis was applied to study the data within qualitative performance bands. On the OCCT, the performance bands were identified from high to low as advanced, proficient, limited knowledge, and unsatisfactory. On the ACCESS for English language learner students, the performance bands were identified from high to low as reading, bridging, expanding, developing, emerging, and entering. The performance bands from both

tests each contained a range of scale scores which quantify the student language proficiency level or academic performance, respectively.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between English language proficiency as measured by the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment and academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading for third grade English language learner students?

RQ2: Can the number of years in which an English language learner student has received English language development services predict academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading?

Null Hypothesis

The null hypotheses for this study were:

H₀1: There is no statistically significant relationship between the ACCESS for English language learner students English language proficiency level in reading and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test performance level in reading for third grade English language learners.

H₀2: There is no statically significant predictive relationship between the number of years in which an English language learner student has received English language development services and academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading.

Participants

Demographics

The population which was included in this study was a convenience sample based on specific criterion relevant to the study. The sample was drawn from the third grade English language learner students in ABC Public Schools (pseudonym) which is a large school district in

Oklahoma. Students included in the sample had both ACCESS for English language learner English language proficiency scores in reading and Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test performance scores in reading from the 2015 test administrations. The sample population size of students with matched assessment files was 967. This sample size number of participants exceeded 66 students which according to Gall et al. (2007), is the required minimum for a medium effect size with the statistical power of .7 at the .05 alpha level. The correlational analysis was applied to these matched assessment scores to determine the relationship in regard to student performance.

The final sample population included in this study consisted of 967 third grade English language learners in an urban school in Oklahoma during the 2014-2015 school year. Specifically, the sample consisted of 497 male students and 469 female students. Of the sample, 10 identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 29 identified as Asian, three identified as Black or African American, 890 identified as Hispanic or Latino, eight identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, four identified as multi-racial, and 22 identified as White. Additionally, 127 students were served on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 927 students qualified as economically disadvantaged.

Students who had scores from the Alternate ACCESS test or the Oklahoma Alternate Assessment Program (OAAP) were not included in the sample. Students who participated in these alternate assessments had severe cognitive disabilities and the assessments, scale score measures, and performance bands were independent of the ACCESS for English language learner students and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests.

A total of 79 different languages were spoken by students in the district, which consisted of a total of 85 schools, 52 of which were elementary schools. Five of the elementary schools

provided dual language instruction as an English language development service in which students received literacy instruction in English and Spanish. Approximately one-third of all third graders in the 2014-2015 school year were in their second year of third grade as they were retained for scores of unsatisfactory on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading in the spring of 2014 as required by the Reading Sufficiency Act of Oklahoma.

The data analysis also analyzed the impact of the years of English language development services on the achievement on a standardized test of reading. The years of English language development (ELD) instruction for the sample population ranged from zero to six years. Of the population, seven students had received ELD instruction for zero years, 14 had received one year, 42 had received two years, 182 had received three years, 556 had received four years, 131 had received five years, and 34 had received six years. Nineteen different languages, in addition to English, were spoken by the sample population. Of the sample population, three spoke Arabic, two spoke Bengali, one spoke Chinese, nine spoke Chuukese, one spoke French Creole, three spoke Muscogee Creek, one spoke Filipino, one spoke French, one spoke German, two spoke Gujarati, 21 spoke Hmong, two spoke Indonesian, one spoke Laotian, one spoke Lugandan, one spoke Malayalam, one spoke Navajo, one spoke Punjabi, one spoke Russian, and 913 spoke Spanish.

Instrumentation

The correlational design studied the extent and direction of the correlation between the English language proficiency levels in reading on the ACCESS for English language learner students assessment and the academic performance levels in reading in English on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test for third grade English language learners. The construct, standards

alignment, and scoring of the two assessments are described below. The reliability and validity of the respective assessments are also detailed.

ACCESS for English Language Learners

The ACCESS for English Language Learners assessment, also known as the ACCESS for ELLs, was initially developed in 2005 by the Center for Applied Linguistics. Through partnership with the WIDA consortium hosted by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, the assessment series has continued to grow through continuous research, support, and training to its current status of adoption and implementation in 39 states (Fox and Fairbairn, 2011; WIDA, 2017). One of the primary purposes of the development of the ACCESS for ELLs assessment was to meet the federal requirement established by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 which required states to adopt English language development standards and an annual assessment measure for English language proficiency (USDE, 2015). In a peer review, Fox and Fairbairn (2011) found “evidence of exemplary research tradition that has guided the test’s development over the years and support of the developers’ claims that the test reflects current theory and research on academic language” (p. 426). The reviewers went on to state that the number of states represented in the consortium, the number of resources available to ground the assessment within pedagogical practice, and the intentionality with which WIDA has aligned the assessment to classroom practice distinguishes the assessment group regarding appropriateness and effectiveness for support and assessment of English language learner students (Fox & Fairbairn, 2011).

The ACCESS for English language learner students assessed English language proficiency in the four domains of language, speaking, listening, reading, and writing, using academic language across the content areas. The contents of the test are aligned to the WIDA

English Language Development Standards and both the standards and assessment are designed by WIDA. The standards and assessment content address the five WIDA English language development standards: (a) language of social/instructional, (b) language of language arts, (c) language of mathematics, (d) language of science, and (e) language of social studies. The assessment was aligned to grade level cluster using language and vocabulary appropriate for the grade cluster. The grade clusters included kindergarten, Grades 1-2, Grades 3-5, Grades 6-8, and Grades 9-12. With the exception of kindergarten, each grade cluster was further divided into tiers which are aligned with levels of language proficiency: Tier A, Tier B, and Tier C. Tier A includes proficiency levels 1.0 to 4.0; Tier B includes proficiency levels 2.0 to 5.0; and Tier C includes proficiency levels 3.0 to 6.0. The proficiency levels are identified on a range of 1.0 to 6.0, with a performance band identified for each whole integer. Each proficiency level performance band contained a range of scale scores to provide more detailed analysis of student proficiency levels (WIDA, 2014a).

The initial scoring of the assessment responses was differentiated by grade level and language domain. The kindergarten test was adaptive; therefore, all responses are scored as administered by the trained test administrator in order to determine how to proceed forward in the test administration. Similarly, the speaking test for Grades 1-12 was also adaptive with responses scores as administered by the trained test administrator. All scoring for the listening, reading, and writing domains for Grades 1-12 was completed by trained scorers and raters at the testing company. MetriTech was the testing company selected by WIDA for the 2015 test administration (WIDA, 2016).

Reliability is the accuracy, consistency, and dependability of test scores (Gall et al., 2007). As this study analyzed the proficiency levels in reading of third grade English language

learners, the reliability of the ACCESS for ELLs third-grade reading subtest using Cronbach's alpha is as follows per tier: Tier A = 0.838, Tier B = 0.805, and Tier C = 0.748. These reliability scores provided an overall weighted reliability of $\alpha = 0.764$ which identified the test, as well as individual tiers, as reliable (WIDA, 2016). Validity, regarding a test, is a measure to ensure that the test measures what it was designed to measure (Gall et al., 2007). To establish validity, WIDA employed an Assessment Use Argument (AUA, 2016) to determine validity in the use of "test design and administration on the intended and actual score use and consequences" (p. 44). Per the framework guidelines established by the American Educational Research Association, all issues of the validity argument were addressed (WIDA, 2016).

Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test

The Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test was a criterion referenced test of standardized, content area tests administered to students in third grade through eighth grade as well as End of Instruction tests in specific content classes in Grades 9-12. The content of the tests was aligned to the Oklahoma Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS). The tests were originally implemented per the federal regulations of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (USDE, 2015). After extensive searching, while no peer reviews of the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests have been made publically available, the State Department of Oklahoma received approval on the standardized assessment from the Assistant Secretary of Student Achievement and School Accountability at the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2006).

The content areas included on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests is determined by grade level. At the third and fourth grade levels, students take reading and math content area tests. In the fifth grade, students take reading, math, science, social studies, and writing. In the sixth grade, student take reading and math. In the seventh grade, students took reading, math, and

geography. In the eighth grade, students took reading, math, science, social studies, and writing tests, in grades third through fifth tests are administered on paper forms, and tests for grades sixth and up were administered online. All tests were scored by Measured Progress in 2015. The test scores were released as performance bands with each band encompassing a range of scale scores detailing specific student performance which include unsatisfactory, limited knowledge, proficient, and advanced (Measured Progress, 2015).

Regarding the reliability of the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading in third grade, Cronbach's alpha (α) was identified as 0.87 for English language learners, and 0.90 for students in the all student subgroup which is also considered to be a reliable assessment measure (Measured Progress, 2015). However, Measured Progress (2015) also issued a warning regarding the reliability of subgroup scores considering the subgroup reliability determinations were "based on a subset of items rather than the full test computed subcategory reliabilities were lower (sometimes substantially so) than were overall test reliabilities, and interpretations should take this into account" (p. 56). The 2015 test administration of the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test was the first administration facilitated by Measured Progress. While no statistical data was provided in the 2014-2015 technical report regarding the test validity, details describing the use of the Stocking and Lord method of equating with previous test administration data. Recommendations were made for further validity studies with future internal and existing external assessment data but resolved that the data available was stable enough to make valid inferences regarding student performance (Measured Progress, 2015).

Procedures

The students who were involved in this study were students enrolled in ABC Public Schools during the 2014-2015 school year. Before the students took the ACCESS for ELLs assessment and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests they were pre-screened to determine their status as an English language learner and registered for both assessments. Once the students were assessed on both measures, their tests were scored, and their data results were saved.

Once the research was approved by the research committee, permission was requested from the ABC Public School district through the local Research and Review Board managed by the Office of Data and Analytics. The permission pertained to the analysis of 2015 third grade student performance and demographic data on the ACCESS for ELLs assessment and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading. Once approval from the school district was awarded, permission was requested from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University. Following IRB approval, the researcher requested access to the data as specified from the ABC Public Schools. The data for both ACCESS for ELLs and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum test were made available in the original comma separated value files as generated by the respective testing companies. For both data files, district identification numbers, state student identification numbers, first names, last names, middle names, and birthdates were removed. The data was provided to the researcher with matched files masked for anonymity with students identified by sequential numbers beginning with 001 and continuing through the remainder of the matched student files. The researcher used SPSS version 24 to analyze the student data files.

Data Analysis

A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the correlation between the ACCESS for English language learner proficiency level in reading and the Oklahoma Core

Curriculum Test of reading for third grade English language learners. The analysis determined the statistical significance of the relationship of the test scores based upon their linear correlation (Gall et al., 2007). The researcher used bivariate regression analysis to analyze the data in smaller cohorts based upon the number of years of English Language Development instruction, in order to determine the statistical significance of the relationship of student performance on the assessment isolated by years of English Language Development instruction an English language learner has received.

The Pearson linear correlation is a test of statistical significance. Tests of statistical significance are intended to determine whether a null hypothesis can be rejected. If Pearson's r in this study showed a statistical significance, then the first null hypothesis would be rejected, meaning that there is a statistically significant correlation or connection between a third grade English language learner's reading proficiency level in English and their performance on a standardized test of reading skills in English (Gall et al., 2007). A bivariate regression model addresses how one variable can predict the other variable. It is a way to quantify the relationship and make predictions of a future state (Warner, 2013). The R^2 in this study showed a percentage of predictability of the number of years of English language development instruction on the reading achievement scores on the OCCT. The significance of the regression would determine if the predictability was statistically significant.

Data screening was to ensure that there is no missing data, data entry errors or potential outliers that can influence the data analysis. This included identifying potential outliers using a box and whisker plot as well as additional research on the contextual factors of potential outliers (Gall et al., 2007)

Following the data screening, the correlation related assumption tests were satisfied. Testing of assumptions is a critical component of research as it confirms the interpretations of the results for desired accuracy (Gall et al, 2007). For the Pearson product-moment correlation, normality tests were run using histograms and the Shapiro-Wilk test. Skewness and kurtosis were also examined to determine if the data was normally distributed.

Scatter plots were also used in the data analysis to determine the direction of the correlation, either positive or negative, which in turn tested the threshold hypothesis (Cummins, 1979; Gall et al., 2007). If the correlation between the assessment scores is positive then that supports the threshold hypothesis which states that a student must have attained an advanced level of language competency in the target language, or L2, in order to successfully perform academic tasks in the second language. Regarding the specific assessments in the study, this means that for a student to score in the higher performance bands on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading, they would also have to score in the higher performance bands on the ACCESS for English language proficiency in reading. If the scatter plot shows a negative direction, or correlation, then that means that a higher score on one assessment relates in general to a lower score on the other assessment. If there is absence of a line of best fit, then there is no correlation between the assessment scores at all (Gall et al., 2007).

To address the second null hypothesis which states that there is no statistical significance between the number of years an English language learner has been receiving English language development instruction and their academic performance score on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum test of reading, a bivariate regression analysis was performed. This examination of data determined the magnitude of relationship sequentially across years and academic performance scores because the achievement scores and the years are continuous in nature and

can reveal the predictive or explanatory nature of the relationship among the data points (Gall et al., 2007).

Similar to the testing for the hypothesis one, an analysis of histograms and the Shapiro Wilk tests was used to determine normality of the data. Skewness and kurtosis were also examined as assumptions of normality. The level of measurement used was on an interval scale due to the continuous variables based on the standard scoring structure of both assessments (Measured Progress, 2016; Warner, 2013; & WIDA 2016). A scatter plot was used to test the linearity of the data analysis as well as homoscedasticity. The linearity test determined if there were any outliers within the data set that result in a non-linear regression. The homoscedasticity view using a Shapiro Wilk test was also used to determine if the data fell evenly along the line of regression (Gall et al., 2007; Warner 2013).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The literature suggests that the more proficient an English language learner is in the English language the more ability they have to effectively demonstrate their content knowledge using the English language (Cummins, 1980). Within the era of standardized assessment and accountability, there are a number of high stakes decisions being made based on the performance of all students, including English Language Learner (ELL) students, to ensure success as they continue their learning experiences founded in college and career readiness standards (Baker, et al., 2014; Bornfreund, et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the English language proficiency and reading performance levels of third grade English language learners in a large, urban school district in Oklahoma. This chapter presents demographic sample information, results of assumption testing, and the results of the data analyses performed as a part of this study.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between English language proficiency as measured by the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment and academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading for third grade English language learner students?

RQ2: Can the number of years in which an English language learner student has received English language development services predict academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading?

Null Hypothesis

The null hypotheses for this study were:

H₀1: There is no statistically significant relationship between the ACCESS for English language learner students English language proficiency level in reading and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test performance level in reading for third grade English language learners.

H₀2: There is no statically significant predictive relationship between the number of years in which an English language learner student has received English language development services and academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were used to draw conclusions from the sample population included in the analyses. The data was analyzed using the statistical software of SPSS, version 24. Descriptive statistics were analyzed for variables including mean, standard deviation, and range. Pearson correlation was used to determine correlation coefficients. Histograms, box plots, and scatter dot plots were generated using SPSS. All analyses were tested to a significance level of 0.05. The research questions were addressed using correlation analyses.

Table 1

Variables and Statistical Tests Used to Examine Research Questions One and Two

Research question	Criterion variable	Predictor variable	Statistical test	Significance
One	OCCT reading performance level	ACCESS reading proficiency level	Pearson moment correlation	≤ 0.001
Two	OCCT reading performance level	Years of English language development instruction	Bivariate Regression	≤ 0.001

The study used both a Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis and a bivariate linear regression analysis to address the null hypotheses. For null hypothesis one, a Pearson's product correlation analysis was used to determine the significance of the relationship between the OCCT reading performance levels and ACCESS proficiency levels. For null hypothesis two a bivariate linear regression model was used to determine how the years that a student participated in English language development instruction predicted their achievement score on the OCCT test of content area reading knowledge. The criterion variable in hypothesis one was the OCCT reading performance levels. The predictor variable in hypothesis one was the ACCESS reading proficiency levels. In hypothesis two the criterion variable was the OCCT reading performance levels. The number of years of English language development instruction was the predictor variable in hypothesis two.

Scores for both assessments were reported as scale scores. Scale scores on the ACCESS test of English language proficiency in reading of the population sample ranged from 277 to 399 out of a minimum to maximum range of 158 to 347 (WIDA, 2016). Scale scores on the OCCT content area test of reading of the population sample ranged from 474 to 881 out of a minimum

to maximum range of 400 to 990 (CTB/McGraw Hill, 2015). Years of English language development instruction ranged from zero to six years for the population sample included in the study.

In order to examine the consistency of the data, the mean, standard deviation and range were analyzed. The data was found to be consistent and is evidenced by the standard deviation remaining consistent among the variables. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Range for Variables Collected

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	
			Min	Max
OCCT Reading SS	664.0	69.2	474	881
ACCESS Reading SS	338.6	19.5	277	399
OCCT Reading SS 0y ELD	608.86	58.3	532	690
OCCT Reading SS 1y ELD	675.0	63.0	579	810
OCCT Reading SS 2y ELD	665.6	70.7	474	798
OCCT Reading SS 3y ELD	658.3	74.2	474	810
OCCT Reading SS 4y ELD	671.9	66.1	474	881
OCCT Reading SS 5y ELD	638.6	70.7	474	798
OCCT Reading SS 6y ELD	666.4	60.1	474	777

Note. n = 967

Table 3

Mean, standard deviation, N-size of OCCT reading scale score and Years in ELD

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
OCCT Reading SS	663.94	69.62	967
Years in ELD	3.86	0.928	967

The descriptive statistics of the bivariate regression model are show above in Table 3.

The descriptive statistics include the mean, standard deviation, and *n*-size of the sample population (*N*=967) included in the statistical analysis.

Results

Data Screening

Prior to testing the hypothesis, the data was screened for missing data and univariate outliers. Both the ACCESS test data and OCCT test data was provided in anonymized, matched data sets and in scale score form. Outliers were present in both assessment sets. Cases were researched and found to contain valid and matched data for both assessments that fell into the extreme scoring ranges causing them to be identified as outliers. As previously explained, data was tested using z-scores and outliers outside of the absolute value of three standard deviations from the mean were removed as extreme outliers (Warner, 2013). This resulted in the exclusion of 32 student records from the sample population studied.

Assumptions Testing

To address the research questions, appropriate statistical assumption testing was completed to ensure that a Pearson correlation could be used to analyze the data for null hypothesis one. The variables were assessed for univariate normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

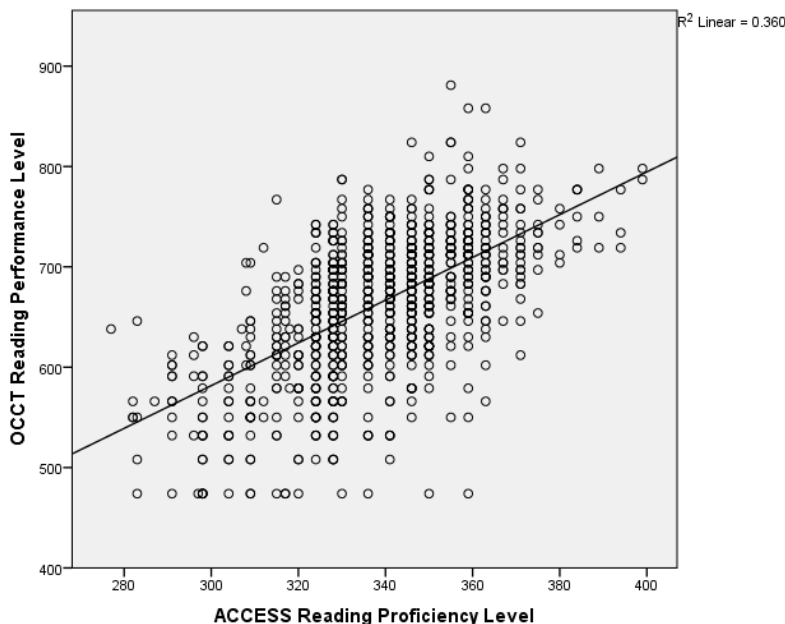


Figure 1. Test for Linearity.

Test for linearity. Figure 1 shows the results of the linearity test for the variables of OCCT reading performance levels and ACCESS reading proficiency levels show that the assumption of linearity was met due to the linear movement of the data along the line of best fit (Warner, 2013). This representation confirms bivariate normal distribution despite a weak presence of homoscediscity. Despite the variation, Pearson's product-moment correlation provides the necessary stability for valid data interpretation and analyses to address hypothesis one (Gall et al., 2007).

Additionally, outliers were identified in an initial review of the box plot analysis during assumption testing. Further analysis led to extreme outliers being identified using z -scores which is the distance from the mean in standard deviations. Using the absolute z -score value of 3.0, parameters regarding the standard deviation quartiles were established to protect the correlation assumption of no extreme outliers (Warner, 2013). This resulted in 32 extreme outliers being

excluded from the sample population data. This totaled 3.1% of the total sample population and resulted in a final sample population size of 967.

Test of normality. The following histograms (Figures 2 – 10) provide an analysis of the relationships between the OCCT reading performance level, ACCESS proficiency level, or year in English language development instruction. Most histograms reflect normal distribution. Skewness was found in the histogram of OCCT reading performance level with zero years of English language development instruction. However, the skewness was not determined to be extreme or likely to affect the correlations (Gall et al., 2007).

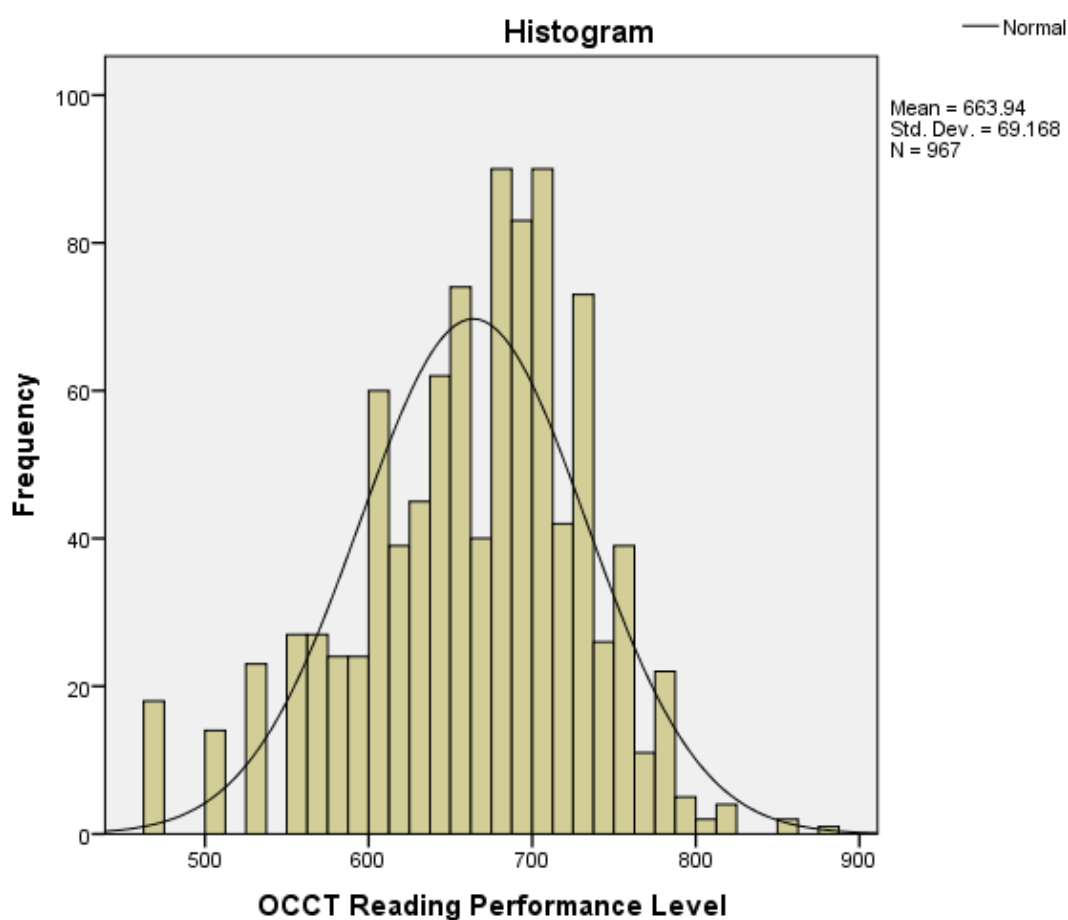


Figure 2. Histogram of OCCT performance level by frequency.

The histogram in Figure 2 shows the frequency points of the OCCT reading performance level for students included in the study. The frequency data is normally distributed as the shape follows the bell curve. The minimum score was 474. The maximum score was 881. The mean score was 663.9. The number of participants was 967. The standard deviation of the mean was 69.2.

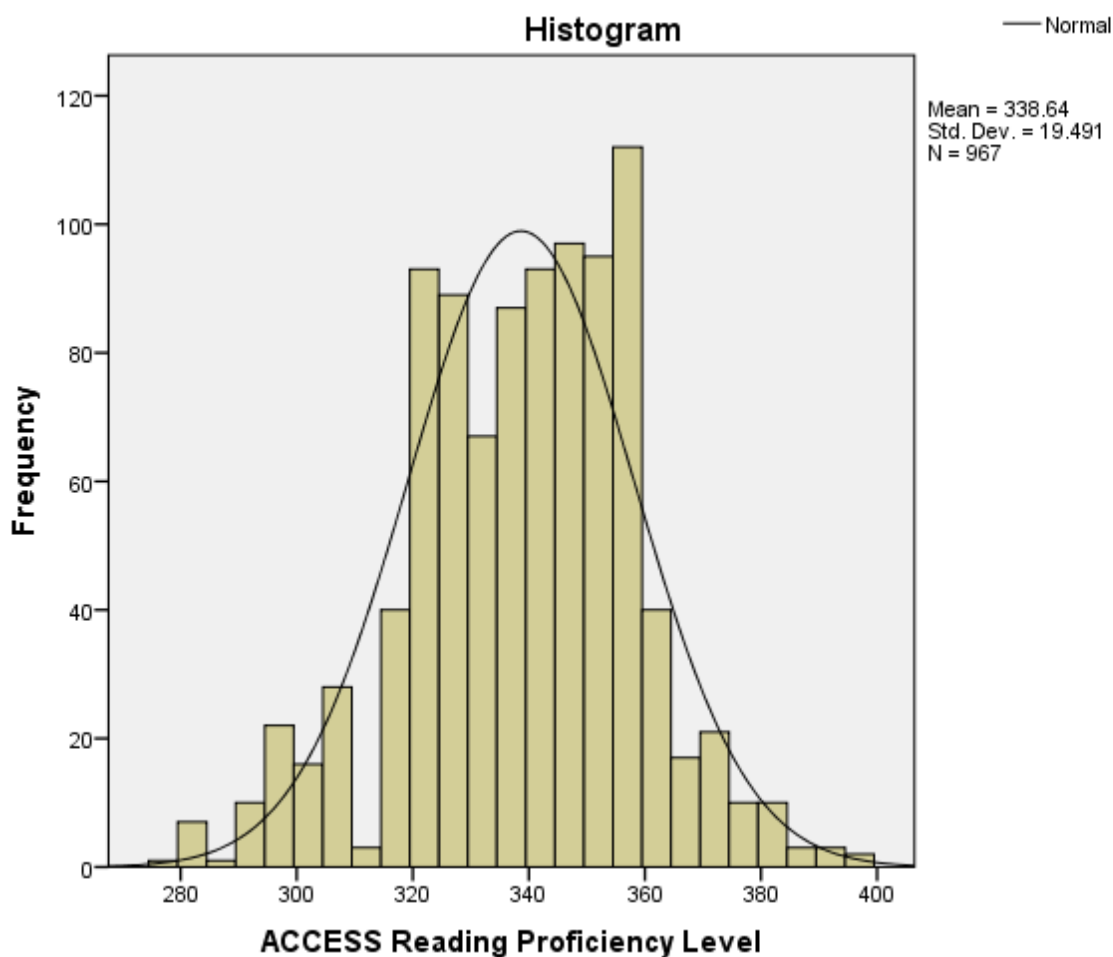


Figure 3. Histogram of ACCESS reading proficiency level frequency distribution.

Figure 3 contains the distribution points of the ACCESS reading proficiency levels for the students in this study. The data is normally distributed as demonstrated by how the data outcomes follow the bell curve. The minimum scale score was 277. The maximum scale score

was 399. The mean score was 338.6. The number of participants was 967. The standard deviation of the mean was 19.5

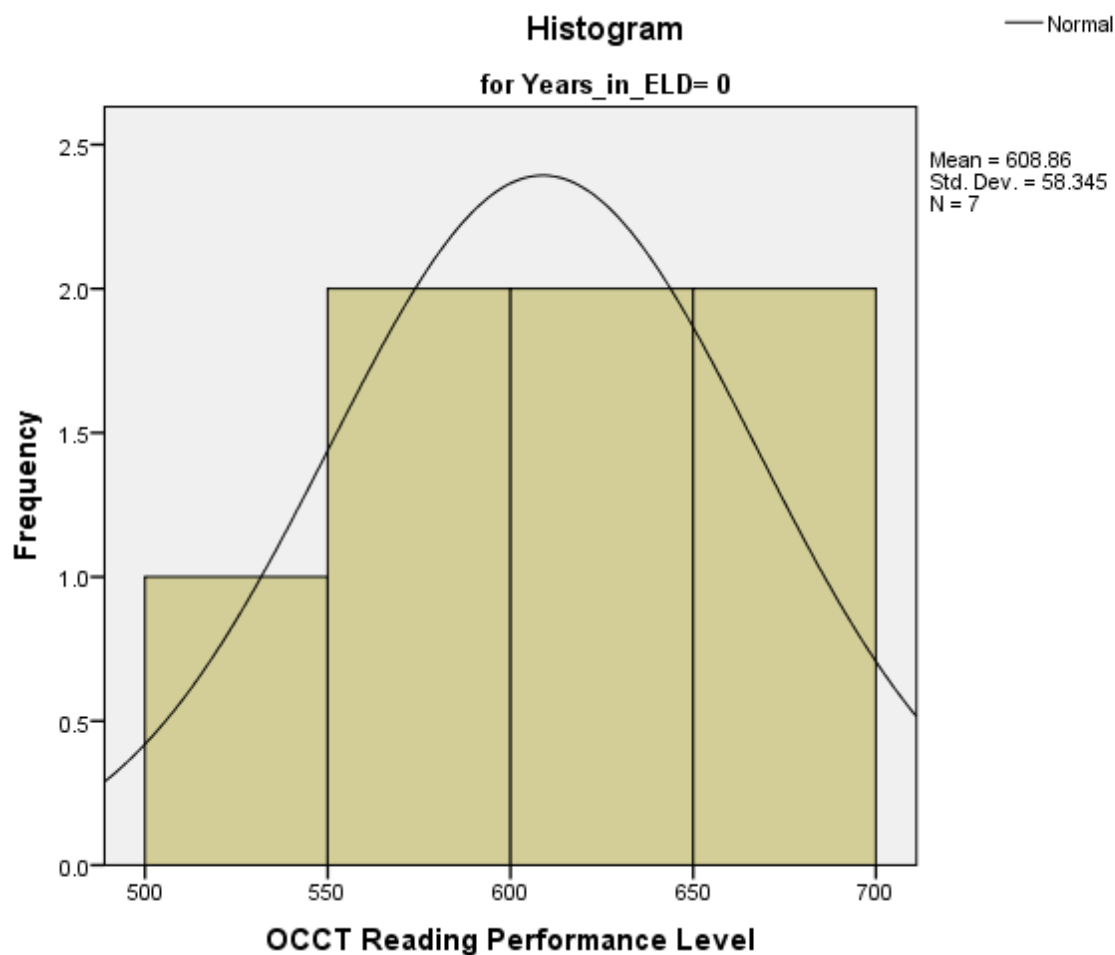


Figure 4. Histogram of OCCT reading performance level of English learners with zero years of ELD instruction.

Figure 4 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had zero years of English language development instruction. The data shown is slightly negatively skewed. The minimum score was

532. The maximum score was 690. The mean score was 608.9. The number of participants was seven. The standard deviation of the mean was 58.3.

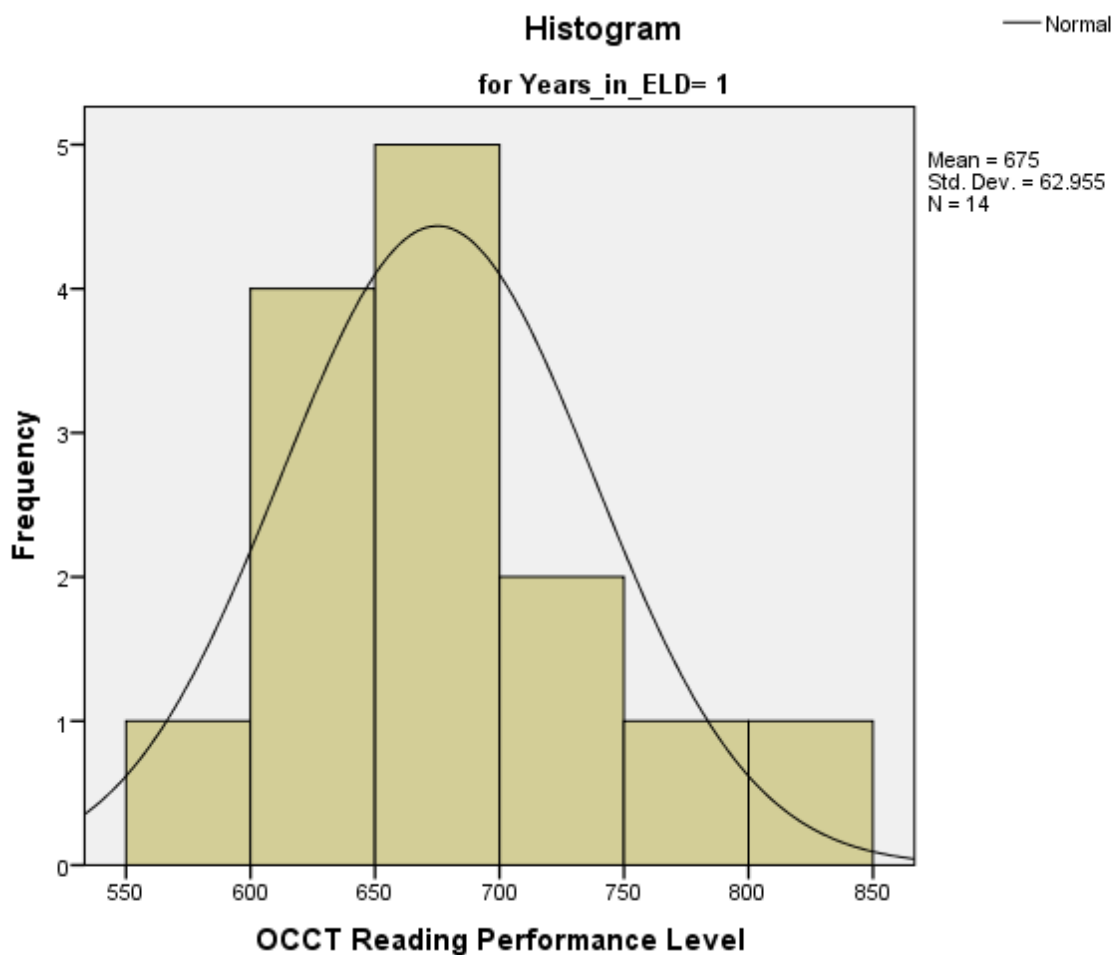


Figure 5. Histogram of OCCT reading performance levels of English learners with one year of ELD instruction.

Figure 5 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had one year of English language development instruction. The data shown is slightly positively skewed. The minimum score was

579. The maximum score was 810. The mean score was 675.0. The number of participants was 14. The standard deviation of the mean was 63.0.

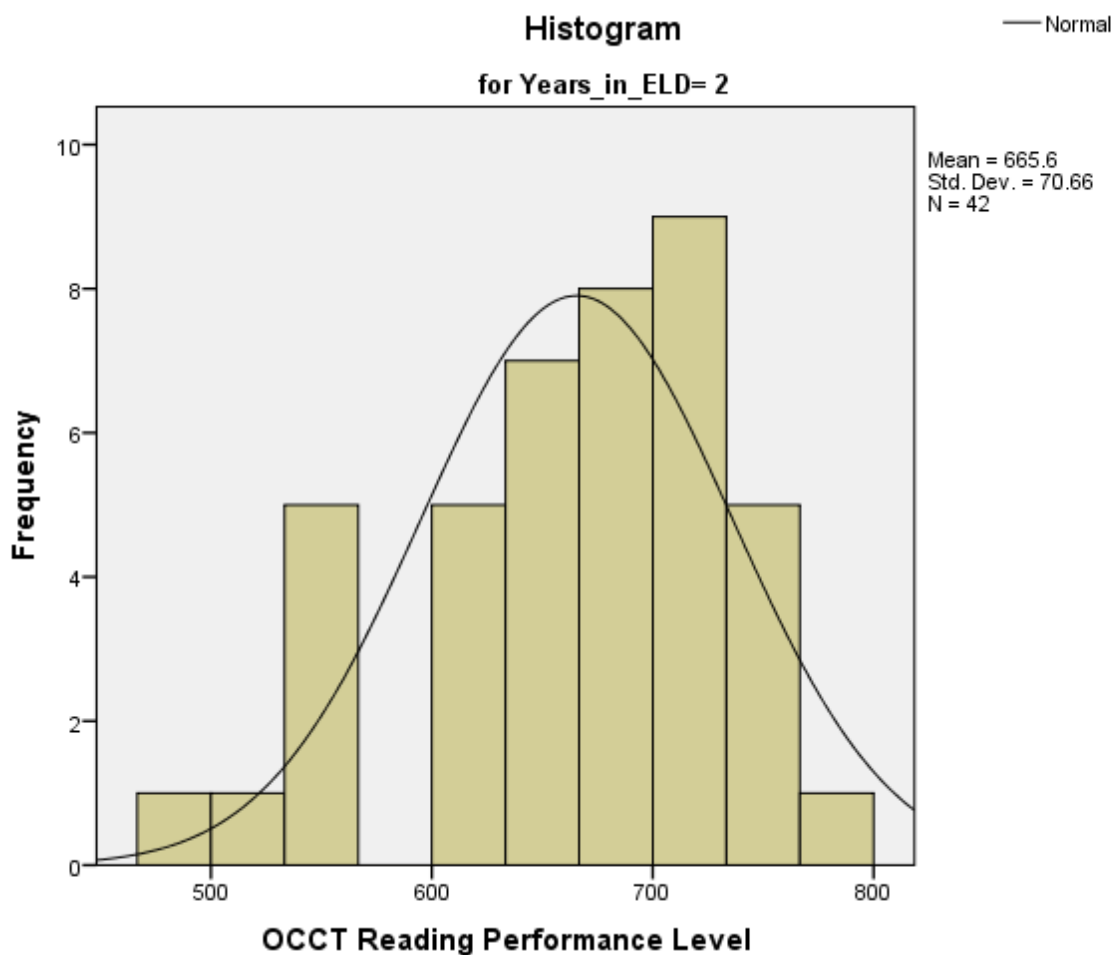


Figure 6. Histogram of OCCT reading performance levels of English learners with two years year of ELD instruction.

Figure 6 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had two years of English language development instruction. The data shown is slightly negatively skewed. The minimum score was

474. The maximum score was 798. The mean score was 665.6. The number of participants was 42. The standard deviation of the mean was 70.7.

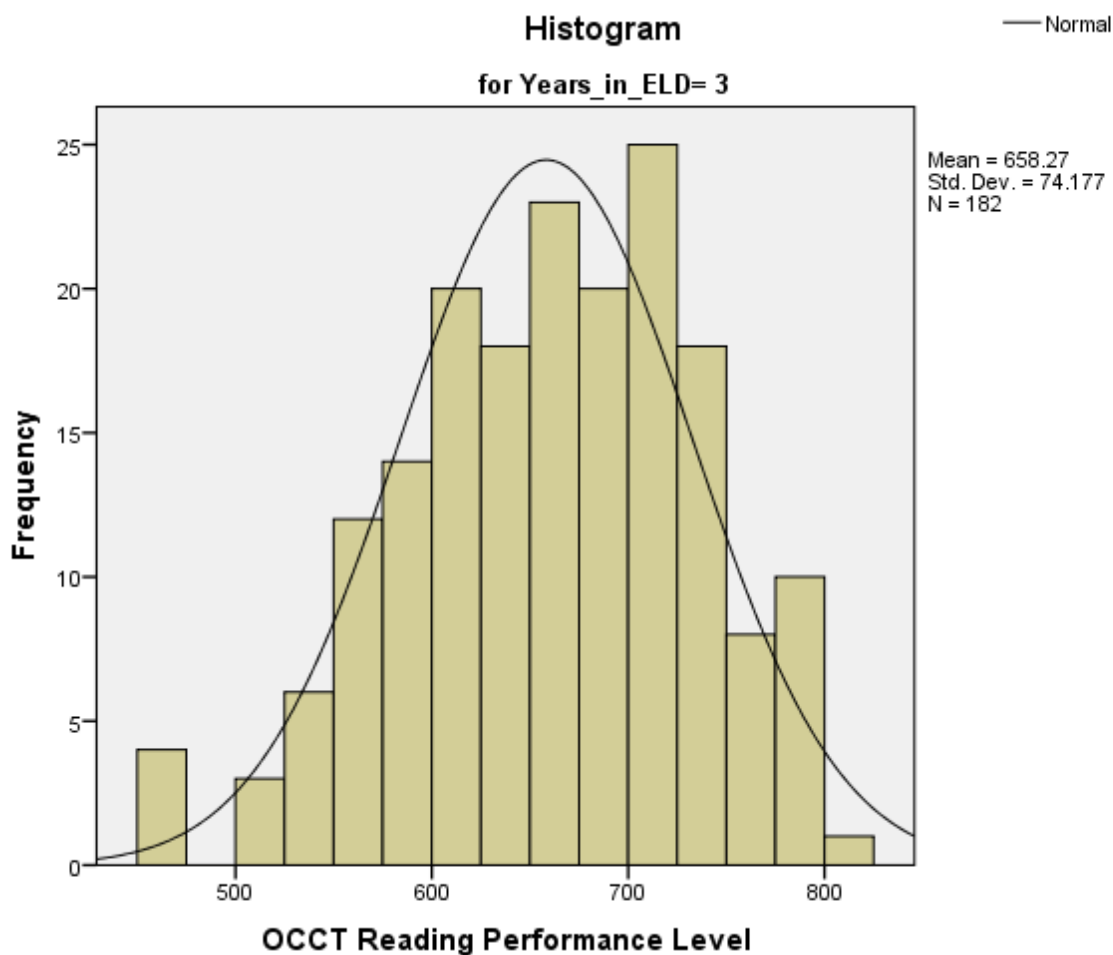


Figure 7. Histogram of OCCT reading performance levels of English learners with three years year of ELD instruction.

Figure 7 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had three years of English language development instruction. The data shown is slightly negatively skewed. The minimum score was

474. The maximum score was 810. The mean score was 658.3. The number of participants was 182. The standard deviation of the mean was 74.2.

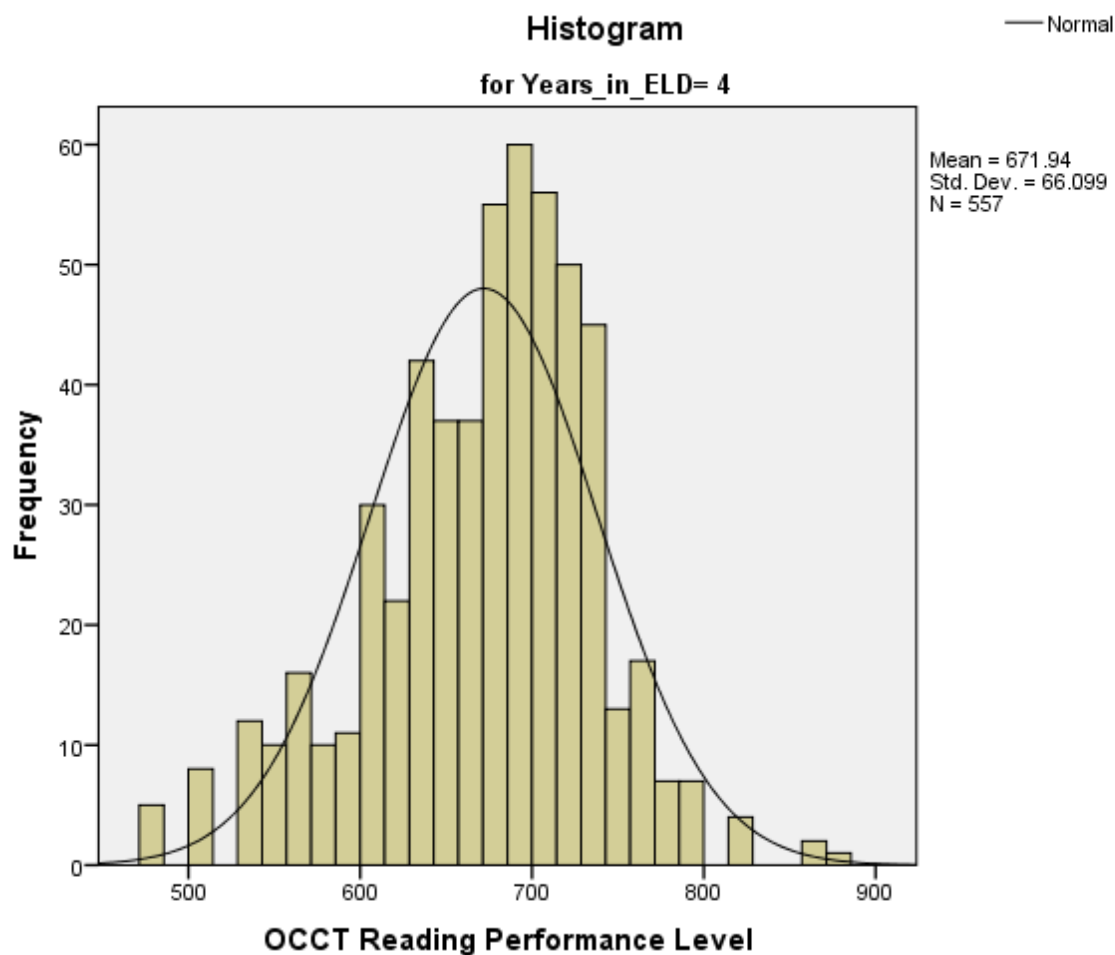


Figure 8. Histogram of OCCT reading performance levels of English learners with four years year of ELD instruction.

Figure 8 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had four years of English language development instruction. The data shown is slightly negatively skewed. The minimum score was

474. The maximum score was 881. The mean score was 671.9. The number of participants was 557. The standard deviation of the mean was 66.1.

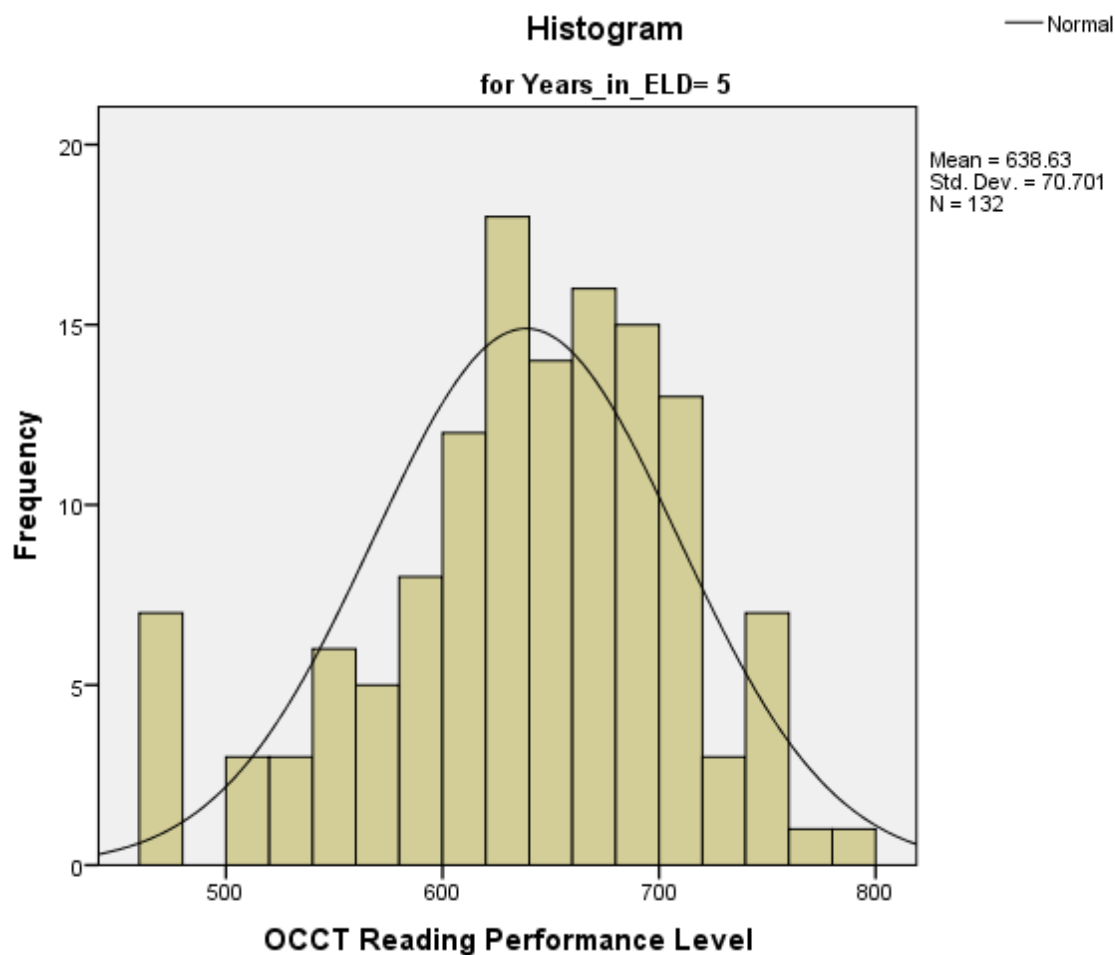


Figure 9. Histogram of OCCT reading performance levels of English learners with five years year of ELD instruction.

Figure 9 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had five years of English language development instruction. The minimum score was 474. The maximum score was 798. The

mean score was 650.0. The number of participants was 132. The standard deviation of the mean was 70.7.

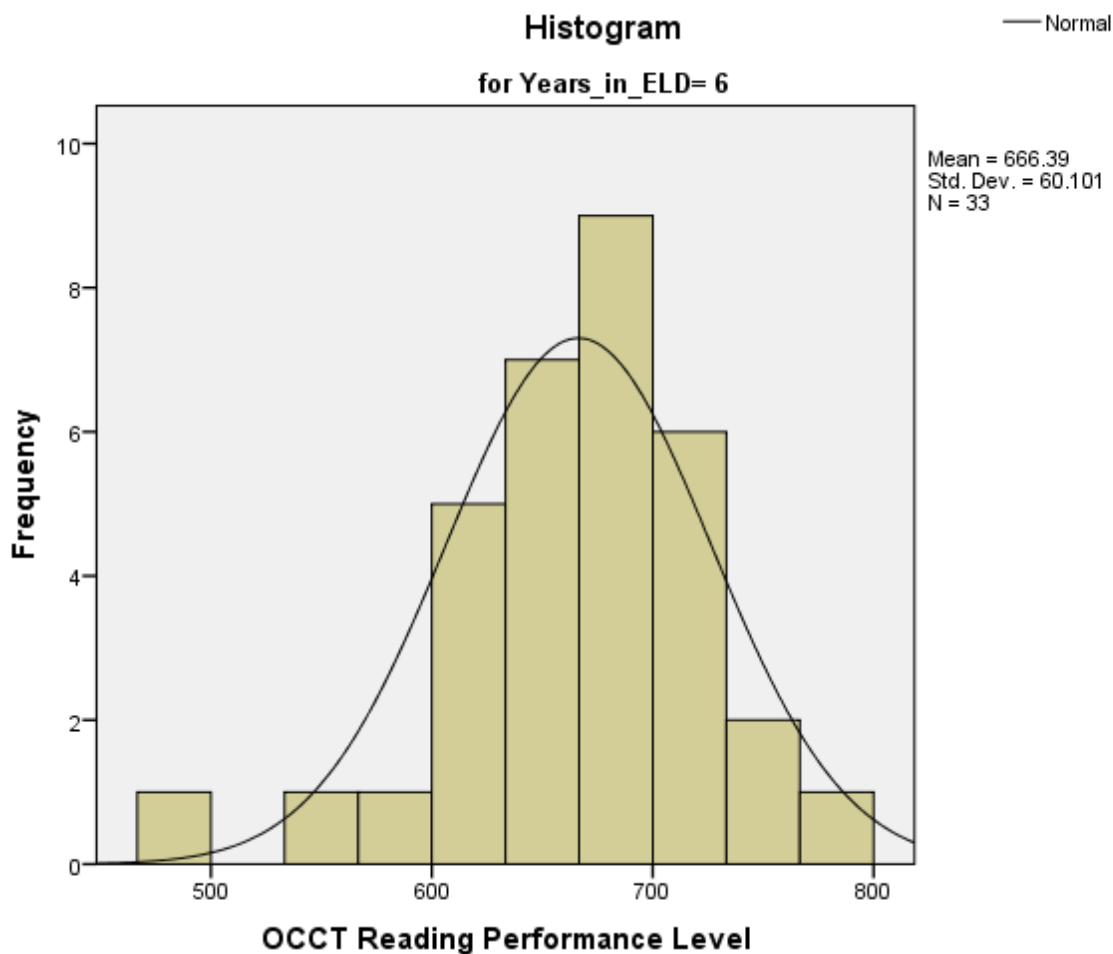


Figure 10. Histogram of OCCT reading performance levels of English learners with six years year of ELD instruction.

Figure 10 is a histogram which contains the frequency distribution of the OCCT reading performance levels of English language learners who have had six years of English language development instruction. The data is slightly negatively skewed. The minimum score was 474. The maximum score was 777. The mean score was 666.4. The number of participants was 33. The standard deviation of the mean was 60.1.

In addition to the histograms displayed in Figures 2-10, a Shapiro Wilk test of normality was also used to test the normality of the data. The results of the Shapiro Wilk tests are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Shapiro Wilk Tests of Normality for OCCT, ACCESS, and Years in ELD Data

Variable	Shapiro Wilk	<i>df</i>	Sig.
OCCT Reading Scale Score	0.979	967	0.000
ACCESS Reading Scale Score	0.988	967	0.000
OCCT reading scale score with 0y ELD	0.965	7	0.863
OCCT reading scale score with 1y ELD	0.957	14	0.677
OCCT reading scale score with 2y ELD	0.959	42	0.133
OCCT reading scale score with 3y ELD	0.980	182	0.009
OCCT reading scale score with 4y ELD	0.977	557	0.000
OCCT reading scale score with 5y ELD	0.970	132	0.005
OCCT reading scale score with 6y ELD	0.944	33	0.090

The Shapiro Wilk test of normality showed that the *p*-value was less than the alpha level ($p \leq 0.005$) for normality in the analysis of the OCCT reading scale score, ACCESS reading scale score, and OCCT reading scale score with four years of English language development instruction. A *p*-value of less than the stated alpha level indicates that the population violates the null hypothesis that the data is normally distributed (Warner, 2007). However, large sample sizes in excess of 30 - 40, as evidenced in the variables impacted, can impact the assumption tests for normality (Altman & Bland, 1995). Following a cumulative review of the histograms with the

outcomes of the Shapiro Wilk tests in regards to the assumption of normality show the analyses to meet assumptions and normality distributions were not violated.

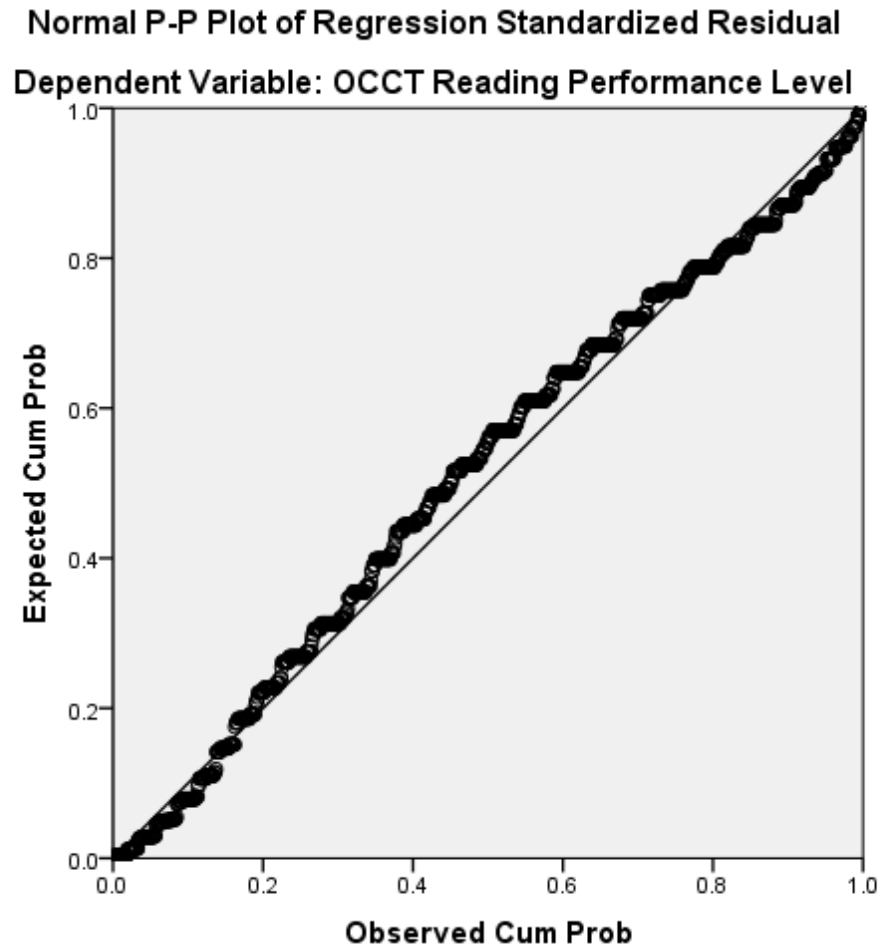


Figure 11. Scatterplot of distribution of OCCT reading scores and Years of ELD instruction.

Bivariate normal distribution. As evidenced above in Figure 11, the data points for both the OCCT reading scores and the years of ELD instruction demonstrated normal distribution along the line of best fit. This assumption test confirms that the sample population does not include any random variables, extreme outliers, and are normally distributed (Warner, 2013). The assumption test of normal distribution for the bivariate regression model was met.

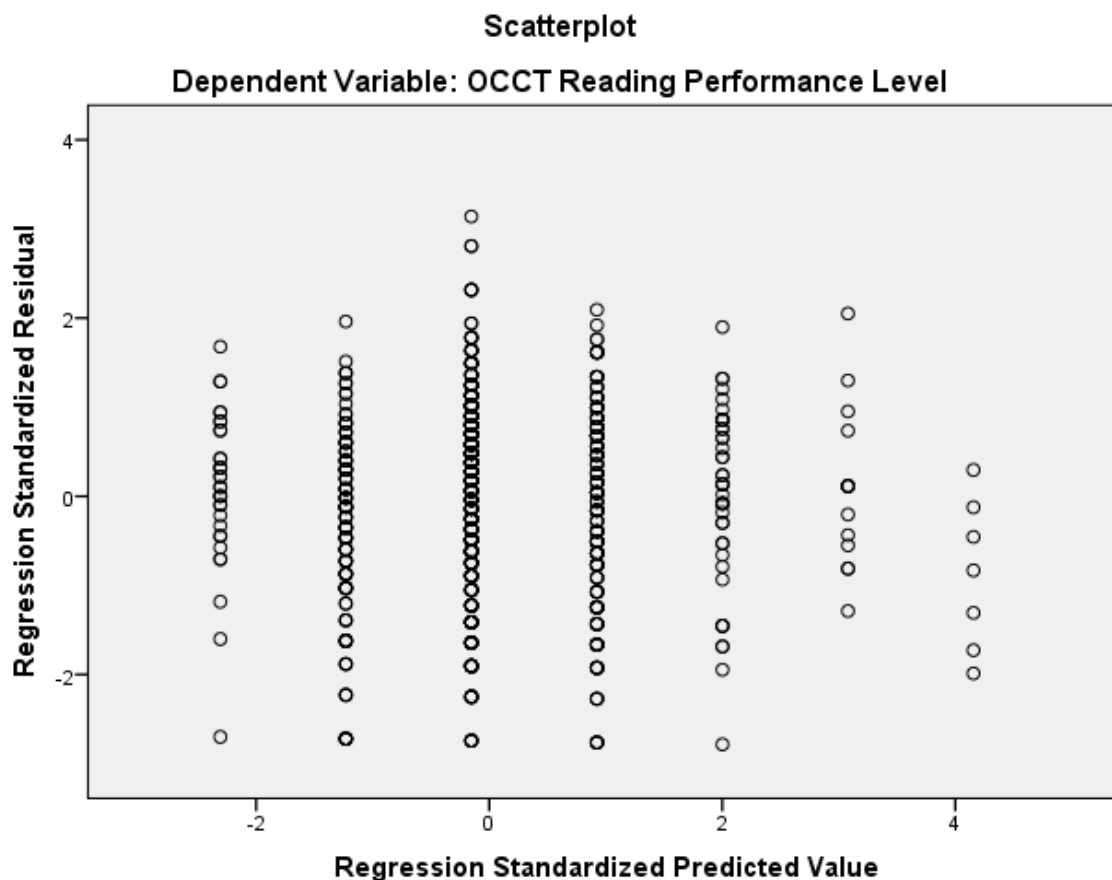


Figure 12. Scatterplot of OCCT reading achievement levels by Years of ELD instruction.

Bivariate outliers. To test for the assumption of bivariate outliers, a scatterplot was used as seen above in Figure 12. Some outliers seen may be considered outliers; however as stated previously in the study, due to the application of the z-scores to identify and remove extreme outliers in the data, these can be considered as not extreme in nature. The assumption of no extreme outliers was met for the bivariate regression model.

Results for Null Hypothesis One

Null Hypothesis One stated, “There is no statistically significant relationship between the ACCESS for English language learner students English language proficiency level in reading and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test performance level in reading for third grade English language learners.” As assumption tests were satisfied, the analyses of relationships between (1)

the OCCT reading content area test and the ACCESS for ELLs reading language proficiency test and, (2) the OCCT reading content area test and the number of years that the student had been in English language development were studied using the Pearson product-moment correlation in the statistical software SPSS version 24. The results of the analyses are listed in Table 4. Results indicated there was a statistically significant relationship between the OCCT reading test and the ACCESS for ELLs reading domain test. This relationship was determined to be a statistically significant positive relationship between the scale scores on the assessments, Pearson's $r = .60$, $p \leq 0.001$ (see Table 4).

Table 5

Correlational analysis of OCCT reading test and ACCESS reading language test

Variables	Pearson correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	<i>N</i>
OCCT reading scale scores and ACCESS reading scale scores	0.600**	0.000	967

Based on these analyses, the null hypothesis for Research Question One was rejected. The data analysis showed a strong positive relationship between the variables. This study has shown that there is a strong, statistically positive correlation between the performance of third grade English language learners on the OCCT reading content area test and the ACCESS for ELLs reading language proficiency test.

Results for Null Hypothesis Two

Null Hypothesis Two stated, “There is no statically significant predictive relationship between the number of years in which an English language learner student has received English language development services and academic achievement on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading.” Using the statistical software program SPSS version 2.4, a bivariate regression model was performed to assess the relationship between scale scores on the OCCT reading test and the number of years that a student has been participating in English language development instruction.

Table 6

Model Summary^b

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.19 ^a	0.000	-0.001	69.19

Table 6 shows that the number of years that a student has participated in English language development instruction does not predict their achievement outcomes on the OCCT content area test of reading, $R^2 = 0.00$. This means that the number of years that a student participated in ELD instruction had 0.00% prediction value on their resulting performance on the OCCT reading test.

The ANOVA output, shown in Table 7 below, noted the significance value of 0.545^b which meant that there was no significance in the relationship between the number of years a student participated in ELD and their achievement score on the OCCT reading test. The ANOVA test provides confirmation of the finding in the bivariate regression analysis (Warner, 2013) by determining that none of the years of English language development instruction have a statistically significant relationship on the student performance on the OCCT content area test of reading.

Table 7

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
1	Regression	1755.74	1	1755.74	0.37	0.545 ^b
	Residual	4619760.13	966	4787.32		
	Total	4621515.87	967			

a. Dependent Variable: OCCT Reading Scale Score

b. Predictors: (Constant), Years in ELD

Based on these analyses, the researcher failed to reject Null Hypothesis Two. The data analysis determined that the number of years that a student participated in English language development instruction did not predict their achievement performance on the OCCT content area test of reading.

Summary

This study examined the performance of 967 third grade English language learner students on the 2015 OCCT reading content area test, 2015 ACCESS for ELLs reading language proficiency test, and the number of years that a student had been participating in English language development instruction. The study set out to determine if there was a relationship between student performance on the OCCT reading content area test and the ACCESS reading language proficiency test. Additionally, the study set out to determine if there was a predictive relationship between student performance on the OCCT reading content area test and the number of years the student had been participating in English language development.

Data was found to be consistent as evidenced by the standard deviations following a consistent form among the variables. Normality, skewness, and kurtosis of the data was observed via the histograms and the Shapiro Wilk tests. Linearity was assessed by a scatter dot

plot. Minor violations of normality were determined to be due to large sample sizes and the data was confirmed to have met all assumption testing. Null Hypothesis One was accepted. Null Hypothesis Two was rejected.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The findings of this study showed strong support for Cummin's (1979) threshold hypothesis. The threshold hypothesis states that the higher one's language proficiency is the more content they will be able to demonstrate mastery of in the target language. Cummin (1979) asserted that there is a minimum threshold of language proficiency that must be established in order for language learners to successfully demonstrate their knowledge in the target language. As evidenced in the data, as ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency scores increased as did their performance on the OCCT content area test of reading.

However, the study also determined that there was not a strong relationship between the number of years an English language learner had been participating in English language development instruction and their performance on the OCCT content area test of reading. In Oklahoma, as in many states across the nation, an increasing number of high-stakes decisions are being made based upon standardized test performance, such as promotion and retention decisions at key grade levels. When exemptions or considerations are present related to these decisions, they are often based upon the number of years an English language learner has been receiving services. The findings of this study, that there is no predictive relationship between the number of years an English language learner has been receiving English language development services and their performance on the OCCT reading test, may have powerful implications for policy and the appropriateness and effectiveness of exemptions or considerations made.

The purpose of this research study was to examine the relationship between the OCCT content area test of reading, the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency test, and the number of years that a student had been participating in English language development instruction. Each of

these variables was examined to determine if significance existed within the respective relationships.

Discussion

The results of the study supported the first hypothesis that there was a significant relationship between the OCCT content area test of reading and the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency test. The relationship tested at a significance of $p \leq 0.001$, which indicates that the findings had a low probability of chance. The correlation itself was very robust and indicated a strong positive relationship, Pearson's $r = 0.600$ (Cohen, 1988). Students who demonstrated higher levels of English language proficiency in reading on the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency assessment also demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement in reading on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test.

In regards to the second hypothesis, the study showed that there was not a predictive relationship between the number of years that an English language learner had been participating in English language development instruction and their performance on the OCCT content area test of reading. The bivariate regression model showed a non-existent predictability percentage of 0.00%. There was no significant predictive relationship or pattern found between the number of years a student had received English language development instruction and their performance in academic achievement of reading on the OCCT.

The study produced two primary findings related to English language learners and their performance on the OCCT content area test of reading. The first finding was that there is a significant relationship between the English language proficiency on the reading test of the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency and student performance on the OCCT content area reading test. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two, Cummin's (1979) theoretical

framework of the threshold hypothesis stated that as English language learners attain higher levels of proficiency in the English language they are able to demonstrate more academic achievement in English. This concept is further defined in the relationship of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). The initial stages of language use and learning are described within the concept of BICS. However, in order to demonstrate what one knows within the medium of the target language, which in this case is English, one must also possess a proficient level of CALP (Cummins, 1980). The finding of the statistically significant relationship between the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency scores and the OCCT content area test of reading scores is significant in confirming the concept of a necessary threshold of proficiency in English is required to effectively demonstrate what one knows using the English language as the medium. The significance of the relationship means that as a student's proficiency in the English language increased, so did their achievement score on the OCCT reading test. Likewise, the lower proficiency in English a student had, the lower they scored on the OCCT reading test. This symbiotic relationship underscored the validity of Cummin's (1979) threshold hypothesis by confirming that there is a level or band of English language proficiency at which a student must have attained in order to have the ability or opportunity to successfully demonstrate their content knowledge and understanding on the OCCT reading test. This finding also implies that the concept that the OCCT effectively measures the content area knowledge in reading of English language learners is likely flawed due to the lower English language proficiency of some learners.

The second finding of this study was that there is not a predictive relationship between the years an English language learner has been participating in English language development instruction and their performance on the OCCT content area test of reading. This finding aligns

with research by Fry (2007) that showed that English language learners performed at higher levels of academic achievement on the National Achievement of Educational Progress assessments in fourth grade, and much closer to their native English language peers, but by eighth grade the gap between the groups had widened significantly. The instructional time that elapsed between fourth and eighth grade did not correlate to higher performance on standardized testing in Fry's (2007) study, as in the current research study.

Additionally, research has shown that a number of factors impact the time required for a student to attain proficiency in the English language. While it is a common understanding that the standard time required ranges between five to seven years, there are additional factors that can shorten or lengthen that range (Thomas and Collier, 1997). Collier (1987) has also demonstrated that as students make progress upwards in grade levels so do the rigor and proficiency levels required to participate proficiently in grade level content by analyzing English learners whose high achievement gains in early grade levels dissipated as they progressed into higher grade levels requiring higher levels of English language proficiency.

The findings of this study corroborate previous studies cited by determining that the number of years that a student has been participating in English language development does not have a predictive relationship on students perform on the OCCT content area test of reading (Cummins, 1980; Hakuta et al., 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). While additional factors were not analyzed in the current study, factors that have been identified as impacting this relationship include the level of education in the student's dominant language, the level of proficiency of the student in their dominant language, or the age at which the student began learning the target language. These are some of the factors that can have varying levels of impact on the time a student needs to meet the English language proficiency threshold required to effectively

demonstrate their content area knowledge and achievement using the medium of English (Cloud et al., 2009).

Implications

In Oklahoma, as in many states across the nation, high stakes decisions are being made as a part of a larger accountability system that is trying to provide interventions for struggling learners (Appleton et al., 2006). The Reading Sufficiency Act includes one specific exemption for English language learners in regards to retention in third grade for a score of Unsatisfactory or Limited Knowledge on the OCCT content area test of reading. The exemption states that “limited English proficient students who have had less than two (2) years of instruction in an English language learner program” (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2015, p. 11) may be promoted to fourth grade even if they score below the proficient level on the OCCT reading test. The analysis shown in the current research study showed that there is a correlation between how students score on the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency assessment and the OCCT content area reading test but that there is not a relationship between how a student performs on the OCCT reading test and the number of years they have been participating in English language development instruction. These findings directly contradict the exemption in place to provide a sense of equity to the use of retention as an intervention.

This has two direct implications for policy. By intertwining the concept of academic achievement and language proficiency for English learners, the applications of appropriate and effective interventions for students has become convoluted. The first implication is that students’ performance on the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency test in reading is a leading factor in how well they demonstrate achievement in reading in English on the OCCT content area test. This brings into question the efficacy of the OCCT content area test as a true measure

of academic achievement for English language learners who have not yet attained proficiency in English.

The second implication is that within the current exemptions of the Reading Sufficiency Act, the only consideration given for English language learners to approach equitable practice is driven by years in English language development instruction. Research has shown that when retention is used as an intervention for academic achievement for English language learners, there are no long-term literacy gains in academic achievement (Hughes et al., 2012). The findings of this study have confirmed that there is no relationship between the years of English language development instruction and student performance on the OCCT reading test. However, based on the findings of a significant relationship between ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency in reading and the OCCT reading test and research, an exemption consideration based on the level of language proficiency in reading would be a more accurate and equitable consideration for the goal of measuring and promoting based on grade level academic achievement.

Limitations

The first limitation of the study is the age of the data in the analysis as compared to current protocols. The data analyzed was from the 2015 testing window for the ACCESS for ELLs language proficiency assessment and the OCCT content area test of reading. Both assessments have undergone multiple changes and updates in the past few years. In 2016, the ACCESS for ELLs was retired and the ACCESS for ELs 2.0 was launched in an online testing format. Prior to the 2017 ACCESS for ELs 2.0 testing, the scoring alignment was revised to increase the rigor of the assessment and the 2017 scores were released on a new standards scoring framework. In 2017, the OCCT test family was retired and the Oklahoma State Testing

Program (OSTP) was launched based on new state content standards, Oklahoma Academic Standards (OAS). The 2018 scores for both the ACCESS for ELs 2.0 and the Oklahoma State Testing Program will be the first set of scores to be released with both assessment families on a consistent and stable framework.

An additional limitation of the study relates to the findings of reliability of the subgroup scores of English Language Learner students on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading. The reliability was assessed by Measured Progress, the test publisher, on a subset of items rather than the full assessment which led to lower reliabilities on subcategories than those of the overall test reliabilities. In some cases, the reliabilities were substantially lower. (Measured Progress, 2015). This finding on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading may imply that the test itself does not provide a reliable measure of content performance in reading of English Language Learners.

The final limitation of the study was that the hypothesis focused on the achievement of English language learners. The English language learner student subgroup is, by definition, a fluid and continually changing group of students. As English language learners attain proficiency in the English language they are reclassified as Former English language learners. Because the Former English language learner subgroup was not a focus of the research hypotheses, their data was not included in the analysis. For a complete picture of the relationship between the two assessments and a true test of the Threshold Hypothesis, the study should be expanded to include the data of Former English language learners as well as English language learners.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study provides confirmation of the strong relationship between English language proficiency as measured by the ACCESS for ELLs and academic achievement in reading as measured by the OCCT reading test. Future research should be replicated on 2018 or future data, as both assessments have undergone revisions in content, administration, and scoring since 2015. Additionally, data analysis for the relationship with both assessments and other factors, such as type of English language development instruction, composite English language proficiency level, and the impact of grade retention should be performed to do a further analysis of the various factors that impact the academic and linguistic achievement of English language learners.

Finally, as mentioned in the discussion regarding limitations of the current study, future research should also be expanded to include the outcomes of students classified as former English language learners. These students have met the threshold for proficiency in English language. By examining their achievement outcomes on the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency assessment and the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test of reading, more insight into the efficacy of scores and respective performance relationships could be informative to research, policy, and practice.

Conclusion

This research study was based on hypotheses regarding the relationships between the performance of third grade English language learners on the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency reading subtest, the OCCT content area test of reading, and the number of years that students have been participating in English language development instruction. The sample student population is located in a large, urban school district in Oklahoma.

A Pearson correlation model confirmed the strength of the relationship between the ACCESS for ELLs English language proficiency reading subtest and the OCCT content area test of reading. A bivariate regression model determined that there was no predictive relationship between the years that an English language learner student had participated in English language development instruction and their performance on the OCCT content area test of reading.

As the population of English language learners continues to grow nationwide and the sharp focus on accountability including the implementation of high stake decision making continues, it is imperative that policy makers at both the national and local level become very familiar with the research on English language learners, language acquisition theory, academic achievement and standardized testing. Grounding future policy and practice in a solid understanding of these concepts will ensure that English language learners are educated and developed in an effective and equitable educational system across the country.

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