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# Early Literacy in the Secondary ESL Classroom

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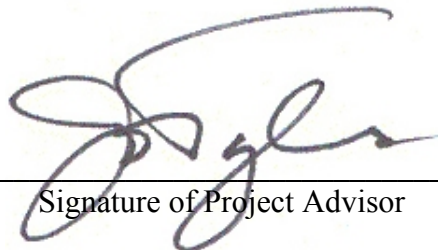
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**EARLY LITERACY IN THE SECONDARY ESL CLASSROOM**

**HEATHER ATKINSON**

**EDCI 590 INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH**

**MAY 1, 2015**

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jo Tyler", is positioned above a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Signature of Project Advisor

**Dr. Jo Tyler**  
**Professor of Linguistics and Education**

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## Introduction

“Frederick Douglass taught that literacy is the path from slavery to freedom. There are many kinds of slavery and many kinds of freedom, but reading is still the path” (Sagan, 1993 p.13). For English language learners (ELLs), reading fluently provides a path to academic attainment and freedom from the confines of language barriers which impede their ability to achieve the successes of their English-speaking peers. The number of ELLs attending public schools in the United States continues to grow. In 2011, 9.1% or an estimated 4.4 million students in United States public schools are identified as ELLs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014a). This increase in ELL population is present in Virginia as well. As of 2014, Virginia is home to approximately 97,169 ELLs receiving services in public schools across the state (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). The achievement gap which exists between limited English proficient students and those of non-minority students in U.S. schools is monumental. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports a 45 point achievement gap on both fourth and eighth grade reading assessments between ELLs and non-ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014b). A leading contribution to this achievement gap is the lacking ability these students have in literacy skills (Russell, 2014).

As anyone who knows me can attest, the ultimate passion of my life is advocating for the ELLs and their families which I’ve had the pleasure of teaching over the past four years. Throughout my journey as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher and ESL instructional coach, a great deal of my professional development and research has been dedicated to the effort of improving the English language proficiency of my ESL students. The population of ELLs is continually increasing in our U.S. public schools. As such, best practices in instruction for

English language learners continue to be researched, developed and suggested. We must seek to educate these students and promote their success in conjunction with their English speaking peers. Furthermore, it is imperative that we understand and develop instructional approaches appropriate to these students' needs. These instructional methods must support their language development and allow them to access the grade level content on which they will be assessed.

According to the United States Department of Education, the national graduation rate of limited English proficient students (otherwise referred to as ELLs) is approximately 57%, while their white, non-Hispanic peers graduate at a rate of 85% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014c). Hispanic youth are four times more likely than white students and twice as likely as African-American students to drop out of school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014c). A large contributing factor to this problem is that these students often struggle a great deal with reading because they received little or no literacy instruction in English prior to entering U. S. schools (Walsh, 1999). This reading instruction, often referred to as early literacy instruction, encompasses the necessary components of literacy development. Essential components for reading instruction include, phonics, phonemic awareness, high frequency word instruction, spelling, and oral literacy promoted by teacher guided discussion. Recent reviews of research indicate at least three critical content categories in early literacy: oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, and print knowledge (Roskos, Christie & Richgels, 2003).

Secondary ESL teachers and their general education counterparts often lack professional training in early literacy instruction. Early literacy is not always a required component of their teaching coursework for licensure in specialized content instruction. By understanding the means by which secondary ELLs become literate, educators can better assist these students in

becoming more proficient listeners, speakers, readers and writers of English, thereby closing the achievement gap between them and their English-speaking peers. The hypothesis to be tested in my research project is that secondary ELLs' ability to read English fluently will improve upon receiving explicit early literacy instruction. This literacy component is frequently missing from the curriculum and instruction of ELLs.

This paper includes a thorough literature review of relevant studies, the methodology, data analysis and discussion of my action research, a conclusion with regard to findings and research, and finally, recommendations for best instructional practices for the secondary ESL classroom. The literature review synthesizes the common findings within researched articles. This synthesis has been crafted in an attempt to compile the most effective means by which to instruct ELLs in a secondary academic environment while increasing English language proficiency. The data analysis component of this paper displays the data collected in ongoing formative assessments of early literacy skills as conducted in a secondary ESL classroom. These skills include high frequency words, and phonological and phonemic awareness as assessed in level 1-2 ELLs at a high school ESL classroom in a semi-rural Virginia county. The conclusion of this document summarizes both written sources and assessment results used for supporting this study. Finally, recommendations have been made for instructional methods and strategies for implementing best practices in early literacy instruction in the secondary ESL classroom.

## Literature Review

### Language Acquisition and Literacy Instruction for ELLs

In U.S. public schools, the goal of language acquisition for English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in ESL classes is proficiency. Language acquisition incorporates three processes of learning: social, linguistic and cognitive (Cummins, 1994). Proficiency is reached when ELLs develop both basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1994). In other words, ELLs must be both orally fluent and literate at an appropriate level if they are to be successful in meeting the academic expectations required to access the content and curriculum in U.S. schools.

While reaching proficiency is not an overnight process, recent studies have shown that for older ELLs, with considerable CALP in their native language, proficiency can occur at a more desirable rate. Initial research suggested a period of approximately seven years of schooling for ELLs to catch up academically with native-English-speaking peers. However, studies conducted by Cummins (1994, 2001) indicate that these same students, given literacy in their first language, can reach a level of speaking and reading proficiency within as few as two years of appropriate English language instruction.

For ELLs, English literacy instruction is crucial for becoming proficient readers and writers of English, as is the expectation in our U.S. schools. All students become literate via explicit instruction of the necessary facets of the reading process. Exposing students to key literacy features is crucial for building literacy. Literacy instruction is a standard in elementary classrooms, as it is now considered best practice in instruction. Good instruction for students in

general tends to be good instruction for ELLs with appropriate modifications (Goldenberg, 2008). Language and literacy development are key in increasing the language proficiency and reading ability of English language learners. Determining the appropriate components of English language instruction is crucial to the process of reaching proficiency. Language literacy instruction makes use of multiple skills: oral language proficiency, phonological processing, working memory, word-level skills (decoding, spelling) and text-level skills, such as scanning, skimming, summarizing and making inferences (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). For ELLs, learning to read in English is a major facet to reaching proficiency. Early literacy is an emerging set of relationships between reading and writing and includes instruction in oral language comprehension, phonological and phonemic awareness, and print knowledge (Roskos, Christie & Richgels, 2003).

### **Components of Literacy**

ELLs learning to read in English, just like English speakers learning to read in English, benefit from explicit teaching of the components of literacy, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension and writing (Goldenberg, 2008). Early literacy components such as phonological and phonemic awareness, identifying high frequency words and decoding and spelling, are the initial required skills needed by ELLs for becoming proficient readers in English (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). Phonological and phonemic awareness are fundamental components of developing English literacy (Mesmer, 2014). Phonological awareness is an all-encompassing term for hearing sounds in spoken language, specifically referring to combined sounds as found in compound words, rhyming words, syllables, and onset-rimes (Tindall & Nisbet, 2010). While phonological awareness focuses on the combination of



sounds, the opposite is true of phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in words (Tindall & Nisbet, 2010).

There is much evidence available to support the importance of phonemic awareness in promoting reading for second language learners of alphabetic as well as non-alphabetic languages (DelliCarpini, 2006). For English language learners who have limited exposure to the English alphabetic sounds or little prior literacy in their native languages, phonological and phonemic awareness may require explicit instruction. Research indicates that English language learners who have acquired both phonological and phonemic awareness skills in their native languages can more simply apply these skills to a second language, thereby providing a predictor of reading ability in the target language (Lindsey, Manis & Bailey, 2003).

Another major component of literacy instruction is decoding and spelling. Attainment of decoding and spelling skills is important because these early skills accurately predict later skill in reading comprehension (Juel, Griffith & Gough, 1985). When students are able to engage in wide reading, they are provided with the opportunity to develop vocabulary, concepts, and knowledge of how text is written. Before students are able to act as wide readers, they require skills in decoding and spelling. Development of decoding and spelling skills generally follows a sequence: 1) Beginning readers first learn the alphabetic principle and letter-sound relationships that enable them to read and spell highly regular words. 2) Later, they learn about more complex orthographic patterns, especially for vowels. 3) Later still, they learn how morphemes influence spelling, particularly in multisyllabic words (MacArthur, Alamprese, & Knight, 2010).

Some researchers suggest that spelling is a window into literacy processes and that there is a reciprocal relation between learning to read and learning to spell (Garcia, 2003). For this

reason, spelling and decoding often walk hand in hand. Spelling requires attention to all of the letters, patterns, and sounds in words, and this attention may support decoding (MacArthur, Alamprese, & Knight, 2010).

For English language learners, spelling and decoding can be a crucial skill for building fluency of text and gaining comprehension. To account for how word recognition skills develop, some researchers claim that word recognition skills develop as the quality of the orthographic or spelling knowledge in the orthographic lexicon develops (Garcia, 2003). Research conducted with children and adults at all levels of ESL reading proficiency shows that the emergence of ESL word recognition abilities involving phonological and orthographic decoding skills plays a major role in ESL reading development, and that is in part independent of ESL oral language proficiency and general vocabulary knowledge (Fender, 2008).

Though decoding and spelling are key instructional components for ELLs learning to read in English, there is also a need for explicit instruction of common English words that are often difficult to decode, also known as high frequency words. High frequency words, also commonly referred to as sight words are those words most commonly used in both oral and written English language. Mastery of high frequency words contributes to a student's ability to recognize more words in a given text. According to Fountoukidis, Frye and Kress (2000), the first three hundred words on the Frye list of common high frequency words appear in 65% of all English text, with just ten forms of words *the, be, to, of, and, a, in, that, have* and *I* accounting for 25% off all words used in the English language.

Students who develop an extensive bank of words that they can retrieve effortlessly by sight will find reading new texts easier and more meaningful and are in a better position to learn

many more new words from grade level texts (Johnston, 2000). In other words, students who can automatically recognize and recall words can read more fluently. ELLs become proficient readers of English when they not only decode for but are also able to understand what they are reading; and a sight word vocabulary that can be used in fluent reading is an important component of this proficiency (Helman & Burns, 2008). Teaching high frequency words to ELLs is both an intervention and proactive approach to increasing vocabulary. Teaching lists of written and orally presented words is a common intervention for ELLs and may effectively increase contextual reading skills among all children with word recognition deficits (Burns & Helman, 2009). Research indicates that teaching high frequency words will increase students' vocabulary and will better prepare them for future content and leisure reading (Birch, 2002). While the effect of English proficiency on a child's ability to rehearse and retain new sight words is unknown, this is potentially important because rapid word recognition leads to fluent contextual reading, which in turn is highly linked to reading comprehension (Page, 2014). In addition, word recognition for ELL children may be connected to oral proficiency, because oral vocabulary is essential in decoding, and words that are part of the student's vocabulary are easier to decode (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Accurate decoding and spelling and sight word automaticity are not the only necessary skills for fluent reading. Another key component of literacy instruction is reading fluency. Fluent readers have the ability to automatically identify words and comprehend simultaneously as they read text. Conversely, less fluent readers expend a great amount of energy in word identification and decoding text. During this process of word-to-word reading, comprehension of the text is impaired as the reader strives to decode (Osborn & Lehr, 2003). Development of fluency requires practice reading for accuracy *and* speed (MacArthur, Alamprese, & Knight,

2010). The goal of fluency is not speed, but rather, less time spent on decoding to allot more time for comprehension. When this goal is achieved, students are able to quickly, but more importantly, accurately identify words in a text and begin to establish connection and meaning of those words. Fluency is regarded as the connection between word recognition and comprehension. In other words, when students achieve greater levels of reading fluency, they are better equipped to comprehend and apply meaning to the context of written words within a text. Recent studies suggest significant correlation between oral reading fluency and comprehension among English language learners. In an investigation conducted by Jiang, Sawaki and Sabatini (2012) found that oral passage reading fluency correlated significantly with comprehension. This finding would suggest that ELLs benefit from literacy instruction which promotes English reading fluency.

Fluency instruction for English language learners should include the use of assisted reading techniques are improved reading rate, reduced student error, and increased comprehension (August, 2003). When these components are in place, students are given opportunity to practice oral reading with the prospect of becoming more efficient and fluent readers. English language learners may benefit from more opportunities to practice oral reading. ELLs may have less opportunity to read aloud with feedback than their English-proficient peers. Some of this practice occurs at home, but parents of ELLs may not be literate in English (August, 2003).

### **Early Literacy in the Secondary ESL Classroom**

More often than not, English language learners who enter U.S. public schools at the secondary level lack exposure to early literacy instruction in English. Therefore, these students

face an enormous struggle to read and comprehend grade level material. For secondary English language learners in particular, appropriate literacy instruction is pivotal for success. ELLs benefit most from literacy approaches which encompass all four language domains: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Additionally, effective secondary literacy instruction of ELLs includes constant explicit connections between knowledge, skills and ideas across lessons, classes and grades as well as across in-school and out-of-school application (Cumming, 2008). In the case of secondary ELLs with lower levels of English language proficiency, these connections between knowledge and skills may refer to the literacy instruction they received in their native languages. For secondary students who are lacking in native language literacy, or whose language does not use a phonetic alphabet, acquiring English proficiency is all the more daunting. The differences in the orthography of the native language influences the degree of difficulty experienced in acquiring a second language, as well as the length of time required to learn to read in English (Tindall & Nisbet, 2010).

Because literacy competencies for high school students differ from those for elementary students, there is a need for continued development in the areas of reading, writing, reasoning, and communication for *all* students (Lester, 2000). This is extremely true for ELLs in high school. Providing these students with the appropriate literacy instruction is crucial for success. Providing secondary ELLs with literacy instruction which introduces the essential elements for reading and writing in English (i.e., early literacy) opens the gateway for connecting prior literacy exposure and knowledge. Literacy instruction for secondary ELLs must be prepared to prepare them for decoding and comprehending grade level content area texts. In the absence of these instructional methods, ELLs cannot reach appropriate levels of language proficiency and reading fluency in comparison to their general education peers. Secondary English language learners

must learn to understand, speak, read and write English; develop academic literacy in English to make the transition to the labor force or into other educational programs; and become socialized into American society (Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

McCollin, O'Shea and McQuiston (2010) suggest that literacy instruction in secondary settings, particularly in classrooms serving culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, must include three key components to be effective. The authors assert that important components of all secondary literacy support must include instruction in word identification, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. Word identification (i.e. decoding of text) is an essential element of early literacy instruction of English for all students. Many struggling secondary readers, particularly those from CLD backgrounds, continue to struggle with word identification (e.g. syllabication and identification of affixes to help break words into parts). Moreover, research has demonstrated that students who expend great energy on decoding typically do not read extensively and, consequently, they do not acquire the background knowledge essential for comprehending secondary-level content-specific material (McCollin, O'Shea & McQuiston, 2010). In other words, before they can be expected to decode and comprehend English text, secondary ELLs must receive explicit literacy instruction for developing skills in phonologic and phonemic awareness, identifying high frequency words, decoding and spelling, as a means of building fluency of reading in English.

All ELLs, but particularly those in a secondary setting, benefit from explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction as well. Many experts believe that vocabulary instruction is pivotal in increasing the level of comprehension. Vocabulary instruction contributes to the overall effectiveness of instruction by developing students' phonological awareness and reading

comprehension (Calderon, Slavin & Sanchez, 2011). Incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction is highly effective in improving the reading skills of ELLs at all ages, particularly secondary students. Calderon, Slavin and Sanchez (2011) list the facets of explicit vocabulary instruction as:

- frequent exposure to a word in multiple forms
- ensuring understanding of meaning(s)
- providing examples of its use in phrases, idioms, and usual contexts
- ensuring proper pronunciation, spelling, and word parts
- teaching its cognates, or a false cognate, in the child's primary language

Students who can decode text more fluently will be able to attain more vocabulary with supportive explicit vocabulary instruction for making background connections. Greater levels of reading fluency allow for increased vocabulary exposure in higher level texts. While wide reading promotes vocabulary growth, ELLs who do not read enough cannot acquire the word wealth that would help them with language learning. When students are able to understand the vocabulary for the content they are reading and hearing, they will have a better understanding of the material (Sibold, 2012).

### **Methodology**

The review of literature strongly suggests that explicit instruction in early literacy benefits English language learners, especially those with limited prior literacy experience. To test this hypothesis, I conducted action research by providing explicit early literacy instruction and collecting formative fluency data for beginning level high school ELLs, in a semi-rural Virginia

county. The participants (see Table 1) were five Spanish-speaking ELLs in grades 9 and 10 at the lowest English proficiency levels. At these levels students may produce and understand no more than short phrases or sentences and have English language errors that impede comprehension (World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2012).

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Proficiency Level</b>	<b>Native Language</b>	<b>Prior Literacy in both native language and English</b>
<b>Student 1</b>	9	1.0	Spanish	limited
<b>Student 2</b>	9	1.0	Spanish	limited
<b>Student 3</b>	10	1.9	Spanish	limited
<b>Student 4</b>	9	1.0	Spanish	moderate
<b>Student 5</b>	10	2.2	Spanish	limited

Parental consent and student assent forms were obtained from all participants. The school division interpreter provided translation and interpretation services as needed for informing parents and students of my research. Upon collecting the necessary consent and assent, I collected baseline data by conducting formative fluency and high frequency word screening assessments for all participating students. Each participating student's current fluency level was identified. Subsequently, during five instructional weeks, I assisted the high school ESL teacher with implementing multiple components of early literacy instruction. I developed and shared a literacy cheat sheet for Spanish-speaking ELLs (appendix p 31). This tool identifies phonological and phonemic awareness skills, such as letter sounds and combinations (i.e. vowel sounds, consonant digraphs, silent letters, etc.) which differ from Spanish to English. The



teacher and I explicitly taught much of the content from the literacy cheat sheet for Spanish-speaking ELLs in small group, guided reading formatted lessons. Students were introduced to these concepts by teacher explanation, modeling and guided application in a leveled English text. Students were then given the opportunity to practice newly introduced phonological and phonemic awareness skills with activities such as board games, sorts and online skill games. Students were also provided with opportunities to translate, pronounce and memorize high frequency words with web-based games and tools. After given an opportunity to practice aforementioned phonological and phonemic awareness skills and high frequency words, all students received guided reading instruction of another leveled English text for practicing oral, partner, and independent reading. These components of early literacy addressed during this study included instruction of high frequency words, phonological and phonemic awareness, and decoding and spelling strategies.

Throughout the five-week period of instruction I provided the ESL teacher with multiple forms of formative assessment tools for gauging literacy development and collecting quantitative fluency data. These formative fluency assessments measured gains in the following literacy components: high frequency words, phonological and phonemic awareness, and decoding and spelling strategies. The teacher and I administered these fluency assessments on at least three different occasions, throughout a five week period. In order to determine the effect of early literacy instruction, I conducted a final round of formative fluency screening assessments to identify each participating student's fluency level at the end of five weeks of embedded early literacy instruction.

The formative fluency and high frequency word assessments used in this research were the “Fluency Timed Reading” tests provided by Reading A-Z (2014). Although no information about the reliability and validity of these assessments is available, I chose to use these assessments because of their user-friendly and easily accessible format for gauging fluency progress. For both the high frequency word and fluency assessments, the ESL teacher or myself met one-on-one with each participating student to administer these assessments.

The high frequency word assessment contained two forms featuring the most commonly used words in printed English text. Each form targeted words of gradually decreasing frequency. Form one targeted the top 32 high frequency words and form two targeted the next 36 high frequency words. Both forms in this assessment include a total of 69 high frequency words. For the administering of this assessment, students were given flash cards of all words in order of their appearance on the assessment. Students were asked to read each word aloud and provide an oral translation of the meaning of each word in Spanish. For each administration of the high frequency word assessments, words not easily recognized by the student (within 3-5 seconds), and words the student was unable to provide oral meaning for, were recorded as incorrect. Therefore, for each data point, students were give a score of  $X/69$ .

The fluency assessments were administered in the form of one-minute timed readings of a leveled passage in order to measure the number and accuracy of words read. The passages were leveled. Each leveled passage contained more difficult sentences than the preceding one. Prior to beginning the assessment, students were given a copy of the leveled passage and told that if they experienced difficulty with a word (spending longer than 3-5 seconds in reading the word), the teacher would provide the word and they should continue to read through the passage. Also, students were instructed to cease reading once the teacher says, “Stop. You’ve now read

for one minute.” The timing of each assessment began only when the student read the first word of the passage. During student reading, the assessment administrator (myself or the ESL teacher) only assisted students with determining an unknown word if the student spent more than 3-5 seconds in decoding the word.

For each data point, a record was kept of errors and number of words per minute (WPM) read by each student.

Errors included:

- skipped words
- mispronounced words
- Word substitutions, including incorrect forms of the word
- Words in the wrong order (for these cases all words were counted incorrect)
- Struggling for a greater length of time than 3-5 seconds

In addition, records were kept of accuracy percentage of words read by each student for each passage. This measure was found by dividing the number of words read correctly by the total number of words read. This result was then multiplied by 100 for calculating the student’s accuracy percentage. Students were expected to read at 90-95% accuracy to be considered fluent at a given level of passage. For each fluency passage reading, students were given a score of  $WPM=X$  and  $Accuracy=X\%$ .

## **Results**

Prior to implementation of early literacy instructional components with the student participants, I conducted initial assessments with each participating student as a means to collect

baseline data. The baseline data for high frequency words was distributed very variably (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Baseline data for high frequency word assessment*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Baseline high frequency word score (X/69)</b>
<b>Student 1</b>	4/69
<b>Student 2</b>	8/69
<b>Student 3</b>	23/69
<b>Student 4</b>	11/69
<b>Student 5</b>	38/69

While none of the students demonstrated mastery of all 69 high frequency words, some knew a great deal more words than others. Student 3 and Student 5 knew far more high frequency words. Student 1, Student 2, and Student 4 knew a smaller number of these high frequency words. It is important to note that many of the words missed were incorrect due to the fact that students could not provide translation of the word in Spanish.

All participants were given the Level F fluency passage in order to determine future level placement for fluency readings. The results of the baseline fluency assessment varied among students (See Table 3).

Table 3. Baseline data for fluency assessment

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Level of Passage</b>	<b>WPM</b>	<b>WPM Target</b>	<b>Accuracy</b>	<b>Accuracy Target</b>
<b>Student 1</b>	<b>F</b>	27	<b>50</b>	68%	<b>90-95%</b>

<b>Student 2</b>	<b>F</b>	33	<b>50</b>	72%	<b>90-95%</b>
<b>Student 3</b>	<b>F</b>	63	<b>50</b>	89%	<b>90-95%</b>
<b>Student 4</b>	<b>F</b>	40	<b>50</b>	77%	<b>90-95%</b>
<b>Student 5</b>	<b>F</b>	68	<b>50</b>	92%	<b>90-95%</b>

The WPM ranged from 27 to 68 words with a target on the baseline assessment being 50 WPM.

Accuracy percentage ranged from 68% to 92%, with the target being 90-95%. After reaching an accuracy percentage of at least 90%, students are then assessed on a higher fluency level.

After collecting baseline data, follow-up formative assessments for high frequency words and fluency data were given at two points during the five weeks of early literacy instruction. The first round of assessments following the baseline collection was given after two weeks of instruction. The second round of assessments following the baseline collection was given after four weeks total of instruction. Following two weeks of early literacy instruction, high frequency word assessment #1 was conducted. On this assessment, the number of words identified and understood increased for all students (See Table 4).

Table 4. *High frequency word assessment #1 and #2 data*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>High frequency word assessment #1</b>	<b>High frequency word assessment #2</b>	<b>Increase from Baseline high frequency word assessment</b> <i>(total number of high frequency words learned)</i>
<b>Student 1</b>	23/69	58/69	54
<b>Student 2</b>	33/69	64/69	56
<b>Student 3</b>	40/69	69/69	46
<b>Student 4</b>	28/69	61/69	50
<b>Student 5</b>	60/69	67/69	29

After another two weeks of early literacy instruction, again, all students increased the number of known high frequency words as indicated by the data collected for assessment #2. In addition, the number of words known from baseline assessment to high frequency word assessment increased for all participants. The average number of words on assessment #2 was 63.8, and the average increase of high frequency words learned from the baseline assessment to assessment #2 was 47. Notably, the final assessment data for Student 5 shows the least increase in words known. However, this participant began the study with the greatest amount of high frequency word knowledge.

All students were assessed for fluency after two weeks of early literacy instruction and again after another two weeks. Following the baseline assessment, each student increased the WPM and accuracy at which they read the Level F passage on fluency assessment #1 (See Table 5).

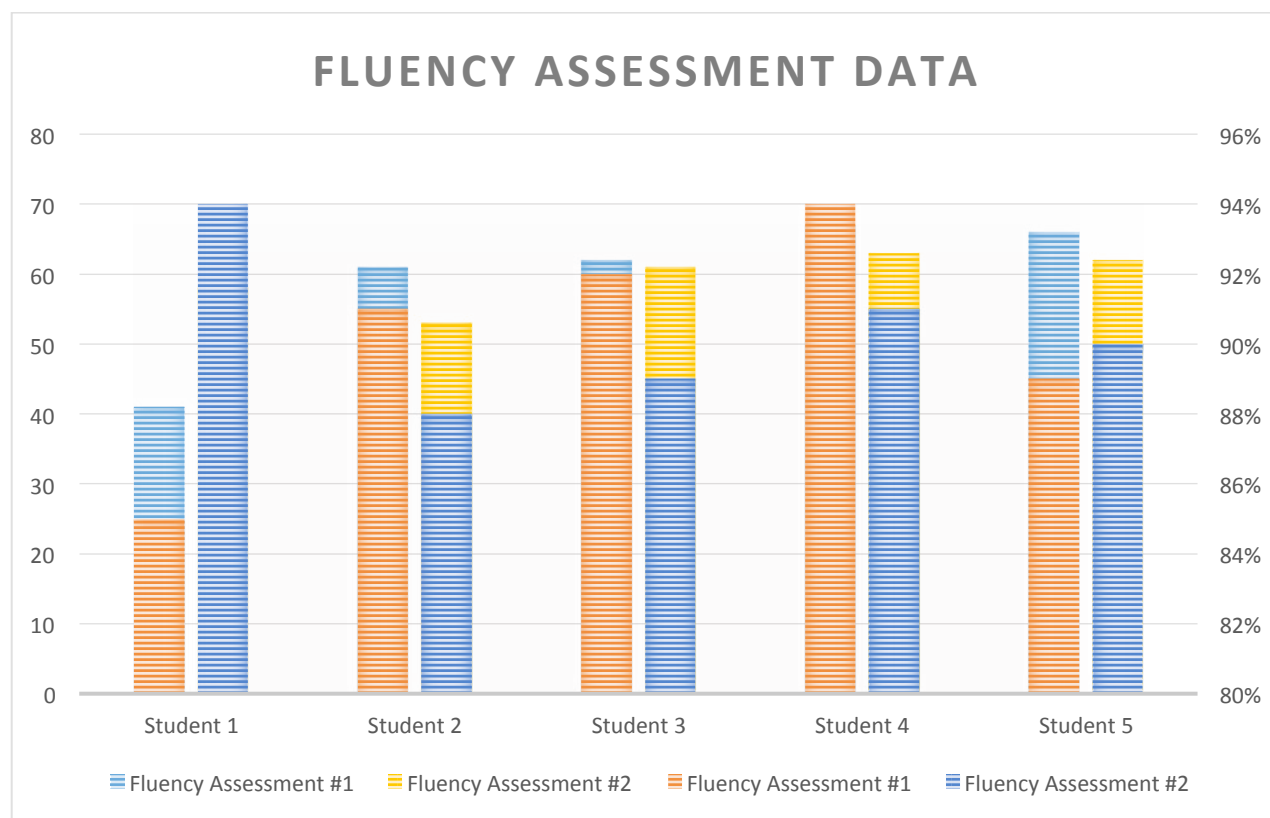
Table 5. *Fluency assessment #1 and #2 data*

	Fluency Assessment #1			Fluency Assessment #2		
	Level	WPM	Accuracy	Level	WPM	Accuracy
<b>Student 1</b>	F	41	85%	F	58	94%
<b>Student 2</b>	F	61	91%	G	53	88%
<b>Student 3</b>	G	62	92%	H	61	89%
<b>Student 4</b>	F	67	94%	G	63	91%
<b>Student 5</b>	H	66	89%	I	62	90%

The average WPM on fluency assessment #1 was 59.4. This was an increase of 13.4 WPM from the average of 46 WPM on the baseline assessments. The average accuracy percentage on fluency assessment #1 was 89.6%, an increase of 13 % from 79.6% average accuracy on the baseline assessment. During fluency assessment #1, two of five participants increased the level of passage they read fluently and two students increased the fluency of a passage they re-read.

Following an additional two weeks of instruction, all participants were given fluency assessment #2. Once again, all students demonstrated increases in the fluency of reading. The average WPM on fluency assessment #2 was maintained at 59.4. The average accuracy percentage on fluency assessment #2 was 90.4%, an increase of 13.8% from 79.6% average accuracy on the baseline assessments. During fluency assessment #2, two of five participants increased the level of passage they read fluently from fluency assessment #2 and three students increased the fluency of a passage they re-read. Through the five-week action research, all students made significant progress on words per minute and accuracy (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Progress Data*



## Conclusion

This research was conducted to test the hypothesis that providing explicit instruction on early literacy for secondary ELLs would improve their reading skills. The results of this action research support this hypothesis and better inform the means by which secondary teachers can support ELLs in their classrooms. The basis for this research was founded on literature exploring the concepts of early literacy instruction and language literacy development, as well as the usefulness of these instructional approaches for building the English language proficiency of ELLs in secondary ESL classrooms. The studies conducted by McCollin, O'Shea and McQuiston (2010) and Calderon, Slavin and Sanchez (2011) indicate that secondary ESL students benefit at large from both purposeful exposure to new vocabulary as well as word context, meaning, structure, and phonological awareness for decoding of text. In the case of secondary ELLs with lower levels of English language proficiency, early literacy instruction, which introduces the essential elements for reading and writing in English, allows for connections to prior literacy instruction received in their native languages (Cumming, 2008). These findings were the foundation on which I developed the instructional tools such as the literacy cheat sheet for Spanish-speaking ELLs. Likewise, this research supported my implementing guided reading methods, to embed early literacy structures into secondary ESL instruction and consequently formatively assess the effectiveness of these instructional methods.

The results of my action research revealed that early literacy instruction can lead to increases of English reading fluency among secondary ELLs. Although the formative data reflects that all participants showed improvement in both recognition and understanding of high frequency words and ability to read fluently in English, there are some factors which may or may not have affected these results. First among these factors is that the students who participated in



this study had been attending school in the U.S. for at least five months prior to conducting the research. During this time, the students had been exposed to a variety of instructional methods and strategies in their ESL classroom which could have exposed them to high frequency words and supported their ability to read fluently in English. Conversely, many of the students could read or decode high frequency words, but did not know meaning in native language.

Also notable is the fact that students increased the WPM and rate of accuracy in the re-reading of fluency passages. For example, one student reread the baseline assessment fluency passage for both fluency assessment #1 and fluency assessment #2. During this time, the student increased from 27 WPM to 58 WPM and 68% accuracy to 94% accuracy. It is understood that each time a student re-reads a given passage, the student may more easily recall words and therefore reread the text later with more ease. If the student had been assessed on another text within the same fluency level, the progress data may have been affected. Finally, time constraints played a role in the outcomes of this study. During the five weeks of research, the participating students missed 4 days of instruction due to snow cancellations. Due to this factor, I was only able to conduct a total of three assessments with baseline collection included. Having the results from a fourth assessment would have been beneficial for establishing trend data. In addition, two students scored at a range on fluency assessment #2 which would have warranted an additional reading of a passage at a higher level. However, due to the time constraints, I was unable to administer an additional assessment during the assessment period for fluency assessment #2. While there were some factors which could have affected the data results, the overall interpretation of the data collected in all three assessments indicates that the instructional measures taken to implement early literacy components in a secondary ESL

classroom were beneficial in increasing the students' ability to read English text more fluently with knowledge of high frequency words.

Current research indicates that the quest for defining best practices in literacy instruction in the secondary ESL classroom is an ongoing process. Even though the sample size of my study and time for research were limited, the findings that early literacy instruction can positively affect the English reading fluency of secondary ELLs are promising. These results provide data that will be beneficial in supporting secondary teachers with developing instruction that better meets the language needs of our high school ELLs.

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- I pledge on my honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.*  
Heather D. Atkinson

## **Appendix Procedural Documents**

This Appendix contains original versions of all of the documentation used in requesting permission for participation, instructing, and gathering data for this research project. School-identifying information has been removed for the purpose of maintaining student privacy.

Included, in order of appearance are:

Parent consent form (p. 28)

Student assent letter (p.29)

Instructional Tools:

Literacy cheat sheet: developed by H. Atkinson (p.31)

Magic E (CVCe patterns) Gameboards (p. 32)

EAster Egg (CVVC patterns) Sort (p. 33)

High frequency word flashcards: Quizlet links (p. 34)

High frequency word assessment sample (p. 34)

Fluency assessment samples (p. 35)

**Parent Consent Form – Action Research**  
ATKINSON

Dear Parents,

My name is Heather Atkinson, and I am the ESL Coach for [REDACTED]. I am also a graduate student in the University of Mary Washington's College of Education. In order to successfully complete my graduate degree, I am conducting a research project from February 12, 2015 to March 26, 2015. Therefore, I am requesting your consent for your child to participate in my research study. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you agree, I will also ask your child for his or her agreement to participate. Please read further to learn about what the study entails.

My research focuses on improving the English reading fluency of high school English Language Learners. In the coming weeks, your student will receive instruction on frequency words, phonological and phonemic awareness, and decoding and spelling. As a participant in my study, I will use your student's assessments to analyze how these strategies affect their English reading fluency.

Students whose parents allow them to participate in the study will be doing the same work as required for all students in the class. However, for the purposes of my research I will use data only from students who have parental consent to participate in the study. There are no extra benefits to any students for participating in the study, and no penalties for any students who do not participate in the study. Whether your child participates in this research or not, the decision will have no effect either positive or negative on the student's grades on any assignment.

All information and data collected from individual students will be kept completely confidential. I will not reveal any confidential information about your child to anyone else, unless required by law to do so. In any reports I make about this research, all students will be given pseudonyms and I will not report any identifying information about individual students or their school.

The benefit of this research is to provide educators with deeper understanding of how ESL students can improve reading fluency. There are few risks to students participating in the study as all students will be performing the same tasks in class. If you decide to withdraw your student from this study, you may do so at any point.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, please sign the form below and return it to me by **Monday, February 16, 2015**. If you have any questions before returning the form, or at any time throughout the duration of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at [hatkinson@culpeperschools.org](mailto:hatkinson@culpeperschools.org). The research described above has been approved by the University of Mary Washington IRB which is a committee responsible for ensuring that research is being conducted safely and that risks to participants are minimized. For information about the conduct of this research, contact the IRB chair, Dr. Jo Tyler, at [jtyler@umw.edu](mailto:jtyler@umw.edu).

Thank you for taking the time to review this letter.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Atkinson, ESL Coach



\*\*\*\*\*

**Form to be completed by Parent or Guardian**

*All of my questions and concerns about the research described above have been addressed.  
I choose, voluntarily, to allow my child to participate in this research project.  
I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.*

\_\_\_\_\_   
print first and last name of child

\_\_\_\_\_   
print name of parent/guardian

\_\_\_\_\_   
signature of parent/guardian

\_\_\_\_\_   
date

**Student Assent Letter  
ATKINSON**

Dear Student,



During the next six week period, you will be learning new words, and tools for improving your reading abilities in English. During this time, I will be doing a research project that is part of my Master's degree requirements at the University of Mary Washington, so I will be learning alongside you. The goal of my research is to determine if teaching high school ESL students high frequency words, phonological and phonemic awareness, and decoding and spelling strategies will affect their English reading fluency.

Your participation is completely voluntary, but please read this letter before deciding whether to participate or not. During the next six weeks, all students in the class will do the same work and complete the same assignments, whether they agree to participate in the research or not. Students who agree to participate will not receive any rewards or benefits, and there will be no penalty to any student who does not wish to participate. If you decide to participate in the study, I will keep your work and information completely confidential.

The parents of all students, ages 17 or younger, have been given a letter requesting their permission for you to participate in this research. If your parents did not grant permission for you to participate, you will not be required to sign this form. However, with your parents' permission to participate, I would encourage you to participate as well. You may decide at any point to no longer participate in this study. Before signing below to agree to participate, please feel free to ask any questions about this study, as I am happy to answer. If you agree to let me use your work and information for my research, please sign the form below.

*Thanks!*

Mrs. Atkinson, ESL Coach



\*\*\*\*\*

*I have read the above letter or have had it read to me, all my questions have been answered, and I agree to participate in the research described above.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Print Student's Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

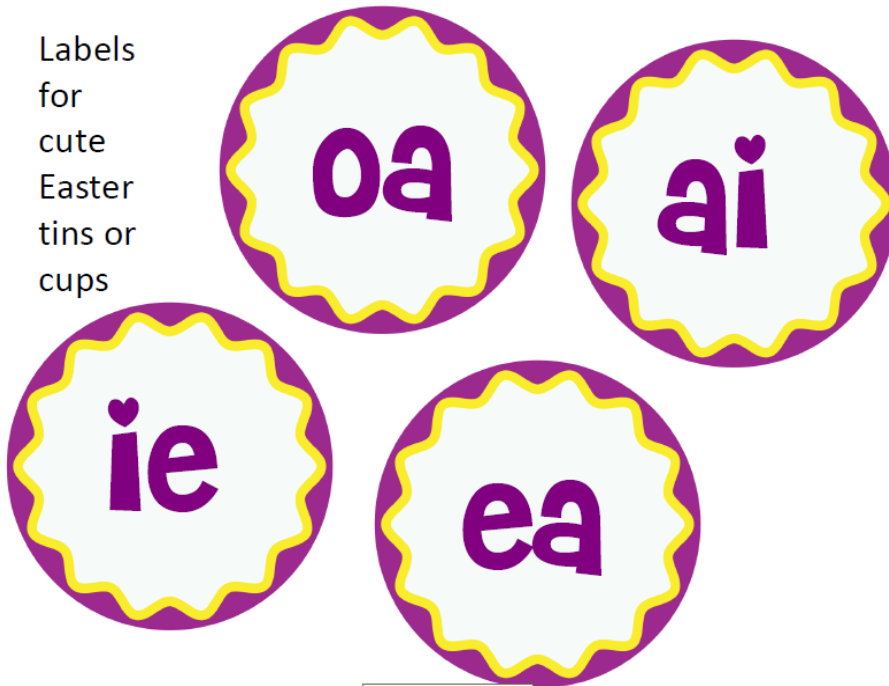
**Literacy Cheat Sheet**





**Easter Egg (CVVC patterns) Sort**

Labels  
for  
cute  
Easter  
tins or  
cups



Sqigglebadgedyellow.png

**easter egg hunt**

After sorting the Easter eggs into buckets, write the words in the boxes.

ai	ea	oa	ie

<http://quizlet.com/60661240/word-list-1-flash-cards/>

<http://quizlet.com/60893329/word-list-2-flash-cards/>

<http://quizlet.com/63432572/word-list-3-flash-cards/>

## High Frequency Word Assessments

Reading a-z

High-Frequency Words  
**Assessment Form 1**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Number of errors \_\_\_\_\_

DIRECTIONS: Have the student read the words in each column and place a check mark next to those he/she incorrectly reads.

<input type="checkbox"/> it	<input type="checkbox"/> go	<input type="checkbox"/> he
<input type="checkbox"/> the	<input type="checkbox"/> am	<input type="checkbox"/> said
<input type="checkbox"/> is	<input type="checkbox"/> are	<input type="checkbox"/> no
<input type="checkbox"/> a	<input type="checkbox"/> they	<input type="checkbox"/> big
<input type="checkbox"/> we	<input type="checkbox"/> on	<input type="checkbox"/> that
<input type="checkbox"/> I	<input type="checkbox"/> like	<input type="checkbox"/> not
<input type="checkbox"/> look	<input type="checkbox"/> in	<input type="checkbox"/> can
<input type="checkbox"/> at	<input type="checkbox"/> all	<input type="checkbox"/> see
<input type="checkbox"/> for	<input type="checkbox"/> of	<input type="checkbox"/> to
<input type="checkbox"/> you	<input type="checkbox"/> and	<input type="checkbox"/> this
<input type="checkbox"/> will	<input type="checkbox"/> she	

Reading a-z

High-Frequency Words  
**Assessment Form 2**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Number of errors \_\_\_\_\_

DIRECTIONS: Have the student read the words in each column and place a check mark next to those he/she incorrectly reads.

<input type="checkbox"/> his	<input type="checkbox"/> me	<input type="checkbox"/> get
<input type="checkbox"/> her	<input type="checkbox"/> too	<input type="checkbox"/> from
<input type="checkbox"/> come	<input type="checkbox"/> some	<input type="checkbox"/> them
<input type="checkbox"/> so	<input type="checkbox"/> have	<input type="checkbox"/> find
<input type="checkbox"/> him	<input type="checkbox"/> one	<input type="checkbox"/> these
<input type="checkbox"/> up	<input type="checkbox"/> two	<input type="checkbox"/> those
<input type="checkbox"/> down	<input type="checkbox"/> little	<input type="checkbox"/> more
<input type="checkbox"/> was	<input type="checkbox"/> what	<input type="checkbox"/> how
<input type="checkbox"/> with	<input type="checkbox"/> out	<input type="checkbox"/> when
<input type="checkbox"/> my	<input type="checkbox"/> there	<input type="checkbox"/> than
<input type="checkbox"/> do	<input type="checkbox"/> your	<input type="checkbox"/> many
<input type="checkbox"/> play	<input type="checkbox"/> be	
<input type="checkbox"/> yes	<input type="checkbox"/> but	

## Fluency Assessments

**Reading a-z** Fluency Passage

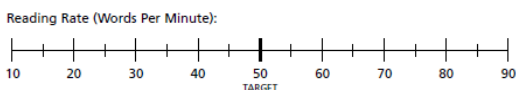
**Level F**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Kim's Flowers  
Word Count: 80

Kim picks some flowers for Mom. 6  
 She walks into the field where 12  
 the flowers grow. 15  
 She picks blue and red flowers. 21  
 She picks orange flowers, 25  
 and she takes some leaves, too. 31  
 She brings the flowers to Mom. 37  
 Mom smiles. 39  
 "Thank you so much," she says. 45  
 Mom fills a white vase with water. 52  
 She puts the flowers in the vase and 60  
 sets the vase on the table. 66  
 People ask, "Where did you get 72  
 the pretty flowers?" 75  
 "Kim picked them," Mom says. 80

Number of Errors:       Accuracy (%):



**Reading a-z** Fluency Passage

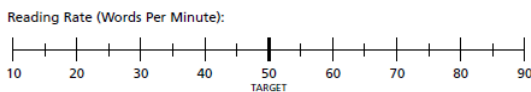
**Level G**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

The Perfect Puppy  
Word Count: 83

Dad and I go to the shelter. 7  
 There are so many different dogs to look at. 16  
 We don't want a dog that's too big. 24  
 We don't want a dog that's too loud. 32  
 And we don't want a mean dog. 39  
 I see a little white puppy with black spots. 48  
 He jumps up in his cage when he sees me. 58  
 He even licks my fingers through the cage. 66  
 I think he is the perfect little puppy. 74  
 My dad says that we will take him home. 83

Number of Errors:       Accuracy (%):



**Reading a-z** Fluency Passage

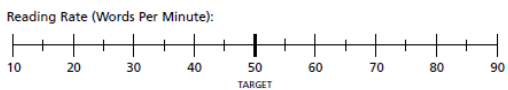
**Level H**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Larry's Big Feet  
Word Count: 98

Larry had the biggest feet in the whole world. 9  
 He even had to get special shoes made for them. 19  
 They seemed to stretch across the entire football field. 28  
 Everyone made fun of Larry's huge feet. 35  
 People called him "football-field feet." 41  
 Larry decided to try out for the football team. 50  
 He put his huge feet on the field. 58  
 His shoes were like a wall. 64  
 The other team couldn't get around them. 71  
 Some teams even gave up when they saw Larry's feet. 81  
 Larry's team won every game. 86  
 They gave Larry a trophy that said, 93  
 "The best feet in football." 98

Number of Errors:       Accuracy (%):



**Reading a-z** Fluency Passage

**Level I**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Crunch  
Word Count: 93

My baby brother, David, wouldn't eat his food. 8  
 Mom pretended his spoon full of food was an airplane. 18  
 She slipped it in his mouth when he said "Baba," 28  
 but he spat it out. 33  
 I was having carrot sticks for lunch. 40  
 Crunch, crunch, crunch, I chewed loudly, and David giggled. 49  
 "Chew with your mouth closed," said Mom, 56  
 but David laughed. 59  
 When he laughed, his mouth opened up wide. 67  
 Mom slipped the food in. 72  
 He chewed his food and laughed, copying me. 80  
 I crunched again, and David laughed and chewed. 88  
 Even Mom laughed, a little. 93

Number of Errors:       Accuracy (%):

