Growth in Oral Reading Fluency of Spanish ELLs with Learning Disabilities

Abstract

The process of learning to read is difficult for many children, and this is especially true for students with specific learning disabilities (LD). Reading in English becomes even more difficult when a student’s home language is not English. For English language learners (ELLs) with a learning disability, acquiring the necessary skills to read fluently is an even greater challenge. The process of repeated reading has been beneficial for many students with LD, yet there is little research showing its effect on ELLs. The current study measured how using the *Great Leaps Reading* program affected the reading fluency of elementary-level, Spanish-speaking ELLs with learning disabilities. Results indicated that all three participants improved in reading fluency and comprehension over the course of the school year. The findings have implications for assisting ELLs with LD in the process of improving their ability to read in English.

Growth in Oral Reading Fluency of Spanish ELLs with Learning Disabilities

**Introduction**

Learning to read is a challenging process for many young children. It is a complicated chain of events that involves more than simply decoding words on a page (Cohen, 2007). According to Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, and Jenkins (2001), “Reading is a complex performance that requires simultaneous coordination across many tasks. To achieve simultaneous coordination across tasks, instantaneous execution of component skills is required” (p. 239). For students with learning disabilities (LD), learning to read is often quite daunting and difficult (Walker, Jolivette, & Lingo, 2005). It has been asserted that Latino/Latina students living in the United States have a great amount of difficulty learning to read (Ross & Begeny, 2011). When trying to learn to read in English, when one’s first language is Spanish, reading becomes even more challenging. For Spanish English Language Learners (ELLs), this problem is even more substantial (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007) depending upon the person’s “fluency in the native language, socioeconomic status, parents' education level, sociocultural adjustment and whether the student has a learning disability” (Farahmandpur, 2015, p. 1). It is not really surprising then that ELLs have some of the highest grade retention and dropout rates of all children in this country (Duran, 2008). Therefore, if ELLs “are to develop reading and writing skills that are comparable to those of their native English-speaking peers, they must develop literacy skills as they continue to increase their oral English language proficiency” (Linan-Thompson, Vaughn, Hickman-Davis, & Kouzekanani, 2003, pp. 221-222).

Statistics predict that Latinos/Latinas will make up one-fifth of this country’s population by 2050 (Cart, 1996) and that Whites will probably be a minority in the United States by 2070 (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Even though the number of ELLs in American schools has increased considerably over the past few decades (Cohen, 2007; Sullivan 2011) and that by 2030, it is estimated that for 40% of students, English will not be their first language (Solari, Petscher, & Folsom, 2014), teachers in this country are still predominantly White, female, middle-class, and linguistically and culturally different from their students (Rodríguez, 2009). It is due to these reasons that Solari, Petscher, and Folsom (2014) posit that:

This population of [ELL] students, given its unprecedented growth across the country and the unique learning challenges they bring to classrooms, is a group that warrants further study to enable a deeper understanding of development trends in key literacy areas. (p. 331)

Therefore, according to Scott and Shearer-Lingo (2002), “Because of the strong relationship between reading failure and general school failure, reading instruction should be studied as an intervention for students with a history of academic and social failure in school” (p. 168). Furthermore, it is essential that special educators, as well as all teachers of reading at the elementary level, find techniques to help their ELL students with disabilities learn how to read more efficiently and effectively.

**Reading Fluency**

Reading fluency is considered to be one of the defining traits of a skilled reader (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 1992; Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Ross and Begeny (2011) define oral reading fluency (ORF) as “a student’s ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression” (p. 604). Fluency is a crucial part of the reading process and a main component of becoming a skilled reader (Lingo, 2014), for it is believed that if readers can spend less time and effort decoding a text, then they will be able to focus more time on ascertaining the meaning of the given passage (Linan-Thompson et al., 2003; Lingo, 2014; Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan, 2013). Consequently, it is believed that more efficient reading fluency can lead to less misinterpretations of a given text (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). For students with LD, there is also strong evidence that increased fluency is related to higher levels of reading comprehension (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Maxwell, 1988).

A successful method of increasing reading fluency for students (with and without learning disabilities), as well as for ELLs, is by the use of repeated reading (Linan-Thompson et al., 2003). In repeated reading, a person practices reading a given text until s/he reaches a particular level of accuracy (Tam, Heward, & Heng, 2006). In other words, “The goal of repeated reading is to increase the speed of word recognition and make decoding of the words automatic, thus enabling the student to concentrate on the meaning of the text” (Walker, Jolivette, & Lingo, 2005, p. 21). The use of repeated reading leads to an increased recognition of sight words and overall vocabulary, and it also provides poor readers with more time to practice (Marchand-Martella et al., 2013). For students with learning disabilities, who frequently have great difficulty reading, the use of repeated reading has shown to be highly effective (Bhat, Griffin, & Sindelar, 2003; Lingo, 2014; Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000; Strickland, Boon, & Spencer, 2013). According to Mercer et al. (2000):

Given the power of fluency in helping students become proficient readers (e.g., fluent with comprehension) and the conditions that students with specific LD in reading are deficient in fluency, it is important that fluency training be used with these youngsters. (p. 182)

In addition, when focusing on ELLs with learning disabilities, the stakes appear to be even higher. There is research “suggesting that targeting ELL’s fluency and comprehension instruction in the early elementary grades may be critical to their later school success and that even intensive remediation efforts during later grades may be unsuccessful” (Begeny, Ross, Greene, Mitchell, & Whitehouse, 2012, p. 136). Therefore, in order to assist ELLs with learning disabilities to become more fluent and efficient readers, the use of repeated reading can be of great assistance. Thus, in an attempt to increase the reading fluency rates of my ELL students with learning disabilities, I introduced the *Great Leaps Reading* programat the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year.

**Method**

**Participants and Setting**

Three intermediate, Spanish-speaking, Mexican American ELL students at Desert Sands Elementary School (DSES; a pseudonym) participated in this study. During the 2014-2015 school year, Monica (age 9) and Orlando (age 10) were in the fourth grade and Antonio (age 12) was in the fifth grade (all student names are pseudonyms). All three students were in bilingual education classes at DSES, taught in both Spanish and English depending on the day. They had all been determined to have specific learning disabilities (SLD) in both reading and math. In addition, Orlando and Antonio received speech/language (SLP) services at school once per week, while Monica received social work services once per week due to academic anxiety.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Research was conducted in the Desert Sands School District (DSSD) in the southwest region of the United States. In DSSD, the Latino/Latina student population is the majority at 75%. It is also reported that, in this region, 35% of Latino/Latina children under the age of 18 live in poverty (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010), which is almost triple of that of White children. More specifically, in the DSSD, it is documented that 46% of the students are “economically disadvantaged.” At Desert Sands Elementary School, 84% of the students are Latino/Latina and 24% of the students are identified as being ELLs. DSES is considered to be a Provisional II school, which means that all students receive free meals throughout the course of the day; therefore, the school, as a whole, is considered to be “economically disadvantaged.”

**Reading Program**

The *Great Leaps Reading* program(Campbell, 1998)(called *Great Leaps* from here forward) is believed to be one of the most widely used supplemental reading programs in the country (Begeny, Laugle, Krouse, Lynn, Tayrose, & Stage, 2010). *Great Leaps* has programs for grades K-2, 3-5, middle, and high school. The program consists of readings in three different sections: phonics, sight phrases, and oral reading passages (called “stories”). This individual reading program takes about 7-8 minutes per day to complete. The student has exactly 60 seconds to read each particular selection (called “probes”), and as the student is reading, the program administrator corrects orally any mistakes the student makes. At the same time, the program administrator marks the mistakes on their copy of the reading probe. After the student completes each reading, the administrator charts the student’s performance, documenting the total number of words read and the number of mistakes made during that 60-second reading block. A student successfully completes the reading, or makes a “leap” as it is called, when a given page is read in a minute or less. In the phonics and sight phrases sections, students must complete the passages with no errors. In the reading passages section, students are allowed up to two mistakes in order to make a leap on to the following probe. In the Phonics section, there are a total of 27 probes; Phrases, 20; and Stories, 80.

*Great Leaps* has been used in select studies with learning disabled children in the elementary grades (Walker, Jolivette, & Lingo, 2005), middle school (Bhat, Griffin, & Sindelar, 2003; Mercer et al., 2000; Scott & Shearer-Lingo, 2002), and high school (Haselden & Webster, 2011; Lingo, 2014). Studies have shown that *Great Leaps* is quite effective in increasing students’ reading fluency (Bhat, Griffin, & Sindelar, 2003; Joseph & Schisler, 2009; Lingo, 2014; Mercer et al., 2000) as well as phonemic awareness and sight word fluency (Scott & Shearer-Lingo, 2002). The program is also considered to be easy to use and implement (Walker, Jolivette, & Lingo, 2005). Despite the number of studies focusing on reading fluency of students with learning disabilities, there has been little, if any, research specifically focusing on programs that increase reading fluency of ELL students with learning disabilities. To help address this concern, an action research study was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of the *Great Leaps Reading* program on ELLs with learning disabilities at the elementary level.

**Assessments**

Two assessments were administered as pre- and post-tests in order to measure growth in student reading fluency: the *Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form* and the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) *Next Benchmark Assessmen*t. The *Great Leaps* Assessment form (Campbell, 1998) charts a student’s current performance in reading fluency. Using specifically identified one-minute probes in phonics, sight words, and short stories helps the program administrator know where to begin the student’s personalized instruction. The DIBELS (Good, III & Kaminski, 2011) is an individually administered assessment used to measure the acquisition of early literacy skills. In the DIBELS *Next*, a student is given a reading passage and asked to read it aloud. Then, the student is asked to retell what s/he had just read about. Three different readings are administered. This assessment measures reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension by calculating the mean words correct per minute (WCPM) of the three passages. The pre-test was administered to each student participant in early September 2014, and the post-test was given in early May 2015.

**Procedure**

The *Great Leaps Reading* program was administered by the grade 3-5 special education (SPED) teacher at DSES each school day, whenever possible (i.e., minus days absent, standardized testing days, and so on). The program was used with the three student participants from early September 2014 to early May 2015. Each student worked individually with the special education teacher without interruption. Monica, Orlando, and Antonio read the three different probes (Phonics, Phrases, and Stories) each session, and they had exactly 60 seconds to read each individual probe. The SPED teacher used a stopwatch to ensure timed accuracy. As each student read, the teacher corrected orally any mistakes the student made. Concurrently, the SPED teacher marked the mistakes on his individual copy of the reading probe in order to review the errors with the participant after completing the given probe. After the participant completed each separate reading, the teacher charted the student’s performance, recording the total number of words read and the number of mistakes made during that 60-second time period.

**Results**

**Monica**

Monica showed great growth in her phonemic awareness and reading fluency over the eight months of using *Great Leaps*. Monica began on probe 1 in Phonics, and by the end of the study, she was at probe 19. At the beginning of our time working together, Monica pronounced several phonemes as a Spanish-speaker would be expected to. For example, when she encountered the “j” sound, she pronounced it as “huh” instead of “juh.” In Spanish, the “j” sounds like a “huh,” while in English, it sounds like a “juh.” Additionally, as Monica moved to the consonant-vowel (cv) sound pattern in the Phonics’ probes, she encountered a few issues as well. For example, when Monica initially read the “si” digraph, she said “see,” yet with the short vowel, it is supposed to sound like “sih,” as in “sit.” This is an understandable error, since in Spanish, “sí” is read as “see,” meaning “yes.” In the Phrases section, Monica went from probe 7 at the beginning of the year to probe 15 by the end of the school year. In the Stories section, Monica really excelled. She started on probe 22 (primer reading level) and finished on probe 46 (second grade reading level); therefore, she went up two reading levels in her *Great Leaps* reading during the course of the school year.

According to Monica’s performance on the *Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form* (see Table 1), it appears that she improved in the areas of both phonemic awareness and fluency. She improved on the number of correctly read sounds/phrases in both the Phonics probes as well as the Pre-primer Reading (PP Reading) and Primary Reading (P Reading) probes.[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, in her 1st grade-level Reading, she went from reading 48 words and making 7 errors (or 48/7) to reading all 103 words with no errors (103/0). Furthermore, her percentage of errors also decreased as her words read increased. Based on Monica’s scores on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade Stories probes on the *Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form*, she is nearing proficiency at the third grade level. On the DIBELS *Next Benchmark Assessmen*t, Monica showed improvement in all three areas of fluency, accuracy, and recall. According to the DIBELS’ scores on her posttest, Monica is reading faster and more accurately. She went from reading 53 Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM) to 77 WCPM and her accuracy rate rose from 87% to 96%. In addition, Monica was also stronger at summarizing the content of what she was reading, as shown by her Quality score increasing from a 1 to a 2 (out of a possible 4).

**Orlando**

Orlando had great success in the *Great Leaps* program and greatly enjoyed the challenge of passing off (or “leaping”) on probes. Orlando began on probe 3 in both Phonics and Phrases, and similar to Monica, he pronounced the “j” sound as “huh” instead of “juh” at the beginning of his phonics work. In addition, Orlando rolled his “r” when he initially pronounced the “r” sound in the Phonics’ section. In the Stories’ section, Orlando began at probe 30 (first grade reading level) and finished on probe 51 (second, almost third, grade reading level). Ultimately, Orlando completed reading two out of the three sections in the reading program a month before the end of the study; he was the only student participant to come close to doing so. After all was said and done, he leaped off on 24 probes in the Phonics section and 17 probes in the Phrases section.

Based on Orlando’s performance on the *Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form* (see Table 2), it appears that he improved in the areas of both phonemic awareness and reading fluency. Orlando earned higher scores on both of his Phonics post-tests (going from a 34/5 to 50/0 and a 42/5 to 55/1) and his Phrases post-tests (moving from a 60/2 to 60/0 and 63/2 to 114/0). In the Stories assessments, Orlando also saw strong increases (e.g., he went from a 72/3 to a 116/2 on his 2nd Reading probe). On his DIBELS *Next Benchmark Assessmen*t post-test, Orlando saw increases in his reading fluency (from 88 WCPM to 98 WCPM) as well as his accuracy (from 95% to 99%). Although he went down one point in his story retelling (from 42 words to 41), his quality rose from a 1 to a 2. In summary, Orlando increased on all of his post-tests except for one, and it was a modest decrease at that.

**Antonio**

The final student participant in this study was Antonio. He was 12 years of age and in the 5th grade. Antonio began on probe 3 in the Phonics’ section at the beginning of the year and finished on probe 14. Antonio did make progress in this area, but overall, he had great difficulty with phonics and was unable to master short vowel sounds by the completion of the study (e.g., he pronounced “stro” as “str-oh” instead of “str-ah”). In the Phrases section, he began on probe 11 and finished on probe 16, which was the least amount of growth of the three students (based on the number of probes leaped). In the Stories section, Antonio began on probe 35, which is a second grade reading level, and finished on probe 49, which is a second, almost third, grade reading level. Therefore, Antonio did make moderate gains in his reading fluency based on his probe completion.

On the *Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form*, it appears that Antonio also improved in the areas of phonemic awareness and reading fluency (see Table 3). Even though phonics was the most difficult area for Antonio, he improved on both of his Phonics post-tests (from a 45/8 to 50/4 and 51/8 to 55/5). In his Phrases assessment, Antonio also increased in his words read and decreased in his percentage of errors (from 60/1 to 60/0 to 76/6 to 115/7). Antonio also improved in his Stories post-test. He went from a 103/2 to 103/1 on his 1st Reading and rose from a 104/4 to a 131/1 on his 2nd Reading. On Antonio’s DIBELS *Next Benchmark Assessmen*t post-test, he continued to improve significantly in all areas. His fluency rose from 89 WCPM to 121 WCPM and his accuracy improved from a 90% to a 95%. In his story Retell, Antonio went from 36 words to 55 words and his Quality improved from a 1 to a 2. In summation, it appear that Antonio improved in both his reading fluency and accuracy over the course of the school year.

**Discussion**

Based on the data presented in this study, all three ELL student participants’ reading fluency scores increased on both measures (*Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form* and the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) *Next Benchmark Assessmen*t). As is evident from the participants’ 3rd and 4th grade-level reading scores on the *Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form*, the student participants were also getting closer to reading on grade-level; in particular, both Monica and Orlando increased almost two grade levels by the end of the year. Additionally, when asked, all three participants stated that they felt that they were better, more confident, readers by the end of the school year than at the beginning of the school year when *Great Leaps* administration began. Therefore, it is evident that *Great Leaps* positively affected the students’ reading fluency, comprehension, and overall confidence.

According to Solari, Petscher, and Folsom (2014), “The early grades are when intensive instruction in critical literacy skills that have been shown to ameliorate reading risk such as basic reading skills, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and decoding is traditionally provided” (pp. 344-345). Furthermore, for ELLs, who have some of the highest-grade retention and dropout rates in the United States (Duran, 2008), it is essential that educators find better methods to help linguistically diverse students learn to read in English in order to succeed academically. Using the *Great Leaps Reading* program has the potential to assist ELL students with learning disabilities learn to read English more efficiently and effectively, and this increase in reading skills can benefit most, if not all, academic areas.

**Implications**

In order to address the reading needs of ELLs with learning disabilities in this nation’s schools, using repeated reading programs can be highly effective. Reading programs, such as *Great Leaps,* are easy to use, demand a minimal amount of time, can be used in a variety of instructional settings, and require minimal teacher training (Strickland, Boon, & Spencer, 2013). Therefore, it is believed that including repeated reading programs into schools with high percentages of ELL students, can benefit both ELL students as well as those with specific learning disabilities. By doing so, teachers can help support struggling students become successful and reach their intellectual potential.

**Limitations**

Research of this nature must always be viewed within the larger academic context. Although the special education teacher worked with the student participants as frequently as possible on the *Great Leaps Reading* program, the students also received reading instruction in their own individual classrooms via various techniques, methods, and instructional tools. Therefore, it is impossible to attribute all reading growth specifically to this program, yet it is apparent that the *Great Leaps* program did positively influence the participant’s reading scores. A limitation to this study is the small sample size. Due to the small number of student participants, it is difficult to generalize these findings on a larger scale. Further studies should be conducted with larger sample sizes to assess growth in reading fluency due to the *Great Leaps Reading* program. Another limitation to this study is that all of the participants were Spanish-speakers of Mexican descent. Further studies involving elementary-level students of varying nationalities would help solidify the findings in this study.

Additional note: while there is good reason to be concerned about the disproportional amount of ELLs in special education programs (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Klingner & Artiles, 2006), this article solely addressed a method to help ELL students with diagnosed learning disabilities be more successful in academics; the issue of overrepresentation was not approached.

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Table 1 - Monica

*Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form*

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Pre-Test Post-Test

Phonics cv-vc[[3]](#footnote-3) 30/3 50/4 (out of 50)

Phonics cvc[[4]](#footnote-4) 36/3 55/1 (out of 55)

PP Reading 55/1 60/0 (out of 60)

P Reading 44/7 61/5 (out of 126)

1st Reading 48/7 103/0 (out of 103)

2nd Reading n/a[[5]](#footnote-5) 131/2 (out of 131)

3rd Reading - 111/5 (out of 168)

4th Reading - 84/3 (out of 173)

*DIBELS Next Benchmark Assessmen*t

Pre–Test Post-Test

Fluency 53 WCPM 77 WCPM

Accuracy 87% 96%

Retell 48 Words / 1 Quality 70 Words / 2 Quality

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Table 2 - Orlando

*Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form*

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Pre-Test Post-Test

Phonics cv-vc 34/5 50/0 (out of 50)

Phonics cvc 42/5 55/1 (out of 55)

PP Reading 60/2 60/0 (out of 60)

P Reading 63/2 114/0 (out of 126)

1st Reading 95/2 103/0 (out of 103)

2nd Reading 72/3 116/2 (out of 131)

3rd Reading - 113/1 (out of 168)

4th Reading - 113/0 (out of 173)

*DIBELS Next Benchmark Assessmen*t

Pre–Test Post-Test

Fluency 88 WCPM 98 WCPM

Accuracy 95% 99%

Retell 42 Words / 1 Quality 41 Words / 2 Quality \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Table 3 - Antonio

*Great Leaps Reading Elementary Assessment Form*

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Pre-Test Post-Test

Phonics cv-vc 45/8 50/4 (out of 50)

Phonics cvc 51/8 55/5 (out of 55)

PP Reading 60/1 60/0 (out of 60)

P Reading 76/6 115/7 (out of 126)

1st Reading 103/2 103/1 (out of 103)

2nd Reading 104/4 131/1 (out of 131)

3rd Reading - 138/2 (out of 168)

4th Reading - 116/5 (out of 173)

*DIBELS Next Benchmark Assessmen*t

Pre–Test Post-Test

Fluency 89 WCPM 121 WCPM

Accuracy 90% 95%

Retell 36 Words / 1 Quality 55 Words / 2 Quality

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1. It was decided by the IEP team that, due to lack of further need, Monica was exited from social work services during her annual IEP meeting in December 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In lieu of testing the Pre-primer Reading and Primary Reading probes in the Stories section, as is on the assessment form, I chose to use the same numbered probes in the Phrases section. I wanted to assess student growth in the area of fluency in reading phrases; therefore, I adjusted the pre/post-test accordingly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phonemes have a pattern of consonant/vowel or vowel/consonant (e.g., ab, ti) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Phonemes have a pattern of consonant/vowel/consonant (e.g., cub, rob) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Did not assess due to low score on 1st Reading [↑](#footnote-ref-5)