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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this non-experimental study was to determine whether English language proficiency has an effect on phonological awareness skills among second graders. A convenience sample of 101 second graders from a school in Northwest Arkansas was gathered. Secondary data from the Phonological Awareness Screening Test was analyzed to determine whether there was a difference in phonological awareness skills between those students who were native English speakers and English language learners. An analysis of the results found that there is a significant difference between phonological awareness skills of English language learners and native English speakers. The students who were native English speakers had stronger phonological awareness skills relative to English language learners.

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, students are struggling to read. In 2019, only 35% of fourth graders were proficient in reading according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] scores. This assessment in 2019 revealed a two percent point decline since 2017 (Green & Goldstein, 2019). Recognizing the importance of reading, these results are leading to educational policy changes in many states. In fact, Mississippi was one of the first states to make policy changes, and they were the only state to show increased reading scores in 2019 (Hanford, 2019). The detailed NAEP report, though, also revealed a growing achievement gap between English language learners [ELL] and native English speakers. Carnoy and Garcia (2017) found that Hispanic English language learners and Asian English language learners continue to lag behind their native English-speaking classmates on measures of reading achievement. This, paired with the fact that the number of ELL students in schools is growing (Mitchell, 2018), emphasizes the importance of recognizing the different reading skills of ELL and native English speakers.

THE READING SKILLS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Many ELLs enter school with lower reading skills than their native English-speaking peers (Linklater, O' Connor, & Palardy, 2009). When a student's second language is English, their reading abilities in English will often fall behind native English speakers. Yesil-Dagli (2011) states that a high percentage of ELLs' oral reading fluency falls in the at-risk level. This is not because they do not possess the ability to read in English, but often because English language learners do not always come to school with the early literacy skills that are the

foundation of reading success. One of these skills is phonological awareness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Phonological awareness is a key component of early literacy. In early grades, such as preschool and kindergarten, phonological awareness is the best predictor of a student's word reading ability as they progress through school (Lonigan & Goodrich, 2018; Russak, 2013; Yesil-Dagli, 2011). Pynell (2012) found that students in kindergarten who had high phonological awareness scores also had high scores, several years later, on a third-grade reading examination known as the Virginia SOL. Since the development of phonological awareness in students is critical for students' reading success, it is an important part of an early childhood curriculum, not only for native English speakers, but for ELLs as well.

Phonological awareness also plays a role in the reading growth of ELLs. Lower phonological awareness skills have been shown to correlate with lower reading ability in ELLs (Bing, Bingxia, Jinfen, & Hui, 2015; Linklater, et al., 2009; Yeung & Ganotice, 2014). Kalia, Lane, and Wilbourne (2018) suggest that a young child's phonological segmenting skills can predict their native language and second language vocabulary skills. So not only does it affect reading in their native language, but also in their second language. If an ELL does not have adequate phonological awareness skills, they will struggle with learning to read. It is, however, important to make a distinction between people's phonological awareness skills in L1 (their native language) and L2 (their learned language). The phonological awareness skill level in a student's native language may differ from the skill in their learned language. It is possible, however, for these skills to be transferred across languages.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN L1 VERSUS L2

Cross-transfer of skills means that a student can transfer skills learned in their native language to a new language they are learning. In this case, it may be possible for students to transfer phonological awareness skills from L1 to L2 (Kalia, et al., 2018; Reynolds, LopezVelasquez, & Valentin, 2017; Yeung & Ganotice, 2014). Theoretically, if a student has good phonological awareness skills in his/her native language, he/she should also have good phonological awareness skills in English. Yeung and Ganotice (2014) state that if L1 and L2 phonological awareness is transferred across languages, it supports the idea that phonological skills underlie both L1 and L2 reading. While phonological awareness may be a foundational skill for both L1 and L2 reading, there is a difference between a student's phonological ability and their phonological skill. The difference between their ability and their skill may be affected by what is called *L1-L2 distance*.

L1-L2 distance is the difference between a person's native language and the learned language. Saeigh-Haddad (2019) defines it as whether the phonological units that people are asked to manipulate are available or unavailable in their native language. These different features in language may interfere with the acquisition of phonological awareness (Russak, 2013). For example, there are sounds in the English language that other languages do not include. If a person's native language is not English, they may not have access to these sounds in their

phonological memory. Russak and Saigh-Haddad (2011) investigated this phenomenon and found that students had a harder time manipulating new L2 phonemes and performed poorly on tasks that included phonemes that were not original to their native language. Russak also found that this affected Spanish speakers' spelling of new English phonemes. If a student cannot access and correctly pronounce a sound, they will not be able to accurately read or spell that sound. If an ELL is to grow in their reading skills, phonological awareness training in English sounds is essential.

EFFECTS OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS TRAINING

Phonological awareness training is beneficial to the growth of reading skills of ELL students. Compared to groups that did not receive phonological awareness training, Chinese students who received a 10-week phonological awareness training course in English subsequently performed better on reading tasks (Bing, et al., 2015). Additionally, phonological awareness training in English benefited the word reading skills of Taiwanese children (Li & Chen, 2016). Phonological awareness training also helps ELL students meet benchmark standards set by the state. Zoski and Erickson (2017) found that the number of ELL students who met the DIBELS phoneme segmentation benchmark increased dramatically after receiving phonological awareness training. When given phonological awareness training in L2 language, students are able to increase their reading skills in that language. There are also other factors that can impact an ELL's reading ability.

OTHER SKILLS THAT IMPACT ELL'S READING ABILITY

ELLs' reading ability can also be affected by their vocabulary skills, oral language ability, or background knowledge. An ELL will have higher oral language ability depending on when they were introduced to English. Students introduced to English before preschool often develop better English language skills and higher vocabulary knowledge (Lonigan & Goodrich, 2018). Oral language ability and vocabulary are two major factors in a student's ability to comprehend written material. If a student is able to read the word, but does not have the vocabulary knowledge, they will not comprehend what they are reading. Because of this, oral language and vocabulary can also impact the reading comprehension of ELL students. Additionally, Yesil-Dagli (2011) discovered that letter naming fluency, in addition to vocabulary and phonological awareness, could predict oral reading fluency in ELLs.

Overall, the findings suggest that phonological awareness, among other skills, does play an important role in the reading ability of English language learners. Phonological awareness is a foundational skill for all students learning how to read and must be directly taught to all students, including ELLs. General intervention in phonological awareness is effective for ELL students, but because of the phonological differences in languages, this skill may require different strategies for teaching.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine whether English language proficiency has an effect on phonological awareness among second grade students. For this study, English language

proficiency is defined as whether English is the student's first or second language. It can also be referred to as non-ELL or ELL. In addition, phonological awareness will be defined as the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words (Bottari, 2020). Specifically, phonological awareness skills will be considered in terms of the PAST.

Although there is a wide range of research on phonological awareness, there is not a wide range of research about ELLs and their phonological awareness skills. The results from this study may be beneficial to school administrators and literacy specialists, especially to administrators who develop literacy curriculum in schools. Specialists who focus on ELLs may also benefit from the study and gain additional insight into ELLs. Finally, these findings may serve as a foundation for future research that may help us understand if different interventions, or more intense interventions, are needed for ELLs with deficient phonological awareness.

HYPOTHESES

It is hypothesized that the level of English language proficiency will have an effect on phonological awareness skills among second graders.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of 101 second grade students from a school in Northwest Arkansas. The sample consisted of 56% males and 44% females. 75.4% of the students qualified for free/reduced lunch. 56.4% of students were ELLs. 43.6% of students were not ELLs.

INSTRUMENTATION

The primary instrumentation for this study was the Phonological Awareness Screening Test [PAST] developed by Kilpatrick (2018). This instrument contains 10 sections, labeled D through M, comprising a total of 52 questions that are given by the instructor and then answered orally by the student. The test is administered to one student by an instructor. The administrator orally gives the student the prompt, and the student is required to answer the prompt with the correct response. The instructor writes an X for automatic if the question is answered correctly under 2 seconds, a 1 if the correct response is provided but takes longer than 2 seconds, and a 0 for incorrect. Then the instructor totals the number of correct and automatic responses for each section. For sections D (including subsections D1 and D2) and E (including subsections E2 and E3), each subsection includes three questions, and the student must correctly answer two of these three questions to pass a section. For sections F through M, each section contains five questions, and the student must correctly answer three out of five to pass a section. A student's total correct score is the number of correctly answered items, regardless of whether the answer was automatic (provided in less than two seconds) or not. Thus, for this total score, 52 is the maximum.

According to the initial report developed by Kilpatrick and McInnis (n.d.), the PAST has strong concurrent validity with other phonological awareness subtests from tests such as the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing. Additionally,

the PAST had a stronger correlation ($r=.60$) with word level reading tests in fifth grade than the CTOPP ($r=.47$). The test-retest reliability of the PAST was also acceptable ($r=.82$).

PROCEDURE

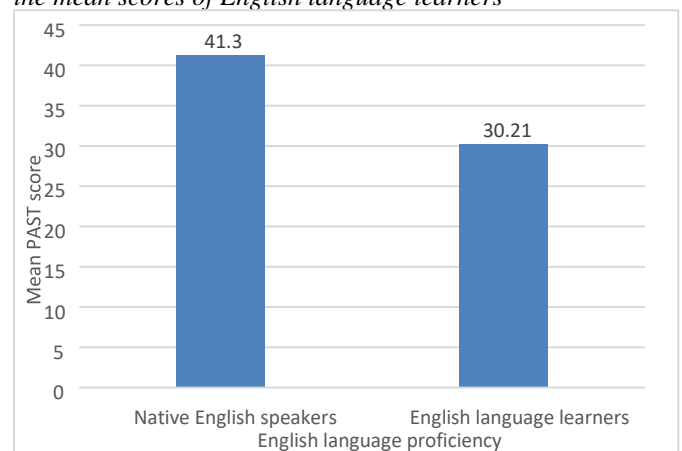
This was a casual, comparative nonexperimental study. Once IRB approval was obtained, the principal from the elementary school in Northwest Arkansas was emailed and asked to submit the deidentified PAST data from second grade classes, along with the demographic information. The test data had already been scored and marked by the literacy specialists at the school. The data also contained information regarding students' English language learning status. Once this data was obtained, the data was analyzed using an independent samples t-test. The hypothesis was examined with an alpha level of 0.05.

RESULTS

An independent samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean PAST scores of native English speakers to the mean score of ELLs. A significant difference was found $t(99) = 5.31$, $p < .0001$. The mean PAST score of native English speakers ($m=41.30$, $sd = 10.57$) was significantly different from the mean PAST score of ELLs ($m=30.21$, $sd = 10.26$). The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis could be supported.

Figure 1

The mean PAST scores of native English speakers compared to the mean scores of English language learners



DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This study found a statistically significant difference in the phonological awareness skills among second grade students in an elementary school in Northwest Arkansas. Native English speakers had a higher average overall score on the Phonological Awareness Screening Test than ELLs. These results led to the finding that English language proficiency does have an effect on phonological awareness skills among second graders.

LIMITATIONS

The data utilized for this study was obtained from only one school in Northwest Arkansas. This limitation in geographic sampling led to a smaller sample size, and the findings may not

be representative of a broader population. Additionally, since the study focused on one area of Arkansas, the findings may not generalize to the whole state or the whole country. Phonological awareness skills may vary in different areas of the country.

Secondly, since this was a casual, comparative study, not all variables were controlled. Demographics such as gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity/race could have a role in the students' level of phonological awareness skill. The methods of instruction used by the teachers could also have an effect on the students' phonological awareness skills. Also, our data set did not include important variables such as special education status.

IMPLICATIONS

The results from this study may be informative for educators, as well as interventionists, administrators, or even legislators. The need for phonological awareness has been demonstrated in many research studies (Lonigan & Goodrich, 2018; Russak, 2013; Yesil-Dagli, 2011), and curriculums involving direct instruction in phonological awareness have subsequently been implemented in schools, but students who are not native English speakers have been found to struggle to acquire reading skills. This study adds to this body of knowledge by demonstrating that, at least in this sample of children in Northwest Arkansas, students who are non-native English speakers struggle with one critical aspect of reading, phonological awareness. These findings indicate that ELLs likely need more instruction in phonological awareness than is currently being provided.

Phonological awareness is a critical prerequisite for successful reading. If ELLs lack phonological awareness skills, they will continue to have lower reading scores as documented by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Carnoy & Garcia, 2017). In order to close this gap, educators must address the roots of the problem. While the roots may vary among ELL students (vocabulary, oral language skills, phonological awareness, etc.), the students still deserve support in their schools. While some schools have specialists designed to help ELL students, many do not. Every student deserves the best education they can receive and an equal opportunity to excel.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although there has been research conducted about phonological awareness skills using different methods of assessment, there has not been a lot of research done using the Phonological Awareness Screening Test. Additional research on this specific instrument and its effectiveness would be beneficial to teachers and administrators. It is widely used in the state of Arkansas and further research can help the assessment be utilized in other states.

Additionally, further research can be conducted with the PAST. For instance, the PAST may be useful in determining students' response to interventions involving phonological awareness. Also, the PAST may be useful in designing more individually tailored interventions for ELLs, as well as native English speakers.

Lastly, research could be conducted on the differences between phonological awareness skills among ELLs. Overall, the ELL students had a lower average on the PAST, but there are many other questions that need to be answered pertaining to the

potential differences between various groups of ELLs. For instance, students with certain ethnic backgrounds may have more, or less, of a disadvantage in phonological awareness as they strive to learn to read in English. Differences in phonological awareness skills may be attributed to the student's first language and how different the phonology is from English. For instance, Spanish and English may have a closer phonology than Marshallese and English. Hopefully, additional research will, in the future, inform intervention strategies to help ELLs close the gap in reading achievement.

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Mackenzie Thompson is from Birmingham, AL. She started at Harding in the fall of 2015 and studied Elementary Education and received a minor in Spanish. She finished her undergraduate degree in 2019 and immediately started a Master's program. She graduated from Harding in May of 2020 with a Masters in Reading with Dyslexia. She currently teaches second grade in Cabot and plans on using her Masters in the future to become a reading specialist. She would like to assist students who struggle with reading, especially students with dyslexia. She also is interested in utilizing her Spanish minor to teach English language learners.