The Impact Of Literature Circles On The Reading Comprehension Of English Language Learners

Madeline Fletcher
University of South Carolina

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THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON THE
READING COMPREHENSION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

Madeline Fletcher

Bachelor of Arts
Furman University, 1978

Master of Science
University of South Carolina, 2008

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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Accepted by:

Catherine Compton-Lilly, Major Professor
Todd Lilly, Committee Member
Leigh D’Amico, Committee Member
Rhonda Jeffries, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Parrish Fletcher, my daughter, Madeline Hall Fletcher, and my sister, Eve Chandler, without whose support it would never have been written.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge those people whose help and guidance have been important in enabling me to complete this dissertation.

First, Elisabeth Allen, who teaches English for speakers of other languages at Research Site High School, enthusiastically welcomed me into her classroom and allowed me to work with her students on the action research project outlined herein.

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Finally, Dr. Susan Schramm-Pate, Dr. Richard Lussier, and Dr. Todd Lilly have challenged me, encouraged me, and made me think. I will always appreciate their wise direction.
ABSTRACT

This Dissertation in Practice was written in response to a Problem of Practice in the high school in which I work. Close to 40% of the students in my school are Hispanic, and more than two thirds of these are English language learners. Like so many ELLs around the country, these students struggle to learn English while also keeping up with their other classes, which are not taught in their native language. Almost half of the ELLs at my school end up dropping out before graduating.

To address this problem, I undertook an action research study with the goal of improving the English reading comprehension of the ELLs at my school. To accomplish this goal, I worked with a small class of ESOL students for one semester, using literature circles. Literature circles, as described by Harvey Daniels (2002) and others, have been found to be an effective way to increase the English reading comprehension of ELLs, while respecting their culture and experiences.

This dissertation describes in detail the action research methodology used, the findings of my research, and the implications of my study.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I’m so hungry.” “Ahuda,” a 16-year-old immigrant from the Central African Republic who spent seven years in a refugee camp in Chad, is no stranger to hunger. Food insecurity is common in the community in which I work, but few if any of the other students at my school have experienced the near starvation that Ahuda has. But today is different. Ahuda is hungry today because she missed lunch in order to attend a tutoring session for her English II class.

Like most of the English language learners at Research Site High School, Ahuda struggles to keep up in her classes because of her lack of English reading comprehension skills. Consequently, she often misses lunch to do school work. Even with this extra effort, Ahuda sometimes feels hopeless about her chances for success.

Background

Public education is a cornerstone of American life. In 1785, second United States President John Adams wrote, “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expenses of it” (para. 4). And in 1786, third President Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness” (para. 2).
In spite of its long-standing commitment to education for all, the United States has grappled with how best to educate English language learners (ELLs). In the 1700s and early 1800s, the prevailing thought was that all citizens should learn the common language of English, and all school lessons should be taught in English (Cavanaugh, 1996, p. 40). As the 19th century wore on, however, English-only education gave way in some places to a bilingual approach. For example, by 1870, education was provided in German throughout Chicago. But in 1889 the Compulsory Education Law was passed in Illinois, which required English-only instruction (Cavanaugh, 1996, p. 41). This English-only attitude continued throughout the country into the 20th century, growing stronger with the “Americanization Movement” after World War I (Cavanaugh, 1996, p. 42).

Between 1917 and 1921, thirty-one states passed laws that contained one or more of the following propositions: all schools to be conducted in English; no German to be taught in public elementary or, in some states, in any elementary schools; no modern foreign languages to be taught in one or either type of elementary schools. After 1921 still other states joined the group. (Good, 1962, p. 511)

The anti-German laws were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923 (Baron, 2005, para. 18), but English-only sentiment remained strong. However, in 1964, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act forbade discrimination based on, among other things, national origin (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015), and in 1974 the Supreme Court of the United States proclaimed that schools must provide equal educational opportunities to students whose native language was not English (Cavanaugh, 1996, p. 43). Today, in spite of hundreds of years of struggling to make educational equality a reality, no perfect solutions have been found.
According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), English language learners made up almost one tenth of all public-school students in the U.S. in 2012 – 2013, and “it is estimated that by 2020, one in four learners in US classrooms will be an English language learner” (Bondy, 2016, p. 764). Although most experts today agree that instruction in one’s native language is the most effective (Escamilla, 2009; Pacheco, David, & Jimenez, 2015), these students are usually forced by law or by practice to be taught everything in English. Moreover, English language learners are often made to feel deficient: “Since monolingualism is presented as the norm, language-minority students are by default defined as not normal and as ‘behind’ from the onset” (Escamilla, 2009, p. 435). These factors often lead to a lack of academic success.

Indeed, only 73% of South Carolina students with limited English proficiency graduated from high school in 2014 (U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

Much has been written about the “essentially oppressive nature” (Breen, 1999, p. 52) of education. The education of English language learners, in particular, has been criticized as a way to “reproduce social inequality” (Malik & Mohamed, 2014, p. 63). Lopez-Robertson and Schramm-Pate (2013) argue that “the ideology that stands behind academic English as the dominant language in the US is a combined commitment to white, Anglo supremacy, middle-class norms, and patriarchal gender roles” (p. 44).

However, my purpose in undertaking this action research study is grounded in the belief expressed by Malik and Mohamed (2014): “Since English has become a lingua franca, the oppressed should appropriate it for their own use after stripping away its fetishization. This would be the best strategy to combat English as cultural capital” (p. 73). The English language should not be culturally overvalued and should never be used to
marginalize any student. However, since English is used as the common language in U.S. schools, it is of practical value for all students to become proficient in its use.

**Summary of the Statement of the Problem**

Although the goal of my school district’s ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) program is “to provide equal educational opportunities to students who have a primary or home language other than English,” (County Schools, 2016b) English language learners are usually excluded from equal educational opportunities because they are taught almost exclusively in English. Numerous studies have shown that education in one’s native language is most effective (Escamilla, 2009; Pacheco et al., 2015), but ELLs in my district are instructed almost entirely in English only and are provided with English-language textbooks only. Therefore, if the ELLs at the research site are to be academically successful, they must improve their English reading comprehension.

The English language learners at my high school are assisted by three full-time ESOL teachers, two of whom instruct them entirely in English, as do all their other teachers. The ESOL teachers employ iLit, an internet-based reading program by Pearson. Although the ESOL teachers believe the iLit program helps some of their students improve their English reading comprehension, a number of the ELLs at the school continue to struggle, as measured by their teachers’ observations, their report card grades, and their graduation rates.

**Summary of the Purpose of the Research**

In “Considerations for Literacy Coaches in Classrooms with English Language Learners,” Escamilla (2007) says, “Just as ‘one size fits all’ literacy programs are not likely to serve the needs of students learning to read and write, ‘one size fits all’ ESL
programs are unlikely to serve the needs of ELL students” (p. 5). Although few
promising literacy strategies for intermediate and advanced ELLs have been identified,
recommendations include the use of literature circles (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Day
& Ainley, 2008; Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Hill, Johnson, & Noe, 1995). Elhess and Egbert
(2015) describe a literature circle as “an activity in which members meet to discuss and
respond to a book that they are all reading” (p. 13). This method is consistent with
psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s socio-cognitive theory, as explained by Stapa (2007) and
Iddings, Risko, and Rampulla (2009). This theory maintains that “cognitive development
requires social interaction, as learning is a socially situated activity” (Stapa, 2007, p.
137). Using literature circles with ELLs has the additional advantage of allowing these
students to discuss English texts in their native languages, and “leveraging heritage
languages can . . . facilitate students’ English language development” (Pacheco et al.,
2015, p. 50).

The purpose of this action research study was to explore the impact of literature
circles on the English reading comprehension of a group of English language learners at a
high school in South Carolina. I worked with one of the ESOL classes at my school for
90 to 180 minutes per week for one semester. I worked with six students whose English
reading levels varied from grade 1 to grade 3.

Research Question

Despite the use of the iLit reading program, many of the English language
learners at the high school in which I work struggle with English reading comprehension.
Bolos (2012) points out that “when choosing instruction for ELLs, it is important to
consider not only the students’ linguistic needs but also the students’ personal learning
styles” (p. 18). Incorporating literature circles into the curriculum offered the ESOL students at my school additional reading support that might better have matched some students’ learning styles.

The following research question guided this study:

**What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews?**

I studied the impact of participation in literature circles on the English reading comprehension of the ELLs in the research study. In deciding how best to gauge the success of ELL participation in literature circles, I initially considered the use of a standardized reading comprehension pretest and posttest. However, some researchers argue that standardized assessments do not accurately reflect the reading capabilities of non-native speakers of English (Croce, 2010). Others, such as August, Francis, Hsu, and Snow (2006) point out that “disruption of comprehension by a single limitation in the face of generally good comprehension skills is, unfortunately, invisible in standardized comprehension assessments” (p. 222). Therefore, standardized reading assessments were not used, but instead the growth of student reading comprehension was evaluated through informal assessments such as teacher observations and student interviews.

**Scope, Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

The scope of this action research study was confined to one class of six English language learners at a small high school in South Carolina during the spring of 2018. Although reading comprehension is a problem for many students, the ELL population at
this school is growing rapidly, and ELLs are the most likely to drop out of this school. Therefore, the delimiting choice of English language learners as student-participants was made.

There were two major limitations to this study. First, this study was limited by its time frame. I had only 15 weeks in which to implement my action plan and collect data. Additionally, as an action research study, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population (Mertler, 2014).

This action research study rests upon several assumptions. First, it was assumed that English reading comprehension would continue to be a serious problem for the English language learners in my school. Although the school’s ESOL teachers had used the iLit reading program by Pearson for more than a year at the outset of this study, their students still struggled with reading comprehension. It was also assumed that the student-participants would evaluate the study honestly. Students’ grades were not affected by their assessment of the study, and anonymity of responses was maintained, so I made the assumption that students would be candid in their responses.

**Significance of the Study**

English language learners are growing at a faster rate than are native-English-speaking members of the school-age population in America (Callahan, 2013). This trend is evident in my school, where the percentage of Hispanic students has almost quadrupled in the last 13 years and ELLs now number over 250 of the approximately 1,000 students (M. Noel, personal communication, Aug. 17, 2016). Unfortunately, the academic success of these English language learners is often hindered because their classes are taught almost exclusively in English. Indeed, close to half of our ELLs drop out of
school before graduation. Finding a way to improve the English reading comprehension of the emerging bilinguals at my school could potentially bolster their academic success and in turn prevent dozens of students each year from dropping out.

**Dissertation Overview**

Chapter One of this Dissertation in Practice serves as an introduction to this action research study. It includes a statement of the problem of practice in my school, along with the research question addressed by the study and the purpose statement for the study. Chapter Two contains a review of the related literature for the study. This literature review includes theoretical texts as well as first-person accounts of teachers’ experiences using literature circles in their classrooms. Chapter Three outlines the action research methodology used in the study. This study employs a qualitative research design, in which one ESOL class participated in literature circles in their ESOL classroom twice a week for 15 weeks during the second semester of the 2017-2018 school year. Chapter Three also summarizes the ethical considerations that were addressed in this action research study. Chapter Four of this Dissertation in Practice details my findings and reflections upon completing the action research study, while Chapter Five summarizes my conclusions and gives suggestions for future research.

**Conclusion**

Equal opportunity is a foundational principle of the American way of life. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, age, creed, or national origin in any program that receives federal funds (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). The Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 goes further, requiring public schools “to take action to overcome language barriers that impede English
Language Learner (ELL) students from participating equally in school districts’ educational programs” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). In spite of these guarantees, many ELLs in the United States struggle to learn. Although Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act allows schools to “make use of both English and a child’s native language to enable the child to develop and attain English proficiency” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, p. 12), the vast majority of schools employ English-only instruction (Escamilla, 2007). Therefore, it is critical to the academic success of ELLs that they become proficient in English reading comprehension. But English reading comprehension is not only critical to the academic success of ELLs, it also critical to their full and free participation in American society. It is a critical part of tearing down “those barriers that keep large portions of the population from having access to economic and social justice” (Pharr, 2013, p. 594). Several studies have shown that using literature circles is an effective way to accomplish that goal (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Day & Ainley, 2008; Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Farris, Nelson, & L’Allier, 2007).

Many of the more than 400 Hispanic students and other English language learners at the high school in which I work have yet to achieve proficiency in English reading comprehension, even if they were born in this country. This action research plan seeks to determine if the use of literature circles will help these students to increase their English reading comprehension.
Glossary

Additive schooling: In contrast to subtractive schooling, Valenzuela (1999) defines “additive schooling” as

Schooling [that] is about equalizing opportunity and assimilating Mexicans into the larger society, albeit through a bicultural process. In this world, students do not have to choose between being Mexican or American; they can be both. This pluralistic model of schooling builds on students’ bicultural experience – which all minority youth bring with them to school – to make them conversant, respectful, and fluent in as many dialects and languages as they can master. (p. 269)

ATOS: a readability level determined by using the ATOS formula. ATOS levels are expressed in terms of grade levels; thus, a book with an ATOS level of 3.7 could be read by an average third grader during the seventh month of school.

At-risk student: The South Carolina Department of Education (2016) defines an “at-risk student” as “poorly prepared for the next level of study or [at risk] for dropping out of school” (para. 1).

BICS: an acronym for “basic interpersonal communicative skills.” BICS refers to conversational language.

CALP: an acronym for “cognitive academic language proficiency.” CALP refers to academic language.

Lexile: a readability level based on sentence length and word frequency
**Limited English proficient**: a term used to describe English language learners. “Limited English proficient,” or LEP, is seen as a derogatory descriptor, since it focuses on a perceived deficiency in the student.

**Reading Counts**: a readability level assigned to books by teachers and librarians

**Subtractive schooling**: Angela Valenzuela (1999) defines “subtractive schooling” as schooling that dismisses their [Mexican immigrant students’] definition of education which is thoroughly grounded in Mexican culture” and “encompasses subtractively assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language. A key consequence of these subtractive elements of schooling is the erosion of students’ social capital. (p. 20)
CHAPTER 2
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Background.

Throughout America’s history, schools have sought to assimilate all students into the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, which includes the speaking of English. This effort to subjugate the native languages of Native Americans, African Americans, and non-English speaking immigrants has been motivated by a variety of beliefs. Some early American leaders such as Benjamin Franklin were convinced that the culture of the Anglo-Saxons was superior to others. Other leaders, such as Noah Webster, were concerned with the survival of the nation and feared that multiculturalism could tear the new country apart. Still others, like Thomas Jefferson, believed that a single national language would best serve to allow all citizens equal access to full participation in our democracy. Authors such as Malik and Mohamed (2014) assert that “English language is used as a form of capital to reproduce social inequality” (p. 63). Whatever the motivation, for hundreds of years, American schools have sought to make all students English speakers (Spring, 2014). Consequently, success in school is dependent upon English fluency.

The issue of English fluency and its relation to academic success has become more and more urgent as the number of non-English speaking students has grown in recent years. According to a recent report of the National Academies of Sciences,
Engineering, and Medicine (2016), “the number of immigrants living in the United States increased by more than 70 percent—from 24.5 million (about 9 percent of the population) in 1995 to 42.3 million (about 13 percent of the population) in 2014; the native-born population increased by about 20 percent during the same period” (p. 2).

**Problem of practice.**

Reflecting this trend, the number of Hispanic students at the school in which I work has increased this year to 39 % (E. Allen, personal communication, Nov. 15, 2017) from 9 % in 2003 – 2004 (Research Site High School Portfolio, 2015). More than two-thirds, or approximately 250 of our Hispanic students, fall below 6th grade English proficiency and therefore participate in the school’s ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) program. These Hispanic students are joined by a small number of English language learners from Asia and Africa. Attempting to learn all their subjects, which are presented in English only, while also learning English, is an almost overwhelming task for these students. Consequently, over half of the ESOL students at my school do not graduate (E. Allen, personal communication, July 9, 2016). A high school diploma is necessary in this country today, not only for admittance to college but also for having a good chance of finding a job that provides a living wage (Ewert, 2012, n. p.). It is critical to help them in this endeavor.

**Purpose of research.**

“Knowledge of English has served as a powerful tool for personal development and advancement, and fluency constitutes a huge step forward in many individual’s struggles for self-sufficiency and success” (Malik & Mohamed, 2014, p. 66). But how best to provide effective instruction to support English reading comprehension for
emerging-bilingual high school students has been the topic of much debate. Recommendations include strategies ranging from intensive vocabulary study (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009) to the “Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol” model (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2008). At my school, the ESOL teachers use Pearson’s online iLit program. Pearson describes this program as “a comprehensive digital literacy program that helps engage readers and accelerate literacy skills and language development…. iLit provides an extensive digital library, lessons with personalized support, progress tracking, and a built-in rewards system” (iLit Literacy and ELL Solutions, 2016, para. 1). Although this program sounds promising, there are frequent problems with the tablet computers used by the students. In addition, the iLit program precludes students from interacting with each other, and group interaction has been shown to be a powerful element of successful literacy strategies. Therefore, many students continue to struggle.

Clearly, as Escamilla (2009) points out, “one size fits all” (p. 439) does not work when it comes to reading instruction for English language learners. Furthermore, few strategies for teaching intermediate and advanced ELLs have been identified. “Our knowledge in the area of ELL literacy development is narrow and thin” (Escamilla, 2009, p. 449). One method that has shown promise in improving the English reading comprehension of emerging bilinguals is the use of literature circles (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Day & Ainley, 2008; Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Farris, Nelson, & L’Allier, 2007). Many elementary and some middle school level teachers have documented their success with using literature circles. However, very few high school or college educators have done so. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to explore the effects of
participation in literature circles on the English reading comprehension of a class of six high school English language learners.

Research question.

This study addresses the following research question: **What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews?** To answer this question, I conducted an action research study in which I worked with a class of emerging-bilingual students for one semester, using literature circles as described by Harvey Daniels (2002) in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*.

Researcher-participant.

I am in a unique position to carry out this action research project. I taught English and Latin at the research site for many years. While working as a teacher, I had many ESOL students in my classes, so I am familiar with the obstacles they must overcome to do well in school. I am also familiar with the standards to which they are held. For the past ten years, I have been a librarian. In this position, I have continued to work with ESOL students and have also become more knowledgeable about young adult literature. I have had the opportunity to talk to hundreds of students, including English language learners, about books. In addition, I have collaborated in a small way with the ESOL teachers in my school.
Purpose of the Literature Review

The purpose of this review is to provide an overview of the scholarly literature related to the topic of improving the English reading comprehension of emerging-bilingual students using literature circles. As Mertler (2014) points out, “The literature review can … help establish a connection between your action research project and what others have said, done, and discovered before you” (p. 61). This literature review begins with an examination of the literature that provides the historical context for the study, including both the early records of the plight of non-English speaking students in American schools as well as the more recent history of ESOL programs in America. Next, this review explores the research on the teaching of English language learners. A review of the scholarship on literature circles is next, especially in terms of their use with English language learners. This is followed by a review of the research on ELL assessment. The scholarship on action research methodology is examined, as are the theoretical perspectives that ground the research.

I relied on two main sources of information for the literature review, online journal articles and scholarly books. To find these sources, I first employed an online search of two educational databases, Education Source and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). I began by using the search terms “ESOL” and “reading comprehension.” These searches led me to articles that promoted the use of literature circles with English language learners. I then read books on related topics including English language learners, literature circles, assessment, and educational theory. The information found in these resources has been augmented by information from online
governmental sites as well as personal communications with my school’s ESOL teachers and principal.

**Historical Context**

Cavanaugh (1996), Spring (2014), and Takaki (2008) provide the historical backdrop necessary to understand the grim situation of English language learners in American schools today. Spring describes the ongoing deculturalization of all non-Anglo-Saxon Protestant members of the American population. Early efforts at deculturalization and assimilation involved primarily Native Americans and African American slaves and former slaves. However, “the attempt to change languages and cultures would eventually include not just Native and African Americans but also Mexican, Asian, and Puerto Rican Americans” (Spring, 2014, p. 43). As time went on, this same desire to acculturate all Americans to the dominant Anglo-Saxon mold would also extend to Irish Catholics, southern Europeans, and others. Schools would be used as the means to accomplish this acculturation.

The global movement of people has been central to American school policies from the early colonization of the Americas and the massive immigration of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries to today’s global movement of people. Schools have been considered central to the assimilation of new populations into American culture. (Spring, 2014, p. 5)

This assimilation, rather than making all Americans feel like part of a great whole, has left those who do not fit the White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant mold with a feeling of otherness and inferiority. Takaki (2008) says this is due to what he calls the “Master Narrative of American History” (p. 5).
According to this powerful and popular but inaccurate story, our country was settled by European immigrants, and Americans are white…. Not to be “white” is to be designated as the “Other” – different, inferior, and unassimilable…. The Master Narrative’s narrow definition of who is an American reflects and reinforces a more general thinking that can be found in the curriculum, news and entertainment media, business practices, and public policies. Through this filter, interpretations of ourselves and the world have been constructed, leaving many of us feeling left out of history and America itself. (Takaki, 2008, pp. 4 - 5)

In addition to the general history of the deculturalization of minorities in American schools, for this study it is also valuable to reflect upon the more recent history of ESOL education. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was enacted. Title VI of this Act barred discrimination based on, among other things, national origin (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). Title VI called for federal funds to be withheld from school districts that remained segregated (Weise & Garcia, 1998). In 1968, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (also known as the Bilingual Education Act) was approved. “The Bilingual Education Act has been considered the most important law in recognizing linguistic minority rights in the history of the United States” (Nieto, 2009, p. 63). Although the Bilingual Education Act did not require schools to offer bilingual education, it did encourage schools, through the awarding of grants, to develop new programs to meet the needs of English language learners (Wiese & Garcia, 1998).

In 1974, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled, in Lau v. Nichols, that schools must provide equal educational opportunities to students whose native language was not English (Cavanaugh, 1996). This ruling opened the door for bilingual education.
However, once again in the 1980s and 1990s, a movement opposing bilingual instruction erupted. In 1998, Proposition 227 was adopted in California, bringing bilingual education in that state to an end. Similar legislation was soon passed in Arizona, Colorado, and Massachusetts (Nieto, 2009). To this day, in spite of an overwhelming body of literature that promotes the efficacy of bilingual education for English language learners (Escamilla, 2009; Pacheco et al., 2015), English-only instruction predominates in American schools. Therefore, the millions of English language learners in this country fail to receive a satisfactory education.

**Teaching English Language Learners**

**At-risk status of ELLs.**

English language learners are the most at-risk minority in American schools today. They are twice as likely to drop out of high school as are their English-speaking counterparts (Callahan, 2013). Part of the reason for this grim statistic is what Valenzuela (2013) calls “subtractive schooling,” which is education that does not appreciate the differences among students. For example, as noted above, schools often seek to do away with the culture and language of immigrants by forcing them into English-only classrooms. Schools also undermine the social ties between immigrants and other students by segregating them from each other. “Whenever Mexican youth emerge from the schooling process as monolingual individuals who are neither identified with Mexico nor equipped to function competently in the mainstream of the United States, subtraction can be said to have occurred” (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 292).
Class climate.

Valenzuela’s (2013) answer to subtractive schooling is for teachers to take a Learner-Centered approach and genuinely care about their students. These teachers must examine the school’s curriculum and find ways to enhance their students’ experiences, rather than subtracting from them. Martinez, Harris, and McClain (2014) also advocate that teachers “create a literacy and learning climate that is welcoming and emphasizes cultural and linguistic diversity” (p. 141).

Gay (2015) describes her shift in focus over the years from a major concern with the content of curricula to the concept of “culturally responsive teaching.” She argues that American teachers, in spite of the fact that they are mostly White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant females, must find ways to “build bridges across cultural differences” (p. 67). To do this, teachers must have a positive attitude toward the issue of diversity, and they must incorporate contemporary multicultural content into their curricula. Gay (2015) says,

The education of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students should connect in-school learning to out-of-school living; promote educational equity and excellence; create community among individuals from different cultural, social, and ethnic backgrounds; and develop students’ agency, efficacy, and empowerment. (p. 49)

Literacy development.

To teach English language learners effectively, the teacher must understand each student’s stage of literacy development. The stages of literacy development among ELLs can be described in various ways (Cloud et al., 2009), but however one chooses to
describe them, experts believe that the ELL’s stage of literacy development must be recognized, and instruction planned accordingly (Bolos, 2012; Ernst-Slavit et al., 2002; Escamilla, 2007). Cloud et al. label the stages of reading development as *beginning*, *beginning intermediate*, *intermediate advanced*, and *advanced supported*.

Students in the beginning stage show an interest in books and understand the concept of letters and words. They are not, however, able to read beyond basic words and short, common phrases. Those in the beginning intermediate stage can read many high-frequency words and have a rudimentary understanding of grammatical relationships. Additionally, beginning intermediate readers enjoy reading and can employ an assortment of tactics to aid in comprehension. Students falling in the intermediate advanced range can read many uncommon words and use prefixes, suffixes, and roots to discern the meaning of new words. Intermediate advanced students also enjoy reading, and they read with persistence. Advanced supported students understand the complex multiple meanings of words, and they are adept at using context clues. They can identify various genres and understand complicated texts (Cloud et al., 2009).

Most of the students in ESOL classes at my school read at the beginning intermediate or intermediate advanced level. When students reach the advanced supported level, they are usually removed from the ESOL class.

**Vocabulary instruction.**

Several authors advocate the use of explicit and ongoing vocabulary instruction for English language learners. “Encountering unknown vocabulary is a primary deterrent to comprehending text so explicit vocabulary instruction is essential in the educational curriculum of all ELs throughout their schooling” (Martinez et al., 2014, p. 136). Cloud
et al. (2009) recommend what they call “frontloading” vocabulary by teaching beforehand those words that students will encounter in the texts they read. Word walls and student-developed definitions accompanied by pictures are effective means of frontloading. On the other hand, Bolos (2012) stresses the importance of not teaching vocabulary words in isolation. She also suggests reinforcing vocabulary lessons with the use of objects and pictures. “When teaching vocabulary, educators can present a photo or model of the item being defined along with its definition. This will allow students to pair something visual and concrete with the definition to make it more meaningful” (Bolos, 2012, p. 17). Graphic organizers are another powerful tool to use when teaching vocabulary to ELLs (Bolos, 2012; Cloud et al., 2009; Ernst-Slavit, et al., 2002), as are games such as Word Bingo and Concentration (Bolos, 2012). Tran (2006) stresses the importance of teaching vocabulary in the context of reading.

**Small groups.**

Working in small groups has been shown to be effective in literacy instruction for English language learners (Martinez, et al., 2014; Ross & Fisher, 2009). Many researchers speak to the importance of interaction among students in learning a second language (Breen, 1999; Freeman & Freeman, 2011; Iddings et al., 2009; Puzio, Keyes, Cole, & Jimenez, 2013). One type of small-group work that has proven successful is literature circles (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Day & Ainley, 2008; Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Farris et al., 2007).

**Literature circles.**

Several strategies for improving the English reading comprehension of Spanish-dominant students who are in the early stages of literacy development have been
recommended. Fewer strategies have been identified for intermediate level ELLs, but experts suggest guided reading (Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez, & Rascon, 2007; Iddings, et al.; Montero, Newmaster, & Ledger, 2014), story read-alouds (Ceron, 2014; Farris, et al.; Stewart, Araujo, Knezek, & Revelle, 2015), and writing to read (Gao, 2013; Graham & Hebert, 2011). A strategy that some think may hold the most promise for intermediate English language learners is the literature circle. As described by Harvey Daniels (2002),

Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. While reading each group-assigned portion of the text (either in or outside of class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group follows a reading and meeting schedule, holding periodic discussions on the way through the book. When they finish a book, the circle members may share highlights of their reading with the wider community. (p. 2)

There are many reasons why literature circles are an effective strategy for improving reading comprehension. To begin with, they offer students an opportunity for independent reading while also taking advantage of the social orientation that most students naturally have (Daniels, 2002; Day & Ainley, 2008). They also give students frequent opportunities to talk and to write, which Haneda and Wells (2012) identify as one of the key strategies teachers should use to help ELLs succeed. Additionally, according to Daniels (2002), literature circles are not only an effective literacy strategy, but they also address the issue of social justice in the classroom. “Literature circles … are a key structure for detracking schools, which is one of the greatest unsolved issues of
educational justice in our country” (p. 36). Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) list nine reasons why literature circles should be used.

Literature Circles:

- promote a love for literature and positive attitudes toward reading
- reflect a constructivist, child-centered model of literacy
- encourage extensive and intensive reading
- invite natural discussions that lead to student inquiry and critical thinking
- support diverse response to texts
- foster interaction and collaboration
- provide choice and encourage responsibility
- expose children to literature from multiple perspectives
- nurture reflection and self-evaluation (p. 3)

Several authors have described various versions of the literature circle. Daniels (2002) claims that his version is best because of its “eleven key ingredients” (p. 18), which include student choice of books and discussion topics.

Daniels also suggests the optional idea of assigning roles to each member of a literature circle. Fulfilling the duties of a specific role helps students become accustomed to participating meaningfully in a group discussion. Roles can be swapped around and even completely discarded as students become more comfortable and adept at discussing their books in a small group setting.

The basic roles that Daniels (2002) suggests are the connector, the student who connects the book to real life and other texts; the questioner, who asks questions about the book to help improve understanding among the group members; the literary luminary
(or passage picker), who chooses special excerpts from the book for the group to “savor, reread, analyze, or share” (p. 103); and the illustrator (or artist), who creates a visual reaction to the text. These roles can be supplemented with the optional roles of summarizer, researcher, vocabulary enricher (word wizard), and scene setter.

**Relevant literature.**

One essential component of meaningful and successful literature circles for English language learners is the use of relevant literature. When using any literacy strategy to improve the reading comprehension of English language learners, the teacher should choose relevant literature that acknowledges the children’s cultures and life experiences (Ernst-Slavit, et al., 2002; Stewart, et al., 2015). Books for use in literature circles should include those that were originally written in the student’s native language or those that reflect his or her culture (Cloud, et al., 2009). O’Malley and Pierce (1996) also emphasize this idea:

> Reading instruction needs to acknowledge the life experiences and cultural assumptions that second language learners bring to school…. Reading skills should, therefore, be taught in the context of reading and writing activities that build on students’ prior knowledge and experience. (p. 95)

Both Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005) and Day and Ainley (2008) recommend introducing literature circles for English language learners by using culturally relevant picture books. While these authors are thinking in terms of younger students, picture books could be of some value for older ELLs, as well. Starting with picture books would allow the students to become acquainted with the organization of literature circles and would give them practice in discussing books in a group setting with no pressure to
struggle with reading and comprehending an English text at the same time. Students could then progress to books more suited to their ages.

**Use of native language.**

Experts agree that English language learners should be allowed and encouraged to use their native language (L1) as they work to gain proficiency in English (L2) (Cloud, et al., 2009; Cummins, et al., 2005; Law & Eckes, 2007). Cummins et al. (2005) suggest that learning can take place only when it is linked to prior knowledge, and “pre-existing knowledge for English language learners is encoded in their home languages” (p. 38).

It is not uncommon for students to want to write in their own language first. This should be encouraged. It is often easier for them to get their thoughts out in the language with which they are familiar than to struggle through the triple whammy of formulating ideas, finding the words in a language in which they are not proficient, and then transcribing these words onto paper. Writing first in their primary language gives students a chance to figure out what they want to say before struggling in English. (Law & Eckes, 2007, p. 111)

Literature circles allow students to write and to converse in both their native language and their target language (English). Using both languages freely enables the students to focus on understanding the literature and not simply on struggling to express themselves in a new language they feel uncomfortable using. In addition, “findings clearly show that bilingualism can be a positive force in minority children’s development when their L1 is promoted by the school” (Cummins, 1981, p. 17).
Assessment

An abundance of standardized reading assessments can be found, but most experts in the field of ESOL instruction favor a less formal approach (Cloud, et al., 2009; Law & Eckes, 2007; MacDonald, Boals, Castro, Cook, Lundberg, & White, 2015; O’Malley & Pierce, 1996). Schiro (2013) points out that the use of standardized tests can even increase the dropout rate among high school students. Although some (Law & Eckes, 2007) endorse the use of reading assessments such as the Flynt/Cooter Comprehensive Reading Inventory in certain situations, most believe that a more integrated approach to assessment is appropriate.

MacDonald et al. (2015) advocate the use of formative assessments to evaluate the reading comprehension of English language learners. They specifically endorse what they have named the “IDEAL assessment model.” This model has five attributes:

- It is integrated, in that it has the same learning goals as other assessments.
- It is dynamic, because it is part of the instructional process, not separate from it.
- It is enlightening, because it provides clear feedback to students.
- It is attainable, in that it is not an add-on to instruction.
- It is linked to the content students need to know. (pp. xix-xx)

O’Malley and Pierce (1996) emphasize that assessments used in conjunction with literature discussion groups should include teacher’s anecdotal records of students, teacher checklists based on observation of students, and student self-assessment. They recommend a written self-assessment for students that includes the following questions:
1. How much did you participate in today’s discussion group? (Circle one.)
   a lot  about the right amount  too little

2. What did you do well in group discussion? (Check what is true for you.)
   o I finished the reading assignment and came prepared to discuss it.
   o I wrote in my journal.
   o I listened to others.
   o I responded to others.

3. What was an important idea expressed by someone in your group? (Name
   the person and describe what he or she said.) (p.115)

   Law and Eckes (2007) also speak to the effectiveness of observation and
   anecdotal records in assessing the reading comprehension of English language learners. They
   reiterate the importance of evaluating students during regular class activities, and
   not during a separate, contrived situation such as a test. In addition, they suggest
   conferencing with students. “ESL students, in particular, are often more verbal speaking
   than they are writing. With a considerate and supportive audience, they can often reveal
   what they know better than they could with paper and pencil” (p. 176).

   Methodology

   Action research methodology is a powerful tool for finding solutions to local
   educational problems.

   Action research, in so far as it aims to guide us in the way we lead our lives,
   might therefore best be understood as a process that helps us to lead good lives. If
   we accept this view, then we might say that action research should aim not just at
achieving knowledge of the world, but at achieving a better world. (Kemmis, 2010, p. 419)

For this study, I followed the procedures described by Mertler (2014) in Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators. In his book, Mertler outlines nine steps in the action research process: identifying and limiting the topic, gathering information, reviewing the related literature, developing a research plan, implementing the plan and collecting data, analyzing the data, developing an action plan, sharing and communicating the results, and reflecting on the process.

In step four of the process, developing a research plan, I had to decide whether to use a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research design. Traditional research generally takes a quantitative approach, wherein variables are controlled to determine cause-effect relationships. However, according to Mills (2007), a qualitative design is more appropriate for action research, and that is the approach that was taken. An observational study was employed, in which I observed and participated with a group of English language learners engaging in literature circles over the course of 15 weeks. Data collection methods used included observation field notes and checklists, student self-assessment surveys, and student interviews. This data was analyzed using the method outlined by Charmaz (2006) in Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis.

Theoretical Base

This action research study is informed by the theories of Paulo Freire and L.S. Vygotsky and influenced by Learner-Centered theory, as described by Michael Schiro (2013). This study also relies on the experiences of Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005),
Day and Ainley (2008), Shelton-Strong (2012), and Morales and Carroll (2015), who have implemented the use of literature circles with the English language learners in their classrooms.

Freire.

Paulo Freire (1970/1996), a Brazilian educator, said that teachers should eliminate what he termed the “banking concept” (p. 53) of education, wherein teachers make “deposits” into passive students’ brains. Instead, he believed in “reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 53). Freire also emphasized the importance of dialogue between teachers and students. He maintained that “through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (p. 61).

In this action research study, dialogue played an important role, as the English language learners led their literature circle groups to a greater understanding of English, literature, and themselves.

Vygotsky.

Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky (trans. 1978) also spoke to the importance of dialogue in education, and he saw education as an essentially social process. Vygotsky originated the idea of the “zone of proximal development”:

An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. (p. 90)
By definition, a literature circle demands cooperation among its participants. Student participants must allow each other to speak, they must listen carefully to each other, and they must ask questions of each other.

**Learner-centered theory.**

Schiro (2013) describes a learner-centered school as a happy, active place where “the interests, needs, and desires of learners influence the nature of the school programs, the content of the curriculum, and (to some degree) the governance of the classroom” (p. 105). In these ideal schools, “educators dedicate themselves to the growth of people in the present moment” (Schiro, 2013, p. 116). In learner-centered schools, the curriculum recognizes the natural growth and development of individual children, so “there is no set body of knowledge which must be transmitted to all learners” (Schiro, 2013, p. 112). Learner-centered schools provide their students with hands-on experiences, social and physical activity, and opportunities to explore the world outside the classroom.

Assessment is important in learner-centered schools, but it does not involve objective, standardized tests. Instead, learner-centered educators prefer assessment through direct observation of students as well as examination of student artifacts, such as portfolios.

This action research study reflects a basically learner-centered approach. The student-participants in the study chose the books they read, and they led their literature circles. They were involved in social activity. Furthermore, assessment was based on my observations as well as student self-assessments.

Learner-centered ideology has its roots in the writings of such philosophers as Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey, but it briefly gained ascendency in American schools beginning in the mid-1960s, when educational ideas like whole language and
open classrooms became popular.

**Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005).**

Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005) present a powerful endorsement of using literature circles with English language learners based on their own classroom experiences. As a teacher of fourth grade students, Carrison decided to employ literature circles in an effort to increase her students’ reading skills and motivation. A review of the literature had shown Carrison (2005) what it has shown this researcher – that “because of their collaborative and dialogic nature, literature circles enable students to learn and interact with one another in a non-threatening, community-like setting through sharing ideas, opinions, and personal experiences and responses to literature” (p. 96).

In Carrison’s class of 24 students, five were ELLs, all at different stages of English literacy development. Two of the five were Ukrainian-dominant, two were Spanish-dominant, and one was Russian-dominant. These students also differed in their usual behavior and oral communication, but most of them were typically quiet and withdrawn during class.

Before initiating the use of literature circles in her class, Carrison taught several mini-lessons on such topics as elements of a literature circle and etiquette for group work. She then administered surveys to assess her students’ attitudes toward reading and to determine what types of books interested them. She also gave a reading comprehension assessment to establish a basis for comparison. Finally, “books with multicultural themes were chosen at a variety of reading levels. More specifically, the selected books used rich language, had interesting plots, and strong characters” (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005, p. 100). Carrison acquired four to six copies of each book and prepared a short
book talk on each one. After Carrison presented the book talks, her students looked over the books and listed their top three choices. Carrison grouped the students according to their choices, and the groups met to decide on reading goals and to plot their goals on a calendar.

At this point, the students were ready to begin reading their books and meeting to talk about them. Carrison allowed her English language learners to read with a partner or to read with the aid of a tape recording of the book. Carrison observed each group over the next several weeks as they met to discuss their books. Outside the literature circles, Carrison (2005) required the students to write in a literature response journal and also to do several “extension projects” (p. 101). Each group worked on a culminating project that was presented to the class and videotaped.

After her initial experiment with using literature circles, Carrison decided to make several adjustments to her design before implementing it a second time. First, she decided to teach the literature circle format by modeling it ahead of time with the entire class acting as one large group. She then allowed small groups to practice responses to literature. Carrison (2005) also decided to cut back on the required extension projects because they “actually served to curtail the rich interaction it was hoped they would illicit. The lesson learned here … is that, especially with ELL students, those who lack confidence, or readers who are reluctant to engage – less is more” (pp. 108 – 109).

In evaluating the effectiveness of using literature circles with her English language learners, Carrison notes that one of the greatest benefits was in increasing student enthusiasm for reading. Carrison’s ELLs became more confident and willing to speak and participate in class, even outside the literature circles. Furthermore, after two
literature circle cycles, covering a total of approximately two months, a qualitative reading inventory showed significant gains in reading comprehension for most of the students. Carrison acknowledges that other variables could account for this growth, but she also insists that literature circles were responsible for increased self-confidence and motivation among her students.

Although Carrison used literature circles in a 4th grade class with only five English language learners, and this study used them in a high school class composed entirely of ELLs, her experiences helped to guide this study. In particular, I incorporated Carrison’s idea of practicing the literature circle with the full class before forming the small literature circle groups. This practice helped the actual small literature groups to function more effectively.

**Day and Ainley (2008).**

Day and Ainley (2008) describe Ainley’s implementation of literature circles in her sixth-grade class and also tell of her gradual acceptance of literature circles as a valid strategy for use with English language learners. Ainley began her journey as a skeptic regarding the efficacy of literature circles, but over the course of using them for three months in her sixth-grade class, she became an enthusiastic supporter.

Ainley’s class comprised 22 students, ranging in age from 11 to 13 years, and in reading level from second to low fifth grade. Twelve of her students were immigrants from Russia and Ukraine, who had been in this country between four months and six years. Four other students in Ainley’s class received special education services. Most of her students reported a dislike of reading before beginning this study.
Ainley employed several strategies to help her students overcome their initial hesitation toward participating in literature circles. First, like Carrison, she began the experience by using picture books with the class as a whole. She chose books with captivating themes and had several copies of each book on hand. After reading the books aloud to the students, Ainley gave them an opportunity to discuss the books with a partner. She provided prompts to stimulate discussion. Then she either discussed the books as a whole class, or else formed small groups to extend the conversation begun by the pairs of students. These picture book discussions enabled Ainley to model the skills needed for later participation in literature circles.

When Ainley’s students began working in their actual literature circles, Ainley encouraged her ELLs to use their native languages. “We worked on creating an environment in which students supported each other in their first and second languages…. By supporting the English language learners in this way, they were more willing to take a chance and converse in English” (Day & Ainley, 2008, pp. 162 – 163).

Ainley departed from the traditional format of literature circles by having her students work in groups of just two for the first book they read. She paired students whom she thought “would work well together, support each other, and … complete the book” (Day & Ainley, 2008, p. 163). Even when Ainley’s class moved on to larger groups, she continued to form the groups herself, ensuring that there were both ELLs and English-dominant students in each group. Ainley did, however, allow the groups to choose the books they read.

In spite of her initial doubts, Ainley discovered that her students became better readers through participation in literature circles. They asked questions, made
connections, and formed opinions about their reading. They not only grew in their “Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills” (BICS), but also in their “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency” (CALP).

Ainley’s experience in using literature circles with middle school students demonstrates their value in increasing students’ enthusiasm for, and understanding of, literature. She admits that a few of her students did not complete the last book, and several of her students expressed frustration with students that talked too much. Overall, however, Ainley found the process rewarding. Her experience helped guide my action research project, although I followed Daniels’s recommendation in allowing groups to form based on book choice.

Shelton-Strong (2012).

While Shelton-Strong (2012) advocates the use of literature circles, he suggests several modifications when using them with English language learners. First, he believes that the teacher, rather than the students, should choose the reading materials to be used. Shelton-Strong reasons that teachers are best able to choose texts that are on the appropriate reading level to promote growth in the reading proficiency of their ELLs. Furthermore, Shelton-Strong advises teachers to form reading groups, rather than allowing them to be based on the students’ choice of books. Not only does he recommend choosing which students to place in each group, he also believes that the teacher should be in charge of assigning the various roles in each group, in order to achieve “a balance of personalities and learning styles, thus leading to a more dynamic exchange within the post-reading discussions” (Shelton-Strong, 2012, pp. 215 – 216).
Shelton-Strong’s (2012) recommendations directly contradict two of Daniels’s (2002) “key ingredients.” As Daniels (2002) says, “Student choice tops the list, because the deepest spirit of literature circles comes from independent reading. One of the gravest shortcomings of school reading programs is that assignments, choices, texts to read, are usually all controlled by the teacher” (pp. 18 – 19). Because students are English language learners does not make this freedom of choice any less important. If anything, choice is more important for ELLs, whose lives have often been so disrupted through no choice of their own. Daniels (2002) admits that it may be difficult to select and procure an adequate number of different books or stories from which the students may choose, but this is another choice that ELLs deserve.

There may also be compromises or imperfections in the formation of groups. Of course, smart teachers know that many kids will pick books not out of genuine curiosity but to create a group of their friends. But these teachers also realize that as long as kids do the reading, invest in the conversation, get into the book, this needn’t be a problem. (Daniels, 2002, p. 19)

Hill et al. (1995) also support the importance of allowing students to choose the books they read: “In the school setting, we often limit students’ freedom to choose. Choice can be the wild card that makes students embrace tasks with greater enthusiasm. It is a powerful motivational tool and a first step toward developing independence” (p. 7).

**Morales and Carroll (2015).**

Unlike most proponents, Morales and Carroll (2015) have employed literature circles with English language learners in a college English course. Although the college setting necessitated some adjustments to the typical structure, Morales and Carroll still
found literature circles to be an effective strategy to use with ELLs. Carroll, an instructor at the University of Puerto Rico, instituted literature circles with a basic English course composed of 29 students aged 18 – 20 years old. She sought to answer the following research questions:

How do literature circles influence participation in a classroom of adult ESL Learners?

How does the use of Spanish (the students’ first language) influence classroom discussion and reading comprehension of English texts? (Morales & Carroll, 2015, p. 197)

Instead of allowing her students to choose their own books, Carroll required all students to read The Boy Without a Flag by Abraham Rodriguez (1992). Although Carroll’s usurping of her students’ responsibility in choosing their own books is not in keeping with Daniels’s (2002) recommendations, the book she selected does support the philosophy of choosing culturally relevant texts. Like the other teachers highlighted above, Carroll allowed her students an opportunity beforehand to practice working in groups and performing the duties of the group member roles. She assigned the roles of summarizer, questioner, literary luminary, and connector.

During the first week of Carroll’s experiment using literature circles, she provided her students with questions to guide their discussion. This is not at all consistent with the ideas put forth by Daniels (2002). In any case, Carroll did not provide questions the second week, and she was disappointed in the shallowness of her students’ discussion. Carroll then spent some time explaining and modeling the type of analysis and dialogue she was looking for, and her students’ performance after that was more in line with her
expectations. This experience shows the value of having clear expectations for students and making sure they understand them.

During the novel unit, Carroll observed, took notes, and occasionally joined each of the literature circles. Several times through the course of the unit, her students wrote pieces reflecting on the book they were reading. Carroll allowed her students to write these reflections in Spanish if they wished. Using their native language in their writing probably helped them to form more clearly their thoughts on the English words they were reading and helped to prepare them for the in-class discussions, which were in English.

When the unit was completed, Carroll asked volunteers to participate in a focus group that analyzed the experience of using literature circles. An interviewer whom the students did not know conducted an hour-long question-answer session that was audio-recorded. The recording was transcribed to provide anonymity to the students, and the transcription was not given to Carroll until after grades had been recorded. Additionally, all the students in the class filled out a questionnaire giving general information about their age, reading habits, etc. These documents were also anonymous.

To analyze the data she had collected from the unit – teacher observation notes, students’ reflections, and the focus group discussion – Carroll read through all of them multiple times until themes emerged. The themes she found were the importance of “community building/participation, relevance, and using student’s first language” (Morales & Carroll, 2015, p. 200). These important themes reflect what others have found in using literature circles with English language learners. Although Carroll did not attempt in her study to determine the effect of literature circles on her students’ English
reading comprehension, her results did provide a positive answer to her research questions. As Morales and Carroll (2015) observed,

   Literature circles provided these students with the opportunity to read, write, and speak in English while using their first language as a cognitive tool, encouraging language acquisition while simultaneously opening up the language classroom to discussions that were relevant to students’ own lives. (p. 205)

**Conclusion**

   Much has been written to support the use of literature circles as a means of assisting ELLs in improving their English reading comprehension. This literature review summarizes some of the relevant research, as well as touching upon the procedures for implementing literature circles. The methodology for implementation of literature circles will be detailed more thoroughly in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

All researchers, according to Craig A. Mertler (2014), collect, analyze, and interpret information to answer questions (p. 6). Although we typically think of researchers as “scientists in white lab coats coaxing mice through a maze,” (Mertler, 2014, p. 4) researchers can work in any field, including education. Traditional research in education is designed to describe and explain educational practice, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Traditional researchers are usually not directly involved in the situations they study, and their conclusions can be generalized to other educational settings (Frankel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015, p. 14). Action researchers, on the other hand, seek to improve an educator’s personal practice. In fact, they are often teachers who explore problems in their own classrooms. The work of an action researcher is practical and reflective and not necessarily applicable to other situations. Action researchers follow John Dewey’s (1938) lead when he said that “education … must be based upon experience” (p. 89). Although Dewey was referring to the experience of the student, his words also apply to the teacher’s experience, which should shape the teacher’s practice.

Although action research usually takes place in an individual teacher’s own classroom, as a high school library media specialist, I do not have an assigned group of
students with whom to work. However, I am in a position to collaborate with teachers in my school and do so often. In this action research study, I worked with one of the ESOL teachers at my school to improve English reading comprehension among her students.

Before becoming a library media specialist, I taught English and Latin for many years in the same school, and my classroom teaching experience helps me to understand the reading skills required of high school students. My school has almost 400 Hispanic students, and most of these are not native speakers of English. Keeping up with classes in all subjects while trying to learn English is an onerous task for these and other ESOL students. This study explored a method to address this problem.

**Statement of the Problem of Practice**

English language learners comprise almost one tenth of the public-school students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) and represent the fastest growing demographic among the school-age population (Callahan, 2013). “Their educational pathways will shape the economic and demographic future of the nation. The ability of EL students to graduate from high school will increasingly influence the American economy, labor market, and higher education system” (Callahan, 2013, p. 2). With so much at stake, it is imperative that educators do all they can to help English language learners to succeed.

Unfortunately, academic success is difficult to achieve for many ELLs. In addition to learning English, they also must try to keep up with all their other subjects, which are usually presented to them in English only. These challenges lead to a great number of ELLs dropping out of school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the dropout rate for ELLs is almost double that of the student
population as a whole. These grim statistics are mirrored at the high school in which I work. Of the more than 250 English language learners at my school, almost half drop out before graduating (E. Allen, personal communication, July 9, 2016).

The costs of dropping out of high school are steep, both to the individual who must navigate the adult labor market without a base set of academic credentials, and to the society at large that must incorporate an inadequately prepared individual into its economic and civic spheres. High school dropouts not only earn lower wages and have fewer economic, social and educational prospects compared to high school graduates, but they are also quite costly to society as a whole. (Callahan, 2013, p. 12)

In order to help English language learners achieve academic success, methods to improve their English reading comprehension must be found. Although the ESOL students at my school use the iLit reading program, many of them still struggle with English reading comprehension, so I sought a way to avoid “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 2013) and instead implement a method that would offer the sort of cultural responsiveness advocated by Gay (2015). Literature circles seemed to be exactly what was needed.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the impact of the use of literature circles on the English reading comprehension of a small class of English language learners in a high school in South Carolina. This study attempted to answer the question: What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews?
Key Ingredients of Literature Circles

The literature circles were organized as explained by Daniels (2002) in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. Daniels describes 11 “key ingredients” (p. 18) of successful literature circles. First, Daniels (2002) says that “students (should) choose their own reading materials” (p. 18). The students in this study were allowed to choose from a variety of young adult novels that acknowledge their culture and life experiences.

English Learners bring a wealth of experiences with them into their secondary language arts and social studies classes. Those experiences can be leveraged for academic success if we tap into them through relevant literature, literature that values their adolescence and cultural identities while understanding the uniqueness of the immigrant coming of age experience. (Stewart, Araujo, Knezek, & Revelle, 2015, p. 17)

Daniels’s (2002) second key ingredient requires that “small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice” (p. 18). Students in this study chose their own books, and the resulting groups comprised the literature circles for the 15-week study. Daniels says that groups can range from two to six members, but he believes that four or five members is best. In this study, the initial literature circles were composed of two groups of three students each. These literature circles met separately for two months. The second literature circle comprised the entire class of six students, which met for almost two months.

Next, “different groups read different books” (Daniels, 2002, p. 18). Daniels goes on to say that “our best research on the development of readers is very clear. . . . They
need substantive opportunities to develop their own tastes, curiosities, and enthusiasms in
the world of books” (p. 20). For this study, students were given a variety of books from
which to choose. Initially, the members of the class chose two different books, so two
small literature circles were created. When that first literature circle ended, the entire
class chose the same book for their second literature circle.

The fourth key ingredient is that “groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule
to discuss their reading” (Daniels, 2002, p. 18). This study’s literature circles met every
Monday and Thursday for 45 - 90 minutes each day throughout most of the spring
semester.

Daniels’s (2002) fifth ingredient is that “kids use written or drawn notes to guide
both their reading and discussion” (p. 18). Daniels recommends that students use Post-it
notes and response logs as they are reading to help them think about and respond to the
text. When the book is completed, students can work alone or in groups to write a longer
synthesis. Several experts (Gao, 2013; Graham & Hebert, 2011; McElvain, 2010) have
pointed to the relationship between writing and reading. According to Graham and
Hebert (2011), “writing about text should facilitate comprehending it, as it provides
students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing,
personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in text” (p. 712). Students in this study used
Post-it notes to mark words and important passages. They also completed role sheets
that required them to write summaries of the text, questions about the text, and
connections the students made to the text.

The sixth key ingredient Daniels (2002) recommends is that “discussion topics
come from the students” (p. 18) as opposed to originating with the teacher. Literature
circles should require students to take ownership of their reading as well as their responses to it. In this study, students took the lead in their discussions. One student was appointed discussion leader for each session, and discussions were driven by the students’ role sheets.

Next, Daniels (2002) says that “group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome” (p. 18). Teachers should not force students to analyze the literary elements of the books they are reading in their literature circles. Instead, students should be allowed to enjoy the books and respond naturally. In this study’s literature circles, students were allowed to discuss their books in their native language as well as English. “Use of the home language can promote English language development and academic achievement, particularly in literacy” (Working Group on ELL Policy, 2009, p. 3).

The eighth key ingredient of literature circles is that “the teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor” (Daniels, 2002, p. 18). After helping students to choose books and form groups, the teacher steps back and allows the students to be in charge. In some literature circles, the teacher may choose to become a part of a group as a reader, but the teacher’s role in this situation would be that of a fellow-reader, not an instructor. In this study, I remained outside the groups during the first nine weeks of the semester and joined the literature circle as a fellow-reader and observer during the last six weeks.

Daniels’s (2002) ninth ingredient is “evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation” (p. 18). Daniels maintains that literature circles give teachers the
opportunity to make true authentic assessments of their students through observation, student conferences, interviews, portfolios, etc. (p. 24). These were the types of assessments used in this study.

Next, “a spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room” (Daniels, 2002, p. 18). Echoing Vygotsky (trans. 1978) on the social nature of learning, Daniels (2002) says, “Teachers who implement literature circles in their classroom are recreating for their students the kind of close, playful interaction that scaffolds learning so productively elsewhere in life” (p. 25).

Finally, Daniels (2002) says that “when books are finished, readers share with their classmates, and then new groups form around new reading choices” (p. 18). When the first literature circles in this study ended, the students in the class told each other about the books they had read and then chose a second book for reading and discussion.

Research Design

**Action research introduction.**

“The main goal of action research is to address local-level problems with the anticipation of finding immediate solutions” (Mertler, 2014, p. 12). The problem that this action research study addresses is the English reading comprehension of English language learners at a high school in South Carolina. Mertler (2014) outlines nine steps in the action research process: identifying and limiting the topic, gathering information, reviewing the related literature, developing a research plan, implementing the plan and collecting data, analyzing the data, developing an action plan, sharing and communicating the results, and reflecting on the process.
Identifying and limiting the topic.

I have worked in my current high school for more than 30 years, first as a teacher of English and Latin, and for the last ten years as a library media specialist. During my years in the classroom, I taught many English language learners. Since becoming a library media specialist, I have continued to work with these students and have also had the opportunity to collaborate with the ESOL teachers at my school. I have witnessed the ELLs struggle to succeed in all their classes while trying to learn English. Helping the ELLs at my school to succeed is something I feel strongly about, and as Mills (2007) says, “Taking time in the beginning of the action research process to identify what you feel passionate about is critical” (p. 25).

Gathering information.

Upon deciding on a general topic for action research, I began to gather information by talking to the ESOL teachers as well as other classroom teachers at my school. I read my school district’s web page on ESOL instruction and began reading *Literacy Instruction for English Language Learners* (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009).

Reviewing the related literature.

As I delved deeper into my topic, I found that working in small groups has been shown to be effective in literacy instruction for English language learners (Martinez, Harris, & McClain, 2014; Ross & Fisher, 2009). Many researchers also speak to the importance of interaction among students in learning a second language (Breen, 1999; Iddings et al., 2009; Puzio et al., 2013). One type of small-group work that has proven successful is literature circles (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Day & Ainley, 2008;
Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Farris et al., 2007). Literature circles are “small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book” (Daniels, 2002, p. 2). According to Daniels, literature circles are not only an effective literacy strategy, but they also address the issue of social justice in the classroom: “literature circles . . . are a key structure for detracking schools, which is one of the greatest unsolved issues of educational justice in our country” (p. 36).

When using any literacy strategy to improve the reading comprehension of English language learners, the teacher should choose relevant literature that acknowledges the children’s cultures and life experiences (Ernst-Slavit et al., 2002; Stewart et al., 2015). Books for use in literature circles should include those that were originally written in the student’s native language or those that reflect his or her culture (Cloud et al., 2009).

**Developing a research plan.**

The next step was to develop a research plan. Working with one of the ESOL teachers at my school, I formulated my research question: What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews?

**Research site.**

The school in which this action research study took place is a public high school in the northwest area of SC, with a highly transient population that hovers around 1,000. According to the school’s 2015 State Report Card (S.C. Department of Education, 2016), the school’s poverty index is 79.2 %, which is down from 90.4% in 2014. Almost 400 of
the school’s students (39%) are Hispanic, and more than 250 of these have limited English proficiency. Most of the school’s English language learners were actually born in the United States. The others were primarily born in the Central American countries of Honduras and Guatemala, but a few were born in Africa and Asia (E. Allen, personal communication, April 14, 2016). The fact that most of these ELLs were born in the United States and have been in American schools for at least eight years speaks to the inadequacy of the current ESOL education provided to them. Like so many other English language learners across our State, this school’s ELLs struggle to master the material in their classes while learning English.

**Participants.**

Participants in this action research study include the researcher-participant, a library media specialist who has 25 years of classroom teaching experience in English and Latin as well as ten years of experience in the high school’s media center. An important aspect of the study was the support of one of the school’s ESOL teachers. This teacher is a highly respected member of the faculty, who continually explores new ways to increase the success of her students. Although she believes in the effectiveness of the iLit reading program that she recently began using with her students, she also believes this program could be successfully supplemented with additional literacy strategies. Working together, the ESOL teacher and I hoped to find the best way to help our school’s ELLs with their English reading comprehension. As Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) say, “Any inquiry you engage in becomes stronger when connected to a collection of related inquiries generated by other teacher researchers. This strength is made possible through your collaboration with others” (p. 75).
The student-participants in this action research study comprised six English language learners in grades 9 through 12 who have limited English proficiency. Their English reading levels range from first grade to third grade. One of these students was born in the United States, and the others were born in the Central African Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. One came to the United States just last year, while others have been here from two to eight years. The student who was born in the U.S. moved back to Mexico when she was a young child and returned to this country in the fourth grade.

Implementing the plan and collecting data.

According to Mertler (2014), “the next step in the process of conducting action research is the determination of the specific data to be collected and how to actually collect them” (p. 41). At this point, I implemented my plan to investigate the effect of literature circles on a class of ESOL students.

Mertler (2014) maintains that both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are appropriate for action research. Fraenkel and Wallen (2015) recommend observation, interviews, and analysis of documents (p. 592). I used qualitative data for this study, such as observations, open-ended interviews, and student self-assessment and writing samples. (See Appendices A, B, C, and D for examples of data collection instruments that were used in this action research project.)

Analyzing the data.

Mertler (2014) suggests that the qualitative data that is collected be analyzed through inductive analysis. This involves organizing, describing, and interpreting the data (p. 163). Specifically, in this study I analyzed the collected data by using the
constructivist grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2006). Using this approach, every piece of data was studied and coded in order to identify recurrent themes. These themes formed the basis for my action plan.

**Developing an action plan.**

At this stage, I reflected on the results of my study and created a plan for the future. I will continue to work with the English language learners at my school and to collaborate with the ESOL teachers. The information gleaned from my research so far will guide me as I continue to search for the best ways to help the ELLs at my school to achieve academic success.

**Sharing and communicating the results.**

I have begun to share the results of my action research informally with the teachers and administrators at my school. I have also composed an action research report, in the form of this Dissertation in Practice. In writing this report, I kept in mind Mertler’s (2014) suggestions concerning title, person and voice, tense, definiteness, clarity, consistency, simplicity, and conventions of format.

**Reflecting on the process.**

Although reflecting specifically occurs in the final phase of action research, it is an important part of the entire process. Mertler (2014) defines reflection as “the act of critically exploring what you are doing, why you decided to do it, and what its effects have been” (p.13). Reflection is a critical piece of the action research planning process.

I should reflect in two important ways: by looking back, to consider the entire study and determine how it could have been improved, and also by looking forward, perhaps to reflect on possible professional development suggested by the study’s results.
As Pereira (1999) describes it, the process of reflecting “is an 'expanding spiral,’ where
the experience acquired today will support the reflective practice of tomorrow . . . .
There is much more to reflect on, to criticize, to improve, to explore, to discover and to
learn from” (p. 339).

**Ethical Considerations**

Maintaining high ethical standards is an important consideration for all researchers. Mertler (2014) points out that several steps should be followed to ensure adherence to ethical standards. First, the project was submitted to the researcher’s principal for review and approval (See Appendix E). This research proposal was also submitted to the University of South Carolina’s Institutional Review Board for Human Research (See Appendix F).

Next, Mertler (2014) says that permission to collect and share data must be obtained from all student-participants as well as their parents (pp. 107 - 108). The Research County School District’s Research Guidelines (Research County Schools, 2016a) require that all participants in the study sign an informed consent form that outlines the study’s purpose and procedures. Parents and student-participants must be given the option not to participate and to withdraw from the study at any time. In accordance with these requirements, I obtained permission from all the students in the study as well as their parents (See Appendix G).

Finally, Mertler (2014) emphasizes that the anonymity and confidentiality of all student-participants must be maintained (p. 112). Research County School’s (2016a) guidelines ensure full anonymity and confidentiality for all research participants. This
anonymity and confidentiality must be explained to parents and student participants in advance of the study.

In addition to the ethical considerations outlined above, I also constantly kept in mind the ethical concerns peculiar to my particular research study. The student-participants in this study comprised six high school English language learners. These students are non-native speakers of English with varying degrees of knowledge of English. Throughout this study, I strove to be mindful of my students’ experiences and respectful of their native languages and cultures. As Breen (1999) says, “The ways in which we enable students to learn a new language in order to gain access to other people, other cultures, and other ways of seeing needs to be sensitive to their immediate experience” (p. 48). Furthermore, I bore in mind that

children and their families should not be made to feel that they are deficient
simply because their way of making sense of the world or their way of communicating in the world does not mirror that of the middle-class, white, patriarchal cultural norms that pervade our schools. (Robertson & Schramm-Pate, 2013, pp. 45 – 46)

Conclusion

Equal educational opportunity for all is one of America’s most treasured ideals. Too often, however, the reality falls short, especially for students whose native language is not English. Throughout our history, Americans have grappled with finding the best way to educate English language learners. Although experts agree that instruction in one’s native language is most effective, most ELLs are denied this opportunity. Therefore, English language literacy is of paramount importance for English language
learners if they are to succeed academically. The purpose of this research study was to determine the effect of using literature circles with a small class of ELLs in my high school. This study sought to answer the following research question: What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews? To address this research question, I employed an action research methodology as outlined by Mertler (2014) in *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators* (4th ed.).
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Introduction

The goal of action research is to improve a teacher’s practice in addressing a specific problem at her particular school. Kemmis (2010) says that it is the responsibility of teachers to contribute to the evolution of the professional practice for which its practitioners are not just accredited operatives, but also stewards – custodians of the practice for their times and generation. As stewards, they have the responsibility to protect, nurture, support and strengthen the practice for changing times and circumstances, not as something fixed and fully sufficient but as something that must always evolve to meet new historical demands in the interests of changing communities, societies and the good of humankind. (p. 420)

Problem of Practice and Research Question.

This action research study sought to confront an evolving problem brought about by the rapid change in the community in which my school is situated: the failure of the school in helping its growing number of ESOL students to succeed academically and to graduate from high school. Specifically, this study aimed to explore a method of improving the reading comprehension of the students in one ESOL class through the use of literature circles. This study addressed the following research question: What is the
perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews?

Study Participants

The major participants in this study included six English language learners and one researcher-participant. Five of the ELLs were Spanish-dominant students, and the sixth was an immigrant from the Central African Republic (CAR), a 16-year-old sophomore named “Ahuda,” whose native language is Sangho. Ahuda was born in the CAR, but her family fled to Chad when she was only one or two years old. She passed the next almost seven years in a refugee camp, living in a tent. Ahuda spent the first half of her life close to starvation. Two of her siblings died during this time, and two others died before being born. Since coming to the U.S., Ahuda has lived in three states and attended six different schools. Ahuda would like to return to the CAR to help other refugees escape to the U.S., but she is afraid that her lack of success in learning to read English might prevent her from achieving her goal. Ahuda’s most recently measured English reading level, based on the ACCESS for ELL’s test given last year, was grade 2.6.

The youngest of the students is 15-year-old freshman “Luis.” Originally from Mexico, he came to the United States when he was 12. His parents are divorced. Luis hopes to stay in this country and own his own business one day. Luis’s reading level last year was grade 3.4.

The second youngest in the group is another 15-year-old freshman named “Maria.” Although Maria was born in North Carolina, she moved back to Mexico at the
age of four and then returned to the U.S. when she was 11. Maria’s life has been full of upheaval, not only because of these moves, but also because her parents did not marry until Maria was 11 and then divorced soon after. Maria has often felt persecuted by her teachers, and her grades are not good. However, her goal in life is to become an orthodontist, although her most recently measured reading level was grade 2.4.

“Angel” is a 16-year-old freshman from Honduras. He came to the U.S. just last year. Although Angel has been in this country only a short time, he is a fast learner and a good student. He hopes to be a psychiatrist one day. Angel’s current reading level is unknown.

“Ian” is another 16-year-old freshman from Puerto Rico. He has been in the U.S. for two years, but he hopes to return to Puerto Rico, where his father remains with Ian’s little brother. Ian’s reading level according to the ACCESS test administered last year was 1.6.

Finally, “Eddy” is an 18-year-old senior from Guatemala, who has been in this country since 2015. Eddy dropped out of school in Guatemala after the sixth grade but was placed in high school when he came to this country. Eddy works in construction every day after school as well as on the weekends. He would like to continue his education, but he will be unable to because he is an undocumented alien. Although other states would allow him to attend college, he does not have the resources to do so. Eddy’s reading level last year was grade 2.6.

All the student-participants in this study have faced enormous loss and uncertainty throughout their lives and continue to feel the effects of these experiences.
I am a high school librarian with 25 years of experience teaching English and Latin and ten years of experience as a librarian. I conducted this research study in cooperation with an ESOL teacher at my school with whom I had collaborated on small projects in the past.

Data Collection

To answer my research question, I undertook an observational study in which literature circles were implemented in an ESOL class for almost four months during the spring semester of 2018. These literature circles took place each Monday and Thursday during the students’ fourth block ESOL class.

Before the literature circles began, I gave book talks over a two-day period on books I had chosen on the basis of cultural relevance for the students or simply because they were popular young-adult books written at an appropriate reading level (based on ATOS, Reading Counts, and Lexile measure). Surprisingly to me, all the students initially were uninterested in the culturally-relevant books but seemed very enthusiastic about the popular young-adult books. Three of the six students in the class chose to read *Wake* by Lisa McMann, and three chose *I Am the Weapon* by Allen Zadoff.

When the groups finished these books, I introduced the class to seven more books. This time, I not only told the students about the books, but I read the first chapter of each book aloud to them. All but one of the students voted to read *La Linea* by Ann Jaramillo (2006). This book about two teenagers who make the perilous journey from Guatemala to the United States is written on a higher reading level than the first books chosen by the students, but it is much more relevant to their experiences as young immigrants. Although the students initially chose a book that did not relate to their own
personal experiences, every student in the study later admitted that they did prefer reading the more culturally-relevant book. As Freeman and Freeman (2011) point out, “Students are more likely to become engaged readers when teachers choose books that connect to their students’ lives” (p. 201).

During the literature circle meetings, students discussed these books, using six of the roles suggested by Daniels (2002):

- **Summarizer**, whose job is to write a short summary of the day’s reading, including the main events
- **Word Wizard**, whose job is to look for special words in the book that are new, funny, strange, hard, interesting, or important
- **Questioner**, whose job is to write down questions he or she has about this part of the book
- **Passage Picker**, whose job is to pick excerpts from the book that he or she wants to read aloud and talk about with the group
- **Connector**, whose job is to find connections between the book and the student’s personal experiences or something happening in the world or in another piece of literature
- **Artist**, whose job is to draw some type of picture related to the day’s reading

I created “role sheets” for each of these roles, and students completed the sheets prior to each literature circle meeting.

Before the students began reading their chosen books, I gave each student a set of all six role sheets and explained each of the roles in detail. I then distributed copies of a very short (three-page) story. After reading the first half of the story aloud, I assigned
each student a role and gave them a few minutes to complete their sheets. I then led the
group in a discussion, guided by the role sheets. Afterwards, I read the remainder of the
story aloud and assigned each student a new role. This time, I had the students discuss
the story with one of them acting as the discussion leader. In this way, they were able to
practice the procedures and skills needed for literature circles. Although most of the
students seemed to find it difficult at this point to talk about what they had read, all the
students seemed enthusiastic about the study.

Once students had begun reading their books, roles were assigned to different
students each time the circles met, and the students came to each meeting with their role
sheets completed (see Appendix A for role sheets). During the first round of literature
circles, the students dispensed with the role sheets after two weeks, but the shyer students
did not participate as much, so the sheets were reinstated. The role sheets helped every
student to contribute to the discussion. Without them, some students lacked the
confidence to speak. As Daniels (2002) says, “The role sheets have both cognitive and
social purposes: they help kids read better and discuss better” (p. 99).

During the weeks in which the literature circles met, qualitative data was
collected through analysis of student role sheets, researcher-participant observations and
checklists, and student self-assessment surveys and interviews. When the literature
circles had concluded, the students’ ESOL teacher administered an anonymous literature
circle assessment to the class (see Appendix B). I analyzed this collected data using the
constructivist grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2006).

Charmaz (2006) acknowledges that qualitative researchers usually begin their
research with “a sound footing in their disciplines . . . and often have an intimate
familiarity with the research topic and the literature about it” (p. 17). She cautions, however, that researchers “need to remain as open as possible to whatever we see and sense in the early stages of the research. In short, sensitizing concepts and disciplinary perspectives provide a place to start, not to end” (p. 17). With this in mind, I began my data collection with intense observation of the student-participants and the recording of copious field notes throughout the four-month experiment. I also administered periodic self-assessments to the students, conducted interviews at the end of the four months, and gave the students an opportunity to assess the literature circles anonymously.

Data analysis

When using the constructivist grounded theory approach, the first step in analyzing the collected data is to “code” it. “Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). To accomplish this coding, I read through all the data numerous times and used sticky notes of various colors for emergent themes. For example, each time I came across a bit of data that pertained to vocabulary, I attached a blue sticky note to it. Coding enables the researcher to discover important themes presented in the data. Several major themes emerged from coding the data from this research study: vocabulary, comprehension, attitudes, and relationships. As Charmaz (2006) points out,

Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding, you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means. The codes take form together as
elements of a nascent theory that explains these data and directs further data-gathering. (p. 46)

Coding enabled me to define the most important aspects of literature circles for my student-participants.

**Findings of the study**

**Vocabulary.**

Literature circles offered the student-participants numerous opportunities to learn new words. Like Day and Ainley (2008), I found that literature circles increased my students’ BICS as well as CALP. One of the roles that Daniels (2002) recommends for participants in a literature circle is “Word Wizard.” This student’s job is to find words that are unfamiliar or interesting and discuss these words with the group. This role is particularly important for emerging bilinguals, and in the literature circles described here, the Word Wizard’s job led to many rich conversations. For example, during one circle meeting in the third week, Ian asked about the word “glanced.” Looking at the word in context, Ahuda said, “It means ‘looked.’ He glanced at the clock. That means he looked at the clock. He couldn’t do anything else to the clock, so that has to be what it means.” Thus, Ahuda not only explained the meaning of the word to Ian, but I also illustrated an important method that good readers use to learn vocabulary.

At every literature circle meeting, students brought words to the group for discussion. The students noted the words on their role sheets along with page numbers. Words brought up for discussion included buzzkill, lemonade, carcass, strand, disengaged, vouch, cautioned, shrugged, unsteadily, fugitives, stubbornly, clumsily, grinding, screeched, tremble, and urged. When a word was introduced for discussion,
the group looked back at the page containing the word and discussed possible meanings of the word. For example, one of the words Angel picked out for discussion from *La Línea* was *carcass* from the following sentence on page 22: “Her eyes moved up and down the carcass.” None of the students was familiar with this word, so they guessed at several possible meanings including *road* and *rope*. After discussing all possible meanings in the context, they agreed on the correct one. Often, I was asked to define a word or confirm the meaning the students had surmised. After discussing the word’s meaning, I occasionally asked if the paragraph could be understood in spite of the unknown word. I also asked students to relate words to Spanish cognates if possible.

**Comprehension.**

Increasing the English reading comprehension of the student-participants was the over-arching goal of this action research study. A significant indicator of reading comprehension is the ability to summarize what one has read. According to Lemke (2002), “The dominant means of ascertaining whether or not skillful reading and insightful comprehension of a text has occurred is to look to an essay explicating the read text, which the reader has written. All other means of assessment are shortcuts designed to make assessment cheaper at some sacrifice in validity compared to this gold standard” (p. 8).

At the beginning of the semester, summaries that students wrote on their role sheets or gave orally tended to be very short and sometimes consisted merely of lines copied from the chapter(s) they had read for that day. For example, an early summary of Chapter Two of *Wake* is shown in Figure 4.1 below. These are simply lines copied from page five of the book.
The cloud blurs Janie’s vision so slowly that she doesn’t realize what is happening. She floats in the fog for a moment and then she is in a large room sitting at conference table with five men and three women.
However, as the literature circles described here progressed, the student-participants’ summaries improved. Even though the second book that the students read was slightly more difficult (as measured by ATOS, Reading Counts, and Lexile measure), the summaries produced by the students gradually became longer, and they more clearly contained the major events of the chapters. For example, Luis summarized Chapters 17 – 19 of *La Linea* as shown in Figure 4.2 below. This is an excellent account of the main events of these three chapters, and it clearly indicates Luis’s reading comprehension.

In addition to the discussion and role sheet summaries becoming more complete, the drawings made by the students also became more detailed and complex, containing elements to illustrate events from the entire selection instead of just one event. The drawing in Figure 4.3 below was produced by Angel during the second week of literature circles. It depicts only one incident in the chapters that were read for the day. The next drawing (Figure 4.4), however, evinces Angel’s clear understanding of Chapters 20 – 22 of *La Linea*.

**Attitude.**

Student-participant attitudes and behavior also changed as the study progressed. In the first few weeks, two of the students often put their heads on their desks or complained of feeling ill. These two students, along with several of the other students, frequently did not seem able to discuss the books they were reading. Sometimes they did not complete their role sheets. Other times, they simply read the few words on their sheets but did not offer any additional comments. As the study progressed, however,
Literature Circle

SUMMARIZER

Your Name

Pages Chpt. 14-19

Your job is to write a short summary of today’s reading.

Include the main events that happened in this part of the book.

In chapter 17 call Don Clemente private number and Juanito answer. Miguel said I need talk with Don Clemente and Juanito said my uncle is dead he die in a car accident.

In chapter 18 Miguel and Elena found Javi and they want go to the north in a train.

In chapter 19 they go in a train and Elena cut her hair. Because she dress up like a boy.

Figure 4.2 Later summary
Literature Circle

ARTIST

Your Name __________________________

Pages ____________________________

Your job is to draw some kind of picture related to today's reading.

You can draw a character, the setting, a problem, an exciting part, what will happen next, or anything else.

Figure 4.3 Early drawing
Figure 4.4 Later drawing

these students became more actively involved in the literature circles, asking questions of other students and contributing their opinions to the discussion. The literature circles came to be full of lively discussions and laughter. This change in attitude reflected the students’ improved feelings about reading English and increased engagement with the books they were reading.
Relationships.

At the beginning of this study, not all the student-participants knew each other. Nevertheless, Angel, Eddy, and Luis quickly became friendly as they read *Wake* together. These students often laughed over what they read in the book. For example, one of the characters in the book used the blended word “unfuckingbelievable,” and these boys thought that was hilarious. These group members frequently discussed their book in both English and Spanish, and as Pacheco, David, and Jimenez (2015) point out, “Researchers have shown the advantages of leveraging heritage languages to promote literacy achievement” (p. 50).

On the other hand, Ahuda, Ian, and Maria did not become fast friends. In fact, in the first few weeks of the study, Ahuda and Maria sometimes argued about anything from who had read the most to who was talking too loudly. At the same time, Ian often put his head on his desk or looked at his phone. Gradually, however, as the students got to know each other better, they became friendlier. Ahuda complimented Maria on her drawing, and Maria asked Ian to help her understand a passage. As the students’ ESOL teacher observed, “Since the kids are really talking to each other, they really develop relationships that they wouldn’t normally. They start to like each other and can talk to each other. It’s wonderful” (E. Allen, personal communication, May 11, 2018).

Interpretation of findings

The implementation of literature circles in a small class of ESOL students at Research Site High School was found to be a success in terms of enriching the students’ vocabulary, improving their English reading comprehension and their attitude toward reading English, and helping them to form supportive relationships with each other.
Vocabulary.

Experts in teaching English language learners stress the critical importance of vocabulary. As Wallace (2007) says, “The greatest challenge inhibiting the ability of English-language learners (ELLs) to read at the appropriate grade level is perhaps a lack of sufficient vocabulary development” (p. 189). Various solutions, including direct teaching of high-frequency words and morphological elements, have been proposed (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2012). Data collected in this action research study suggest that participation in literature circles also provides an effective means of vocabulary enrichment for ELLs.

In separate interviews, all six student-participants in the study volunteered that literature circles had helped them to learn English vocabulary words. For example, Maria said, “Other people can explain words you don’t know,” and Ahuda said that participating in the literature circles helped her to “learn new words I’ve never heard. The best part is if you don’t know words, you write them down and ask in the group.”

An anonymous survey (see Appendix D) administered to the students by their ESOL teacher at the end of the semester supported this finding. All of the students indicated that participation in the literature circles had helped them learn English vocabulary words.

Comprehension.

Based on observation of the student-participants in this study as well as an examination of their literature circle role sheets, all students showed improvement in their English reading comprehension. Vygotsky and others have pointed to the social nature of learning, and literature circles take advantage of that truth. “Talking to others about deep
questions and co-constructing knowledge seems to increase comprehension, perhaps because of the exercise of critical-thinking skills and a motivation for deeper inquiry” (Meltzer and Hamann, p. 27).

**Attitudes.**

Participation in literature circles seemed to improve the attitude of several of the students in the group. Ian, for example, often put his head down or looked at his phone during the first few weeks of the study. As he became more confident of his ability to contribute to the group, he became more engaged, often volunteering to share his role sheet first. In fact, according to his ESOL teacher, he was “on fire” by the third month of participating in literature circles (E. Allen, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

The anonymous survey given to the students by their ESOL teacher a week after the conclusion of the literature circles (See Appendix D) also indicated a significant change in attitude toward reading books in English. All six student-participants indicated that, after participating in literature circles, their feeling about reading books in English was positive, whereas before the literature circles, half of the students indicated that their feeling about reading books in English was either negative or neutral.

**Relationships.**

Perhaps the main reason that literature circles were successful in increasing the vocabulary and reading comprehension of the student-participants in the study is because the circles strengthened their relationships with each other. As Cloud, Lakin, & Leininger (2011) have observed,

Schools that cultivate supportive relationships among teachers and students, especially for disenfranchised groups, promote higher attendance levels, help
students achieve at higher levels, experience fewer behavior problems, and have faculty who report a greater sense of satisfaction in their work. Belonging has been associated with a host of positive effects, the most important of which are increases in motivation and academic achievement. (p. 134)

In the anonymous survey that the students completed after participating in the literature circles, four of the students indicated that the experience had helped them to get to know the other people in the class “a lot,” and their ESOL teacher and I both observed their strengthening relationships. Ahuda and Eddy even went to the prom together!

Conclusion

This action research study sought to answer the following research question:

What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews? Since many experts discourage the use of standardized assessments with ELLs and for literature circles in general (August et al., 2006; Cloud et al., 2009; Croce, 2010; Daniels, 2002; Law & Eckes, 2007; MacDonald et al., 2015; O’Malley & Pierce, 1996; Schiro, 2013) the students in this study were not given a pretest and posttest to evaluate their reading comprehension levels. However, each of the student-participants in this study indicated through interviews and self-assessments (See Appendices C and D) that they felt their English reading comprehension had improved through the course of the study. My observation of student discussions and my analysis of the students’ role sheets supported this assessment, as did conversations with the students’ ESOL teacher, who said near the end of the study, “I’ve seen a lot of improvement in terms of their
reading and their wanting to read.” She went on to say, “Ian is making great strides; a lot of this is this [the literature circles]. I really think they have become better readers” (E. Allen, personal communication, May 7, 2018). This growth in comprehension seems to be related to the concurrent growth in vocabulary and to the relationships that were formed or strengthened through the process. The students’ attitudes toward reading improved as their abilities improved.

The findings of this study meet the requirements for trustworthiness set forth by Guba (1981). Credibility was established through “persistent observation” over the course of 15 weeks. Additionally, “peer debriefing” with the students’ ESOL teacher offered me the opportunity to confirm my conclusions, and comparing data from observations, checklists, role sheets, self-assessments, and interviews provided triangulation.

I agree with Schnoor (2016), who sums up the benefits of literature circles: “Literature circles keep students accountable within their group, incorporate discussions about what they read at each meeting, and provide a choice that will keep them interested and invested” (p.23).
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study focused on six English language learners at a small high school in upstate South Carolina. These students have faced loss and deprivation and even starvation in their short lives that few of us in the United States will ever know. Even now, these young people struggle to survive in the face of abject poverty. Despite the hardships they continue to endure, all of these students cherish ambitions that include continuing their education beyond high school. In order to achieve their dreams, these students must be able to succeed in school, which demands increased English reading comprehension.

Problem of Practice and Research Question

Research Site High School in upstate South Carolina is home to almost 400 Hispanic students, close to 40% of the entire school population. Over 250 students at the school are English language learners, who, after one or two semesters in a “newcomer” class, must attempt to learn all their subjects in English only. Like many ELLs across the country, these students often cannot succeed and end up dropping out of school. In order to help these students succeed, I explored methods of increasing English reading comprehension among ELLs. One method that showed promise was literature circles, as described by Harvey Daniels (2002) in his seminal work, Literature Circles: Voice and
Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups. This book is grounded in the Vygotskian theory that learning is a social activity.

This study sought to answer the following research question: **What is the perceived effect of participation in literature circles on the level of English reading comprehension of one class of high school English language learners as measured by teacher observation, student self-assessment, and student interviews?**

**Research Methodology**

To answer my research question, I coordinated the use of literature circles in a small class of English language learners at Research Site High School during the second semester of the 2017-2018 school year. During the course of the semester, I observed the students and took abundant field notes. Additionally, the students assessed their participation in the literature circles as well as the literature circles themselves. I interviewed both the student-participants and their ESOL teacher at the conclusion of the study.

**Findings**

Based on a thorough qualitative analysis of the data produced by this action research study, I believe that the literature circles were successful in increasing the English reading comprehension of the student-participants. This increase was largely due to the gains in English vocabulary realized by the students but was also related to the fact that the literature circles simply encouraged the students to read. Countless studies have shown the importance of reading for pleasure as a means of increasing overall reading comprehension (Priya & Ponniah, 2013; Wilhelm, 2016).
Reflection

Action research is a reflective process (Mertler, 2014). It begins and ends with the participant-researcher reflecting on his or her practice in an effort to improve its efficacy. My action research study began with years of reflection on the challenges faced by the English language learners (ELLs) in my school. I taught English and Latin in my school for many years, and by the time I left the classroom, a large number of my students were ELLs. Although these students had the benefit of a dedicated and talented ESOL teacher, they still struggled in my classes as well as in others. Ten years ago, I became a librarian in the same school in which I had been teaching. I continued to work with the English language learners and became even more aware of the difficulties they faced in all their classes. Personal reflection as well as conversations with my school’s lead ESOL teacher led us to explore the possibility of collaborating on a project to improve the English reading comprehension of our English language learners. This idea formed the basis of my action research study.

Throughout the subsequent stages of my action research study, I reflected on the process, as Mertler (2014) recommends, and considered how each aspect of my plan could be improved. This reflection led me to formulate a research plan that I implemented in the Spring of 2018. After collecting data during the implementation phase and then analyzing the data, I devised an action plan based on my findings. Developing this action plan required earnest reflection. As Mertler (2014) says, “Developing an action plan takes some time and thought, looking back across the entire study, starting with the initial need or topic idea, the strategies for research design, data collection, and data analysis” (p. 211). I reflected on the students’ attitudes about the
project and the student behaviors I observed throughout the course of the study. I reflected on the effectiveness of the use of literature circles with ELLs and considered whether the methods used in the study need to be modified. I also reflected on how my findings might influence the teaching of English language learners in my school in the future.

**Action Plan**

According to Mertler (2014), “the action plan is essentially a proposed strategy for implementing the results of your action research project” (p. 43). My action plan will require me to continue to collaborate with the ESOL teachers in my school, but, in addition, I will share my findings with the members of the English Department, so that they might also take advantage of what I learned through my study. I will offer to collaborate with those English teachers who may want to incorporate literature circles into their curriculum. Through this continued collaboration with the teachers at my school and repeated implementation of literature circles, I will refine my findings.

Action research is, by its very nature, cyclical. Most action researchers firmly believe that once through an action research cycle is simply not enough. In order to develop adequate rigor, it is critical to proceed through a number of cycles, where the earlier cycles are used to help inform how to conduct the later cycles.

(Mertler, 2014, p. 28)

I was fortunate to be able to lead my student-participants through two rounds of literature circles during the semester I worked with them. Based on my first experience in implementing literature circles, I changed my method of introducing books the second time around. The second time, I not only described the books to the students, I also read
aloud the entire first chapter of each offered book. Another change I made was having the students work in one group of six, instead of two groups of three, as they did in the first round. In the first round, I had realized that three was too small for an effective literature-circle group. Finally, I required the students to use role sheets throughout the second round of literature circles.

The next time that I implement literature circles with English language learners, I will make another change: I will offer only culturally-relevant books. Although I will continue to give students a choice in their reading, I will suggest only those books that the students can connect with personally. Many researchers speak to the importance of using relevant literature (Cloud, et al., 2009; Ernst-Slavit, et al., 2002; O’Malley & Pierce, 1996; Stewart, et al., 2015), and my findings corroborated them. In the study described here, the students were much more engaged in reading La Linea than they had been in reading either I Am the Weapon or Wake. As Ahuda said, “We all have connections to this book because we are all immigrants.”

The Action Researcher as Curriculum Leader

Leadership philosophy.

To implement her action plan and to share her results effectively, the action researcher must be a leader in her school. My leadership philosophy is based on what Greenleaf (1977) calls “servant leadership” (p. 18). Greenleaf maintains that servant leaders choose first to be servants and only later decide to pursue leadership roles. He says that there is a vast difference between those who initially seek to serve and those who first seek to lead. According to Greenleaf (1977),
The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (p. 22)

Sergiovanni (2013) elaborates on the theory of servant leadership, declaring that “it is a morally based leadership – a form of stewardship” (p. 373). I do not usually think of myself as a leader. My purpose in undertaking the action research project described in this dissertation was simply to help the student participants become more successful in school. However, as Crippen (2010) points out, “once a person assumes the mantle of teacher, one becomes a leader” (p. 27). So even though I think of myself as a librarian and a teacher, I am actually a leader in my work with students. As such, it is my duty to lead my students toward the accomplishment of shared goals.

Classroom leadership requires the teacher to be involved in the “unheroic” activities that Murphy (2013) outlines, including “developing a shared vision” and “listening and acknowledging” (p. 30). If students do not share the teacher’s or the school’s vision, then the teacher’s efforts will be wasted. At the school in which I work, administrators and teachers spend a great deal of time discussing their vision for the school; however, this vision is rarely communicated to the students. Every faculty member knows that the school’s motto is “community, character, excellence,” but I am not sure that a single student does. Listening to students and acknowledging the value of their thoughts is also important for the teacher-leader. Teachers, like other leaders, must
not assume that they have all the answers. When a student is having difficulty learning, he or she probably knows better than anyone what the problem is. Teachers should not be too quick to pass judgment on the student’s motivation or effort. Instead, the teacher should take the time to listen attentively to the student and try to find a solution. Sharing one’s vision with students and listening to them are two ways that teachers can build trust, and, as Tschannen-Moran (2013) points out, “Trust leaders are at the heart of successful schools” (p. 49).

The principles of servant leadership, as espoused by Greenleaf (1977) and Sergiovanni (2013) form the basis of my philosophy of educational leadership. I believe that all school leaders, from the principal to the classroom teachers, have a moral duty to serve the best interests of their students.

**Curriculum Leader Role**

Historically, teachers have had a very limited role in curriculum leadership in public schools in America (Spring, 2014). Still today, teachers in public schools are restricted by traditional practice as well as state content standards. When I taught high school English and Latin, I often felt excluded from any aspect of curriculum leadership. However, as a high school librarian, I now have the freedom and the power to help define the curriculum at my school.

An example that illustrates the latitude I enjoy in my position is the action research project I undertook in collaboration with the lead ESOL teacher at my school. Librarians in my school district are encouraged to collaborate with classroom teachers; in fact, they are evaluated partly on their collaborations. Moreover, they are allowed a great deal of freedom in determining what form the collaboration will take. Since my school
has a large ESOL population, and many of the English language learners struggle with English reading comprehension, I sought a way to address this problem through a collaborative action research plan.

In addition to the leadership role I took in relation to my action research project, I have also recently realized that I must assume more of a leadership role in my position on the Leadership Team at my school. I became a member of the Leadership Team when I became a librarian, but I have always felt that I was primarily an observer in the group rather than a leader. However, reading “Leadership Practices to Support Teaching and Learning for English Language Learners” by McGee, Haworth, and MacIntyre (2015) caused what Brubaker (2004) describes as “a radical change in an educator’s mind-set, something that may be called a paradigm shift” (p. 67). Reading McGee et al. in conjunction with reflecting upon the topic of my action research study opened my eyes to the obligation I have to advocate for the English language learners (ELLs) in my school. The ESOL teachers are not members of the Leadership Team; therefore, their students’ needs are not often brought before the group. Brubaker (2004) declares that curriculum leaders must “identify and understand ways in which persons are dominated or constrained” (p. 19) and act on this understanding. This is what I intend to do as a member of the Leadership Team from now on.

There are several problems concerning ESOL at my school that I hope to address. First, teachers are allowed, to some degree, to ignore the needs of the English language learners in their classrooms. They are not required to note accommodations for ELLs in their lesson plans, and they are allowed to ignore numerous requests from the ESOL teacher for information about student performance. In addition, the lead ESOL teacher is
not supported in her need to obtain information from the school’s Guidance Department for federal reports she must make. Finally, professional development for teachers in how best to teach ELLs is rare. My high school has the largest population of English language learners in a district that includes 14 high schools, and yet my school leadership is not doing enough to support their learning. I will work to change that. I will voice my concerns at future Leadership Team meetings. I will speak to the department chairmen on the Leadership Team concerning the teachers who fail to supply information to the ESOL teacher, and I will ask the team to consider a requirement to include ESOL accommodations in their lesson plans. I will request that the Instructional Team include professional development relating to ELLs in their yearly schedule, and I will offer to assist in creating and presenting these professional development lessons. Finally, I will seek to collaborate more with the ESOL teachers and other teachers at my school in order to implement literature circles in their classes. These are simple steps, but I believe they could help my school’s students to succeed.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Although I found literature circles to be an effective means of increasing the English reading comprehension of the English language learners with whom I worked, there is considerable need for further research. This study was limited by the small number of student-participants and by its short time frame. Although action research is never considered generalizable, continued research including repeated use of literature circles with ELLs would help to validate my findings.
Conclusion

Too often, English language learners are denied access to educational opportunities and educational success because of their lack of English reading comprehension skills. In fact, “only 63 percent of ELLs graduate from high school, compared with the overall national rate of 82 percent” (Sanchez, 2017). Through my action research project, I hope to help the English language learners at my school become better readers and, ultimately, high school graduates. These students hunger for more than just food; they hunger to realize their dreams.
REFERENCES


Ewert, S. (2012, Feb. 27). GED recipients have lower earnings, are less likely to enter college. Retrieved from U.S. Census Bureau website: http://blogs.census.gov/2012/02/27/ged-recipient-have-lower-earnings-are-less-likely-to-enter-college


Your Name ________________________________

Pages __________________

Your job is to find connections between the book and you and between the book and the world.

This means to connect the reading to your own past experiences or to happenings at school, in the community, in the news, or to anything else that you are reminded of.

You may also see connections to other books or stories.

Some connections I made between this reading and something else are ...
Literature Circle

PASSAGE PICKER

Your Name ____________________________

Pages ___________________

Your job is to pick parts of the book you want to read aloud and talk about in your group.

This could be

- A good part
- A funny part
- A scary part
- Something else

Mark the part you chose with a Post-it note

Write the page number here and be ready to tell why you picked this part
Literature Circle

WORD WIZARD

Your Name ________________________________

Pages __________________

Your job is to look for special words in the book. Look for words that are new, funny, strange, hard, interesting, or important. When you find a word, write it here and give the page number.

Some words I found in this reading are ...
Your Name ____________________________

Pages ___________________

Your job is to write a short summary of today’s reading.

Include the main events that happened in this part of the book.
Your Name ____________________________

Pages ___________________

Your job is to write down a few questions that you have about this part of the book.

What were you wondering while you read it?

Did you have questions about what was happening?

Did you wonder what would happen next?

Some questions I had about today’s reading were ...
Your Name ____________________________

Pages ______________________

Your job is to draw some kind of picture related to today’s reading.

You can draw a character, the setting, a problem, an exciting part, what will happen next, or anything else.
Literature Circle Observation Checklist

Date _______________      Title of Selection __________________________________

Pages _______________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Ahuda</th>
<th>Angel</th>
<th>Eddy</th>
<th>Ian</th>
<th>Luis</th>
<th>Maria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Brought book to class</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did assigned reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed role sheet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributed to discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Listened to others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to text</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Literature Circle Self-Assessment

Name ___________________________ Date __________

Title of Selection ________________________________________

1. How much of today’s assignment did you read? (Circle one.)
   • All
   • Most
   • Some
   • None

2. How much did you participate in today’s literature circle discussion? (Circle one.)
   • A lot
   • Some
   • None

3. What did you do well today? (Circle the ones you did.)
   • I brought my book to class.
   • I was prepared.
   • I completed my role sheet.
   • I listened to others.
   • I added to the discussion.
   • I helped someone else.
   • Anything else? ________________________________
APPENDIX D

ANONYMOUS SURVEY

Literature Circles Assessment

CIRCLE YOUR ANSWER TO EACH QUESTION

1. How did you feel about reading books in English before doing literature circles?
   ☹ ☻ ☺

2. How did you feel about reading books in English after doing literature circles?
   ☹ ☻ ☺

3. Did literature circles help you learn English vocabulary words?
   Not at all  A little  Some  A lot

4. Did literature circles help you get to know other people in this class?
   Not at all  A little  Some  A lot

5. How did you feel about participating in literature circles?
   ☹ ☻ ☺

6. Would you like to participate in literature circles again?
   Yes  No  Maybe
APPENDIX E

PRINCIPAL’S APPROVAL OF STUDY

Mr. Mike Noel, Principal
Berea High School
201 Burdine Drive
Greenville, SC 29617

Dear Mr. Noel:

As part of my doctoral program in education at the University of South Carolina, I am proposing an action research project on the effect of literature circles on the English reading comprehension of a group of ESOL students. This research would be conducted during the second semester of the 2017-2018 school year. I propose to work with one of Elisabeth Allen’s ESOL classes of approximately fifteen students. I will work with these students one day per week for approximately nine weeks. Student progress will be measured through qualitative assessments such as teacher observation and student surveys. The anonymity of the students will be carefully maintained throughout the process. Mrs. Allen and I have discussed my proposed project at length, and we both believe that it will have a positive impact on her students’ English reading comprehension.

Please indicate your approval of my proposed study by signing below. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Madeline C. Fletcher

Mr. Mike Noel, Principal, Berea High School
APPENDIX F

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

Madeline Fletcher

College of Education

Department of Instruction & Teacher Education / Curriculum & Instruction

Wardlaw College

Columbia, SC 29208

Re: Pro00069618

This is to certify that the research study, “The Impact of Literature Circles on Reading Comprehension of English Language Learners,” was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1), the study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 7/21/2017. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the study remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in
procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research study could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this study was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

All research related records are to be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson

IRB Assistant Director
APPENDIX G

STUDENT/PARENT PERMISSION FOR STUDY

Student/Parent Consent Form - Literature Circles Project

The purpose of this project is to improve your English reading comprehension. The project will involve the use of small groups, called “literature circles,” whose members will all choose to read the same story or book. The groups will meet weekly to discuss their reading. Each member of the group will have a role in the discussion.

I will write a summary of the results of this project on improving the English reading comprehension of the students who choose to participate, but I will not use any student’s real name or any personal identifier. I will include my summary in my dissertation for the University of South Carolina.

You do not have to participate in this study. You may refuse with no penalty whatsoever. You may also withdraw from this project at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about this project, please see me in the library or call me at 864-355-1648.

Please check the appropriate box below and sign this form. Thank you!

Mrs. Madeline C. Fletcher

☐ I wish to participate in this study.

☐ I do not wish to participate in this study.

Student’s Signature

Parent’s Signature