Designing Vocabulary Instruction for English Language Learners in a Kindergarten Classroom

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DESIGNING VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

by

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DEDICATION

To my husband Todd, you offered an easy silence and quiet resilience as well as a safe place to release my frustrations. You provided the encouragement, love, and support to keep moving forward. I will forever be grateful for your patience and unwavering strength as I worked to achieve this dream. I love you!

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My love to you all!
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Finally, I would like to thank my students. Beautiful Ones, you are the reason I do this work. May you continue to grow and learn to be the amazing people you are now and will become.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research study was to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices used to teach vocabulary to English Language Learners in a kindergarten classroom. The central question of the study was: what classroom practices support vocabulary acquisition of ELLs? The purpose was to determine the impact of an intervention on vocabulary acquisition with a focus on directional prepositions and rhyming word vocabulary. Students participated in whole group direct instruction, small group targeted instruction, and integrated peer play opportunities over the course of the study as vocabulary interventions. Data for this study included pre- and post-instruction assessments of student participants, coded recordings of student and researcher interactions, and researcher observations and notes. Based on the evidence the researcher concluded that the designed vocabulary interventions were successful for ELL students. The hope is that from this research that teachers may be able to implement similar instructional practices to support ELLs in the acquisition of vocabulary.

Keywords: Action research, English Language Learner (ELL), vocabulary instruction, kindergarten
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the spoken and written word is a foundational skill within any school and for a student in the United States, this means learning English. Students enrolled in school in the United States learn to read, write, and speak English. Students enter kindergarten with a variety of language experiences (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Kindergarten is often the first experience of formalized schooling and the place for the foundations of academic language to begin. Within a kindergarten classroom, students learn concepts of the printed language and how to apply vocabulary in multiple academic settings as well as in the world beyond school (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2017). For students whose first language is not English, vocabulary acquisition is more complex (Gibbons, 2015). This action research study was designed to evaluate instructional practices to support English Language Learners in their acquisition of vocabulary.

As a teacher at the elementary level, I have taught in both single-subject and self-contained classrooms in grades two, four, five, and currently kindergarten. Throughout my career, I have worked with children with a variety of academic needs and from a variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. In 2017, due to changing enrollment, my licensure that encompasses all subjects in grades kindergarten through eighth grade, and my training as an International Baccalaureate instructor, I was
reassigned from a fifth-grade social studies classroom to a full-day kindergarten classroom. I spent the summer of 2017 preparing curriculum materials and setting up a child-centered kindergarten classroom.

With only two kindergarten teachers in the building at that time, my classroom was the unit for English Language Learners (ELL). I worked closely with the ELL teacher to support students learning English as a second language. What I noticed in my first year of kindergarten was that the general English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum of teaching reading, writing, and vocabulary supported all students to meet the expected state standards. With a combination of whole class instruction and differentiated targeted instruction to fill learning gaps, most students, including ELLs, were reading and writing at developmentally appropriate levels by the end of the school year. All students also showed improved vocabulary understanding verbally and with written texts. However, my formative and summative assessments that first year showed that ELL students did not make the same progress compared to their English-only peers in vocabulary understanding of directional prepositions and rhyming sounds. My second year of teaching kindergarten resulted in the same problem. ELL students made progress in reading, writing, and vocabulary but were not making the same progress as their English-only peers with rhyme and directional prepositions. The ELL teacher affirmed what my classroom assessments showed: in her experience, ELLs at the kindergarten level have difficulty mastering directional prepositions and rhyming sounds.

This action research study was designed to target ELL vocabulary acquisition for directional prepositions and for rhyming sounds, both kindergarten state standards (Ohio’s Learning Standards, 2019). Mastery and understanding of content vocabulary
are essential for academic success for ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017). With the increasing numbers of ELL students in our district, I felt it was important to research practices that would support kindergarten ELLs in achieving mastery of directional prepositions and rhyme in a child centered environment. Integrating developmentally appropriate play with targeted instructional practices can support vocabulary acquisition for kindergarten ELLs.

**Problem of Practice**

With an identified problem of vocabulary acquisition for ELL students within my teaching environment, it became important to create a research study to address the problem. The first step in an action research cycle is to identify a problem that can “address the complexities of the issues educators face in their practice day in and day out” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 9). Those “complexities” required a deep understanding of the research environment and the challenges of designing a study to target vocabulary acquisition for ELLs in kindergarten.

At the beginning of the 2019-20 school year, there was a major change in our school district. Instead of four separate elementary buildings, a new elementary building was opened to house all students in the district from preschool through grade four. This was the first time in the district’s modern history that all elementary students and staff would be housed in a single location. Kindergarten in the new building has both half-day and tuition-based full-day options. The State of Ohio does not mandate that schools offer full-day kindergarten, but allows districts to charge tuition on a sliding scale based on economic need for a full-day kindergarten program (Kindergarten, 2019). In the past, our district would cap the number of students able to participate in full-day programs due to
staffing levels and space at the four different buildings. With all kindergarten classes now in one location, there were seven classes for full-day instruction and three sections of half-day kindergarten. The full-day classes offered by the district increased by one, while the half-day sections decreased by one.

With a completely new physical structure and the ability to share resources in one location, incoming kindergarten students had to be sectioned into classes for the first time. Prior to the 2019-20 school year, students were assigned a full-day or half-day section based on their neighborhood. There was little analysis of student data before placement of kindergarten children, as two of the four schools had only one full-day kindergarten classroom and thus no choice for placement. Now with seven full-day kindergarten sections and three half-day sections, as a kindergarten team we looked at screening data as well as information from parents to place students in supportive academic environments. With the new one building structure, we now had the ability to have co-teachers in select rooms for parts of the academic day to meet the needs of special education and ELL students.

When we looked closely at our incoming student data, there were approximately 50 of the 150 students registered for full-day kindergarten whose parents listed a second language spoken in the home. Approximately one-third of our entering full-day kindergarten class had experience with a language other than English before entering school. Because this was our first year looking at data as a whole, rather than subdivided at separate buildings, we were all surprised by the number of potential ELLs. All students with a second language listed on their registration would be screened with the Ohio English Language Proficiency Screener (OELPS) to determine the level of
academic need. While this assessment would not be completed until October, the initial language and math screening gave a snapshot understanding of student academic needs for placement.

With a third of students entering kindergarten with experiences in a language other than English, our school had a need to support ELL students in language and vocabulary acquisition to be successful in the academic environment. The identified problem of practice in this research study was how to best support the acquisition of content vocabulary in the form of directional prepositions and rhyming words for students who are ELLs in a kindergarten setting. Using action research, I designed an intervention using storybooks for direct instruction, small group targeted interventions integrating play, and intentional play-based activities to support kindergarten ELLs with vocabulary acquisition.

ELLs in the primary grades have developed language understanding in a primary language other than English; however, younger ELLs do not have an understanding of linguistic complexities to analyze language and make constant connections between their primary language and English (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Learning vocabulary becomes a key component of integrating ELLs into the school environment to support students both socially and academically. Arriving in the classroom with a variety of cultural experiences that may be vastly different than those of their English-only peers, ELLs need an environment that supports them emotionally and physically as they adjust to their role within the school (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). Beginning the vocabulary building process for ELLs in kindergarten is essential for future academic success due to the strong correlation of vocabulary, reading comprehension, and school achievement
With the large number of students prescreened as ELL, it was important for our team to meet the academic needs of ELL students with specific attention to the acquisition of English vocabulary.

Since the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, vocabulary instruction is an embedded part of the curriculum and an essential component for understanding academic content (Graves, 2016). Research has shown a direct correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, but there is less understanding of how to best apply vocabulary interventions to impact reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). The Report of National Reading Panel (2000) found no best practice in vocabulary instruction, with research going back as far as 1979. With no clear definition of the term academic vocabulary, designing interventions for students is a complex process (Baumann & Graves, 2010). While researchers have recognized the importance of vocabulary instruction, and multiple methods have been developed, there is little evidence for determining best practice for vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

With my school’s increasing population of students identified as ELL, I designed this study to further the knowledge of instructors in my district on practices to support vocabulary acquisition for ELLs. Through embedded instruction, extended instruction integrated with play, and small group play with peer language interaction, the intervention was designed to support the learning of ELLs as they develop English vocabulary skills.
Theoretical Framework

I love teaching kindergarten. Watching and supporting the learning of children at this age is an almost magical experience. My students love to learn. As long as everything seems fun and is the “best thing ever,” letters, numbers, reading, writing, and solving problems are all candy for the taking in an environment that centers on play. While children are involved in play, the outside observer may just see children having fun, but the trained instructor knows learning does not happen by accident. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) acknowledges the importance of high-quality learning through best practices that meet the developmental needs of children. Play is an important component in the learning process for all students at the kindergarten level (Piaget, 1923, 2002). Researchers find it difficult to define play in the academic environment yet have an understanding that play-based learning has a strong dependence on the philosophy of the individual teacher (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Play has a purpose (Piaget, 1923, 2002), but it is up to the individual teacher to define that purpose in the learning environment. Rich experiences through play and active engagement provide opportunities for cognitive growth in each child (Piaget, 1923, 2003). Understanding a child’s love of learning and need to be part of a larger group (Piaget, 1923, 2003) supports the need to create a rich environment to actively engage all students in the learning process.

In addition to play, literacy development requires vocabulary instruction (Graves et al., 2013). As part of the ELA Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (ELA, 2019), kindergarten students are expected to have mastery of a variety of complex linguistic understandings. Students should know multiple meaning words, nouns, and prepositions,
as well as have a keen phonological and vocabulary awareness for deciphering both word sound and meaning. The CCSS for ELA (2019) require an in-depth knowledge of words and the ability to apply vocabulary with multiple meanings. Text complexity is an integral part of early grades instruction for vocabulary, and instructors must apply that complexity within a usable framework (Mesmer, Cunningham, & Hiebert, 2012). For this action research study, embedded story book instruction, extended direct instruction with play, and play-based engagement were used together for the vocabulary intervention.

Using story books as a vocabulary intervention for both English-only students and ELLs in kindergarten is a research-based intervention (Beck et al., 2013; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Graves et al., 2013; Nielson & Friesen, 2012; Silverman, 2007; Silverman & Crandell, 2010). A story book targets all students within the research setting, with books chosen for a specific learning goal. *Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1968) was used as the story book to address directional prepositions, while *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* (Thomas, 2009) was used to address rhyming words. Story books facilitate the instruction of familiar words in print while also adding vocabulary depth through the concepts within the story (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). The words used for instruction are at the discretion of the teacher and are selected to meet the purpose of the lesson. A common practice in primary grades, the use of story books is proven to support vocabulary growth and development of all students (Graves, 2016).

While embedded story book instruction typically is presented to an entire class, direct vocabulary instruction for kindergarten ELLs takes place in small groups, extends learning from the general classroom setting, and focuses on specific targeted words.
Direct instruction of vocabulary has resulted in an increase of vocabulary acquisition for students who received the intervention in multiple vocabulary studies (Crevecoeur, Coyne, & McCoach 2014; Loftus et al., 2010; Marulis & Neuman 2010; Spycher, 2009). Marulis and Neuman (2010) determined in their meta-analysis that direct instruction has benefits for both ELLs as well as English-only students struggling with vocabulary acquisition. While these results are not surprising, finding the time, personnel, and resources are all limitations to direct instruction in small groups.

When choosing instructional practices within a small group, considering developmentally appropriate strategies is essential. Challenges facing teachers when attempting to integrate play with literacy instruction include planning play-based activities and integrating direct instruction with guided play (Pyle et al., 2018). Play, according to NAEYC (2009), should be part of any program for young children. Graves (2016) suggests best practices for teaching vocabulary apply to all students, including ELLs. For ELLs, play can support language acquisition and social development. However, integrating play and instruction can be challenging in the school environment with the demands to meet specific academic outcomes (Pyle et al., 2018). Often the academic outcomes are in pedagogical contrast to the constructivist philosophy of play. The use of play has been documented to support student learning and growth (Piaget, 1923, 2003). Play can become an important piece of developing vocabulary for ELLs.

The ultimate aim of a vocabulary intervention is to improve the lived experiences of students and build a foundation for future school success. Kinsler’s (2010) analysis of action research and the potential impact it can have in making change derives from the assumption that action research can support social justice goals and provide educational
equality for marginalized groups. Quality action research should “contribute to the increased well-being of human persons” (Kinsler, 2010, p. 186). With the assumption that technical change in educational practice is not enough, Kinsler (2010) advocates for research that has “emancipatory intent” (p. 173). With a social justice lens, action research has the potential to eliminate the racial and economic barriers that prevent academic success for groups who have been historically marginalized.

It is through emancipation that the oppressed can become equal members within the society. Emancipatory action research should do more than just improve teaching techniques, the efficiency of practice, and policies (Kinsler, 2010). Conducting research in isolation and exclusionary research that only examines the perspectives of professionals will not achieve emancipation or equality (Kinsler, 2010). Action research should serve a higher purpose. Improving school practice is an important component of quality action research, but the ultimate aim is to conduct action research that has the intent to enlighten and emancipate the lives of all. The goal of this action research study was to improve the vocabulary acquisition of ELL students in kindergarten. With an increased understanding of English, the hope is that students have more access to educational opportunities and teachers are able to prevent marginalization.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to improve the classroom practices in a suburban environment that has seen an increase in the ELL student population based on data from the state of Ohio. This research was conducted to determine the effects of a targeted vocabulary intervention integrated into peer play for the acquisition of vocabulary for
ELLs. The action research study was designed to teach vocabulary acquisition while still meeting the developmental needs of students who are in kindergarten.

The questions that guided this action research were:

1. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?
2. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?
3. What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play?

The intervention designed for this research includes three components. Before beginning the intervention, all students participating were assessed in their knowledge of rhyme and directional prepositions. After the pre-intervention assessment, the first component of the intervention was story book instruction. For this phase of the intervention, the researcher read a storybook related to the vocabulary standard to the entire class. The second phase of the intervention was small-group play and peer, as I met with ELL students in a small-group setting to target directional prepositions or rhyming words, using activities designed to elicit conversation as well as engage the students in play. The third phase of the intervention was play-based. Students used the materials from the small-group intervention during play-based centers to engage in vocabulary learning with both ELL students and English only peers. Students were
assessed at the end of the intervention to determine if the intervention improved their vocabulary knowledge.

While the intervention with direction prepositions proceeded in the phases as designed, the rhyming word intervention was interrupted by school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Exner, 2020). I made changes to accelerate the play-based, small-group component and post-assessment due to impending school closures. Schools were later closed for the remainder of the academic year (Pinckard, 2020) to ensure the safety of students and teachers during the continuing health crisis. Changes to the rhyme intervention will be addressed in chapter three.

In the research environment, there is a gap between the performance of ELL kindergarten students and their English-only peers for rhyming word understanding and directional prepositions. This study may offer insight into vocabulary instruction to support ELLs as they learn English content vocabulary.

**Researcher Positionality**

Positionality requires researchers to identify who we are and what we believe. As easy as it seems to identify who we are, we are like onions with lots of layers and experiences. Peeling back each layer takes time and focus to determine how who we are impacts our research. This action research was completed in my community. I both live and work in the community in which I teach creating a unique research positionality. I am also a graduate of the local high school. My parents moved to this community over thirty-five years ago. I have watched it change and grow from a very small town with lots of farmland to a thriving and diverse suburb. My closest friends are from this town. My husband is from this town. This closeness to the community gives me a strong civic
responsibility in directing my research. I am directly tied at multiple levels personally, socially, and professionally to the place where I hope to make change.

Positionality requires us as researchers to identify who we are and what we believe. Within the context of this action research, I am both the instructor in the classroom and the researcher. At the time of the study, I had already formed relationships with the participants and their families. Because I am the instructor in aspects of the classroom curriculum for the participants, I had an intimate knowledge of their academic strengths and weaknesses as well as a deep understanding of what the students needed on a daily basis. As a teacher of kindergarten students, I am an extra mother. It is not unusual for me to spend more waking hours with the children than their parents. In addition to the academic pieces of my work, I put on Band-Aids, gave hugs, and provided a nurturing classroom for students to thrive. I have a depth of knowledge and care for my students. With a personal stake in the outcomes of my students, my research is also a reflection of who I am as a teacher. The interventions I have chosen for my research are based on my personal beliefs as an educator. "Underlying the different approaches are alternative assumptions and sets of beliefs about knowledge, school reality, and the purpose of research" (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 39). Recognizing my beliefs and assumptions is important as I remove personal bias from the choices I make as the researcher and teacher. My research was designed to benefit the students for whom I care deeply. However, for my research to be successful, I had to create a reality that allowed me to still be the teacher while setting aside any personal bias, personal assumption, and other knowledge about the student participants.
I am an insider within the larger structure of the school and the community. My personal ties mean that I must be extra vigilant in remaining focused on the factual aspects of the data rather than my connections within the community. This was the most difficult part of the research study, yet "some of the worst action research studies are done by researchers who are insiders, but fail to fully acknowledge this positionality and think through its implications" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 42). As the full complexities of the study emerged, I had to look carefully at my role as an insider and find all of the places that my insider status could potentially impact the results of the study. My insider status gave me pause at all stages of the research to make sure my positionality was not a hindrance to valuable and relevant research.

For this action research I am both a teacher and a researcher at the same time. I am a white female, in a suburban environment that is predominantly white. I have been employed by the district as a teacher for nearly 20 years. I have held leadership positions within the faculty and with the local teachers’ union and continued that service during this action research. While working in the district, I have served on multiple curriculum initiatives including the implementation of the International Baccalaureate Programme PYP, state standards committees, testing initiatives, and subject based curriculum committees. Most of my subject committee work has been in the areas of ELA and Social Studies. I have published a book relating themes from American History to literature, have presented information at conferences about the use of literature in the classroom, and have worked on ELA and social studies textbook and curriculum adoptions. Additionally, I have worked with multiple grade levels during my teaching
career and have a broad understanding of the expectation students face with standardized testing and curriculum demands.

I began my experience as a kindergarten teacher in the fall of 2017. Prior to my experience in kindergarten within the researched district, I taught fifth grade social studies for three years, and taught in a self-contained fourth grade classroom for over a decade. Kindergarten was a completely new experience. I volunteered to have the ELL unit in my classroom and worked to create a language-rich environment for all students. I personally believe in teaching with a pedagogy that is both respectful and responsive to the cultures within my classroom. My goal each year is to create environment that transcends culture while recognizing and celebrating the uniqueness of each individual, that facilitates open communication, and is built upon kindness. The result is a strong committed community of learners; committed to themselves and each other.

In my observations I noticed that ELL and English-only students benefitted from direct phonics instruction, small-group reading, and targeted reading instruction. However, in the area of rhyme and directional prepositions, English-only students excelled, while ELL students did not. For two years in kindergarten, I saw this as a pattern. The ELL teacher confirmed that rhyme and directional prepositions were two skills where ELL students seemed to struggle within the district.

As a teacher connected to the community I have stayed in contact with many students and their parents over the years, writing letters of recommendation and giving academic advice. Some of my students are my neighbors. I often see students and parents outside when I return home in the evening, often times having driveway or across- the-fence conversations. When walking in the neighborhood, shopping at the
local grocery store, and out at local restaurants it is common for me to meet current and
former students and their families. I walk with teachers in the local Homecoming parade
and see families at local parks and events. This is my community.

For this action research study, I consulted with the kindergarten teachers on my
team and the ELL teacher. I used their professional knowledge to help proofread the
assessments, evaluate activities, and examine the research design. I reviewed the design
of the research with the ELL teacher. Although she was originally assigned as a co-
teacher in the classroom, her schedule changed the week of the intervention. She was not
present in the classroom during the intervention activities, nor was she engaged in the
data collecting process. At the conclusion of the study, I shared my findings with the
kindergarten team and the ELL teacher to help develop future instructional strategies.

Because I am such a part of the community, the success of the schools is personal
to me. I am personally disappointed if our ranking in the state declines, if the community
is not happy with the school district, or if a local levy fails. It is for this reason my
problem of practice is a personal as well as scholarly based topic. Our community has
become more diverse as the local health care industry attracts immigrants from around
the world to come here for either medical treatment or to become staff members. In
addition to immigrants coming to join the health care field, we have had more students in
our school escaping wars and refugee camps from many different Middle Eastern
countries. Our immigrant population continues to grow and the number of students for
whom English is not their first language has increased. School is challenging for our
ELLs in a predominantly white, English speaking suburb. Helping students find early
academic success is important to me. Finding the best way to support these young learners helps to drive my research questions and my research topic.

**Research Design**

This action research study used a mixed-method design. Action research is designed to create an intervention that can improve the practices within the environment being studied (Herr & Anderson, 2015). My research was designed to solve an identified problem through active engagement of participants. The purpose of an action research design is to support improvements within my classroom and school environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With an action research framework, the researcher is able to affect change. With research specifically designed to “inform local practice” (Fraenkel et al., 2015, p. 587), action research can affect change in a local setting to improve practice. Quality action research should be “relevant to the local setting” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 67), create new knowledge, and have value to both the researcher and the participants. Herr and Anderson (2015) recognize the complexities of action research from a historical perspective and from within various settings and traditions, including how it can be “problematic in fields that do not have a consensus on basic aims” (p. 4). However, Kinsler (2010) believes action research that shows technical advances in a population that is typically marginalized can be viewed as emancipatory as it allows access and achievement on “gate keeping tests” (p. 185). Within my research environment, improving vocabulary acquisition for ELL students is important for their educational opportunities and for creating “action-oriented outcomes” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 67) for me as a teacher. For the purpose of this action research study, it is my intent to
improve vocabulary for ELLs and define what interventions can support in this acquisition of vocabulary in a kindergarten setting.

The use of mixed methods allows “drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 216), which can strengthen the findings within the study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). When choosing a mixed-method design, a researcher must clarify if the research questions being asked can be effectively answered within a mixed methods framework (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Because my sample is kindergarten students, “using multiple methods” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 70) to accurately triangulate only qualitative data seemed too challenging to reach accurate conclusions. Member checking with a kindergartener creates its own unique challenges, so while qualitative data is valuable to my daily work, I also collected a lot of quantitative progress data. Efron and Ravid (2013) argue, “the research approach should match the question you ask” (p. 50), and a mixed-methods approach answered my questions more effectively.

The district that was the focus of this study is a suburban district located in Ohio. According to state statistics, there are approximately 3,500 students within the city limits who attend grades preschool through grade twelve within the district. The majority population of the district is white, non-Hispanic (81.14%). Minorities within the district include Asian or Pacific Islander (6.07%), Black, non-Hispanic (2.11%), Hispanic (5.52%), and multiracial (4.61%). Students with disabilities make up 14.34% of the student population. Limited English students vary across all racial and ethnic groups and make up 4.79% of the population, with the economically disadvantaged comprising 17.66% of the population.
The study was conducted in a kindergarten classroom within the school district. The school opened at the beginning of the 2019-20 school year and housed all students enrolled in grades PreK through grade four in the district. The school had approximately 1300 students, with an enrollment of around 150 full-day kindergarten students. Study participants were part of a convenience sample because the action research was designed to impact the local setting (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The participants were “the nearest and most accessible individuals” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 62). All students in the class were given a permission form to participate in the study in January of 2020. While not all students in the class were ELLs, I wanted all parents to be aware of the intended instruction and the data collection process. Observational data about perceptions would include conversations between ELL and non-ELL peers.

Of my 23 kindergarten students, fourteen were identified as ELLs, while nine students were their English-only peers. Of the ELL students, five students spoke Arabic, one student spoke Korean, one student spoke Russian, two students spoke Spanish, one student spoke both Czech and Japanese, one student spoke Mandarin Chinese, one student spoke Tamil, and two students spoke Indian dialects not specifically identified by parents. The students were both linguistically and racially diverse. Six students were racially identified as White, 4 students were identified as Asian Pacific Islander, 2 students were identified as Hispanic, and 2 students were identified as racially mixed. Five of the participants were female and nine were male. At the time of initial identification as ELLs, one student was six years old, while the remaining 13 students were 5 years old. During the study, several students celebrated birthdays, and at the conclusion of the study, all but six of the participants were six years of age.
The identification of ELLs was based on a home language survey given by the district at the time of registration and OELPS (Ohio English Language Proficiency Screener) test results. The nine English-only peers participated in the embedded instruction of whole-group lessons and play-based center activities. Pre- and post-intervention assessment data were collected for English-only peers as it related to progress monitoring for the student report card, but not for the purpose of this study. However, I used observation data that included English-only students and ELLs engaging in play to evaluate student perceptions of the intervention and the interest the intervention created in learning. Identified ELLs participated in the embedded instruction, extended instruction, and play-based center activities. The pre- and post-assessment data collected from the ELLs was used for progress monitoring for the student report card and for this research study. Additional observational data during small group extended instruction was collected to further evaluate student perceptions.

Prior to the intervention, students were assessed on directional prepositions and rhyming words. Data were collected in the form of the initial score of each student on the assessments (Appendix A and B) in January of 2020. Then, the intervention occurred in three phases: whole-group embedded instruction, targeted play-based extended instruction for ELL students with peer and play interactions, and play-based integrated instruction during centers. At the conclusion of the intervention, students completed another assessment to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. The rhyme intervention was accelerated due to the impact of impending school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An extensive analysis of this change will be presented in chapter 3. Qualitative data related to student perceptions were collected throughout the study. I kept
a research journal to record daily observations and reflections, audio recorded students as they worked in small groups, and wrote observation data during play-based activities.

**Significance of the Study**

This study holds significance within the research environment, but has larger implications in the general education setting. With the increasing ELL population in the district and a trend that is impacting suburban districts around the country (Tyler, Frankenberg, & Ayscue, 2016), having strategies to teach ELL vocabulary is increasingly important in the classroom. Increasing ELL populations in the classroom require that teachers have the skills and strategies to support these unique and diverse learners (Gibbons, 2015). The National Reading Panel (2000) has determined that teaching vocabulary is not a one-size-fits-all approach. A deep understanding of a variety of vocabulary interventions is critical for ELLs to have academic success when learning English vocabulary (Graves, 2016). This research adds to the body of knowledge to support vocabulary instruction for ELL students.

Action research was used for this study because action is needed in the immediate educational setting. The intervention attempted in the research setting needed to be manageable in a classroom setting with only one teacher available for instruction. While this generates knowledge only for the research setting and is not generalizable, teachers who work in classrooms are the audience for this study. Many teachers, like me, are responsible for the planning of all areas of curriculum and instruction in a classroom with a variety of learners and learning needs. There is no team of graduate students to manage an intervention or to collect data. One teacher is the single individual responsible for
formative and summative assessment data, differentiation of instruction, and daily interventions to promote learning in the classroom.

While I am fortunate that I do have the knowledge and support of a co-teacher, the increasing needs of new ELL students limited her ability to be present within the classroom and to support planning. The lack of resources or resources that are stretched too thin are common problems within my research environment. We don’t always have the staff or the materials to address the needs of our growing ELL population. The burden then falls on the classroom teacher to meet the needs in the general classroom environment. With the knowledge that resources are limited, I developed the study to be managed by one classroom teacher. This study was intended to support teachers in the classroom to develop practical vocabulary instruction strategies that can easily be adapted in a classroom environment to support vocabulary acquisition for ELLs. It is my hope that classroom teachers can learn from this research and apply these practical interventions.

Limitations of the Study

The intervention, while reviewed by teachers at the action research site, has not been widely tested in multiple settings. However, the research was designed for use in an individual classroom setting by one teacher with the hopes the design can be easily replicated by other classroom teachers. Although these limitations prevent generalizability to a larger population, the research is applicable within the research setting (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Gaining insight within the research setting to understand what instructional strategies best support ELL students in the learning of vocabulary can be further expanded in other research and instructional settings.
Additional limitations include the timing of the research. The research was conducted during the second semester of the school year. Participants at this point of the year have already had informal exposure to the vocabulary that was part of the study. Rhyming words and directional prepositions, while not formally taught before the intervention, have been intertwined in the daily instructional practice of the day. Simple directions such as where to stand in line or where to put a classroom object use directional prepositions as part of everyday speech. Rhyming stories, poems, and instructional books are also part of the kindergarten curriculum to help support student memory and to make the readings fun for students. Exposure to directional prepositions and rhyming sounds had occurred prior to the intervention.

Another limitation that cannot be controlled in the research environment is the use of English at home. For some participants, English was the primary home language. For other participants, English was only used at school. The differing exposure to English at home may have had an impact on the results of the study.

School scheduling conflicts were another limitation. During the intervention period, there were two fire drills and one lockdown drill. While these are important safety measures within the school, these events disrupt instructional time. Scheduling conflicts and an increase of enrollment of new ELL students also impacted the availability of the ELL instructor both in the classroom and as a planning resource. Prior to the intervention, I had one thirty-minute block per week to meet with the ELL teacher to discuss student progress and plan. She was also present in the room for small-group language arts instruction for an hour each day. Her schedule changed the week of the direction preposition intervention, reducing the planning time to zero minutes and her
classroom time for small groups to 30 minutes per day. It was a last-minute change to her schedule and a surprise.

The OELPA (Ohio English Language Proficiency Assessment) was an additional schedule change. It was administered in the middle of the intervention period. The test is given to determine eligibility for ELL services and student progress. The test window given by the state (OELPA, 2020) was designated as February 3, 2020 – March 27, 2020. Our district chose to begin the testing process on March 2. For the two weeks beginning March 2, all identified ELL students would be pulled for a 45-minute testing block in the afternoon. Technical difficulties with the I-Pads the Friday before testing made it impossible to know the exact schedule of which students would be pulled and when they would miss instruction. The rhyme intervention and small-group plan for extended instruction would need to be a daily decision based on testing and technology availability. While this is far from ideal, in my classroom experience this is unfortunately normal.

Another limitation was the participants’ availability during the research period. Small children get sick and parents take their children out of school for family vacations. The inability for students to participate in the intervention daily may have impacted the results of the study. The rhyme intervention of the study was delayed one week due to excessive absences. For one week, a third of the students in the classroom were absent on any given day. As the instructor, I did not think it would be best practice to teach new material with such a significant number of student absences.

For this intervention, I was the sole instructor of the whole-group lessons as well as with the small-group ELL student participants. Due to an increase in the ELL school population, state testing, and social-emotional needs of ELL students on her caseload, the
ELL teacher was not always able to be in the classroom during the planned instructional times. During the week of the first intervention, the ELL teacher’s schedule changed multiple times. Unfortunately, her changing schedule was typical in the research environment due to a lack of the necessary resources for a growing ELL population. Knowing that change was possible, I designed activities that could be completed solely by one teacher in the classroom. Front loading of concepts was not done for directional prepositions or for rhyming words, and the targeted small-group instruction of the ELL teacher was not related to my intervention. The ELL teacher and I worked together to make sure that instruction related to directional prepositions and rhyming was my sole responsibility so as not to compromise the validity of the experiment.

A final limitation was the COVID-19 outbreak that impacted not only our school, but the entire world. Information from the World Health Organization (WHO) outlined the spread and impact of the novel coronavirus throughout the world (2020). To maintain the health and safety of our students and teachers, the governor of Ohio closed our schools for the remainder of the academic year (Pinckard, 2020). In less than twenty-four hours I switched from an in-person delivery model of instruction to a distance learning platform. This rapid switch to distance learning and the impact it had on students will likely be the basis of many studies in the future.

While there were significant limitations to the study, including a global pandemic, the results of the study indicate that there is hope and promise for embedded story book instruction, targeted small group instruction that includes play, and play-based activities. Even with the limitations in place, all students showed growth within the research setting. The action taken to help improve instruction within the environment will support me as I
plan future instruction for my students, and support other teachers as they plan instruction.

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter served as an introduction to this action research dissertation. Chapter two presents a clear outline of the current research in a comprehensive literature review. In chapter three, the methodology of the intervention will be explained in detail. Chapter four will provide and discuss the data collected during the interventions. Chapter five will conclude with a summary of the results, my analysis of the data and future research recommendations.

Glossary of Terms

- **Embedded instruction** – whole class instruction. Instruction that is embedded into the daily framework of classroom practices (Graves, 2016)

- **English Language Learner (ELL)** – a student whose first learned language is not English; also identified in the state of Ohio as a student who lives in a home environment where multiple languages are spoken (Echevarría, Vogt, & Short, 2017; Gibbons, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; OELPA, 2020; Zacarian & Haynes, 2012)

- **English-only** - students who speak and know only English (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017; Gibbons, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Zacarian & Haynes, 2012)

- **Extended Instruction** – small group or individual instruction to support the embedded instruction delivered within a whole group classroom setting
(Crevecoeur, Coyne, & McCoach 2014; Loftus et al., 2010; Marulis & Neuman 2010; Spycher, 2009)

- **Story book instruction** – the use of a story, usually a picture book, to support lesson concepts (Beck et al., 2013; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Graves et al., 2013; Nielson & Friesen, 2012; Silverman, 2007; Silverman & Crandell, 2010)

- **Vocabulary** – known words that are used for communication in reading, writing, and speaking (Beck et al., 2013; Graves et al., 2013)
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

We communicate through language. Whether written, spoken, or symbolic form such as gestures and pictures, people share ideas, thoughts, and feelings through language. Having the ability to communicate and successfully convey meaning is an integral part of the structure of a school. Understanding the meaning of words between teacher and student and between student and student can be such a perfunctory task that the importance of vocabulary for communication can easily be dismissed. “Mend your speech a little, Lest it may mar your fortunes” (Shakespeare, 2015, p. 886) was the warning given by King Lear to his daughter Cornelia at the importance of communicating her love. Her inability to find the words to express her feelings for him led to tragic consequences for the kingdom. Teachers have a responsibility to assist students in acquiring the language necessary for effective communication in both a personal and academic setting. Not having the vocabulary to effectively communicate with others impacts the fortunes of our students, especially students learning English as a second language.

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice in this research study is that ELLs were not making the same vocabulary gains as their English-only peers. The intervention was designed to discover how to best support the acquisition of content vocabulary for kindergarten students who are English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs in the primary
grades have already developed language understanding in a primary language other than English, however younger ELLs are lacking in “cognitive maturity or metalinguistic analysis” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 30). Students do not have the capacity to analyze language to make connections between their primary language and English, especially when the majority of language learned both in the primary language and in English is oral and not written. In addition to linguistic complexity in learning a second language, there is complexity in teaching ELLs from a cultural standpoint. ELLs arrive in the classroom with a variety of cultural experiences, language experiences, differing socioeconomic status, possible traumatic experiences, and with varying expectations of their role within the school (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). Learning vocabulary becomes a key component of integrating ELLs into the school environment to support them both socially and academically. With a strong correlation of vocabulary related to reading comprehension and school achievement (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013), it is important to begin the vocabulary building process for ELLs in kindergarten.

Kindergarten students in the research environment struggled with vocabulary acquisition of directional prepositions and rhyming words. Developmentally students at this stage of cognitive development learn through language and play (Piaget, 1923, 2002). In this action research design the intervention used storybooks for embedded instruction, small-group targeted interventions based in play, with the use of the play interventions during play-based centers to support kindergarten ELLs acquire and improve vocabulary through play and peer language interaction.
Research Questions

To further develop the vocabulary acquisition process for kindergarten ELLs, the questions guiding the research were as follows:

1. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

2. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

3. What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of a targeted vocabulary intervention integrated into peer play for the acquisition of vocabulary for ELLs. An analysis of research of vocabulary instruction for kindergarten students will be the first focus to provide the background for the intervention. Additional research considering the various strategies and methods for teaching vocabulary to ELLs will further lay the groundwork for the importance of the intervention. Learning theory and play-based learning approaches will be presented to support developmentally appropriate strategies to be used in a kindergarten environment. Finally, an understanding of the broader pedagogical implications to teaching students in a culturally diverse environment will be presented to support the research questions and the intervention.
Purpose of the Literature Review

The general purpose of a literature review in a research study is to provide a knowledge base for the reader while also justifying the purpose of the study (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). Locating sources, organizing information into thematic sets, and presenting the ideas of past and current researchers is a key component of a thorough literature review (Efron & Ravid, 2013). To conduct a literature review, it is important for the researcher to identify key terms to search for literature to discuss theory, practice, and demonstrate the need for further research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The materials chosen will create “frameworks for thinking about topics” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 29) to support the research of the problem of practice. The literature presented demonstrates an understanding of the topic and support the questions of this research study (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). The literature review is essential to the understanding of the current research study.

I chose peer reviewed journal articles, books related to the topic, and websites for the literature review. The researcher used topic and author searches through EBSCO, ERIC, and PsycINFO. In addition to an online search, the researcher also met with teaching peers to discuss relevant literature to support the research topic. Through Amazon, the researcher was able to acquire books related to the topic. The researcher also used the Google search engine to locate relevant websites and current periodicals to support the research, particularly websites with government statistics. The supporting literature will provide an analysis of current research and historical perspective to support the need to design vocabulary learning interventions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting that focus on a child’s natural inclination toward play.
Theoretical Framework: Vocabulary Instruction and Play

Language is an important aspect of our daily lives. Vocabulary impacts understanding of others in both social and academic settings. Having “a large and rich vocabulary is the hallmark of an educated individual” (Beck et al., 2013). When arriving to school in kindergarten, students come with varying levels of vocabulary development. Research estimates that children from linguistically rich environments enter school with oral vocabularies of 5,000 -10,000 words while ELLs and students living in poverty enter school with a significantly smaller vocabulary ranging from no English words for recently arrived immigrants to approximately 2,500 words (Graves, 2016). While children are able to quickly acquire words in the school setting at a young age, vocabulary acquisition is often dependent on access to a variety of reading materials and interactions with peers and adults (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Given that future academic success is directly related to vocabulary knowledge (Graves, 2016; Beck McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), it is imperative that vocabulary instruction begin in kindergarten.

Historical analysis of vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary instruction have been an important aspect of curriculum development since the early part of the 20th century and continues today with the adoption of the Common Core (Graves, 2016). However, while research has shown a direct correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, there is less understanding of what vocabulary interventions are best at impacting reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). According to the National Reading Panel (2000) “there is little research on the best methods or combinations of methods of vocabulary
instruction and the measurement of vocabulary growth and its relation to instruction methods.” In a review of research studies dating back to 1979, the National Reading Panel (2000) determined a formal meta-analysis of vocabulary instruction was not possible due to the use of 21 different variables encountered in vocabulary research. With so much discrepancy in research methods and variables, determining best vocabulary instruction is a challenge. Even defining what is meant by the term academic vocabulary is difficult, which makes the designing of interventions more complex (Baumann & Graves, 2010). While researchers have recognized the importance of vocabulary instruction, and multiple methods have been developed, there is little evidence for determining best practice for vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

**Linguistic complexities.** English is a complex language. Standard English in the United States is just one of many dialects of English spoken around the world (McCrum, Cran, & MacNeil, 2002). English vocabulary is a mixture of languages reflecting the conquering of and collaboration between various ethnic groups. English vocabulary has its origins from invading Angles, Saxons, and Jutes conquering the Britons in what is now known as England in 449 C.E., with additions and changes made by the Viking invasion in 750 C.E., continuing with the French influence and the Norman Conquest in 1066, the religious influences of St. Augustine and later the Reformation period, and the expansion of the language through the British conquest of others (McCrum et al., 2002). The language reflects the willingness of English speakers to adapt and change to new circumstances. Words we use today such as *get*, *hit*, and *leg* come from Old Norse (McCrum et al., 2002). In addition, English words such as kangaroo originate from the Aboriginal language, hammock was adapted from the Spanish translation of conquered
Caribbean people, and skunk is derived from the dialects of Native Americans (McCrum et al., 2002). English is constantly changing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) has 171,476-word entries, while *Merriam Webster* (n.d.) estimates there are over one million words in use in the English language when multiple meanings and derivatives within word families are considered. Linguists have further estimated that the English language contains over 520 million words (Graves, 2016). With so much word variety and the adaptability of the English language, it is no wonder that instructors have not found a best way to teach English vocabulary.

**Researched methods of vocabulary instruction in kindergarten.** Vocabulary instruction is a critical component for the literacy development of students (Graves et al., 2013). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (ELA, 2019) expect that as part of the ELA standards, kindergarten students be able to:

- Identify new meanings for familiar words and apply them accurately (e.g., knowing *duck* is a bird and learning the verb to *duck*).
- Use the most frequently occurring inflections and affixes (e.g., *-ed, -s, re-, un-, pre-, -ful, -less*) as a clue to the meaning of an unknown word.
- Use frequently occurring nouns and verbs.
- Form regular plural nouns orally by adding /s/ or /es/ (e.g., *dog, dogs; wish, wishes*).
- Understand and use question words (interrogatives) (e.g., *who, what, where, when, why, how*).
- Use the most frequently occurring prepositions (e.g., *to, from, in, out, on, off, for, of, by, with*).
• Produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.
• Sort common objects into categories (e.g., shapes, foods) to gain a sense of the concepts the categories represent.
• Demonstrate understanding of frequently occurring verbs and adjectives by relating them to their opposites (antonyms).
• Identify real-life connections between words and their use (e.g., note places at school that are colorful).
• Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs describing the same general action (e.g., walk, march, strut, prance) by acting out the meanings.
• Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts.
• Demonstrate an understanding of spoken word: recognize and produce rhyming sounds

All of the above CCSS for ELA require an in-depth knowledge of words and the ability to apply vocabulary with multiple meanings. With text complexity an integral part of early grades instruction for vocabulary, it is important for instructors, text designers, and curriculum specialists to understand how to integrate vocabulary instruction into a usable framework (Mesmer, Cunningham, & Hiebert, 2012). There are several existing models for kindergarten vocabulary instruction that will be addressed: embedded instruction, extended instruction, storybook instruction, and multi-tiered instruction.

**Embedded v. extended instruction.** The goal of embedded instruction is to introduce words in a kindergarten setting through a storybook or other academic instructional period, while extended instruction is designed for specific direct teaching of
content words based on the storybook read by the teacher. Embedded instruction occurs during the lesson, whereas extended instruction is more intense and targets specific vocabulary words after the embedded instruction has taken place. In a quantitative study by Coyne et al. (2009) of 42 kindergarten participants, embedded instruction was compared to instruction using both embedded and extended instruction. Word meanings were introduced as part of the story or discussed related to the content “within a meaningful and supportive context” (p. 4) during embedded instruction. For extended instruction students received both the embedded instruction and additional instructional activities specifically targeting chosen vocabulary words. Coyne et al. (2009) concluded that while embedded instruction was an efficient model of instruction in the classroom with students having partial knowledge of vocabulary, it did not yield the same results as extended instruction practices. The kindergarten participants in the quantitative study showed greater vocabulary gains with both an embedded and extended instruction model than those students who only received embedded instruction.

In a later quantitative study from 2018, Coyne et al., investigated initial receptive vocabulary knowledge in 284 kindergarten classes and interventions that supported improving vocabulary knowledge. The 2018 study found that students with vocabulary gaps who received extended vocabulary instruction in small groups outside of the classroom for 30 minutes a day, 4 days a week improved as compared to similar peers who only received embedded classroom instruction. Having both an embedded instruction approach within the classroom and extended vocabulary instruction outside the classroom resulted in increased knowledge of targeted vocabulary words.
Graves et al. (2013) recommends using a model of vocabulary instruction of Selecting Words for Instruction from Texts (SWIT) for extended vocabulary instruction. This case study of vocabulary instruction within an elementary classroom demonstrates how the strategies applied can be transferred to any grade level. While the words are embedded within the instructional text that can include both story books or non-fiction content texts, specific extended instruction of word meanings is given to students to support acquisition of vocabulary knowledge. With the SWIT approach, four types of words are addressed in vocabulary instruction. The words include “essential words, valuable words, accessible words, and imported words” (Graves et al., 2013, p. 336). Essential words are critical for comprehension of the text, valuable words are utilitarian based on the age of the students, accessible words are common words that need to be accessible for students with limited vocabularies, and imported words extend the thematic message of the text. A teacher must identify and select words from each text, then build extended instruction to teach specific meanings using context clues, clear definitions, sentence applications, and questions for each group of words. The study concludes by recognizing the value of vocabulary instruction, especially within the context of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), but acknowledges that there is little guidance for teachers in accomplishing vocabulary instruction in the classroom.

In a case study conducted by Baker et al. (2015), embedded vocabulary instruction was analyzed in relationship to the implementation of the CCSS. In a kindergarten classroom in a high-poverty area where students entered school with low vocabulary knowledge various embedded instructional practices were suggested to support students’ vocabulary knowledge. First the classroom teacher was expected to
choose words from either a story book text or from a content area such as science or social studies. Choosing words was a task that was difficult due to time commitment and the lack of teacher training in what words to select. Next, the teacher was expected to create activities that targeted specific definitions, provided extended instruction with picture sort games, teaching targeted words with a word web, and a review of words through questioning activities. While these concrete extended activities resulted in improved vocabulary understanding for the students in the classroom, the extended instruction also required the support of parent volunteers or teacher aides which limited the ability of the teacher to provide the instruction to all students consistently.

The Coyne et al. (2009, 2018) studies, the Graves et al. (2013) study, and the Baker et al. (2015) study all recognize both the time commitment of choosing words for extended instruction and the extra class time or adults needed to provide extended instruction. The studies relied on the use of story books or non-fiction texts selected by the teacher for instruction. The words chosen for the studies varied and were specific only to the texts used within the participant classrooms and did not represent a standardization of extended vocabulary instruction. All studies recommend an extended approach for more effective vocabulary instruction and offered classroom strategies to support the use of an extended instruction model.

**Storybook instruction.** While extended and embedded instruction rely on the use of story books for the instruction of vocabulary, a specific intervention called story book instruction is used to teach vocabulary in kindergarten. For young children, particularly non-readers vocabulary becomes a two-fold process, teaching familiar words in print and adding vocabulary depth through interactive read-alouds and conversation (Beck,
McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Deciding what words to teach is left to the discretion of the
teacher. Interactive oral reading that includes specifically chosen books and a small
group of selected words, repeated reading of the text, fluent reading by the adult, and
conversations related to the text are proven strategies that support vocabulary growth in
the primary grades (Graves, 2016). The use of storybooks to read aloud is common
practice in most primary grade classrooms.

Vocabulary instruction using storybooks can support student vocabulary growth.
In 2006, Biemiller and Boote recognized the value of storybook instruction in the primary
grades. The quantitative study tested vocabulary gains in primary grade students by
using repeated readings of storybooks either two or four times with added vocabulary
definitions during the readings. In the second part of the study, repeated readings and
added vocabulary definitions were used, but the procedures used by the instructor were
changed when children provided word definition of the last day of instruction with the
chosen text. The study concluded that gains were made for student vocabulary
knowledge, yet further research was needed in choosing words, the sustainability of
vocabulary knowledge, and the impact of word meanings for future reading
comprehension.

In a quantitative study completed by McKeown and Beck (2014), 131
kindergarten students were instructed using a repetitive and interactive model with
specifically chosen storybooks. The condition for repetition was based on the study
conducted by Biemiller and Boote (2006) and used repetitive readings of storybooks
with enhanced vocabulary instruction during the story readings to include word
definitions. The interactive approach used a storybook to begin the lesson. The lesson
also included word definitions, adding additional opportunities to apply and use the selected vocabulary words within the storybook context and with student generated contexts. Students in the interactive group were engaged in repeated reading of the chosen text with follow up activities related to specific vocabulary words within the text. At the conclusion of the study McKeown and Beck (2014), determined that repetitive and interactive instruction showed improvements to vocabulary knowledge of kindergarten students compared with students who only experienced one reading of the story.

Silverman and Crandell (2010) noted in a qualitative study of 244 kindergarten and prekindergarten students that read-aloud time and non-read-aloud time has benefits for the increase of vocabulary knowledge, but recognized that it was difficult to delineate which practices caused the most improvements in vocabulary instruction, noting the read-aloud was just one piece of the language arts instructional period in the classroom. Graves et al., (2013) also noted with a SWIT approach that while it is important to choose vocabulary words from an embedded text, using specific words, explanations of words and inferencing through context clues are important components of instruction in a storybook framework.

Through robust vocabulary instruction increased vocabulary knowledge and comprehension can be achieved with story book instruction when words are selected directly from an engaging text and activities relating to the words are provided (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Questions and examples relating new words to known words, through the use of example sentences, and student examples are instructional strategies to support the use of storybooks in the classroom (Beck et al., 2013). To choose words it is important to recognize three tiers of words. Beck et al. (2013) have
created a tiered system in identifying words needed for instruction. Within this system of identifying and choosing words each tier has value at differing levels of instruction and can be applied to all grade levels. Tier one words are in everyday conversation and include words such as *run, look,* and *swim.* Children who are native English speakers have been exposed to tier one words with high frequency and rarely need instruction for this tier. Tier three words are words that are rarely used in conversation and are content specific. In kindergarten a unit on plants might include tier three words such as *photosynthesis* or *chlorophyll.* Tier two words “are of high utility for mature language users and are found across a variety of domains” (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013, p.9). Tier two words might include vocabulary such as *frustrated, patience,* or *melancholy.* It is from the tier two words that story book words should be chosen for instruction.

*Multi-tier instruction.* Multi-tiered instructional practices can support kindergarten students of varying instructional levels. Cuticelli et al. (2015) outlined a multitiered approach to include direct instruction, teacher modeling, scaffolding, and student practice. Based on prior studies, Cuticelli et al. (2015) determined that at risk students who received multi-tiered instruction in addition to regular classroom instruction learned more vocabulary than expected and that multi-tiered instruction helped to close the achievement gap. Supporting the instruction of vocabulary through direct and explicit multi-tiered model as an intervention supports student success (Cuticelli et al., 2015). Daily vocabulary interventions with activities to include the review of target words, picture sorts, telling about pictures, and making connections between new words and prior knowledge are all valuable strategies in multi-tiered instruction.
In a quantitative study of 43 kindergarten students, Loftus and Coyne (2013) found that a combination of classroom instruction with an intense second tier of out of classroom intervention also supported at-risk students in making gains in vocabulary knowledge. This multi-tiered approach had students receive classroom instruction and an additional second tier of instruction for 30 minutes a day in a small group setting. The additional instruction included a review of targeted vocabulary words learned in the classroom, review of the classroom instruction, and specifically designed language activities using picture cues. However, while the students in the study learned more words than children who did not receive the intervention, the students in the intervention group also received twice as much vocabulary instruction than students who did not receive the intervention. Administering a multi-tiered intervention did not seem practical in a regular classroom setting due to the need for additional teaching staff. In addition, Loftus and Coyne (2013) felt that the current available vocabulary assessments, the targeted words for intervention, and intervention strategies need further research. While multi-tiered instruction shows benefits for students, more research is necessary to determine best practices using the approach.

Multi-tier instruction, as its name implies, is vocabulary instruction that uses a framework for instruction that employs different strategies. Often used for students defined as at-risk, the multi-tiered model is designed in a Response to Intervention (RTI) model for tier 2 instruction. In an RTI model, tier 2 is instruction that extends the instruction in the regular classroom to enhance prior instruction. In Cuticelli et al. (2015), a study analyzing the effectiveness of multi-tiered instruction, multi-tiered instruction was defined as a framework that included direct instruction, teacher modeling,
scaffolding by the teacher, extended practice opportunities, and immediate feedback. Loftus and Coyne (2013) defined multi-tiered instruction as choosing words to teach from a selected text, providing student friendly definitions of the targeted words, using context clues from the story, and providing direct instruction of the targeted words through extended activities. Both studies concluded that a multi-tier approach supported at-risk kindergarten students in developing vocabulary knowledge, but neither offered a consistent definition of a multitiered approach.

**Value of vocabulary instruction.** Vocabulary instruction is integral to the development of more sophisticated language skills. The National Reading Panel (2000) noted the importance of vocabulary instruction, but could not delineate from the research a specific model to exemplify best practice. Embedded instruction, extended instruction, story book instruction, and multi-tier instruction often overlap in their methods and use of materials. All three approaches suggest the use of authentic texts or story books that are engaging to kindergarten students. Extended instruction, story book instruction and multi-tier instruction all suggest the use of additional activities to move beyond the embedded discussion of the text to target specific vocabulary words. To address the need for vocabulary instruction at the kindergarten level and the CCSS, it is important to make several instructional considerations. Determining words to teach, creating activities and assessments, dedicating instructional time to vocabulary, the using of pictures and games, and making word connections are all instrumental in teaching vocabulary (Baker et al., 2015). Choosing and teaching vocabulary words to English-only learners is a complex process. Teaching vocabulary to ELLs requires an even more detailed approach to instruction.
Vocabulary Instruction Practices for ELLs

The capacity to use words is impactful in the school setting. Strong vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten is a predictor of future reading comprehension and academic success, whereas a poor grasp of vocabulary can lead to difficulties in an academic setting (Graves, August, & Mancilla-Martinez, 2013). It is for this reason that vocabulary instruction for all students, but particularly for ELLs who lack the same vocabulary knowledge as their English-only-speaking peers, is critical. Beck et al. (2013) noted that for teachers of ELLs, knowing what words to teach and how to teach those words are difficult issues. Training teachers is a concern when teaching vocabulary. Instruction of ELLs in the acquisition of vocabulary is not limited to the cognitive domain of just learning words, but can also be framed in a sociocultural framework (Gibbons, 2015). Within this framework it is important for students to interact with others and for teachers to scaffold instruction. ELLs are typically not at the same level in vocabulary acquisition and word knowledge as their English-speaking peers (Graves, 2016). All students need vocabulary instruction, ELLs need additional support to master a second language.

Instruction for acquisition of a second language. ELLs enter school with a variety of language abilities and experiences. Approximately 75% of ELLs were born in the United States with the remaining students arriving as immigrants. The ELL population in U.S. schools represents over 350 languages (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). Students often arrive to school with a limited knowledge of school culture in the United States, with parents who are not fluent in English, and in some cases, students arrive having experienced a traumatic event (Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). Nonetheless, with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), ELLs are still expected to achieve the same level
of academic proficiency as their English-only-speaking peers (Wilson, Fang, Rollins, & Valadez, 2016). This presents a challenge to all teachers of ELLs. Building the foundation of vocabulary acquisition when ELLs enter kindergarten can support academic growth and meet the expectation from the CCSS.

With the adoption of the CCSS many school administrators are fearful of the ability of ELLs to meet the demands of the rigorous standards, specifically in literacy (Fillmore, 2014). Both cognitive and sociocultural theorists support the notion that ELLs require “access and interaction with people who know the language they are learning” (Fillmore, 2014, p. 627). Vocabulary acquisition through speech and personal interactions facilitates language learning (Wilson et al., 2016). For ELLs daily instruction focused on specific English targets is the key to academic success (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2012). In kindergarten, literacy growth begins with oral language before progressing to reading and writing. It is this focus on the spoken word that encourages vocabulary acquisition.

Vocabulary is a critical component for building English proficiency. From a pedagogic perspective there are several key elements that should be present in the instructional practices of teachers working with ELLs. First, instruction for second language students should include varied vocabulary activities both written and oral, materials that are of high interest to students, activities that connect to the personal experiences of students, and the setting of concrete goals for students (Haneda & Wells, 2012). Second, strategies that support the learning of basic vocabulary with repetition and review of words are important. However, it must be recognized that lack of teacher understanding of what words to teach and the limited instructional time in the classroom
can hinder the progress of ELLs (August, Carlo, & Snow, 2005). In addition, Wright (2012) observed that in kindergarten vocabulary instruction was often within a large group setting, brief, and scattered throughout the instructional day. Very little direct vocabulary instruction was observed. Kindergarten settings with a higher low-income population received even less instruction through whole group interactions. Whether in an affluent setting or a low-income setting, the lack of direct vocabulary instruction widens the achievement gap between ELLs and their native speaking peers.

Conversational words are the first to be acquired by ELLs and should be taught in the primary grades as part of specific instruction, while words that are academic or more complex in meaning require specific instruction for all students, particularly for ELLs (Beck et al., 2013). Graves (2016) suggests that ELLs should have repetitive instruction, scaffolded instruction, differentiated instruction, and instruction that uses context clues and pictures to support word meanings. For a classroom teacher to provide the best instruction, specific strategies must be employed to support vocabulary development for ELLs.

Methods of instruction for ELLs in kindergarten. Low or limited academic progress for ELLs can often be attributed to limited vocabulary knowledge (Sibold, 2011). It is essential for teachers working with ELLs to apply instructional practices that support the growth of vocabulary to promote student learning. While many instructional practices can be applied across a variety of academic settings, there are differences in the application of strategies when addressing the age of the student. In kindergarten targeted vocabulary instruction for ELLs includes: direct vocabulary instruction, linguistic based

**Direct vocabulary instruction.** Direct vocabulary instruction for kindergarten ELLs is similar in its approach to that of extended vocabulary instruction designed for English-only students. Direct instruction, like extended instruction, takes place in small groups, extends learning from the general classroom setting, and focuses on specific targeted words. As the ELL population increases in the United States, research is beginning to focus efforts on how to support vocabulary growth for this diverse population.

Spycher (2009) conducted a quantitative study with 39 ELL kindergarten students using science vocabulary as the targeted words for the intervention. The intervention group received direct instruction of twenty science vocabulary words in addition to the regular science curriculum while the control group only received instruction with the regular science curriculum. The intervention included the selection of specific content vocabulary or Tier 3 words (Beck et al., 2013) and strategies such as visuals, sentence frames, and scaffolding to support the vocabulary instruction. The vocabulary lesson included a science text read twice, a student-friendly definition of a specific word, examples of the word in context, questioning strategies, and word repetition to solidify learning. The study revealed that the direct instruction of vocabulary resulted in an increase of vocabulary acquisition for students who received the intervention. While these results are not surprising, the results indicate the importance of direct instruction on the acquisition of vocabulary for ELLs.
Similar studies conducted by Marulis and Neuman (2010) and Loftus et al., (2010) reached similar conclusions about the use of direct vocabulary instruction for supporting ELLs. The qualitative study conducted by Loftus et al. (2010) was similar in design to the Spycher study (2009). The results were also similar, noting that direct vocabulary instruction for ELLs improved vocabulary knowledge and usage. In the meta-analysis conducted by Marulis & Neuman (2010), a review of 67 studies related to vocabulary instruction for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students revealed that direct instruction methods not only supported the instruction of English-only students, but also for ELLs and other students considered at risk. However, the meta-analysis did not “yield recommendations for how to promote quality instruction in vocabulary” (Marulis & Neuman, 2010, p. 328). More research was recommended for selection of words, number of words for instruction, and what constitutes meaningful pedagogical instruction.

In a quantitative study completed by Crevecoeur, Coyne, and McCoach (2014), 31 ELL kindergarteners received an 18-week intervention to test the effectiveness of direct instruction methods to teach 54 target words. Crevecoeur et al. (2014) noted that there is limited research to examine the impact of vocabulary instruction on ELLs in kindergarten. Students in the study were given specific direct instruction related to the targeted words including word reinforcement, exposure of words in varied contexts across the academic day, and a review of the words that included picture clues. The control group of 17 ELL kindergarten students did not receive the targeted intervention. While the culmination of the study revealed that direct instruction did show improvement
of vocabulary knowledge for ELLs when compared to the control group, further research was suggested to develop vocabulary intervention programs for ELLs.

**Linguistic based instruction.** Interactive instruction employs techniques that use the constructs of the English language as tools when interacting with ELLs with both spoken and written language. Metalanguage instruction has been investigated as a vocabulary intervention for ELLs using “language about language” (Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 156). In a study that focused on ELLs at the primary grades, metalanguage instruction was applied across various curricular settings. Schleppegrell (2013) surmised that metalanguage instruction using Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) supports the building of meaning through a linguistic understanding of the English language and greater participation and interaction of ELLs within the classroom setting. As students learn about content material, they are also learning about context, grammatical structures, mood, and emotional words. While no data were provided within the analysis of the importance of metalanguage for ELLs, Schleppegrell (2013) suggests further study of this practice will lead to more concrete practices that allow teachers to address the learning of language and vocabulary with the teaching of content simultaneously.

A different linguistic strategy researched by Vadasy and Sanders (2016) used both orthographic (writing) and phonological (sound) word features to enhance vocabulary instruction. In this qualitative study of 116 kindergarten students, an intervention that focused on the spoken and written word with a 15-minute intervention outside of the classroom four days a week for 14 weeks was conducted. Participants were divided into two intervention groups. The first received phonological vocabulary instruction, while the second group received the phonological vocabulary instruction with an additional
orthographic spelling component. The vocabulary intervention included defining the targeted words, listening to the word being read in context, supporting the word with picture clues, scaffolding sentence construction, and for one group writing the word four times during each intervention period by breaking apart the word into phonemes (sounds). Words for the intervention were chosen using the CCSS to include content vocabulary from math and science as well as words to support kindergarten decoding skills. The routine of the intervention and the ELLs’ interaction with an adult was successful for both groups. There was little difference between the participants who received the additional orthographic component and the participants who did not. The study concluded that vocabulary intervention delivered by qualified and trained adults in an interactive setting with listening to words and discussing them supported the vocabulary acquisition of ELLs.

**Storybook instruction.** Both Silverman (2007) and Nielson and Friesen (2012) researched the use of storybooks as an intervention to address vocabulary instruction for ELLs in kindergarten. Similar to the research about general vocabulary instruction using storybooks (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Graves et al., 2013; Silverman & Crandell, 2010), Silverman (2007) and Nielson and Friesen (2012) developed an intervention to teach targeted words chosen from a storybook read to the class. While neither qualitative study found conclusive evidence that supported the use of the storybook intervention for ELLs, both studies recommended further research on the use of storybooks as an instructional tool for ELLs and recommended that teacher training to address the varying needs of ELLs is imperative to support language development and vocabulary acquisition.
**Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP).** The SIOP model developed by Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2013) is a research-based model of instruction that contains 30 features grouped under eight headings. The headings that guide the SIOP model include: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practices and applications, lesson delivery, and review and assessment. The SIOP model can be used in all grades K-12 for the instruction of ELLs. The SIOP model also provides a framework for best practice instruction to include cooperative learning, explicit instruction, schema construction and activation, CCSS, reading and writing content objectives, technology, Response to Intervention (RTI), and differentiated instruction (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short 2013). This comprehensive model can be applied to any content area.

While the SIOP model has been shown to improve language acquisition and vocabulary development (Kareva & Echevarria 2013; Short, Echevarria, & Richards-Tutor, 2011), there are concerns about the training of teachers when using the SIOP model (Short, Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, 2011). According to a quantitative study analyzing performance of students in reading and writing, without professional development, teachers are unable to deliver instruction as well as teachers who have been supported through professional training on the SIOP model (Short, Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, 2011). The complexities of the model make it difficult to apply without consistent support and professional development.

Lesson planning for kindergarten lessons using the SIOP model included identifying content standards, choosing the targeted vocabulary, outlining needed materials, examples of how the lesson can connect to prior learning, specified learning
activities, and methods for assessment (Vogt, Echevarria, & Short, 2010). Each lesson is designed to specifically scaffold instruction while offering opportunities to communicate in a variety of group and partner settings to integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Each lesson is complex to develop but offers ELLs opportunities to develop language. Within the SIOP model, there should be a high expectation for students, the use of best practices as outlined by SIOP, and a respectful relationship between teacher and student (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, & Short, 2015). Passive activities, separating students by ability, the lack of teacher questioning, and the absence of authentic learning are practices that do not support the SIOP model (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, & Short, 2015). While a research-based intervention, the complexities of the SIOP model require significant training to implement in the classroom.

Direct instruction, linguistic based instruction, story book instruction, and the SIOP model are all instructional practices designed to support vocabulary development for ELLs. All four models vary in complexity, but demonstrate ways to enhance the language acquisition of the kindergarten ELL. When teaching kindergarten, it is also important to consider the developmental needs of the learner. When instruction is passive, there is little opportunity for students to acquire vocabulary and develop language (Echevarria, Richards-Tutor, & Short, 2015). Integrating the natural inclination of play with an interactive approach to learning vocabulary can become a model to support learning for ELLs at the kindergarten level. Before combining ELL vocabulary instruction and play, it is important to first understand play-based learning.
Play-Based Learning: A Child-Centered Approach

With adoption of the Common Core standards teaching academic skills in kindergarten has become commonplace (Almon & Miller, 2011). Teachers face increasing pressure to meet the demands of policy makers to create an academic environment, while still recognizing the developmental needs of students (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Recognizing that the responsibility of the teacher is to understand the developmental level of the child and provide experiences that build on that foundation for growth (NAEYC, 2009), teachers are stuck meeting the demands of two conflicting philosophies; the academic demands of state and district standards and the developmental needs of children. This creates a problem addressed by Jean Piaget known as the “American question” (Almon & Miller, 2011, p. 1). Simply stated it is the desire for American policy makers to accelerate the developmental processes of children to meet current academic demands.

But what is play, and specifically play-based learning? Play is the opposite of work (Christakis, 2016). Play is enjoyable and perceived as fun and engaging. For children, “play and learning are inseparably tied” (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 275), with play-based learning being “purposeful, co-construction of knowledge with others” (Nolan & Paatsch, 2017, p. 42). Play serves as a catalyst for social, physical, emotional, and mental functions (NAEYC, 2009). As such, teachers in kindergarten classrooms can look at play as a continuum from free play to teacher directed play, each having value in the learning process (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The experiences created within the constructs of play have immense learning value for all students including ELLs.
It is difficult, even among researchers, to define play in the classroom environment (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). While it is theorized that, “play is a fundamental building block of human cognition, emotional health, and social behavior” (Christakis, 2016, p. 146). It is through play and the social interactions that accompany play that children are able to develop language and problem-solving capabilities (NAEYC, 2009). But implementing play-based learning in the classroom depends on the philosophical beliefs of the teacher, the training of the teacher, and the fixed environment in which teachers and students come to learn (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Implementing a play-based pedagogy requires a “clear and consistent definition of play-based learning that will determine how best to integrate play and the learning of academic skills” (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016, p. 361). Play-based learning is not just for fun; it is a constructivist approach that is purposeful. With support and direction from the teacher to create meaningful learning experiences, all students can learn and thrive.

To truly understand the implementation of play-based learning teachers need to think of play on a continuum ranging from child-directed free play to teacher directed learning games (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Play is not a fixed point and needs guidance from the teacher. Teachers must also be aware that constructivism is not a theory of random happenstance of experiences for the learner. Constructivist play-based lessons are carefully planned with specific goals designed for the learner (Applefield, et al., 2001). Without clear guidelines of what constitutes play it is difficult for teachers to effectively implement the lesson.

Challenges exist for teachers implementing play-based learning. Teachers applying play-based learning to teach literacy found difficulties integrating play with the
expected academic standards, teachers often lacked the training involved in creating a play-based environment, and were unclear of the type of play that best enhanced learning (Pyle, et al., 2018). Professional development for teachers implementing play-based learning practices is crucial (Nolan & Paatsch, 2018). While developmentally appropriate guidelines for teaching young children are well established with constructivist play-based learning being a key component (NAEYC, 2009), there continues to be a disconnect between accepted pedagogy of play-based learning and classroom practices. Implementing the Common Core without considering the developmental need for play-based learning has created confusion for teachers, problems in institutions for teacher training, and conflicts for determining the best practices in the classroom in a standards-driven environment (Strauss, 2013). To successfully implement play-based learning we need to take a close look at the needs of our kindergarten programs that address diverse students to build confident, creative, and engaged learners.

**Child-centered learning theory: an historical perspective.** To understand play-based learning in the classroom, it is important to understand the origin of the theories of child development from a constructivist perspective. Constructivist theory developed as a reaction to behaviorism and cognitivism (Harasim, 2012). From a constructivist perspective, learning emerges from the experiences of the learner, with people creating meaning and changing meanings based on perceptions and interactions (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Jean Piaget, one of the pioneers of constructivist theory, believed that children learn by interacting with their environment (Mooney, 2013). Teachers facilitate learning in a classroom environment by creating opportunities for play and learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). However, this does not mean that the learning is a free-for-all.
Constructivist learning is goal-oriented, structured, purposeful, and planned with the teacher being an instrumental force in guiding student learning (Applefield, et al., 2001). Teachers must have adequate training, an understanding of constructivist theory, and feel less pressure from a pervasive culture of competition within the education system itself in order to fully implement constructivist play-based learning (Walsh & Gardner, 2006).

Extending play-based learning to ELLs requires both the knowledge of play-based practices and the instructional practices that support the acquisition of vocabulary.

From its origins in the 20th century with a learner as the center of the model of learning constructing meaning through experience (Harasim, 2012), constructivism has become accepted “as the basis of our teaching methods” (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Using Piaget’s stages of development as a guide, teachers support student learning by nurturing students through an inquiry process (Mooney, 2013). Children in kindergarten are within Piaget’s Preoperational Stage of Cognitive Development. At this cognitive milestone, students build learning based on their individual perceptions, focus on one item at a time, and have difficulty accurately generalizing concepts due to limited experiences in the real world (Mooney, 2013). By understanding the cognitive developmental stage, teachers can plan lessons and play to support learning. ELLs, while having their experiences in a language other than English, still fit this developmental model.

Interactions between teacher and student and between student peers are integral for learning to occur in a constructivist environment (Mooney, 2013). Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the learning gap between what a child can accomplish independently and the most challenging task a child can do with support. The ZPD provides teachers the framework for developing lessons for students to build new
learning. By scaffolding, Vygotsky, believed that teachers and peers could help build the connections necessary for new learning. Teachers should think of social interactions as part of the learning process, using careful observations to determine the developmental needs of each student (Mooney, 2013) and structure learning opportunities and experiences that build knowledge. With the belief that “learners must transform or appropriate whatever is learned” (Applefield, et.al, 2001), removing the social interactions that push students into the ZPD hinders students’ acquisition of knowledge and skills.

“Education may be intelligently conducted upon the basis of experience” (Dewey, 1997, p. 33). In Experience and Education, John Dewey wrote about the importance of teachers being involved and engaged with students on a social, emotional, and academic level to shape students to be prepared for society. He espoused the importance of observing children and knowing them as individuals to support experiences for growth and development. The role of the teacher was one of facilitator to support students when making sense of the world and their experiences. Dewey believed that “teachers must be willing to tap their general knowledge of the world to help children make sense of their surroundings and experiences” (Mooney, 2013, p. 22). When teaching ELLs, this paradigm still applies. Teachers are the key to help children unlock knowledge through experience.

With the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky and the philosophical work of Dewey forming the basis of child-centered theories, it important that the theories are applied in the classroom to create developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for all students, including ELLs (Mooney, 2015). “International evidence would suggest that
high quality early years practice is often associated with a play-based and practical approach to teaching and learning” (Walsh & Gardner, 2006). Experiences are the key component of constructivist learning theory (Harasim, 2012). To create those experiences in the kindergarten classroom, teachers must encourage students to be active participants in their learning with time to engage with others, reflect, and communicate ideas to the broader learning community (Applefield, et.al, 2001). For children to build and create knowledge from experience and social interactions play-based learning offers a developmentally appropriate solution for kindergarten teachers to address the language and cognitive development of all students.

**Intersection of play and vocabulary instruction.** Childhood is a time to play. It is through play and experiences that children learn social skills, solve problems, and become more aware of the environment and the world around them. Recognizing the developmental needs of kindergarten students is essential when developing a curriculum and pedagogical practice in the classroom. A central part of the social development of young children is the concept of play (Piaget, 1923, 2002). Play-based learning provides a developmentally appropriate approach to learning based on the human psychological developmental theories of Piaget and Vygotsky and the philosophical writings of John Dewey. By providing real-world context and experiences, play enables children to grow socially, mentally, academically, and physically (Mooney, 2016). According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (n.d.), play and physical activity help to reduce stress, improve engagement in the classroom, improve motivation, and decrease behavioral disturbances in the classroom. Creating a play-based environment that supports the learning of all students, and more specifically ELLs and vocabulary acquisition, requires
an examination of best learning practices for ELLs and how to integrate play into the vocabulary learning process.

Considering developmentally appropriate practices when teaching young children is essential for physical, social, and emotional growth in students and should be the primary consideration when developing a program of excellence for young children with play being a component of the recommendations (NAEYC, 2009). For ELLs the value of play-based learning needs to be examined as a benefit for the social and academic growth of our youngest school age learners. Play supports fundamental skills such as language acquisition and social development (NAEYC, 2009), yet integrating play-based learning in kindergarten to develop the behaviors necessary for teaching and promoting literacy content presents its own unique challenges (Pyle et.al, 2018). Pyle et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and video data from 12 participating kindergarten teachers to investigate teacher perceptions and challenges with teaching literacy and integrating play.

The demand to meet academic outcomes that are not based in pedogeological practice has made it difficult for teachers to maintain developmentally appropriate play-based learning practices in the classroom. The three biggest challenges facing teachers when trying to use play-based learning with literacy content were how to implement guided play, planning play-based learning, and the application of direct instruction in literacy development. Pyle and her research team determined a balanced approach to play was most beneficial for literacy development for kindergarten students. Both free play and guided play provided opportunities for students to develop the experiences necessary to improve literacy skills. While direct instruction still had benefits when
addressing very specific language skills, play supported student acquisition and use of language. With experiences being essential for learning, the need for play-based learning is clearly demonstrated when creating a balanced pedagogical approach to instruction that includes play (Pyle et al., 2018). For ELLs, play can become an important piece of developing vocabulary and provide experiences to become fluent in English.

Graves (2016) suggests that best practices for teaching vocabulary apply to all students including ELLs. Goldenberg, Hicks, and Lit (2013) ascertain that there is “considerable overlap” (p. 27) in effective instruction for ELLs and English-only students in the primary years, but ELLs still need additional support. General practices for vocabulary instruction should include word meanings, word usages, and word applications within a rich language context where the language is used and applied (Manyak et al., 2014). However, Goldenberg (2013) acknowledges that while there is evidence to support a variety of strategies to promote literacy and vocabulary development, the results are modest compared to the expected results within the CCSS. The reality is that “we lack the knowledge base to fully prepare teachers” (Goldenberg, 2013, p.11) for the effective instruction of ELLs in the classroom. From a constructivist perspective, ELLs should experience vocabulary instruction that include active learner participation, scaffolding, instruction within the ZPD, cognitive modeling, direct instruction, review, teaching for understanding, and teaching to include transfer of knowledge to other contexts (Graves, 2016). The recommendations by Graves (2016) fit within a constructivist model of play within a kindergarten setting.

Promising research from Silverman et al. (2017) using a quasi-experimental design investigated the impacts of a peer learning program that incorporated elements of
play between kindergarten and fourth grade students. The buddy program used in the research included reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction embedded in play-based activities. ELLs received additional teacher support during the buddy activities to scaffold conversation and provide assistance and direction with target vocabulary words. The results of the study demonstrated that play and specific vocabulary interaction showed positive effects on the acquisition of vocabulary for ELLs and English-only peers at both grade levels. While this research is limited by size and the length of the intervention, it supports the suppositions by Graves (2016) that best practice applies to all students and Goldenberg’s (2013) assertion that we still lack the pedagogical knowledge to prepare teachers for the diverse needs of ELLs in the classroom. For these reasons, it is important to conduct research to examine what types of developmentally appropriate play support the vocabulary development of ELLs with a balanced literacy approach.

**Quality Instruction: A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

The population of ELLs are increasing in classrooms in the United States (Gibbons, 2015, Graves, 2016; Zacarian, 2012). For the fiscal year 2017, the Department of Homeland Security documented 1,127,167 people who obtained legal residency. Since 2005, all but the year 2013, saw over a million people gain legal status (DHS, 2018). This is the largest timeframe of immigrants numbering in the millions since the early 1900s. People from all over the world are moving into the United States in large numbers. Within those immigration statistics are persons who are immigrating from Arabic countries. According to the Arab American Institute, 3.7 million persons of Arab descent live in the United States, with the largest populations in California, New York, and Michigan. Ohio, where I teach, ranks eighth with approximately 100,000 persons of
Arab descent (AAI, 2019). In the introduction of T.C. Howard’s work on race and culture, James Banks (2010) recognizes that the Islamic religion is currently the fastest growing religion in the United States. As America changes with another immigrant wave that matches the early part of the previous century, educators need to be prepared to adjust for students of different ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and language backgrounds to ensure the success of all students who enter our schools.

Diversity should not be looked at as a problem, but an opportunity to grow and learn. Guided by multicultural theory teachers “should recognize the important roles that race, culture, language, gender, and class currently play in US society” (Howard, 2010, p. 45). James Banks (1993) recognizes five dimensions that are essential to a multicultural education in the classroom. He suggests that content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure are equal components in structuring curriculum and instruction to create an inclusive environment for all students to benefit. In her work explaining the importance of culturally responsive teaching, Geneva Gay (2002) asserts that teachers must have “informed conversations” (p. 107) to build a community that is inclusive, understanding of the variety of cultural and ethnic values, and creating a teaching environment that supports the diversity within the classroom and the global community. As the face of America changes with large groups of immigrants arriving from around the world, it is the responsibility of teachers through multicultural education to create an empathetic and culturally responsive environment to meet the needs of all students.

The need for highly qualified teachers in the classroom is a political and social issue. Quality education in the United States rests on the expertise of teachers in the
classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, many schools and practitioners lack expertise in culturally responsive teaching (Howard, 2010). Creating a color conscience environment that recognizes the value of individuals (Tyler, Frankenberg, & Ayscue, 2016), teachers can support students in finding acceptance among diverse groups. Understanding, caring, and empathy are teacher traits that cannot be overemphasized in the classroom. Providing a pedagogical framework that supports traditionally disadvantaged students is instrumental to creating a quality education for all (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Culturally responsive teaching can support students in reaching their academic potential in a supportive and nurturing environment. Teachers are not the only influencers in the life of a student. Children enter school with cultural beliefs and ideas that come from the home environment (Dubner & Herman, 2016). It is through a culturally responsive partnership between home and school that teachers can work with the communities they serve for the education of all students.

The world is in constant change. Culturally responsive teaching is a practice that can help close the achievement gap. Building a community that respects the cultural values of students, while developing a practice among teachers to provide learning opportunities that are conducive for learning in a diverse environment, improves student outcomes and achievement (Gay, 2002). Our response as educators to a changing environment should be reflected in our classroom practices. Ladson-Billings (2014) recognizes that her previous work relating to a culturally relevant pedagogy must shift because “researchers and practitioners are moving and evolving in new ways that require us to embrace a more dynamic view of culture” (p. 75). Her work recognizes that pedagogies must evolve to encompass the variety of students and changing environments
that practitioners encounter in their work in the classroom. As educators, we must recognize the cultural dynamic within our own classrooms and respond with a pedagogy that supports the learning and success for all students.

Students come to school with a language from home. While Standard English (SE) is the language taught at school, there must be an acknowledgement of the home language as part of the learning process (Howard, 2010). A standard form of communication is key in a large society. However, in their study of urban Latinx youth, Martinez and Montaño (2016) concluded that “understanding language, and talking and reflecting about their own language practices can lead to emerging expansive learning opportunities” (p. 213). While Standard English is an academic language, the variances of the English language across cultures and locations can add rich learning experiences. Rich language can bring both acceptance and understanding in the classroom for both teachers and students. Recognition and validation of a home language while instructing SE can bring learning opportunities to groups who are traditionally marginalized (Martinez & Montaño 2016). Equal access to education for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, or language should be an important part of our beliefs as teachers. Culturally responsive teaching improves student learning as it addresses the complexities of race and ethnicity within the school setting (Howard, 2010). Language is a powerful force.

**Summary**

Vocabulary instruction is an important part of effective literacy instruction for any kindergarten student, but needs to be of particular focus for ELLs as they develop language skills in English. Play is a developmentally appropriate learning strategy that
engages the experiences of the kindergarten learner. Combining the need for play with the need for instruction in vocabulary can support ELLs in an environment that is culturally responsive to their social, emotional, and academic needs.

In the current action research study, I developed a vocabulary intervention combining research-based storybook instruction with extended vocabulary instruction based in play with an extension of play activities during play-based centers. Directional prepositions and rhyming words were taught through teacher directed classroom instruction using story books, targeted small group instruction, and supplemented with play-based classroom activities as additional practice during classroom centers and reading with older peer models. By combining the effective vocabulary practices of story book learning, extended instruction, peer modeling, and play I hoped to develop a practical, classroom friendly model of instruction to build vocabulary for ELLs in a kindergarten setting.

Chapter three will explain the methodology of the intervention. The research design, participant sample, and data collection methods will be outlined in detail. The methodology chapter details are designed to support teachers in replicating the research design within their own instructional setting.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this action research is to identify strategies to effectively teach vocabulary to kindergarten students who are learning English as a second language. Children who are English Language Learners (ELLs) have developed primary language skills in a language other than English and are at various stages of language acquisition ranging from no English vocabulary to basic conversational English comprehension. Research has shown that having a large and varied vocabulary is instrumental for academic success (Beck et al., 2013). Under the CCSS, ELLs are still expected to achieve the same level of academic proficiency as their English-only-speaking peers (Wilson, et al., 2016). To meet those standards, ELLs must acquire the necessary academic vocabulary for school success through varied vocabulary activities (Haneda & Wells, 2012) and strategies that include repetition and review of words. In addition to addressing vocabulary needs, instruction should address the developmental needs of the learner. Students in kindergarten are naturally inclined to learn through play (Piaget, 1923, 2002). It is the constructivist use of play, the need within the learning environment to improve the vocabulary acquisition of ELLs, and the importance of designing an intervention that is structured in a culturally responsive classroom environment that form the foundation of this research.
The questions that guide this action research were:

1. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

2. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

3. What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play?

Words that are specific in academic content need more direct instruction than conversational words, particularly for ELLs (Beck et al., 2013). The intervention designed for this action research builds on the idea that ELLs should have repetitive instruction with context clues and pictures to support word meanings (Graves, 2016) in an environment that is supported by a kindergarten learner’s natural affinity toward play.

Research Design

This Dissertation in Practice used an action research approach with a mixed method design. The design of the research is outlined in this chapter to explain the research approach, elements of researcher positionality, ethical considerations, the research site, participants in the study, data collection, data instrumentation, and data analysis are further explained to support the importance of this research.

**Action research.** The purpose of action research is to improve the practices within the environment being studied (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Action research is a cyclical process where the researcher identifies a problem, studies the problem through
systematic research design, analyzes the findings within the study, and creates a plan to address the problem before repeating the process with a newly identified problem (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Designed to solve an identified problem through active engagement of participants, action research supports improvement within a practice or environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the purpose of this action research, it is my intent to improve vocabulary instruction strategies for ELLs in my kindergarten environment.

With an action research framework, the researcher is able to affect change. With research specifically designed to “inform local practice” (Fraenkel, et al., 2015, p. 587), addressing vocabulary instructional practices for ELLs can support a suburban school community in the midst of change. Tyler, Frankenburg, and Ayscue (2016) have recognized that diversification of language, culture, and race is becoming more prevalent in the suburbs, yet acknowledge that there is little research in how policies and actions in suburban schools are adapting to the change. A research design for kindergarten ELLs can inform the beliefs to create a culture conscience environment to recognize the value of individuals (Tyler, et al., 2016), while supporting teachers and students in finding academic success for a diverse academic environment. The instructional practices analyzed within this study can support teachers within the research environment to improve academic vocabulary acquisition for ELLs. Analysis of the instructional strategies for vocabulary can find best practices to further enhance the learning experience of ELLs in a suburban environment.

**Mixed-methods design.** The use of mixed methods allows the researcher to “minimize limitations” while “drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 216). Although using mixed methods can reduce
limitations, limitations still exist within the research. Nevertheless, action research finds solutions at a local level that are often reflected in a larger population (Herr & Anderson, 2015). With increasing diversity in suburban school in the United States (Tyler et al., 2016), vocabulary instruction for ELLs is a growing concern within schools (Echevarria et al., 2017; Gibbons, 2015; Graves et al., 2013; Zacarian & Haynes, 2012). Informing teachers within the selected research environment of strategies to improve daily practice can also support other practitioners experiencing similar student population shifts.

The mixed-methods design approach also provided a stronger analysis of the intervention through a convergent design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With a convergent approach both qualitative and quantitative data are collected, analyzed separately, and then triangulated in the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using both qualitative and quantitative data as part of the research study can “confirm or cross-validate relationships between variables” (Fraenkel et al., 2015, p. 556). Further analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data in a mixed-methods study can determine if there is a convergence of results of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2015). A mixed-methods design gives a more complete understanding of the research intervention and the application of the intervention within the classroom environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A convergent mixed-methods design was chosen for this research to compile a complete and comprehensive understanding of the research questions and the impact of the intervention on young learners.

**Intervention.** In accordance with university guidelines approval was received from the Institutional Review Board. Parents of all participants received a consent form (Appendix E) for participation. I collected each consent form and answered any
questions parents had about the research study. Once approval and permission were granted, students were given a pre assessment for directional prepositions and for rhyming words. Data was collected with the initial score of each student on the assessments (Appendix A and B). With the pretest data collected, the intervention was divided into whole group embedded instruction, targeted play-based extended instruction for ELL students, and play-based integrated instruction during centers for both directional prepositions and rhyming words. The directional preposition intervention was completed first, followed by the intervention targeting rhyming words. At the conclusion of the directional preposition and rhyming word intervention periods students were given the post-assessment to determine the effectiveness of each intervention.

**Whole-group embedded instruction.** Whole-class instruction addressed the concepts under investigation for each research question. The storybook *Rosie’s Walk* was used to introduce the concept of directional prepositions. The story books *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* was used to introduce the concept of rhyming words and sounds. The use of storybooks as a vocabulary intervention for both English only students and ELLs in kindergarten is a research-based intervention that introduces vocabulary through storybooks presented to the class (Beck, et al., 2013; Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Graves et al., 2013; Nielson & Friesen, 2012; Silverman, 2007; Silverman & Crandell, 2010). The use of whole-group instruction targets all students within the research setting.

The directional preposition intervention began with embedded instruction of positional vocabulary words with *Rosie’s Walk* (1968). The book was read to the entire class. On the first reading, all students engaged with the content of the story recognizing how Rosie the Hen is able to avoid being eaten by the fox. A group discussion within the
general classroom setting analyzed story elements such as sequence of events and story characters. Next, students created their own Rosie on a craft stick as part of a whole class art activity. On the following instructional day, *Rosie’s Walk* (1968) was read with the use of the newly created “Rosie’s”. Each student modeled the directional prepositions as I modeled a Rosie moving on each page of the story. For example, when *Rosie* (1968) walks “over the haystack” or “under the beehives” the Rosie craft sticks moved over or under the students’ hands to demonstrate Rosie’s directional movement. Students colored their own mini Rosie books to practice the movements modeled during embedded instruction. All students kept the books and the Rosie puppet in their personal book bin to read during independent work times or during play-based center exploration.

The rhyme intervention also began with embedded instruction with the entire class. The book *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* (Thomas, 2009) was read out loud. Poor Bob cannot say rhyming words, but his non-rhyming words show that he is the character most aware of the problem faced by a dust bunny and a vacuum cleaner. In addition to reading the book out loud, the class played a rhyming game. Students had the opportunity to be a rhyming bunny or Bob with a set of consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words. Rhyming bunnies were able to add words to the word family, while the “Bob” student added a word that did not rhyme. An example word was “fun.” Rhyming bunnies could add words such as run, bun, sun, etc. and the “Bob” could say a non-rhyming word such as potato. Embedded instruction continued during the week with word family activities for the class.

*Extended play-based direct instruction.* Extended instruction of directional prepositions consisted of three weeks of additional instruction for ELL students. The
directional prepositions targeted for extended instruction were: in, above, below, beside, in front, behind, between, out, across, and around. Instruction each week was divided into three segments of direct extended instruction. The first segment was small group instruction with the targeted ELLs where I created text using the selected directional prepositions was introduced. The purpose of the strategy was to use the familiarity of the class’ stuffed narwhals and the student to create a relatable and memorable story for the application of the vocabulary concepts. The characters used in the three researcher created texts were Nari and Pearl (Appendix C), the class’ stuffed narwhals, and the student. Students were able to color the text and take the book to the reading center to read with a stuffed animal. Each week during the extended instruction part of the intervention a new text was introduced. The first day focused on introducing the text. The second day of extended instruction involved a play-based art activity with the targeted sample to create a new puppet character related to the introduced text. On the third day of extended instruction I again met with ELLs in a small-group setting to model the directional prepositions with the movable puppet character. I voice recorded students participating in the intervention during small group instruction using the Rev recording application. The recording allowed me to determine how the intervention was working with student understanding of the vocabulary concepts, as well as indicate student perceptions of the intervention.

Extended instruction of rhyming words consisted of only one week of additional instruction for ELL students. The original plan of three weeks of extended instruction was changed due to the impending school closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Exner, 2020). The introduction of rhyming words with Rhyming Dust Bunnies began the week
of March 2, 2020. During that week, I read *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* (Thomas, 2009) and students played the “Who is Bob” game.

In addition to Rhyming Dust Bunnies, we celebrated Dr. Seuss week by reading several books by Dr. Seuss and listening for the rhyme. Books that were read included *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960), and *Hop on Pop* (1963). On March 9, 2020 three cases of the novel coronavirus were discovered in the state of Ohio causing the governor to declare a state of emergency (Bosco & Thomas, 2020). At the end of the day on March 9, staff learned of the possibility of a school closure. Instead of students meeting in small groups with me to play the designed rhyming games with a word family list (Appendix D), I met with each student individually on Tuesday and Wednesday to review the rhyming concepts one-on-one. The researcher played a rhyming matching game with each student using the words from the word family list (Appendix D). By Friday, March 13, the post-assessment was given to all students in the class who were still present in school. Some parents had already pulled their children out of school due to fear of the COVID-19 virus. At the end of the school day on March 12, the school closures were announced (Exner, 2020). On Friday, March 13, I spent the day with my students trying to calm fears and prepare them for an absence from school for an undetermined period of time. While the change in the intervention strategy deviated significantly from the original plan, the change was necessary due to an uncertain future and a global pandemic.

*Play-based extended engagement.* In addition to the use of story books and extended direct play-based instruction with peers, I encouraged further engagement with the vocabulary in a play-based setting with peers. Once the book and character for
Directional prepositions were created, students had the opportunity to share the story with other peers at the dramatic play center (puppets), reading center, and at the block center to build and create new objects for the puppet to demonstrate directional movement. Students also had the opportunity to read their stories with fourth-grade book buddies. The fourth-grade students were a weekly activity, coming to read with their assigned kindergarten buddy since September of 2020. The fourth-grade book buddy time allowed for kindergarten students to engage with their created books. I also collected additional observational data while students played at centers with peers and their new learning tools. Students were able to keep both the puppets and the books in their personal book storage to have for continued use beyond the intervention period.

Changes were made to the play-based activities with rhyming words due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Because there was only one week of extended instruction, play was limited to a rhyming game played with partners in the classroom and with fourth-grade book buddies and only one wee of center play. The activity, “Who is Bob?” was played with fourth-grade students and kindergartners. Students also played a rhyming matching game with the fourth-grade student. Dr. Seuss books introduced the previous week with examples of rhyme were in the reading center for kindergarten students to explore. Because I believed that school would be closing soon, this adjustment to the play allowed for some amount of play before the post assessment.

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 illustrate the design of each vocabulary intervention in the classroom setting.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directional Preposition Intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Embedded Instruction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Rosie’s Walk" /></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Extended Play-based Direct Instruction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Nari’s Adventure" /></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Play Engagement</strong></td>
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<td><img src="image" alt="Puppets" /></td>
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**Figure 3.1** Directional Preposition Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhyming Word Intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Embedded Instruction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Rhyming Dust Bunnies" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extended Play-based Direct Instruction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="fun" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Play Engagement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Who is “Bob”?" /></td>
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**Figure 3.2** Rhyming Word Intervention
**Research site.** The district in this study is a suburban district located Ohio. According to state statistics there are approximately 3,500 students within the city limits who attend preschool through grade twelve within the district. The majority population of the district is white, non-Hispanic (81.14%). Minorities within the district include Asian or Pacific Islander (6.07%), Black, non-Hispanic (2.11%), Hispanic (5.52%), and multiracial (4.61%). Students with disabilities make up 14.34% of the student population. Limited English students vary across all racial and ethnic groups and make up 4.79% of the population, with the economically disadvantaged comprising 17.66% of the population.

The study took place at the district’s new elementary school. The building houses all students within the district in grades preschool through grade four. There are approximately 1,200 students who attend the elementary school. Of the current school population 121 are identified as ELLs with 48 students identified ELLs in kindergarten.

The research was conducted in one kindergarten classroom designated as an ELL unit. The classroom is located in the kindergarten wing of the building. The researcher was the classroom teacher in the environment and conducted the intervention. The ELL teacher was an additional support within the research environment and consulted with the researcher about the effectiveness of the intervention. Initially, the ELL instructor cotaught within the kindergarten classroom three times per week for 40 minutes during English Language Arts instruction and pulled out identified ELL students for targeted instruction twice a week in the morning for 30 minutes. The targeted small-group instruction in the morning was designed to front load skills planned for whole-group or to fill learning gaps based on individual language needs. The ELL teacher was also present
during literacy center activities for 30 minutes each day in the afternoon. All planning within the classroom environment was completed by the researcher with the ELL teacher as a consult for specific needs for the ELL population. Both teachers met with individuals and small student groups of both ELL and non-ELL students to differentiate instruction and provide support for specifically targeted learning goals. Goals for students were determined through observations, checklists, and formative assessments.

**Participants.** Study participants were part of a convenience sample. The convenience sample was used because of the impossibility of selecting a random sample (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The participants were chosen “from the nearest and most accessible Individuals” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 62). The participants in the study included the 23 kindergarten students in my class. Fourteen of the students were identified as ELLs while nine students were English-only peers. The nine English-only peers only participated in the embedded instruction of whole group lessons and play-based center activities. Identified ELLs participated in the embedded instruction, the extended instruction of the intervention, and play-based center activities.

Students were placed before the start of the school year in my kindergarten classroom based on data collected from parents that included a home language survey, a formal assessment of letter and number identification administered to all incoming kindergarten students, and an informal assessment administered by an ELL teacher to students who had a second language spoken in the home. Seven languages were identified as home languages for the participating ELL students. Five students spoke Arabic, one student spoke Korean, one student spoke Russian, two students spoke Spanish, one student spoke both Czech and Japanese, one student spoke Mandarin
Chinese, one student spoke Tamil, and two students spoke Indian dialects not specifically identified by parents. The students were both linguistically diverse and racially diverse. Six students were racially identified as White, 4 students were identified as Asian Pacific Islander, 2 students were identified as Hispanic, and 2 students were identified as racially mixed. Five of the participants were female and nine were male. At the time of initial identification as ELLs, one student was six years old, while the remaining 13 students were 5 years old. At the conclusion of the research seven students were six years of age. All students qualified for ELL services based on the Ohio English Learning Proficiency Screener (OELPS).

All parents of the kindergarten class received a consent letter (Appendix E) prior to the start of the intervention. All consent forms were returned and collected by the researcher. While the form was a standard form, based on the researcher’s experiences during the intervention with communication with parents of ELL students, the researcher recommends a form that is less formal and is more colloquial to accommodate a variety of English language skills in the home.

**Data collection instruments.** Vocabulary understanding is an important component to literacy development and mathematical understanding. Standards set by the state determine instructional practices in the classroom. Currently the State Standards for Ohio in the area of Mathematics (2017) and English Language Arts (2017) expect that kindergarten students be able to do the following:

- **K.G.1** Describe objects in the environment using names of shapes and describe the relative positions of these objects using terms such as above, below, beside, in front of, behind, and next to.
RF.K.2 Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and phonemes (sounds).

a. Recognize and produce rhyming words.

b. Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.

c. Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.

d. Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final phonemes (sounds) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words. (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /r/, or /x/.)

e. Add or substitute individual phonemes (sounds) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.

The data collection instruments were specifically designed to address the research questions and target these specific state standards (Table 3.1).

**Directional preposition assessment.** Directional prepositions were assessed using the researcher created *Directional Preposition Assessment* (Appendix A). All kindergarten participants in the study completed the assessment prior to the administration of the intervention and after the intervention. The assessment asked students to demonstrate understanding of directional prepositions by placing a teddy bear in a specific location related to a cup. Students physically demonstrated an understanding of the directional preposition in a one-on-one assessment with me, and I recorded competency in the standards with either a check mark or a 0. A check indicated
understanding and a 0 indicated that the student does not understand the preposition.

Correct answers were totaled.

**Rhyming assessment.** Rhyming word knowledge was assessed using the researcher created *Rhyming Assessment* (Appendix B). All kindergarten participants in the study completed the assessment prior to the administration of the intervention and after the intervention. There were five students who were unable to complete the post assessment due to absence. They were kept home from school due to illness and concern of the COVID-19 virus. Students demonstrated an understanding of rhyming words in a one-on-one assessment with me. Participants were asked to determine if a pair of words rhyme. The assessment was marked with a check or a 0, with a check indicating a correct answer and a 0 indicating an incorrect response. On the second section of the rhyme assessment the student produced a word to rhyme with the given word. I recorded the answer of the participant on the data collection sheet. A word that rhymes with the given word was considered an acceptable response. Nonsense words were accepted as correct answers if the word demonstrated the rhyme. Correct answers were totaled.

Perceptions of kindergarten students participating in the intervention were recorded using the smartphone application Rev. I recorded my interaction with the students and student comments during the instruction. I had the recordings transcribed. I also wrote personal reflections about the effectiveness of the instruction at the end of each small-group instructional period, and wrote daily observations of students during center time. I observed student use of materials and interactions between ELL and non-ELL students. These observations and reflections were recorded daily in a notebook. Observations and reflections of the researcher were also analyzed for themes and tallied.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Instrument</th>
<th>Type of Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directional prepositions</td>
<td>Directional preposition assessment</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
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<tr>
<td>What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?</td>
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<td>Rhyme</td>
<td>Rhyming Assessment</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
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<tr>
<td>What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of students (play-based)</td>
<td>Transcripts of small group recordings</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play?</td>
<td>Observations Field notes</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data collection methods.** Prior to the intervention, I assessed students on directional prepositions rhyming words and collected each student’s initial score Appendix A and B). Once the initial data was collected the intervention was divided into whole group embedded instruction, targeted extended instruction for ELL students, and play-based integrated instruction during centers for each targeted vocabulary. At the
conclusion of each intervention students were given the post-assessment to determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

Since the study was a mixed method study both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Quantitative data was collected by administering an initial assessment to determine student knowledge of directional pronouns and an initial assessment for rhyming words and sounds. The directional preposition assessment was given again after the conclusion of the first four weeks of the intervention, while the rhyming words assessment was given after the second week of the intervention. The shortened intervention for rhyming words was due to school closures related to COVID-19 (Exner, 2020). Student pre-test and posttest scores were compared to determine individual and group growth through a frequency comparison.

Qualitative data were collected through recording students during instruction, writing observations of students, and reflecting on each instructional period. Students were recorded using the smartphone application Rev. Transcripts were then analyzed for themes related to student perceptions of the intervention. I collected additional qualitative data by writing observational notes when students were engaged in play activities to apply the learned concepts. Observations occurred while students interacted within a play-based center with the intervention materials and age-based peers. My reflections were written at the end of each day as part of the field notes during the study.

By collecting both qualitative and quantitative data the researcher hoped to inform practices at the local level to improve vocabulary instruction, while creating a foundation for further research to support vocabulary acquisition for kindergarten ELLs.
**Data analysis.** Since this was a mixed-method study both qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed.

**Qualitative data.** Audio recordings were transcribed and coded into themes. Once the transcripts were available, I highlighted information to locate themes, and made tally marks on a chart to determine the reoccurrence of the theme. I then, analyzed themes to offer insights about the intervention model. I worked with the ELL to interpret themes from the recordings, field notes, and observations to enhance validity. Rather than member-checking with the students, due to the developmental age of participants, I invited the ELL teacher to participate in a peer debriefing “to enhance the accuracy of the account” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 201).

**Quantitative data.** Pre-intervention and post-intervention data from both the Directional Preposition Assessment (Appendix A) and Rhyming Assessment (Appendix B) were analyzed to determine student growth from the use of the intervention. An analysis of the pre and post percentage scores data was completed to determine if vocabulary knowledge of participants increased.

**Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To present research that is trustworthy or credible it is important that I present data using instrumentation that is meaningful and useful to support the inferences and conclusions from the research (Fraenkel, et al., 2015). To that end both qualitative and quantitative data were collected as part of this research. The quantitative instruments were matched with the state standards, reviewed by me, the ELL teacher, and reviewed by six kindergarten teachers. Data were collected prior to the intervention in a quiet
classroom environment familiar to the participants. The same environment and materials were provided for the participants for the post assessments.

The quantitative data were triangulated with the qualitative data. I worked with the ELL teacher in the room to interpret themes from the recordings, field notes, and observations to control any bias in the research with a peer debriefing. Themes from the qualitative data were reviewed by both the ELL teacher and by me to clarify student responses.

I also kept a daily journal recording events in and out of the classroom that impacted the research setting. Such “memoing” is a technique that can be applied to “enhance the research experience” (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2007, p. 68). By keeping an account of events, the researcher was able to refer back to daily notes to support the trustworthiness of the data while adding rigor to the research process.

**Ethical Considerations**

Protecting participants from harm is the responsibility of the researcher (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). Because all the participants in this research study are under the age of eighteen, parental permission was required (Appendix E). An informed consent form was provided to all parents and guardians of the study’s participants prior to data collection. An opportunity was provided for parents to ask questions either in person or via electronic communication to ensure any concerns were addressed prior to participation in the study. I also made clear that participation in the study was not required and choosing not to participate would have no bearing on student evaluations in the classroom.
This was a kindergarten classroom. With an intervention specifically designed to make books, puppets, and play games, it is impossible to prevent other students from wanting to participate. I delivered embedded instruction to all students in the class, participants and non-participants. With an eagerness to learn and a desire to have the same materials, I anticipated that there would be many students not involved in the intervention interested in creating the books, puppets, and playing the games. For this reason, I also made the same materials and games completed with the study participants available to all students as part of center activities. Non-participants were able to complete the same tasks during a play-based centers without the specific extended instruction. I also included non-participants who needed more direct instruction to meet the state learning standards in extended instruction groups but did not use their data in this study.

Data for the study were kept confidential, as it is important that participants recognize that information collected in a research study is kept in confidence (Fraenkel et al. 2015). Numbers were assigned to participants in the study with only the researcher having access to the data. Results of the study were shared with the building’s ELL teachers for the purpose of improving teaching practices, however names were removed from the results. Parents were also informed about their child’s progress after the intervention period.

**Summary**

This action research project collected both qualitative and quantitative data on an intervention designed to test vocabulary instruction for ELLs in my kindergarten class. Directional prepositions and rhyming words were the specific vocabulary needs
addressed with the intervention. The results of the research indicate ways to support ELLs when learning English vocabulary. In Chapter 4, an analysis of the results will illustrate the impact of the intervention.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This action research was designed to further the knowledge of instructors in my teaching environment on practices to support vocabulary acquisition for ELLs. Vocabulary acquisition of directional prepositions and rhyming words were the two targeted skills for this research. The research attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

2. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

3. What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play?

Mastery and understanding of content vocabulary are essential for academic success for ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017). With the increasing numbers of ELL students in our district, finding instructional practices to support kindergarten ELLs in improving content vocabulary understanding was an important problem to address. During the three years that I had been a kindergarten teacher, observations and student data demonstrated a difference in vocabulary acquisition between ELL students and their
English-only peers. This action research was designed to support mastery of directional prepositions and rhyme in a child centered environment. I wanted to discover if integrating developmentally appropriate play with targeted instructional practices can support vocabulary acquisition for kindergarten ELLs.

The research was conducted in my kindergarten classroom in a suburban school district. The class had 23 total students with fourteen of those students identified as ELL. The target ELL vocabulary acquisition for directional prepositions and for rhyming sounds were both kindergarten state standards (Ohio’s Learning Standards, 2019). With the increasing ELL population in the suburban district, a trend that is impacting suburban districts around the country (Tyler, Frankenberg, & Ayscue, 2016), having strategies to teach ELL vocabulary is increasingly important. A deep understanding of a variety of vocabulary interventions is critical for ELLs to have academic success when learning English vocabulary (Graves, 2016). Increasing ELL populations in the classroom require that teachers have the skills and strategies to support these unique and diverse learners (Gibbons, 2015). The purpose of this study is to add to the research of instructional practices to support vocabulary acquisition.

The vocabulary intervention was designed to support the learning of ELLs as they develop English vocabulary skills. Vocabulary understanding is a key component for ELL students’ success in the academic environment (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Beginning the vocabulary-building process for ELLs in kindergarten is essential for future academic achievement (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). Research has shown a direct correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, however there is less understanding of how to best apply vocabulary interventions to impact
vocabulary acquisition (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). Going back to research conducted as early as 1979, The National Reading Panel (2000) finds no best practice in vocabulary instruction. While researchers have recognized the importance of vocabulary instruction, and multiple methods have been developed, there is little evidence for determining best practice for vocabulary instruction in the classroom. With no clear understanding of the most effective practice for vocabulary acquisition, designing interventions for students is a complex process (Baumann & Graves, 2010). Understanding the developmental needs of students should be a primary consideration when developing instructional strategies. Best practices for teaching vocabulary apply to all students, including ELLs (Graves, 2016). This intervention was designed to include three research-based practices: embedded instruction, extended instruction, and small group play with peer language interaction.

**Class Profile**

The fourteen identified ELL students participating in the intervention were from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds. Exposure to English in the home varied for each student. One student had no English usage in the home setting. Six students had limited English use in the home. For these students English was a secondary language at home with the primary language spoken most often outside of school. However, English was encouraged and practiced in the home setting for these six students. For the remaining seven students at least one parent was fluent in English. English was the language spoken most often in the home, but the child was learning to speak the language of the non-English speaking parent or grandparent living in the household.
Upon entering kindergarten all ELL students had a variety of experiences with the English language. All but one student had experiences in a preschool or daycare setting at least twice a week. With preschool experience most students began the school year comfortable in a school setting and transitioned well to an all-day learning format. Students were able to understand verbal directions and visual cues. Students were generally excited about learning and being present at school. One student, who entered kindergarten with no English experience, struggled with the transition to school and acted out with attention seeking behaviors. With a lot of coaching, work with the ELL teacher, patience, emotional support, and academic support this student gradually integrated well into the classroom environment, making friends and speaking in short English phrases by the winter break in December of 2019, approximately 15 weeks into the school year.

As a group, the ELL students and their English-only peers worked well together. Students considered each member of their class a friend. Lunch, recess, classroom group work, and play center time in the classroom were all times during the school day when students moved fluidly among their peers. Behaviors such as sharing, acts of kindness, and respect were part of the class culture. While the ELL teacher and I, used labels such as ELL for documentation, state record keeping, interpreting assessments, and this research, students were generally unaware of the label. When teaching, students were grouped based on need and ability rather than the ELL label. This flexible grouping created small groups of both ELL and English-only peers working on the same academic skills. The cohesiveness of the group was observed in multiple school settings by other instructors, including in music class, art class, and Physical Education. Students recognized and celebrated cultural differences. With the innocence and wonder that
comes from being five, if your friend is happy about something fun, then as a good friend you are too.

As ELL students became more comfortable with English, some students began to share and teach words in their primary language. This happened often at lunch as students shared food, much to the consternation of the cafeteria monitor. Picture books chosen for learning in the classroom also showed a variety of cultures and faces. When reading *Wheels on the Tuk Tuk* (Sehgal, 2016), one ELL student identified the location of the story as India and was excited to read the story. Her reasoning was, that the people in the story are brown and her skin was also brown. Since she was from India it made sense that the story was also about India. A similar reaction occurred when reading *Crescent Moons and Pointed Minarets: A Muslim Book of Shapes* (Khan, 2018). While the book was to support our math unit about shapes, it was evident that Muslim students had a sense of pride seeing themselves represented in a classroom story book. Integrating stories and recognition of all the cultures in our class, was a natural extension to support the cultural and language variety in the classroom and a way to include ELL students in the learning process.

While learning throughout the COVID-19 closure was outside the scope of this research, despite the difficult learning environment faced by me, the parents of students, and the students themselves thirteen of the fourteen ELL families remained engaged in online learning during the school closure. The active engagement of parents to support the learning needs of their children demonstrated dedication to learning in ways that I would not have seen had we been in regular in-person classroom learning. Parents of all students were deeply concerned about the academic progress of their children, fearing
that learning would be lost in an online classroom. ELL parents regularly asked me for support in helping with learning at home, particularly when English was not the primary language spoken by the parent. Communication with parents was a key element of the distance learning experience. The constant communications allowed me to see with more depth the concern, care, and value parents had for their children to make progress with the English language. The importance of communication with parents, ELL and English-only, will be addressed further in Chapter 5.

The ELL students were a vibrant part of the classroom environment both in-person and during distance learning. The cohesiveness of the class and the positive learning environment supported students during the intervention period. The intervention was not perceived as a forced change, but a natural part of the established classroom norms for instruction.

Student Profiles

There were fourteen ELL students who participated in the study. Five students were female and nine were male. To be identified as an ELL student in kindergarten, the language survey indicated that a second language was spoken in the home and the Ohio English Learning Proficiency Screener (OELPS) was given per state guidelines (2018). Each student in the study qualified as an ELL student after the administration of the OELPS. All students had unique language backgrounds and a variety of English language exposure.

ELL students within the research environment entered school with a variety of language, social, and cultural experiences. To provide readers with a deep understanding of my data, I have assigned each child a pseudonym to further explain their personal
experiences with the English language using the names of characters from *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (DiCamillo, 2006). This particular was the first chapter book I read to students during afternoon story time. We began the book around the beginning of the intervention period, and I completed the book reading by video during the COVID-19 school closure. Themes of loss, recovery, kindness, empathy, and compassion are found throughout the book. The title character, Edward (DiCamillo, 2006), learns the value of love during his journey. Because there was a deep connection with this text within the research environment, it seemed an appropriate text to choose pseudonyms for the ELL students in the study. The names below are not in any particular order.

**Abilene**, a female, entered school with experience in both English and the primary language from home. She had experience in an English-speaking setting in preschool while fluently speaking the primary language at home. In kindergarten she was learning the fundamentals of the English language, while at home she was learning to read and write in the primary language. She often struggled with subject content vocabulary, needing support in this area. Abilene often needed extra time to think about responses in class as she was clearly trying to process information. Sometimes she would translate words from the primary language to English to help herself understand. However, with the support in the classroom, she was able to build her vocabulary knowledge.

**Martin**, a male, also had preschool experience in English. At home the primary language was spoken by the adults, while a combination of English and the primary language were spoken by the children. Martin had a working knowledge of both languages, but was not fluent in the primary language. However, he had a keen
understanding of swear words in the primary language. He liked to say these words on the playground and teach other students to say them. Other kindergarten students thought they were learning something new, not knowing that the words were inappropriate. ELL students who understood Martin’s home language, shared his inappropriate use of the language with adults. The issue was addressed with his parents. While Martin did have an understanding of a second language, Martin used English more frequently.

*Pellegrina* had an interesting experience with English. When entering kindergarten from preschool, there were no indications through initial interactions that English was not her primary language. She was a fluent speaker and could read many sight words. However, English was not the primary language spoken at home. The adults in the home spoke the primary language, but Pellegrina and her older siblings spoke English. As the youngest sibling, she had the support of her older siblings in learning the English language. She understood the primary language when it was spoken to her, but she was not fluent in the home language of her parents.

*Ruth Ann* was actively learning two languages, the primary language of her parents and English. She had attended preschool, but had trouble with pronunciation of English words. Vowel sounds were very difficult for her to produce, but she made improvements with continued practice and support. Even with improvements, phonemic awareness and the pronunciation of words were still very difficult for her compared to her English-only peers and other ELL students. Ruth Ann often needed extra time to process information, but was observant and a quick learner. She liked to share about her trips to her home country and her cultural experiences. She was very proud of her background.
**Nellie**, a female, was another student who did not appear to be an ELL student on a first encounter. She entered kindergarten as strong academic student based on her initial kindergarten screening. However, the language survey indicated a second language was spoken at home. Nellie was actually learning two other languages at home. She was learning her father’s primary language at home, while she also attended a religious school on weekends to learn third language. Her primary language was English, but when screened with the OELPS, Nellie was identified as an ELL student.

**Lawrence** was a very shy and reluctant student when entering kindergarten. His English-speaking skills were not strong even though he did attend preschool. Because he was born outside of the United States, English was a true second language for him. For the first several weeks of school he hardly spoke in the classroom, on the playground, or at lunch. He would hide his face under his arm whenever he was spoken to by an adult or another student. One English-only student, without adult encouragement, made it her mission to make him talk. She played with him every day on the playground, sat with him at lunch, and would seek him out during any choice time. They became good friends. She would poke him to make him talk, and eventually Lawrence became more confident making lots of school friends. At the time of the school closure due to COVID-19, he was actually a chatty student.

**Edward** was an ELL student who only spoke English. He did not have a working knowledge of his mother’s native language often spoken in the home. Because a second language was spoken in the home, he was given the OELPS. Edward qualified for ELL support and showed significant gaps in vocabulary understanding. He was a reluctant student, but made significant progress with classroom academic supports.
Susanna had very little English experience before starting kindergarten. She had attended preschool, but was still very hesitant with spoken English. While familiar with English, she and her parents spoke in the primary language at home. However, her parents were very adamant about Susanna’s mastery of English. Her parents often asked for extra ways they could assist Susanna at home. She received a tremendous amount of home support and practiced English whenever given the opportunity. Susanna became a confident student. She was often the first to raise her hand in a group setting. Her academic passion became writing stories, writing whenever she had the opportunity. Academically, Susanna was a talented student, but she still struggled hearing and producing vowel sounds, especially short /e/ and short /i/.

Malone came from a home where dad was a native English speaker and mom was not. He was exposed to both English and the mother’s primary language in the home. Malone was a hard-working student in the classroom. His favorite subject was math. He enjoyed solving number problems. While Malone excelled in math, he struggled at the beginning of the year with phonemic awareness. He had trouble with identifying letters for the sounds /b/, /r/, /w/ and all short vowels. His hearing was checked multiple times and the speech teacher gave a quick informal assessment as well as observed him in class. There was no evidence of a hearing deficit or indication of a speech learning disability. With continuing practice during the first eighteen weeks of the year, Malone’s phonemic awareness improved and he was able to write with letter and sound correspondence.

Bull was a quiet and shy student. He was very hesitant to speak in class at the start of the school year. While Bull had exposure to English in preschool and English was sometimes used in the home, English was not the primary language used at home.
Identification of letters in the English alphabet as well as their corresponding sounds was challenging for Bull. His parents were very diligent about helping him practice at home and often asked for extra materials. As the year progressed, Bull became more confident in speaking, reading, and writing. He still needed a lot of scaffolding and extra supports, but he was always eager to learn and willing to try.

Bryce had lived in multiple countries before starting kindergarten. His exposure to English was outside of the United States in Australia. English was not the primary language spoken in the home. Bryce was a very confident student. He was always quick to volunteer to respond in class, but his responses often showed that he did not quite understand the question or the material. There were significant gaps in his English vocabulary comprehension. Because his peers were typically ego-centric (Piaget, 1923, 2002), his mistakes often went unnoticed by the class. Even though the ELL teacher was a co-teacher in the classroom for the language arts block, she would sometime pull Bryce out of the room for individualized vocabulary interventions.

For Ernest’s family, English was the primary language spoken in the home. However, a second language was practiced at home in order to communicate with his grandparents. Because a second language was listed, Ernest was screened using the OELPS, and he qualified for ELL services. Ernest was a hard worker. While he did struggle at the beginning of the year with vocabulary, by the winter break in December he was a strong student in both reading and writing. His love of reading blossomed during the COVID-19 closure. By using the on line reading program, Ernest was reading at a high first grade level by the beginning of June.
**Jangles** was born outside of the United States. His father was a native-born English speaker, while his mother was not. Jangles’ mother used the translate feature in the messaging system to understand electronic communication to parents. Both English and the mother’s language were spoken at home with the mother’s language being the first language learned by Jangles. However, Jangles was a fluent English speaker. He did not seem to have any issues understanding vocabulary or with phonemic understanding. Jangles did struggle with behavior, often hitting or touching other students, especially during recess. A behavior plan was put in place to help support Jangles with his behavior. As his behavior improved, so too did his academic performance.

**Lucius** entered kindergarten with no English knowledge. He had not attended preschool and no one in the home was fluent in English. He began the year in the half-day kindergarten program, but switched to the full-day program about a month after the initial start of school. The transition was difficult for Lucius. He struggled with school norms and had to be removed from recess for hurting other students. His outbursts made it difficult for him to make friends. The ELL teacher pulled Lucius for small group instruction twice a week to work on vocabulary for newcomers as well as social skills. He was very willing to learn and enjoyed the individualized attention. With a behavior plan, individualized instruction, and a lot of patience, Lucius gradually became more confident as a student. He smiled more and wanted to be at school. He started talking more with his peers. Lucius broke his arm at home in December. While at the beginning of the school year students avoided Lucius because he hurt them, in December students
volunteered to give up their recess outside to play games with him inside. Not only did Lucius make tremendous academic gains, he was able to make friends.

Each student had unique language experiences before entering kindergarten. Table 4.1 shows the different language backgrounds and Table 4.2 summarizes the language experiences of each child. Their experiences and English background are important to understand. Directional prepositions and rhyming words were the vocabulary skills targeted with this action research. Each of the students made different degrees of progress, but all students made progress after participation during the intervention period. The findings that follow suggest that there is value in embedded instruction, extended instruction, and integration of instruction with peer play.

**Table 4.1 Student Home Languages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home Language</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other not specified</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 4.2 Student Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Pseudonym</th>
<th>Student Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Abilene           | • Use of both English and primary language at home  
|                   | • Needed content vocabulary support                   |
| Martin            | • Use of both English and primary language at home  
|                   | • English used primarily by the children at home     |
| Pellegrina        | • Use of both English and primary language at home  
|                   | • Understood, but not fluent in parents’ primary language |
| Ruth Ann          | • Use of both English and primary language at home  
|                   | • Struggled with English vowels                      |
| Nellie            | • Primary language English                            
|                   | • Actively learning two other languages at home       |
| Lawrence          | • Use of primary language at home                     
|                   | • Attended English speaking preschool                 
|                   | • Shy at the beginning of kindergarten                |
| Edward            | • Use of both English and primary language of mother at home  
|                   | • Gaps in vocabulary understanding                    |
| Susanna           | • Little English experience or exposure               
|                   | • Primary language spoken at home                    
|                   | • Parents very supportive for her to learn English   |
| Malone            | • Dad a native English speaker, mom not               
|                   | • Used both languages in the home                     
|                   | • Struggled with phonemic awareness when entering kindergarten |
| Bull              | • English not the primary language in the home       
|                   | • Hesitant student needing supports in class         |
| Bryce             | • English not the primary language at home            
|                   | • Significant gaps in English vocabulary comprehension |
| Ernest            | • English primary language spoken in the home        
|                   | • Practiced a second language to communicate with grandparents |
| Jangles           | • Dad a native English speaker, mom not               
|                   | • Two languages spoken in the home                   |
| Lucius            | • Non- English speaker                                
|                   | • No preschool and no one at home fluent in English  |
Quantitative Data Analysis

A quantitative data analysis uses statistics to address the questions that guide the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, a statistical quantitative analysis provided answers to two of the research questions:

1. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?
2. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

The data collected during the directional preposition phase of the intervention will be presented first, followed by the data from the rhyming word intervention.

**Directional Preposition Intervention.** The directional preposition intervention lasted four weeks, beginning on January 27, 2020 and concluding on February 21, 2020. Quantitative data were collected to answer the following question: What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting? Pretest data were collected prior to the start of the directional preposition intervention. Fourteen ELL students took the pretest for the intervention, with only 13 students participating in the entire intervention. One student, Bryce, missed the first three weeks of the intervention due to travel outside of the United States. He was removed from the directional preposition part of the study.
The directional preposition intervention began with one week of embedded instruction using *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1968). During embedded instruction the entire class participated in whole-group lessons focused on directional prepositions. Students created their own *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1968) book and had a Rosie to manipulate to demonstrate the prepositions. The intervention continued for three more successive weeks using extended instruction integrated with peer play. The extended instruction included books I created (Appendix C) and were also encouraged for use as a part of play centers. A new book was introduced each week after the initial first week of embedded instruction.

The extended instruction with the research was play-based with the children having puppets and the texts. During extended instruction ELL students interacted with the researcher and their peers in the small group to engage with the prepositions while playing with the puppets and the text. Children were also encouraged to play with their books during play centers and with fourth grade book buddies. Fourth grade buddies came once a week to read books and play games with kindergarten students. In addition, many students, ELL and English-only, chose to play with their books during the quiet time period in the classroom after lunch and recess.

Posttest data were collected over a period of one week, beginning on February 20. Both the pre and posttest (Appendix A) had a total of eight items for students to demonstrate proficiency with directional prepositions. A score of eight indicates a student is proficient with the skill. A score between 4 and 7 demonstrates a student is still developing the skill. A score below a four indicates that a student is a novice at the skill.
Table 4.3 illustrates the quantitative data collected for the pre and posttests showing that all students made progress during the intervention.

Table 4.3 Pre and posttest data for directional prepositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELL Student</th>
<th>Pretest score out of 8</th>
<th>Posttest score out of 8</th>
<th>Difference between pre and posttest score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ernest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellegrina</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nellie</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malone</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jangles</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilene</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Ann</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanna</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bull</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucius</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to the intervention only one student, Ernest, had mastered the concept of directional prepositions. At the conclusion of the intervention, all but two students demonstrated mastery on the posttest. Lawrence and Lucius had very low scores on the initial assessment, but they were able to increase their scores 3 and 5 points respectively after participating in the intervention. For Lucius, this is particularly remarkable since at the time of the intervention, he was still not able to fluently communicate verbally using English.

Further analysis of the data in Table 4.4 showed that with an $n = 13$, the mean score increased between the pretest and the post test. With 8 questions on the directional preposition assessment, the mean score for the pretest was 5.77 and 7.69 on the posttest. The increased mean score demonstrated overall improvement in student scores and understanding of directional prepositions. The range of scores decreased between the
pretest (7) and the posttest (2). The large range for the pretest reflected significant variability, while the smaller range from the posttest demonstrated limited variability. The standard deviation also showed a decreased variability among scores from the pretest to the posttest. The standard deviation of 1.96 on the pretest was significantly larger than the .75 standard deviation on the posttest. The smaller standard deviation showed the post test scores were closer and had less variability.

**Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics Directional Preposition Intervention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Minimum Score</th>
<th>Maximum Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quantitative data collected for the directional preposition intervention suggest there was an impact. ELLs in a kindergarten setting showed improvement in the understanding and mastery of directional prepositions with a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play.

**Rhyming word intervention.** The rhyme intervention lasted only two weeks, beginning on March 2, 2020 and concluding on March 13, 2020. Quantitative data were collected to answer the following research question: What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting? The rhyming word pretest (Appendix B) was completed in January prior to the directional preposition and rhyme intervention. While all fourteen ELL students were given the pretest for the intervention, only nine students completed the posttest. Due to the unforeseen impact of COVID-19, schools were unexpectedly closed. Instead of completing four weeks of the
rhyme intervention, as previously planned, the intervention was shortened to two weeks. I administered the posttest prior to the school closures in order to collect data. Abilene, Nellie, Edward, Malone, and Bull were present for the intervention, but were all absent for the posttest administration due to illness. While the illness was not COVID-19 related, the students were unable to take the posttest. Their scores were excluded from the statistical analysis.

*Rhyming Dust Bunnies* (Thomas, 2009) was the text used for the whole class embedded instruction. Because the intervention began the week of March 2, Dr. Seuss books were added to the embedded instruction to celebrate Dr. Seuss week. The game “Who is Bob?” was introduced as part of the embedded instruction period. Students played this rhyming game as well as rhyming matching games during play center time for the first week of the intervention.

On the Monday of the second week of the intervention, the first cases of COVID-19 were announced in the state. To prepare for a potential closure, instead of completing rhyming games in small groups for extended instruction, I met with all ELL children individually to play a rhyme game. This change meant that the initial play was with the researcher and the child. There were no small peer groups to engage in play, as had originally been planned for the intervention. Using the rhyming words (Appendix D), I played a rhyming matching game with students. The intervention was completed over a four-day period. The posttest was administered after all students completed the individualized extended instruction.

To facilitate integration with peer play, I encouraged students to play rhyming games at centers and read Dr. Seuss books to find words that rhymed during the
shortened two-week intervention period. In addition to encouraging play during center time, I created time within the structure of the school day for the students to play rhyming games with each other. Extra time to play “Who is Bob? was added to whole-group instruction, as well as adding instructional time for small-groups of children to play the game. The game was also an option for students to play with their fourth-grade book buddy.

The rhyme pre and posttest had a total of 15 test items (Appendix B). The first part of the assessment asked students to recognize a rhyming sound, the second part of the assessment asked students to produce a rhyming sound. A score of a 14 or 15 indicates a student is proficient with the rhyming skill. A score of eight or below indicates a student is a novice with the skill. Table 4.5 illustrates the pre and posttest data indicating progress made during the intervention.

Table 4.5 Pre and Posttest data for rhyming words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELL Student</th>
<th>Pretest score out of 15</th>
<th>Posttest score out of 15</th>
<th>Difference between pre and posttest score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>+0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellegrina</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jangles</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernest</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Ann</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanna</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucius</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Martin, Pellegrina, and Malone were all proficient on the pretest and maintained proficiency on the posttest. Susanna, Lawrence, Bryce, and Lucius made the most
significant gains. While still not proficient with rhyming, the data suggest that the intervention supported their understanding of rhyming words.

Students needed to identify rhyme and generate rhyme on the assessment. Tables 4.6 and 4.7 show student performance on the pretest and posttest broken down by types of questions. For Ruth Ann, Susanna, Lawrence, Bryce, and Lucius generating rhyme was the most difficult part of the assessment. For these students, English is not spoken with frequency at home. Hearing the English sounds and reproducing the sounds is challenging for these students.

For the remaining students at least one member of the home is a fluent English speaker and uses English in the home environment. The results for the rhyme generation suggest that there is a possible connection to the amount of English spoken in the home and the ability for students to hear and generate English rhyming sounds.

Table 4.6 Identification of rhyme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELL Student</th>
<th>Pretest score out of 10</th>
<th>Posttest score out of 10</th>
<th>Difference between pre and posttest score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellegrina</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jangles</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernest</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Ann</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanna</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryce</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucius</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further analysis of the rhyme intervention data suggests the intervention had an impact on student learning. Table 4.8 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the quantitative data. The mean on the test scores improved from the pretest to the posttest to demonstrate higher scores. The range of scores also decreased from the pretest and the post test. This is further reflected in the standard deviation data. With the standard deviation decreasing from 4.94 on the pretest to 2.98 on the posttest there is less variability among the student scores.

### Table 4.8 Descriptive Statistics Rhyming Word Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Minimum Score</th>
<th>Maximum Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>8.89</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>11.89</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the improvement from pretest to posttest is not as dramatic for rhyme as it was for directional prepositions, the quantitative data collected for the rhyming word intervention suggest there is an impact. Even with a shorter intervention period due to the COVID-19 closure, ELLs in a kindergarten setting showed improvement in the
understanding and mastery of rhyme with a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collected in this action research study was aligned with the third research question: What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play? By analyzing the lived experiences of the participants, the qualitative analysis can “help practitioner-researchers to achieve an in-depth understanding of the studied problem” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 232). Understanding how kindergarten students feel about the learning experience adds depth to the understanding of the vocabulary intervention. Because learning is an interactive process in the development of the young mind (Piaget, 1923, 2002), how a child perceives the world in which they construct independently is important to understanding the value of the vocabulary intervention. The qualitative analysis will report the findings of the perceptions of the kindergarten study participants.

**Perceptions of kindergarten students during vocabulary interventions.**

Qualitative data were collected to address the perceptions of kindergarten ELL students who experienced the targeted interventions of directional propositions and rhyming words with peer play. I voice recorded students’ discussions during extended instruction, collected field notes when observing students during peer play, and kept a daily journal of students’ experiences during the intervention period. Because the participants were young, determining how best to qualify themes was challenging. Kindergarten students while in tune with their individual feelings, likes and dislikes, do not have the same depth of vocabulary as would an older student or an adult (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013).
Two themes emerged from the qualitative data: the interventions were fun with students liking the interactive play and students chose to remain engaged with the activity during independent play.

*Fun.* Kindergarten students will let you know with relative immediacy if they like or dislike an activity. Body language or a simple, “I don’t like that” are not unusual expressions among students who are typically egocentric (Piaget, 1923, 2002). While the word “fun” is a simple expression from an adult perspective, for a student who is five or six years old, fun is the ultimate compliment. Describing fun as something in which a person would find pleasurable, enjoyable, or entertaining, fun is an activity that causes delight for the person engaged in the activity. Thinking of the intervention as fun for a kindergarten student means the activity provided joyful pleasure. Fun was clearly defined by words “this is fun,” smiles, laughs, and engagement during play. Fun and liking the interactive play were evident during embedded instruction, extended instruction integrated with peer play, and peer independent play in both the directional preposition vocabulary intervention and the rhyming word intervention.

With the embedded whole-class presentation of *Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1968) for directional prepositions, I noted in my observations, the class as a whole was engaged and enjoying the lesson. Each student wanted a turn to act out parts of the Rosie story and was eager to participate in the acting activity. All students in the class were able to act out part of the story and there was general enthusiasm to participate in the playful activity. As the week continued with the embedded instruction, all students created their own Rosie books with a puppet chicken to move to demonstrate the prepositions from the
story. Students remained actively engaged in making the books and had fun with the activity.

Embedded instruction using *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* (Thomas, 2009) for rhyming words sparked the same class enthusiasm for fun. In my observation journal, I wrote about the energy from the day. There was no shortage of volunteers to play the “Who is Bob?” rhyming game. In the game “Bob” cannot produce a rhyming word, just as the Bob character in the text does not produce rhyming words. While ELL students struggled with the concept of “Bob” not being able to rhyme, students had fun and wanted to play the game. Because it was Dr. Seuss week, we continued with the concept of “Who is Bob?” with words from *Hop on Pop* (Seuss, 1963). *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957) and *Green Eggs and Ham* (Seuss, 1960) were also read to the class during embedded instruction to reinforce the concept of rhyme. Students had the opportunity to be silly with the “Who is Bob?” game, and were able to laugh. Students enjoyed the interactive play of the game and had fun learning the concepts.

In my observations, fun was also a component of the extended instruction period. Three different books were used during extended instruction for directional prepositions (Appendix C). One book was introduced each week during the intervention period. The first two books, *Nari’s Adventure* and *Pearls’ Adventure*, were based on our class stuffed animals, Nari and Pearl. The puppets created for these texts were designed to emulate the Nari and Pearl used in the classroom.

Nari and Pearl were chosen for the intervention because of their presence in the classroom. The stuffed animals established figures in the classroom greeting each child with a kiss on the forehead each morning and a kiss on the forehead each afternoon. This
unconditional love from our social and emotional learning tools made them very popular. The primary function of Nari and Pearl was to teach interpersonal skills. In the classroom, they were my examples of what is appropriate behavior and what is not. Hitting your friends on the playground is not OK, while sharing crayons (although not anymore in a COVID-19 classroom) is a kind act in the classroom. Any social behavior that needed addressing, Nari and Pearl were the models. For students to have their very own Nari and Pearl puppet was beyond thrilling. Students talked to the puppets, played with the puppets, and read to the puppets. While the goal was to teach directional prepositions, the puppets were also toys with which students could engage in self-talk and self-play. Figure 4.1 shows Nari our blue narwhal, Figure 4.2 shows Pearl our violet narwhal, and Figure 4.3 shows the puppets used for Nari and Pearl.

![Figure 4.1 Nari Stuffed Animal (blue)](image1)

**Figure 4.1** Nari Stuffed Animal (blue)

![Figure 4.2 Pearl Stuffed Animal (violet)](image2)

**Figure 4.2** Pearl Stuffed Animal (violet)
The third book used for directional prepositions, *My Adventure*, did not use a puppet, but allowed students to draw a representation of themselves playing in the book. Having a personal depiction was another way to engage in play with peers. Sharing pictures, acting out the items in the book, and engaging in conversation to discuss how and where to draw the picture were part of the play when engaging in small group extended instruction.

Extended instruction for directional prepositions allowed students to engage with the puppets and the researcher, as well as peers in the group to play with the puppets and act out their own placement within the text. During small-group instruction, students often made comments indicating the type of fun they were having. Abilene commented during one session “I like this book because I can make Pearl do things.” Her sentiment was echoed by her ELL peers in the group. In another recorded session of extended instruction with directional prepositions, Lawrence said, “I like it at the end when they (Nari the book’s character) splash.” Bull stated that he “had fun drawing the pictures.” When asked in the small-group setting if students were having fun playing with their books and puppets, each student agreed that the books and puppets were fun with Edward stating “I wish I could play all day.” In each of the small-groups, all students were
clearly having fun. These were typical comments in the small-group setting indicating students had fun with the learning tasks and enjoyed the interactive use of the puppets as well as being able to use themselves as a “live” puppet to act out their own adventure. It was fun both to play and learn the vocabulary.

Because of the impending closures due to COVID-19, instead of small-group games to practice rhyme, I played games one-on-one with the students. The ELL students engaged in a rhyme matching game that was both visual and verbal. The observations recorded in my journal reflected that students did not mind the change. Bull actively smiled when it was his turn to play, stating “It’s fun to be with the teacher.” Abilene and Ruth Ann also commented on how fun it was to be able to play a game with the teacher. Lucius, who thrived on individual attention, ignored the independent work at his space to constantly look to see when it would be his turn to play. When it was his turn, he nearly fell because he was trying to move so quickly to get to the game with me. This enthusiasm was partly due to his desire for attention, but partly because his perception of being with the teacher as a fun activity no matter the lesson. Lucius commented that the one-on-one game was “better” because he got to play with the teacher.

Once each student had an opportunity to play with me, they received sets of cards to play with peers. When playing with peers, smiles and laughs observed in the classroom indicated that the game was fun. While this game did not have the same playful interaction as the puppets for directional prepositions, students still said that they had fun and enjoyed the interactive activity.
During opportunities for independent play for both rhyme and directional prepositions I recorded and observed students continuing to have fun. Students were often observed talking to their directional preposition puppets in whispers. Susanna in particular would talk quietly to herself while playing with the puppet. While I could not hear her words, the smile on her face indicated the activity was fun. During weekly fourth-grade book buddies, students continued to engage with their directional preposition books. All students were proud of their books and read the new book each week to the older students showing what the puppet could do and their ability to read a memorized text. There was never a shortage of smiles. The fourth graders enjoyed the role of “playing teacher” while the kindergarten students enjoyed showing their books, puppets, and what they learned. A sea of smiles while engaging with the intervention was further evidence that the vocabulary interventions were fun for the students.

The same level of fun was observed when the students played “Who is Bob?” with the fourth-grade buddies. It was enjoyable to make up rhyming words. Each kindergarten student wanted a turn to be the “Bob” because this answer was always silly and did not rhyme with the other words. This ability to be silly and laugh showed that playing the game was an enjoyable experience with peers and with older students.

The collected qualitative data suggests the students perceived the instructional interventions of embedded instruction and extended instruction integrated with peer play as fun and engaging. Having fun was a consistent theme during all parts of the intervention.

Engagement. While fun was the dominating theme, the second consistent theme of engagement during independent play was of particular interest to me. My journal
notes frequently reflected on the students, both English-only and ELL, choosing to continue to engage with the puppets from the directional preposition intervention during independent play and choice times. With fourth-grade book buddies, students read their self-created puppet books as part of the weekly visits, but kindergarten students chose to continue with these activities even after other choices became available. Ernest, Abilene, Nellie, Lawrence, Bull, and Lucius chose to remain engaged with the puppet books instead of making another reading choice.

Students were also observed actively choosing to engage with their puppet books during quiet time after lunch and during center time. Susanna and Ernest were very particular with their puppet books and often chose to read and play with their directional preposition puppets. Jangles would bring his puppets to the block center and have them actively engage with his building creations. Lawrence and Martin would play with their puppets without the book and have the puppets move to different parts of the classroom. Both engaged in quiet self-talk with the puppet as they made this choice. Having students remain actively engaged with the puppets during independent play indicated to me that the intervention was engaging and meaningful. While it is unclear how this continued engagement impacted the growth of vocabulary understanding, the continued engagement with the puppets suggests play was an important component in the learning process. By continuing the engagement independently, with the puppets in particular, students seemed to independently scaffold their own learning and build independent connections within their own internal thinking. The self-talk seemed indicative of independent learning.
I also observed active independent engagement of the rhyme intervention. Susanna liked saying words to friends at her table to see if they could make a word that rhymed. Students played the “Who is Bob?” game at their tables as they worked on other assignments. In the kitchen center, Abilene tried to find food names that rhymed. With fourth-grade buddies, students played the “Who is Bob? game and a rhyme matching game, with Bryce, Martin, and Ruth Ann continuing to choose to play even after other choices were available. While there was less time to observe independent engagement in rhyme activities due to the COVID-19 school closures, students still made the choice to engage independently in rhyming activities.

Kindergarten ELL students found the vocabulary intervention fun, liked the interactive activities, and chose to remain engaged in the activities during independent play during the action research period. The themes from qualitative data suggests the perceptions of students were positive during both the rhyme and direction preposition interventions. This may indicate that a positive feeling toward learning during play impacted the overall growth in both interventions.

The qualitative findings suggest that engagement and fun increase the vocabulary interactions students have with the vocabulary. With repeated practice students were able to have a deeper understanding of both directional prepositions and rhyming words. Repeated practice of vocabulary also increased the confidence of ELLs to engage in conversations and practice the language. Building that confidence has the potential to set the stage for future academic growth as well as improved reading comprehension. By providing that confidence through a culturally responsive classroom and teaching
practice, ELLs, a marginalized population, are supported through vocabulary understanding.

**Triangulation of Findings**

Triangulation is a method for checking validity by comparing several data sources (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) and serves as “a powerful technique for establishing qualitative credibility” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 68). By triangulating the qualitative and quantitative findings, the researcher can examine the depth of these findings and determine the value of the results not only for the students, but to plan for further action.

Kindergarten is a year of milestones in growth. As a kindergarten teacher, I witness students entering the classroom for the first time, apprehensive about their new surroundings, fearful of the new school environment, and missing the comforts of home. Edward was a student who cried frequently when entering kindergarten, while Lawrence barely spoke. To have both students not only show quantitative academic growth on the given pretests and posttests for direction prepositions and rhyme (Tables 4.3 & 4.5), but also indicate in the qualitative findings that they were having fun and enjoyed the learning process is a milestone that cannot be overstated. Both boys began the year unsure of themselves as students, and three-quarters of the way through the year were confident students active in their own learning with opinions about the learning process. While these are just two examples, this suggests a connection between the positive perception of the intervention and the vocabulary instruction integrated with play.

Further analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative suggests Lawrence and Edward were not alone in the magnitude of academic growth, as well as enjoying the learning process. Lucius, a non-English speaker loved the times he was able to play,
particularly when the play was with the teacher. His pretest and posttest data for directional prepositions (Table 4.3) improved 5 points, while his rhyme score improved 6 points (Table 4.5). Having fun during the learning process may have been a motivating factor that impacted his academic gains. Given that his growth in directional prepositions was so substantial, it is possible his growth in rhyming words may have been more substantial had the intervention continued and had schools not been forced to close.

Looking at the pre and posttest data for directional prepositions (Table 4.3) and rhyming words (Table 4.5), all ELL kindergarten students either maintained vocabulary understanding or made growth. Using the qualitative data gathered about student perceptions of the activities, there is a suggested relationship between the positive attitude toward learning vocabulary during the intervention and the quantitative growth students made. If the learning had not been fun and engaging, students may have been less apt to participate, therefore impacting the learning gains. Being excited about the learning process, as students indicated in small groups and as individuals during independent play, indicates that play and fun are pieces that cannot be overlooked in the learning process.

In a recent study designed to explore the relationship of play and literacy instruction in kindergarten, standardized test data indicated students exposed to play-based literacy activities showed statistically significant improvement in literacy scores (Cavanaugh, Clemence, Teale, Rule, & Montgomery, 2017). Added benefits of play as part of the instruction included “development of student story telling skills, application of new vocabulary, and recurring practice of phonemic and phonics” (p. 842). The study went further to recommend that “play-based literacy opportunities” (p. 842) should be
part of any literacy curriculum for early childhood classrooms. The findings in the current action research study similarly suggest the value of play in the classroom in terms of learning gains as well as learning engagement and learning enjoyment.

According to Piaget, “children form ideas from their direct experience in life” (Mooney, 2013, p. 86). By creating direct experience with play, the participants in the current study of a vocabulary intervention with kindergarten ELLs were able to build cognitive connections with the expected vocabulary: directional prepositions and rhyming words. The NAEYC (2009) has also determined that play in the classroom should be part of any instructional program for young children. Both the qualitative and quantitative data collected from the current study suggests students were able to build vocabulary knowledge while having a positive learning experience through play. By engaging in a play-based intervention during embedded instruction and extended instruction while also facilitating independent play with the targeted vocabulary words, students demonstrated academic growth and pleasure in the learning process.

Having findings that suggest the value of play in improving vocabulary acquisition is important, but because these students were ELLs in kindergarten there is more depth to the findings than just the positive impact of play. For ELL students in particular, conversation and rich language opportunities are essential in developing a second language (Gibbons, 2015). A guiding principle to a strong program for vocabulary instruction should be to “actively engaging students with words in deep and meaningful ways” (Rimbey, McKeown, Beck, & Sandora, 2016, p. 69). Any ELL vocabulary instruction should also include explicit instruction of specific vocabulary (Saunders, Goldenberg, & Marcelletti, 2013). Engaging students in play required
conversation during both the embedded and the extended instruction period. All students benefited from the play during the embedded instruction. Extended instruction specifically targeted ELLs with an intervention integrated with peer play. Both the embedded instruction and the extended instruction provided for meaningful use of the language. Play was the additional push that allowed students to have rich and authentic experiences with the vocabulary.

ELLs also began to use and apply the language on their own. By using the English language independently, learners are able to process language with more depth of understanding (Gibbons, 2015). Susanna’s self-talk with her puppet is an example of how play enhances the opportunity for ELLs to engage in language with themselves. In addition, the opportunities to engage in play during play-based centers further encouraged the use of the vocabulary through play. Because students showed so much enjoyment with the play-based activities, they freely choose to work with the vocabulary, as Ernest did when choosing his puppets during after lunch quiet time. Engaging with fourth-grade buddies was an additional play centered time for ELLs and allowed each student to practice vocabulary in language building conversation with others. Extending that play to include cross-aged peers for ELLs impacts vocabulary growth (Silverman et al., 2017). Having multiple opportunities to play beyond the extended instruction supported the use of the vocabulary in the classroom.

Each of these talking experiences built around the desired vocabulary goal, modeled in both the embedded and extended instruction contexts and facilitated within the developmentally appropriate use of play provided ELL kindergarten students with the rich language experiences necessary for vocabulary. Previous research indicates the
importance of play in the curriculum and student academic growth (Christakis, 2016; NAEYC, 2009; Mooney, 2009; Piaget, 1923, 2002; Weisberg, Pasek, & Golikoff, 2013). Building a strong vocabulary in the early grades is important for future academic success (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). For ELL students a strong vocabulary knowledge base is even more critical (Graves, 2016). Building vocabulary knowledge can set the foundation for students as they move forward through their academic careers. It is my assertion that the findings in both the qualitative and quantitative data suggest the importance of play when creating a vocabulary intervention in kindergarten particularly for ELL students. Play provides a fun way to learn, allows for students to develop conversations using the vocabulary within the second language, and builds confidence in language usage.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the two vocabulary interventions seemed to have had an impact on the vocabulary acquisition of my kindergarten ELL students. With gains between the pre and posttest, there is evidence of increased understanding of both directional prepositions and rhyming words. The largest gains were in the directional preposition intervention. This is perhaps because the rhyme intervention was interrupted by school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The perceptions of ELL kindergarten students during the targeted vocabulary intervention were also observed as positive. This might suggest a relationship that learning through play supports learning in the classroom. The implications of these findings with a targeted action plan will be discussed in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Kindergarten is a unique grade level. It is typically the first experience students have within a traditional school model. Community building and socialization are learning experiences a typical child is expected to receive in kindergarten. Within those shared experiences comes communication and use of vocabulary. For kindergarten students in general and ELLs in particular who enter school with a variety of language experiences and skills (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Gibbons, 2015), fostering an environment that supports vocabulary acquisition while meeting the developmental needs of the learner has been the focus of this research in this instrumental grade. To support the need for both quality and developmentally appropriate vocabulary instruction, this action research has specifically targeted vocabulary intervention and peer play for ELLs in a kindergarten setting. Vocabulary acquisition of directional prepositions and rhyming words were the two targeted vocabulary skills with interventions to include peer play.

The questions guiding this research were:

1. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the acquisition of directional prepositions for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?

2. What impact does a targeted vocabulary intervention using extended instruction integrated with peer play have on the identification of rhyming words for ELLs in a kindergarten setting?
3. What are the perceptions of kindergarten students who experience targeted vocabulary interventions integrated with peer play?

Rhyme and directional prepositions were chosen as the vocabulary skills for this research. In my kindergarten classroom, ELLs were not making the same progress with vocabulary development for rhyme and directional prepositions when compared to their English-only peers. In meeting with the school’s ELL teacher, she confirmed that in her experiences as an ELL instructor, rhyme and directional prepositions are typically very challenging for ELLs. Because this was a deficit within the research environment, I chose to investigate methods to improve vocabulary acquisition for ELL students. My goal from this adjustment to classroom practices was to build a teaching practice that provides equal access to learning for our suburban district’s growing ELL population.

The research is both clear and muddy when it comes to vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary instruction. Vocabulary is important for students to achieve success within an academic setting, but there is no one clear method for vocabulary instruction that meets the needs of all learners. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, vocabulary instruction is an embedded part of the standard curriculum (Graves, 2016). Mastery and understanding of content vocabulary are important for all students, but are key components for ELLs’ present and future academic success (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017). Past studies have shown a direct correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, but there is less understanding of how to best apply vocabulary interventions or even what vocabulary to choose to impact reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Wright & Cervetti, 2017). Even the National Reading Panel (2000) finds no best practice in vocabulary instruction, with
research going back as far as 1979. With no clear definition of the term academic vocabulary or what constitutes best practice, designing interventions for students is a complex process (Baumann & Graves, 2010). For students whose first language is not English, vocabulary acquisition and instruction are even more complex (Gibbons, 2015). Researchers in the fields of vocabulary instruction and in particular vocabulary instruction for ELLs (Beck et al., 2013; Gibbons, 2015; Graves, 2016; Graves et al., 2013; Voight, et al., 2013; Zacarian & Haynes, 2012) have recognized the importance of vocabulary instruction, the value it has for all students and in particular ELLs, and multiple methods of vocabulary instruction, however, there is a research gap to determine what practices are best for ELLs in a kindergarten environment. My research does not attempt to fill that gap, but to add to the conversation of vocabulary instruction.

As with vocabulary instruction, there is also a gap in understanding what constitutes play. With experiences being essential for learning, the need for play-based learning is clearly demonstrated when creating a balanced pedagogical approach to instruction that includes play (Pyle et al., 2018). The academic demands of the classroom however, make finding a time to play difficult with the high expectations of academic learning. Piaget’s “American question” (Almon & Miller, 2011, p. 1) that pits academics against play demonstrates that there is no one clear philosophy of how to address play in American classrooms. With play and vocabulary falling into the nebulous realm of personal belief and personal understanding, it is important to look at how teachers are trained to address both the need for academic content vocabulary and play to intersect for young learners. It is my hope that this research helps those in teaching training programs
to design instruction for new teachers that addresses both the need for children to play
and the need to specifically address content vocabulary instruction.

I designed vocabulary interventions to address rhyme and directional prepositions,
two key components of kindergarten vocabulary (ELA, 2019). The vocabulary
intervention was designed to address the vocabulary deficit, while engaging the natural
inclination of young children to learn through play (Piaget, 1923, 2002). Each
intervention was divided into three parts: embedded instruction, targeted play-based
extended instruction, and integrated play during classroom play centers. During each part
of the intervention, students were able to engage with peers to practice and extend the
vocabulary instruction. Embedded instruction was designed for the entire class.
Extended instruction was conducted in small groups for ELLs as well as English-only
students who were struggling with the concept. The data for the English-only students
were not included in the study. Play centers were also designed for all students to
practice the vocabulary skills. Play was both teacher directed and student directed. As
the teacher, I placed the games and books in centers to allow students to continue to
engage with the vocabulary and students independently applied their learning in a play-
based setting.

Prior to the start of the intervention, I administered a pretest to determine
students’ current knowledge of rhyme and directional prepositions. After the
intervention, I administered a posttest to determine if the intervention impacted students’
learning. The results of the data showed that students made growth by participating in
the intervention for both directional prepositions and rhyme. Even with the unexpected
school closures due to COVID-19 that changed the interventions for rhyming words,
students still showed growth. While all of the ELL students improved, the change for Lucius was the most meaningful for me as a researcher. He entered kindergarten with no English comprehension or any ability to communicate in English. To see his test scores improve from a pretest score of 1 to a posttest score of 6 out of eight questions for directional prepositions and from a pretest score of 1 to a posttest score of 7 out of fifteen for rhyming words demonstrates that in the research setting the intervention might have had an impact on learning for the neediest of the ELLs in my class.

The intervention was targeted and specific to rhyme and directional prepositions, but the overall model of my classroom was / is embedded instruction for all, targeted instruction to meet individual student academic needs, and play integrated in the learning process. Given the positive overall results of the vocabulary interventions, embedded instruction, targeted extended instruction, and integration of peer play met the learning needs of ELLs within the research setting. This method of vocabulary instruction merits further exploration. I will discuss how the results from the research will inform my practice in an action plan, discuss implications for practice outside of the research setting, and suggest further research that can support vocabulary acquisition for ELLs.

**Action Plan**

Advantages of action research include the ability of teachers to improve educational practice, systematically analyze problems, and use the results to improve teaching techniques (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The nature of action research requires that the researcher develop a plan to address the perceived problem within the research environment (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Through a critical lens the researcher must look carefully at the collected data to determine what can be done to improve conditions to
address the problem. Such “critical reflection of the presented evidence” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 298) is integral to the action research process and an essential last step to improve conditions within the research setting. The last step for me as a researcher is to develop an action plan to improve my practice as a teacher, as well as improve the learning environment for the ELLs in the district where I work.

My research indicates that interactive peer play and play-based learning support vocabulary growth for ELLs when teaching the vocabulary concepts of rhyme and directional prepositions. My core belief as a teacher is to have play and social interaction at the center of learning in a kindergarten classroom. That core belief and the results of my research are being challenged by a virus that is forcing students into virtual instruction or a radically different in-person model of instruction. Core tenets of kindergarten such as sharing, working together, and play cannot flourish in the way it has in the past due to new COVID-19 protocols in our school building and across the world. Items like crayons and pencils cannot be shared, all toys have been put away, and children will not be able to work together with manipulatives, puzzles, blocks, games, or share books in the classroom library. Virtual students will not even have access to the classroom. As a researcher, I am challenged with reworking what I have found through research to be good practice in the classroom and making it fit into a COVID-19 protocol school day. However, bumps in the road do not preclude action. My action plan will take into consideration the impact of COVID-19, as well as looking to a future where children will get to interact and play as they did pre-pandemic.

The first part of my action plan will build on the work of teaching directional prepositions and rhyming words within the kindergarten classroom under typical
circumstances. I have found that what I have done in the classroom works and works well. However, I would like to make some small changes to the timing of the instruction. Instead of embedded instruction of the discreet skills of directional propositions and rhyme in the second semester, I would like to teach both skills within the first semester. By introducing the skills earlier in the school year, I can give students more time to practice the vocabulary in the classroom. There would also be more opportunities to have the extended instruction to reinforce the vocabulary skills, particularly for students like Lucius who entered kindergarten as a non-English speaker. Furthermore, by teaching directional prepositions and rhyme earlier in the school year, I could give students more play experience to apply their newly acquired vocabulary skills. Additional practice earlier in the school year may also support students in reaching mastery by the end of the academic year, particularly students with limited English. By setting up extended instruction vocabulary groups earlier in the year, I will also have the ability to use these small groups to introduce play with additional content vocabulary to support learning.

The second part of my action plan specifically relates to teaching directional prepositions and rhyme through virtual instruction. Our district is currently offering two models of instruction for kindergarten: virtual half-day learning only or an in-person half day program. The half-day model is two-and-a-half hours a day of instruction with limited time to play. Since the state of Ohio does not mandate the kindergarten programs be offered full time (Kindergarten, 2020), our team had more flexibility than other grade levels for required contact time between teachers and students. Kindergarten students can attend class every day for half-day instruction in a socially distanced environment if local conditions are safe for instruction or learn virtually from home. For the 20-21 school
year, I will be the virtual kindergarten teacher, having both a morning section of kindergarten and an afternoon section. Knowing the value of embedded instruction, extended instruction, and the integration of peer play as part of the instruction for rhyme and directional prepositions, I am challenged to create a play-based environment through a screen. After only one week of instruction, I recognize that this will not be easy.

For embedded instruction of directional preposition and rhyme, I plan to teach short lessons live at the end of our morning Google Meets. I also will create videos of me reading the selected vocabulary texts *Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1969) and *Rhyming Dust Bunnies* (Thomas, 2009). Students will be able to access these videos at home to reinforce the embedded instruction. For extended instruction, I will meet with small groups of students via a Google Meet to target directional prepositions and rhyme. In these Google Meets, I will integrate social interaction and play by creating activities that are better suited to a screen format.

Directional prepositions will need instructional adjustments. I cannot guarantee that all families will be able to print the texts or be able to come to the school for a pick-up of paper pencil supplies. Instead of using the paper books that were used for the directional preposition intervention, I will have the students bring a stuffed animal or a favorite toy to the Google Meet. I will model directional prepositions with Nari and Pearl, while students mimic my actions with their own stuffed animals. As a concluding part of the Google Meet, students will draw a picture of their toy modeling the action of the preposition. I will teach them how to label their picture with a sentence that describes the action of the preposition, by modeling with my own drawings of Nari and Pearl in the
present mode of a Google Meet. After our small-group sessions, students will be encouraged to play at home with a caregiver or a sibling to practice their prepositions.

Rhyming games will be easier to play online with small groups. We will be able to play “Who is Bob?” in a virtual format in a similar way that we did in person. The biggest difference will be instead of guessing who is the “Bob,” students will know in advance, but it should be as fun online as it was in the classroom. Instead of a game of concentration or seeing the words, students will be able to give a word while other students think of a word to rhyme. For example, I will model by saying a word like “hat” and respond to myself with “cat,” a rhyming word. Students will be both the creator of the rhyming word and the responder with a word that rhymes. I will need to set specific ground rules for this game so the words are simple and students are able to feel confident in creating rhyme. Just as I did in the spring, I can add books by Dr. Suess, as well as poetry to further illustrate the vocabulary skill of rhyme. After our small-group sessions, students will be encouraged to play at home with a caregiver or a sibling to practice rhyming.

As part of a virtual curriculum to teach rhyme and directional prepositions, it will be important for parents to understand that play at home is valuable. Currently, I have several parents who believe that paper pencil activities are the only way to learn. I will create a series of video lessons for parents on how to encourage play at home and why it is important for academic growth. For parents who don’t speak English, I will create a Google Document and use Google Translate to explain how play at home using the directional prepositions and rhyme will be important for the learning process. I will also build a play center time into the classroom as part of the school day. Even with students
at home, they can engage in the social aspects of play with siblings, and older adults. Even time playing on their own with self-talk will be encouraged. Talking to and with a stuffed animal or pet can be additional ways for students at home to practice the vocabulary and engage in the English language.

The third part of my action plan will be viable in both a COVID-19 influenced educational environment as well as in an educational environment not influenced by a pandemic. The key component is communicating with parents who do not speak English in order to support their children at home and with navigation of school information and culture. The closure of schools opened wide the lack of support and disparities in education for a variety of students, including ELLs (Rani, 2020). Interviewing parents trying to support children learning at home, Rani (2020) learned that parents who did not have English as their first language struggled with helping students learning at home with technology, lessons, and directions. When school closed, I was fortunate that I had all of my parents using an application that allowed them to translate all of my messages into their native language. This helped parents understand how to work on school at home. I spent as much of my time in the spring of 2020 during the school closure supporting parents, as I did creating online instruction for students. However, before ever meeting my students and connecting parents to a translating application for the 20-21 school year, dozens of emails and surveys were sent to parents. All of those messages were only in English.

Navigating a new environment is a challenge for us all, whether it be a new job or learning a new skill. Trying to navigate something new in a language that you do not understand has to be incredibly frustrating. Our district has teacher apps to communicate
and translate for parents, a phone translating service, Google Translate, and translators available for parent conferences, but no mass communication for registration, school events, and general school information is translated. These communications are only available in English. Some districts have the resources to offer translating services in multiple languages due to their population size and the larger population of ELLs (Rani, 2020). Our district is small, only about 3400 students, and the resources to translate all district-wide communications into multiple languages is expensive and time consuming. Arabic, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Korean, and two different Indian dialects were just a few of the languages represented in my classroom for the 19-20 school year. Having every district communication translated into a variety of languages is not feasible for our district to manage. Yet, in order to effectively communicate with our small, but growing ELL population it is important that families have the information they need for their children to be successful in school.

As part of the communication piece of my action plan, I would like to build our community outreach network to connect to a variety of local cultural and ethnic groups in order to help with translation. The Arabic speaking population is growing in our region. One example of an outreach network to cultivate will be to support ELLs who speak Arabic. At the beginning of the 20-21 school year, the Westside Muslim Center offered a training and support seminar via video conference to help parents navigate Google Classroom. The training was offered in both Arabic and English. I was able to share this with my current students. It is connections like these that I would like to cultivate and build to help our ELLs and the parents of our ELLs. I plan to work with the ELL teacher, the principal, and the curriculum director to make connections with community groups to
provide the translating skills, as well as the support that is needed as parents learn about the particular expectations within our school district.

The fourth part of my action plan involves social justice. Our community is still majority white. Unfortunately, there is a vocal part of the population that is racist. I truly believe that parents love their children and want what is best for them. It is on the very rare occasion that I have encountered a parent who did not care about the well-being of their child regardless of cultural background or language. Terms like “those people” and “what did you expect from someone like that” are still phrases I hear in the community and within the building among staff members. These hurtful phrases come from a place of misunderstanding and misinformation. A lot of the misunderstanding, I believe, goes back to the third part of my action plan of communication. We cannot expect understanding of societal norms in a public school, if the norms are not provided. It is an unreasonable expectation for parents to follow directions if the directions are not given to them in a language they understand.

Empathy, compassion, and cultural education need to be part of professional development for staff. I plan on working with the ELL teacher, principal, and curriculum director to develop professional development that teaches all three. My hope is that by connecting with cultural outreach groups, they will be able to offer support in teaching about the variety of cultures represented in our building. Creating an understanding of the cultures and languages within our building can be the first step in creating empathy and compassion for members of the community and our students.

Integrating play in the classroom is a natural part of my instruction in kindergarten, but with the data from my research, I would like to target specific skills
through play. As the final part of my action plan I will share the results of my research with my kindergarten team and the ELL teacher. As a team we have a strong play-based philosophy. We all believe that conversations, whether self-talk or peer interaction support our students’ learning. We see the value of this socialization in the classroom each day through our lived experiences. By sharing the results, I hope we can work together to build and create games and activities that support not only directional prepositions and rhyme, but also other discrete vocabulary skills, reading skills, and writing skills with play. The play-based activities that we develop can be used for targeted small groups and also applied to independent play.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Typical Classroom Learning</strong></th>
<th><strong>Action Plan</strong></th>
<th><strong>Virtual Learning</strong></th>
<th><strong>Action Plan</strong></th>
<th><strong>Social Justice</strong></th>
<th><strong>Action Plan</strong></th>
<th><strong>Communication</strong></th>
<th><strong>Action Plan</strong></th>
<th><strong>Kindergarten Team</strong></th>
<th><strong>Action Plan</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teach directional prepositions during the first semester</td>
<td>Teach rhyme during the first semester</td>
<td>Allow for more practice with vocabulary skill</td>
<td>Embedded and extended instruction on Google Meets</td>
<td>Directional Prepositions</td>
<td>Videos to support parents at home about the importance of play</td>
<td>Community outreach partnerships to support in translating parent communications</td>
<td>Professional development for empathy and cultural understanding</td>
<td>Share Results of research with Kindergarten Team and ELL teacher</td>
<td>Collaborate to create future play-based vocabulary interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image7" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image8" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image9" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image10" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.1 Action Plan Summary**
The results of my research will help me improve my practice and the lived educational experiences of my students. My research shows the value of embedded instruction, extended instruction, and integrated learning with peer play. I truly believe that type of instruction not only has value for ELLs, but also for all students. As one of the virtual teachers in kindergarten, I plan to determine how to deliver embedded instruction, extended instruction and peer play in a virtual format. From my lived experiences as a teacher over the course of the 2020-21 school year, I hope to find new ways to integrate play with instruction for virtual learners and to develop more play-based vocabulary activities for the day students are able to return to school and engage in interactive play.

**Implications for Practice**

This action research has concluded that vocabulary instruction for ELLs in kindergarten that includes whole-class embedded instruction and small-group extended instruction with integrated peer play as part of the instruction of directional prepositions and rhyming words benefited the student participants. All students made growth during the intervention, showing improvements of vocabulary usage and application. Given the success of this instructional strategy, under normal school conditions, this model for vocabulary instruction would seem to be a model to apply in all kindergarten classrooms in the research environment. Unfortunately, what constitutes play is currently being redefined by COVID-19 safety protocols. Currently in our school, children are no longer able to share items, be in close contact, or have interactive peer experiences when present for in-person instruction. There can be no small-group instruction and no peer play. For students learning at home in an online format, there is no clear definition of peer play and
small groups present technological challenges for kindergarten students. COVID-19 has changed the learning environment for all students in the research setting. For that reason, the data collected from this action research cannot be applied as intended for the upcoming 2020-21 school year.

However, the research still has value. The data demonstrates success in the vocabulary instructional strategies. The interventions worked. The children were successful, and demonstrated academic gains. It is, therefore, my intent to find new ways to apply these vocabulary instructional strategies not only in a virtual learning space, but also in classrooms where social distancing policies prevent play, small groups, and sharing. I know, based on the data, what works for students in the research environment under normal conditions. I now need to get creative to find ways to integrate play in a virtual format so my students and other ELL students within our school can continue to make the academic progress necessary for future school success.

**Implications for Further Research**

Action research by its nature is constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As professionals, we “are capable of making informed decisions” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 7) based on the information we gather from our research. The data from my research showed that students made academic growth with the applied interventions of embedded instruction and extended instruction integrated with peer play. The results of this research will be important for me to improve my own practice in the research setting. Further research to consider is replicating the current research to make it generalizable to a larger setting, examining effective communication practices between districts and ELL populations when resources
are scarce and the ELL population is small, and investigating effective play-based instruction in a virtual format.

The success of my students is just a small sample of the overall ELL population. The results of my research cannot be generalized to the population of ELLs as a whole. Because my students were so successful, it is important to learn the efficacy of these instructional practices in other school settings. My research setting is a suburban environment. Is the same strategy for vocabulary interventions successful in a rural or an urban setting? Lucius was the only complete non-English speaker when entering kindergarten. How effective is the intervention for students like Lucius? Another research item to consider when replicating the study is the home language of the student? With so many languages represented in my class, I did not find it was a factor in my research. In schools where there is one dominant second language, does that change the impact of the intervention? Generalizability is important. Further research should be completed in variety of kindergarten settings to determine if the results can be replicated.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the communication challenges schools face when parents speak a language other than English (Rani, 2020). The communication challenges were evident in my district, particularly as the district made plans for opening school for the 20-21 school year. What are the best ways to communicate with parents of ELLs? Is there an effective strategy that bridges cultural and ethnic barriers that districts may face when communicating with immigrants and non-native English speakers? What strategies have other districts found to be the most successful? Questions like these can be answered through a meta-analysis of what strategies large, medium, and small districts employ to effectively communicate with the parents of ELLs.
Finally, further research can address how play is best conducted in a virtual format. With the prevalence of online school being offered during the pandemic school year, what are research-based practices that allow for small children to have the social and play-based interactions that are part of what it means to be in kindergarten? How can kindergarten students effectively communicate and play on a flat screen? Discovering what works well for small children in this new era of on-line schooling might support not only social and emotional growth of students, but also create the peer-based play interactions that support learning.

Summary

As a kindergarten teacher I see the impact we, as educators, have in starting the schooling process and beginning a child’s path to academic and social success. What is best for our youngest learners is a vibrant play-based environment grounded in constructivist theories of active academic engagement, socialization, and play planned by a teacher. However, creating a classroom environment that allows for play and meets the needs of all learners can be challenging. Kindergarten students do not enter the classroom knowing how to “do school.” Our students are not initially independent learners. Because our students cannot read and require significant guidance from adults, teachers must build on the natural curiosity and playful nature of the learner while also guiding that learner to meet academic targets. Young students are also naturally social, interacting naturally in a play-based setting. Using the natural inclination of the child can support learning in the classroom.

Vocabulary is an important piece of the learning puzzle for kindergarten students in general and ELLs in particular. Having a strong base of vocabulary knowledge is a
predictor of future academic success. For this reason, developing strategies to support vocabulary learning in the classroom should be an essential part of instruction. The instruction should be designed to teach targeted vocabulary goals, meet individual needs, and meet the developmental needs of the learner. This action research study demonstrates success for ELLs when taught using embedded instruction, extended instruction, and integrating instruction with peer play. The research design should be considered as a starting point when developing models for vocabulary instruction in other kindergarten environments with an ELL population.

Ultimately, our goal as educators is to have meaningful instruction that meets the needs of our learners. The interventions developed as part of this research can begin the discussion of providing the best academic support in a challenging environment. Making the interventions used in this action research practical and effective in a new COVID-19 school year, is the next goal in the cyclical action research process.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

DIRECTIONAL PREPOSITION ASSESSMENT

Student # __________________

Place a teddy bear counter, a cup, and a block in front of the student. Ask the student to demonstrate the following prepositions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directional Prepositions</th>
<th>Pre assessment Date: ______</th>
<th>Post assessment Date: ______</th>
<th>X weeks Date: ______</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>in</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>above</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>below</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>beside</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>in front of</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>behind</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>between</strong> the cup and the block.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place the teddy bear <strong>out of</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move the teddy bear <strong>around</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Move the teddy bear <strong>across</strong> the cup.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total correct</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

RHYME ASSESSMENT

Student # __________________

Give the student an oral example of rhyme.

Say: Cat rhymes with hat because the two words have the same ending sound.
Student will orally identify words that rhyme by listening to word pairs.

Say: Do these words rhyme?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word Pairs</th>
<th>Pre assessment Date:</th>
<th>Post assessment Date:</th>
<th>X weeks Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bug/rug</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man/fan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shoe/blue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>girl/green</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dog/deer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ship/clip</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>funny/bunny</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cake/carrot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>night/light</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pot/ring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total correct

Student generated rhyme.

Say: Now you will create a rhyme with a given word. An example might be if I say “mat” you might say “cat”.

Note: Nonsense words that rhyme are acceptable responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Given word</th>
<th>Pre assessment Response Date:</th>
<th>Post assessment Response Date:</th>
<th>X weeks Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>back</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pig</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total correct
APPENDIX C

DIRECTIONAL PREPOSITION BOOKS UNILLUSTRATED

Note: The appendix below is designed to be reproduced in the format that it has been created. Each page is a duplicate of the same sentence. Copy the books. Staple along the left margin of each text. When pages are copied and stapled, cut the stack in half. Students will then have a book to use and illustrate independently.
Nari’s
Adventure
by:_________

Nari’s
Adventure
by:_________
Nari dives in the water.
Nari swims around seaweed.
Nari swims beside a sea turtle.
Nari swims above the jellyfish.
Nari swims below the shark.

Nari swims below the shark.
Nari swims in front of Pearl.
Nari swims behind the tuna.
Nari swims across the sea.
Nari swims between the boat and the land.

Nari swims between the boat and the land.
Nari jumps out to splash!

Nari jumps out to splash!
Pearl’s Adventure
by:__________

Pearl’s Adventure
by:__________
Pearl dives in the water.

Pearl dives in the water.
Pearl swims around seaweed.
Pearl swims beside a sea turtle.
Pearl swims above the jellyfish.
Pearl swims below the shark.
Pearl swims in front of Nari.
Pearl swims behind the tuna.
Pearl swims across the sea.
Pearl swims between the boat and the land.

Pearl swims between the boat and the land.
Pearl jumps out to splash!

Pearl jumps out to splash!
My Adventure
by:__________

My Adventure
by:__________
I walk in the school.

I walk in the school.
I walk around the bookshelves.
I sit beside my friend.
I climb above the ground.
I crawl below the table.
I stand in front of the line.
I jump behind the teacher.
I dance across the room.
I sit between ___________ and ___________.

I sit between ___________ and ___________.

I sit between ___________ and ___________.

I sit between ___________ and ___________.

I sit between ___________ and ___________.
I jump up to say “hello”!

I jump up to say “hello”!
APPENDIX D

RHYMING WORDS FOR RHYMING GAMES

Fun
Run
Bun
Sun
Pet
Get
Set
Met
Bat
Hat
Rat
Cat
Pig
Big
Wig
Dig
Pot
Cot
Not
Bot
Vocabulary Study:

Dear Parent,

As your child’s teacher, Loretta Ayers, I am sending this letter to obtain your formal permission. I am a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum Studies Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and I would like to invite your child to participate. This study is part of my dissertation research.

I am studying vocabulary acquisition of content vocabulary for ELL students. If you decide to have your child participate, your child will participate and be evaluated on their performance on vocabulary measures pertaining to rhyming words and directional prepositions.

All instruction will take place during class time and data will be collected to determine if the instruction practices improve understanding of rhyme and prepositions. Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identity of your child will not be revealed.

Participation, non-participation or withdrawal will not affect your child’s grades in any way.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at X, or through the class dojo.

Thank you for your consideration.

With kind regards,
Loretta Ayers

I ___________________________ give permission for my child ___________________ to participate in a vocabulary study to be conducted by Loretta Ayers.

Parent or Guardian Signature