According to Jim Cummins in Baker (2006), everyday conversational language could be acquired in two years while the more complex language abilities associated with background knowledge, enhances oral expression and strengthens literacy skills. The acquisition of these skills turn account for school success (Tong et al., 2008). Immersing students in vocabulary supports English proficiency, because it expands a student’s knowledge of the English language. Oral English proficiency is of critical importance, because it is associated with subsequent English literacy skills, which in turn account for future academic success.

Discussions such as those in a classroom or an academic setting help students in early-exit transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs develop a stronger proficiency of the English language. Oral English proficiency is of critical importance, because it is associated with subsequent English literacy skills, which in turn account for future academic success.

Conversations that include academic language allow students to analyze and use words in context. According to Ruston and Schwanenflugel (2010), vocabulary outcomes are improved when discourse is situated in a warm and encouraging setting. When introducing a lesson to students it is important for them to participate and take part in the learning experience allowing students to immerse themselves in the lesson. Including student opinions, feelings, and ideas in lesson discussions shows the learner that his/her opinion is valued and an important part of the learning experience. Learning is not always a linear function it is multifaceted, because topics can take multiple directions without limit and regardless of how complex learning can be the educator scaffolds ideas in lesson discussions shows the learner that his/her opinion is valued and an important part of the learning experience.

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According to Jim Cummins in Baker (2006), everyday conversational language could be acquired in two years while the more complex language abilities associated with background knowledge, enhances oral expression and strengthens literacy skills.
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of vocabulary games and conversations that included new vocabulary words, on story retelling skills of Spanish speaking fourth grade ELLs.

Research Question

How do vocabulary games and conversations in English, following read-alouds, affect a ELL bilingual students’ oral retelling skills?

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that the vocabulary games and conversations, following read-alouds, will positively affect oral story-retelling skills of ELL bi-lingual students.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in the study were four bilingual students who attended a Title 1 school in a low-socioeconomic neighborhood in Texas. A Title 1 program works towards meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in high-poverty schools. The first language (L1) of the four students was Spanish. However, as fourth graders, they were all enrolled in an English language exit program, which by definition, exited them from bi-lingual services, with the intent that they would be capable of completing technical school work in English only, by the end of the fourth grade year.

Based on the Rigby PM Benchmark assessment all four students were reading at first and second grade reading-levels in English. Due to low reading abilities in English, students were struggling with daily reading and writing activities as well as oral expression necessary for success in the fourth grade classroom. Student 1 and Student 3, were Spanish dominant learners, most of their classroom work samples were written in the Spanish language and their basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) language preferences were in Spanish. Student 2 and Student 4 used English and Spanish interchangeably in their daily writing assignments and during conversations. Student 4 was a consistent code switcher which meant that the student had difficulty with speaking in one language without switching and applying vocabulary from another language within academic and informal contexts.

Additional factors contributed to the students’ academic standing. School absences were very common. In addition, students’ attitude was slightly smiling towards recreational and academic reading as shown below. According to the Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude Reading Survey (ERAS) a student’s attitude toward reading is a central factor affecting reading performance (McKenna & Kear, 1990). According to the Texas Education Agency (Texas English Language Learners Portal, 2012), the students in the study were unable to meet any of the proficiencies for English language learners (ELLs) at the fourth grade level. The data from the initial survey are noted in Figure 1. In general, the students were in the middle range of attitudes toward reading, both academic and recreational reading.

Design

The study was a one group pre-test, post-test design. Students were systematically pretested on multiple measures of reading, provided with interventions of games and read-alouds with discussions, and then post-tested. Throughout, informal assessments of students’ vocabulary use were made, the results of which were used to guide subsequent interventions.

Data Sources

Rigby PM Benchmark Kit 1. Rigby PM Benchmark Kit 1 is used by teachers to assess student’s reading abilities using unseen, meaningful texts (Steck-Vaughn, 2003). The PM Benchmark Kit 1 contains paper-based reading records that allow teachers to precisely record what a child says and how a child is performing during the reading assessment. Reading records show an accurate account of the types of strategies students use when sampling, predicting, checking, confirming, and self-correcting while reading (Steck-Vaughn, 2003). The PM Plus books that accompany the reading record monitor children’s control of meaning, language structures, and visual information. In all, the Rigby PM Benchmark Kit offers a quality assessment resource that accurately identifies student’s reading levels, a vehicle for consistent assessment practices, and data for school review, instructional planning, and community feedback (Steck-Vaughn, 2003). This resource was used to attain the students’ previous and current reading levels.

Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis

The Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis is a research-based, classroom-tested assessment published by the International Reading Association (IRA) (McAndrews, 2008) that focuses on the student’s written or oral retelling responses of narrative texts. Students are given credit on correct and partially correct responses for their retelling responses. The analysis forms contain a sequential list of story elements: introduction, plot, theme, and resolution that the students must target and report. The organization of the Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis form helps the assessment administrator or teacher determine whether the students are retelling the story in structural order (characters, setting, theme, events, and resolution) and including relevant story details, such as a description and the names of the main characters. This analysis was used to analyze the English oral retelling abilities following read-aloud discussions.

Graded Reading Words Assessment. The Graded Reading Words Assessment is a research-based, classroom-tested assessment published by the International Reading Association (IRA) (McAndrews, 2008) that focuses on word identification. The purpose of the assessment is to identify which sight words (high-frequency or commonly used words) the student knows in addition to testing the student’s ability to distinguish new words. To appropriately administer the assessment, it is important to begin at least two grade levels below the student’s actual grade. For example, if the student is in fourth grade, the administrator must begin at a second grade level.

Students are given a copy of the reading word list, but for emergent readers, the words must be written on index cards. There are twenty words in each grade reading words section. If students are unable to identify a word, it is marked with a minus sign. Following administration of the assessment, an average is calculated. The assessment results provide graded reading words functioning level: independent equals 18-20 correct words, instructional equals 14-17 correct words, and frustration equals 13 correct words and below. This assessment was used to identify the functioning levels of the students based on grade level.
**Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS).** This Elementary Reading Attitude Survey provides quantitative estimates of two important aspects of children’s attitudes toward reading (McKenna & Kear, 1990). The survey is not a test; it simply helps teachers and interventionists understand and analyze how students feel about recreational and academic reading. To complete the survey, students must be familiarized with the instrument and its purpose. Teachers read the survey questions aloud as the students mark their responses. They can either choose the happiest Garfield (4 points), the mildly upset Garfield (2 points), or the very upset Garfield (1 point). ERAS comes alongside a scoring sheet guide that helps the administrator organize the results and record the recreational, academic, and total scores. The instrument can be used to (a) make possible initial conjecture about the attitudes of specific students, (b) provide a convenient group profile of a class (or a larger unit), or (c) serve as a means of monitoring the attitudinal impact of instructional programs (McKenna & Kear, 1990).

**Interventions**

**Game 1. Connect the Cubes** (Soto-Vazquez, 2014a) required math-link cubes as manipulatives to spell words. Students were required to form the letters in words with the cubes. Using the cubes instead of pencils allows students to take their time forming and choosing the appropriate letters to spell a vocabulary word. Students are encouraged to imagine the word and pronounce its sounds as a spelling strategy. The vocabulary words used for this game came from the read-aloud books. After the students are done spelling a word, they must explain why they chose the letters they did to form their word and, in return, receive tactful feedback. Overall, this game encourages students to strengthen their phonological awareness and to think about spelling patterns.

**Game 2. Guess the Word** (Soto-Vazquez, 2014b) focuses on the spelling of words and is similar to the television game show, Wheel of Fortune, wherein contestants guess the letters in mystery words. A double set of the alphabet was created using index cards which were used to spell the mystery words. The game required cooperative learning interactions that were designed to develop academic language with the intent to increase high-frequency word bank. The high-frequency word bank was drawn from the game, Words in a Row (Soto-Vazquez, 2014c).

**Game 3. Words in a Row** (Soto-Vazquez, 2014c) was designed using four twelve-cup muffin pans and a package of sixty cupcake liners. Each cupcake liner contained a high-frequency word (words were written on the bottom of the cupcake liner using a permanent marker) and placed in each cup of the pan. The words were obtained from the high-frequency words leveled from second to fourth grade Graded Reading Words Assessment tool. The rules of the game are a bit similar to Tic-Tac-Toe: two players take alternate turns completing a row, a column, or a diagonal using X’s and O’s. In order to claim his or her position and place a colored bead in the desired cup, a student must use the word in an appropriate and complete sentence. A game monitor (teacher) observes the game, providing acknowledgement when a marker is appropriately placed and supportive feedback when otherwise.

**Read-Alouds.** In order to expand reading and speaking skills, the students participated in reading narrative/story books aloud in a group (read-alouds). The Monster Who Did My Math by Danny Schnitzlein (2007), Bird by Zetta Elliott (2008), Howway for Wodney Wat by Helen Lester (2002), and Miss Smith’s Incredible Storybook (2005) by Michael Garland were the books used for intentional dialogue read-aloud conversations. The intervention involved reading the book aloud, followed by a discussion about the book, with the intent to include the academic and conversational language. Words included in the games were an important part of the discussions.

**Data Collection**

**Pre-test week.** The first week was dedicated to assessment and determination of levels for the interventions. Each day, a different assessment was administered. On Day 1, reading levels, attitudes towards reading, and academic interests were collected through a series of mediums. The classroom teacher and reading specialist administered the Rigby PM prior to the study, which indicated reading levels. The narrative books for the read-alouds were selected based on Rigby reading levels. On Day 2, the Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude Survey was administered. After results were revealed, students openly talked about their attitudes toward reading. Students revealed their insecurities with discussing read-alouds in front of their classmates. All four sensed that their comments during class discussions were incorrect and cause laughter among peers. On Day 3, each student selected a book he or she enjoyed and had read several times. As each student retold the story of the book, he or she was assessed using the Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis tool. Also on Day 3, the Graded Reading Words Assessment was administered. The creation of the games was based on high-frequency words the students missed in the Graded Reading Words Assessment. Some of the non-missed words and vocabulary found in selected read-aloud books were also included.

**Intervention week I.** On Day 1, the group read aloud and discussed the narrative story, The Monster Who Did My Math by Danny Schnitzlein (2007). Students were able to make text-to-self connections and were encouraged to speak in English. When the story time was over, students spent the last ten minutes practicing vocabulary with the game, Words in a Row. For the last ten minutes, the group finished the read-aloud and discussion on The Monster Who Did My Math by Danny Schnitzlein (2007). On the third day, the four students were individually assessed with the Oral or Written Story Retelling Analysis on their retelling abilities of the aforementioned story. Students were allowed to look at the book before the analysis in order to refresh their memories on the occurrences, main characters, and main idea. After each student completed the retelling, feedback was tactfully expressed, and the interventionist used the results to develop the focus for the next intervention.

**Intervention week II.** On Day 1, students played six matches of the game, Words in a Row. Based on last week’s observation on vocabulary use, students had to work on adding more detail and clarity to their sentences. For example, “I carry my dog” progressed to “I like to carry my dog around the house because she makes me happy”. Next, the four students spent the whole second day on a new narrative story, Bird by Zetta Elliott (2008). During the read-aloud, students made inferences and predictions about the story line based on the images on the front cover and carried out discussions throughout the narrative text. The goal of Day 2 was to expand students’ vocabulary within the discussion. On Day 3, students spent the first twenty minutes on the game Guess the Word. The final ten minutes were spent discussing and finishing Bird by Zetta Elliott (2008). Each student was asked to summarize the text in order to practice his or her English oral proficiency skills.

**Intervention week III.** The first day was spent assessing the student’s oral retelling abilities of Bird by Zetta Elliott (2008), using the Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis. Feedback was immediately given to the students, so that they would have an idea of what they need to improve for the next retelling analysis. For the last ten minutes, they played Connect the Cubes and practiced spelling words from the book, Bird by Zetta Elliott (2008). On Day 2, the book Howway For Wodney Wat by Helen Lester (2002) was read in a large-group setting. After the reading lesson, the students in the study spent the rest of Day 2 discussing the story in their small group. On the third day, the students were playing Words in a Row and focused on creating sentences that were clear and detailed. While three students participated in the game, one was being assessed using the Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis on the story retell of Howway For Wodney Wat by Helen Lester (2002).

**Intervention week IV.** The narrative Miss Smith’s Incredible Storybook by Michael Garland (2005) was introduced as the read-aloud of the week. Before
reading the story, students analyzed the illustrations and inferred the story’s events and outcomes. This allowed the students to express their thoughts among their peers. Conversations on story events and personal connections continued throughout the book reading. On Day 2, students were asked to write an adjective on the lightest color of a paint sample card. Using the thesaurus, students filled the darker colors on the paint card with synonyms. This small exercise was done so that students would have stronger responses during discussions and story retelling assessments. When the paint cards were completed, the students were asked to provide the group with sentences using their newly found words. On the last day of intervention, the four students’ oral retelling abilities of Miss Smith’s Incredible Storybook by Michael Garland (2005) were individually assessed using the Written or Oral Story Retelling Analysis. In all, students received 7 hours and 30 minutes of intervention time within the five-week period.

Data Analysis

Based on the pre- (January) and post- (March) Rigby PM Benchmark reading levels graph noted in Figure 2, students showed a significant increase in their reading levels (t-test = 0.032647, p < 0.05). Student 1 increased from middle of first grade to the end of first grade reading level, Student 2 increased from middle of second grade to third grade reading level, Student 3 increased from middle of first grade to the end of first grade reading level, and Student 4 increased from the middle of first grade to a middle of second grade reading level. Although the expected reading levels for fourth grade students were recognized, the goal of the study was not to reach the expected levels, but to aid students on expanding literacy skills at their individual levels. The analysis of the results suggests that the goal of the study was met.

Figure 3 shows that when comparing the oral story retelling raw scores of the pre-test week to the oral story retelling percentage scores of the fourth intervention week, no significant increase was made in students’ story retelling (t-test = 0.114216, p < 0.05). During the pre-test week, Student 1 and Student 3 completed their Oral Story Retelling Analysis in Spanish, Student 2 had difficulty with story sequence and word choices, and Student 4 would interchangeably retell the story in English and Spanish (code-switching). By the fourth intervention week, students were retelling the stories in English without code-switching.

The pre- and post-results of the Graded Reading Words Assessment in Figure 5 show that the students made increases in their word identification abilities from grades second through fourth. The numbers on the columns of the data chart represent how many words the students got correct out of a total of twenty words within each grade level (ex. Student 1: 16/20 correct in grade 2, 17/20 correct in grade 3, and 13/20 correct in grade 4 in the post-assessment). The data chart also shows whether the students were at their frustration, instructional, or independent functioning levels. For example, 2/4 students were at frustration levels in the fourth grade words pre-assessment and 2/4 were at instructional levels; 2/4 students remained at frustration levels in the fourth grade words post-assessment, but 1/4 was at an instructional level and 1/4 was at an independent level. In comparison, the pre- and post-test showed a significant increase in the four bilingual fourth grade students’ reading words assessment results (t-test = 0.044791<0.05).

The results show that the attitude towards academic (t-test = 0.42>0.05) and recreational (t-test = 0.34>0.05) reading did not show a significant increase. Students’ attitudes varied, and it was believed that the variance was also correlated to their performances in other assessments of this study.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that vocabulary games and story-based (narrative-based) discussions would positively affect oral story retelling skills of English Language Learners (ELLs). The hypothesis for this study was affirmed. The results of multiple t-tests showed that the students improved their reading levels with the help of interactive vocabulary games and story-based discussions that supported the use of cognitive academic language skills. The informal vocabulary practice of high-frequency words in the interactive vocabulary games Words in Row, Connect the Cubes, and Guess the Word promoted a significant increase, at the p < .05 level, of students’ word identification abilities because they interacted with the printed words and used the words in a meaningful, repetitive context. Students also showed increases in English oral proficiency skills. The significant differences in vocabulary and oral-proficiency skills could be attributed to the comfortable, content-rich environment that accommodated their needs. Students’ attitudes towards literacy, reading levels, oral retelling abilities, and word recognition abilities did not show a significant shift toward the positive; however, in the case of Student 3, the shift was positive, showing a marked change in attitude toward academic reading and recreational reading. This finding alone suggests that more research is needed, possibly for longer periods of time, to encourage and support shifts in attitudes toward reading either for academic or recreational purposes.

Conclusion

According to the Texas Education Agency, students are expected to speak using grade-level content area vocabulary; express opinions, ideas, and feelings on grade-appropriate academic topics; demonstrate English comprehension; and expand reading skills. Students new to this country may not be able to achieve those expectations because they may have very basic interpersonal communicative skills in English. In order to meet the state expectations, students require cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALPS). In contrast, some students may be capable of reaching Texas Education Agency expectations. However, preeminent researcher on second language acquisitions Jim Cummins (Baker, 2006) reports that reaching the CALPS level could take up to seven years. A nine-year-old fourth grader may not have had enough years in the country – or his/her life – to reach the necessary CALPS level.

An educator’s job is to support all students in their educational endeavors within the student’s instructional level. The focus should not be on the expectations, but on the reality of the student’s situation. Taking the entire student’s life into account not only helps educators understand a student’s needs or strengths, but also shows the individual student that the teacher cares and is willing to support his or her learning. In addition, taking all individual aspects into account enriches interventions that support student growth.

The University of North Texas’ College of Education PDS 2 program makes it possible for pre-service teachers, current teachers, and students to study and examine the effectiveness of short-term classroom interventions. The action research project opens the eyes of those involved, bringing forth significant changes in students’ educational careers and refocuses teachers to the true reason as to why they show up in that classroom every day – to help the learner. Pre-service teachers and in-service teachers working together on action research can learn more about their learners, as I did. In conclusion, this study sought to strengthen English proficiency skills of ELLs, is replicable, and serves as a model for future action research by teachers and pre-service student interns.

References

Figure 1: Initial Garfield Elementary Reading Survey

The recreational row in the data table represents the raw score (out of 40 total points) of each student’s attitude toward recreational reading. The academic row represents the raw score of each student’s attitude toward academic reading.

Figure 2: Rigby PM Benchmark

The numbers on the January row represent the reading levels of the students at the beginning of the 5-week study. The March row represents the reading levels the students attained at the end of the 5-week period. The row labeled Expected, represents the expected reading levels for fourth grade students.
The raw scores in this graph are from the Oral Story Retelling Analysis form. Each raw score represents total elements completed under the Introduction, Theme, Resolution, and Sequence columns by each student. For example, under the Introduction column, Student 1 completed 5 out of 6 elements and Student 2 completed 6 out of 6 elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Introduction (6)</th>
<th>Theme (4)</th>
<th>Resolution (2)</th>
<th>Sequence (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The raw scores in this graph are from the Oral Story Retelling Analysis form. Each raw score represents total elements completed under the Introduction, Theme, Resolution, and Sequence columns by each student. For example, under the Introduction column, Student 1 completed 5 out of 6 elements and Student 2 completed 6 out of 6 elements.

There was a total of 20 words in each graded reading words list. Therefore, the Grade 2, Grade 3, and Grade 4 columns in the pre- and post-assessment results represent the number of words the students got correct in each graded word list.
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**Figure 7: Pre and Post Elementary Reading Attitude Survey Results**

The raw scores in this chart represent the scores the students got out of 40. For example, Student 4 scored 22 out of 40 under pre-academic and scored 18 out of 40 under post-academic.
Feelings & Emotions Vocabulary. [Note: This vocabulary pronunciation is in American English]. Emotions vocabulary words can be really important in describing how we feel and how others are feeling. Most of us know the emotional states happy and sad, but what about determined and resentful? Hopefully this list of words will help expand your vocabulary. The video provides a chance to hear each word pronounced and there is a pause after each word so that you can say the words to practice your pronunciation. Spot the vocabulary Collocation pelmanism. Have you tried these practical activities to help students with vocabulary learning? There’s something for all ages and levels. Spot the vocabulary.