

School Administrators Association of New York State

# Vanguard

WINTER 2016

Vol. 45 No. 1

Exploring  
Educational  
Leadership



## ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

**IGNITING  
EDUCATION  
FOR ELLs**



**A CHAMPION OF  
EDUCATION  
BUILDING SCHOOLS,  
CREATING HOPE**

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2016  
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# Practices

from practitioners

This magazine is published  
three times a year by the  
**School Administrators Association  
of New York State**  
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Latham, NY 12110  
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# Structured Silent Reading Practice:

## An Effective Educational Support for ELL Students



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By Alexandra N. Spichtig, PhD  
and Jeffrey P. Pascoe, PhD

Designing effective reading instruction for English language learners (ELLs) entails many of the same considerations as designing instruction for students who are struggling or developing readers. All of these **students benefit from a highly structured reading practice environment that is tailored to their current reading ability and learning needs, while also embracing their diverse topical interests.** Effective instruction also provides discrete personalized goals, salient feedback, and educational scaffolds as needed to promote success.



it is important that ELLs' reading practice takes place in an environment that provides support to overcome language barriers, increases word knowledge, and maintains their motivation to succeed.

Further, ongoing monitoring is essential to assure a student is responding to a given curriculum and is held accountable in terms of behavioral and cognitive engagement.

The ultimate goal of reading practice (i.e., the effective application of reading as a tool for learning) is the same for everyone, regardless of background or initial level of English proficiency. To achieve this goal, students need effective practice to develop higher levels of reading automaticity and fluency. *Automaticity*, or the ability to instantly recognize an ever-expanding assortment of words, is prerequisite to being able to dedicate sufficient cognitive resources toward comprehension strategies and constructing meaning. Students also must develop *reading stamina*; that is, the ability to persist in attending to longer and more challenging texts, adjusting their reading in relation to the demands of the texts, and maintaining good comprehension. These reading behaviors are the foundations of "close reading" as defined in national standards, within which students are expected to focus their attention on complex text, integrate each new idea with what has come before (and with preexisting background knowledge), and build a coherent conception of what the text is saying.

ELL students often require more reading practice than their native English speaking peers since ELLs must develop automaticity and reading stamina with English language texts while drawing upon a limited knowledge base of English vocabulary and grammar. Given these challenges,

### SUPPORT FOR ELLs IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

It is possible to demonstrate that structured silent reading practice has a significant effect on the state test scores of ELL students. To measure this, we examined the amount of reading practice students engaged in during the school year, as well as associated changes in achievement scores on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2.0 (FCAT). The FCAT is similar to New York State's English Language Arts (ELA) Test in that both tests yield a scale score and a performance level.

All of the ELL students we studied were enrolled in one large school district (466 schools) that used the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment (CELLA) to document language proficiency. This assessment is similar to New York State's NYSESLAT in that it assigns students to one of five ELL English proficiency levels: (1) beginning, (2) low intermediate, (3) high intermediate, (4) advanced, and (5) fluent. Florida students on level 5 no longer require services and exit the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

program.

District records indicated that there were more than 71,000 ELL students in grades 4-10 who had valid 2013 and 2014 FCAT scores. More than 21,000 of these students were on ELL levels 1-4 and were receiving ESOL services. The rest had received ESOL services previously but no longer did so because they had attained English proficiency. Nearly 88 percent of these students were Hispanic, and nearly 85 percent were eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

All of the schools in the district were provided access to a suite of programs that could be used in their curriculum or to provide supplemental services. One of these programs was Reading Plus – a highly structured, web-based silent reading program. The Reading Plus program provides an extensive library of carefully leveled informational and literary texts that meet text complexity recommendations outlined in national standards, and include STEM, social science, and literary content. Selections on each reading level are written to include critical academic vocabulary appropriate for students reading on that level. The program uses adaptive scaffolds to facilitate each student's development of silent reading proficiency. Text is presented in a guided window format to model efficient silent reading behavior. Reading selection length, syntactic and semantic complexity, and required background knowledge are also carefully controlled. The program builds stamina and encourages comprehension monitoring by challenging students to focus closely on content so that they can respond correctly to comprehension tasks that follow.

### MEASURING THE IMPACT OF SILENT READING PRACTICE

For our analyses, we grouped students into three grade bands: elementary school (grades 4-5), middle school (grades 6-8), and high school (grades 9-10). We then



looked at each student’s 2013 and 2014 FCAT scores, English proficiency level, and how many Reading Plus lessons they had completed. On average, each Reading Plus lesson lasted about 15 minutes. In the figures and discussion below, the ELL groups include only students on English proficiency levels 1-4 (students who were receiving ESOL services).

**Scale Score Gains:** ELL students tended to make larger FCAT score gains than non-ELL students. Superimposed on this pattern were the effects of silent reading practice. In every case, students who completed more Reading Plus lessons achieved significantly larger scale score gains on the FCAT ( $p < .001$ ). This was true in all grade bands and on all English proficiency levels. These patterns can be seen in Figure 1, which compares students who did not engage in structured silent reading practice to those who completed at least 100 Reading Plus lessons (about 30 hours) over the school year.

**PERFORMANCE LEVEL GAINS:**

Florida’s key learning gains criteria are met when students achieve and maintain scores in the range of FCAT Level 3 (satisfactory) or above, or increase their scores by one or more FCAT levels. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of students who moved from a less-than-satisfactory performance level to a satisfactory level tended to be somewhat lower among ELL students as compared to non-ELL students. In

all cases, however, the percentage of ELL students reaching satisfactory performance was much greater (by 25-30 percent) among those who engaged in at least 100 Reading Plus lessons as compared to students who did not engage in any Reading Plus practice.

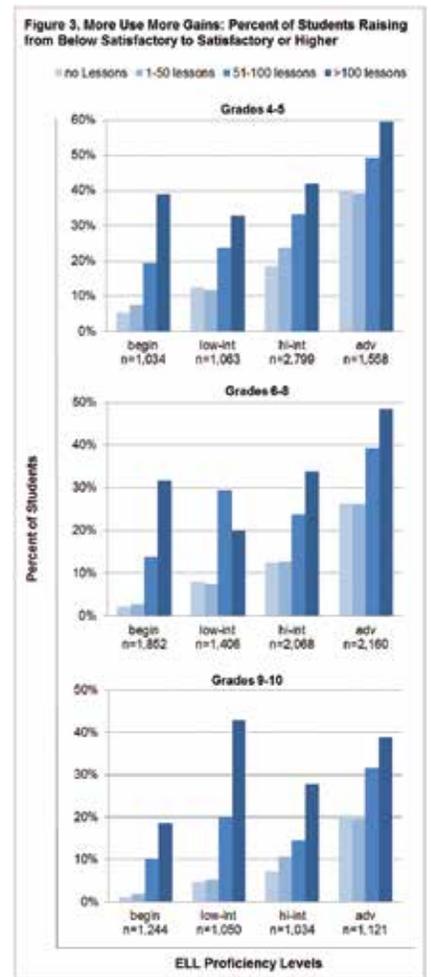
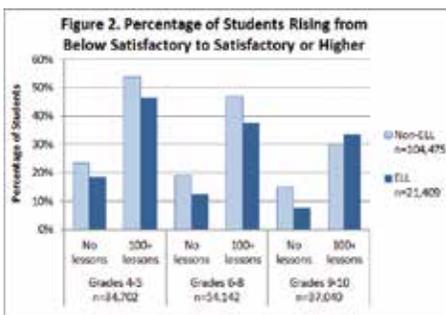
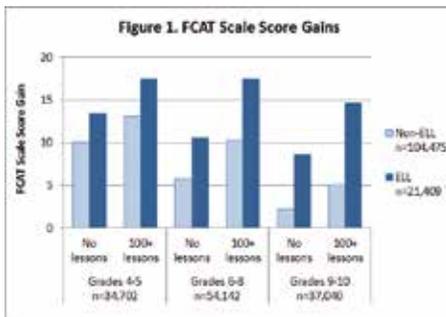
Figure 3 provides a closer look at performance level gains, showing the effects of differing amounts of silent reading practice as well as a breakdown by English proficiency levels. Readily apparent is the tendency for higher percentages of students who used Reading Plus more frequently to advance from below satisfactory to a satisfactory performance level or higher. Additionally, this pattern was evident across all English proficiency levels, including the lowest ELL levels, and in all grade bands. In the lowest two English proficiency groups, for example, the percentage of students advancing to satisfactory levels on the FCAT ranged from 19 to 43 percent if they engaged in Reading Plus practice compared to just 1-12 percent if they did not. In the highest two English proficiency groups the percent of students advancing to proficiency ranged from 28 to 60 percent if they used Reading Plus compared to 7-40 percent if they did not.

FCAT scale score gains also were largest among students who used Reading Plus more frequently. In nearly every case, scale score gains among these students were 1.5 times to 2 times as large as those measured in students who did not use the program. This was true in every grade band.

**WHAT WE LEARNED**

Structured silent reading practice is required to develop reading fluency, comprehension, and stamina. While most ELL students are able to decode text, students who are learning English as a second language must often devote a disproportionate share of their cognitive resources to recognizing words rather than understanding what they are reading. Carefully calibrated silent reading practice that utilizes a structured text display approach, together with appropriately leveled texts and comprehension tasks, clearly helps ELL students to expand their word knowledge skills and close the

reading proficiency gap in English. Within Reading Plus, we found that students who engaged in just 30 hours of silent reading practice achieved increased reading rates and demonstrated an improved ability to comprehend more complex text over the course of a school year. Critically, there also was a generalization of this learning as evidenced by higher score gains and an increased likelihood of level advancement on the Florida state assessment. These observations provide compelling evidence that structured silent reading practice is a highly effective educational support for developing reading proficiency in ELL students.



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