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# The Impact of Explicit Instruction in Phonics and Phonological Awareness on Kindergarten English Learners' Reading Scores

Emily Goranson

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The Impact of Explicit Instruction in Phonics and Phonological Awareness on  
Kindergarten English Learners' Reading Scores

by

Emily Goranson

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Guiding Question

Within the elementary teaching realm, it is commonly known that students transition from learning to read to using reading skills for more advanced learning in third grade. One study among many indicates that third grade reading progress is a predictor of high school dropout rates (Hernandez, 2011). Reading is an important academic and lifelong skill. As such, elementary schools across the United States spend a significant portion of their schedule on literacy instruction. While viewing fourth grade reading scores for the nation, 30 states experienced a decline from 2019 to 2022, Minnesota included (*NAEP Reading*, 2022). The English learner (EL) population scored lower than native English speakers. With this in mind, I wondered the most effective way to teach reading to my students, who are kindergarten and first grade English language learners.

Historically, reading instruction has swung between phonics-first approaches and whole-text approaches (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015). A current trend among educators is Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS<sup>®</sup>) training, based in the Science of Reading<sup>1</sup>. The Science of Reading is both a movement and a body of research based on how the human brain learns to read, which has become popular in education (Lexia, 2022b, Moats & Tolman, 2019). My school of employment is engaging in a three-year exploration and implementation of LETRS<sup>®</sup>. We are abandoning guided reading books, tailoring instruction to match what LETRS<sup>®</sup> recommends. As we began this training, I wondered how my district's implementation of

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<sup>1</sup> The capitalized 'Science of Reading' refers to the current movement towards science-based reading instruction. It has been capitalized since 2018 as a specific approach to literacy (Colton, 2022).

LETRS<sup>®</sup> would impact my English language learners. This research seeks to answer the following question: *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?*

This chapter introduces the guiding research question, followed by the personal context of the author. Personal and professional rationale is provided as to why the research topic was chosen and its importance to the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) education.

### **Background**

This section introduces the researcher. It highlights my early language experiences, professional language experiences, and my process of becoming an ESL teacher. My background contextualizes the research study and explains the lens with which I see the world.

### ***Early Language Experiences***

I am a white woman from a rural town. In elementary school, I grew up with two Hmong students who were the only English learners I knew. For much of the day, they were pulled into a small room for English classes. Besides these students, my classmates were majority white. Headed into my undergraduate coursework, I encountered many people who were not like me. I found that beautiful and fascinating, and I had many questions. During those years, I befriended international students, who were kind and brave to share their stories with me. At that time, I also pursued an undergraduate minor in Hispanic Studies to develop my emerging Spanish language skills.

### ***Professional Language Experiences***

Language learning felt like a puzzle to me. I would often ask my friends from varied language backgrounds to teach me phrases and vocabulary. This passion eventually led me towards a career in film dubbing, where I matched the lips of a person in a video to the audio of a person speaking a language different from the film's original language. For hours each day, I sat in a small room with voice actors whose language I had never heard about except for these work assignments. I traveled to their countries. As I experienced language, I experienced habits, customs, schedules, and foods that were unfamiliar to me.

**Development of a Written Language.** During one work assignment in Nigeria, I visited a translator's office. One translator and his colleagues were hard at work creating an orthographic system for their native language. I was given a poster showing the phoneme-grapheme correspondences and a picture of a word that started with each phoneme. Their goal was to translate an important religious document into their language and to educate young children in literacy of their language so it would not be lost.

This experience alerted me to the importance of literacy knowledge. While these translators did the hard work of forming a written language system, there remained the challenging task of teaching a whole language community the rules for reading this written system. In this case, the preservation of their culture depended on literacy development.

### ***Becoming an English Teacher***

Based on these experiences and relationships with people near and far who do not share my culture, I pursued becoming an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher.

My values are to hold high expectations for the achievement of my students, to leverage my White identity to partner with and advocate for my multilingual students and their families, and to honor the native languages of the families I serve, while giving their students the additional tool of English. This research stems from a desire to see English learners excel at reading, to see English learners demonstrate all they know, and to see English learners proud of their heritages, multilingual abilities, and navigation of multiple worlds.

### **Context**

This section describes the context of the research study, describing personal experiences and disconnects that led me to research this topic.

#### ***Personal Experience***

I am a second-year ESL teacher in a low-income, urban elementary school for kindergarten through third grade. What I have experienced during guided reading instruction are two disconnects: 1) a disconnect between what my graduate coursework identifies as research-based reading instruction for English learners and what are traditional, widely accepted practices, and 2) a disconnect between what ESL teachers expect and promote for English learners' reading achievement and what classroom teachers expect and promote for the same population.

**The First Disconnect: Form of Instruction.** The first disconnect manifests during lesson planning and implementation. My graduate courses inspire me to plan according to the Teaching and Learning Cycle and genre theory (Derewianka, 2015; Derewianka & Jones, 2016). According to Herrera, Perez, and Escamilla (2015), these paradigms look at the structure and meaning of an authentic text, and use meaningful

connections to the text to teach smaller language parts, such as letters, sounds, morphology, and syntax. I seek to introduce even young learners to texts that will interest them, and scaffold instruction based on particular language skills I want them to gain. In contrast, my school teaches reading using mainly phonics, letter-sound correspondence, and blending to form words. Students are also exposed to authentic text in their reading curriculum. Focus for these young students is on learning the mechanics of reading before fully comprehending texts. I interpret the first disconnect to be a clash between top-down and bottom-up reading instruction.

***Practical Application.*** In practice, I find myself weighing whether to use the genre of text highlighted by the students' reading curriculum, informational text, realistic fiction, personal narrative, etc., or a text within a group of students' guided reading level. Each classroom has access to leveled libraries, and the set of texts recommended for ESL teachers to use is also leveled. As a language teacher, responsible for giving ELs access to the language of grade-level texts, I personally feel frustrated when English learners are given texts below grade level, since that is their identified guided reading level, with simplified language structures and with content far removed from their lived experiences.

**The Second Disconnect: Deficit View of Students.** The second disconnect manifests during casual and professional conversations with licensed staff in the building, in which English learners are discussed with a deficit view. Within this topic, I must acknowledge that each teaching professional is influenced by the education, experience, and training they receive. I must also state that all teaching professionals are a collective influence on the development of the student population. With those acknowledgments in place, I believe this disconnect can be resolved with increased conversation,

collaboration, and professional development. Classroom teachers perform a running records assessment several times per year which assesses students' reading proficiency and comprehension. The result is a leveled letter, which informs the teacher of which texts are most matched to students' skills at that point in their education. Many teachers teach at least a portion of their literacy instruction in a station format; an ESL teacher instructs one small group of students, while the classroom teacher instructs others, and the remainder perform independent work. In a guided reading model, classroom teachers group students by their identified reading level. However, an ESL teacher groups students by their reading proficiency score they have achieved on the WIDA ACCESS test they have taken the spring before.

The WIDA ACCESS test is an annual assessment that students receiving English language services must take. The test assesses students' language proficiency levels in each of four domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Students receive a proficiency score in each domain from 1 to 6, and a composite score from 1 to 6. A deficit view of English learners creeps in when students read at a letter A reading level, but their overall language proficiency is more advanced than this.

***Simplified Texts.*** One dimension of this disconnect is the types of text ELs experience. The EL books within the curriculum mirror below-level texts, but feature visual support for targeted vocabulary. Visual support is essential for English learners (Halwani, 2017). However, since the text is below-level, the assumption is that all English learners are below-level readers, therefore banning them from higher-level texts and locking them into seeing the same, simple language structures.

*Classroom Example.* I experienced these low expectations of an English learner who also received specialized education services for autism. According to her running records, she was identified as a Rebus level reader, which means Pre-A. When I shared that I wanted to challenge her with grade-level concepts, such as cause-and effect and sequencing, I was adamantly rejected. I was told, “The student is a Rebus reader. Review letters, sounds, and sight words with her.” However, I knew she grasped her letters and sounds, and identified many sight words in context. During an animal research project, this same student decided to research ostriches. Using technology and physical books, she was able to find facts about ostriches that she repeatedly recalled to her classroom teacher and me. I felt frustrated that this student’s reading level dictated what she could access in school when a world of information that could fascinate her exists in texts at and beyond her reading level. Additionally, more advanced linguistic structures remain just out of her reach.

### **Rationale**

This section gives the professional reasons for the research study. It describes why this study is important for the field of English learner education.

### ***Professional Necessity***

With LETRS® training becoming more popular, ESL teachers are curious how the Science of Reading impacts their instruction. At the Minnesota English Learner Education (MELEd) conference in November, 2023, hosted by MinneTESOL, five sessions presented about the Science of Reading and English language learners. With changing educational paradigms, ESL teachers need solid research evidence to inform

their reading instruction. My district desired to bring LETRS® training to staff, and I wondered how English learners would be impacted.

**LETRS® Training for Staff.** The 23-24 school year promised change to the way my district teaches reading. Each Wednesday after school, licensed staff engaged in professional development in LETRS®, based in the Science of Reading. District administrators saw the need for improved reading outcomes in our schools. The school-wide goal for the 22-23 school year was to increase second graders' reading scores on the STAR reading assessment from the fall 2022 score of 22.1% to 37.1% in the spring of 2023. Our school met that goal, with 37.6% of second graders reading at or above proficiency. However, teachers still needed to account for the remaining 62.4% of second graders who scored below grade level. Those students also need effective teacher practices to help them succeed in reading.

**Guided Reading and Reading Levels.** Several journals suggest that guided reading instruction and homogenous grouping by reading level could be partially to blame for low reading scores among marginalized students (Hoffman, 2017). Hoffman (2017) argued that the act of leveling readers has consequences, some of which are denying access to informational texts that interest readers, widening the gap between higher-letter readers and lower-letter readers, not acknowledging alternate forms of literacy, such as oral storytelling, and adding to condescending dialogue about students. Hoffman (2017) is a proponent of reading paradigms that build background centered on student lives and choice, which involve students in reading informational texts, and which is inquiry and advocacy based. Teaching reading to English learners does not often give students access to a wide variety of texts.



**ELs Need More From Reading Instruction.** Goldenberg (2020) presented that learning to read in a native language and learning to read in an additional language are similar processes, which could validate either guided reading or Science of Reading paradigms. However, he also stated, “The Science of Reading still applies, but it is not enough” (p. S133). EL readers need more than simplified texts or phonics instruction. They need targeted support, access to varied language structures, and practice with oral language.

**Lack of Research Around LETRS® for ELs.** Another challenge for teachers of English learners as they adopt LETRS® is that no research around LETRS® includes English learners as significant stakeholders in the data. Lexia, the parent company of LETRS® training, published a report citing evidence for the effectiveness of LETRS® (Lexia, 2023a). However, English learners were not identified as participants, and one study specifically excluded English learners from the data set, explaining that English learners would be enrolled in programs to support their reading skills already and that LETRS® would not be relevant (Garet et al., 2008).

### ***Rationale Summary***

In summary, my research will benefit the field in several ways: 1) It will investigate the effectiveness of LETRS® in improving reading outcomes for the English learners within my school, 2) it will inquire if the Science of Reading is sufficient for English learners, and 3) it will place English learners at the forefront of LETRS® training, for which there is no prior evidence of effectiveness.

## Summary of Introduction

I seek to answer the question: *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* After experiencing the cultures of acquaintances and students, I desire to research this question to advocate for the best English learner outcomes in reading. Since my school is engaging in professional development in LETRS<sup>®</sup> training, now is the time to investigate its effectiveness for English learners. This will fill a gap in the research, which has investigated LETRS<sup>®</sup> effectiveness with monolingual English speakers (Garet et al., 2008) and which has stated the Science of Reading may not be enough for English learners (Goldenberg, 2020).

Chapter 2 summarizes research from the existing literature about guided reading, the Science of Reading, and what English learners require from reading instruction. Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to gather data and relevant analyses. Chapter 4 discusses the results of the research, and Chapter 5 concludes the study, highlighting the study's limitations and suggesting future research studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of existing research related to the question, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* A review of the available literature establishes the present study within the context of reading instruction in the United States. The first major section outlines major instructional reading movements from the 1800s until today, with an emphasis on the swing from phonics-focused to whole language-focused. The second major section describes guided reading, which has been utilized at the research site in previous years, and is a major reading strategy across the nation. The third major section introduces Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (Moats & Tolman, 2004), its proposed changes to literacy instruction, and its early criticisms. The final topic explores English learners' needs during reading instruction in English, which has direct implications for the participants of this study, who are English learners.

#### Historical Context of Reading Instruction

Reading instruction has historically swung between two ideologies: 1) whole-language instruction and 2) phonics instruction (Herrera et al., 2015). Whole-language refers to reading and memorizing whole words so that students comprehend texts. Students are exposed to texts which are interesting to them, prompting a love of reading. Texts are also predictable, so that early readers can activate and utilize prior schema (Goodman, 1989). Whole-language proponents state that reading is as

natural to humans as speaking, and that letter-sound correspondence comes with immersion in texts (Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a). In contrast, phonics instruction refers to the pairing of written letters with their associated sounds. Students practice letter-sound correspondences and decode whole words by separating them into sounds. Phonics proponents state that reading is not natural to humans, and must be taught explicitly (Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a; Young, 2023). These two ideologies are the center of a long-standing debate, so named The Reading Wars in the 1990s and which had been brewing for decades before that (Keso, 2022; Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a).

### ***Early Disagreement: 1800s-1950s***

Before the debate between whole-language and phonics had a name, dissent occurred between the ideologies of two men considered fathers of American education: Mann and Webster (Emans, 1968; Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a). Mann subscribed to what would today be called whole-language thinking, warning that a focus on identifying words by sounds would detract from word meanings (Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a). In contrast, Webster subscribed to what would today be called phonics thinking and wrote a grammar and spelling book to teach American children how to read. This book started with the alphabet and progressed by language complexity towards words and sentences (Emans, 1968).

Mann's influence prevailed during the development of the education system and until the 1950s, the whole-language approach was how teachers taught reading. *Dick and Jane* readers evolved from these ideas, prompting students to memorize sight words, and to use picture cues to decipher meaning (Elson & Gray, 1936; Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a).

While whole-language dominated education, other ideas and methodologies were also developed. In the 1930s, Orton, a psychologist interested in reading failure, and Gillingham, a teacher and linguist, developed a systematic reading model. Their purpose was to instruct students with dyslexia in a systematic and multisensory way (Gillingham & Stillman, 1936; as cited in Sayeski et al., 2019). Their reading system paved the way for more explicit and systematic instruction, such as was found in phonics-based instruction later on.

### ***Shift to Phonics: 1950s-1980s***

In the 1950s, Flesch, a Columbia University graduate with a Ph.D. in library science, wrote a book summarizing that student reading in the United States had stagnated due to the lack of systematic phonics instruction (Flesch, 1955; Lexia, 2022a). This book caused a national conversation about the state of reading instruction and its impact on young learners (Lexia, 2022a). Flesch argued that the whole-language approach forced students to learn many distinct words. In contrast, phonics could teach rules applied in many different contexts (Flesch, 1955). The educational community did not widely accept Flesch's argument. However, children's book publishers took note of his recommendations, and his research regarding readability of texts, when publishing texts such as *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Seuss (Battistella, 2019; Flesch, 1948).

Another researcher, Chall, founder of the Harvard Reading Laboratory, advocated that there were developmental stages of reading, contrasting with the whole-language view that reading was acquired naturally. Chall wrote extensively on the debate between whole-language and phonics, and promoted that explicit phonics instruction helped the most struggling readers (Chall, 1967, 1983, 1996). Flesch and Chall's separate research

and writings influenced the shift to phonics as schools began implementing phonics instruction.

### ***Whole-Language Dominates Education: 1980s-1990s***

Despite a lack of research base, educators latched onto the whole-language approach instead of phonics. First, if reading is a natural process that students learn through exposure, as whole-language taught, the teacher's responsibility in reading instruction is much less. This appealed to teachers whose time was stretched. Second, whole-language seemed to be effective. Kim (2008) found why whole-language seemed so effective at the time; struggling readers use non-linguistic cues to understand when phonics skills are lacking. Students who had minimal phonics knowledge could appear as effective readers based on those non-linguistic cues.

Whole-language dominated education between the years of 1980 - 1990. Smith founded what is contemporarily known as whole-language. They were a psychology professor at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. In 1986, his book contrasted the joy of reading using whole texts with repetitive letter drills of phonics (Smith, 1986). Goodman, an education professor at the University of Arizona, was also vocal about whole-language. They believed that reading is a natural process, which comes through exposure to text. In their belief, phonics was difficult and tedious. In contrast, whole-language learning was engaging and easy to plan (Goodman, 1989; Lemann, 1997; Lexia, 2022a).

The 1990s is when the debate between whole-language and phonics was officially called The Reading Wars (Rothman, 1990; Stanovich & Stanovich, 1999). The comparisons escalated from a debate (Chall, 1967) to a so-called war, due to

disagreements in research findings, evidence from classrooms, and policy decisions affecting students.

### ***Development of Balanced Literacy: 1990s***

The term *balanced literacy* emerged during the 1990s, describing a reading approach that used aspects of both whole-language and phonics approaches, while also balancing the modes of interaction with text (Lexia, 2022c). Balanced literacy first began in California, after the California Department of Education identified low reading scores, and blamed whole-language practices (Asselin, 1999). Although *balanced* mainly refers to whole-language and phonics, it also meant a balance between teacher and student-led activities and between reading and writing (Frey et al., 2005).

**Leaders in Balanced Literacy.** Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and Calkins (1986) were widely renowned reading experts, and they promoted balanced literacy practices. Calkins (2003) introduced *Units of Study*, a teaching curriculum that followed four steps. First, a teacher modeled and taught reading skills and strategies. Second, students chose a book at their reading level and tried to practice the skills and strategies on their own. Third, the teacher met with small groups to practice skills. Finally, the whole group came together to debrief. Calkins' version of balanced literacy incorporated picture-cuing from whole-language (Reading Partners, 2023).

**Fountas and Pinnell.** The use of leveled texts in guided reading is a balanced literacy practice attributed to Fountas and Pinnell (1996). They both worked in Reading Recovery, a reading intervention program with roots in whole-language practices (Fountas & Pinnell, 2015; Lemann, 1997). With these literacy foundations, they developed a leveled system of texts, an assessment for students to determine their reading

level, whole-group guided reading curriculum, and a small group reading intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Since then, they have both received a plethora of honors within the literacy community, and are common names in education.

***Guided Reading.*** The guided reading practices supported by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) incorporated word study, patterned texts, and comprehension strategies, which are associated with the whole-language approach (Goodman, 1989). An updated version of guided reading incorporated phonics and phonemic awareness, which aligns with phonics (Fountas & Pinnell, 2008).

***The Reading War Continues.*** While balanced literacy proposed to unite the whole-language and phonics worlds by utilizing both, the Reading War raged on (Lombardi & Behrman, 2016). In response to the report *A Nation at Risk*, published in 1983 which disparaged public education in the United States, governmental entities became increasingly involved in educational reform (Godwin & Sheard, 2001; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). In 1997, Congress created a National Reading Panel, which consisted of scientists and researchers, tasked to identify science-based literacy practices and effective practices for teaching literacy (Shanahan, 2005). The nation transitioned into a new decade, a new presidential term, and a new period of education with the findings of the National Reading Panel.

### ***No Child Left Behind: 2000s***

In 2000, the key report from the National Reading Panel explained that effective literacy instruction must incorporate five aspects: 1) phonemic awareness, 2) phonics, 3) comprehension, 4) vocabulary, and 5) fluency (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Following these findings, Former President George W.



Bush and Congress funded a nationwide reading program called Reading First (Shanahan, 2020). Additionally, the No Child Left Behind act of 2002 was enacted during this period (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Each of these factors converged, raising the expectations for educational institutions, identifying reading as a target area of improvement, and mandating the use of science-based literacy practices (Keso, 2022; Schwartz, 2021a).

Current viewpoints on the 2000s are varied. Shanahan (2020), a member of the National Reading Panel in 2000, argued that Reading First was effective, because it incorporated the five key elements proposed by the panel, including more diligent instruction in phonics. In contrast, some believed it placed too much importance on phonics, and that other reading practices, like comprehension, were left lacking (Schwartz, 2021b).

### ***Structured Literacy: 2000s-Today***

The current reading paradigm is called structured literacy or the Science of Reading. Although this is not the first time professionals have called for science- and evidence-based reading instruction, scientists and psychologists know more about the brain's role in reading than ever before. The term structured literacy was coined in 2014 by the International Dyslexia Association (Cowen, 2016; Lexia, 2022b; Malchow, 2014). This type of literacy aligns with science and incorporates: 1) phonology, 2) sound-symbol association, 3) syllables, 4) morphology, 5) syntax, and 6) semantics. Lexia (2022b) said, "these elements are taught in an explicit, systematic, cumulative, diagnostic, and responsive way" (para 17). While structured literacy has been shown to be effective with dyslexic learners, it is also employed with at-risk readers, or readers with other

hindrances to reading (Collins et al., 2020; Ray, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Structured literacy incorporates systematic phonics instruction, along with strategies for reading comprehension, potentially bridging the gap between the two sides of the reading wars.

**Simple View of Reading.** One foundation of structured literacy is The Simple View of Reading. In this model, reading comprehension is described as the product of word recognition and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990; Hoover & Tunmer, 2020). Word recognition involves decoding and quickly identifying words, while language comprehension involves understanding oral language and what that language means (Moats & Tolman, 2019).

**Scarborough's Reading Rope.** Another key foundation of structured literacy is Scarborough's Reading Rope. This model elaborates on The Simple View of Reading and describes both word recognition and language comprehension tasks as a rope of many interconnected strands which comprise fluent reading (Scarborough, 2001).

**Development of LETRS®.** In 2004, Moats and Tolman developed *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (LETRS®), a guide for reading teachers. It was based on research Moats had done with students who had dyslexia and other reading struggles (Moats, 2023). They found that marginalized students, such as ethnic minorities, students with dyslexia, and English learners, continued to struggle to learn how to read within the balanced literacy paradigm (Moats, 2023).

### ***History of Reading Instruction Summary***

Past views of teaching literacy have mainly emphasized either phonics or whole-language approaches. Balanced literacy incorporated both phonics and whole-language, while varying interaction with text (Lexia, 2022c). LETRS®

professional development promotes structured literacy, which emphasizes explicit and systematic instruction of foundational literacy skills (Collins et al., 2020; Ray, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019). The following section discusses guided reading, in contrast to structured literacy, and is the reading model the research site has used for many years (Goldberg, 2019). Since the research site is embracing structured literacy practices in place of guided reading, new research is needed to substantiate its effectiveness with the English language learners in the building, who makeup a significant portion of the student body.

### **Guided Reading Framework**

Guided reading is a widely used practice throughout the United States, which follows a balanced literacy paradigm (Anderson, Wilkinson, & Mason, 1991; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Young, 2019). The strategy is most often utilized during a literacy block. There are eight factors that must be present for the strategy to increase reading outcomes: 1) a small group of four to six students, 2) students at a similar reading level, 3) a rich introduction to a text, 4) students engaged in reading the same text, 5) teacher-led discussion of the text, 6) phonics work, 7) meaningful instruction, and 8) appropriate texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Pinnell & Fountas, 2010; Young, 2023). The purpose of guided reading is for students to develop effective reading strategies which they can implement in their independent practice (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Young, 2019).

### ***Student Grouping***

Teachers with a social constructivist lens enjoy guided reading because of its small-group orientation (Young, 2019). Social constructivist theory highlights the importance of students interacting and constructing meaning with each other (Vygotskii

& Cole, 1978). Young (2023) found that when students read a text out loud in a guided reading group, peers could copy modeled reading with increased fluency. A prominent question in the literature is about the makeup of student small groups. Fountas and Pinnell (2017) argued for homogeneous groups of students who are at a similar reading level. Their reading level is determined using running records (Clay, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Running records are transcripts taken while a student reads, which are coded for errors, strategies, and answers to comprehension questions. The running records are then analyzed, and a student's reading level is associated with one letter from A-Z. The letter names what a student can read independently, which books would likely frustrate them, and which texts they could access with scaffolding from a teacher (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012; Young, 2023).

**Classroom Practice.** According to the classroom practice of guided reading, a teacher would place similarly-lettered students in the same guided reading group. For example, four students who read independently at Level B might meet with a teacher, who would help them access Level C skills (Young, 2019). However, students could also benefit from heterogeneous groups. One benefit of grouping heterogeneously was found by Anderson, Wilkinson, and Mason (1991). They found that on a recall test of a text students read, outcomes were associated with the average performance of the group, not necessarily on individual ability. If students are grouped by similar level, reading outcomes would be predicted by their level. If, however, students are grouped heterogeneously, lower-lettered students benefit from the more advanced skills of classmates (Anderson, Wilkinson, & Mason, 1991).

**Opponents of Leveled Grouping.** Hoffman (2017) and Young (2023) disagreed wholeheartedly with the practice of leveled grouping. Hoffman (2017) disparaged the leveling of texts and leveling of students, because of the phrases “higher-level” and “lower-level”. These terms are common to hear in an elementary setting. Teachers may not tell the students, but there is usually a high group and a low group in every classroom. Hoffman (2017) stated that this kind of labeling was an unintended result of guided reading paradigms. Students labeled as “low” often retain that label throughout the duration of their schooling. Instead of homogenous grouping by reading level, Hoffman (2017) called for grouping by student interest and causes they care about.

**Evidence for Mixed Grouping.** Young (2023) agreed with Hoffman (2017) and tested non-leveled guided reading, which grouped students with mixed abilities. They argued that students with higher reading achievement make the most gains in reading, while students labeled low continue to make meager gains, thus expanding the achievement gap in reading (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2012; Young, 2023). One benefit of heterogeneous groups is that students model their reading after higher-ability peers, making faster gains in reading. Another benefit is that higher-ability students made expected gains, and remained above grade level.

### ***Lesson Focus***

Meaningful instruction is vital to an effective guided reading lesson (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Young, 2023). This instruction is influenced by teachers’ perspectives on how students learn to read and could tend towards balanced literacy, phonics, or

comprehension as a focus (Anderson, Wilkinson, & Mason, 1991; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Ji & Baek, 2019; Young, 2019, 2023).

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) identified five categories that must be present within reading lessons: 1) phonemic awareness, 2) phonics, 3) comprehension, 4) vocabulary, and 5) fluency. Additionally, Pollard-Durodola et al. (2006) found that oral language instruction needs to be present and has a positive impact on reading outcomes for English learners. If any category is lacking, reading skills may be impeded. For example, a teacher in Young's (2023) study taught using the whole-language approach (Goodman, 1989). Young and the teacher noticed the students were having difficulty decoding new words, because they had not been taught the phonics skills of decoding, nor the phoneme-grapheme connection between written letters and their sounds. In this case, instruction was not balanced between the five categories identified or oral language. Similarly, Anderson, Wilkinson, and Mason (1991) found that students could recall details from a story when the guided reading lesson was taught with a focus on story meaning, rather than on the elements of language found in the story. This instruction promoted meaning and comprehension, but did not emphasize phonics.

### ***Text Level***

In guided reading groups, students read the same text paired with instruction from the teacher. The teacher is responsible for choosing a text which will not frustrate the reader, but which is beyond what they can read independently (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Young, 2019). According to Gickling and Armstrong (1978), the *frustrational level* of a text is where students can read less than 90% of elements in text, *instructional level* is where students can read 93%-97% of elements in a text, and *independent level* is where

students can read 97% of elements in a text. Many schools have leveled libraries, teachers have leveled bins in their classrooms, and storage rooms have leveled texts from which teachers can select a book (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Each text level has features that students can learn to see using strategies appropriate for that level (Young, 2019).

**Challenging Texts.** An alternative practice exists where students access more complex text than their reading level would suggest (Hoffman, 2017; Shanahan, 2017, 2019; Young, 2023). If students are identified as a Level A reader, they are taught early reading strategies, without access to higher-level skills, some of which their peers may be already learning (Young, 2023). The difference in complexity between texts only grows as students enter later grades, contributing to an achievement gap (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2012). There is also evidence that early readers have less access to informational texts, delaying their exposure to informational genres and certain modes of inquiry (Hoffman, 2017). Young students can be exposed to complex texts, even while still learning to read (Hoffman, 2017; Young, 2023). Young (2023) implemented a non-leveled guided reading paradigm in a kindergarten classroom. They found the practice needed patience, diligence, and planning on the part of teachers, and persistence from the students. Overall, non-leveled reading resulted in previously-named low-level students becoming grade-level readers by the end of kindergarten (Young, 2023).

### ***Guided Reading Summary***

The guiding question of this research is: *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* The research location

has used a guided reading framework for many years. Teachers placed students in homogenous groups, utilizing leveled texts to teach phonics concepts. The LETRS<sup>®</sup> framework offers a new lens from which to teach reading, which will change how teachers use their literacy block for effective instruction. The following section describes reading instruction using the LETRS<sup>®</sup> framework, and how it differs from guided reading.

### **LETRS<sup>®</sup> Framework**

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS<sup>®</sup>) is a professional development course created in 2004 (Moats & Tolman, 2004). The course consists of modules designed to inform teachers of early literacy practices, based on the Science of Reading (Keso, 2022). The modules highlight the instruction of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and written language, which are aligned with the findings of the National Reading Panel in 2000 (Moats & Tolman, 2019; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

### ***LETRS<sup>®</sup> and Science of Reading***

The term science of reading<sup>2</sup> has origins in the eighteenth century, describing the correct pronunciation and reading of sacred texts (Keso, 2022). Today's understanding of the Science of Reading refers to decades of research, including neurological research, which explains how humans learn to read. LETRS<sup>®</sup> is a professional development course that instructs educators on how to best teach students how to read. LETRS<sup>®</sup> is not synonymous with the Science of Reading, but instructs teachers about the brain science behind reading development. LETRS<sup>®</sup> promotes the structured literacy paradigm, which

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<sup>2</sup> When 'science of reading' is left uncapitalized, it refers to the broader scientific understanding of reading development. This is not associated with a type of teaching or instructional movement.



emphasizes explicit and systematic instruction of foundational literacy skills (Collins et al., 2020; Ray, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2019).

### ***Effectiveness of LETRS®***

As of September 2022, eight peer-reviewed studies have reported on the effectiveness of LETRS® professional development with both teachers and students. Four of those studies reported on outcomes for students with high-needs or students with disabilities (Garet et al., 2008; Katz et al., 2008; Tillman, 2018; Trivelli, 2017).

In the researched schools, teachers received LETRS® training and implemented explicit, systematic instruction with their students. Schools who implemented additional reading-based interventions or who engaged in LETRS®-based coaching had positive student outcomes (Garet et al., 2008; Tillman, 2018; Trivelli, 2017). Overall, LETRS® was deemed effective based on student outcomes within these schools.

However, these same studies presented several inefficiencies. First, students with specific learning disabilities made slower progress than their peers in oral reading fluency, listening comprehension, and analyzing words in a structured literacy paradigm (Katz et al., 2008). This suggests that LETRS®-based instruction may not be effective or all-encompassing for these students. Second, while kindergarteners experienced more reading growth than peers whose teachers did not receive literacy coaching, second and third-graders showed no difference in reading growth, and first-graders actually grew less (Trivelli, 2017). This suggests that coaching alongside LETRS® plays a crucial role in implementation, and that not all grade levels benefit equally. Finally, these initial efficacy studies fail to include reading outcomes for English language learners. This suggests that

the effectiveness of LETRS® has not been established for the English language learner population.

### ***Guided Reading Versus Structured Literacy***

A structured literacy approach differs from more traditional guided reading practices in critical ways. In guided reading, students read leveled texts with a variety of words they may have been taught, but not explicitly. In structured literacy, students are taught a skill or phonics concept, then practice that concept with decodable readers (IDA, 2019; Lynn, 2023). Texts are highly controlled to model the exact skill the students learned. In guided reading, if students come to a word they do not know how to read, students guess, for the sake of moving the lesson towards another taught skill. However, in structured literacy, decoding is the priority; if a student encounters an unfamiliar word, they use the skills they have acquired to read the word (Lynn, 2023; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Finally, guided reading lessons contain phonics work, but the practice of phonics skills may be isolated, if included at all (Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Lynn, 2023). In contrast, structured literacy requires the explicit instruction of phonics skills, which are used in the lesson, and practiced in the context of a decodable text (Lynn, 2023; Spear-Swerling, 2019). Overall, structured literacy prioritizes direct instruction from a teacher, with explicit phonics instruction that is used to decode texts. Guided reading often fails to explicitly teach phonics in a systematic way, without attention to decoding words in context (Spear-Swerling, 2019).

### ***LETRS® Summary***

LETRS® professional development, and the Science of Reading, is a structured literacy approach, which does not neatly fall into either the whole-language or phonics

literacy paradigms of the past. LETRS® has incorporated aspects of the National Reading Panel’s report and added explicit, systematic teaching to instruct young students how to read. The following section describes English learners’ unique needs when learning to read in English (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

### **Effective Reading Instruction for English Learners**

The existing literature about how the brain learns to read has largely centered the experiences of monolingual English speakers. During the No Child Left Behind era, English learners were a group identified as having significant reading difficulties, but the resulting approaches to teaching and assessment failed to account for their culturally and linguistically diverse needs (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavick, 2022). This section identifies the unique needs of English learners when learning to read in English.

### ***Reading is an Equity Issue***

According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), educational entities are required to provide English learners with rigorous academic content, high academic expectations, and instruction in the English language. If English learners as a demographic group continue to experience gaps in reading instruction, schools will not be in compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, and these students will not receive an equitable education. The existing literature calls for effective instructional practices when teaching English learners to read, so that emergent bilinguals can equitably access the same content and opportunities as their monolingual peers (Derewianka, 2015; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavick, 2022; Guilamo, 2021; Lexia, 2023b).

### ***Monolingual Student Experience***

When a monolingual English student begins to read, they have spent significant time developing oral language, which they can bring to the reading task (Nassaji, 2014). In school, monolingual students learn and develop key reading skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Depending on curriculum and the schools' literacy philosophy, students engage in whole group, small group, and independent reading activities, tailored to their reading needs or identified reading level.

**Exposure to English.** Monolingual students have had exposure to English their whole lives, in print, on billboards, on television, and in language spoken at home. When they encounter text, it often reflects their lived experience and references familiar concepts. These students learn phonemic awareness, phonics, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency in a variety of modalities and lesson structures.

### ***Multilingual Student Experience***

Multilingual students benefit from the lessons and strategies taught to monolingual students. However, multilingual students require more specialized instruction. Researchers agree that English learners need more than what the National Reading Panel identified as key reading skills, and that literacy instruction should be scaffolded and tailored to their unique needs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavick, 2022; Guilamo, 2021; Nassaji, 2014; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Schwartz, 2022a). The additional elements multilingual learners need to successfully read are described below.

Multilingual learners come to their learning with varied home languages, cultural practices, experiences with literacy, and exposure to English, what Herrera, Perez, and Escamilla (2015) called a culturally and linguistically diverse student profile. These students are also described as *emergent bilinguals* because they hold the linguistic resources of multiple languages in their brains, and draw from those resources as required by the social context (García, 2009). The following subsections outline six learning suggestions for multilingual students.

**Build Background.** As each student brings a unique background to the learning process, it is important for them to connect previous experience to current tasks as much as possible. Multilingual students may not have an immediate connection to the content, and so background knowledge must be both activated and built for access to content (Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). Teachers strive to connect to students' lived background as often as possible, choosing subjects and characters that reflect their students (Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015).

**Contextualize Instruction.** In phonics instruction, it is common practice to identify the sounds in a word. For multilingual students, it is important for them to understand the meaning of the focus word. Herrera, Perez, and Escamilla (2015) suggested choosing words from texts explored in class to decode, along with a visual representation of the word. Contextualization is also important in phonemic awareness activities, such as phoneme deletion or isolation. This will help students connect words to real concepts in their worlds. Without this contextualization, they are manipulating sounds without meaning (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023).

**Develop Oral Language.** Oral language development is directly related to reading comprehension for English learners (Bialystok et al., 2005; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2006; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). Oral language in monolingual students solidifies command of the English language, which is then transferred to making sense of written language. English learners often learn oral language at the same time as they learn to read in English, so comprehension of grammar and vocabulary is less developed (Nassaji, 2014).

According to Veguilla, Lettau, and Nass (2023), oral language is the greatest indicator of success in reading. English learners need oral language practice, even while practicing foundational skills such as phonics.

**Use Authentic Texts.** Emergent readers are often exposed to decodable texts. Decodable texts are short texts which contain short words that can be read by blending the pronunciations of each letter. Some researchers advise against these texts because the language is not authentic to language used in the classroom or real-world situations. Instead, they advocate for authentic texts, which expose English learners to rich language and vocabulary (Escamilla, 2004; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Hoffman, 2017; Krashen, 2002).

**Access Complex Texts.** When early readers are grouped by reading level, English learners are often placed in the beginning levels. According to Young (2023), the beginning groups are placed with other readers at the same level, reading below grade-level texts. From year to year, this means English learners' reading proficiencies would continue to fall below their monolingual peers', with little access to more complex texts and more complex vocabulary, language structure, and content knowledge

(Hoffman, 2017; Schwartz, 2022b). English learners benefit from exposure to complex texts by analyzing language features of various genres, responding to text through writing, and developing academic language (Bunch, Walqui, & Pearson, 2014; Derewianka, 2015; Leighton et al., 2019).

**Leverage and Represent Home Languages.** When students learn literacy skills in their home language, research shows that the skills can be transferred to English literacy (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2020; Cummins, 2000; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015). Students benefit when they can apply those literacy skills to their school context. Students also benefit when they use their home language with other speakers of that language, or to make meaning as they comprehend texts (Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). There are abundant resources multilingual students access when they use all of the language resources available to them concurrently, a term called translanguageing, coined by García (2009). This practice aids comprehension, builds background, and affirms the student as a reader (Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023).

### ***Implications of Guided Reading and LETRS® for English Learners***

With respect to the needs of English learners, while learning to read, neither guided reading nor LETRS® offer perfect frameworks. No reading program can solely meet the needs of all English learners because of the variety of backgrounds, various supports and scaffolds needed, and the cultural diversity of students within schools (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000; Schwartz, 2022a). The following subsections describe evaluations of guided reading and LETRS® from the literature.

**Guided Reading.** Within a literacy block, English learners may be grouped by reading level during a guided reading group. Some researchers advocate that guided reading can be amended to better benefit English learners. Others call for an end to guided reading altogether. Ascenzi-Moreno and Quiñones (2020) stated that guided reading is not fully serving English learners. However, centering bilingualism and allowing students to make meaning in two languages aided the reading process. Lazaro-Farmer (2019) also investigated bilingual guided reading and found that reading in Spanish increased significantly, even while reading in English increased moderately.

Other researchers advocate for amendments to the reading groups for better student outcomes. Young (2023) conducted guided reading groups with heterogeneously leveled students, rather than traditionally homogenous groups. They found that more proficient readers scaffolded reading behaviors for those less proficient. Outcomes for all students were significant and impressive.

Finally, Hoffman (2017) recommended an end to guided reading for higher reading achievement of English learners. They stated that leveled reading groups are inequitable, keeping low-performing students in the beginning stages of reading. The types of texts and information beginning readers experience are rudimentary compared to the texts accessed by more proficient readers.

**LETRS®.** LETRS® instruction is based in the Science of Reading and offers a structured literacy approach (Lexia, 2023a). Lexia's base of research to support its program acknowledges that English learners were not participants, but that the Science of Reading is still applicable (2023a). While the effectiveness of LETRS® specifically for



English learners has not been researched and is the aim of this study, researchers have much to say about the Science of Reading paradigm.

A committee called the National Committee for Effective Literacy was formed in response to the Science of Reading movement and to advocate for English learners (National Committee for Effective Literacy, 2022). They interpreted the science of reading to mean a return to phonics-based teaching. August and Shanahan (2006) stated, “The ability to sound out words in a language a child does not know is simply not sufficient to build literacy skills” (p. 6). They argued that phonics should not be separated from oral language, comprehension, or context (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023).

Others have proposed changes to Science of Reading instruction so that English learners maximally benefit. Veguilla, Lettau, and Nass (2023), working within the framework of Science of Reading, emphasized that English learners still need to develop oral language, to make meaning, and to learn the meaning of words whose parts they analyze in phonics. Ray (2020) wrote that a structured literacy approach could benefit not only students with reading difficulties attributed to dyslexia but also English learners and other struggling readers.

Guilamo (2021) offered a unique perspective. They state that bilingual students need to access all parts of language to read and make meaning. They are inclusive of both phonics and whole language concepts, as both are useful for English learners. Students need both the macro and micro levels of languages and one cannot be sacrificed for the other.

### ***Summary of Reading Instruction for English Learners***

English learners have unique reading needs, which differ from their monolingual peers' needs. English learners need education in foundational literacy skills, but also continued oral language development, background knowledge, continued use of the home language, authentic language examples, and access to complex texts. Neither guided reading nor Science of Reading paradigms perfectly meet the needs of multilingual learners. However, researchers advocate for amendments and altered practices that can prioritize oral language and contextualize phonics instruction for English learners (Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Guilamo, 2021; Veguilla, Lettau, and Nass, 2023; Young, 2023).

### **Literature Review Summary**

Reading instruction has been fraught with disagreement since the 1800s (Lemann, 1997). For monolingual English speakers, teachers either promoted phonics or whole-language instruction. While guided reading has been a primary reading method in the United States, it has not served the needs of the lowest-performing readers, including English learners (Goldenberg 2020; Young 2023). LETRS<sup>®</sup>, a professional development course based in the Science of Reading and structured literacy practices, offers an explicit and systematic way to teach reading, which has greatly benefitted monolingual English speakers, with evidence of serving students with dyslexia (Garet et al., 2008; IDA, 2019). This study aims to research the effectiveness of LETRS<sup>®</sup> with kindergarten English learners, bridging the gap between what is known about the success of LETRS<sup>®</sup> with monolingual students, and the diverse needs of English learners.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of collecting reading data from English learners who have received direct structured literacy instruction. I will employ LETRS<sup>®</sup> practices during one semester, measuring reading skills before and after teaching.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Methods

#### Necessity for Research

The history of reading instruction has largely emphasized outcomes for monolingual students. A review of the literature highlights the need for research studies centering emergent biliteracy. Research suggests that guided reading does not fully serve English learners, and LETRS<sup>®</sup> offers new guidance. However, structured literacy did not form with English learners as key stakeholders; students with dyslexia and monolingual English speakers were the primary targets. The present study seeks to answer, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* It will center these students' data and bridge the theory that LETRS<sup>®</sup>-aligned instruction works for English learners into practice.

The first section describes the research approach, action research, and why it was the best fit for this particular study. The quantitative and qualitative nature of research are briefly compared. Then, a more detailed description of action research and research methodology is described, matching features of the research question to a tailored research approach. This section transitions into an account of the research site.

The second section describes the research location, participants, and relevant circumstantial details. It introduces where and with whom the study is conducted. The following section details the specific research procedures.

The third section outlines the instructional practices used with the treatment group, and describes data collection methods. It identifies how mixed methods data is

collected and analyzed. This forms the foundation for conducting the study and for summarizing the findings, which are described in Chapter Four.

### **Research Approach**

The term *research approach* refers to the broad way research is conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Research approaches fall along a continuum between quantitative and qualitative, or combine both. Quantitative research involves collecting numerical data which tests or supports a hypothesis. Qualitative research involves gathering non-numerical information from participants, which helps build a theory or adds new information to existing theories (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Mixed methods research falls along the continuum, and uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to solve problems or investigate social phenomena. While all approaches constitute valid research, the approach must align with the research question and information desired.

This study utilizes mixed methods. The effectiveness of LETRS<sup>®</sup> training and structured literacy has been previously examined using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods data (Garet et al., 2008; Katz et al., 2008; Tillman, 2018; Trivelli, 2017). In order to evaluate the effectiveness of LETRS<sup>®</sup>-aligned instruction with English learners at the research site, numerical data is most compelling to guide stakeholders in implementing effective instruction. The research site responds to numerical data and sets numerical goals for reading scores each year. Synthesis with qualitative data, through teacher journals, gives stakeholders an inside look at my daily and moment-by-moment instructional decisions. Mixed methods research is most appropriate to communicate both numerical results and my experience of teaching systematic phonics and phonemic awareness. Creswell and Creswell (2023) described the use of mixed methods to

advocate for change. The outcomes of this study advocate for the English learners at the site.

### **Research Design**

The term *research design* refers to the specific way a research approach is implemented (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study implements a research design called action research, following these steps: 1) Choose a focus area, 2) Collect data, 3) Analyze data, and 4) Create an action plan based on the findings (Mills, 2018). Mills (2018) described action research as cyclical. Collecting data and analyzing data can be done concurrently over time. Additionally, once the action plan is implemented, more data will need to be collected to determine the effect of the action. Each step of the present action research is described next.

#### ***Choose a Focus Area***

The focus area of this study is the effect of explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness with kindergarten English learners. It was chosen based on the convergence of developing reading skills at the research site, and the introduction of LETRS<sup>®</sup> professional development. Units 1 and 2 of LETRS<sup>®</sup> primarily focus on the word recognition strands of Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), which include phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition. I chose instructional materials aligned with these strands. Additionally, equity in reading for English learners is desired, and reading is one area where an achievement gap has been researched (Lleras & Rangel, 2009).

### ***Collect Data***

This study utilized a mixed methods research approach. Weekly progress monitoring was utilized with a pullout group of students to supply numerical data about student reading scores. These measures are described in more detail in the Methods section. For the duration of the study, a pullout group met with the researcher daily for thirty minutes, and received explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness. Qualitative data was collected via teacher journaling. Each instructional day, I journaled about what I learned through LETRS® training, what I implemented with students, what went well, and any challenges faced (see Appendix A). Teacher journals are an effective data collection tool which are often used in action research (Mills, 2018).

### ***Analyze Data***

Scores from progress monitoring tests were graphed over four weeks. Scores were compared between students and starting scores were compared to ending scores. A trendline was created, predicting progress towards grade-level benchmarks in reading. Student trendlines were compared to score goal lines created by FastBridge, a data collection tool for reading assessments. FastBridge will be described more in Research Methods.

Teacher journals were analyzed for common themes using an AI technology called PopAi. AI gave summaries of teacher successes, opportunities for growth, and observations made. Additionally, PopAi gave insights from notes about each individual participant and key themes from student quotes.

### ***Create an Action Plan***

A key purpose for action research is to create an action plan for fellow educational professionals based on the data analyzed from the study (Mills, 2018). An action plan was developed to guide further instruction of English learners using LETRS®-aligned resources and instructional practices. The action plan was developed to share with English language teachers and literacy teachers at the site. Appendix B shows an educational action plan template.

### ***Summary of Research Design***

This research utilized mixed methods action research to best answer the question, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* Numerical data from progress monitoring assessments and a daily teacher journal were used to determine the effectiveness of this type of instruction for English learners. The following section describes the site of research and the participants.

### **Research Site**

Research was conducted at a kindergarten through third grade elementary school in an urban setting. Within the school population, 83.5% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 32% of students are English learners, and 19.9% of students receive special education services. Additionally, 5.7% experience homelessness. Of students who are learning English, 76.3% speak Somali at home, 10.5% speak Spanish, and 4.7% speak Anuak, a South-Sudanese language (Ellevation, 2023; Minnesota Department of Education, 2023).



The surrounding community is a blend of suburban homes and low-income apartments. There are several youth organizations locally which seek to meet physical and emotional needs of children who attend the research site.

### ***Participants***

The participants were a group of English learners in kindergarten. This group consisted of four students at beginning reading levels. These students were pulled from their classroom environment daily for thirty minutes. Students were from Spanish, Somali, and Anuak language backgrounds.

### ***Summary of Research Site***

A group of kindergarten English learners participated in the research study at an urban K-3 school. Both building administration and the IRB at Hamline approved the research. The following section gives a detailed description of instructional procedures used.

### **Instructional Procedures**

This section names and describes the specific materials used during daily instruction to provide students with practice in explicit phonics and phonemic awareness skills.

### ***Explicit and Systematic Instruction of Phonics and Phonemic Awareness***

The selected group of kindergarten English learners met with me for thirty minutes each instructional day in a pullout classroom for four weeks during their spring semester. LETRS® recommends explicit and systematic instruction in literacy skills, incorporating oral language development. The research site has an intervention curriculum called Wonderworks, which aligns with students' reading curriculum.

Wonderworks has been out of use for several years at the site, likely because of other resources available to interventionists, EL teachers, and special education teachers. I decided to use Wonderworks to deliver explicit instruction due to the nature of its components, and alignment to suggestions in LETRS® training. Specifically, it aligned with word recognition skills from Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001). During each week, students were engaged in developing oral language and oral vocabulary, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, high-frequency words, and connected text using decodable readers. Appendices C and D give overviews of the instruction implemented during the research study.

### **Research Methods**

The methods section names and describes the specific modes of data collection and analysis. It gives the most detailed information about what was implemented, when it was implemented, and points to the proper appendices for reference.

#### ***FastBridge Benchmark Scores***

At the start of the 23-24 school year, the research site used FastBridge to assess students' reading skills. In the fall, kindergarten students were tested on concepts of print, onset sounds, letter names, and letter sounds. In the winter, kindergarten students were tested again to determine progress made. The tests in the winter were onset sounds, letter sounds, word segmenting, and nonsense words. In the spring, near the end of the school year, kindergarten students were tested on letter sounds, word segmenting, nonsense words, and sight words. FastBridge gave me baseline data to determine which skills to focus on during instruction and which skills to monitor for progress. FastBridge also

informed me of benchmark scores students were expected to meet in the winter, during this research, and spring, after the completion of this research study.

### ***Kindergarten Screener Scores***

When kindergarten students arrive at the research site in the fall, the EL team identifies students to be screened for their English language proficiency if any language other than English is indicated on their Minnesota Language Survey (MNLS). In the fall, students are only screened for their listening and speaking skills in English. Depending on how students score, they are either flagged to receive English language services, or do not enter the EL program.

Since students were not screened in their reading proficiency, I began my research using FastBridge benchmark data and discussions with participants' classroom teachers. From this starting point, I learned that the participants were in Ehri's Partial Alphabetic Stage and were developing beginning phonological awareness (Ehri, 1996; Moats & Tolman, 2019).

### ***FastBridge Progress Monitoring***

FastBridge has progress monitoring assessments for the reading skills assessed during benchmark testing windows. This research study occurred within the winter benchmark window. I chose to progress monitor the skills students would be tested on in the winter, which the Wonderworks intervention also explicitly addressed: onset sounds, letter sounds, word segmenting, and decodable words. According to FastBridge, the nonsense words and decodable words assessments are interchangeable. I chose to administer decodable words for English learners, so they could connect the sounds they produced to meaningful content.

Explicit and systematic instruction of phonics and phonemic awareness started on Friday, January 5th, 2024. After five instructional days, receiving explicit instruction, I administered the first set of progress monitoring assessments. This occurred in the morning on Friday, January 12th, so as not to interfere with the next week of Wonderworks instruction. Students' classroom teachers were informed of this interruption to their day, and granted permission. Other progress monitoring dates were Monday, January 22nd, Monday, January 29th, and Monday, February 5th.

During progress monitoring, I accessed the FastBridge online platform. As I chose the appropriate assessment, the platform told me which form to place in front of the student. I was given a matching online form, which timed the students and allowed me to document student errors. Examples of teacher forms and student forms are shown in Appendices E-K.

Since oral language proficiency is an indicator of reading skills for English learners, oral language skills were also assessed (Bialystok et al., 2005; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2006; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). Instruction using Wonderworks included an oral language section, focused on answering questions about text, and using new vocabulary words. Each week, on the second instructional day, I transcribed student speech and rated their oral language output using WIDA's Speaking Rubric for Kindergarten (see Appendix L). This is the same rubric used for English learners' annual language proficiency test, WIDA ACCESS 2.0.

### ***Teacher Journal***

Immediately after instruction each day, I engaged in teacher journaling, following the template in Appendix A. The journal entries documented instructional decisions,

successes and opportunities for change within the lesson, and formative assessment data about what I heard and saw from students.

### ***Data Analysis***

Based on benchmark and progress monitoring data, FastBridge created several graphs and charts. The most important for this research was the Progress Monitoring Report. This report used benchmark scores and progress monitored scores to create a trendline, anticipating whether students would or would not meet reasonable growth goals. This report was helpful in comparing students' beginning scores to ending scores, and comparing reading skills to those of their peers.

To analyze the teacher journals, I utilized an AI technology called PopAi to summarize teacher successes, opportunities for growth, and observations, as well as to summarize specific student notes. It also analyzed my journal for common themes in student quotes.

### ***Summary of Methods***

This section described the data collection methods used. Kindergarten English learners in a pullout group were explicitly and systematically taught phonics and phonemic awareness for thirty minutes daily, over four weeks. Each week, students' progress was monitored in onset sounds, letter sounds, word segmenting, and decodable words. Their oral language output was transcribed and rated according to the WIDA Speaking Rubric. Finally, I documented successes, opportunities for growth, student quotes, and observations in a teacher journal.

### **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process**

In order to conduct research at the research site and with the identified participants, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Hamline was involved. After receiving permission from the research site, and gaining approval from my review committee, an application form was sent to the IRB and a date set to review the proposal for research. The IRB granted permission for research to be conducted in the spring of 2024.

### ***Informed Consent***

With the help of an interpreter, families and guardians were called for their verbal consent, in order for their student to participate. After verbal consent, a form was sent home for written consent, in either English or the home language, depending on need. When written consent was obtained, the students themselves were asked if they would like to participate. All students with these three forms of consent participated in the study.

### ***Consent from Research Site***

To conduct research within the district of the research site, permission was needed from the Research, Evaluation, and Assessment team for the district. I completed necessary forms and described the nature of the research, confirmed how student data and privacy would be protected, and outlined how the study would benefit instruction in the district. The Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment and the principal of the site approved the project for Spring 2024.

### **Chapter Summary**

The research followed a mixed methods action research design to answer, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact*

*reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* A group of EL students were progress-monitored weekly in onset sounds, letter sounds, word segmenting, and decodable words, as well as oral language proficiency. Reflection on instructional decisions and student outcomes was documented in a teacher journal. The data was graphed in FastBridge, and teacher journals were analyzed with the help of PopAi technology, leading to a deeper analysis in Chapter Four. Chapter Four presents and analyzes the results of the collected data sources.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

#### Introduction

This chapter describes and analyzes the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the research study, intended to answer the question, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* As an English as a Second Language teacher, I hope to improve reading achievement for English learners, within the literacy trend towards phonics. Data include progress monitoring scores of students' reading skills, trends in reading achievement according to FastBridge, oral language development, and analysis of themes from teacher journaling. The analyses from these sources will be used to create an action plan and final conclusions, presented in Chapter Five.

#### Participants

There were four kindergarten participants in this study who received English language services throughout the 23-24 school year. This section introduces their personal characteristics which contextualize their data.

#### *Hibaq*

Hibaq was a spunky and intelligent girl who regularly desired to make her classmates and I laugh. She spoke both Somali and English at home with her parents and siblings. Instruction was often tedious and too simple for her; she mentioned many times how she was ready to read books.



***Ayan***

Ayan, like Hibaq, liked to make jokes and regularly quoted TikTok videos her siblings had shared with her. She spoke Somali and English at home as well. Ayan qualified for intervention services early in kindergarten and met daily with an interventionist to practice letter sounds. She was sometimes shy about what she knew, but was actively engaged in learning.

***Ariet***

Ariet was intelligent and had a sight memory for decodable words; she could read decodable texts with ease and joy. She and her family spoke both Anuak and English. Anuak is a South Sudanese language. Many families from South Sudan became refugees and were displaced to the research location. Ariet was dually identified as an English learner and a student with a disability. At times, it was difficult for me to understand her speech, and she was developing a greater awareness of managing painful emotions.

***Miguel***

Miguel was the most engaged learner and desired to make progress in reading. His classmates adored him and he had a natural ability to make friends. His family spoke Spanish, but his primary language was English. Early in kindergarten, he qualified for intervention services, and met daily with an interventionist to practice letter sounds. He often struggled to carry information from one task to another, which may have affected his mastery of the material.

## FastBridge Data

The first source of data is FastBridge (Christ et al., 2018), a data collection platform for student reading scores. I investigated students' fall and winter benchmark scores, and collected progress monitoring scores within the platform.

### *Composite Benchmark Scores*

The four student participants took the FastBridge earlyReading test in the fall of 2023 and in winter of 2024, during this research study. Table 1 shows participants' composite benchmark scores in both fall and winter, which represent students' overall reading scores and are indicative of student reading achievement. In the fall, composite scores were calculated from four subtests: Concepts of Print, Onset Sounds, Letter Names, and Letter Sounds. In the winter, composite scores were calculated from four subtests as well: Onset Sounds, Letter Sounds, Word Segmenting, and Nonsense Words. Two of the subtests changed from fall to winter to reflect students' developing reading skills. All student names are pseudonyms.

**Table 1.**

*FastBridge Composite Benchmark Scores*

Student	Fall	Winter
Hibaq	39	50
Ayan	26	39
Ariet	37	46
Miguel	26	29

*Note.* The colors denote, **Some Risk** and **High Risk**.

Students in kindergarten who are at grade level are expected to score 32 in the fall and 50 in winter. In the fall, Hibaq and Ariet scored at or above grade level. Ayan and

Miguel were identified as being at risk of reading failure<sup>3</sup> by FastBridge, denoted by the dark pink highlighting. Based on benchmark scores, FastBridge recommended small group interventions in phonemic awareness and phonics for Ayan and Miguel. They began receiving Tier 2 intervention services shortly after fall benchmark testing.

In the winter, Hibaq remained at grade level. Ariet scored just below grade level and was identified as some risk for reading failure. Ayan and Miguel remained within the high risk category, and continued to receive targeted Tier 2 intervention services. FastBridge recommended small group interventions for all four students in phonemic awareness and phonics.

At the research site, only Ayan and Miguel qualified for Tier 2 services, based on interventionist staff's criteria. However, Hibaq and Ariet were recommended to improve their phonics and phonemic awareness. Because of the site's commitment to LETRS<sup>®</sup> and use of FastBridge, classroom teachers began implementing whole group interventions, and ESL teachers were recommended to start lessons with short FastBridge interventions as needed.

### ***Subskills Benchmark Scores***

In the winter, participants' FastBridge composite scores were calculated using four subtests: Onset Sounds, Word Segmenting, Letter Sounds, and Nonsense Words. I chose to progress monitor these four skills for the duration of my research study. Instead of Nonsense Words, I monitored Decodable Words, since those are words students may have heard or seen in their daily lives. Table 2 shows students' benchmark scores in each of the subskills I monitored.

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<sup>3</sup> The term *reading failure* is used by FastBridge (Christ et al., 2018) and means an inability to gain the skill of reading.

**Table 2.***Winter Benchmark Comparison by Subskill*

Student	Onset Sounds	Nonsense Words	Letter Sounds	Word Segmenting
Hibaq	16	10	25	18
Ayan	11	1	21	8
Ariet	15	7	24	10
Miguel	5	0	1	0

*Note.* The colors denote, **Some Risk** and **High Risk**.

In Onset Sounds and Nonsense Words, Hibaq scored at or above normative scores for kindergarten. She was identified at some risk for reading failure in Letter Sounds and Word Segmenting. Ariet scored at or above grade level in Nonsense Words, but was flagged as some risk in Onset Sounds, Letter Sounds, and Word Segmenting. Ayan’s composite winter benchmark score flagged her as high risk, but I was pleased to see she was only low risk in Letter Sounds, and her scores were comparable to her peers. Miguel was flagged as high risk across all subskills.

***Onset Sounds Progress Monitoring***

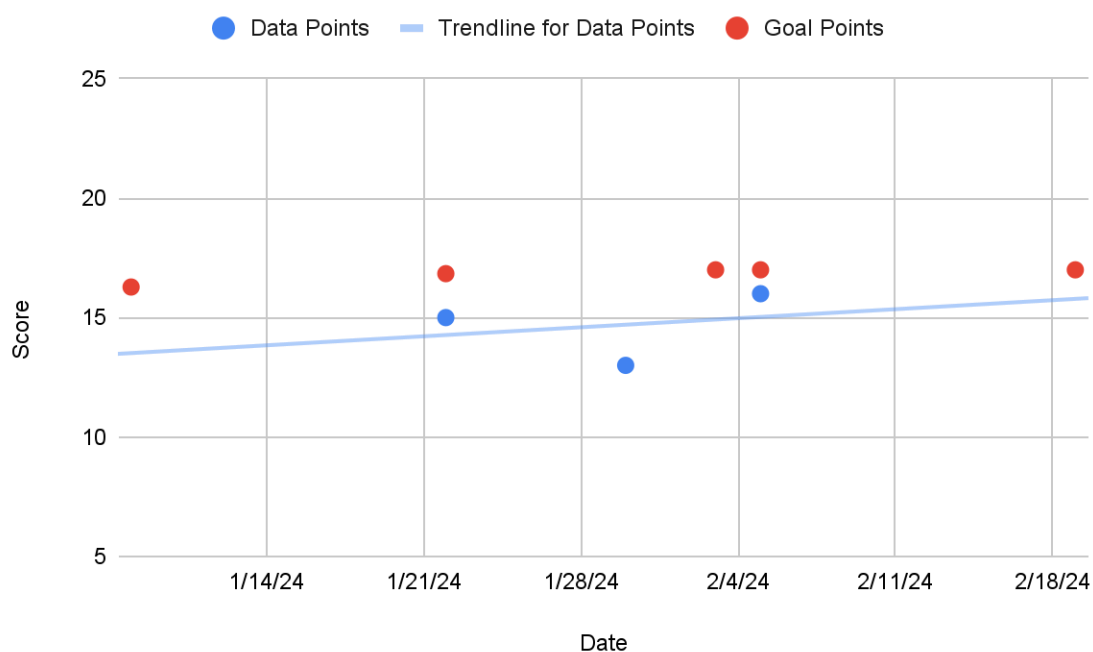
The first subskill I monitored was Onset Sounds. Once per week, over four weeks, I asked students individually about the first sounds from a selection of words they heard. The words they heard were associated with pictures, to connect with their prior knowledge. Appendix E gives an example of the script I used, such as, “This is a chicken, spider, legs, and ice. Which one begins with /sp/?” Students pointed to the picture they believed started with the given sound. There were also questions such as, “What’s the first sound in the word road?” Instead of pointing, students were expected to say the

sound /r/. Appendix F gives an example of images students saw as part of their monitoring. Students did not have a time limit for this assessment.

**Hibaq.** Figure 1 shows Hibaq’s Onset Sounds progress monitoring scores.

**Figure 1.**

*Onset Sounds-Hibaq*



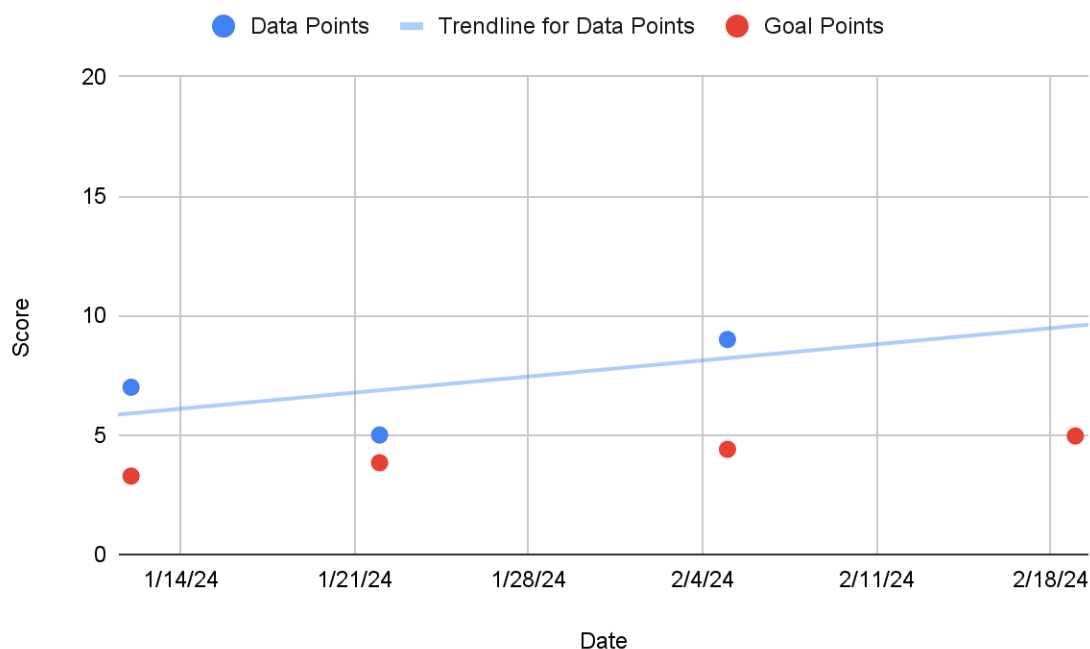
Hibaq was absent for the first week of instruction and progress monitoring, so she did not have a data point for the first week. FastBridge created goal scores for students based on their fall benchmark scores and reasonable growth throughout the school year. This participant scored 13 on her fall benchmark test, and was labeled as low risk. For the duration of research, she remained just below her goal line, scoring 16 at the end. Extrapolating the data, she was predicted to achieve a score of 17 in early March, 2024, which would show her out of the risk zone for the school year.

Hibaq started this research period as a strong student in phonics and phonemic awareness. While monitoring, I could see she had strong listening skills, and could associate letter sounds with the given words and pictures. Based on her performance, I was confident that her spring benchmark scores would be on target for reading success.

**Ayan.** Figure 2 shows Ayan's Onset Sounds progress monitoring scores.

**Figure 2.**

*Onset Sounds-Ayan*



In the last week of research, I had a scheduling conflict, which prevented me from monitoring Ayan. Therefore, she did not have a data point for the final week. Ayan scored 11 on her winter benchmark, placing her in the high risk category. FastBridge set a lower goal score than for Hibaq, since Ayan started the school year able to identify 0 onset sounds, while Hibaq could identify 13.

Ayan made noticeable progress since the beginning of the school year. She started with a progress monitoring score of 7, which was above her goal score of 3.

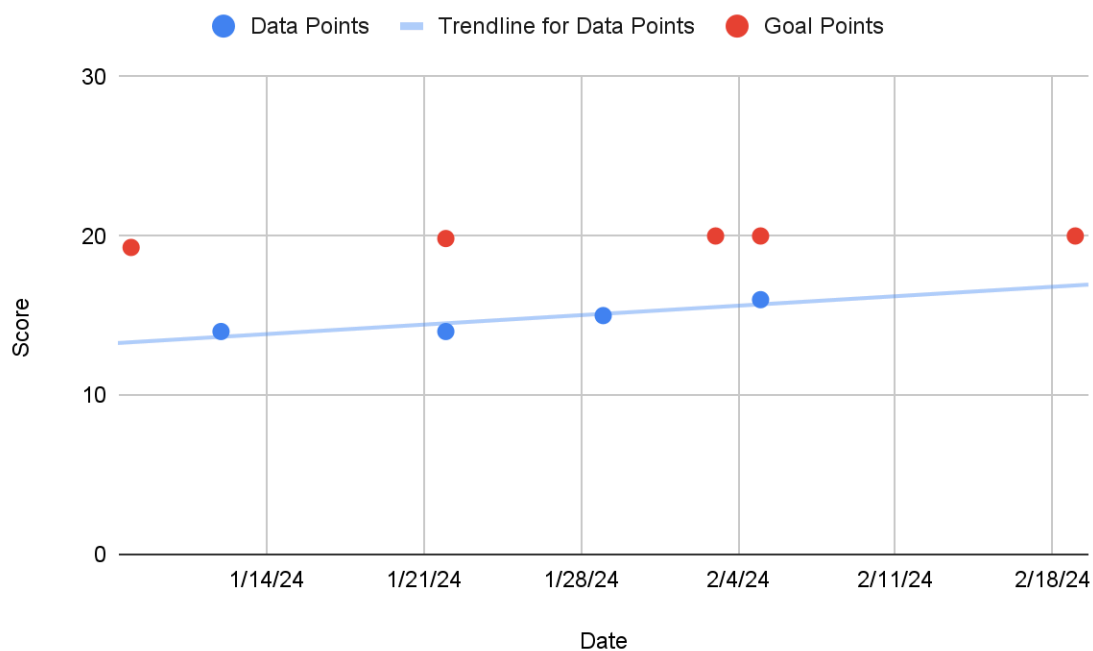
Extrapolating the trendline, Ayan was predicted to remain above her goal line for the remainder of the school year. If she maintained her trendline trajectory, she could exit the high risk category and be low risk by the start of May 2024.

This participant received Tier 2 intervention focused on identifying letter sounds. From three data points, she made growth in onset sounds during the research study. I believe my instruction, along with her intervention, helped her connect letter sounds and words to score well on her progress monitoring assessments.

**Ariet.** Figure 3 shows Ariet's Onset Sounds progress monitoring scores.

**Figure 3.**

*Onset Sounds-Ariet*



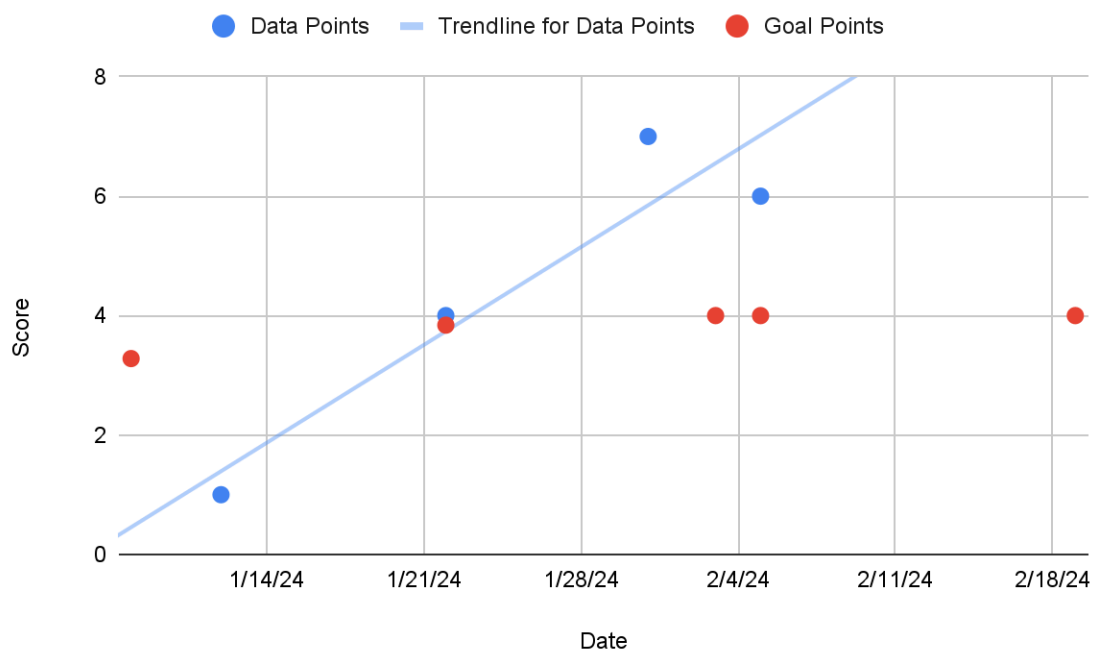
Ariet scored 16 on her fall benchmark, which placed her as low risk for reading failure. By the end of kindergarten, FastBridge set a goal score at 17. Ariet scored below her goal line during the research instruction but followed an upward trendline closely towards her goal. The graph shows she was predicted to meet her goal in late March of 2024.

Ariet had been my student since fall of 2023, after she was identified as an English language learner. I noticed that she entered into new experiences slowly, and took her time to display what she truly knew. I believe that one reason she performed below her goal is because she was warming up to the type of instruction I was doing, to the types of assessments given, and to being one-on-one for assessment, rather than in a familiar, small-group setting.

**Miguel.** Figure 4 shows Miguel's Onset Sounds progress monitoring scores.

**Figure 4.**

*Onset Sounds-Miguel*



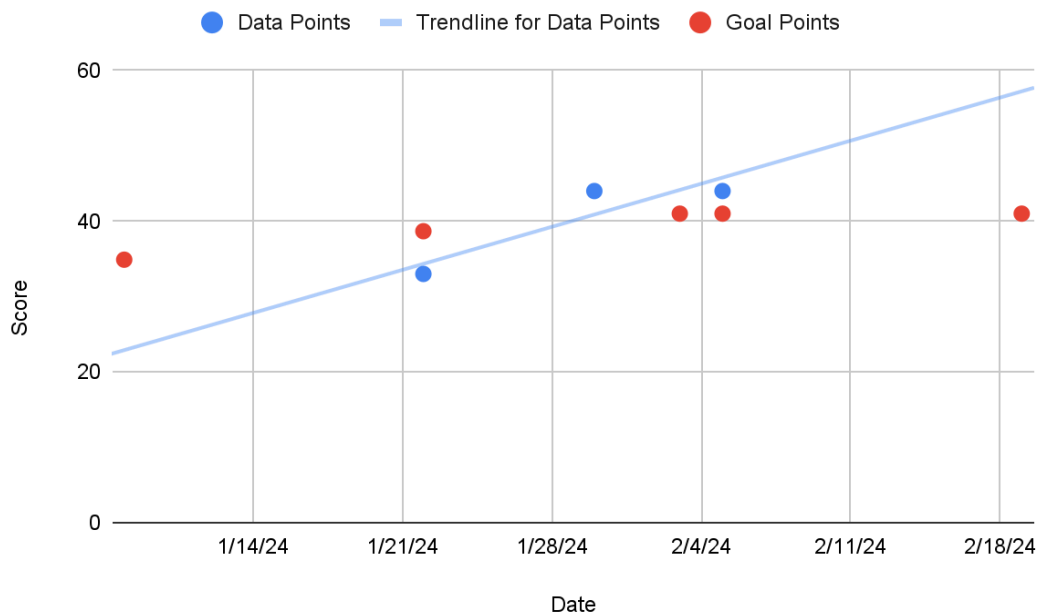


Miguel scored 0 on his fall benchmark score and was identified as high risk. During research, he surpassed his goal in the second week, with a steep upward trendline. During assessment, I noticed Miguel answered each question I asked in the order the pictures were placed on the page. For my first question, he pointed to the first picture. For my second question, he pointed to the second picture, etc. I restated the instructions multiple times throughout the four-week study, but he never changed his strategy. In some instances, he answered correctly because the sound I asked for matched his chosen picture. Because of this, I am not confident that the data points accurately reflect what Miguel knew and could do.

### ***Letter Sounds Progress Monitoring***

The second subskill I monitored was Letter Sounds. Once per week, over four weeks, I asked students individually to identify the sounds made by letters on a page. Appendix H shows an example of the page students saw. Students read as many letter sounds as they could in one minute.

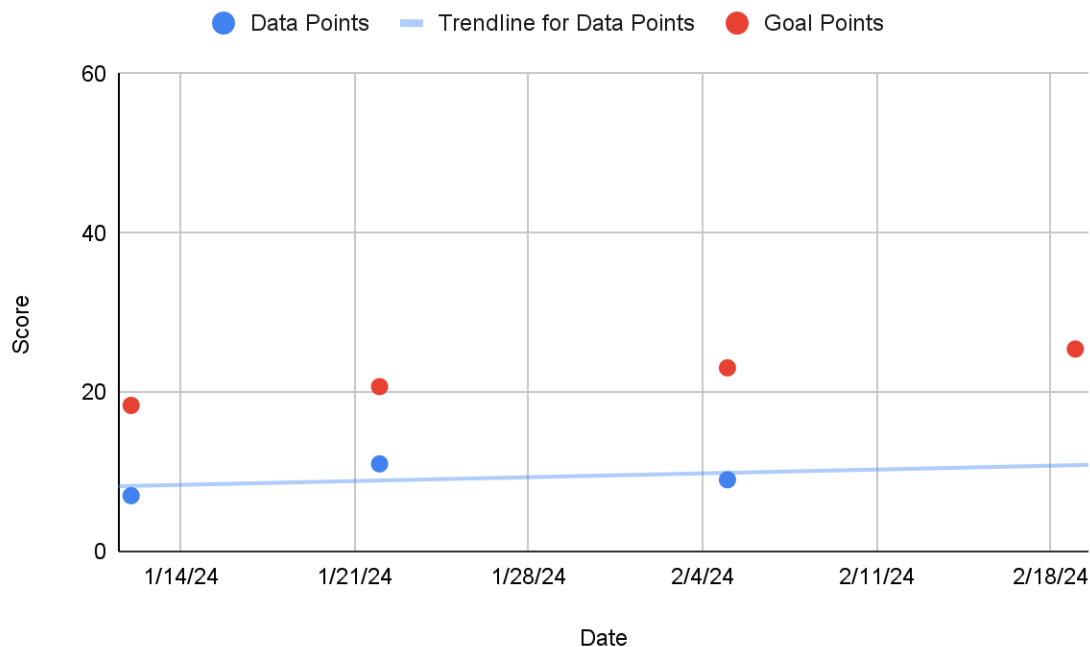
**Hibaq.** Figure 5 shows Hibaq's scores from progress monitoring in Letter Sounds.

**Figure 5.***Letter Sounds-Hibaq*

Hibaq began the school year identifying 18 letter sounds, naming her as low risk for reading failure. For her winter benchmark, she identified 25 letter sounds. In the winter, this was considered some risk for kindergarten reading skills.

This participant was absent for the first week of instruction, so she did not have a data point for the first week. She surpassed FastBridge's goal for her in the second week of instruction, with a steep upward trendline. During small group instruction, Hibaq could quickly name letter sounds. She was often the first student to answer a question if it involved making the sound of a letter. I was confident that she would score low risk for her spring benchmark in May of 2024.

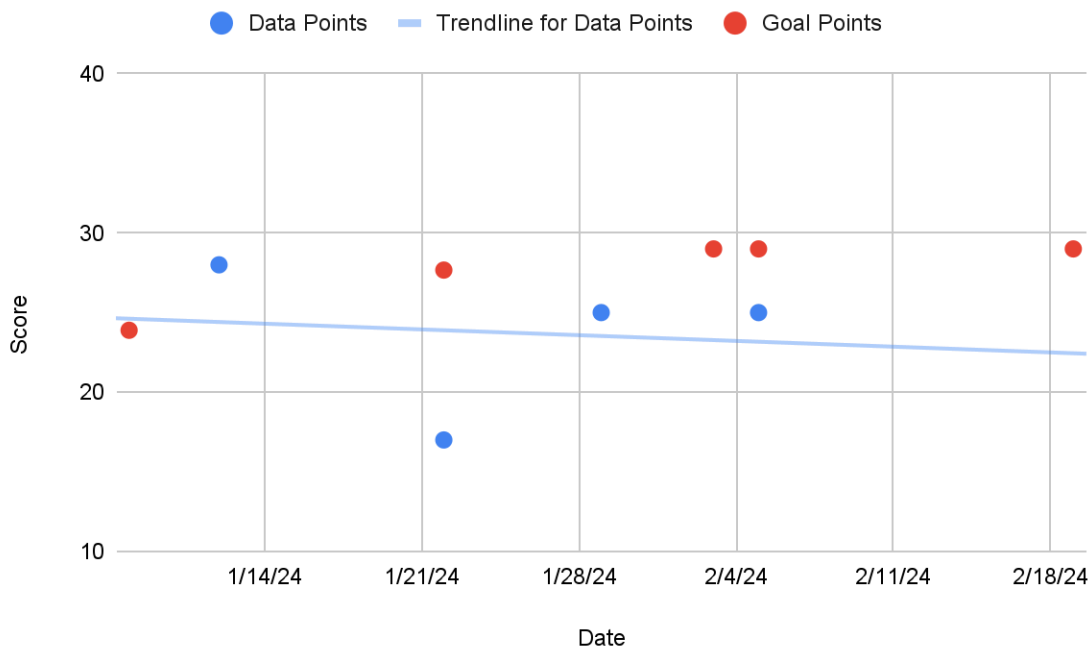
**Ayan.** Figure 6 shows Ayan's progress monitoring scores for Letter Sounds.

**Figure 6.***Letter Sounds-Ayan*

In the fall, Ayan scored 2 in letter sounds, putting her at some risk. At that time, she qualified for Tier 2 intervention in Letter Sounds and met with an intervention teacher daily. After receiving this intervention, she scored 21 on her winter benchmark. This was still flagged as some risk, but showed growth in this subskill.

During this research study, she made slight upward progress but scored below her FastBridge goal line. I believe her work on letter sounds with an interventionist teacher greatly helped her get to this point. Due to a scheduling conflict, I was unable to monitor her for a fourth data point.

**Ariet.** Figure 7 shows Ariet's progress monitoring scores in Letter Sounds.

**Figure 7.***Letter Sounds-Ariet*

In the fall, she scored 5 in the Letter Sounds assessment, and was identified as low risk. In the winter, she scored 24 and was flagged as some risk. This student did not receive intervention services and made progress from classroom instruction.

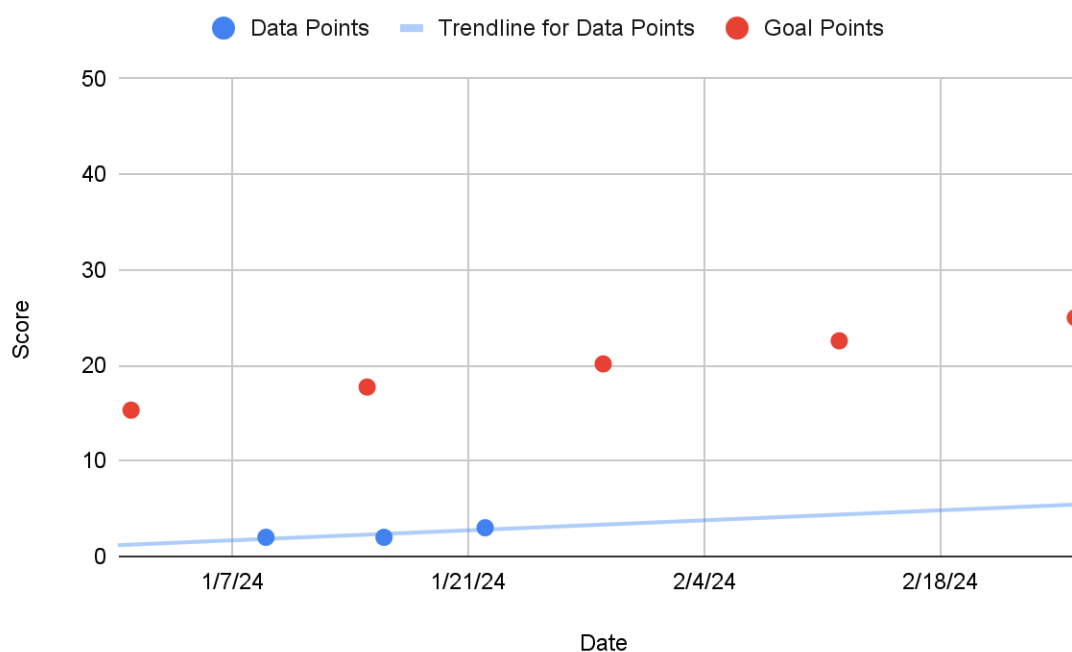
During the research study, Ariet scored once above her FastBridge goal line and three times below it. A trendline through the data points yields a downward-sloping line. Within small group instruction, Ariet, along with Hibaq, was usually the first to name letter sounds in phonics activities. I was confident that Ariet had letter-sound correspondence. One explanation for her downward trendline is the time constraint during the assessment. Each student was given one minute to complete the benchmark test in Letter Sounds. For Ariet, time constraints, or any pressurized situation, caused her to perform below her capacity. During my assessments of her, sometimes she would look

away from the page, pause before answering, or show confusion if a letter was represented a different way than in her class (ex. qu on the assessment, q in class). I do not believe the data points reflected her knowledge.

**Miguel.** Figure 8 shows Miguel's progress monitoring scores in Letter Sounds.

**Figure 8.**

*Letter Sounds-Miguel*



In the fall, Miguel scored 1 in Letter Sounds, placing him at some risk. At that time, he qualified for Tier 2 intervention in Letter Sounds and met with an intervention teacher daily to practice and review. In the winter, after receiving his intervention, he scored 1, which flagged him as high risk.

During the research study, he scored 2, 2, and 3, making minimal growth. His projected trendline is much below FastBridge's goals for him. This caused both me and the intervention teacher concern, especially since the classroom teacher reviewed letter

sounds daily. This data could be grounds to assess the effectiveness of more intense interventions with this student. His intervention teacher performed the progress monitoring assessments, since she was already responsible for inputting that data. The final week, she was unable to do so, and therefore Miguel did not have a fourth data point.

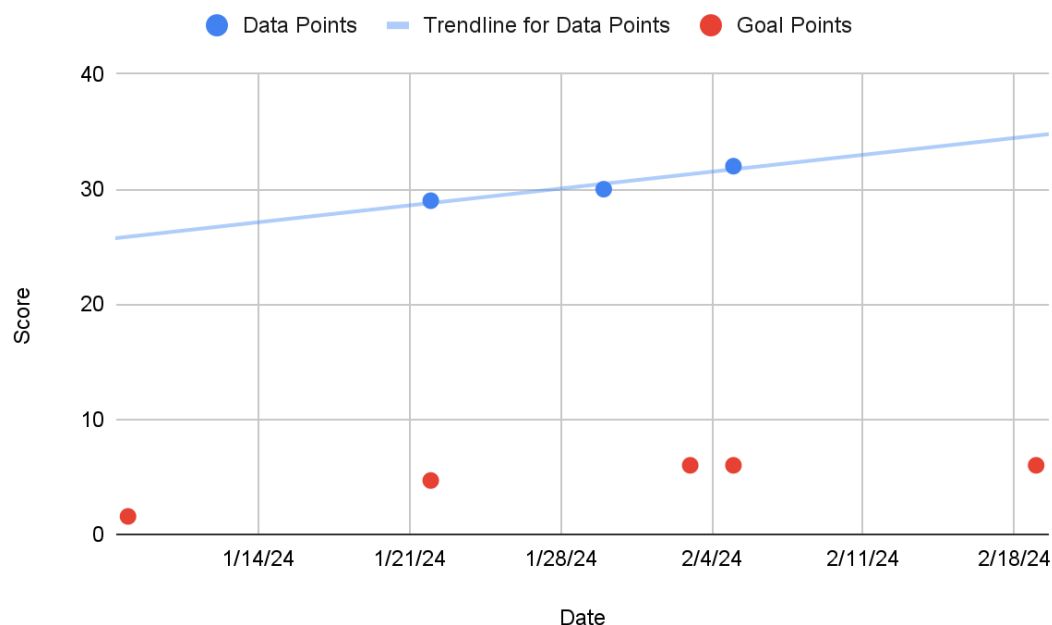
Both Ayan and Miguel qualified for Tier 2 service in the fall. While Ayan made noticeable progress towards her goals, Miguel did not yet make gains in this subskill.

### ***Word Segmenting Progress Monitoring***

The third subskill I monitored was Word Segmenting. Once per week, over four weeks, I asked students individually to identify each sound in a three- or four-sound word. Appendix I shows an example of the administrator's instructions and list of words. Students had no materials in front of them and had unlimited time for this assessment.

Word segmenting was not a skill kindergartners practiced at this point of the school year. As a result, this task was difficult for them. During fall benchmarks, FastBridge tested Concepts of Print and Letter Names, but not Word Segmenting. Word Segmenting was tested for winter and spring benchmarks only.

**Hibaq.** Figure 9 shows Hibaq's progress monitoring scores in Word Segmenting.

**Figure 9.***Word Segmenting-Hibaq*

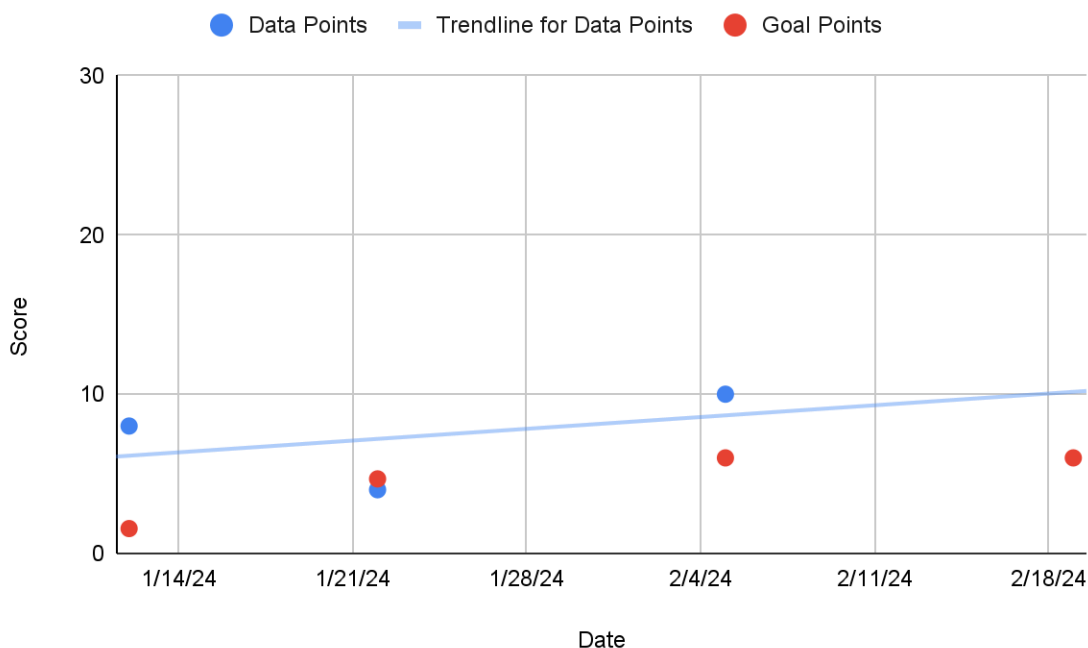
Just before this research study, Hibaq scored 18 on her winter benchmark, marking her as some risk. FastBridge set a moderate goal for her, assuming a starting score of 0. Her data points showed she scored much higher than her goal, and much higher than her initial benchmark score. In the spring, students were considered low risk if they scored 30 or above, and Hibaq already scored this during her last week of the research study. Based on this data, I was confident that she would not be at risk in Word Segmenting.

At the research site, teachers used the phrase “touch spell” to refer to segmenting and spelling words by their sounds. In kindergarten, students did not start this until midway through the year. However, Hibaq had a first-grade sister who touch-spelled every day and was also above her peers in this skill. I believe Hibaq’s success was in part due to her early exposure to touch spelling, in addition to her early grasp of sound-letter correspondence.

**Ayan.** Figure 10 shows Ayan's progress monitoring scores in Word Segmenting.

**Figure 10.**

*Word Segmenting-Ayan*



Ayan scored 8 on her winter benchmark in this skill, marking her as high risk. FastBridge assumed a starting point of 0 in the winter and set a goal for her of 6. During research, she scored above her goal twice and below her goal once. During the last week of research instruction, I was unable to monitor her due to a scheduling conflict.

I was encouraged to see an upward trendline in her data. Although Ayan scored at high risk for her winter benchmark, she achieved a score of 10 within the winter benchmark window which would have placed her as some risk instead of high risk. In the spring, she would have to score between 24 and 30 to score at some risk. Her trendline did not show her achieving a score of 24 during the 23-24 school year.

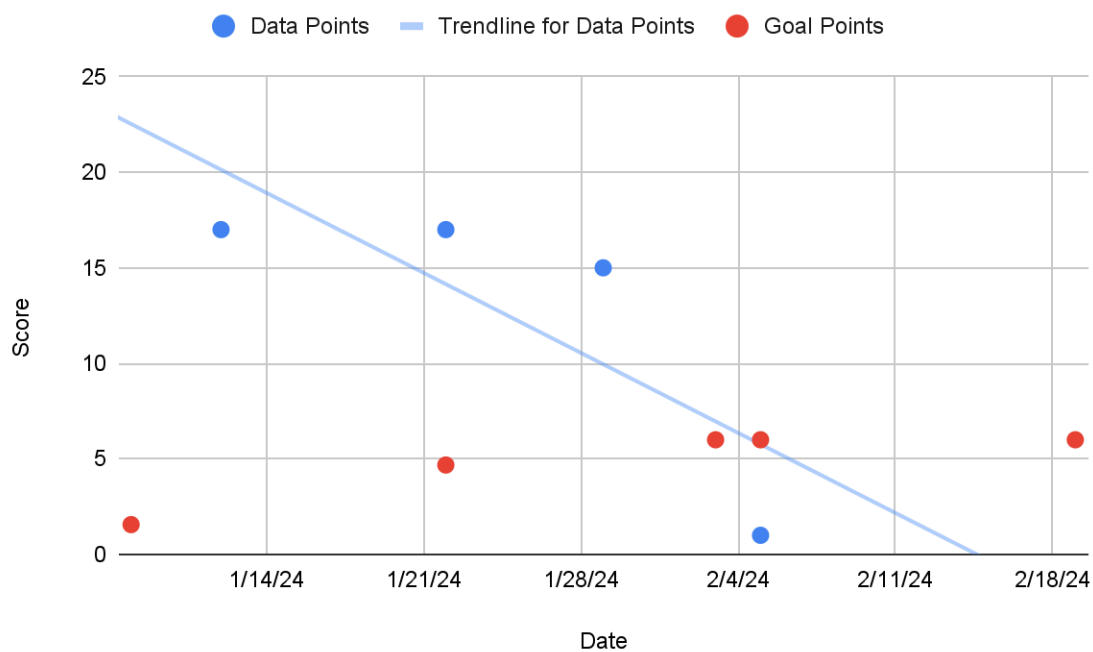


Word Segmenting is a phonological awareness assessment, in that students can complete the task without necessarily knowing the letters that form the word. They only need to identify each phoneme within the word through hearing. Ayan scored similarly on this task as the Letter Sounds test. I propose that Ayan was still becoming familiar with all the phonemes in the English language. I believe that as she becomes better at identifying these sounds, she will be able to isolate these sounds in words more efficiently.

**Ariet.** Figure 11 shows Ariet's progress monitoring scores in Word Segmenting.

**Figure 11.**

*Word Segmenting-Ariet*



FastBridge set the same goal points for Ariet as for the other participants. On her winter benchmark, she scored 10, which flagged her as some risk. During the first three weeks of research, she scored above her benchmark and above her goal points. In the fourth

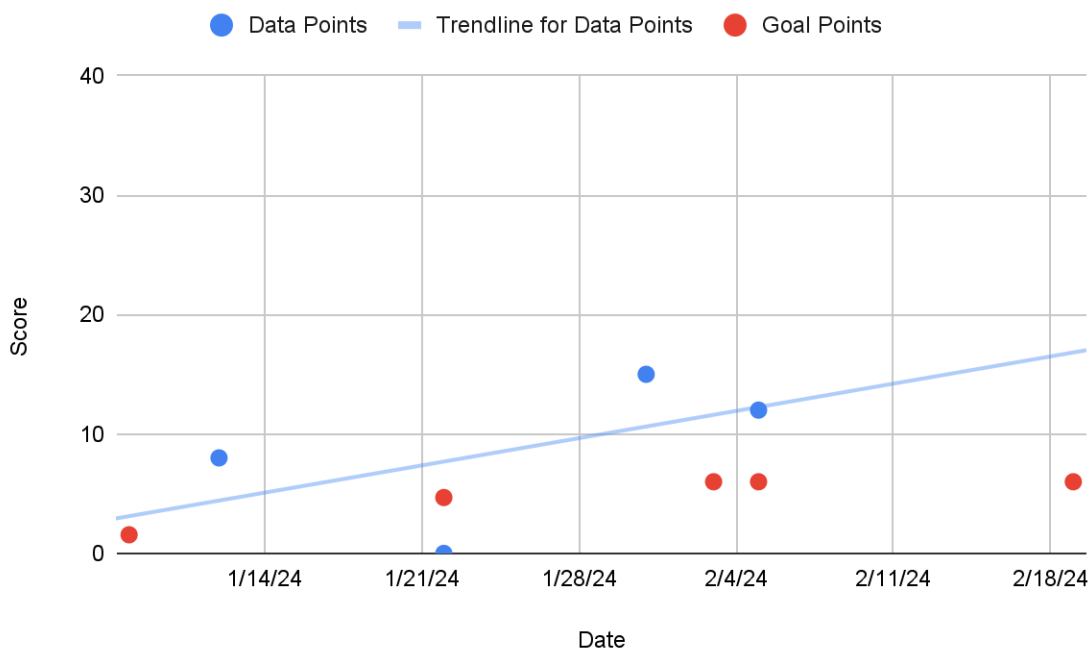
week, this student experienced an upsetting morning. At that time, she had difficulty self-regulating, which caused her to underperform in the Word Segmenting task.

Ariet's trendline was negative with or without the fourth data point. In Spring 2024, she would have to score between 25 and 29 to be considered low risk. Her data does not show her making these gains towards reading success.

**Miguel.** Figure 12 shows Miguel's progress monitoring scores in Word Segmenting.

**Figure 12.**

*Word Segmenting-Miguel*



On his winter benchmark, Miguel scored 0, placing him at high risk. As the weeks of research instruction continued, he scored above his goal points three out of four weeks. His trendline shows steep growth, and predicted that he would become low risk in this skill by the start of April 2024.

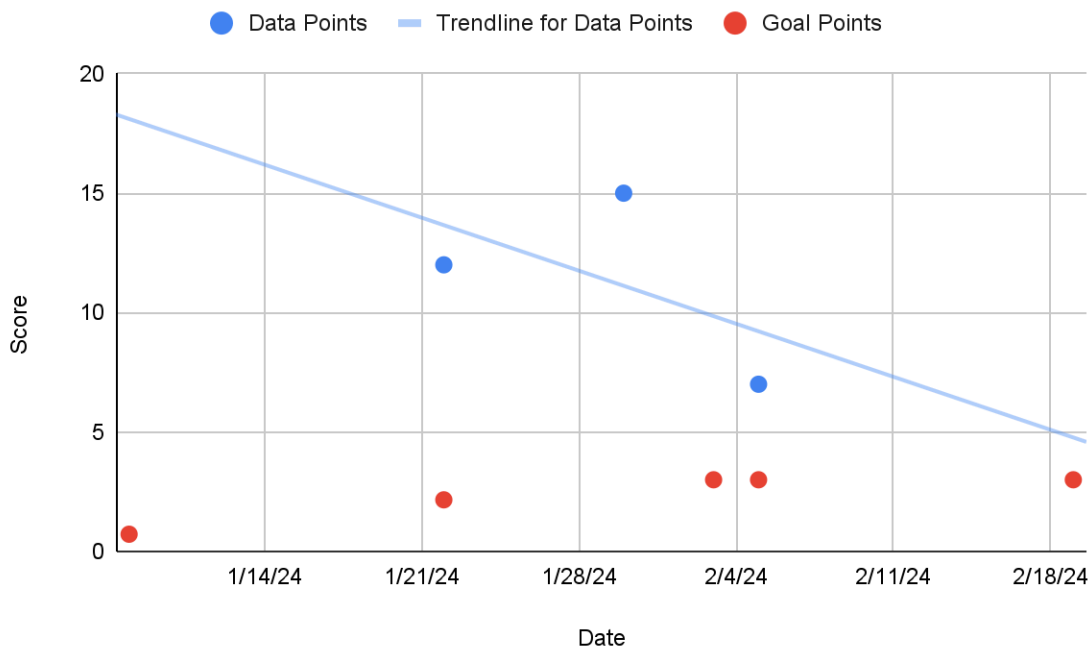
Miguel grasped phonemic awareness tasks more than phonics tasks during instruction. He was able to hear and differentiate unique sounds in the words he heard. I was surprised by his fast growth, since he received intervention in Letter Sounds. This data suggests that he needed less assistance in phonemic awareness and more assistance in developing phoneme-grapheme correspondence.

### ***Decodable Words Progress Monitoring***

The fourth subskill I monitored was Decodable Words. Once per week, over four weeks, I asked students individually to read either each sound in three-sound words, or decodable words as a whole. Appendix J shows the administrator scoring sheet, and Appendix K shows an example of the decodable words placed in front of students to read. Students had one minute to complete this test.

Students did not practice decoding words in class until later in the school year, and so this skill was challenging for them. During fall benchmarks, FastBridge tested Concepts of Print and Letter Names, but not Decodable Words. Instead of Decodable Words, the research site tests Nonsense Words. FastBridge specifies that Nonsense Words and Decodable Words assessments can be interchanged at the discretion of the site. I chose to monitor Decodable Words, but students were tested on Nonsense Words for their winter and spring benchmarks.

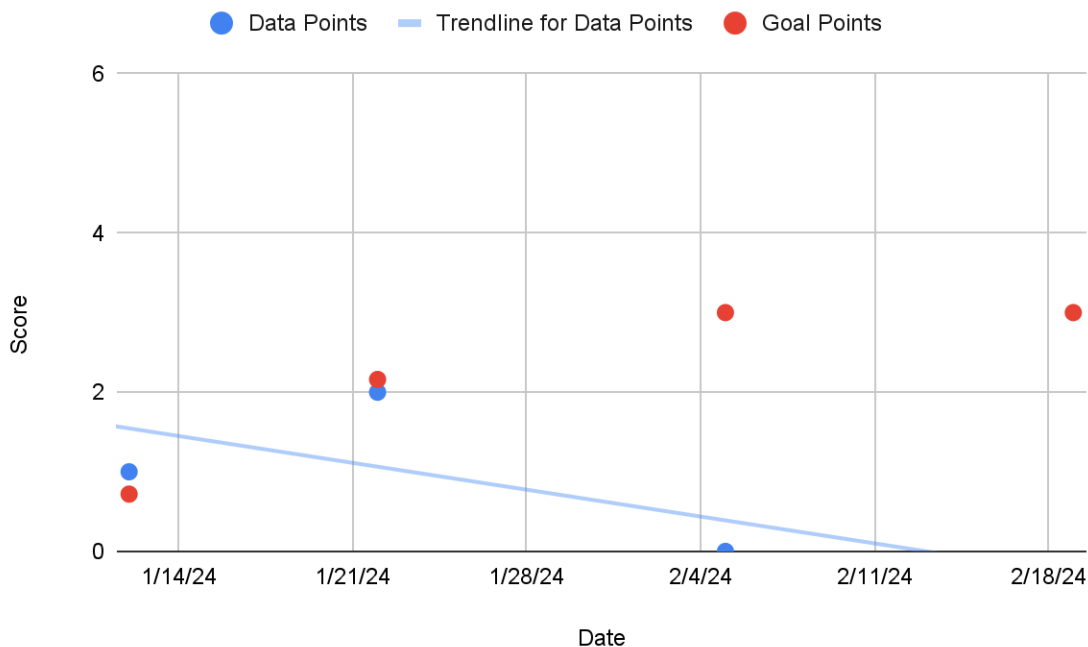
**Hibaq.** Figure 13 shows Hibaq's progress monitoring scores in Decodable Words.

**Figure 13.***Decodable Words-Hibaq*

On her winter benchmark in Nonsense Words, Hibaq scored 10, which placed her at low risk of reading failure. During instruction, she consistently scored above her goal points. Two of her data points were above the low risk score for the spring.

Since Hibaq's last score was lower than the other data points, her trendline was negative. When I assessed her, she sounded out each letter, which counted as reading the whole word. In the third week, she tried reading the whole words, rather than sounding out the letters. I propose her score dropped with the use of this new strategy. However, it showed that she was already reading CVC words with some level of accuracy. I was confident she would score low risk on her spring benchmark.

**Ayan.** Figure 14 shows Ayan's progress monitoring scores in Decodable Words.

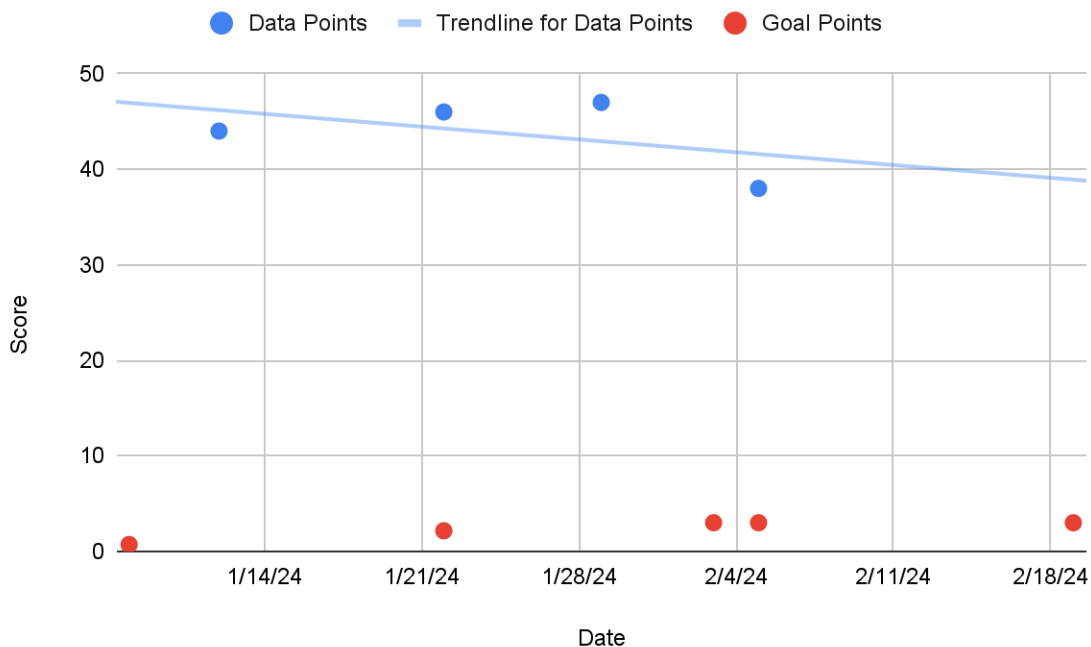
**Figure 14.***Decodable Words-Ayan*

On her winter benchmark in Nonsense Words, Ayan scored 1, placing her at high risk.

During instruction, she closely matched her goal points during the first two weeks. In the third week, her score dropped to 0.

Decoding sounds was difficult for Ayan. She was learning to associate phonemes with graphemes through intervention instruction. In addition, kindergarten teachers had just begun teaching decoding as a skill before this research project started. Therefore, it was completely new for Ayan to put sounds together to form words. It was more difficult to blend sounds because the sounds she associated with the letters were not always correct.

**Ariet.** Figure 15 shows Ariet's progress monitoring scores in Decodable Words.

**Figure 15.***Decodable Words-Ariet*

On her winter benchmark in Nonsense Words, Ariet scored 7, placing her at low risk. During instruction, she scored much higher, even reading every word on the test page! Her trendline was negative, but her scores were higher than first grade spring benchmark norms.

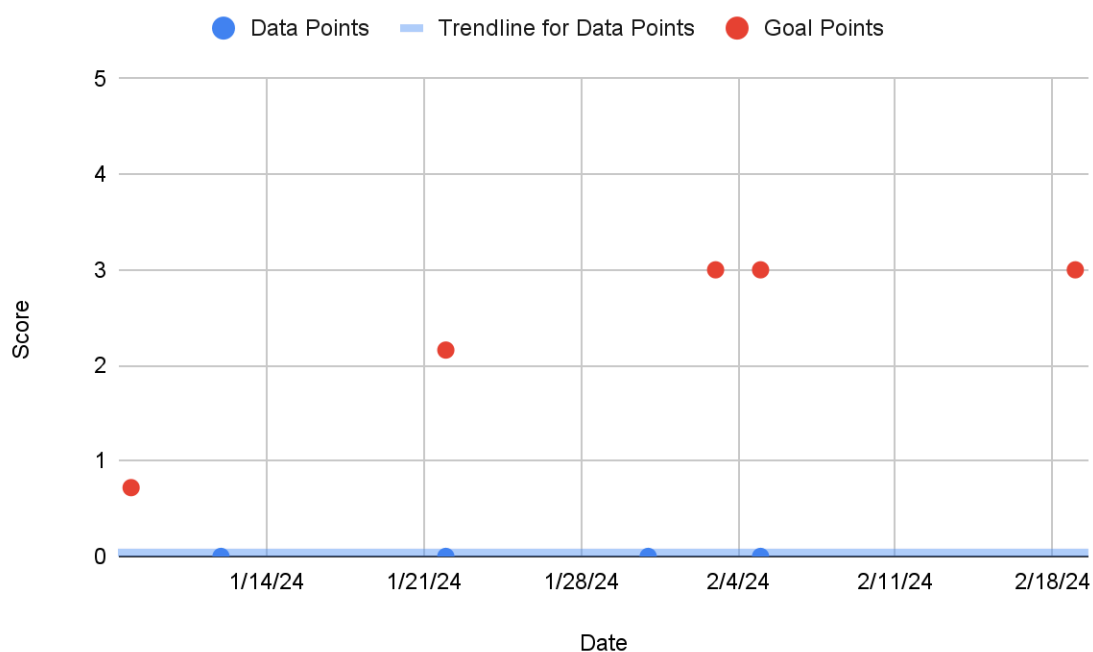
I believe that the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern of these words was a pattern familiar to Ariet. She could quickly recall the pattern and read the word. Her Letter Sounds scores were also high, but she did not sound out any words on the Decodable Words test. She was a student who did not follow the usual progression from phonemic awareness to letter sounds to decoding words (Moats & Tolman, 2019). I believe that Ariet still needs assistance developing phonemic awareness and manipulating

sounds in words. As she continues to read, she will need to lean on decoding skills as well as her identification of the CVC pattern.

**Miguel.** Figure 16 shows Miguel's progress monitoring scores in Decodable Words.

**Figure 16.**

*Decodable Words-Miguel*



On his Nonsense Words winter benchmark, Miguel scored 0, placing him at high risk.

During research, he continued to score 0 through all four weeks. This was the most difficult test for him. As he was trying to sound out each word, many of his letter sounds were incorrect. In addition, he did not blend the sounds he made together. As his mastery of letter sounds increases, and the understanding that letter sounds blend to make words, his outcomes on this assessment will increase.

## **Oral Language Output**

My second source of data was the oral language output of students, as measured by the WIDA Speaking Rubric for Kindergarten, as shown in Appendix L. During instructional episodes, especially days the curriculum focused on building oral language, I transcribed student speech and rated it using WIDA's rubric.

### ***Kindergarten WIDA Screener Scores***

When students were registered within the school district, their guardians completed a language survey, indicating languages spoken at home or languages the student regularly heard. If a student had a language other than English identified on their language survey, an ESL teacher administered the WIDA screener. Since the participants were in kindergarten, they took the WIDA kindergarten screener. Students who tested proficient in English were not eligible for English language services. Students who were still developing proficiency entered ESL services, with guardian permission.

Each participant in this research study qualified for English language services. Their screener scores included a speaking and listening score. Since I assessed student speaking scores during research, Table 3 shows students' initial speaking scores on their screener tests.



**Table 3.***Participants' WIDA Screener Score in Speaking*

Student	WIDA Speaking Score	Growth Indicators		
		Discourse	Sentence	Word/Phrase
Hibaq	4	Create coherent texts using short sentences that convey an intended purpose with emerging organizational patterns; Connect ideas across a whole text through some frequently used cohesive devices; Elaborate or condense ideas through a few types of elaboration	Extend or enhance meanings through sentence fragments and emerging use of simple sentences	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with some frequently used words and phrases with some precision
Ayan	2	Create coherent texts using phrases or short sentences to represent ideas with an intended purpose; Connect ideas across a whole text through an emerging use of cohesive devices; Elaborate or condense ideas through simple elaboration	Extend or enhance meanings through words, pictures, phrases and chunks of language	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with emerging use of words and phrases with attempted precision
Ariet	3	Create coherent texts using short sentences linked together to convey an intended purpose; Connect ideas across a whole text through a few frequently used cohesive devices; Elaborate or condense ideas through simple	Extend or enhance meanings through sentence fragments	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with few frequently used words and phrases with emerging precision

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		types of elaboration		
Miguel	2	Create coherent texts using phrases or short sentences to represent ideas with an intended purpose; Connect ideas across a whole text through an emerging use of cohesive devices; Elaborate or condense ideas through simple elaboration	Extend or enhance meanings through words, pictures, phrases and chunks of language	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with emerging use of words and phrases with attempted precision

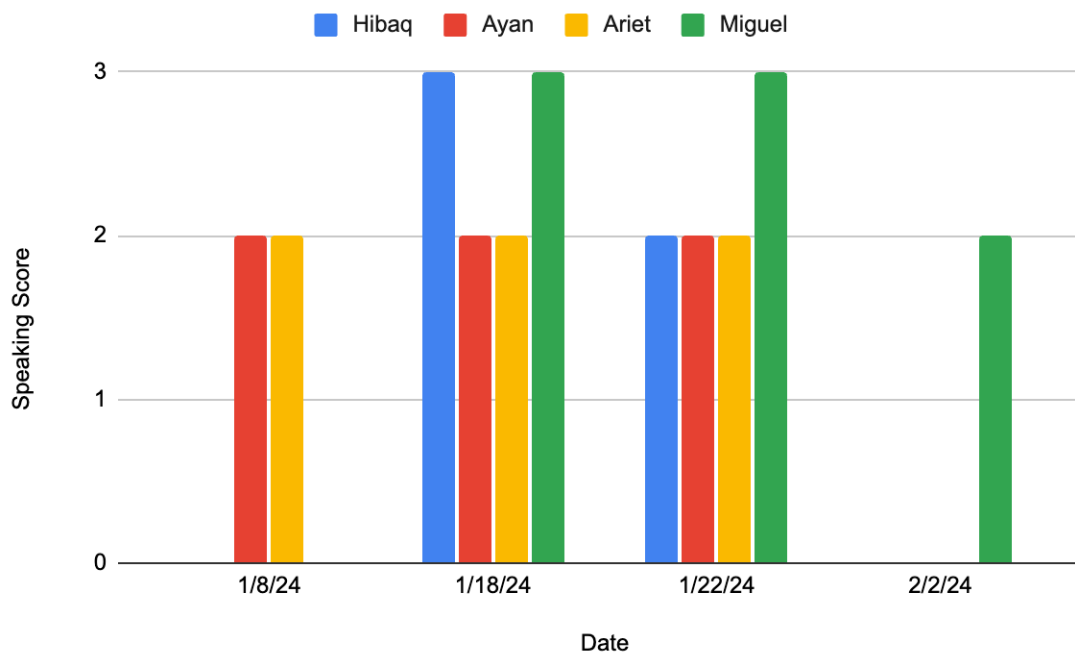
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*Note.* Growth indicators are taken from WIDA (2020).

According to initial screener scores in speaking, Hibaq was able to speak in complete sentences, using a variety of sentence types. She could use technical vocabulary related to content areas. Ariet was able to use some expanded sentences, using some specific vocabulary. Ayan and Miguel were able to use phrases and short sentences (WIDA, 2021).

### ***Oral Language Scores***

Each week, the curriculum I used focused on oral language, and prompted me to ask the students questions about the text I read aloud to them and new vocabulary. I transcribed student responses and scored them. Figure 17 shows their results.

**Figure 17.***Weekly Oral Language Scores*

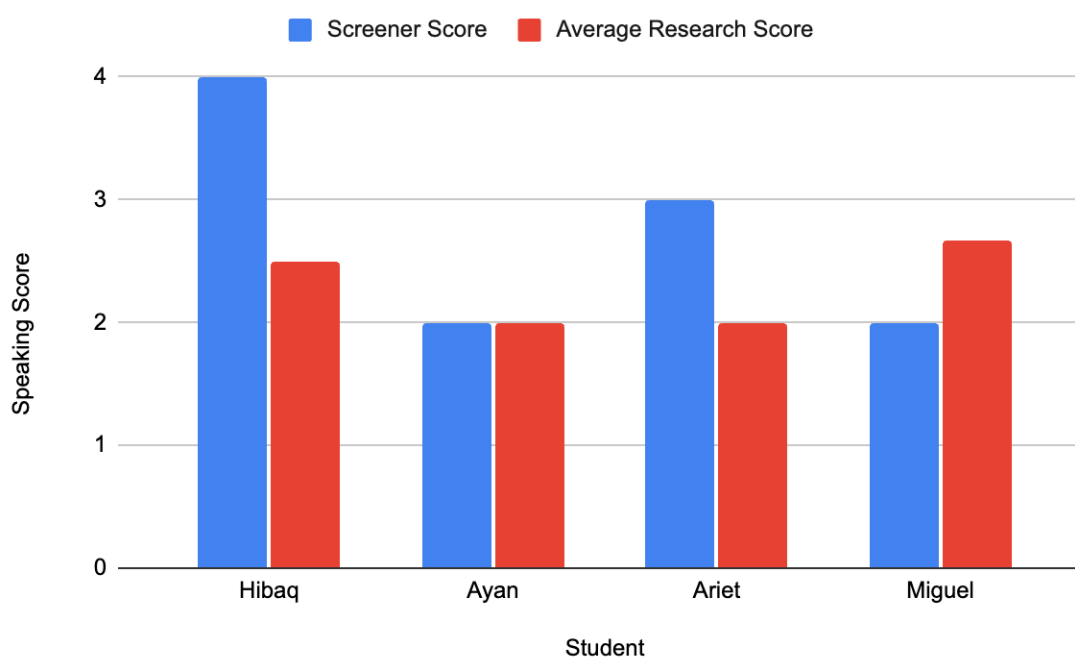
The data shows that students performed at a Level 2 most often. Level 2 consists of phrases and short sentences, using general vocabulary related to the topic (WIDA, 2021). For example, when I asked, “What might you see when you examine your bookbag?”, Ayan responded, “We get a lunch pack” and Ariet said, “We can put our lunch box.” These are short sentences using words that are both familiar to the students and on topic.

Three times over two weeks, Hibaq and Miguel responded at Level 3. Level 3 speakers use simple and expanded sentences with details and specific vocabulary words related to the content (WIDA, 2021). When I asked, “What are some ingredients in your favorite meal?”, Hibaq stated, “Flour, eggs, white chocolate, cinnamon”. While this was not a full sentence, she used a list of related items, and used specific and detailed words

to describe ingredients. When I asked a question related to a text we read, “How does Rockwell make himself look like a superhero?”, Miguel answered, “He put on a hat and his leash on a dog.” This is a complex sentence with two clauses, describing what Miguel had seen and read in the text.

**Figure 18.**

*Speaking Scores Comparison*



After viewing Figure 18, I noticed that one participant’s average research score was higher than his screener score. The others’ average research scores were equal to or lower than their screener score. This was intriguing, considering this research took place four and a half months since the screener was administered. One explanation could be that participants may not have been practicing oral language in their classroom, especially if there were students who raised their hands more often or were more vocal. Another explanation could be the pace of instruction and the many types of tasks

included in each lesson. It is possible students shared short answers, ready to move on to their more desired tasks.

### **Teacher Journal**

The final source of data was a teacher journal I kept during research instruction. Each day for four weeks, I journaled about lesson objectives, targeted skills, teaching successes, opportunities for growth, student quotes, and personal observations. The template I used is shown in Appendix A.

After I completed the journal entries, I utilized the artificial intelligence (AI) software PopAi to analyze the pages. I uploaded my entries and asked PopAi for summaries of teacher successes and opportunities for growth. I also asked for summaries of notes made about each specific participant. PopAi gave informative and insightful summaries, which I compiled into tables.

### ***Summary of Teaching Successes***

I compiled PopAi's insights into Table 4, describing the teaching successes during research.

**Table 4.***Summary of Teaching Successes*

<b>Successes During Instruction</b>	<b>Times Mentioned in Journal</b>
“Exposure to advanced vocabulary”	6
“Interactive questioning”	4
“Use of hands-on activities”	4
“providing opportunities for students to express themselves and engage with the material”	4
“internalization of content and provided corrective feedback to students”	3

Students encountered advanced vocabulary frequently throughout research. The curriculum introduced four new words each week, in addition to discussion vocabulary related to key texts and illustrations. Interactive questioning, hands-on activities, and opportunities for students to express themselves were identified an equal amount of times by AI. Interactive questioning mainly happened during oral language development, while hands-on activities happened through multimedia practice with writing, whiteboards, and letter manipulatives. Students also related to and engaged with the material through discussions of text. The curriculum asked direct questions about text, and questions where students connected to the text. Finally, corrective feedback was mentioned three times. It was recommended to give immediate corrective feedback to students who did not have correct letter-sound correspondence.

I believe these instructional practices helped students make progress in their literacy skills. Advanced vocabulary and the chance to interact with material are especially important for English learners as they make meaning from texts.

### *Summary of Growth Opportunities*

PopAi summarized my notes on opportunities for growth. Key findings and phrases are listed in Table 5.

**Table 5.**

#### *Summary of Growth Opportunities*

<b>Growth Opportunities During Instruction</b>	<b>Times Mentioned in Journal</b>
“differentiation to accommodate students at different levels”	2
“a need to slow down the pace of lessons”	2
“balancing the challenge level to prevent boredom or feeling overwhelmed”	2
“finding ways to engage students effectively during read-aloud activities”	2

Each growth opportunity listed by PopAi was mentioned twice in the journal reflections. I noticed that differentiation was needed between two groups of students: some who were struggling with letter-sound correspondence, and some who were struggling with phonemic awareness and decoding skills. The second growth opportunity listed was a need to slow down the pace of instruction. The instructional materials were meant to cover one lesson per day. However, I noticed that I often finished only half a lesson before the instructional session was over. Third, while some students struggled with content, others encountered boredom. This insight could fall into differentiation but also indicates students’ emotional involvement with the material. In addition to providing instruction within students’ grasp, there was an opportunity to engage them in practices they also found fun and engaging. Finally, AI referenced the need to engage students

more effectively during read-alouds. Read-alouds were students' least favorite activity during instruction, likely because their only task was to listen in order to answer questions. There was an opportunity to make read-alouds more interactive and even hands-on.

In documenting opportunities for growth, I was able to notice trends and problems during instruction, which helped me make changes each day. I wrote down challenges for me as well as for the students. These insights helped refocus instruction and allowed me to brainstorm creative solutions.

### ***Summary of Notes About Ayan***

PopAi was able to compile notes I made about each participant's growth and difficulties during instruction. First, I asked for Ayan's notes, which are listed in Table 6.

**Table 6.**

#### *Notes About Ayan*

<b>Summary of Notes About Ayan</b>	<b>Times Mentioned in Journal</b>
“good grasp of letter names and sounds”	3
“verbal responses to questions about the text”	3
“could blend rime with onset”	1
“hard time holding information and transferring it to the next task”	1

Ayan was noted to have a grasp of letter names and sounds. Her progress monitoring scores contradict this, but do indicate some growth. She demonstrated this skill as she used her knowledge to blend sounds together. She showed verbal responses to text several times, indicating attention to and comprehension of the texts we read.



Additionally, Ayan could blend onset with rime to produce a word, which is an important phonological awareness skill. Blending onset with rime means putting together the first sound of a word with the remainder of a word, such as putting /b/ and /at/ together to make the word ‘bat’. Last, she had difficulty transferring skills. For example, she showed mastery of a letter sound the day before, and then forgot the sound the day after.

### ***Summary of Notes About Hibaq***

The insights AI gave about Hibaq are listed in Table 7.

**Table 7.**

#### *Notes About Hibaq*

<b>Summary of Notes About Hibaq</b>	<b>Time Mentioned in Journal</b>
“often bored and not fully engaged with the activities”	3
“too simple...particularly in the area of sounds and letters”	1
“improvement in willingness to listen to directions”	1

PopAi noted that Hibaq seemed bored or unengaged three times throughout my reflections and that the material seemed too easy for her. While learning letter names and sounds was too simple, she was recommended for a phonemic awareness intervention in FastBridge, based on her Winter composite score. Her FastBridge progress monitoring scores in Letter Sounds also indicated that Letter Sounds was still an area of growth for her. Her perception of the material being too easy led to inattentiveness and disengagement from learning. After talking with her, she was more willing to listen to directions but maintained an attitude that was counterproductive to her learning.

### *Summary of Notes About Ariet*

AI generated a note summary about Ariet based on my teacher journaling during instruction. Her notes are compiled in Table 8.

**Table 8.**

#### *Notes About Ariet*

<b>Summary of Notes About Ariet</b>	<b>Times Mentioned in Journal</b>
“need to address emotional reactions”	2
“reading whole words”	1
“shutting down and getting frustrated, particularly when not called upon”	1

Instruction with Ariet was marked by several emotional responses involving her personal preferences or feeling overlooked. At times, instruction for the whole group stopped while I addressed her needs. Despite these setbacks, Ariet showed proficiency in reading decodable words. One day, the students had decodable readers they were meant to read with a partner. While other students wrestled with letter sounds, Ariet read each word independently and asked me questions about the text. Her ability to do this, while still developing phonological and phonemic awareness, was remarkable.

### *Summary of Notes About Miguel*

Last, PopAi compiled notes about Miguel, which are listed in Table 9.

**Table 9.***Notes About Miguel*

<b>Summary of Notes About Miguel</b>	<b>Times Mentioned in Journal</b>
“participated actively in learning activities”	4
“enjoyment in read-aloud activities”	2
“struggling with certain tasks, such as turning pages and holding information”	2
“improved fluency in letter-sound correspondence”	1

Miguel was the most engaged student during instruction. AI noted that he had improved fluency in his letter sounds, which is minimally supported by his FastBridge progress monitoring data. However, he made growth in Onset Sounds and Word Segmenting, which are important early phonological awareness skills (Moats & Tolman, 2019). I am curious about the source of Miguel’s difficulties with turning pages and holding information. These may be indicators of delayed motor skills or learning disability, but the results of this study are not enough to substantiate further claims.

### **Conclusion of Results Chapter**

This chapter presented and analyzed data, which was collected to answer the question, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* Students’ progress monitoring scores in four sub skills were compared to their fall and winter benchmark scores. In addition, student language was analyzed and compared to their fall WIDA oral language proficiency scores. Finally,

PopAi analyzed teacher journal entries for themes related to successes, opportunities for growth, and individual students.

In Chapter 5, I present my final conclusions taken from the data, explore the implications and limitations of the research, make recommendations for future research, and craft an action plan for future educators moving forward.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

This research sought to answer the research question, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* As the research site began three years of LETRS® training, I wondered if this style of teaching would be beneficial for my English language-learning students. In this conclusion, I discuss my major learnings, revisit the literature, consider the implications and limitations of the research, make recommendations for future research, and present an action plan for future instructional practice.

#### Major Learnings

This section describes the four major learnings from this research study. The learnings are identified and evidence for each finding is given.

#### *Positive Student Growth in FastBridge*

According to progress monitoring scores in Onset Sounds, Letter Sounds, Word Segmenting, and Decodable Words, students made measurable progress toward and above their goal data points. Three students made growth in their ability to segment words into sounds. Three students grew in their identification of onset sounds in words. One student grew in their ability to name letter sounds.

Since there was measurable growth in these discrete skills over four weeks, there is evidence that explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness had a positive impact on these students' reading scores.

### ***Limited Growth in Decoding***

By the end of kindergarten, students at grade level are expected to begin decoding and reading consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words, such as *cat*, *box*, and *dog*. During this study, no student grew in their ability to decode words, as shown by their FastBridge progress monitors. However, students displayed their proximity to mastering this skill.

Ariet consistently scored above her goal performance, at one time reading 47 decodable words without sounding them out. However, she underperformed in identifying letter sounds and onset sounds, suggesting that she had a sight memory for CVC words, but was not able to decode new words.

Hibaq also consistently scored above her goal points and demonstrated both growth in identifying letter sounds and mastery of segmenting words. During the research study, she made the jump from decoding words by individual sounds, to reading CVC words upon seeing them. This indicates grade-level reading skills and a readiness for first grade.

Ayan's progress suggests phonological awareness, but not fluent letter-sound correspondence. She was able to identify onset sounds and segment words, which did not require phoneme-grapheme correspondence. However, with the introduction of graphemes, she struggled to make progress. Ayan will need further mastery of letter sounds before she can decode fluently.

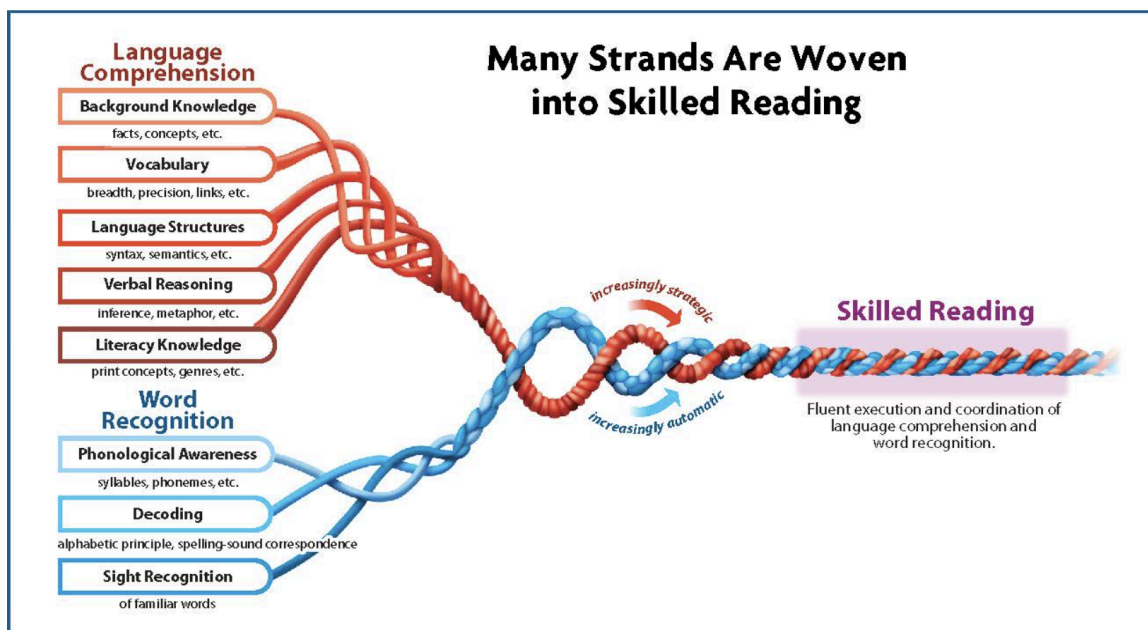
Finally, Miguel's progress mirrors Ayan's but at an earlier stage of developing phoneme-grapheme correspondence. He could segment words, but did not grow in letter sounds. His stagnation with letter sounds prevented his development of decoding skills.

### *Improved Word Recognition Skills*

The phonological awareness and phonics skills I taught fall under Word Recognition in Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), see Figure 19.

#### **Figure 19.**

*Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001)*



The progress students made in identifying onset sounds, segmenting words, letter sounds, and decoding words gives evidence that Scarborough's model and LETRS<sup>®</sup>-based instruction are effective in teaching English learners how to recognize words.

While the instructional materials I chose included the development of background knowledge, new vocabulary, some verbal reasoning skills, and some literacy knowledge, the measures of this study did not report on growth of these skills. Scarborough (2001) asserted that Language Comprehension strands, as shown in Figure 19, are equally important as, and closely intertwined with, Word Recognition strands. This is a topic of research that could greatly impact the field of English learner education.

### ***Minimal Effect of Oral Language on Growth***

Scarborough's Reading Rope does not include oral language as a key strand (Scarborough, 2001). However, the development of oral language is a key indicator of English learners' ability to read (Bialystok et al., 2005; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2006; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). The instructional materials included an oral language section each day, which involved listening to a read aloud passage and answering inference or comprehension questions. Students' oral language scores showed no noticeable growth throughout the research study. Two students maintained the same score, responding to questions using short phrases, familiar vocabulary, and generally fluent discourse (WIDA, 2021). Students did not need to extensively reference their oral language skills to make word recognition growth.

Oral language increases in importance as students grow into higher grades. While this study focused on kindergarten students learning word recognition skills, these same students will need oral language skills for more advanced comprehension later on (Moats & Tolman, 2019; Vellutino, Tunmer, Jaccard, & Chen, 2007).

### **Revisit the Literature**

This section revisits the literature review and adds commentary about what was supported or refuted by this research study. First, I revisit guided reading research. Second, I comment on LETRS<sup>®</sup> and its efficacy research. Finally, I review effective reading instruction for English language learners.

### ***Guided Reading***

In the original conception of guided reading, Fountas and Pinnell (2017) grouped students homogeneously by their reading level, which was determined by running



records. In contrast, Young (2023) found that heterogeneous groups scaffolded instruction for early readers, allowing them to access more difficult content. I found lessons to be more effective by separating the four students into two groups based on their need to develop either phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence, or decoding skills. In this way, I agree with Fountas and Pinnell (2017) in grouping more homogeneously. However, this research suggests that dividing students by specific skills along a spectrum from phonological awareness to decoding is more effective than just by reading level.

When students were grouped all together, the students grasping for letter-sound correspondence were frustrated when their classmates could read full decodable sentences. The students ready to read were frustrated by the time taken during lessons to practice identifying letter sounds. Splitting the group relieved their frustration and allowed them each to shine in the specific skills they were mastering.

### ***LETRS®-Based Instruction***

LETRS® presents information about how the brain learns to read, and how a written language is coded and processed in the brain. From LETRS® training, I found Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001) and The Hourglass Figure (Moats & Tolman, 2019) to be most helpful for implementing instruction.

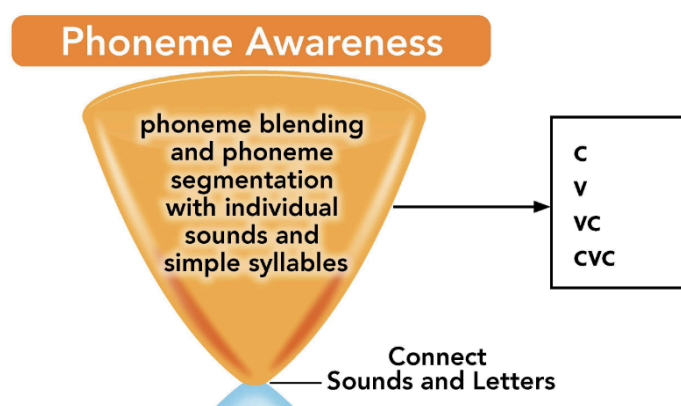
**Scarborough's Reading Rope.** The beginning units of LETRS® disparage the use of the whole-language paradigm, and advocate for explicit and systematic instruction in every aspect of reading (Goodman, 1989; Moats & Tolman, 2019; Smith, 1986). Moats and Tolman (2019) begin their foray into reading with phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics. This may be one reason why I and others believed LETRS® to

only be another pendulum swing towards phonics-based instruction (August & Shanahan, 2006; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; National Committee for Effective Literacy, 2022; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), however, represents reading as an intricate interweaving of phonics-based skills and language comprehension skills, also represented in The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). During my early LETRS® training, I learned that my research only represented word recognition skills or phonics skills, but not language comprehension skills. See Figure 19. This information helped me focus on phonics strands, without forgetting the other aspects of reading, which are essential for English learners as well (Bialystok et al., 2005; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2006; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023).

**The Hourglass Figure.** The partial Hourglass Figure, shown in Figure 20, shows skills needed as students develop letter-sound correspondence. It is not necessarily a progression of skills, but developed in tandem with letter-sound correspondence (Moats & Tolman, 2019).

**Figure 20.**

*Partial Hourglass Figure*



This figure helped me connect my research to both FastBridge data and LETRS®-based instruction. A majority of my participants were progressing in connecting sounds and letters. As the figure shows, they needed additional practice blending and segmenting phonemes they heard, from consonants all the way to CVC words. Progress monitoring scores clearly indicated low Decodable Words scores while students continued to grow in phonemic awareness. This research corroborates LETRS®-based instruction in kindergarteners developing phonemic awareness.

### ***Effective Instruction for English Language Learners***

In Chapter 2, I described recommendations from the literature for teaching reading to English language learners. In addition to phonics and phonemic awareness, these learners need to build background, contextualize information, develop oral language, use authentic texts, access complex texts, and leverage their home languages (Ascenzi-Moreno & Quiñones, 2020; Bialystok et al., 2005; Cummins, 2000; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Hoffman, 2017; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2006; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023).

While this research focused on Word Recognition skills within Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), many of the skills specifically beneficial for English learners are housed within the Language Comprehension strands (see Figure 19). For example, building background knowledge is explicitly written as a strand. Contextualizing information connects to the Language Structures strand, which includes the semantics of words students are analyzing. Both authentic and complex texts could connect to the Literacy Knowledge and Language Structures strands, utilizing knowledge of genres and advanced syntax. Language Comprehension strands become more

important indicators of reading success in later grades (Vellutino, Tunmer, Jaccard, & Chen, 2007). Because my students progressed in their reading skills during this study, I agree that younger grades benefit from zooming in on Word Recognition skills, such as the phonics and phonemic awareness I taught. However, future research will need to address the effect of Language Comprehension strands with younger learners and their reading proficiency in later grades.

Oral language development is not a strand within Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001). However, it is still an important indicator of reading comprehension for English learners (Bialystok et al., 2005; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Pollard-Durodola et al., 2006; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). In this study, students' oral language skills neither progressed or regressed. Students were able to process letters, sounds, and decodable words using their oral language, as well as give me feedback about instruction. This research does not support the connection between oral language and reading skills, but it was evident that participants utilized language they knew to process content.

### **Implications**

This section describes the implications of the research study for the student participants and the research site.

### ***Student Participants***

The four student participants made noticeable growth in their reading skills during this study. Based on their winter benchmark scores in FastBridge, which was a test taken concurrently with this study, FastBridge recommended small-group interventions for each student dependent. The recommendations agreed with what students had accomplished

during this study, and the next steps seemed reasonable. For Ayan and Miguel, who had yet to master letter-sound correspondences, FastBridge recommended a Picture Sort. Students would be required to match pictures with the letter that the picture started with. For Ariet and Hibaq, who were moving on to decoding, FastBridge recommended an Onset-Rime progression. Students would be required to delete or substitute either the onset or rime of various words.

Based on the results of this study, and recommendations from LETRS<sup>®</sup> about skill development, FastBridge did not recommend interventions exactly aligned with what students could benefit from. For example, Ayan and Miguel could benefit from additional phonological awareness activities, such as identifying which pictures start with the same sound, without matching them to a letter. They could also benefit from onset-rime practice and producing rhyming words (Moats & Tolman, 2019, pp. 142-143). Ariet and Hibaq developed a more advanced skill and had basic phonological and phonemic awareness. They could benefit from activities in which they manipulate not only beginning sounds, but ending and middle sounds as well. They could also engage in word chaining, changing one sound at a time to create words (Moats & Tolman, 2019, pp. 143-144).

These students will continue to learn to read as their instruction and interventions are aligned to the stages of skill development they are in.

### ***Research Site***

The research site is dedicated to using both FastBridge and LETRS<sup>®</sup>-aligned instruction. However, since the two are not aligned, special care must be taken to ensure proper instruction. Teachers, interventionists, and ESL teachers must communicate and

collaborate about the exact skills their students are learning. Without this collaboration, students may be learning repeat skills, or consistently learning skills that are either too simple or too difficult. All teachers should consult FastBridge, LETRS®, and each other to match instruction to skill level.

This research has demonstrated that teaching word recognition skills to kindergarten English learners is effective. The research site has not yet clarified roles when it comes to teaching these skills. One implication of this study is that ESL teachers are able to teach word recognition skills to ELs with success. However, without research about language comprehension skills with young English learners, the role of ESL teachers may continue to be debated.

At the research site, and other schools in the nation, English language teachers need clarification on their role in developing word recognition with their students. Based on the literature, English learners need word recognition skills as one piece of the reading puzzle. However, if all English teachers solely instructed in word recognition skills, students would fail to grasp oral language skills, sentence structure, semantics, morphology, genre identification and use, social language, among other parts of the English language (Bialystok et al., 2005; Bunch, Walqui, & Pearson, 2014; Derewianka, 2015; Escamilla, Olsen, & Slavik, 2022; Herrera, Perez, & Escamilla, 2015; Leighton et al., 2019; Veguilla, Lettau, & Nass, 2023). This research has convinced me that I can develop word recognition skills with my students, especially if they are not making reading growth or do not receive Tier 2 reading interventions. I will continue to teach additional English concepts, but if my students do not have word recognition skills, accessing language features in texts will continue to be difficult for them. If my students

struggle with these skills, I will begin lessons with short interventions targeted towards their growth in manipulating sounds, letter-sound correspondence, and decoding words.

### **Limitations**

This section addresses the limitations of the research study, which may have impacted the results. I identified limitations in the length of the study, limited participant selection, and partial training in LETRS®.

#### ***Length of the Study***

I chose the length of the study to be four weeks. This timeline was bookmarked by the end of students' winter break and the start of their state language proficiency testing. Additionally, a spring project aligned with my graduate studies and my desire for spring graduation.

One limitation of the four-week study is there were only four data points for each FastBridge progress monitor. For some students, I saw measurable growth during the study. For other students, there was no measurable change within four weeks. Some students were also absent during the study. For example, Hibaq missed the first week of data points and I was unable to monitor Ayan during the last week due to scheduling overlaps with the classroom teacher and her language proficiency test.

Another limitation to the length of the study was the weight of outliers within the data points. In a longer study, outliers could be disregarded more easily if many data points created a strong trend line. However, this study relied on all four data points to create a growth trendline for students. Because of outlier scores, some students' trendlines were negative or did not accurately represent student knowledge. An example is Ariet's Word Segmenting graph (see Figure 11). Throughout the study, Ariet struggled

with managing her emotions and became more frustrated over time. At the start of the study, she could segment 17 sounds. At the end of the study, she identified just one sound. It is unlikely that her final score reflected her knowledge. However, with just four data points, her trendline sharply sloped down with her increased frustration.

### ***Limited Participant Selection***

Selection of participants was deliberate and based on students' grade, WIDA proficiency level, and existing relationship with me in a small group setting. Participants also had existing relationships with each other. This contributed to a comfortable working environment that was not intrusive to their regular learning patterns. They also felt free to speak their minds about what was not enjoyable for them.

A limitation to the number of participants is that the conclusions for these four students cannot be broadly generalized for a larger population without further research. I can only speak to which research principles applied to these students and which instructional moves worked for them.

### ***Partial Training in LETRS®***

At the start of this study, I was aware of my school district's intent to train all license staff in LETRS® over three years. Before conducting research, I completed Unit 1, Lesson 6 of LETRS®, covering the development of writing systems, The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), connections between oral language and literacy, The Four-Part Processing Model (Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989) and how the brain processes while it reads, Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), and Ehri's Phases of Word-Reading Development (Ehri, 1996). These are all topics I encountered



during my literature review, but which I delved into more deeply during LETRS® training.

During the rest of the 23-24 school year, I finished Unit 2 of LETRS®, which covered reading assessments, progression of word study skills, and the development of phonological awareness. There still remain six units and two years of LETRS training. I believe I received a strong background in the Word Recognition section of Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001) before embarking on this research. However, the additional units will address the Language Comprehension section. During my research, I attended a conference lecture by Choonkyong Kim, a professor at St. Cloud State University (Kim, 2023). It was her belief that teachers of English language learners should focus instruction on the Language Comprehension strands of Scarborough's reading rope, which include background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge (Scarborough, 2001). Since I did not receive this portion of LETRS® training, my research did not focus on these strands. The impact of this type of reading instruction for language learners is an ideal field for future research studies.

### **Future Research**

Research on the impact of instruction with English learners based on LETRS® training is in its initial stages. Future studies may contribute to the field after receiving the full LETRS® training, inviting a larger number of students to participate, by partnering with a classroom teacher, or studying the effects of only teaching Scarborough's Language Comprehension strands to English learners (Scarborough, 2001).

### ***Full LETRS® Training***

Researchers who have completed the full scope of LETRS® training will have a more complete understanding of the literacy landscape in today's classrooms. Future studies could focus on individual skills students must learn to master reading, specific practices recommended by Moats and Tolman (2019), the authors of LETRS®, or the impact of emphasizing particular reading skills over others with English learners.

While I emphasized phonics and phonemic awareness with my students based on my partial training, future researchers could bring their full perspective of LETRS® to the task of identifying its effect on teaching English learners.

### ***More Participants and Longer Study***

Another idea for future researchers is to include more participants at different stages in their reading progress. I was able to include four kindergarten students in my research, but the field would benefit from a larger sample size. For example, a teacher of English learners could document instruction with several small groups and compare results, or document reading instruction within a push-in or co-taught setting.

Additionally, a longer study would be helpful to measure long-term progress. Student progress could be measured in semesters, years, or across grade levels to document their reading journey.

### ***Classroom Teacher Collaboration***

The field of reading instruction for English learners could also benefit from a research study partnering with a co-teacher. In my practice, there is confusion about the roles of ESL teacher and classroom teacher when it comes to teaching reading. Young (2023) partnered with a classroom teacher to observe the teacher in leveled guided

reading groups, and the two changed instruction during the study to measure the results. A similar study could be conducted between an ESL teacher and classroom teacher, measuring reading growth for groups engaged in language comprehension and word recognition tasks.

### ***Language Comprehension Strands***

While my research centered around phonics and phonological awareness, which are word recognition tasks as defined by Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), future research could investigate the impact of language comprehension tasks. These tasks include background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge. One example could be researching the impact of teaching students to identify the language features of the genres they encounter in class.

### **Communicating the Results**

The results of this research were shared with key stakeholders and participants' families. Additionally, an important piece of action research is developing an action plan to share after analyzing the data. This section identifies the key stakeholders and presents the action plan.

### ***Key Stakeholders***

First, the research paper was posted to Hamline University's Digital Commons, which houses all published work produced by Hamline faculty and students. Second, copies of the research paper were distributed to the Executive Director of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment for the district and the administrator of the research site. Finally, copies were distributed to participants' families. I offered to meet with families

during conferences in the fall of 2024 with the help of interpreters to explain the data and results.

### ***Action Plan***

Appendix B shows the educational action plan template I used to develop the action plan. I include objectives, goals, action steps, resources needed, and a timeline. Figure 20 shows the final action plan, to be shared with administration at the research site.

Figure 21.

*Action Plan*

## Conclusion

This research study sought to answer the question, *How does explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness impact reading growth for kindergarten students who qualify for English language services?* Four students who received instruction over four weeks made reading progress in identifying onset sounds, segmenting words, identifying letter sounds, and decoding words. These participants displayed their relative proximity to the skill of decoding consonant-vowel-consonant words, showing their readiness for first-grade reading. While participants grew in word recognition skills, language comprehension skills were not monitored. Future research is needed to determine the effectiveness of language comprehension lessons with young English language learners in learning to read.

The final action plan will help the research site clarify roles for ESL teachers: specifically targeting English language learners who do not qualify for intervention services for word recognition instruction. According to the action plan, we will investigate resources for language comprehension instruction and progress monitoring given by LETRS® in later units.

While the debate between phonics and whole-language continues, this research concludes that phonological awareness and phonics instruction is effective for several English language learners in kindergarten.

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## Appendix B

### Educational Action Plan Template

# ACTION PLAN

**OBJECTIVE:**

**SMART GOAL:**

**ACTION STEPS:**

--	--	--

**RESOURCES NEEDED:**

**TIMELINE:**

## Appendix C

## Unit 4, Weeks 1-2 Overview

## Week 1

**Oral Language**

**Read Aloud:** "Chester's Day Out"

**Oral Vocabulary:**

*athlete, customer, thrilled, reward*

**Word Work****Phonological Awareness:**

Count and Pronounce Syllables

**Phonemic Awareness:**

Isolation, Blending, Identity, Segmentation

**Phonics:** /k/c

Write: Dictation

Build Fluency

**High-Frequency Words:** *go*

**Read Connected Text**

**Teaching Chart:** "Cam Cat"

**Decodable Reader:** "Can Cat? Can Cam?"

**Practice Decodable Story:** "Cam in a Cap"

Write

## Week 2

**Oral Language**

**Read Aloud:** "Tools That Work!"

**Oral Vocabulary:**

*examine, ingredients, grate, lopsided*

**Word Work****Phonological Awareness:**

Onset and Rime Segmentation

**Phonemic Awareness:**

Isolation, Blending, Categorization

**Phonics:** Initial/Medial /o/o

Write: Dictation

Build Fluency

**High-Frequency Words:** *you*

**Shared Read**

**Teaching Chart:** "Sit on Top"

**Decodable Reader:** "Tom Can Sit"

**Practice Decodable Story:** "Can You Pin It On?"

Write

## Appendix D

### Unit 4, Week 3 and Unit 5, Week 1 Overview

#### Week 3



##### Oral Language

**Read Aloud:** “Rockwell to the Rescue”

##### Oral Vocabulary:

*assistant, announced, comforting, support*

##### Word Work

###### Phonological Awareness:

Sentence Segmentation

###### Phonemic Awareness:

Isolation, Blending, Segmentation

###### Phonics: Initial/Final /d/d

Write: Dictation

Build Fluency

###### High-Frequency Words: *do*

##### Read Connected Text

**Teaching Chart:** “Tad and Dad”

**Decodable Reader:** “Dad Did It!”

**Practice Decodable Story:** “Sid, Don, and Dan”

Write

#### Week 1



##### Oral Language

**Read Aloud:** “Lady Bird Cleans Up”

##### Oral Vocabulary:

*billboards, views, joy, laws*

##### Word Work

###### Phonological Awareness:

Recognize Rhyme

###### Phonemic Awareness:

Identity, Blending, Segmentation

###### Phonics: s-Blends (*sn, sp, st*)

Write: Dictation

Build Fluency

###### High-Frequency Words: *to, and, go, you, do*

##### Read Connected Text

**Teaching Chart:** “Do You See It?”

**Decodable Reader:** “It Can Spin”

**Practice Decodable Story:** “Stan and Dad”

Write



## Appendix E

### Example FastBridge Onset Sounds Progress Monitoring Scoring Sheet

Progress Monitoring Form 1

#### Scoring Sheet - Onset Sounds

ITEM	QUESTIONS	CORRECT ANSWERS	
<b>Read ► This is a chicken, spider, legs, and ice.</b>			
1.	Which one begins with /sp/?	0	1
2.	Which one begins with /l/?	0	1
3.	Which one begins with /ch/?	0	1
4.	What's the first sound in the word "ice"? (point to ice)	0	1
<b>Read ► This is a monkey, grass, ambulance, and road.</b>			
5.	Which one begins with /a/?	0	1
6.	Which one begins with /m/?	0	1
7.	Which one begins with /g/?	0	1
8.	What's the first sound in the word "road"? (point to road)	0	1
<b>Read ► This is a pizza, table, flower, and nail.</b>			
9.	Which one begins with /fl/?	0	1
10.	Which one begins with /n/?	0	1
11.	Which one begins with /t/?	0	1
12.	What's the first sound in the word "pizza"? (point to pizza)	0	1
<b>Read ► This is juice, broom, thermometer, and hand.</b>			
13.	Which one begins with /b/?	0	1
14.	Which one begins with /h/?	0	1
15.	Which one begins with /th/?	0	1
16.	What's the first sound in the word "juice"? (point to juice)	0	1

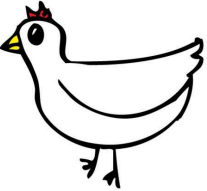

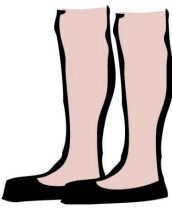

Total Seconds (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Total Items Correct \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F




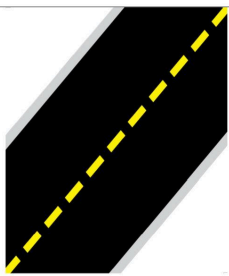
### Example FastBridge Onset Sounds Progress Monitoring Student Form

Levels KG & 1 Progress Monitoring Form 1

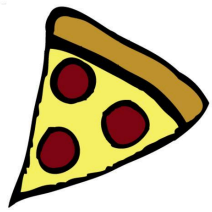


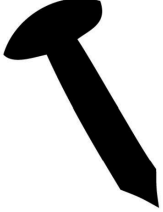
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Levels KG & 1 Progress Monitoring Form 1




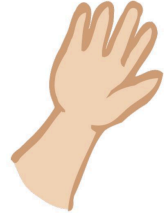
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Levels KG & 1 Progress Monitoring Form 1

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Levels KG & 1 Progress Monitoring Form 1

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## Appendix G

### Example FastBridge Letter Sounds Progress Monitoring Scoring Sheet

Progress Monitoring Form 1																																	
Student: _____	Assessor: _____																																
Teacher: _____	Grade: _____ Date: _____																																
<p><b>Read ► Here are more letters for you to read.</b> (Place Letter Sound test page in front of the student and point to the first letter). <b>When I say “Begin”, say the <u>sound</u> of each letter. Read across the page then go to the next line (point to demonstrate). Try to say each letter sound. If you come to a letter sound that you do not know, I’ll tell it to you. Put your finger on the first letter (guide the student to the first letter) and follow along with your finger as you say the <u>sounds</u> of the letters.</b></p>																																	
<p><b>Read ► Ready?</b> (pause) <b>Begin.</b></p>																																	
<p><b>Read ► Stop.</b> [If under 1 minute, record the time.] <i>Put a bracket ( ) after the final letter the student attempted.</i></p>																																	
b	n	o	s	c	i	l	g	d	z	/10																							
a	e	h	f	v	t	r	k	u	x	/20																							
p	j	w	y	qu	m	f	e	m	x	/30																							
g	z	k	qu	w	u	a	y	n	c	/40																							
l	r	j	d	h	v	b	p	o	i	/50																							
t	s	a	y	l	j	x	d	n	g	/60																							
z	e	c	w	b	p	o	f	s	k	/70																							
m	i	t	r	v	h	qu	u	k	s	/80																							
d	p	t	o	f	w	c	x	y	a	/90																							
e	v	g	u	l	m	r	n	z	i	/100																							
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e	a	c	i	g	u	o																											
<b>Timed in 1 minute</b>	_____ # letters sounded - _____ # errors = _____ # correct letters sounded in 1 min.																																
<b>All letters</b>	_____ # letters sounded - _____ # errors = _____ # correct letters sounded																																
<b>Uppercase letters</b>	_____ # letters sounded - _____ # errors = _____ # correct uppercase letters sounded																																
<b>Lowercase letters</b>	_____ # letters sounded - _____ # errors = _____ # correct lowercase letters sounded																																
<p><b>*Adjusted Score</b> for students who attempted all letter names in less than 1 minute.          [# correct / # seconds] * 60 = adjusted score</p>																																	
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Page 8	Admin Form: Letter Sounds																																

## Appendix H

### Example FastBridge Letter Sounds Progress Monitoring Student Form

Levels KG & 1 Practice Form

b n o s c i l g d z

a e h f v t r k u x

p j w y q u m f e m x

g z k q u w u a y n c

l r j d h v b p o i

t s a y l j x d n g

z e c w b p o f s k

m i t r v h q u u k s

d p t o f w c x y a

e v g u l m r n z i

e a c i g u o

## Appendix I

### Example FastBridge Word Segmenting Progress Monitoring Scoring Form

Progress Monitoring Form I

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Assessor: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Read ► I'll say a word, and you will tell me the sounds in the word. So if I say "bat", you say, /b/ /a/ /t/.**

**Read ► Now let's do some more. Remember to listen to the word and then tell me each sound in the word.**

**Read ► Ready?** (pause, give the first word)

Word	Student Response	Correct	
1. cot	/k/ /o/ /t/	/3	/3
2. led	/l/ /e/ /d/	/3	/6
3. ran	/r/ /a/ /n/	/3	/9
4. hut	/h/ /u/ /t/	/3	/12
5. mom	/m/ /o/ /m/	/3	/15
6. hen	/h/ /e/ /n/	/3	/18
7. skip	/s/ /k/ /i/ /p/	/4	/22
8. rust	/r/ /u/ /s/ /t/	/4	/26
9. slap	/s/ /l/ /a/ /p/	/4	/30
10. mint	/m/ /i/ /n/ /t/	/4	/34

Total Seconds: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Sounds Correct: \_\_\_\_\_

Sounds Correct/min: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix J

### Example FastBridge Decodable Words Progress Monitoring Scoring Form

Progress Monitoring Form 1

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Assessor: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Read ► Here is a list of words for you to read. When I say “Begin,” start reading aloud here** (point to the first word). **Read across the page then go to the next line** (point to demonstrate). **Try to read each word. If you come to a word you don’t know, I’ll tell it to you. Be sure to do your best reading.**

**Read ► Ready? Begin.** [*Start the timer when the student says the first decodable word.*]

**Read ► STOP.** [*If under 1 minute, record the time.*] *Put a bracket ( ) after the final word the student said.*

r a n	j o g	p o d	n o d	v a n	/5
m a n	y e t	g a g	z a p	s u m	/10
f i t	h i t	c a b	t a x	l a g	/15
b i d	d e n	w e t	l o p	m a p	/20
s o b	n a p	g u m	p o t	r i m	/25
l e g	t i n	t a p	m a t	b a g	/30
k i d	r a t	r o d	n e t	l i d	/35
j i g	f e d	c o t	g u t	l o g	/40
n i t	m i d	f i n	d a b	b i t	/45
d o t	t o p	w i n	f a d	m e n	/50

Total Words Read: \_\_\_\_\_ - # of Errors: \_\_\_\_\_ = WRC/min: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix K**

## Example FastBridge Decodable Words Progress Monitoring Student Form

Levels KG &amp; 1 Progress Monitoring Form 1

ran jog pod nod van

man yet gag zap sum

fit hit cab tax lag

bid den wet lop map

sob nap gum pot rim

leg tin tap mat bag

kid rat rod net lid

jig fed cot gut log

nit mid fin dab bit

dot top win fad men

## Appendix L

### WIDA Speaking Rubric for Kindergarten

## WIDA Speaking Rubric KINDERGARTEN

Level	Linguistic Complexity	Vocabulary Usage	Language Control
1 Entering	Single words, set phrases, or chunks of memorized oral language	Highest frequency vocabulary from school setting and content areas	When using memorized language, is generally comprehensible; communication may be significantly impeded when going beyond the highly familiar
2 Emerging	Phrases, short oral sentences	General language related to the content area; groping for vocabulary when going beyond the highly familiar is evident	When using simple discourse, is generally comprehensible and fluent; communication may be impeded by groping for language structures or by phonological, syntactic or semantic errors when going beyond phrases and short, simple sentences
3 Developing	Simple and expanded oral sentences; responses show emerging complexity used to add detail	General and some specific language related to the content area; may grope for needed vocabulary at times	When communicating in sentences, is generally comprehensible and fluent; communication may from time to time be impeded by groping for language structures or by phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors, especially when attempting more complex oral discourse
4 Expanding	A variety of oral sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity; responses show emerging cohesion used to provide detail and clarity	Specific and some technical language related to the content area; groping for needed vocabulary may be occasionally evident	At all times generally comprehensible and fluent, though phonological, syntactic, or semantic errors that don't impede the overall meaning of the communication may appear at times; such errors may reflect first language interference
5 Bridging	A variety of sentence lengths of varying linguistic complexity in extended oral discourse; responses show cohesion and organization used to support main ideas	Technical language related to the content area; facility with needed vocabulary is evident	Approaching comparability to that of English proficient peers in terms of comprehensibility and fluency; errors don't impede communication and may be typical of those an English proficient peer might make



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