

**Developing Academic Language:  
The Effectiveness of Paired Engagement Routines in Raising Student Achievement**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of structured paired engagement routines to develop academic language proficiency in struggling readers (both EL and non-EL) and its impact on student achievement. Specifically, the study examined the effectiveness of using structured paired activities as the primary method of instruction to increase academic growth as measured by the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) English-Language Arts Test and the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). The participants were thirty-five 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in two separate reading intervention classes in Rosemead, California, during the 2008-2009 school year. Both classes used the Scholastic READ 180 intervention program. The ethnic composition of the participant group was 26 (80%) Hispanic, 6 (17%) Chinese, 1 (3%) Vietnamese and 1 (3%) White.

## **Discussion of Topic and Background Research**

Although most students easily acquire conversational speaking skills, they often lack the sophisticated vernacular that is necessary to be successful in an academic setting (Bailey, 2007). This problem is even more pronounced among ELs, who on the norm, are able to progress from beginning to intermediate levels more rapidly, but struggle to reach full language proficiency (Goldenberg, 2008). While educators and classroom texts commonly use academic language, aside from formal writing, students seldom do so because they can viably participate using conversational English. Classroom teachers often fail to hold students accountable for using academic language during classroom interaction, because their main focus is normally lesson content.

In order to acquire academic language, students need opportunities to use high-use sophisticated words in speech and writing. Specifically, daily activities must be structured in a way that keeps students accountable for correctly using newly introduced terminology (Feldman & Kinsella, 2004). Structured pairing is ideal because cognitive growth develops through social interaction (Feldman, 2002). Furthermore, pairing allows less confident students to regularly participate with peers in a safe environment (Kinsella & Feldman, 2005).

## **Framing Question**

How will using structured paired engagement routines as the primary instructional method affect the achievement of high school students who are struggling readers? The hypothesis is that the engagement routines will provide a medium for EL and non-EL students to acquire academic language skills, thereby significantly impacting their gains.

## **Method of Inquiry**

### **Participants:**

Participant group was made up of 35 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in two separate reading intervention classes. While the combined size of both classes was 43 (class sizes: 19 and 24), 8 students were not included due to a lack of 8<sup>th</sup> grade data. All students began the year reading at two or more grades below the 9<sup>th</sup> grade level<sup>1</sup>. At the beginning of the study, the mean student lexile score of the students was 645 (3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade). All students scored Basic or below on their 8<sup>th</sup> grade CST ELA. The ethnic makeup of the participant group was 26 Hispanic, 6 Chinese, 1 Vietnamese, and 1 White. Three of the students were categorized RSP (Resource Specialist Program). The researcher was the classroom teacher.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no direct correspondence between a specific lexile measure and a specific grade level. The term *grade level* refers to an approximate range. There is significant overlap between grades.

### Procedure:

Students utilized the Scholastic READ 180 instructional model, which involves dividing a 90 minute period into four roughly equal parts: whole group instruction, small group instruction, Read 180 computer software usage, and silent reading.

The teacher used the Think-Write-Pair-Share (TWPS) engagement routine as the primary means of instruction during whole and small group. For class discussion, students were directed to first brainstorm (think), rewrite ideas using provided sentence starters (write), engage with a partner (pair), and then share with the class (share). Sentence scaffolds were heavily used to facilitate academic speech and writing. Students were also exposed to texts with recursive academic words from the *READ 180 RBook*.

The focus of the teacher was to elicit concentrated bursts of quality responses orally and in writing, rather than assigning numerous unscaffolded writing assignments. Students were rarely allowed to answer questions with one-word answers or short phrases. Rather, students were given time to prepare written responses, which were then read to a partner or to the whole class. In sum, the goal was for students to gradually replace their casual language with academic language in the class setting.

### Instruments for Data Collection:

1. CST ELA (STAR) Test – to gauge mastery of California State Grade 9-10 ELA standards.
2. Scholastic Reading Inventory – to gauge reading comprehension as measured in lexiles.
3. Attendance tally

### **Summary of Results**

In a comparison of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade CST ELA scores, 19 students improved one or more performance bands, 2 students regressed by one band, and 14 students had no change. It was also noted that students who did not progress averaged 10.1 absences, while those who improved averaged 4.9 absences throughout the year.

8 <sup>th</sup> Grade CST ELA 2007-2009			9 <sup>th</sup> Grade CST ELA 2008-2009			Variation
Performance Band	# of students	% of whole	Performance Band	# of students	% of whole	Change in # of students
Far Below Basic	10	28.6%	Far Below Basic	4	11.4%	-6
Below Basic	15	42.9%	Below Basic	10	28.6%	-5
Basic	10	28.6%	Basic	18	51.4%	+8
Proficient	0	0.0%	Proficient	3	8.6%	+3
Advanced	0	0.0%	Advanced	0	0.0%	+0

The students also averaged a growth of 187 lexile points from September 2008 to May 2009. The average approximate comprehension grade level gain was estimated at 3.7 grades. In a 35-week period, 86% of the participants surpassed the expected yearly lexile growth for high school students.

### **Significance of Findings**

These findings suggest that while students may be exposed to academic language in class, they are not provided with ample opportunities for meaningful practice. The implication is that educators need to focus on not only the content of student responses, but also the way the content is delivered. Intense scaffolding should be provided and students should be held accountable for responding with sophistication. Pairing and grouping is effective, in that every student has an opportunity to engage in frequent meaningful practice.

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### **Biography:**

Justin Lim is a fourth year reading intervention teacher at Rosemead High School in the El Monte Union High School District. He earned his B.A. from the University of California, San Diego in 2002 and completed his credentialing program at California Polytechnic State University, Pomona in 2007. He has since presented at two READ180 National Scholastic Institute conferences in 2008 and 2009. In 2009 he was featured in "Teacher Talk," *READ 180 Community Newsletter*, Vol. 20. He is currently a Scholastic Mentor Teacher and coauthor of the Scholastic.com professional blog *Classroom Solutions*. In addition to his contributions to education, Justin Lim is also a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps Reserve.

### **Curriculum Vitae:**

#### **Education:**

2002 B.A. Political Science, University of California, San Diego.

2007 Single Subject English Credential, California Polytechnic State University, Pomona.

#### **Professional Experience:**

2006 – 2009 Reading Intervention and English, Rosemead High School.

2009 Strategies for Success Curriculum, El Monte Union High School District.

2009 Mentor Teacher, Scholastic.com

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#### **Professional Talks and Contributions:**

2008 Scholastic READ 180 National Summer Institute, San Diego, CA.

2008 El Monte Union High School District READ 180 Success Training, El Monte, CA.

2009 "Teacher Talk," *READ 180 Community Newsletter*, Vol. 20.

2009 Scholastic READ180 National Summer Institute, Nashville, TN.

2009 El Monte Union High School District Strategies for Success Training, El Monte, CA.