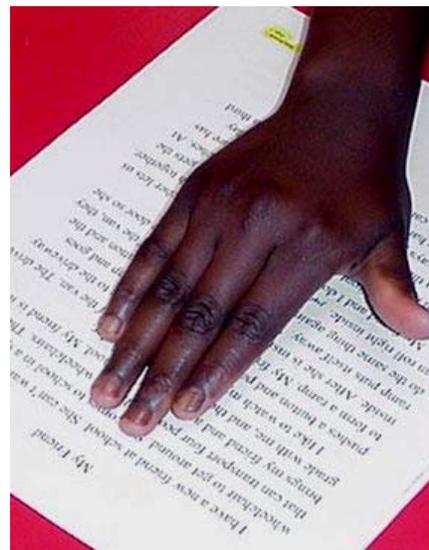


# Focused Reading for English Language Learners

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## Keywords

*Focused reading, pre-reading strategies, fluency, focus hand*

## Abstract

*Focused reading for English language learners is an action research project that examines the effects of using a focus hand to create concentrated attention on reading tasks. The research follows the progress of four fifth grade English language learners in a suburban elementary school over a five week period. The study found that the students were able to increase both their silent and oral reading rates and improve pre-reading skills through the use of a focus hand. This technique established student intent while reading and provided an immediate tool for teacher assessment and intervention.*

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As class started, Heba and Muna (all names are pseudonyms) excitedly announced that they had finished their end-of-year fifth grade reading assessment and felt really good about their results. Later the same day, Muna shared that she was almost done reading her new chapter book and it had only taken one day. Both these situations share a little known but easily used technique called a focus hand.

## Educational Significance of Inquiry

While the number of English language learners (ELLs) has grown exponentially in the United States, their level of academic achievement has lagged behind their language majority peers (Echevarria, Vogt, Short, 2004). Multiplicity in language, culture, educational background, school expectations, socioeconomic status, age on arrival, and personal experiences impact the instructional practices these students will need to succeed. It is important for teachers of ELLs to keep abreast of the most current practices that will allow them to adapt lessons, modify teaching strategies and revise assessments to meet the unique needs of culturally and linguistically varied students (Herrell & Jordan, 2004). While student diversity challenges the educational system, many of the research innovations focused on ELLs also apply to mainstream students, which can lead to effective educational reform at all levels and for all students (McLaughlin, 1992).

As part of today's comprehensive reading programs, educators actively teach and assess for fluency based on the belief that a fluid reading rate will allow students to concentrate on the meaning of the text, leading to greater comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Rasinski, 2003; Samuels, 1979). Struggling ELLs will have multiple tools to improve their literacy if they can combine the gains achieved through fluency instruction with the use of a focus hand during reading. The focus hand technique involves using the hand to:

- circle important information during pre-reading strategies
- underline each line of text during reading to improve pacing and concentration

Increasing the reading rates of ELL fifth graders is important because of the large volume of reading required in middle school, where texts typically have 500 words per page. If a student reads 100 words per minute (WPM) it will take 50 minutes to complete a ten page assignment, while a student reading at 150 WPM will need only 33 minutes to complete the same assignment. Helping students become faster more fluent readers often results in an improvement in comprehension, attitude, and school success (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

*Fluency gives language its musical quality, its rhythm and flow, and makes reading sound effortless*

- Jo Worthy and Karen Broaddus.

*All men by nature desire to know.*

- Aristotle, philosopher.

# Review of the Literature

## Fluency

Fluency is defined as using smoothly integrated operations to process meaning, language, and print (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p.62). Allington (2001) and Clay (1991) note that the most compelling reason to focus on fluency is the strong correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension. Quite simply, faster rates of reading correlate to higher comprehension (Allington, 2001). Proficient readers are both effective and efficient at using only as much information as necessary to construct meaning, whereas ELLs and struggling readers often slow down to focus on too many details while missing the big picture (Freeman & Freeman, 2000). These learners are so attuned to graphophonic cues that they miss the syntactic and semantic cues that add meaning to the text (Freeman & Freeman).

While fluency and phrasing are most often associated with oral reading, they also figure in the silent reading in which most students and adults engage (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). As students switch from oral to silent reading, they realize that articulating the words slows them down and that thinking words instead of saying words allows more attention for text meaning (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Multiple instructional approaches have been identified to improve fluency: choral reading, paired reading, echo reading, buddy reading, repeated reading, listening centers, Reader's Theater, and dialogue (Rasinski 2003). Combining the use of a focus hand with fluency instruction adds a kinesthetic dimension to reading and provides students with yet another resource to build fluency and comprehension.

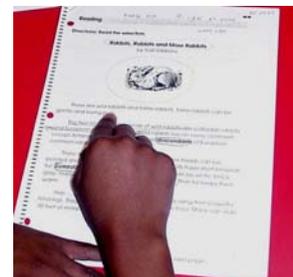
## Pre-reading Strategies

*What is the use of a book thought Alice,  
without pictures or conversations?*  
-Lewis Carroll.

The pre-reading stage is the time for explaining the purposes of texts and assignments, building students' background knowledge, introducing and preteaching significant vocabulary, making predictions, and helping students connect new information to what they already know (Wood & Taylor, 2006, p.xiv). Concentration on key words prior to reading a passage provides critical vocabulary development within a rich contextual environment and is critical if ELLs are to understand the lesson's most important concepts (Echevarria et al., 2004). Pre-reading strategies for ELLs build on past experiences, create rich conversations about a topic, and provide bridges to new material through the use of mental imagery, realia, replicas, photographs and graphic organizers (Herrell & Jordan, 2004). A focus hand serves as a tool to augment pre-reading strategies as students use their hand to:

- circle the title, author, and headings in the passage
- circle bold, italicized, and underlined words in the passage.
- circle pictures, graphs, and visuals in the passage.
- make connections and predictions

## Using a Focus Hand

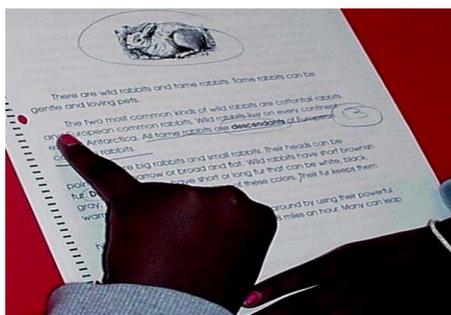


There is a dearth of well-controlled, systematic research on the use of a focus hand while reading. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) note the important transition during reading from slow careful pointing, to pointing and moving quickly along the line of print, and finally removing the finger altogether as children read faster than they can point. Teachers sometimes encourage finger pointing for too long, inhibiting fluent reading as students focus on one word at a time instead of groups of words (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

Conversely, authors who specialize in increasing reading speed and comprehension routinely advocate the use of a focus or pace hand as a guide while reading (Berg, 1992; Berg & Conyers, 1998; Buzan, 1991; Frank, 1990; Konstant, 2000; Kump, 1999; Marks-Beal, 2001; Ostrov, 2002; Rozakis, 1995; Wood, 2003). The technique involves moving the hand smoothly from left to right across the page just under the line of type that is being read, lifting it slightly at the end of the line and bringing it quickly back to the following line. The fluid efficient motion pulls the eyes along the text without stopping or fixating on individual words (Frank, 1990; Kump, 1999; Wood, 2003; Konstant, 2000). Authors suggest the following variations when using a focus hand:

- open hand, palm facing down (Berg & Conyers, 1998; Frank, 1990; Wood, 2003)
- index finger, palm facing down (Kump, 1999; Ostrov, 2002; Rozakis, 1995)
- pointer and middle finger, palm facing down (Berg, 1992)
- circle the thumb and forefinger, extend the fingers, palm facing up (Buzan, 1991)
- use a pen or pencil (Buzan, 1991; Konstant, 2000; Rozakis, 1995)

Wood (2003) lists several benefits of using a focus hand: curbing regressions, enhancing perceptual ability, directing concentration, controlling reading rate and promoting flexibility. Daydreaming and inattention to the reading task is minimized through the use of a focus hand. Neither argument, for or against a focus hand, provides corroborating empirical data to substantiate their position. Verifying extensive claims regarding the use or non-use of a focus hand is beyond the purview of this action research project. The focal point of this study is to determine if fifth grade ELLs can increase their oral and silent reading rates while retaining comprehension and improve their use of pre-reading strategies through the use of a focus hand.



## Methodology



## Participants

The action research involved students from a K-5 public elementary school of approximately 470 students. The institution is one of 16 elementary schools in a large suburban district in Ohio. The school's limited English proficient (LEP) population was 3.2 % in 2004/2005, 9.8% in 2005/2006 and 13.6% in 2006/2007 (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). The school report card for 2006/2007, as issued by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), designated the school as effective based on their scale of excellent, effective, continuous improvement, academic watch, and academic emergency (Ohio Department of Education).

Four fifth grade ELLs participated in the Focused Reading Research. The students, all girls, have attended school in the United States for varying periods of time: Heba and Farah for six years, Gabriela for three years, and Muna for approximately one and a half years. The four students have attended pull-out English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for forty minutes daily since entering school in the United States for support in English language acquisition and access to content across the language arts, science and social studies curriculum. The four students were identified for English language services upon school entry in the district and continue to receive help based on their annual results on the Ohio Test of English Language Acquisition (OTELA). When working with ELLs, it is important to remember that while they usually attain conversational fluency in one to three years, achieving cognitive academic language proficiency in a second language may take five to ten years and require differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and alternative assessments (Haynes, 2007).

Though the students are in fifth grade classrooms, their reading achievement at the beginning of the research project was below grade level (see Table 1) necessitating the use of reading materials that provide optimal challenge without frustration. The assessments and selected readings during the study were within each student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for independent fiction as determined by a STAR reading test, a computer assessment program that provides diagnostic and instructional information pertaining to a student's general reading skills. Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as the distance between a child's actual cognitive capacity and the level of potential development. A score of 3.1 would represent an average third grader after the first month of school.

Table 1 Student Reading Levels for Independent Fiction

Student	Gabriela	Farah	Muna	Heba
ZPD (grade level)	2.2-3.2	2.6-3.7	2.8-4.0	2.7-3.8

## Design

*The style of teaching...  
might be called invitational- an enthusiastic invitation  
to participate, contribute, take over the operation.  
- Don Holdaway.*

Baseline silent reading rates and comprehension scores were calculated at the beginning of the study, prior to the introduction of the focus hand technique. Data was also collected at the midpoint and conclusion of the research project in order to measure the impact of the focus hand intervention. The reading passages and comprehension questions used during project assessment were derived from practice grade 3 Ohio Achievement Tests (OAT) as noted in Table 2.

Table 2 Ohio Achievement Test Assessments

Title	OAT Test	Word Count	Test Given
Skunks	March 2006	493	May 4, 2007
Seahorses	October 2003	424	May 21, 2007
Rabbit, Rabbits, and More Rabbits	October 2004	508	June 5, 2007

Ohio Achievement Test items have undergone rigorous scrutiny and field testing establishing their validity for measuring reading achievement within this research project and are easily accessible for future corroborating research.

Each student's oral fluency rate was also assessed at the beginning, middle and end of the research using Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) for third graders (Good & Kaminski, 2005). The total number of words read correctly in one minute was recorded for the median score of the three selections making up each DIBELS assessment. Throughout the project, students kept a journal, graphed their silent reading rates, and engaged in authentic literature from various genres.

Inquiry was used as the method for introducing the focus hand technique. Initially, students brainstormed the benefits of faster silent reading: improving understanding, completing homework faster, more time for other activities, doing more work in middle school and reading enjoyment. The following experiment allowed the students to visualize regressions and experience how using a focus hand can concentrate attention on the reading passage and prevent going back consciously or unconsciously to relook at words. The students imagined a large beach ball covering a partner's face. Without moving their heads they followed the perimeter of the imaginary ball with their eyes, while their partner watched their eye movement. Then, the partner used a finger to draw around the imaginary ball and they followed the path of the finger with their eyes. The learners immediately noted how smoothly the eyes moved when following an object rather than an imaginary vision. When reading, the eyes constantly jump back and forth between words, just as they moved in an uneven pattern around the imaginary ball. Using a focus hand minimizes these non-productive eye movements allowing students to read smoothly and efficiently (Berg, 1992; Berg & Conyers, 1998; Buzan, 1991; Frank, 1990; Konstant, 2000; Kump, 1999; Marks-Beal, 2001; Ostrov, 2002; Rozakis, 1995; Wood, 2003). Faster readers make shorter fixations, take longer jumps between fixations, and have fewer regressions than slow readers (NICHD, as cited in Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005 p. 703).

The focus hand technique was easy to teach, took only a small amount of time to implement, and was of immediate interest to students. Using a focus hand involved moving the hand from left to right across the page just under the line of type that was being read, lifting it slightly at the end of the line and bringing it quickly back to the following line. Initially all students learned the technique of using an entire flat, open hand with the palm facing down (Berg & Conyers, 1998; Frank, 1990; Wood, 2003). As they gained expertise with using a focus hand, each student experimented to find their individual style. During the first lesson, the students used their Accelerated Reader (AR) books to practice the scanning technique, without focusing on actually reading. A helpful teaching strategy was to have the students turn their books upside down, so that the words would not distract them as they practiced the hand motion. After several minutes, the students righted their books, slowed down their focus hands and began to read. Finally, the learners discussed how using a hand or finger when reading helped to focus the eyes and set the pace for reading.

The following day, the focus hand was incorporated into pre-reading strategies using the book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles. Students used their hands to circle the title, author and picture on the cover. Page by page, the students moved their hand in a large question mark or S over the text, spending approximately 2-3 seconds surveying each page and noticing key words or phrases, especially those that were bolded, italicized, or underlined (Wood, 2003).

The learners also circled the pictures with their hand. When reading copied material or taking tests that can be marked on, students use a pencil as an extension of their focus hand to complete each pre-reading strategy directly on the paper. Throughout the overview, the ELLs constructed meaning before beginning to read; accessed prior knowledge through connections they could make to the text; and generated questions, comparisons and predictions about the story (Beers, 2003). The students then used the focus hand technique to read the book at their own pace.

This basic reading model was scaffolded over five weeks to allow the students to move from small group instruction to independence in employing a focus hand for both pre-reading strategies and actual reading. A reading rate was determined from a 100-500 word selection of each day's reading while comprehension was assessed through quick writes, discussions, and questioning. Journaling allowed the students to reflect on their learning and demonstrate understanding of the strategies introduced.

## Results

*The most compelling reason to focus instruction on fluency is the strong correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension.*

- Richard Allington.

Each of the four students improved their words per minute (WPM) silent reading rate from the pre-test to the post-test as illustrated in Table 3. Three of the four students made their greatest improvement from the pre-test to the mid-test over a period of approximately two weeks. Gabriela, who had the lowest reading level of the four students showed consistent improvement over the entire five week project.

**Table 3**                      **Silent Reading Rate: Grade 3 OAT**

Student	Pre-test May 4	Mid-test May 21	Post-test June 5	Change WPM
Gabriela	96	119	150	+54
Farah	160	170	174	+14
Muna	101	122	126	+25
Heba	71	119	111	+40

As displayed in Table 4, comprehension for three of the students improved or remained the same from the pre-test to the post test. Farah's comprehension remained consistently below grade level. Comprehension interventions throughout the school year and during the research period produced limited success. Farah's oral and silent reading rates were high at the start of the research project. Because she sub-vocalizes during silent reading, this may represent the upper limit of her reading rate, both silently and orally. The use of a focus hand in Farah's case may serve as a mechanism to decrease silent reading rate to provide for additional comprehension interventions. As noted in Table 5, Farah's oral reading rate did decline after the introduction of a focus hand.

**Table 4**                      **Silent Reading Comprehension: Grade 3 OAT**

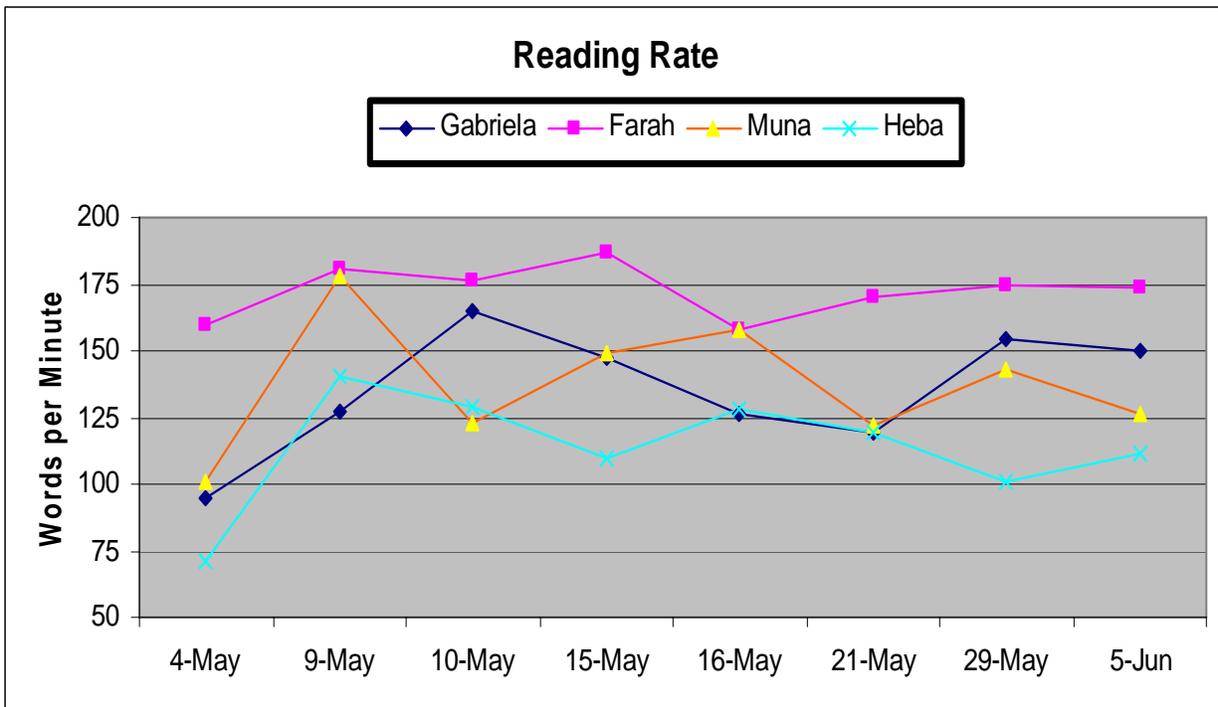
Student	Pre-test	Mid-test	Post -test
Gabriela	92%	100%	92%
Farah	50%	38%	46%
Muna	83%	100%	85%
Heba	83%	92%	100%

Table 5 illustrates oral reading rates for the learners on the third-grade DIBELS assessment. While three of the four students improved, the change from pre-test to post-test in oral reading rates was less than silent reading rates. This may be due to the familiarity students have with the DIBELS testing procedure, the extensive fluency practice that takes place daily in the students' classrooms as part of a school wide initiative, and the comparatively higher oral reading rates at the beginning of the study. The DIBELS program sets a benchmark of 104 WPM for fifth grade students at the beginning of the school year and a 124 WPM benchmark at the end of the school year, representing an average improvement of approximately 2.2 words per month (Good & Kaminski, 2005). It is significant that a positive change of 11 to 24 WPM in oral reading was achieved by three of the participants in the study during the five week duration of the research. As noted previously, an emphasis was placed on reducing the oral reading rate of the fourth participant, Farah, in order to improve comprehension.

**Table 5 Oral Reading Rate: DIBELS**

Student	Pre-test 7-May	Mid-test 15-May	Post-test 4-Jun	Change WPM
Gabriela	98	129	122	+24
Farah	179	162	160	-19
Muna	148	153	163	+15
Heba	112	119	123	+11

The students' progress was monitored during the study through the collection of daily silent reading rates. Figure 1 reflects the individuality of student learning as well as each student's response to a variety of literary genres over the course of the study. Students recognized that more difficult passages require reading at a slower pace in order to maintain comprehension. Current eye movement research verifies that as the text becomes more difficult, readers make longer fixations, shorter saccades, and more regressions (Rayner, Chace, Slattery, & Ashby, 2006).

**Figure 1 Silent Reading Rates Reflecting Various Genres**

Throughout the study, students utilized their focus hand for both reading and pre-reading strategies. Using the focus hand to circle the title, author, visuals, and key words before beginning to read helped the ELLs effectively build background, create comprehensible input, and connect the text to personal experiences, other text, and the world. Marzano (2004) notes that what students already know about the content serves as one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn, remember and apply new information. Table 6 compares each student's use of pre-reading strategies during the silent reading grade 3 OAT pre-test and post-test as observed by the teacher and reported by the students in a discussion following the assessments.

**Table 6**                      **Application of Pre-reading Strategies**

<b>Pre-Reading Strategies</b>	<b>Gabriela</b>		<b>Farah</b>		<b>Muna</b>		<b>Heba</b>	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Circled title/author	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Circled visuals- pictures, graphs	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Circled key words- bold, italics	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scanned text with a focus hand	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Total strategies used	0	4	0	4	0	4	2	4

Pre-test May 4, 2007/Post-test June 5, 2007

During the study, students responded to various question prompts in their journal as a means of reflecting on their reading experiences using a focus hand. After participating in the regression activity in which students used their eyes to follow an imaginary ball and then followed someone's finger, Heba noted that it was much harder with no finger because you stop and go (over and over). But, with someone's finger you can follow smoothly. This activity was crucial because it created immediate buy-in from the students for using a focus hand. When asked to explain how it feels to use a focus hand, students responded that it makes you read more easily, lets you focus on what you are reading, and helps keep track of where you are. The students reflected that when using a pace hand your eyes are pulled along in the reading and you stay focused rather than daydreaming. In addition to using their focus hand during the study, the students were able to transfer the practice into other academic classes and pleasure reading. Students listed the following reading activities in which they could use a focus hand: QRI testing, Accelerated Reader books, chapter books, tests, Ohio Achievement Tests, science, social studies, and language arts.

## Conclusion

*A mind stretched to a new idea never goes  
back to its original dimensions*

*- Oliver Wendell Holmes, jurist.*

Taken as a whole, the qualitative and quantitative results of this research study suggest that using a focus hand is a tool that ELLs and other students can use to increase their silent and oral reading rates. Hudson, Lane, and Pullen (2005) cite a correlation between reading rate and comprehension arguing that automaticity frees the reader to focus on understanding the text and that it can be measured using students' reading rates. Rasinski (2003) does warn that developing a student's reading rate must not occur in isolation from meaning, comprehension, and expression or students may read fast but with insufficient comprehension. Throughout this study careful attention was directed not only to increasing reading rates but also monitoring comprehension. Table 7 compares each students' final reading rate orally and silently to the fifth grade goal suggested by Fountas and Pinnell (2006). Even though the students are currently reading at a third grade level, the chart provides perspective in comparison to their classroom peers.

Table 7 Comparison of final student results and grade level goals

student	Oral WPM	Oral WPM goal	Silent WPM	Silent WPM goal
Gabriela	122	145-170	150	165-190
Farah	160	145-170	174	165-190
Muna	163	145-170	126	165-190
Heba	123	145-170	111	165-190

Improvement in silent reading rates can transform arduous time-consuming assignments into learning experiences where students can focus the greatest amount of their attention on reading strategies that are aimed at meaning making such as predicting, drawing conclusions, finding meaning through context, and questioning. In addition to increasing reading rates, a focus hand served as an effective assessment tool for the classroom by making students' thinking visible, thereby increasing the effectiveness of teacher interventions. The fluency of silent reading is normally inferred if students move reasonably through the text, can relate what they understand, and are able to return to the text to support their opinions (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). When a focus hand is used the teacher can determine that students are employing pre-reading skills as they watch students use their hand to circle the title, author, pictures, and scan for key words. ELLs in particular, may struggle with comprehending a text or concepts because their schemata do not match the dominant culture's schemata. Making explicit links during pre-reading to the students' background allows the information to take on new meaning as students discuss ideas, concepts, issues and vocabulary that is unfamiliar (Echevarria et al., 2004).

The findings of this action research are subject to certain limitations suggestive of further testing: a small number of experimental subjects, brief treatment duration, lack of a transfer measure, inclusion of only one grade level and gender, and involvement of a specialized subgroup of students. These factors tend to limit the generalization of using a focus hand to broader instructional contexts and populations, including ELLs. Accounting for the impact of practice and maturation variables during the action research period may also create a limitation in the validity of the findings. This limitation may be countered by the short five-week duration of the study, the similarity in the type and quantity of reading instruction before and during the study, and the significant increase in oral reading rates when compared to established benchmarks. It is also notable that the increase in the students' reading growth occurred during the last five weeks of school, a traditionally difficult period of the school year in terms of student motivation.

Future research may focus on the hand as a kinesthetic dimension of reading that actively focuses the mind and body on the learning task. Current brain research already confirms that physical activity- moving, stretching, walking- can actually enhance the learning process (Jensen, 2000, p. 34). Additional research may highlight whether a focus hand serves as a motivational tool to encourage students to consistently read closer to their full potential. Advances in eye-tracking devices may make it feasible to examine the eye movements (fixations, regressions, saccades) of children and less skilled readers and how these impact reading (Rayner & Juhasz, 2004). Eventually, studies may concentrate on whether the faster reading of a focus hand supports the premise that the more children read, the more skilled they become at reading; this in turn makes reading easier and consequently increases the chances they will read more (Stanovich, as cited in Marzano, 2004, p. 36). Free voluntary reading makes a powerful contribution to language and literacy development and helps readers from the very beginning level improve: it is good for children, teenagers, and second language learners and has been shown to work all over the world (Krashen, 2000).

*Children, just like adults, learn better in a supportive environment in which they can risk trying out new strategies and concepts and stretching themselves intellectually.*  
- Peter Johnston.

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