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Writing a Reading and Language Arts Unit Designed to Motivate Elementary School English Language Learners (ELL) and Students of Poverty

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WRITING A READING AND LANGUAGE ARTS UNIT DESIGNED TO MOTIVATE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELL) AND
STUDENTS OF POVERTY

By

Kaitlin J. Carlson

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To my family, friends, mentors, and the very promising group of students at Shepherd Community Center...

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ABSTRACT

One of the biggest challenges that educators face today is what has become known as “summer reading setback.” Many students who have at or above grade level reading skills during the months when school is in session fall behind over the summer due to a lack of continued reading practice. For students of poverty in particular, many of whom do not have access to reading materials over the summer months, “summer reading setback” has become a serious problem as they continue to fall behind summer after summer. Although “summer reading setback” has become a reality for far too many elementary school students, numerous schools and communities are working hard to combat this negative trend by implementing motivational reading programs to encourage students to maintain and even improve their reading skills over the summer. One such program is Summer EXCEL, a six week summer school for students at Shepherd Community Center in Indianapolis, Indiana.

One of the goals of Shepherd Community Center is to break the cycle of poverty through education; keeping students engaged in educational activities over the summer is integral to ensure they do not lose the progress they have made during the school year and to continue reading over the summer. Clearly, reading encompasses a

wide variety of skills, so the program decided to focus on improving students' listening comprehension abilities in particular. Therefore, the lessons were written with that skill in mind. Because the theme for Summer EXCEL 2013 was "Down on the Farm," all books and activities were centered on this topic. In order to design a comprehensive reading unit that would motivate students in grades one through six, various instructional strategies were researched and utilized throughout the program.

This paper will explain the importance of Shepherd Community Center's Summer EXCEL Program to provide a motivational, educational experience for high-poverty elementary school students who face the prospects of summer reading loss. Additionally, the process of writing the reading unit will be discussed, along with quantitative data revealing the overall effectiveness of the unit and methods of improvement. Also included are pretest and posttest assessment results, which show that strategies utilized in the unit helped students learn and improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Keywords: Education, English Language Learners, Poverty,
Summer Reading, Interdisciplinary Reading Unit

INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following scenario: you are a summer intern with minimal teaching experience, and you have just found out that part of your job description is to teach a five week reading unit. However, there is a catch. The school you are teaching at does not have the resources available to provide you with a teaching curriculum. Therefore, it is up to you to find books and materials, design lessons, and create a unit that will effectively instruct high-poverty English language learners (ELLs). This was the situation that interns at Shepherd Community Center in Indianapolis, Indiana, were facing without the resources available to hire someone to design their curriculum for them. As an elementary educator with a passion for high-poverty schools and the desire to provide high-quality educational experiences for all students, this was just the opportunity I was seeking. Not only would I learn more about instructional design and lesson development, but I would also have the chance to make a difference in the lives of countless students and positively impact a very deserving summer school program at Shepherd Community Center.

The goals of this project were as follows: research effective instructional strategies for the specific student population of Shepherd Community Center, gather books and materials for the reading

instructional unit based on the theme "Down on the Farm," develop lessons aimed at improving listening comprehension skills, analyze pre and post assessment results, and examine the overall success of the unit. In completing these steps, not only would the Summer EXCEL program at Shepherd Community Center receive a thematic reading curriculum, but the students would benefit from a reading unit specifically designed for their skill levels. The unit was created with the intention of providing a high-quality, holistic summer educational experience and reducing the effects of what has become known as "summer reading setback."

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Summer Reading Setback

Although educators encourage students to maintain the skills they have acquired during the school year over the summer months, many students do not follow this advice for a variety of reasons. Whether children simply choose to participate in other activities, are not encouraged to read at home, or do not have the resources available to continue working on their reading skills over the summer, these months often contribute to significant reading level loss for elementary school students. A major difficulty many teachers encounter when students return to school in the fall has become known as "summer reading setback."

Research has revealed that reading achievement in particular decreases by a few months every summer for students from a low socioeconomic status (SES) background (Allington et al., 2010). Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) explain that while low SES parents would like to offer enriching summer activities for their children, rarely do they have the means to provide them. Therefore, countless schools, community centers, and libraries have begun to suggest that children participate in summer reading programs at least to maintain, if not to improve, their reading skills. Shepherd Community Center offers one such program that consists of six weeks

of lessons and activities in reading and other content areas designed to promote academic growth among the children who attend (M. Wacker, personal communication, June 11, 2012). Alexander et al. provide support for the importance of summer programs in stating that it is necessary for disadvantaged students to be involved in “year-round supplemental programs to counter the continuing press of family and community conditions that hold them back” (p. 176). Most students who attend Shepherd’s summer program come from situations of poverty and may not receive any other cognitively stimulating experiences throughout their summer due to a lack of resources (J. Height, personal communication, February 2, 2012). Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) explain that while children from wealthier homes often attend summer camps or take trips during the summer months, students of poverty rarely have these experiences. The rarity of these opportunities can unfortunately be a hindrance to their overall educational growth.

Shepherd Community Center

“Working to break the cycle of poverty on the near east side of Indianapolis,” (Story, 2010, p. 1): this is the foundation on which Shepherd Community Center was built. Beginning in 1985 with a simple Thanksgiving meal put on by volunteers from Westside Church of the Nazarene in Indianapolis, Indiana, the dream of creating a place

of hope for the impoverished people on the east side of Indianapolis was born. A year later, Central Nazarene Mission was started with the primary goal of providing food and clothing to community members in need. The Mission changed its name to Shepherd Community Center in 1988, and two years later, the first summer day camps were held for about 48 children. Since then, working to break the cycle of poverty through education has continued to grow with Shepherd's Summer EXCEL program, serving about 400 children in 2010 (Story). As Shepherd Community Center has greatly expanded over the past 25 years, reaching out to students of poverty on the eastside of Indianapolis by providing numerous educational opportunities has been one of their primary goals (J. Height, February 2, 2012).

Summer EXCEL

Shepherd Community Center has embraced the idea of providing educational opportunities for their students year-round in order to promote a constant attitude of learning. The program was named EXCEL to represent Shepherd Community's aim for their students of "Embracing eXcellence and Committing to Education for Life" (Summer, 2013). Shepherd's Summer EXCEL program has become an effective way for students in Indianapolis to combat the effects of "summer reading setback." Out-of-school learning loss is a reality for countless children in this poverty-stricken area of Indiana. However,

this six week program encourages students to practice skills they have learned throughout the school year in an engaging manner. One way the staff ensures that students are interested in learning is by designing the entire summer school around a common theme, which was “Down on the Farm” for the summer of 2013. Students are given opportunities to participate in numerous activities such as: buddy reading, field trips, science labs, crafts, and much more. Focusing their activities on this theme allows students to be a part of interdisciplinary learning, which encourages them to make real-life connections across subject areas (M. Wacker, personal communication, June 11, 2012).

Instructional Strategies for Students of Poverty

“Two things that help one move out of poverty are education and relationships” (Payne, 2005 p. 3). Students in situations of poverty are in great need of year-long educational programs with individuals who care about them in order to combat the numerous family and community challenges they face. Because poverty has such wide-reaching effects, it was essential to incorporate instructional strategies into the reading lessons that would benefit these learners.

One of the best ways to motivate students living in poverty situations is to develop in them an intrinsic drive to learn and succeed. A study of several high-poverty schools that are also high performing demonstrated that star teachers “get children to believe in the intrinsic

value of learning because they believe in it themselves and are lifelong learners of various subjects, skills, and fields of study” (Haberman, 1995, p. 11). The challenge is not always to persuade students to learn, but to urge them to believe in the importance of their education. Through experiences such as Summer EXCEL at Shepherd Community Center, students recognize the significance of learning and gain an intrinsic motivation for continuing their education (J. Height, personal communication, Monday, February 2, 2012).

Another vital instructional strategy for high-poverty students is incorporating their interests and their questions into the lessons (Haberman, 1995). When students realize that their interests are valued and their questions are worth asking, they gain a sense of ownership in their learning, which has proven to be a key motivator for students of poverty. Carter (2000) states, “Once a child knows you believe in him, he can compete anywhere in the world” (p. 58). Not only can they eventually compete in the job market in the future, but also because students have experienced others believing in their potential now, they are more driven to learn and achieve throughout their school years.

Other strategies have also been described as effective methods for students of poverty. The formula for success in one high-poverty school in Atlanta, Georgia, focuses on three specific goals: immediate

personal attention, basic skills, and testing (Carter, 2000). Throughout the summer program at Shepherd Community the past several years, students have received all three elements. Due to the format of the lessons with questioning as well as personal attention and instruction after books were read, students were able to thrive in this environment. Basic skills were included during instruction at all grade levels in order that students could strengthen basic reading and writing skills throughout the summer. Finally, formal testing took place both at the very beginning and at the conclusion of the unit in order to measure achievement and improvement. Students also participated in numerous forms of informal assessment throughout the reading curriculum including: comprehension questions, classroom discourse about the main ideas and events of a story, hands-on activities, responses to the books, and more. Each day students had opportunities to show what they learned and thus, gain confidence and purpose in participating in the reading lessons each day (M. Wacker, personal communication, Monday, June 11, 2012).

Teaching English Language Learners

Numerous studies have been conducted that investigate effective practices to best teach English Language Learners (ELLs). These students often struggle, because not only are they trying to learn information in the different content areas, but are also still learning

English language skills. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report revealed that on the fourth-grade reading scale, approximately 30 percent of ELLs were at or above the basic level, indicating partial mastery of expected skills at grade level, while only seven percent scored in the proficient category (Barr, Eslami, & Joshi, 2012). These scores were significantly lower than those for students who have English as their first language; those children scored 69 percent at the basic level and 34 percent at the proficient level (Barr et al.)

However bleak this data may seem, research has shown that there are a wide variety of teaching methods that have positively been utilized to aid in an ELL's learning process. One study found that teachers in a low income area of Massachusetts all indicated four strategies that worked well when instructing ELLs. These tactics included the following: repetition and opportunities to practice skills, using gestures and visual cues throughout lessons, incorporating various objects and hands-on activities, and including multisensory approaches (Facella, Rampino, & Shea, 2005). Incorporating multisensory approaches is important because they "target all learning styles, and children are able to make connections faster" (p. 219).

Additionally, Herrell and Jordan (2012) explain that using realia, or concrete objects, enable ELL students to connect vocabulary to real

life and motivate them to learn by engaging them in hands-on experiences that allow new connections to be made. Making links to vocabulary is vital to the reading success of ELLs, because numerous researchers have determined that a low reading vocabulary leads to poor reading comprehension for these students (Barr et al., 2012). Furthermore, studies have indicated that using thematic literature often stimulates content-based academic learning for ELLs (Facella et al., 2005). One of the major strategies that Shepherd has used in its summer program for years is basing the entire program around a common thematic unit such as rainforest in 2011, oceans in 2012, and the farm in 2013 (M. Wacker, personal communication, June 11, 2012).

Increasing Student Motivation

Thematic Units

Utilizing thematic units is one very effective way to motivate students to be engaged in classroom learning. As Turner, Russell III and Waters (2013) indicate, the term *unit* has many different meanings. However, the essence of a unit can be found in the topic itself, "Basically, a unit includes everything a group of learners does to explore a particular topic" (p. 52). In the case of the thematic unit for Shepherd Community Center, the chosen theme of a farm meant that

all of the book choices and reading activities needed to be centered on this topic (M. Wacker, personal communication, June 11, 2012).

Buddy Reading

Another method that has proven extremely beneficial to increase student reading motivation is buddy reading. One study by Friedland and Truesdell (2004) found that book buddy programs were successful in that the students' confidence and self-esteem increased, and their overall motivation to read improved significantly. Reading with a partner allows children to not only work together to sound out challenging words and phrases, but also gives them countless opportunities to make connections to themselves, to other texts, and to the world around them (Marr, Dugan, & Algozzine, 2007). This, in turn, increases their motivation to read and desire to participate in the learning process. Clearly, incorporating this strategy into the reading curriculum is designed not only to improve oral reading fluency, but also to motivate the students in their learning.

Informational Text

Another major factor that increases student motivation is the use of informational text in classrooms. Studies have shown that especially during the early elementary years, motivation and reading ability are closely linked, and interest in a particular topic plays a significant role in students' motivation to read about that subject

(Kraemer, McCabe, & Sinatra, 2012). Kraemer et al. conducted research in a first grade classroom which showed that the students chose to read expository books more often than narrative stories, and improved listening comprehension directly correlated to reading informational text. Since improving comprehension is a primary goal of Shepherd's summer program, nonfiction literature is included in lessons as well as teachers reading the books to the students (M. Wacker, personal communication, Monday, June 11, 2012); Kraemer et al. indicate that "among the most cost effective and simple ways to introduce primary-grade children, particularly those living in poverty and with limited resources, to deal with EI [expository/informational] text is to read such material aloud" (p. 166). Limiting students to solely narrative text in the early elementary grades gives these students a disadvantage later in their schooling when these informational types of readings with higher vocabulary occur regularly (Kraemer et al.). Therefore, by choosing nonfiction books with topics of interest to the students and relatable to them, the students' reading and vocabulary skills as well as motivation levels increase (Kraemer et al.).

However, utilizing solely nonfiction material during the unit will not connect with all learners. Garner and Bochna (2004) have found that listening comprehension can also be improved significantly

through the use of narratives. It is essential to incorporate stories that have a solid organizational structure that students can easily follow and understand. This aids in their overall recall and provides an opportunity for improved listening comprehension. Although the types of books may be different, it is important to note that whether the students are reading informational or fiction material, the use of questioning is fundamental. Barton and Sawyer (2003) state, "Without response, comprehension of a text is rarely deepened" (p. 336). Therefore, discussion questions should be included in each lesson in order to better grasp the students' overall comprehension of the material taught.

Writing a Reading Instructional Unit

Overview

"When we talk about units in teaching, we are usually talking about the teaching plan for that topic. Such plans vary in length, in amount of detail, and even in their source of creation" (Turner, Russell III, & Waters, 2013, p. 52). Essentially the design of a unit plan depends on the requirements of a specific curriculum or program. Why choose a unit for a summer school program in the first place? Turner et al. state that unit plans lead to "more effective and impactful teaching...because they can be made to fit particular needs and abilities of your students" (p. 53).

Developing a Unit Plan

There are many steps to creating an effective unit plan with lessons designed to engage learners. One of the most important initial decisions is what type of unit one is developing. Three different types of units exist: resource units, sketch units, and teaching units. A resource unit consists of creating, collecting, and ordering materials, as well as teaching activities and ideas, while a sketch unit is a basis allowing the teacher to gather resources and save specific lesson planning for a later date (Turner et al., 2013). The third type of unit is a teaching unit that involves a plan of study requiring changes based on successes and failures.

The initial steps for both a resource unit design and teaching unit design is getting a clear and specific picture of the desired learning outcomes. These objectives should be well-stated in order to give clear direction to the teacher and indicate the types of activities which would be useful to achieve the learning outcomes. When objectives are concise and recognized throughout the lesson planning process, achievement can be more effectively measured. Knowing objectives is beneficial not only to give directional focus to the unit plan, but also to help limit the scope of the lessons and identify the most important strategies to include in lessons (Turner et al., 2013).

In order to ensure that the objectives and outcomes are being taught and assessed throughout a unit, a content outline should be created. This is the next step to writing a unit plan, which allows the writer to define “the academic goals of the big vision of the unit” (Cunningham, 2009, p. 8). Outlines are beneficial in visually indicating the sequence of the unit.

Once the content outline for each grade level is complete, the writer of the unit is ready to develop lesson plans and activities. According to Cunningham (2009), “The purpose of a unit is to unite lesson plans to enhance learning” (p. 9). Therefore, lesson plans created with the theme of the unit and learning objectives in mind are essential to the success of the unit. A few of the key components of lesson planning include: a link to past learning that draws students into new learning, ongoing checks for understanding, adjustments to meet the needs of diverse learners, and timing that maintains interest and engagement throughout the lesson (Cunningham).

Importance of Listening Comprehension

Overview

One of the most important aspects of listening comprehension that one must understand is that students participate in more than one type of listening. Miller (2000) categorized listening into five classifications: discriminative listening, purposeful listening, creative

listening, critical listening, and appreciative listening. Purposeful listening and critical listening were used primarily in the unit. According to Yellin, Jones, and Devries (2008), "purposeful listening is when the listener attends to information and directions given by the speaker and then responds to the information" (p. 150). Critical listening, on the other hand, "involves the listener's ability to understand the information presented by the speaker, evaluate the information, and formulate opinions about the information" (Yellin et al., p. 150).

Use of Questioning for Listening Development

"The primary way to teach listening comprehension skills is through questioning. Asking questions after children listen to a recording or hear a passage read to them is a traditional practice" (Yellin et al., 2008, p. 158). Research indicates that the use of questioning throughout a lesson is an effective strategy for evaluating and improving listening comprehension skills among student learners. Yellin et al. (2008) explain, "In order to make questioning in the classroom part of the instructional process and not just another means of evaluation, teachers need to know something about the nature of questions" (p. 159). The four major questioning categories include the following: literal questions, inferential questions, evaluative questions, and applied questions. A literal question, also known as a "right there"

question can be found directly in the text. Student responses to literal questions indicate a surface comprehension level of the basic content of the material. These types of questions are effective for emergent readers who can experience success in searching and finding the answers to inquiries that come directly from the reading. The next type of question is often referred to as a think and search, or inferential question. When asked an inferential question, students should be given a few moments to think before responding. This idea of encouraging wait time or think time is effective, as answers to these questions are not specifically stated in the text, but must be discovered through careful analysis of the information (Yellin et al.).

The skill of making inferences is extremely important in the educational context today, and the summer school reading program at Shepherd Community Center was no exception. Throughout the reading unit, inferential questions were used to best allow students to think and come to a well-thought-out response that they discovered on their own, rather than directly reading it in the text. This type of questioning, while more applicable with upper grade students, can be incorporated to an extent in any reading lesson for all grade levels (Yellin et al., 2008).

Another effective inquiring technique is known as evaluative or “on my own” questioning. This type of questioning gives the teacher a

reliable method of assessing what students are not only comprehending but learning and connecting what they are hearing with their own experiences (Yellin et al., 2008).

Evaluative questions ask students to “make a judgment about the material heard or read. It is not enough to know what happened in a story or even why it happened. Now the students must also assess the significance of the material in light of their own life experiences” (Yellin et al., 2008, p. 160). Numerous questions at all grade levels required students in the summer reading program to both grasp the content and make real-world connections. Finally, applied questions or “writer and me” questions were included in lessons for the upper grade level students. These questions are very challenging for students, because the students must apply the information read aloud, synthesize, and connect what they have heard in order to apply the information to a different situation or scenario. Applied questions ask students to think outside the box and not only recall information and make inferences, but also apply what they have learned.

When teachers have a greater understanding of the value of all types of questioning and incorporate them into daily instruction, listening comprehension can significantly improve. As Yellin et al. (2008) indicate, the “primary goal as a teacher is to make children think, [therefore] better types of questions are open questions which

usually have more than one right answer and require more thinking and support to justify the answer” (p. 160). When possible, higher-level thinking questions were included in lesson plans throughout the unit to engage students and encourage them to think more deeply about the material being discussed.

Assessment

Clearly, pretest and posttest evaluations of the students’ listening comprehension skills are essential in order to deduce the overall effectiveness of a unit. According to Yellin et al. (2008), tests to evaluate listening comprehension skills generally require the administrator to read material aloud, and then students respond to “multiple choice literal, inferential, and applied comprehension questions related to the material” (p. 161). In addition to content-related questions, oftentimes vocabulary terms are also included in assessments, as vocabulary is an important element of overall comprehension levels. Both formal and informal assessments are essential in order to gain a holistic understanding of the students’ abilities. Turner et al. (2013) explain that ongoing assessment is beneficial for the following purposes: identifying specific areas of student strengths and weaknesses, recognizing the need for differentiated instruction, and bringing about opportunities for self-assessment. Overall, it is essential to recognize that “well-constructed

assessment gives students and parents, as much as teachers, ownership in the learning process” (Turner et al., p. 78).

METHODS

The methodology for this project contained many components in order to meet the requests of the staff at Shepherd Community Center. The goal was to provide the best possible lessons within the unit in order to meet the needs of a very diverse group of learners in an urban setting.

To begin, Dr. Forgrave and I met with M. Wacker, the curriculum director at Shepherd Community Center, and a few of the other teachers of the Summer EXCEL Program in the summer of 2012 in order to discuss the reading unit. They explained that the theme for the following summer would be "Down on the Farm." This meant that all the books and activities to be utilized during the reading unit would be centered on this theme. During our meeting they explained that their primary aim for the reading portion of their summer school program would be to improve the listening comprehension skills of the students. They also expressed that some of the interns teaching the lessons would not be education majors. In the past, they had step-by-step lesson plans with questions prepared in order to give the interns an outline to follow. The format for the lessons would need to be very easy to understand and simple to implement.

For their Summer EXCEL Program, M. Wacker (personal communication, June 11, 2012) and the other teachers explained that

the reading unit would take place over the course of five weeks for students entering grades one through six. Each week, there would be four days of reading lessons with the fifth day, Friday, being an opportunity for students to participate in buddy reading or partner reading.

While developing the reading “Down on the Farm” unit for Shepherd Community Center, both the needs and abilities of the students were carefully considered and incorporated into lesson planning. Given the demographic information of the students who would be attending the program, the unit books and activities were chosen with that in mind. Many students from the east side of Indianapolis who attended the summer school came from poverty-stricken families.

When asked more specifically about the demographics of the students, the Shepherd staff explained that most are from low-income families or situations of poverty. They also indicated that some would be English Language Learners (ELLs), as a majority of the students have a Hispanic heritage and primarily speak Spanish at home. (M. Wacker, personal communication, June 11, 2012). Therefore, an emphasis on creating lessons geared toward improving the vocabulary skills of English Language Learners and incorporating real-life skills was essential in order to best connect to these students.

Discussion with the individuals in leadership at Shepherd Community Center also indicated that most of the students who would be attending the program were far below the reading ability level expected for children their age. The summer school program ranged from students entering grade one through those entering grade six. However, with skill levels below the average for their age group, books were carefully chosen at an interest level that aligned with the students' grade level, but at a reading level below that of their grade level. Clearly, when designing a unit, simply knowing the specific needs and abilities of one's students is not enough. This information must be taken into consideration, and lessons must be written and adapted in order to meet the needs of the particular group of students taking part in the unit.

While designing lessons for the reading curriculum, I was sure to incorporate all essential key elements for lesson success (Cunningham, 2009). Activating prior knowledge and relating content to students' past experiences were integral to motivating students to acquire new knowledge. Additionally, ongoing checks for understanding were possible through before, during, and after reading questions that allowed the teachers to comprehend the students' levels of understanding of the material. Included in many lessons were alternative options for instruction for both advanced learners and

those with special needs. In regard to timing, each lesson took place in a time window of about thirty minutes. The lessons were comprised of many different parts such as: read-alouds, hands-on activities, and follow-up questions to keep students engaged the entire time. As lessons were written and students gained more knowledge about farming concepts, the unit plan began to take shape into an effective method for engaging students in learning and enhancing their listening comprehension skills.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2012, I researched various strategies for teaching low-income and ELL students, along with effective methods for creating reading lessons based around a common theme. Also, during the fall of 2012, Dr. Forgrave and I worked on locating farm books that would be appropriate for the reading ability levels of the students. In order to pay for the books and additional materials required to make the reading unit a success, Dr. Forgrave and I applied for the Community Engagement Grant through Olivet Nazarene University. We received notification of approval for the funding on October 12, 2012. With funding in place, I was able to select and level the books for the lessons. Then I began writing lessons incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction and hands-on learning centered on the chosen books.

The unit for Shepherd Community Center was a combination of both a resource unit and a teaching unit. When developing the unit, I researched ideas and strategies, gathered materials, and created lessons, as is characteristic of a resource unit. However, the unit was also taught by interns who were able to make adjustments based on the triumphs and shortcomings they saw when teaching the lessons to their particular group of students. Therefore, the reading unit could be described as both a resource and teaching unit.

In the case of Shepherd Community Center, the parameters of the unit were specific in regard to the following: time length, theme, and focus of achievement for the unit. The instruction for the summer school reading program took place over the course of five weeks, with lessons needed four days a week, Monday through Thursday, with buddy reading in place for the students on Fridays. As previously stated, the theme for the reading unit was "Down on the Farm." This allowed for a clear focus for the unit as books were chosen and activities were created to address the target skill for the reading unit of improving listening comprehension. In terms of the summer reading program, a content outline was developed for each grade level, grades one through six, once books were selected for these classes. Then I created a plan for the instructional sequence of the books along with

supplemental activities that enhanced the listening comprehension skills of the students.

Because the primary focus for Shepherd's summer reading program was to increase overall listening comprehension levels for first grade through sixth grade students, it was essential to include many strategies that supported ELL vocabulary building and allowed students to gain a strong understanding of the books utilized throughout the reading unit.

The curriculum director, M. Wacker, and other teachers at Shepherd Community Center indicated that each lesson should include numerous opportunities for questioning and discussion in order to promote and assess the listening comprehension abilities of the students. Throughout the planning process for Shepherd Community Center's reading program, the overarching objective was that students would improve their listening comprehension skills. Each lesson and activity was created with this outcome in mind.

Because students participate in both a pretest and posttest evaluating their listening comprehension skills, the ability not only to understand information presented orally, but also to synthesize and voice their ideas was very important. Students needed to critically listen to the books being read in order to best comprehend and respond to questions based on the reading.

At various points throughout the reading instructional unit, all types of listening, including discriminative listening, purposeful listening, creative listening, critical listening, and appreciative listening were utilized. However, the major points of focus based on the objective of improving listening comprehension were purposeful listening and critical listening. For example, during each lesson students listened to a book read aloud by the teacher and then responded to various comprehension questions, which was purposeful listening. Additionally, a response to the information often took the form of completing activities designed to evaluate the comprehension of the information presented, which was critical listening.

As indicated by the curriculum director at Shepherd Community Center, M. Wacker (personal communication, June 11, 2012), one of the most important aspects that teachers and interns who would be instructing the students required in order to promote student improvement in listening comprehension was the incorporation of numerous before, during, and after questions with each lesson. This would allow the teachers to choose which questions would be most helpful and applicable to their particular group of students and best encourage the students' growth in listening comprehension. However, just incorporating questions was not enough to help the students succeed. One must first understand that there are distinct types of

questions that create an environment of learning and comprehension. While all types of questions have value, knowing the questions which best encourage student success is vital.

Clearly, evaluating the listening comprehension skills of students attending the summer program both before instruction and upon completion of the unit was essential in order to deduce the overall effectiveness of the unit. The pretests and posttests were created by Shepherd Community Center and followed a typical format for listening comprehension assessments which was a reading by the teacher and multiple choice questions over vocabulary and comprehension skills answered by the students. Lessons for the reading unit were designed with these evaluation parameters in mind in order to allow students to attain the most growth in listening comprehension skills over the course of the five-week reading program.

Throughout the fall of 2012, I sent examples of lesson plans for all grade levels to Shepherd's curriculum specialist, M. Wacker, for approval and suggestions for improvement. After reading through the lessons, Ms. Wacker indicated that she and the other teachers liked the lessons which included fun, hands-on activities and which incorporated more questions into the lesson plans. Therefore, I made a conscious effort when creating the lesson plans to include multiple before, during, and after questions in order to enhance students'

listening comprehension abilities. I also integrated engaging activities that reinforced information from the book in order to provide numerous hands-on learning experiences for the students throughout the unit.

In the spring of 2013, I continued designing lessons and submitted the final reading unit plan to M. Wacker in March 2013, for approval and changes if needed. In April 2013, I submitted an Internal Review Board (IRB) request to complete the project, which was approved in May. All books and materials were purchased and sent to Shepherd by the end of May. The five-week reading unit was taught at Shepherd Community Center's Summer EXCEL program in June and July 2013. I had the opportunity to visit Shepherd on July 15-16 in order to observe lessons taught in each grade level, interact with the students, talk to the interns who were teaching the lessons, and discuss the unit with M. Wacker and E. Balliett, directors of the summer school program. It was very beneficial to see firsthand how the lessons were progressing and various teaching methods utilized by the interns. In addition to observing the effectiveness of the unit for myself, I asked the interns and teachers who provided the instruction to the students to complete a Likert-scale style survey to assess the overall success of the reading unit. The survey was meant to evaluate the effectiveness of the unit and suggest methods of improvement.

Also included were several short answer questions to collect more qualitative information about the unit.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

To determine the effectiveness of the reading portion of the Summer EXCEL Program, students were administered a pretest and posttest designed by the EXCEL directors to evaluate the students' listening comprehension skills. Tests consisted of a short excerpt read aloud from a story, followed by eight listening comprehension questions. When analyzing the success of the reading unit, students' scores from the reading pretest were compared to scores earned on the reading posttest.* Percentages were determined in order to assess the overall success of the reading unit on improving the listening comprehension skills of the students participating in Shepherd's Summer EXCEL Program. Upon completion of the reading unit, the data indicated that 69.23% of the 117 students who completed both assessments maintained or improved their scores from the pretest to the posttest. Results were graphed both individually by class and as an overall assessment of the program. The figures below indicate student achievement based on their pretest and posttest percentage scores.

*Note: When analyzing the overall data, scores in which students did not complete both the pretest and the posttest were not included.

Figure 1.1

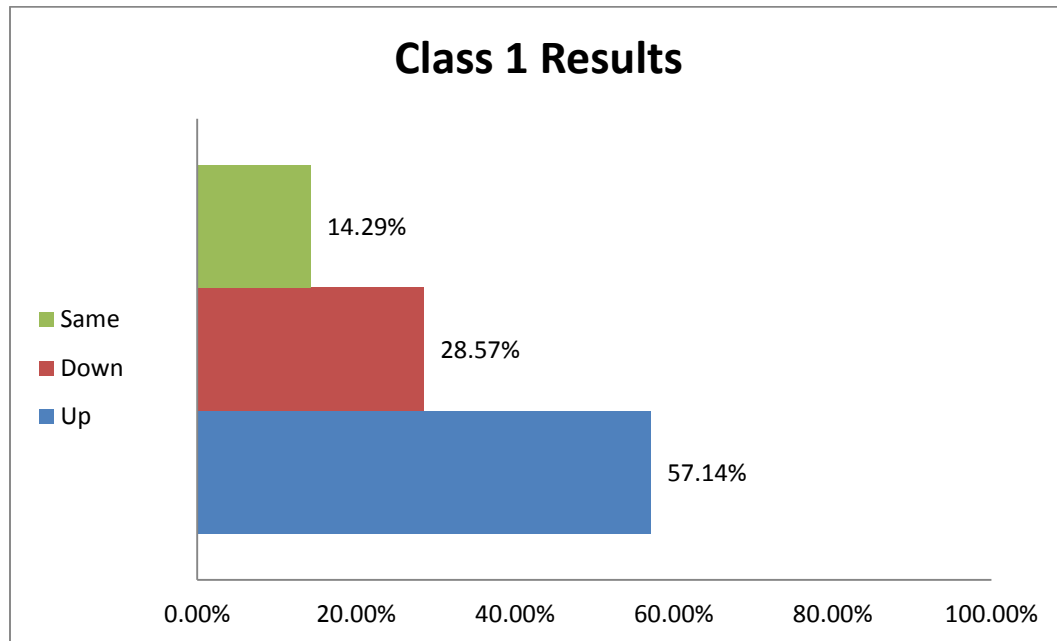


Figure 1.1 shows the overall results of the reading unit for Class 1 in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

As indicated in Figure 1.1, 12 of 21 students or 57.14% of students in Class 1 improved their scores on the listening comprehension posttest. Also interesting to note is that three students (14.29%) earned the same percentage score on their posttest, revealing that the reading unit allowed them to maintain their skills. Finally, 28.57%, or 6 of the 21 students in Class 1 scored lower on the posttest than on the pretest.

Figure 1.2

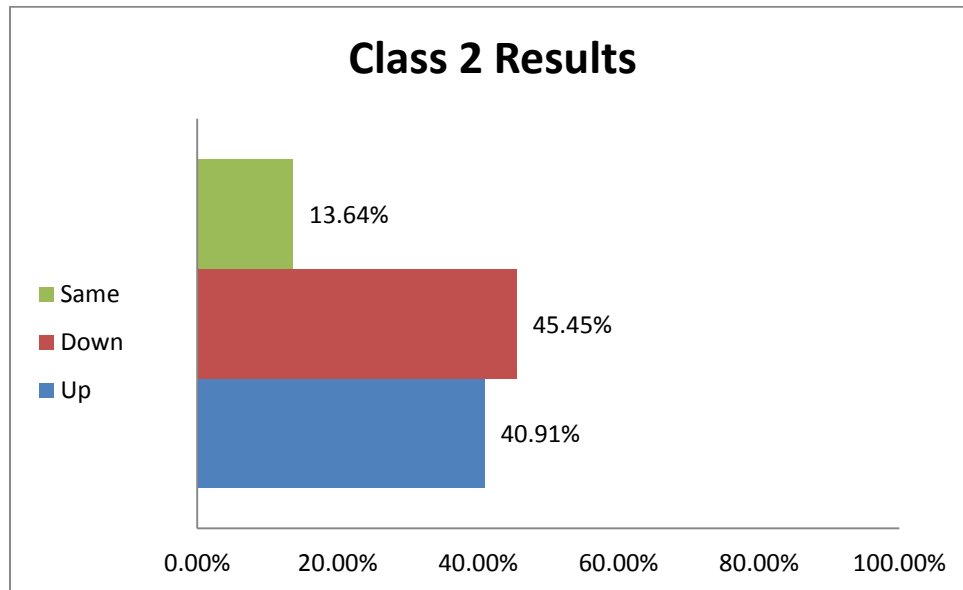


Figure 1.2 shows the overall results of the reading unit for Class 2 in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

Results for Class 2 differed from the norm of most students improving their scores on the posttest. For this group of 22 students in total, nine students (40.91%) scored higher on the posttest, while 10 students (45.45%) scored lower than their original test. Additionally, three students (13.64%) in Class 2 maintained their same percentage on the listening comprehension test.

Figure 1.3

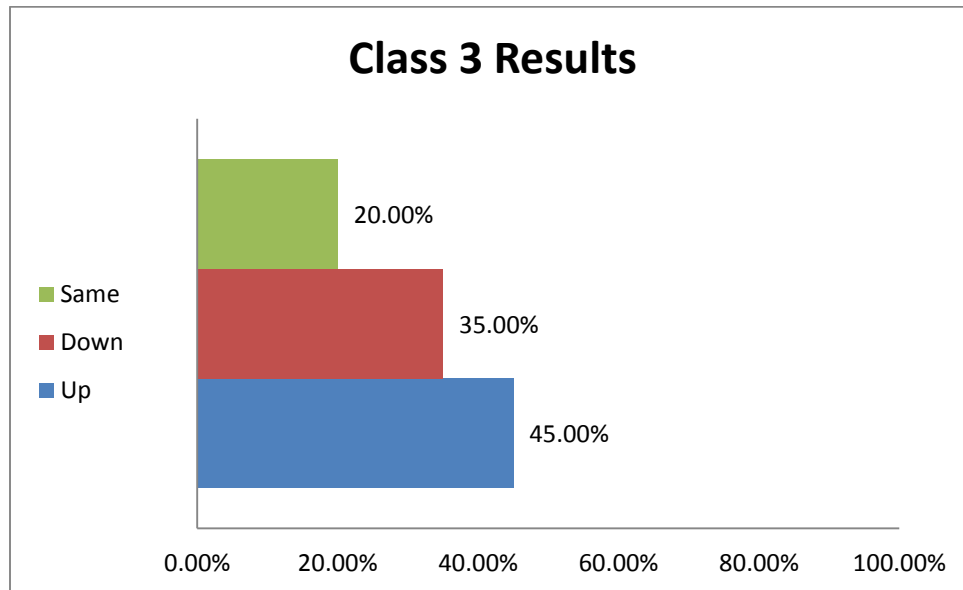


Figure 1.3 shows the overall results of the reading unit for Class 3 in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

As indicated in Figure 1.3, 9 of the 20 students (45.00% of students) in Class 3 showed improvement from the pretest to the posttest, while four students, (20.00%) maintained their original number correct. This demonstrates that while 65.00% of students, or 13 of the 20 total students, maintained or improved their listening comprehension skills from the pretest to the posttest, seven students (35.00%) in Class 3 experienced a decrease in their scores.

Figure 1.4

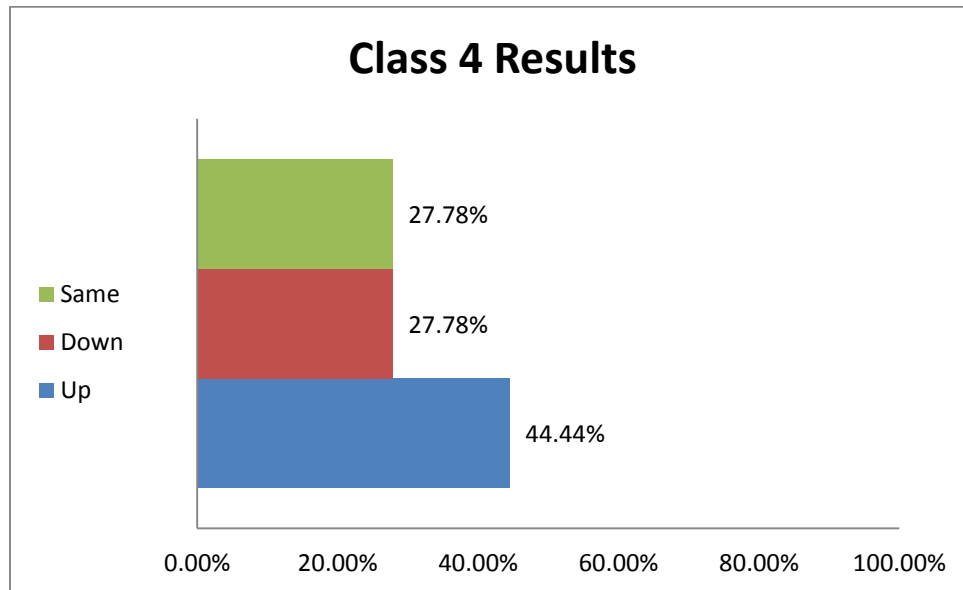


Figure 1.4 shows the overall results of the reading unit for Class 4 in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

In Class 4, the results from the posttest indicated that 44.44% of students, 8 of 18 students, raised their percentage correct on the listening comprehension questions. Interestingly, the percentage of students in Class 4 who either maintained or lowered their score was the same at 27.78% indicating that five students attained the same scores and five students received lower scores.

Figure 1.5

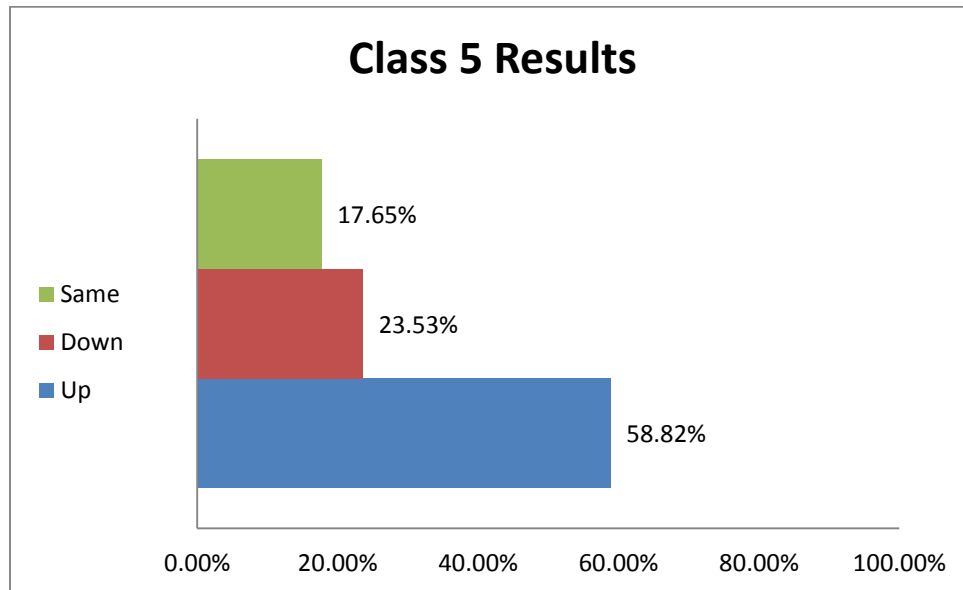


Figure 1.5 shows the overall results of the reading unit for Class 5 in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

As indicated in Figure 1.5, 58.82% of the students, or 10 of the 17 students, from Class 5 earned higher scores on the listening comprehension posttest than on the pretest. With three students (17.65%) earning the same percentage on both pretests and posttests, these results show that for Class 5, 76.47% of students, or 13 of 17 students total, either maintained or improved their listening comprehension abilities, while four students (23.53%) experienced lower posttest results.

Figure 1.6

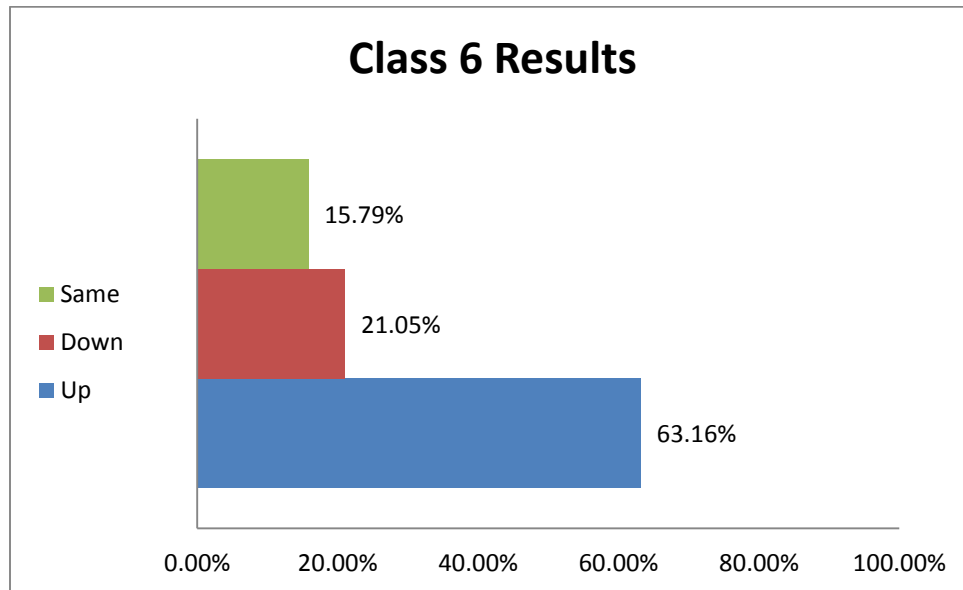


Figure 1.6 shows the overall results of the reading unit for Class 6 in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

The results for Class 6 clearly reveal that this particular group of students experienced the greatest improvement in reading comprehension skills based on pretest and posttest data. As Figure 1.6 indicates, 63.16% of students, or 12 of 19 students, in Class 6 earned higher percentages on the posttest. Additionally, three students (15.79% of these students) maintained their original score, while four students (21.05%) showed a decrease in overall listening comprehension scores.

Figure 1.7

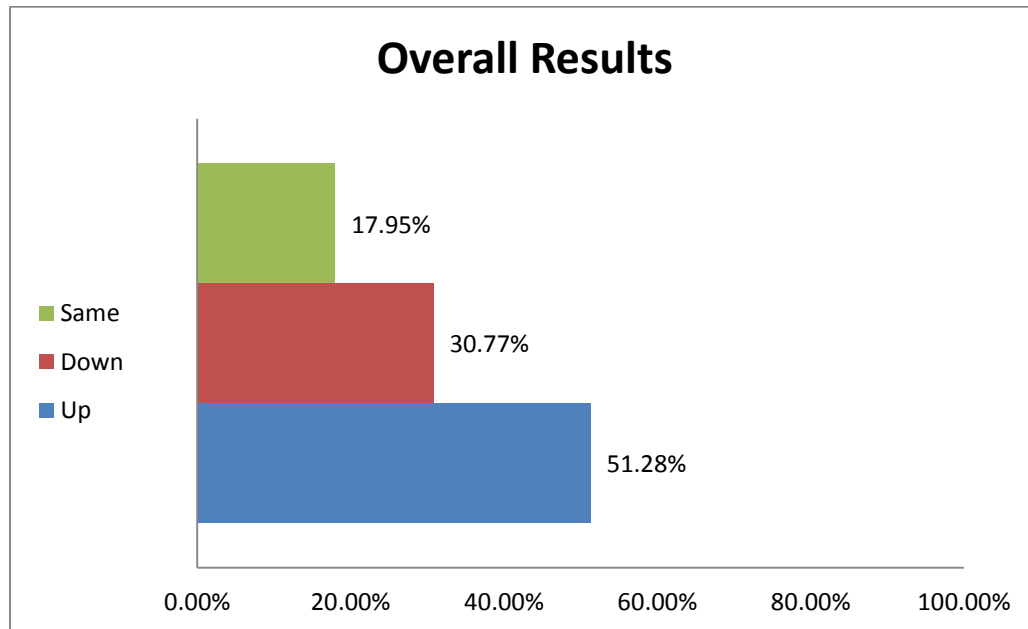


Figure 1.7 shows the overall results of the reading unit in terms of the percentage of students whose posttest scores were the same, decreased, or increased.

As indicated in Figure 1.1, 60 students of the 117 who participated in both the pretest and posttest, or 51.28% of students participating in the Summer EXCEL Program displayed an increase in posttest scores based on listening comprehension skills. Additionally, 17.95% of students, or 21 students, maintained their listening comprehension abilities by earning the same percentage correct on both the pretest and posttest. In all, 30.77% of students, 36 students in all, earned lower scores on the posttest than the pretest. These results will be analyzed further in the Discussion section.

Qualitative Data

I determined that creating a survey for those who taught the reading unit would be an effective method for analyzing qualitatively the overall success of the lessons. A limitation to consider is that only two of the summer interns completed the survey. Both participants were females and summer interns for Shepherd Community's Summer EXCEL Program in the midst of completing college degrees.

Questioning

In order to assess improvement in listening comprehension for the students involved in the summer school program, continual verbal questioning and discussion was utilized in each reading lesson. When asked the effectiveness of this strategy, the survey participants, the interns, responded as follows.

Figure 2.1

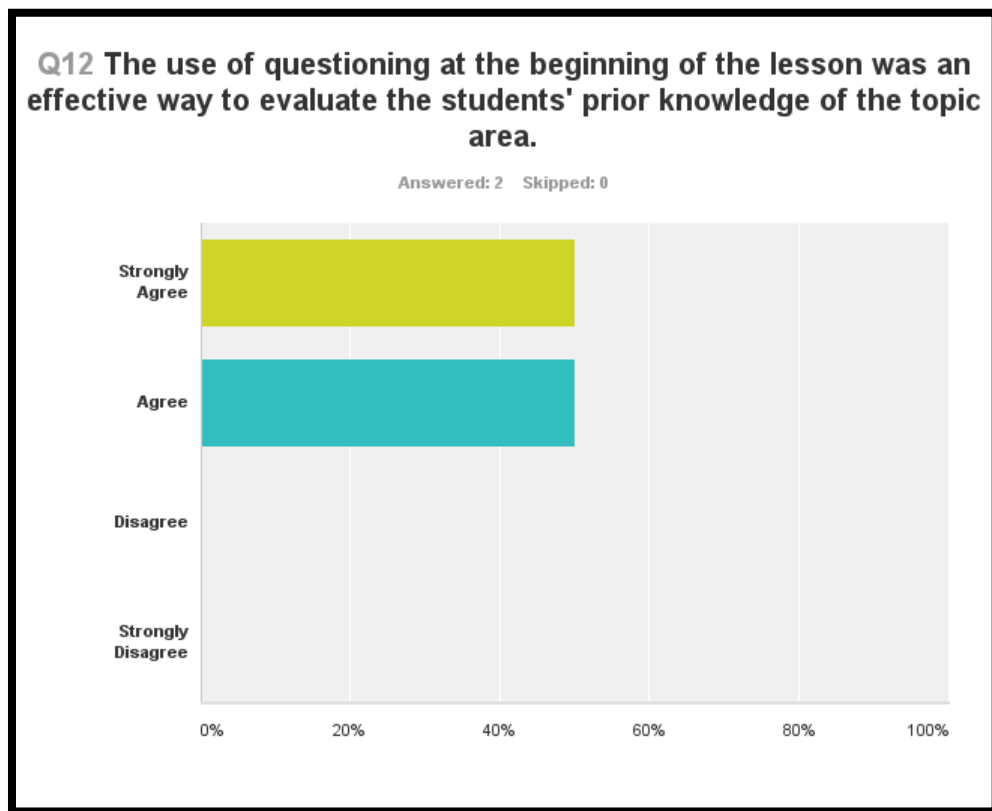


Figure 2.1- Survey participants were asked if the use of questioning at the beginning of the lesson was an effective method to evaluate the students' prior knowledge of the topic.

Figure 2.2

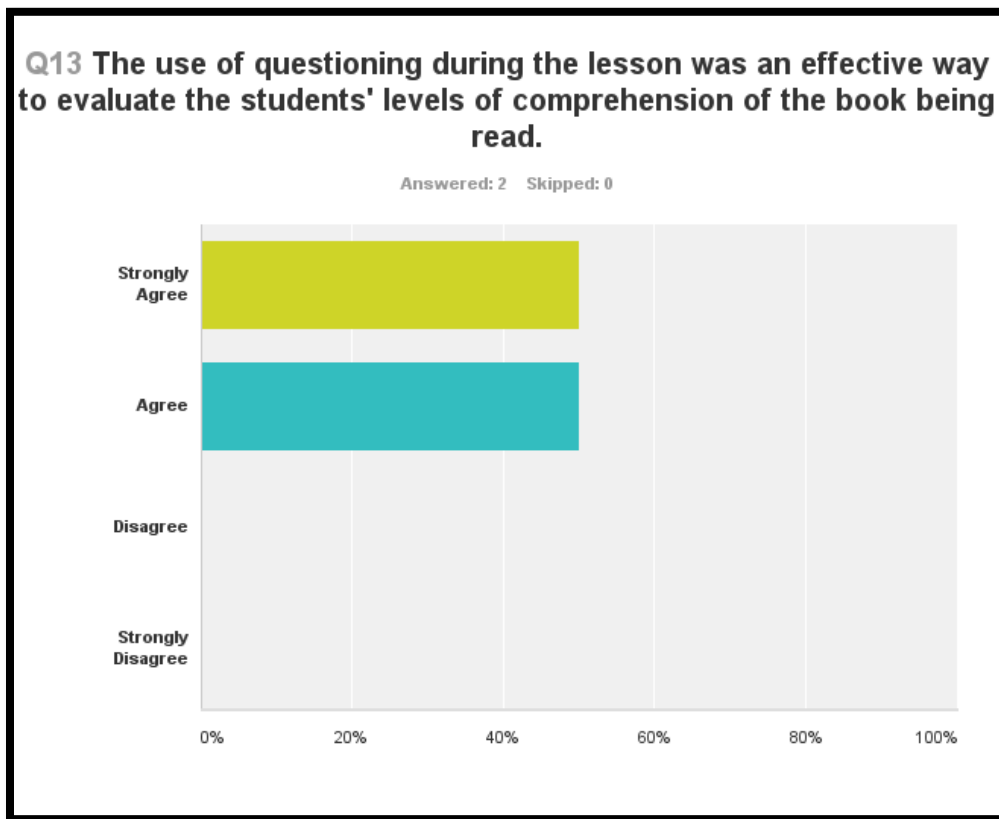


Figure 2.2- Survey participants were asked if the use of questioning during the lesson was an effective way to evaluate the students' levels of comprehension of the book being read.

Figure 2.3

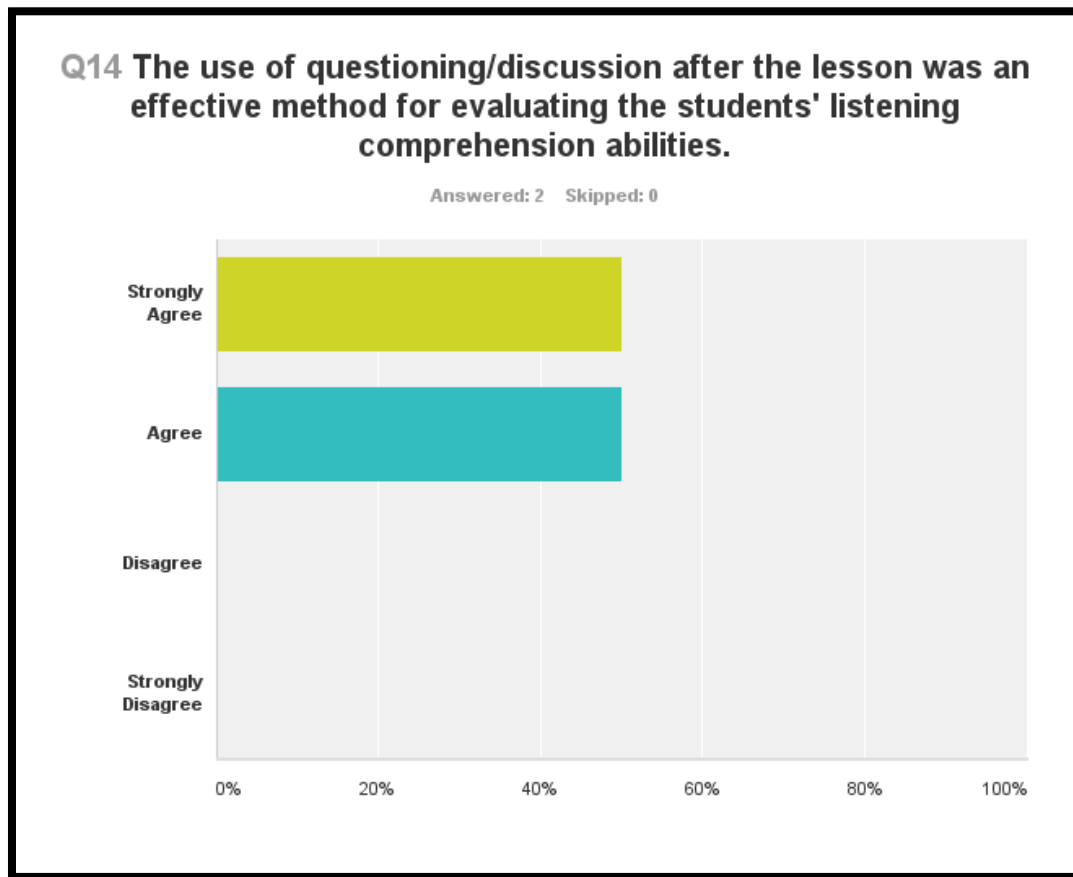


Figure 2.3- Survey participants were asked if the use of questioning/discussion after the lesson was an effective method for evaluating the students' listening comprehension abilities.

From the results indicated above in Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3, it is clear that the interns who taught the reading unit found value in the use of questioning before, during, and after the lessons. Both either agreed or strongly agreed that questioning was an effective method to utilize in the learning process for these students.

Listening Comprehension

The over-arching goal of the summer school reading unit was to enhance the listening comprehension skills of the students through the use of books and hands-on activities. Listening to the farm-themed books read aloud in combination with completing complementary activities allowed students to enhance their listening comprehension abilities.

Figure 2.4

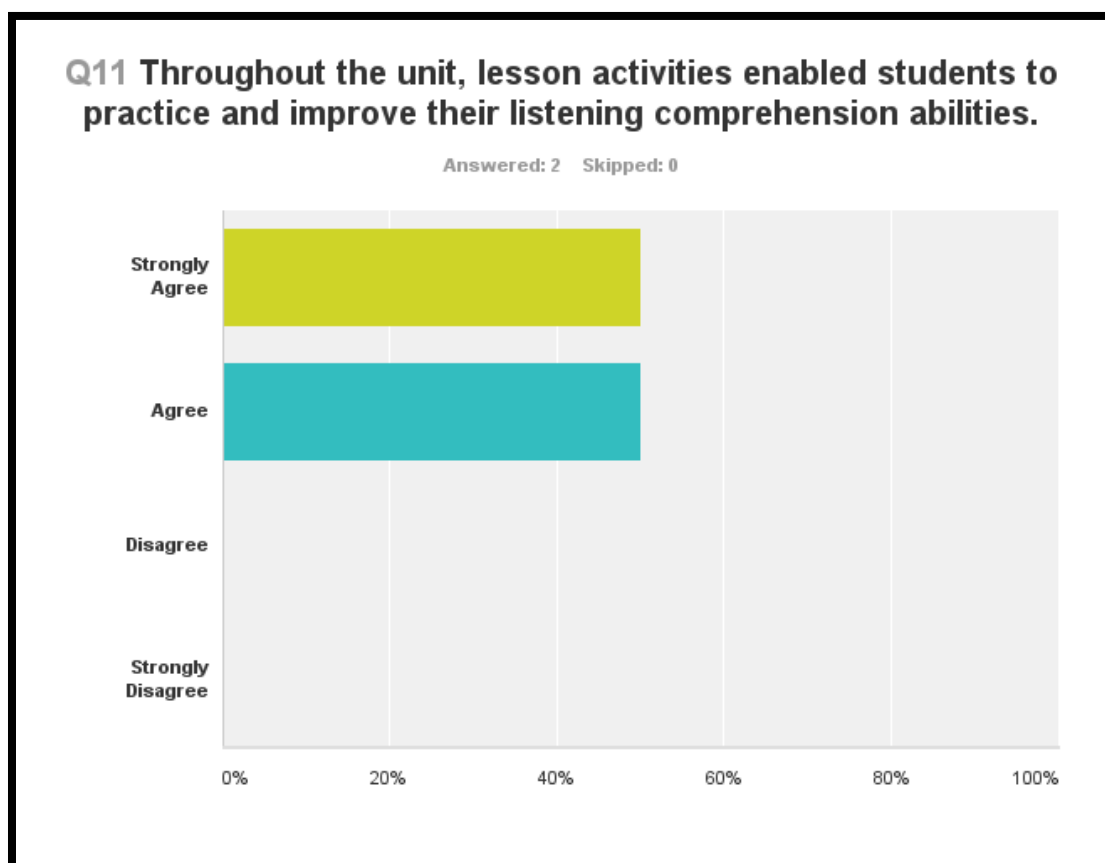


Figure 2.4- Survey participants were asked if lesson activities enabled students to practice and improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Figure 2.5

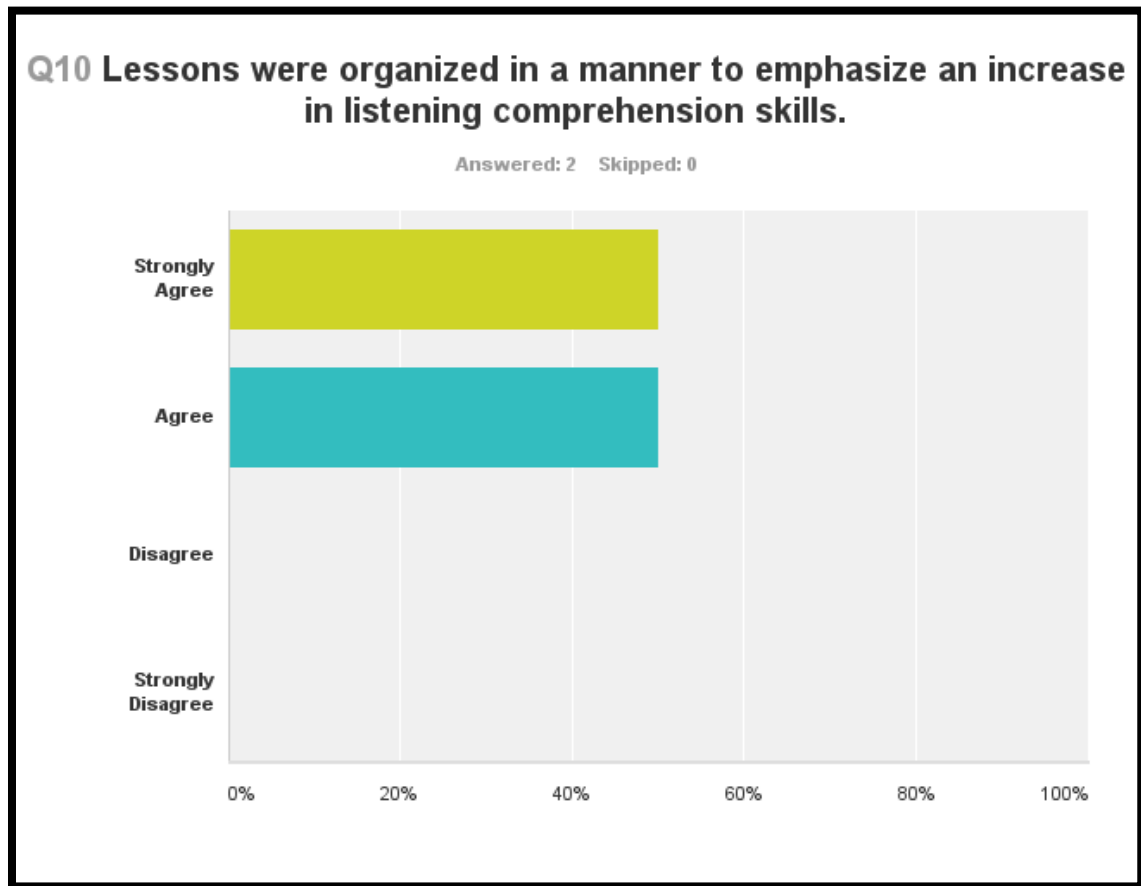


Figure 2.5- Survey participants were asked if lessons were organized in a manner to emphasize an increase in listening comprehension skills.

According to Figures 2.4 and 2.5, it is evident that survey participants agreed that listening comprehension was a major focus of the reading lessons. Both respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to statements indicating that strategies were utilized during lessons in order to provide students the opportunity to improve their listening comprehension abilities.

Modifications for Future Planning

When analyzing the responses of the survey participants, there were a few questions in which disagreement occurred. By examining the responses and reflecting on the design of the reading unit, there are certainly reasons for these results, along with areas for improvement.

Figure 2.6

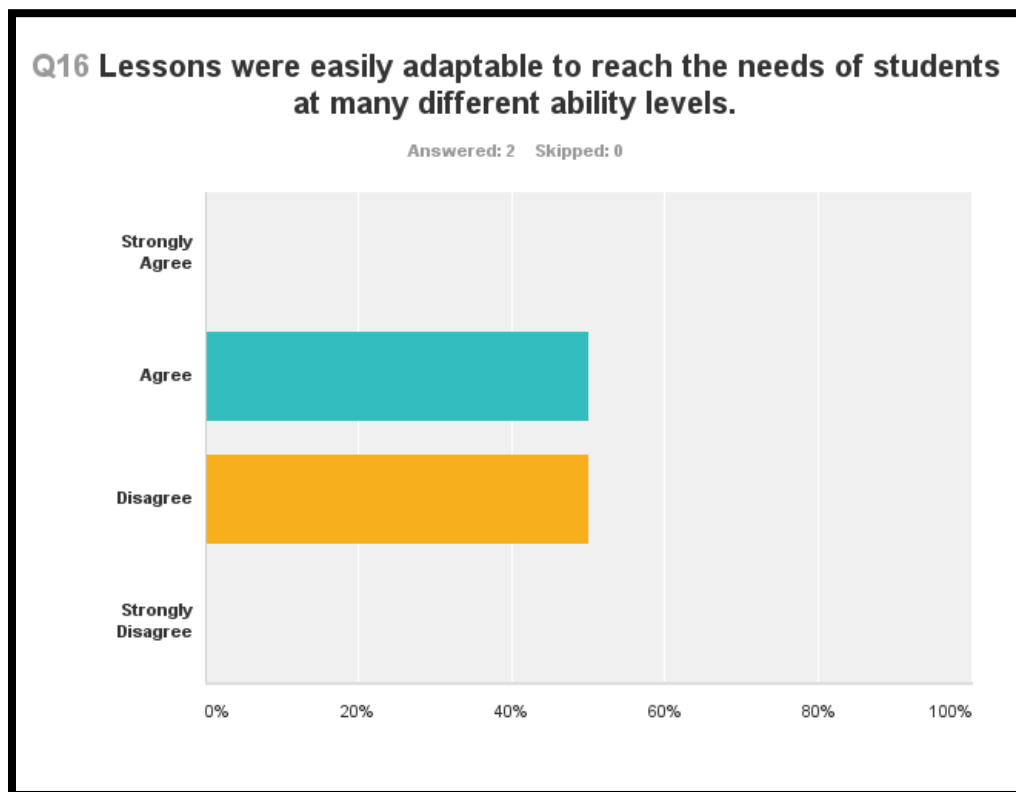


Figure 2.6- Survey participants were asked if lessons were easily adaptable to reach the needs of students at many different ability levels.

Based on the responses of those who took the survey, it is unclear if all lessons were able to meet the needs of students with many different learning needs and skill levels. One respondent agreed with the statement, indicating that she felt that the lessons were adaptable and could be modified to meet the needs of diverse learners. However, another participant disagreed with this statement. No further explanation was given, which makes it difficult to understand the reasoning behind this response. However, upon further analysis and reflection, I can make some hypotheses as to why this response was given, which will be further explored in the discussion section.

Figure 2.7

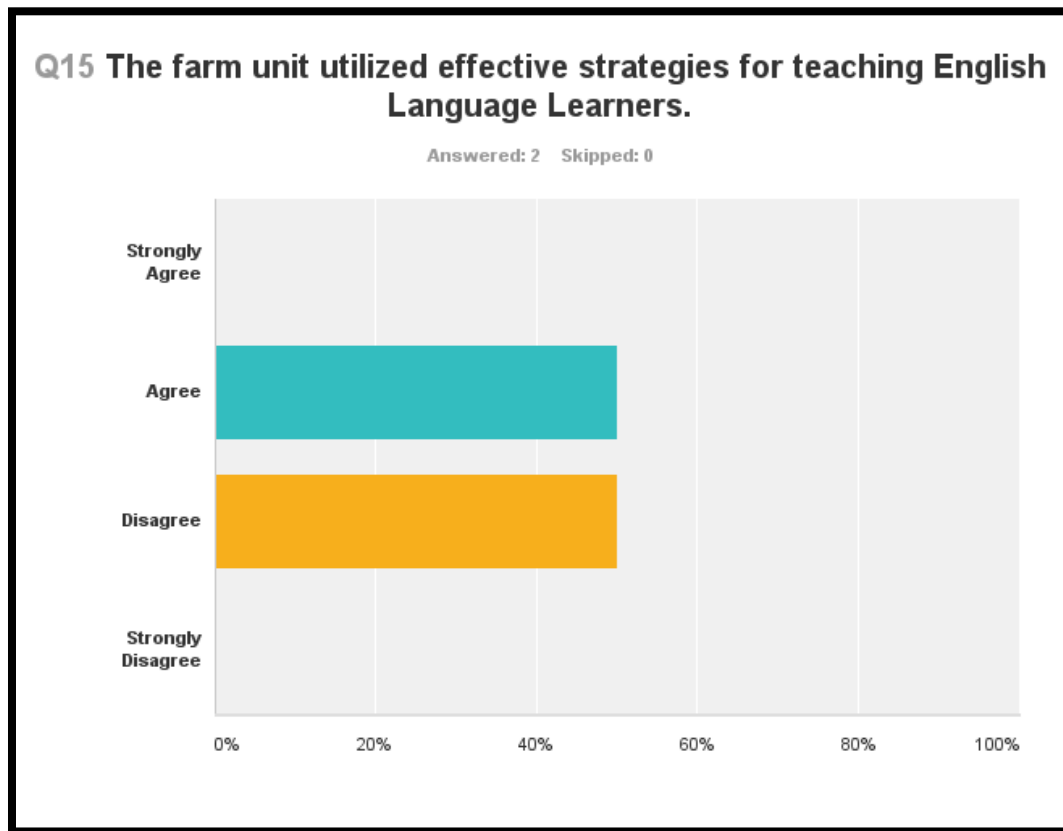


Figure 2.7- Survey participants were asked if the farm unit utilized effective strategies for teaching English Language Learners.

Another question in which survey respondents gave different responses was in regards to reaching English Language Learners (ELLs) through the reading lessons. Figure 2.7 shows that one survey participant agreed that strategies were effective for teaching ELLs, while the other disagreed with this statement. Again, this difference could be due to a variation in the educational background of the

participants. If one was trained with a teaching background, he or she would be more likely to recognize ways in which hands-on strategies and an emphasis on vocabulary were incorporated to reach these learners. If however, the respondent had little background knowledge in effective methods for teaching ELL students, it would be difficult to recognize efforts made in the lessons to include these learners and help them succeed.

DISCUSSION

Overall Success

Student Achievement

As the data from the listening comprehension pretests and posttests indicate, 69.23%, or 81 of the 117 students who participated in the Summer EXCEL Program assessments maintained or improved their listening comprehension scores. Both of the directors at Shepherd Community Center and I were very positive about these results. Creating lessons without being able to design the pretest and posttest or having the ability to control how they were actually taught was a challenge. However, these results indicate that the strategies included in the lessons proved effective for most students.

Students in classes 5 and 6 showed more significant improvement than students in other grade levels. According to the data, 58.82% or 10 of 17 students from Class 5 earned higher scores on the listening comprehension posttest than on the pretest. The results for Class 6 reveal that this particular group of students experienced the greatest improvement in reading comprehension skills based on pretest and posttest data. In all, 63.16% or 12 of 19 students in Class 6 earned higher percentages on the posttest. One hypothesis for this difference is that these classes received complete class sets of the book *Stone Fox*. This allowed students to follow along

as the intern read aloud. This opportunity likely allowed these students to experience more success in their comprehension abilities. Listening comprehension abilities can improve through read-alouds, but are also enhanced by following along during the reading.

Unit Effectiveness

One of the major limitations to consider when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the unit is that only two of the summer interns completed the survey sent out after the unit was taught. Therefore, the responses given were analyzed based on generalizations made from the answers received from two participants. A much better analysis could have taken place had more individuals who taught the lessons completed the survey.

Additionally, designing reading lessons for students in six grade levels meant that the reading ability levels of these students varied greatly. Without knowing the skill levels of the students, it was a challenge to design the lessons in a manner that would be appropriate to their different abilities. Clearly, one limitation to my project was not having the knowledge of the skill levels and reading abilities of the students for which the lessons were created. I was told, however, that most students were reading below grade level. Keeping this in mind, I created lessons that were designed to engage students, but also remain at a reading level that was skill-appropriate.

Another limitation to keep in mind is that not all summer interns who taught the reading lessons were trained with education backgrounds. This not only affected instruction, but the way in which survey questions were answered. One hypothesis for the difference in responses of some of the survey questions could be that one participant had an education background, which emphasizes instruction and practice in adapting lessons for students at many skill levels, while the other did not. While this is not a definitive statement, that would explain the difference in responses. An intern with a background in teaching would know how to better adapt lessons as he or she taught in order to meet the diverse needs of the students. As an education major, it is expected that instruction is individualized whenever possible based on the learning needs of the students in order to allow maximal learning to take place. However, an intern without this background knowledge may find it more difficult to make adaptations in the midst of a lesson and may follow the lesson plan more rigidly, simply due to lack of experience in this practice. Providing the interns with more educational training would be helpful in order to increase their skills in the practice of lesson adaptation. Simple strategies of modifying assignments or simplifying directions would be extremely helpful to teach the interns in order to allow more ease with adapting lessons to meet the needs of individual students.

Another way to read the results as indicated in Figure 2.6 is that lessons were not designed with enough variability in mind for students to succeed at many different ability levels. While I tried to keep the needs of a diverse group of learners in mind while designing the unit, there is always room for improvement. If able to write the lessons again or add to them, I would include a section specifically called modifications for diverse learners. Although some lessons included opportunities for differentiation, not all plans had this section. Knowing more about the interns now and that many were not education majors, it would have been helpful to give them suggestions for both students at lower and higher ability levels. By including lesson suggestions for methods to modify activities for individual learners in their classroom at ability levels that differ from what was to be completed during the normal lesson, interns would be better equipped to adapt the lessons to reach the needs of students at many different ability levels. While there is still no guarantee that these suggestions would be used, the likelihood of including adaptations for a diverse group of learners would increase.

As indicated in Figure 2.7, one survey participant agreed that strategies were effective for teaching ELLs, while the other disagreed with this statement. Although this difference could be due to a variation in the educational background of the participants, there are

other possibilities to consider. The English skills of students in each class varied greatly, and since survey participants were limited to responding based on their own experiences, conclusions are difficult to draw. Because some strategies are more effective for some learners than others, the responses of the survey participants are difficult to generalize.

When designing the lessons, it was important to include strategies from which ELLs would be able to benefit. However, without knowing the specific English-language ability levels of the students, it was a challenge to know which methods to use and skills to incorporate. It would have been very helpful to know more about the English acquisition levels of the students in each grade in order to better adapt lessons to individual student needs.

For improvement in the future, I would be sure to include more vocabulary-specific instruction time, especially for the younger grade levels so that the ELLs have the opportunity to learn words that would help them better comprehend the lesson content. I would also be sure to inquire about specific classes with students with low English language proficiency in order to design more effective lessons for reaching these ELL students.

Limitations

Throughout this process, there were some circumstances that were beyond my control simply due to the nature of the project. First of all, I was not able to design the listening comprehension pretest or posttest. Shepherd Community Center already had an individual who had written these examinations for them, and they use the same tests each year. Therefore, I did not have the option to design these assessments based on the format I had utilized for the reading lessons.

Additionally, I was not aware prior to writing the lessons that the pretest and posttest would consist of only eight multiple choice questions in response to a short story excerpt. An eight question test does not adequately show understanding or improvement. While there are data results from the pretests and posttests, I do not think they represent an accurate measure of student achievement.

The conditions in which the exams were given were also beyond my control. There are many factors that may have caused a difference in pretest and posttest results including: test administrator, testing conditions such as noise level, location, time of day, et cetera. I was not told who would administer the test and when. It is uncertain whether all pretests and posttests were given on the same day or even by the same person. Therefore, when analyzing the results, it is

important to keep these limitations in mind when judging the overall improvements or declines in student listening comprehension ability.

Also important to note is that not every score of the pretests and posttests were included in overall data analysis. If students did not take both the pretest and posttest, their scores were not included in either the class by class or overall data analysis.

Another aspect to consider is that funding did not allow for all classes to receive complete sets of a certain novel, such as *Stone Fox* for classes 5 and 6. This meant that for the majority of classes, when going through a book, there was one copy that the intern or teacher read from while students listened and responded to comprehension questions. While listening comprehension was the focus for the reading unit, allowing students to follow along and read as the intern read aloud may have been more beneficial to improve their overall comprehension skills.

The number of variables in this project is countless. Students received instruction from many different individuals. Specific interns were assigned to each class, and while some were education majors, the majority were ministry or social work majors who did not have a large amount of experience in teaching. Additionally, when I was visiting the program in July, it was evident that some interns followed the lesson plans more closely than others. I had no control over how

rigidly the teachers would stick to the lesson plans, so it is challenging to determine the instruction that actually took place. My observations indicated that some classes enjoyed discussion more than others, so often these classes had trouble getting through all the material in the lesson plan. Therefore, it is difficult to determine which classes followed the lesson plans I had created and which deterred from them based on the needs and interests of their particular students.

Suggestions for Improvement

When reflecting on the reading instructional unit, there are numerous areas in which improvement could take place for future planning. If utilizing the eight question test, students could complete multiple short quizzes throughout the unit rather than one test at the beginning and one at the end, which could lead to more accurate results. Multiple forms of both formal and informal assessment throughout the summer program would give educators a more holistic understanding of skill improvement and overall comprehension.

Another way to improve the reading curriculum and likely increase the scores on the listening comprehension posttests would be to provide class sets of books, especially for the upper grades in which students can follow and read along as the books are read aloud. Individual copies of books would likely help students be more engaged and interested in the reading as well as allow them a greater

opportunity for success in improving comprehension skills. With more funding options in the future and class sets of books, students would gain more experience in not only listening, but also following and reading along. Students would benefit from this addition to the curriculum and further develop their skills as active readers, listeners, and lifelong learners.

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