

English Learner and Non-English Learner Students With Disabilities: Content Acquisition and Comprehension

Wanzek, J., Swanson, E., Vaughn, S., Roberts, G., & Fall, A.-M. (2016). English learner and non-English learner students with disabilities: Content acquisition and comprehension. *Exceptional Children*, 82(4), 428–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402915619419>

Study Background and Purpose

The cross-population of students with disabilities who are English learners (ELs) is an understudied area. Students with disabilities typically are included in general education for one or more content areas, and when these students are also ELs, they are less likely to participate. ELs often have difficulty acquiring content area knowledge due to inadequate relevant background knowledge and unfamiliarity with academic language and discourse skills (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2007). Thus, addressing the instructional needs of students with disabilities, with considerations for ELs, requires instructional practices for students to acquire academic vocabulary, integrate new background knowledge with their existing knowledge, apply strategies to understand the written language of the discipline, and practice and apply content knowledge through discourse-based activities with structured interactions with peers.

The social studies classroom provides opportunities to engage students with a range of learning needs in instruction that connects to students' lives and incorporates critical thinking—concepts that align with the Common Core State Standards.

To meet this challenge, **Promoting Adolescents' Comprehension of Text (PACT)** was designed to improve middle school students' content area knowledge and reading comprehension of social studies text. This study assessed the efficacy of PACT for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities who are provided instruction in general education social studies classrooms. Further, the researchers wanted to determine whether differential effects among the PACT components exist for ELs and non-ELs with disabilities.

The following table represents how the original PACT practices were enhanced to fit the additional needs of ELs in this intervention study.

PACT Practice	Description	Enhancement for ELs
Comprehension Canopy	An engaging springboard into the lesson	New knowledge was supplemented with videos, visuals, and graphic organizers.
Essential Words	Key vocabulary related to the unit	Theme-related vocabulary words were taught across time and activities, integrating oral and written instruction into content learning.
Knowledge Acquisition	Text-based instruction and reading	Informational text reading that included target vocabulary was central to each unit. Essential words were reinforced with additional reading, speaking, and writing activities.
Team-Based Learning	Comprehension checks	ELs had additional opportunities to participate in discussions, write, practice using the vocabulary, and solidify understanding. Students worked in pairs during most components of the lessons. Teams received constant feedback.
Knowledge Application	Content knowledge applied to a novel, engaging activity	Teachers checked in with teams and provided feedback.

Method and Measures

This study examined outcomes for a subgroup of 160 students with disabilities included in another study (Vaughn et al., 2017). Of these students, 52 were also identified as ELs. Teachers' classes were randomly assigned to either the treatment (PACT) or comparison (business as usual) condition. This means that teachers used the PACT instructional practices in some classes (treatment) but not in others (business as usual). In both conditions, teachers taught the same social studies content. Only the PACT classes received the PACT instructional practices.

Before the school year, teachers participated in an intensive 1-day (8-hour) professional development workshop covering implementation of the PACT intervention and study design features related to maintaining a "firewall" between treatment and comparison conditions (because teachers would lead both PACT and comparison classes). Teachers were also provided in-class coaching support in their treatment classes. Teachers had the opportunity to participate in an additional PACT booster training session of 3 hours after each unit to refresh their knowledge.

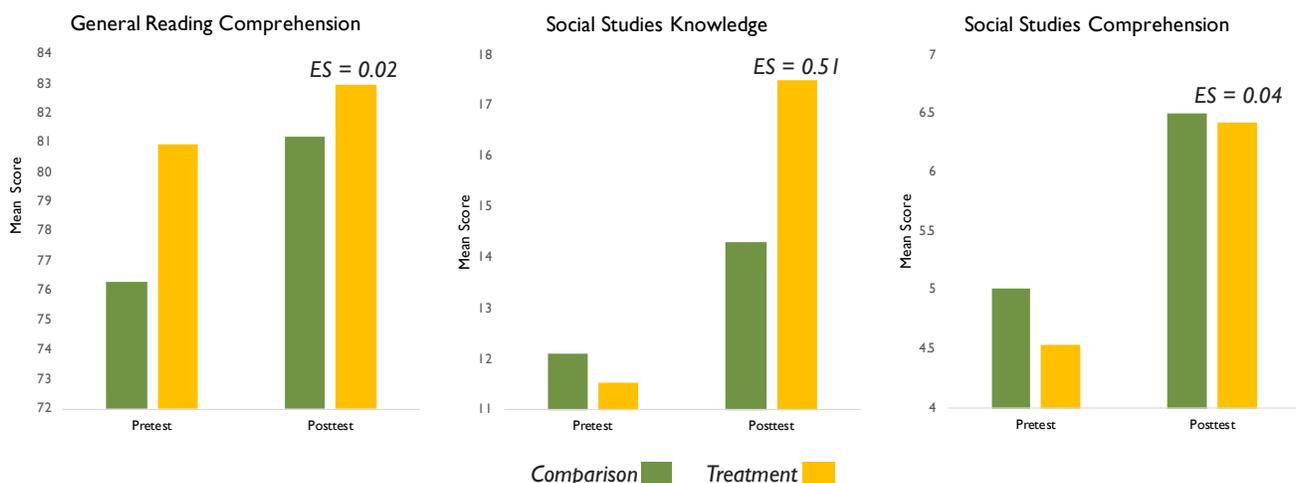
Students in the treatment classes received three PACT instructional units in 10-day cycles that aligned with the district curriculum map. Teachers received semi-scripted lesson plans and a daily schedule identifying the components to be delivered on each day. In total, teachers implemented 30 sessions of the intervention, taking between 6 and 10 weeks. In the comparison classes, students worked at the same pace and received the same content using the district-approved curriculum and state-developed scope and sequence (without PACT practices). Following the three units, students received an additional 12 weeks of critical reading instruction in their classrooms.

The study used the following measures for pretest and posttests:

- Gates-MacGinitie Reading Comprehension Subtest: A standardized measure of general reading comprehension
- ASK Subject Knowledge: A researcher-developed measure of the social studies knowledge from the intervention
- MASK Reading Comprehension: A content reading comprehension assessment on topics from the intervention

Results

The PACT treatment group outperformed the comparison group on social studies content knowledge at posttest. Additionally, the effects of PACT did not differ between ELs and non-ELs. These group differences were statistically significant. This means that the group differences were not due to chance. Instead, they were due to the PACT instructional practices.



Implications for Practice

- Students with disabilities, including ELs, benefit from PACT.
- The effect of PACT did not differ between ELs and non-ELs with disabilities.
- Other studies establish PACT efficacy for students without disabilities (Vaughn et al., 2013; 2015; 2017) and students with disabilities (Swanson et al., 2017). By establishing PACT efficacy among ELs with disabilities (this study), PACT becomes a set of instructional practices with broad classroom impact.
- The enhanced team-based learning components were highly engaging for students.
- Using PACT is an effective way to meet the Common Core State Standards that focus on learning content from expository texts.
- PACT allows the integration of lecture-style teaching (preferred by many social studies teachers). Findings suggest that by increasing emerging pedagogies in the classroom, students have improved outcomes.
- Teachers reported that PACT is a feasible approach to implement in the classroom.
- Training time for a teacher to use PACT is only 1 day.

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