

THE EFFECT OF PRONOUN REFERENCE DRILL AND PRACTICE ON THE  
READING COMPREHENSION SCORES OF MIDDLE SCHOOL ELLS

by

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, I deal with students who exhibit various levels of reading comprehension. There are many times when I ask myself what additional strategies I can draw upon that will help a student comprehend text. I am always looking for that something special that will make things “click” for a particular student. I believe that many teachers would agree that it is crucial to have many teaching strategies from which to draw. The more strategies that teachers draw upon, the more likely they are to meet the variety of needs in their classroom. One area where I believe it is crucial to have many strategies to draw upon is reading comprehension. What specific reading strategies work for a particular student? Can even one additional strategy make a difference? For this capstone I investigated how teaching students the skill of identifying the referent of a pronoun can possibly improve the reading comprehension ability of middle school English language learners (ELLs).

The ESL classroom is a very multi-faceted environment. My job as an elementary and middle school ESL teacher is a very good example of that. The needs of the students I service are varied. I work as the only ESL teacher on staff at a suburban elementary and middle school, and I have a caseload of 75 students. My caseload for that school includes students of almost every imaginable language background and proficiency level, from beginners who speak no English to students who are almost ready to be mainstreamed. The non-English speaking students need to work on everyday basic vocabulary and writing

their alphabet and high frequency words, and the advanced students need to work on strengthening their reading comprehension skills, grammar, and writing complete sentences and paragraphs. However, these two groups of students are at the very top and bottom of the challenges for the students with whom I work. The vast majority are somewhere in the middle. I consider these students to be intermediate learners of English. They have adequate English oral fluency, but are approximately two years behind grade level in the areas of reading comprehension and writing. For this capstone I focused on reading comprehension in regards to pronoun reference and found out that learning to identify the correct referent to a pronoun may have played a role in increased reading comprehension scores for some students.

Gordon and Scarce (1995), among others, claim that pronominal reference often plays a critical role in making discourse coherent. When I asked myself why pronoun reference is important I decided the answer is related to the comprehension of text. The meaning of a text is changed considerably when a student chooses the incorrect referent of a pronoun. The following are a few examples of situations where selecting the incorrect referent of a pronoun affects the meaning of the text and thus creates a potential problem for the student.

(1) Jane told Helen that no one would take her away.

The pronoun *her* is unclear; the reader is unable to tell whether *her* refers to Jane or Helen (<http://ace.acadiau.ca/english>).

Another example which further illustrates this is when the referent of a pronoun interferes with comprehension as follows.

(2) Although the motorcycle hit the tree, it was not damaged.

Is *it* the motorcycle or the tree? The reader would need more information in determining which item the pronoun is referring to (<http://owlenglish.purdue.edu>). The following is yet another example.

(3) Fran gave Lori the homework assignments she had missed.

Who had the missing assignments? Fran or Lori? The reader does not know if Fran or Lori is the antecedent of *she* (<http://harpercollege.edu>).

The preceding examples show how pronoun reference can be ambiguous. English speakers need to recognize ambiguity, and draw upon additional inferential and contextual inferences to assign the correct reading.

In order for ELLs to be an independent and functioning part of a literate society it is important that they have the reading comprehension ability to gain access to higher education and livable wages. Many of my students' parents are working in low-skill, low-paying jobs. These parents tell me they want a better life for their children. This access to a better life begins with a good education. Many ELLs will remain in remedial classes throughout junior high and high school because they are unable to read and write at

their grade level. Although these remedial classes may be what the student needs to improve his/her reading ability, is it going to lead him/her to a higher education?

Unfortunately, the answer is no. The students will have huge barriers to pass if they decide to continue their education and attend college, because they were not able to take literature or other content classes that are necessary for college bound students. The importance of teaching students to be capable readers of grade level materials is important to their future

The authors of the book *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching* make some powerful statements in regard to reading ability. Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) point out that even though we live in this modern age of multimedia and high tech environments, most of us still rely on our reading ability in order to gain information and expand our knowledge. They also state that in a literate society skill in reading is crucial since so much of what we need to know is communicated via written text. For these reasons, reading comprehension is a concern for most teachers; however, it is of particular concern for teachers in the field of second language teaching and learning.

The majority of the ELLs that I work with are unable to read and write in their native language. They also have very limited access to quality literature in their homes. These two factors put them at a disadvantage when they enter school. ELLs need skilled teachers to help them overcome these barriers. The challenges of teaching ELLs are immense. I hope that perhaps my research involving pronoun reference drill and practice will give ESL teachers another strategy to use with students. It is also my hope that this strategy will help ELLs to gain access to more challenging courses in high school which may prepare them for higher education and better paying jobs.

The reasons ESL teachers may be concerned about reading comprehension are quite practical. Teachers know that students need to be good readers in order to comprehend the difficult texts used in their core academic subjects like social studies and science. Also, for ELLs in particular, every test is a test of English. To clarify, students who do not read English well will have difficulty with standardized tests and multiple choice tests. These tests are very language focused, no matter what the content may be. ELLs are often struggling with the vocabulary in a particular text. Because the vocabulary may be difficult for the students, they are able to focus less attention on finding the correct referent to pronouns, thus making correct pronoun reference more troublesome to the students.

In regards to interference from their native language, ELLs from some backgrounds may be struggling with locating the subjects in English as the placement may be different from that of their native language (Van Valin, 2001). This may cause additional difficulty when trying to find the referent of a pronoun.

As I stated previously in this introduction, whether or not a pronoun is accurately identified in a text can drastically affect reading comprehension. Because of the role pronoun reference plays in reading comprehension, pronoun reference is a very important skill students should develop. I believe that ESL reading courses should provide activities that enable learners to locate instances of pronoun reference, giving them the opportunity to practice identifying and using this skill (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000).

Due to the importance in identifying the correct referent of a pronoun, I did research in my classroom in order to find out if explicitly teaching pronoun reference skills

to students might raise their reading comprehension scores. (In chapter three I will go into more detail about how I collected the data.)

The information in this capstone is important because any student who struggles with reading needs to be in an environment where the teacher has many resources to draw upon. Therefore, administrators and reading specialists may want to train teachers who work with various populations of students on how to teach pronoun reference. If pronoun reference is proven to be beneficial for ELL students, it is certainly important to try the strategy on other populations as well. For example, special education students who have reading disabilities may benefit from pronoun reference drill and practice as well.

To conclude, the information in this capstone is beneficial to any teacher, tutor, or paraprofessional who wants to improve the reading comprehension scores of their students. Obviously, ESL teachers can use this method in their ELL classrooms, but pronoun reference may also need to be developed in special education students, Title I students, and mainstream students for whom reading poses a challenge. This capstone will hopefully create an awareness in the reader as to one of the barriers a struggling reader may be facing. In the next chapter, the literature review, I will examine some of the research that has already been done pertaining to pronoun reference and reading comprehension.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the literature review, I will cover several areas of research pertaining to pronoun reference in order to provide some background knowledge on pronoun reference and how it pertains to reading comprehension. In preparing myself to write this chapter I had to consider the most relevant areas of research to my topic. I found the following areas of research to be most helpful: what pronoun reference is, how pronoun reference works, why pronoun reference is important in reading comprehension, why pronoun reference is important to teach, and how pronoun reference should be taught.

### What Pronoun Reference Is

Before I begin a discussion on what pronoun reference is, I must go over some terms that are necessary to understanding pronoun reference, *pronoun* and *antecedent*. Pronouns are words that replace nouns. In this paper I will be focusing on personal pronouns. Other types of pronouns, and anaphora are not within the scope of this paper. Writers and speakers usually refer to a person, place, thing or idea more than once. Pronouns allow writers and speakers to avoid repeating these nouns over and over. The following are some examples of pronouns: *he*, *she*, *it*, *them*, *her*, *him*, and *they*. The noun that is being replaced by a pronoun is called the antecedent ([www.uvsc.edu/owl](http://www.uvsc.edu/owl)). Some examples of possible antecedents include proper names, places, and things.

### Pronoun Reference

The term *pronoun reference* describes the relationship between the pronoun and its antecedent. It is important to note that the antecedent may precede or follow the pronoun.

- (1) After cleaning the room, the workers aired it.
- (2) After removing the carpet from it, the workers cleaned the room.

The pronoun *it* has a clear referent, *room* ([www.nipissingu.ca/department/english.htm](http://www.nipissingu.ca/department/english.htm)).

### How Pronoun Reference Works

In order to understand how pronoun reference works, it is beneficial to examine the cues individuals use to interpret pronouns. The cues I will cover are order of mention and gender.

#### Order of Mention

When there are two characters in a sentence the readers tends to focus more on the first-mentioned character than the second. The reason for this is that the first-mentioned character is more accessible in their memory of the text (Arnold, Eisenband, Brown-Schmidt, & Trueswell, 2000; Arnold, Novick, Brown-Schmidt, Eisenband, & Trueswell, 2001; Gordon, Grosz, & Gilliom, 1993). The following is an example of order of mention. Also, please note that there is an assumed knowledge that if someone is late they can save time by hiring a taxi.

(3) Jane was late for her appointment with Sue and she hurried to get a taxi.

We can assume that *she* refers to Jane, based on the order in which the two potential antecedents of *she*, *Jane* and *Sue*, occur in the sentence.

### Gender

Gender is also a common clue in determining the referent of a pronoun. The following sentence illustrates that point.

(4) Donald is bringing some mail to Michelle, while a big rain storm is beginning. He's carrying an umbrella.

The pronoun *he* is clearly referring to the noun Donald. The reason why the referent of *he* is so clear is because the name Donald is a gender cue, meaning male. The reader knows that *he* could not mean Michelle (Arnold et al, 2000, 2001; Boland, Acker & Wagner, 1998; Stevenson & Vitkovitch, 1986). Consider sentence (3) again; now replace Sue with Harry, so the sentence would read:

(5) Jane was late for her appointment with Harry and she hurried to get a taxi.

Given that Sue was replaced with Harry, the linguistic information would be enough to determine the referent. The gender of the pronoun *she* would rule out Harry as a possible antecedent (Stevenson & Vitkovitch, 1986).

### Pragmatics and Pronoun Reference

Stevenson and Vitkovitch (1986), who conducted their research on native English-speaking adults, and Freeman (1988), based on his research on native English-speaking children, make some statements about gender and pronoun reference, as well as discourse pragmatics and pronoun reference, and they speak to pronoun reference in linguistic terms.

They point to a statement as in (3) that full comprehension of pronominal reference frequently requires non-linguistic as well as linguistic knowledge. To interpret the sentence appropriately, the reader has to make inferences from general knowledge, about some possible consequences of being late, to conclude that *she* refers to Jane. This is an example of how pronoun reference relies on discourse pragmatics, which is the way in which the sentence depends on the context where it is used (such as time, place, social relationship between speaker and hearer, and speaker's assumptions about the hearer's beliefs). One could interpret *she* as referring to *Sue*, but it would not be very likely. The point of this analysis is that despite the linguistic ambiguity of the sentence, the reader may use pragmatic inferences to determine the referent of the pronoun, *she*. Pragmatic cues most often help readers assign pronoun reference in the process of constructing cohesive texts (Stevenson & Vitkovitch, 1986; Freeman, 1988).

Stevenson and Vitkovitch (1986) give an explanation of the mental processes an individual may use when interpreting pronouns that I think is rather interesting. They say that when a pronoun is encountered in a sentence, the reader may adopt one of two possible strategies. One strategy is to pause at the pronoun and interpret it as fully as possible at that

point. The other strategy is not to pause at the pronoun, but to carry on reading and to process the information relevant to pronoun assignment while the rest of the sentence is being read. Then the readers would allow for pragmatic information to help them determine the referent of the pronoun and interpret the pronoun based on that additional information. In other words, the search for the antecedent occurs while subsequent information in the sentence is being integrated with the current information (Hirst & Brill, 1980).

I believe the information on mental processing is pertinent because when I do my classroom research and when I teach my ELL students I need to be conscious of wait time and context. Wait time is the amount of time a student takes to process the answer to any given question. In this case, the ability to determine the correct referent to a pronoun. Perhaps a student will not be able to determine the referent of a pronoun after simply reading the sentence in the text that contains the pronoun. The student may be an individual who relies on context to help him/her determine the referent. This information can also help me teach students how to assign referents to pronouns. Perhaps they are hasty in their assignment of reference and need to be instructed to continue reading in order to determine reference.

#### Why Pronoun Reference is important in Reading Comprehension

Garrod, from the book *Perspectives on Sentence Processing* (1994), concludes that pronoun reference is an integral part of sentence comprehension that can often occur at the earliest possible point in reading or spoken language comprehension. In order to justify my

research question, which was to determine if teaching pronoun reference positively impacts the reading comprehension scores of middle school ELLs, first I had to look for references that support my theory that pronoun reference is important in reading comprehension. I found several sources which supported the notion that being able to accurately determine the referent of a pronoun is important to reading comprehension (Dell, McKoon & Ratcliff, 1983; Gernsbacher, 1989; Marslen-Wilson, Tyler & Koster, 1993).

### Cohesion and Coherence

The research of Sanford and Garrod (1981) on native speakers of English gives reasons why pronoun reference is important to reading comprehension. In order to understand an extended text, the reader has to make sense of the whole thing as each sentence is read. This connection of sentences to other sentences is known by linguists as *cohesion* and *coherence*. Cohesive links are signaled in the sentence by the use of pronouns (and other linguistic cues which will not be included in this examination of pronoun reference). Coherence comes from establishing relationships that are needed to make sense of the events and situations being portrayed in the context of the text as a whole (Garrod, 1994; Brown & Yule, 1983; Halliday & Hassan, 1976).

Sanford and Garrod (1981), Brown and Yule (1983), Halliday and Hassan (1976), and undoubtedly other researchers discuss how cohesion plays a role in comprehension through each part fitting in with what had come before. In other words, the writer makes repeated references to information recoverable from the prior text. In some cases, the references are to things which have been explicitly introduced, in others, to things which

may have only been implied. Therefore, sentence comprehension can be looked at as a process by which the reader connects new information to existing information. The following is an example of cohesive text.

(6) Bill wanted to lend Susan some money.

(7) She was hard up and really needed it.

From a processing point of view, *cohesion* and *coherence* often have to be considered together. Establishing referential cohesion may depend on establishing coherence, and vice versa (Hobbs, 1979). For instance, consider the following sentences, which vary only slightly from sentences (6) and (7).

(8) Bill wanted to lend his friend some money.

(9) He was hard up and really needed it.

(10) However, he was hard up and couldn't afford to.

The same pronoun in almost identical sentences takes on different referential meanings depending on the different coherence relationships between the two sentences. At the same time, the form of the coherence relationship differs depending on the assignment of the pronoun. For instance, whereas his being *hard up* in (9) is taken as the reason for Bill's wanting to lend money, his being *hard up* in (10) is being taken as an obstacle to Bill's lending the money (Garrod, 1994).

### Centering Theory

The research on centering theory in native English speakers also states that pronoun reference is important in reading comprehension. The centering theory claims that semantic objects referred to in utterances serve as discourse centers which are linked together to make a discourse coherent. It is crucial to discourse coherence that pronouns be used instead of names or full descriptions. Reading times and sentence recall have been proven to improve when successive sentences refer to the same entities through the use of pronouns (Gordon & Scearce, 1995). There was also research by Gordon and Chan (1995) which concluded that under certain circumstances an utterance would be understood less easily, and read more slowly, when it repeated a name rather than using a pronoun.

The above information on centering theory is beneficial because speed in reading plays a role in reading comprehension for both native and non-native speakers of English. In English, research shows that readers should process at least two hundred words per minute in order to read effectively. Pronoun reference is a strategy which may increase reading speed, and therefore improve reading comprehension (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Gordon & Scearce, 1995).

### Why Pronoun Reference is Important to Teach

There are some conflicting views on whether or not pronoun reference should be explicitly taught. Some researchers of native English-speaking children, including Baumann and Stevenson (1986) and Pearson and Johnson (1978), have argued that young readers of English encounter difficulty in assigning pronoun reference and should therefore

be directly instructed in pronoun reference. Others, such as Goodman and Gespass (1983), argue that while direct instruction for selected students may be necessary, time is better spent on extensive reading than in direct instruction (Freeman, 1988). I believe that my classroom research on whether direct instruction of pronoun reference benefits reading comprehension in middle school ELLs may suggest which is most useful, direct instruction or extensive reading.

### Grammar Instruction

Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) provide information, based on their study of non-native English speakers, that supports grammar specific instruction in relation to second language acquisition. The authors point out that many ELLs are required to pass standardized national or international exams in order to proceed to a college or university. An example of one such test is the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Students often need a certain TOEFL score to get into a college or university ([www.collegiateworld.com/tests](http://www.collegiateworld.com/tests)). Their futures can be affected by their performance on these examinations. A major component of these exams is grammar. The authors point out that by not teaching grammar, ESL teachers are doing their students a disservice.

### Top-down and Bottom-up Processing

Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) offer more insight on whether reading strategies should be directly taught or if simply exposure to literature is enough. Their book goes into detail on the concepts of top-down processing and bottom-up processing in regards to second language acquisition. Top-down processes include prior knowledge and reading experience, discourse knowledge of writing conventions, genres and registers, purpose for

reading, and pragmatics. Bottom-up processing includes reading strategies and language knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, cohesion, and orthography. There is also one piece that falls into both top-down and bottom-up processing: metacognition (see Appendix A). This example shows how both top-down and bottom-up processes lead to interpretation and understanding of written text, which includes pronoun reference.

### Metacognition

According to a study conducted by Schoonen, Hulstijn, and Bossers (1998) metacognitive awareness plays an important role in reading comprehension, especially for learners of a second language. Metacognitive awareness, related to language learning, is the ability to think about language. In this study weaker students in grades six and eight have not yet acquired metacognitive knowledge and could benefit from special instruction in this area, while older good readers exhibited metacognitive abilities. Pronoun reference is one way to make a student more aware of the process of reading, which contributes to metacognition (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000).

An effective reader in a given first language may be an efficient user of the various processing techniques, but the ESL reader may have to be made aware of these strategies in order to use them consciously when they have difficulty interpreting text. It is therefore important to encourage metacognitive awareness of the interpretive process and of individual processing strategies. Metacognitive awareness connects top-down and bottom-up processing (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

While reading a text students who have metacognitive awareness may ask themselves many questions about the passage they are reading. Some of the questions the

students may ask themselves are: Should I read this text? What do I expect to get out of it? What do I expect it to tell me? What do I know about the writer of the text and the purpose for which it was written? Next, they may ask themselves some more questions about the text as they read. For example: Do I understand the author's point? How carefully do I need to read this? Do I understand all the important words? (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

### How Pronoun Reference Should be Taught

According to Nuttall (1996), the first step in teaching students to identify the correct referent of a pronoun is to make the students take the problem of finding an ambiguous pronoun seriously. Students are generally first aware of ambiguous pronouns when they encounter them in an English class, and the problem is pointed out to them. Once students recognize that pronouns can be a source of trouble when they are trying to comprehend a text, then they can deal with the issue.

Nuttall (1996) also discusses ways in which a teacher can find out what the students need to work on specifically by asking questions and designing activities that challenge the students to find the correct referent of obscure or ambiguous pronouns. Some examples of when students may encounter difficulty is when the text is so difficult that it causes the reader to have trouble with the sentence meaning. Another case is when the placement of the referent is not what the student might expect, such as when the referent follows the pronoun instead of preceding it. The following is a list of specific activities that teachers can use to help students identify the referents of pronouns (Nuttall, 1996).

- (1) For one strategy, a text can be supplied containing various pronouns, with boxes around suitable items, and students can number and color them. The students task is to find all other items with the same referent as the boxed or numbered items and identify them by giving them all the same number and color (see Appendix B).
- (2) In another, a text can be supplied with some pronouns omitted and replaced by gaps. The instructor should also supply a list of omitted pronouns, in random order. The students' task is to insert the items into the correct gaps (see Appendix C).
- (3) For a third strategy, students can be given a text from a book or article which they are currently working on with some of the pronouns underlined and numbered. Then the instructor can give the students a second sheet of paper with the corresponding numbers for which to write the noun the pronoun refers to (see Appendix D).
- (4) In yet another strategy, the instructor can underline one noun in the text on an overhead projector. He/She should make sure it is a noun that is referred to by many pronouns. Then, as a class, the teacher can have the students tell them where to draw lines from the circled noun to all of the pronouns that refer back to that noun, thus creating a web. When students are comfortable doing this exercise as a group, then they should practice it on their own with several different texts (see Appendix E).

The exercises that I described above were the basis for many of the lessons that I used when I conducted my classroom research on whether or not direct instruction of pronoun reference had an impact on middle school ELLs' overall reading comprehension scores. I also used activities specific to pronoun reference from the books *Password one: A reading and vocabulary text* by Linda Butler (2003) as well as *True stories in the news*

by Susan Heyer (1994, 1997), *Comprehension quickies* by Linda Miller (2000), and *Look again pictures* by Winn-Bell Olson (1998). The next chapter, entitled Methods, goes over the specifics of my classroom research on whether or not middle school ELLs reading scores will rise after pronoun reference drill and practice. The chapter includes a description of my subjects, length of time of the experiment, the pre- and post-testing procedure, the curriculum I will teach, and my reasons for keeping a journal of classroom interactions and events during my experiment.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

In this chapter I will explain the details of my classroom research on pronoun reference and its effect on the reading scores of middle school ELLs. I will go over who the subjects of my experiment were, what sorts of pre- and post- evaluation tools I used, and the length of time in which I conducted the experiment. I also explain my reasons for choosing the subjects and assessments that I used.

I also made journal entries while implementing my research project. I believe that this journal is valuable to other teachers who are reading about my research (see Appendix F). In the journal I tell of my daily struggles in the classroom including student behavior, organization, and struggles on how to improve my teaching in order to make this experiment not only run as smoothly as possible but be useful to others in my field.

I wanted the information that I gained through this research to be useful to myself and to the students involved in the study as well as the other students I service. My findings will hopefully be of use to teachers and paraprofessionals of special education, reading specialists, administrators, Title I teachers, tutors, and regular classroom teachers. I thought that the best way to make this research useful to myself and others was to conduct my experiment in an authentic classroom setting I accomplished this by choosing my beginning level middle school ESL classroom for this research, and keeping a detailed

journal of classroom interactions while conducting the experiment.

I conducted classroom research using my students as participants because it enabled me to have the most control over practical matters. Some of the practical matters I considered before conducting this experiment were length of the experiment, materials, subjects, evaluation tools, etc. If I had chosen to conduct my research in a location other than the school that I teach in I would have undoubtedly experienced difficulty giving appropriate time and attention to both my job as a classroom teacher and my research. I also considered it a benefit that I knew my subjects.

### Subjects

The subjects of my research were my first hour class of 14 students whom I teach Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 9:15. The students range in age from 11-14 and are in grades six through eight.

### Level of Proficiency

Most of these students have very low literacy skills, although they have been in the U. S. for several years, or they were born here. According to their scores on the Minnesota Test of Emerging Academic English (TEAE), the majority of the students are orally proficient in English; however, they are significantly below the state average in reading and writing. When the students took this test in the fall of 2003 nine out of 14 were below state averages when compared to other ELLs who have been learning English for the same number of years as they have.

There are many reasons why some of these students are reading below grade level,

although they have had many years of English instruction and are orally proficient. Some students come from a language background that is not written, only oral. Another reason is they have had interrupted schooling due to several moves their family made, or they lived in a refugee camp. Yet another reason for four of the students is that they are labeled learning-disabled in reading according to special education guidelines. This means that although their IQ is within normal range, they do not learn in the same way as their peers (Hardman, Drew, Egan, & Wolf, 1993).

### Language Backgrounds

Their language backgrounds are quite heterogeneous. The languages represented are Hmong, Spanish, Vietnamese, Muldavian, Bosnian, and Chinese. It is a true mix as no particular language is dominant.

### Behavior

This is a very challenging class in terms of behavior. Two of the students are labeled EBD (Emotionally Behaviorally Disturbed). This particular class has many students who tend to speak out frequently and at inappropriate times. Another challenge lies in the fact that some of the students have a very short attention span.

### Pre-Assessment

It is important to note that the pre- and post-assessment tests were administered in the regular classroom during normal class times. The classroom setting was more familiar to the students and I believe this made for more accurate results than results from an artificial testing environment.

### Reading Comprehension

Before the experiment I tested students' ability in two areas, reading comprehension and pronoun reference. This required that I use two different tests to evaluate student performance. For the reading comprehension pre-test I used two sections of the Idea Proficiency Test (IPT). The sections I chose were *Reading for Understanding* and *Reading for Life Skills*. I chose these sections because they contained the most examples of pronoun reference. The IPT is an evaluation that our school district uses as one of the criteria for determining if a student qualifies for ELL services. Therefore, this test was familiar to me. One of the reasons why I chose this test was convenience, I already had access to test copies through my school. Another reason was validity; this test is the product of a major assessment company. The third reason why I used this test was because it comes in two forms of similar difficulty, form A and form B. This makes pre-assessment and post-assessment more accurate. I chose to administer form A as a pre-assessment for reading comprehension.

In this capstone I wanted to show how reading comprehension and pronoun reference are connected. The IPT test questions do not all test a student's ability to correctly identify the referent of a pronoun. However, I wanted to look at the possibility that pronoun reference may have an effect on a student's overall reading comprehension score, not just on his/her ability to correctly identify the referent of a pronoun.

### Pronoun Reference

I also tested the students' ability to find the correct referent to a pronoun. This

information would be useful to me if the students' scores in reading comprehension did not rise. Then I would know that they understand the function of pronoun reference, but that it did not significantly alter their reading comprehension score, at least not in the amount of time in which this experiment was conducted. There may also have been too few instances of pronoun reference on the IPT for the test to be an accurate measure of the effect of pronoun reference drill and practice on reading comprehension scores.

For this portion of the pre-test I used two textbook exercises from the book *More true stories: A high-beginning reader*. These exercises ask the students to identify the referents of certain pronouns that are used in the stories (see Appendix G).

### Drill and Practice

I implemented several lessons which involved identifying the correct referent of a pronoun into my weekly instruction as part of my experiment. This implementation was done over a course of six weeks and the exercises were conducted no less than three times a week. I found exercises that were appropriate for instruction of pronoun reference in several texts including *Easy true stories: A picture-based beginning reader*, *Password 1: A reading and vocabulary text*, *Comprehension quickies*, and *Look again pictures: For language development and life skills*. I also developed some activities based on my teacher training for my ESL license and my reading on how to teach pronoun reference (these teaching strategies are included in my literature review).

### Journaling

I journaled about my classroom interactions with students while incorporating

these lessons into my curriculum. I wrote a very brief synopsis after each lesson and made entries that included more insight and detail at the end of each week. I made a total of 18 journal entries during this six week study of pronoun reference. This journal was very helpful to me when I conducted my research. It helped me to determine which curriculum choices were best for my students through examining how the lessons were received and mastered by the students.

### Post-Assessment

After the period of six weeks in which I implemented pronoun reference instruction, I essentially gathered the same data from the students that I had for the pre-assessment. I used form B of the IPT test to re-evaluate the students' progress in regards to reading comprehension.

I also re-evaluated the students' ability to find the correct referent to a pronoun. For the post-assessment I used different story exercises specific to pronoun reference from *More true stories: A beginning reader*, but they were of similar difficulty to those I used for the pre-assessment (see Appendix H).

In the next chapter I will discuss and evaluate what sorts of results I got on the pre- and post-assessments. I will also relate/describe to the readers parts of my journey in teaching the students the skill of pronoun reference.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will be presenting and analyzing the findings for this research project, which studied the effects of pronoun reference drill and practice on the reading comprehension scores of middle school ELLs. Also, I will present and analyze my findings on whether or not the students were able to correctly identify the referent to a pronoun. (The only types of pronouns used in this research were personal pronouns in the subject and object position). This chapter is broken into several different sections including a section where I discuss my pre-testing results, my drill and practice with the students, my journal entries, and my post-testing results.

### Pre-Testing

#### Reading Comprehension

The students were given part A of the reading comprehension test first. The reading comprehension test consisted of two sections of the IPT (Idea Proficiency Tests), *Reading for Understanding* and *Reading for Life Skills*. The students took most of a 45-minute class period to complete the test. The following is a table which shows each student's score out of a total of 21 test questions. Each student is represented by a letter. The same letter will be used for each student throughout this chapter to ensure the students'

privacy.

Table 1  
Reading Comprehension Pre-test Scores

Student's Letter	Score (out of 21)	Percentage Correct
A	7	33%
B	14	67%
C	5	24%
D	9	43%
E	6	29%
F	8	38%
G	12	57%
H	6	29%
I	11	52%
J	9	43%
K	9	43%
L	14	67%
M	12	57%
N	7	33%

Pronoun usage and the IPT test. It is important to note that not all of the IPT test questions deal with pronoun reference or use pronouns at all. However, this was not a factor in choosing the reading comprehension test, because when doing this study I wanted to see if the ability to identify the referent to a pronoun had an overall effect on pronoun reference. However, five of the 21 test questions do use pronouns. I decided that it would be interesting and perhaps useful to compare the number of missed test questions that used pronouns on the pre-test and the post-test. I found that out of the 208 test questions missed,

43 of the missed questions used pronouns and 165 missed questions did not use pronouns. This means that 21% of the missed test questions dealt with pronouns and 79% of the missed test questions did not deal with pronouns. Later in this chapter these numbers will be compared to the post-test results.

### Pronoun Reference

I also tested the students' ability to correctly identify the referent to a pronoun. This test was given in order to determine if the students did in fact learn to identify the referent to a pronoun. For a number of reasons it was necessary to determine this information. If this test shows that the students did indeed learn to identify the referent to a pronoun but their reading comprehension scores didn't rise, one might conclude that pronoun reference has no measurable effect on reading comprehension scores. Or, if the students do not learn to identify the referent to a pronoun but their reading comprehension scores do rise, then one may be able to determine that a different factor raised their score.

For this test I used two short story selections from *More true stories: A high-beginning reader*. After reading the short story the students were asked to answer questions dealing specifically with pronoun reference. The students took about 15-20 minutes to complete this test.

Two different types of test questions. I examined the test scores to see if there were any patterns to the students' missed questions. The test questions were very direct, and all of the antecedents were in pre-position (located before the noun). Also, all of the antecedents were in close proximity to the pronouns, within a sentence or two. The two types of questions on the pronoun reference test were test questions in which the students

could find sentences in the story that used the pronoun and the referent, and questions in which a pronoun replaced a noun in the test question itself (see Appendix G). For example, in the story the test writers used a proper name and in the test question they used a pronoun.

I predicted that the test questions in which the pronoun and noun were found in the passage would be easier for students to identify, and therefore they would miss those types of questions less frequently. However, upon evaluation, I found that there seemed to be almost no difference in the rate of errors between the two types of questions. Of the 13 test questions, six of them used the pronoun and noun in the story and seven did not. When I did an item analysis I found that the number of questions missed from each question type were very close. There were 32 incorrect answers to questions in which the pronoun and noun were mentioned in the story, and 33 missed answers only used a pronoun in the question. Based on the fact that the two types of test questions have an almost equal error rate, I can conclude that the two types of questions were of similar difficulty to the students.

Table 2  
Pronoun Reference Pre-test Scores

<b>Student's Letter</b>	<b>Score (out of 13)</b>	<b>Percentage Correct</b>
A	11	85%
B	13	100%
C	2	15%
D	5	38%
E	6	46%
F	9	69%
G	10	77%
H	4	31%

I	5	38%
J	10	77%
K	13	100%
L	13	100%
M	10	77%
N	6	46%

Singular and plural pronouns. I also looked at whether the students were more likely to miss singular pronouns like *it* and *he*, or plural pronouns like *they* and *them*. First, I counted how many pronouns fell into each category. I found that five of the test questions dealt with plural pronouns and eight of the test questions dealt with singular pronouns. The students missed 27 questions that used plural pronouns, and 38 questions that used singular pronouns. When compared, this calculates to 0.65 more errors for the plural pronouns, which I believe to be insignificant. Based on this evaluation I can conclude that plural and singular pronouns were of equal difficulty to the students.

### Drill and Practice

#### Journaling

Many things were learned by reflecting upon my pronoun identification and pronoun reference lessons. I am going to use my journal to help me reflect back on the process my classroom went through during the six-week pronoun reference drill and practice time. This journal was a way for me to evaluate the daily struggles involved in doing classroom research.

### Pronoun Identification

I realized that before teaching the students pronoun reference, I needed to give them a lot of practice in simply identifying pronouns. This class had worked on identifying pronouns before, but students had not been given enough consistent practice identifying pronouns to be competent in this skill. Therefore, I used some of my drill and practice time, which was three times a week for at least part of a 45-minute class period, to practice identifying pronouns. It took two of the six weeks to practice simply identifying pronouns, but it was a necessary first step.

### Pronoun Reference

The next four weeks were spent on pronoun reference. I chose to use an adapted reader as a base for many of my pronoun reference lessons. The text I used was an adapted version of *Romeo and Juliet* from Heinemann. This text had a controlled vocabulary that made it easier for the students to comprehend the text. I also used short stories as a basis for many of my pronoun reference lessons (see Appendices B, C, D & E).

## Post-Assessment

### Reading Comprehension

For my post-assessment after the six-week pronoun reference drill and practice time, I basically duplicated my pre-assessment. I used form B of the IPT test sections *Reading for Understanding* and *Reading for Life Skills*. Although it was not mentioned in the test manual, it is not normal practice to have ELLs repeat an IPT test after only a six-week interval. Normally, this test is used as an assessment upon entering, exiting, or

moving to a different level in an ELL setting. However, for the purposes of this study I thought the test was an appropriate evaluation, because it is the product of a major testing company and it has two forms of similar difficulty. The following are the post-test scores for the reading comprehension test.

Table 3  
Reading Comprehension Post-test Scores

Student's Letter	Score (out of 21)	Percentage Correct
A	9	43%
B	10	48%
C	5	24%
D	9	43%
E	6	29%
F	11	52%
G	8	38%
H	7	33%
I	5	24%
J	9	43%
K	14	67%
L	16	76%
M	10	48%
N	9	43%

Pronoun usage and the IPT test. Now, I will compare some of the scores I got for the post-test with the scores I got for the pre-test. Once again not all of the test questions involved pronoun usage. As in the pre-test, five of the test questions used pronouns. This

time when I evaluated the test questions I found that slightly fewer questions dealing with pronouns were missed, 41 compared to 43. This means that of the 207 total test questions missed, 166 were on questions that did not use pronouns and 41 were on questions that did use pronouns. In percentages, 80% of the missed questions did not use pronouns and 20% of the missed questions did use pronouns, compared to 79% and 21% on the pre-test. This is a difference of one percent. In my opinion, this was not a significant finding. Therefore, students scored no better on questions that used pronouns compared to questions that did not use pronouns than they did at the beginning of the six-week study.

Increases in reading comprehension scores. There were, however, some other findings that do point to the fact that pronoun reference may increase reading comprehension scores for some students. These findings support my view that pronoun reference is a skill that can have an overall effect on reading comprehension scores, as opposed to a narrower view in which one only looks directly at questions that deal with pronouns. It goes back to my point in the literature review where I discuss how pronoun reference contributes to the cohesiveness of a text. Of the 14 students who took the pre- and post-test, six of those students scored higher on reading comprehension on the post-test. In statistical analysis, this number would be expressed as the decimal 0.42 (with zero being no chance and one being absolute certainty). I believe that 0.42 is a significant number according to the classic theory of probability which underlies much of probability in statistics. Briefly, this theory states that the chance of a particular outcome occurring is determined by the ratio of the number of favorable outcomes to the total number of outcomes (Voelker, Orton & Adams, 2001).

Factors influencing test results. On the other hand, there were also a number of students' scores who either decreased or stayed the same. There are a number of reasons why this may have occurred. In our district, and many districts across the state and the nation, students are required to take many tests. Many of these students had recently taken the MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) test, and ELLs need to take an additional test, the TEAE (Test of Emerging Academic English). It is my belief, as well as that of many of my colleagues', that students are over-tested. Some students are beginning to take testing less seriously than they once did, especially if it is not for a grade. Other students may have test anxiety and have difficulty concentrating because of their nerves. To conclude, many students have expressed or shown a dislike for standardized tests.

There are also factors that could have negatively influenced the test results which are outside of school and over which we have no control. For example, it might be that student did not sleep well, they did not eat breakfast, or perhaps was experiencing stress at home. All of these things can affect a student's performance on a test

In regards to those students whose scores did rise, other possibilities must be looked at as well. I would like to think that pronoun reference was the reason for the rise in their scores, but perhaps it was due in part to the fact that some students are in remedial classes where they are taught test-taking skills. Perhaps they improved other comprehension strategies or strategies to make better sense of multiple-choice tests. It is possible that other factors could have affected their score, either negatively or positively.

#### Pronoun Reference

The pronoun reference post-test was also very similar to the pre-test. This time,

two different stories were chosen from *More true stories: A beginning reader*. Once again, the students were asked questions about the story and all of the questions examined the students' knowledge of the meaning of pronouns. The following is a table of the students' pronoun reference post-test scores.

Table 4  
Pronoun Reference Post-test Scores

Student's Letter	Score (out of 10)	Percentage Correct
A	10	100%
B	10	100%
C	2	20%
D	8	80%
E	8	80%
F	10	100%
G	10	100%
H	7	70%
I	7	70%
J	10	100%
K	10	100%
L	10	100%
M	10	100%
N	10	100%

Two different types of test questions. As with the pre-test, a test item analysis was

done to see which types of questions were most difficult for the students. The post-test contained the same two types of questions as the pre-test, test questions which specifically recalled information in the story and test questions which did not. I found that of the 10 questions only one of the questions had the same language in the story, the other nine questions had a noun replaced by a pronoun in the test question itself (see Appendix H). Only one student missed the test question that had used the same pronoun in the story. In my opinion, this was not a significant finding, and like the pre-test, shows that students did not seem to have more difficulty with one kind of test question than the other.

Singular and plural pronouns. I also examined the number of missed plural pronouns compared to the number of missed singular pronouns. I found that of the 10 test questions, three were plural and seven were singular. The students missed a total of 18 test questions, five of which were plural and 13 of which were singular. Upon examination, there was only two tenths of a difference between the number of singular pronoun test questions missed and the number of plural test questions missed. In my opinion, this was an insignificant difference, meaning that neither singular nor plural pronouns were easier or more difficult for the students.

Pronoun reference scores raised. Based on the students' scores, I think it is fair to draw the conclusion that the students learned how to successfully identify the referent to a pronoun. On the pre-test, only three students had a score of 100%, compared to nine students on the post-test. Of the 14 students, only one student scored below 70%. I feel as though this proves that except for one student, everyone in the class learned how to identify the referent to a pronoun.

### Concluding Comments

To conclude, nearly all of my students learned to identify the correct referent to a pronoun. The pronoun reference lessons were successful. Also, six out of 14 students raised their reading comprehension scores. Statistically speaking, this was an encouraging number of students. Pronoun reference should at least be considered as a way to raise reading scores.

In the next chapter, the conclusion, I will discuss what I learned through this research process and recommend future areas of research for those who are looking for topics.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

My primary research question in this capstone was whether or not being able to locate the referent to a pronoun would increase middle school ELLs' reading comprehension scores. I also decided to include a test of the students' ability to correctly identify the referent to a pronoun. I tested the students' abilities to locate the referent to a personal pronoun and gave them a reading comprehension test before and after a six-week pronoun identification and pronoun reference implementation time. In regards to reading comprehension, the results showed that some of the students' scores were higher during post-testing. As a result of my data, I believe that pronoun reference lessons are valuable and have a place in reading curriculum. The insight I gained through this capstone experience was very valuable, and I am glad I am sharing it with others.

As I stated in the literature review, there are conflicting viewpoints on whether or not pronoun reference, or grammar at all for that matter, should be explicitly taught. The supporters of pronoun reference instruction, including Baumann and Stevenson (1986) and Pearson and Johnson (1978) claim that students who are struggling with pronoun reference should be directly instructed in it. Goodman and Gespass (1983) argue that time is better spent on extensive reading than direct instruction. After examining the results of my classroom research I would say that pronoun reference should be explicitly taught to

certain groups of students. I think that if they are struggling readers then it is necessary to provide the students with a wide range of skills. Perhaps pronoun reference will help some of the struggling readers improve their reading comprehension.

The research of Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) also supports explicit grammar instruction on pronoun reference. It states that ELLs need to pass standardized national and international exams in order to proceed to a college or university. Grammar is a component of these exams. Therefore, even if teaching students pronoun reference does not raise their reading comprehension score, it may benefit them by giving them an edge on a test of grammar and in English classes at middle school, high school, and college levels.

There are also some studies that show that students can increase their reading comprehension ability by increasing their metacognitive awareness. In other words, the students' ability to think about language can help them to become a better reader. Students who learn how to identify the referent to a pronoun have increased their ability to think about language. Throughout the six-week implementation time in my classroom I could see that students were beginning to think about language in new ways, perhaps this will help them to continue to become better readers (Schoonen, Hulstijn & Bossers, 1998; Celce-Murcia & Olshstain, 2000).

#### Students with Learning Disabilities

When the subjects are middle school students, or perhaps any human subjects, many different factors can affect how the research is conducted. Four out of the 14 students involved in this study were identified as learning disabled and two of the four

were labeled emotionally and behaviorally disturbed as well. This could have played a role in the results of my research. These students are very challenged in the classroom because they have a specific learning disability. They are not only challenged academically, but also socially. I believe that two of the students prefer to get negative attention in order to distract from their disability. The following journal entry, dated January 27, 2004 discusses some of the challenges I had with students.

*Student behavior has been a real problem. I wrote out two office referrals today for student behavior. Two of my male students could not control their behavior. They were loud and disruptive the entire hour and my warnings and re-directions were ignored. It is very frustrating when most of the class is well behaved and a very few make it extremely difficult to teach.*

The learning disabled students that were involved in this study had scores on the pre- and post-tests ranging from 29% to 76% correct and two of the students improved their scores on the post-test. However, I believe my sample of learning disabled students, four out of 14, was too small to draw any conclusions from. Also, this particular study focused on ELLs, not learning disabled students.

Although the learning disabled students were challenging to work with during this study, I am glad that these students were a part of it. When I discuss the need for teachers to have many strategies to draw upon in the introduction of this capstone, this is the group of students that need those additional strategies most. Learning disabled students learn differently and need to be presented material in a variety of ways in order for them to reach their fullest potential (Hardman, Drew, Egan & Wolf, 1993).

### Testing Concerns

There are also some factors to consider when doing research in a school environment. One of the factors that came to my attention while doing this classroom research was the large number of standardized tests students take. Because of the number of tests they take, I am concerned that students may take tests, like the ones that I gave as the reading comprehension component (the IPT) for the pre- and post-tests, too lightly. I was very encouraged by the amount of effort I saw most of my students putting into the pre- and post-tests, but there were a few students who just guessed at the answers. I also noticed some students simply guessing on the answers to the pronoun reference identification test. Although this test was not standardized, I think students guessed on answers because they are tired of tests in general, especially when they know that there is not a grade associated with the test. Although the tests I administered were challenging, I know that if they had tried, they would have had the ability to read the test and make educated guesses at the answers. I think it is important to note that ELLs are given another standardized test, the Test of Emerging Academic English (TEAE) in addition to the MCAs and MAPs tests. I think that some students are tired of taking tests, and are guessing on answers just to be done quickly.

### Benefits of this Study

Many personal benefits occurred to me as I conducted my research, as well as when I read my journal after I had completed my research. The journal helped me to reflect on

my classroom. I can now see more clearly what sorts of activities are most beneficial to my students.

I believe that this study has made me a stronger teacher as well. It has raised my confidence in my ability to teach students a skill. I got some encouraging numbers that show that pronoun reference may positively impact the reading scores of ELLs. In addition, I did teach almost every student to correctly identify the referent to a pronoun. This gives me the confidence to teach students additional strategies that may be new to them.

I also think that this research is beneficial to those who read this capstone. I think that teachers of ESL, Special Education, Title 1, etc. may find that pronoun reference is something that they want to teach after reading this capstone. In addition, my journal entries may be beneficial to those who choose to incorporate pronoun reference into their curriculum (see Appendix F). The journal lets teachers know the daily struggles I went through in teaching students a new skill and may be helpful to them if they decide to teach their students pronoun reference. I think that many teachers are looking for new ideas to challenge themselves and their students.

Another benefit of this study is that it may motivate some teachers to try classroom research of their own. I think that there are many strategies that teachers are using that would be of interest to others. There are also areas of research related to pronoun reference and grammar that may make interesting research projects, like pronoun reference and its effect on writing. It would be interesting to see if by learning to identify the referent to a pronoun ELLs could write a more cohesive text. This capstone will also hopefully

encourage other researchers to keep a journal of their classroom activities and interactions.

I think the journal was a real benefit to myself and the readers of this capstone.

To conclude, I learned a great deal about myself and my students throughout this process. I would encourage others in the field of education to make their classroom a learning environment not only for their students, but also for themselves.

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