

# *What's so Special about Learning to Read in a Second Language?*

*Professor Esther Geva  
Ontario Institute for Studies  
in Education (OISE)  
University of Toronto*

*May 2008  
Minerva Lecture Series  
Canadian Council on Learning*



# Structure of presentation

- Reading models that apply to L2 reading
- Review some research from my lab on learning to read in L2
  - Normally developing students
  - Students with reading difficulties
- Discuss some implications
- Questions



# Terminology

- L2      Second language
- L1      First language (home language)
- ESL     English as a second language
- EL1     English as the L1/home/societal language

# A palette of linguistic and demographic contexts for examining L2 reading

- English as a Second Language (ESL)
- English as a Second Dialect
- French Immersion
- Bilingual day schools
- Core French
- International Languages
- Heritage Languages
- Refugees with no schooling
- Other?

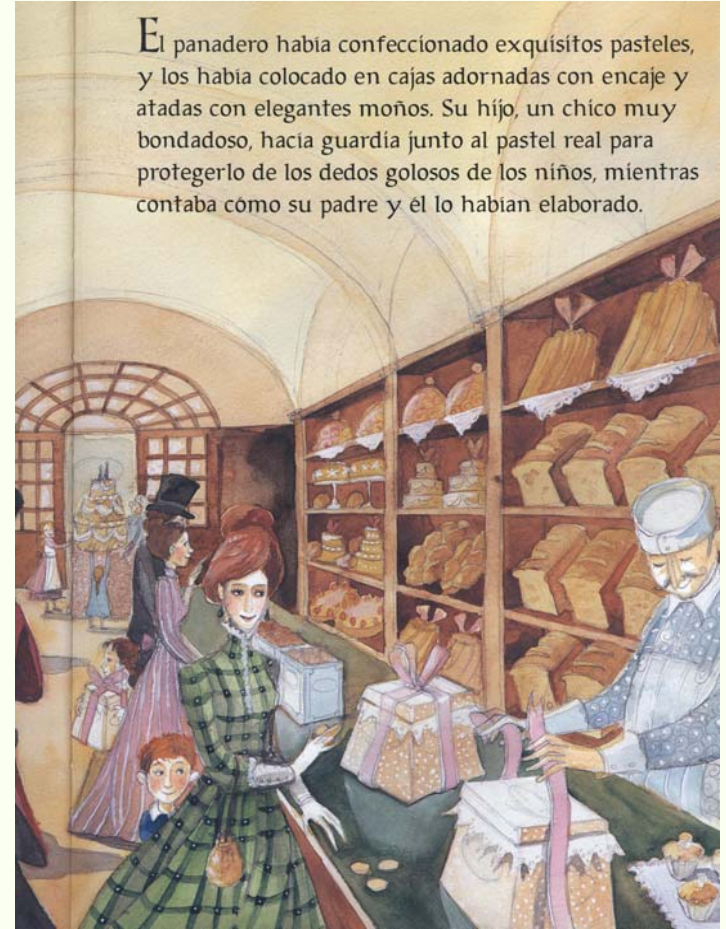


# What is this text about? What are your “clues”?

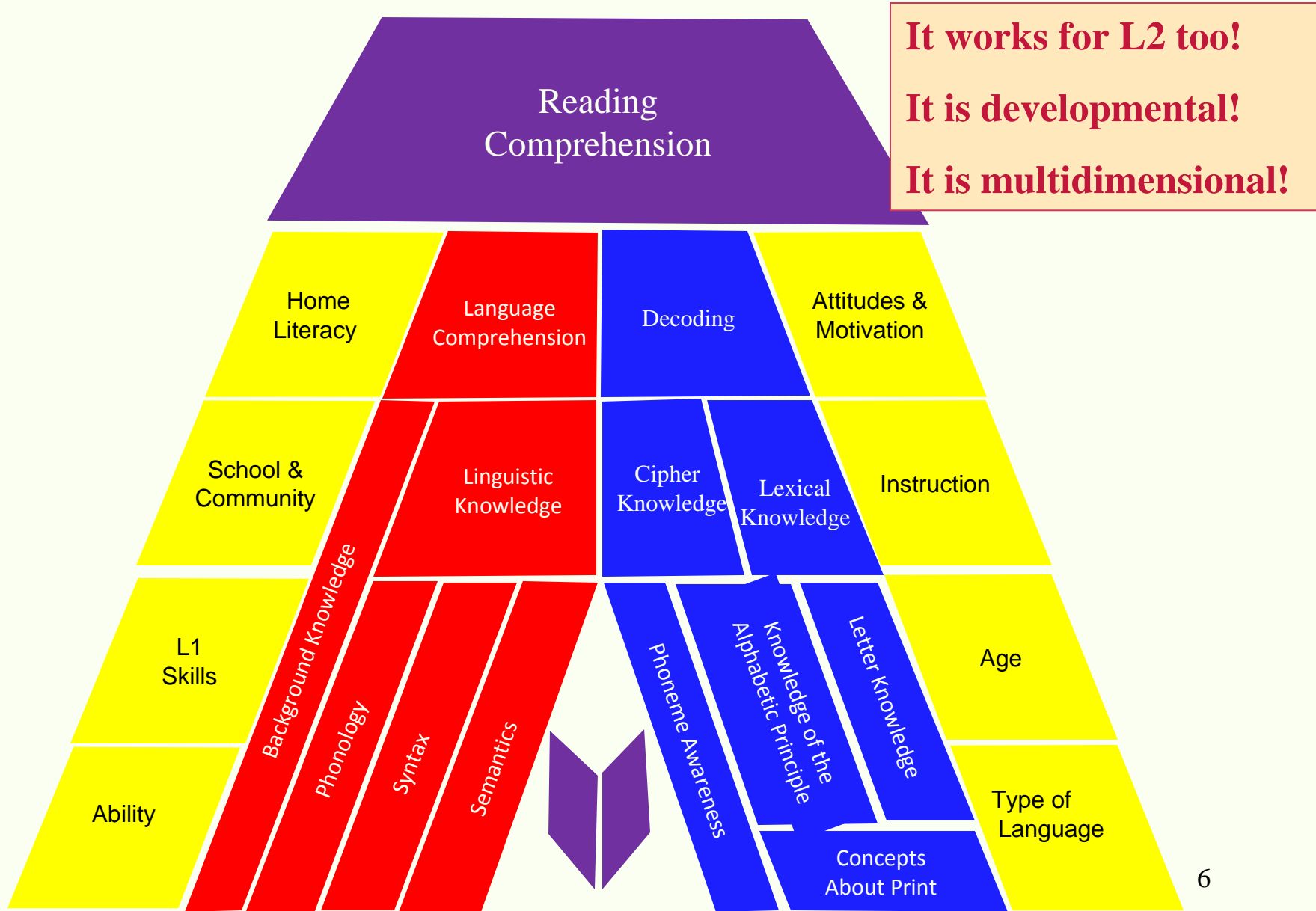
大般若經第九會能斷金剛分序。西明寺沙門玄則撰竊尋浩汗其源者。必總靈怪之儲。紛糾其峰者。自動鬱冥之觀。況沖照倬存。逸韻遐舉。規真附體。紐玄立極。根大衍於初會。革小成於後心。蓄靈蘊福。

تمام انسان آزاد اور حقوق و عزت کے اعتبار سے برابر پیدا ہوئے ہیں۔ انہیں ضمیر اور عقل ودیعت ہوئی ہے۔ اس لیے انہیں ایک دوسرے کے ساتھ بھائی چارے کا سلوک کرنا چاہیے۔

Monsieur le Président,  
Me permettez-vous, dans ma gratitude pour le bienveillant accueil que vous m'avez fait un jour, d'avoir le souci de votre juste gloire et de vous dire que votre étoile, si heureuse jusqu'ici, est menacée de la plus honteuse, de la plus ineffaçable des taches ?



# The Cognitive Foundations for Learning to Read



# Chall's Reading Stages

## Getting Ready

Stage 0: Prereading (Pre-school-Kindergarten, Birth-6)

It works  
for L2  
too!

## Learning to read

Stage 1: Initial Reading or Decoding (Grades 1-2)

Stage 2: Confirmation, Fluency, Ungluing from Print  
(Grades 2-3)



## Reading to learn

Stage 3: Reading for Learning the New: A First Step (Grades 4-8,  
Ages 9-13)

Stage 4: Multiple Viewpoints (High School, 14-18)

Stage 5: Construction and Reconstruction-A World View  
(College, Ages 18 +)

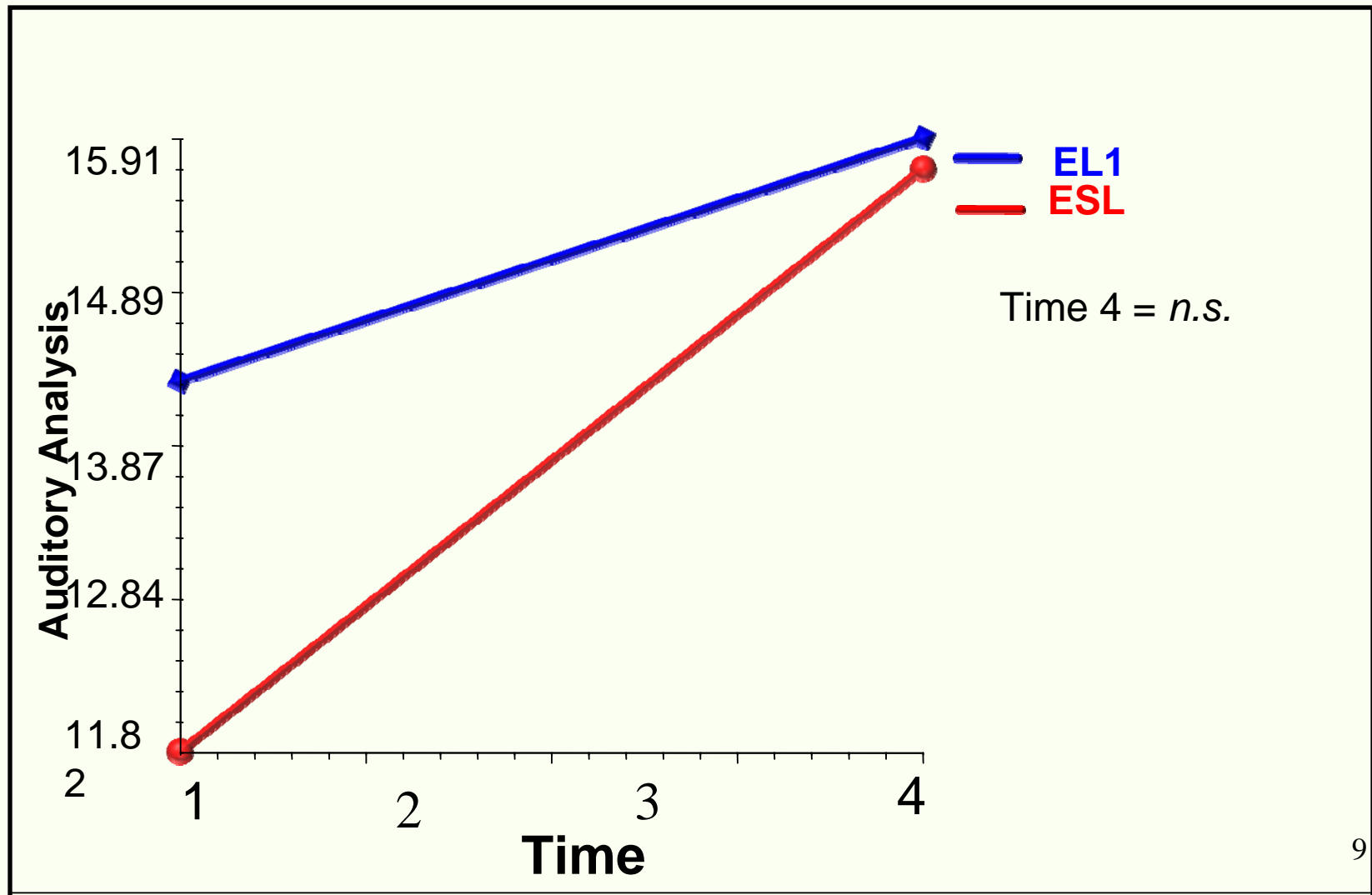


Developing sensitivity to new  
sounds

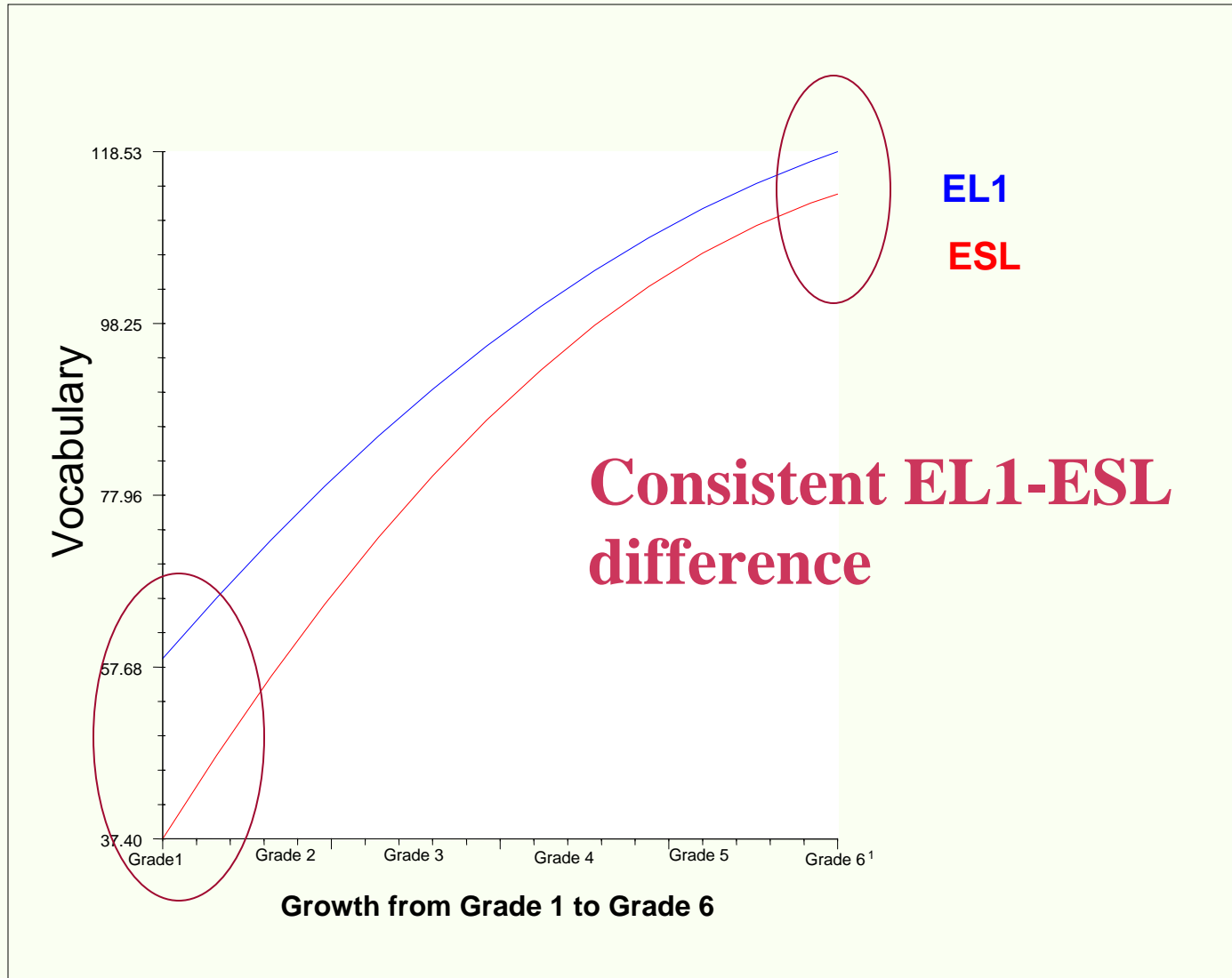
Did I say the same  
thing?

- cheap-ship
- think-sink
- look-look

# Auditory discrimination: From the beginning of grade 1 to the end of grade 2



# Vocabulary Development in EL1 and ESL



# Academic Vocabulary

(from Biemiller and Slonim, 2001)

## Examples of items:

“Johnny fell and broke his arm.”

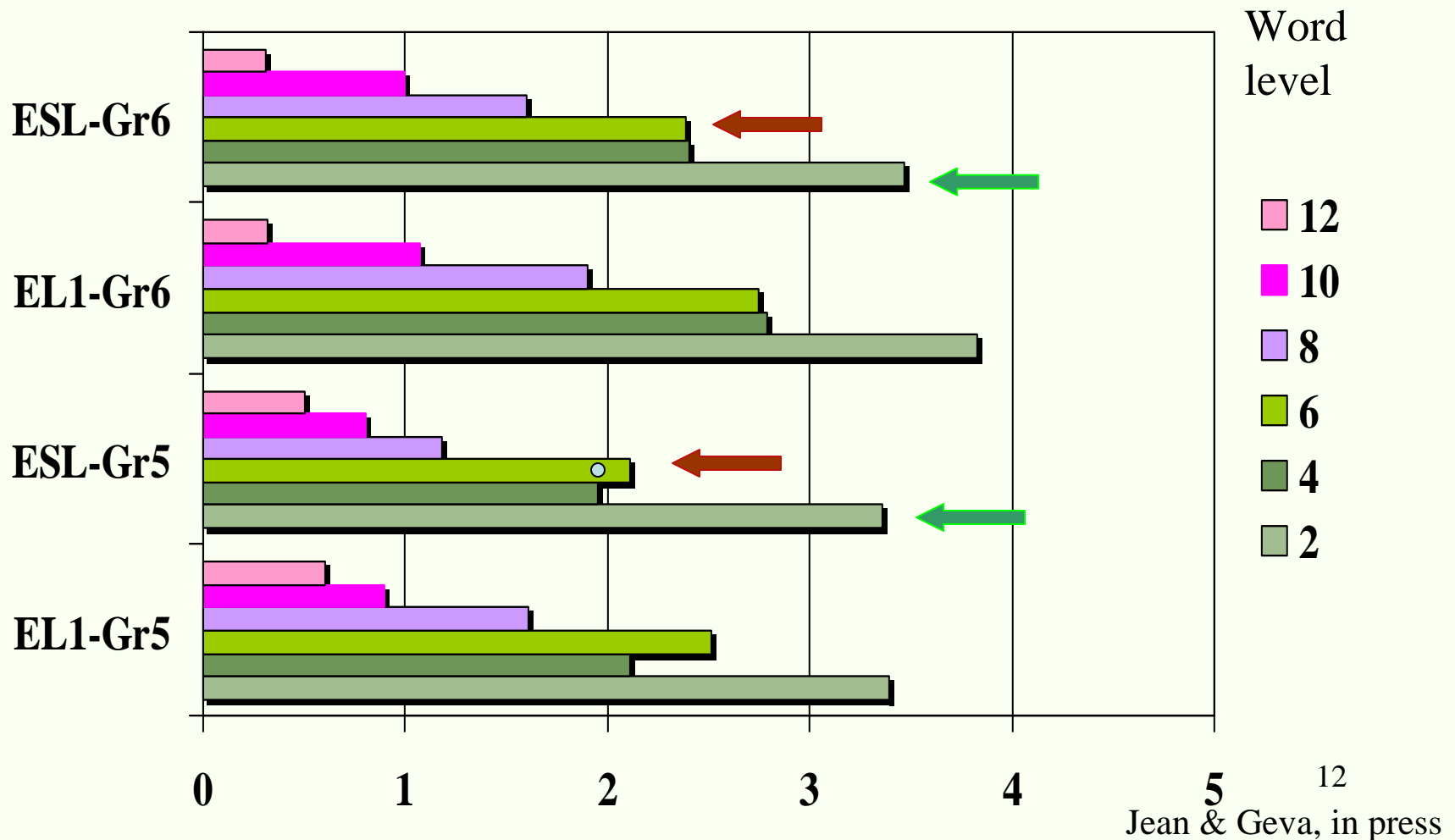
In this sentence what does arm mean?

“The material was translucent.”

What does translucent mean?

Evidence for *common sequence* of vocabulary growth in EL1.

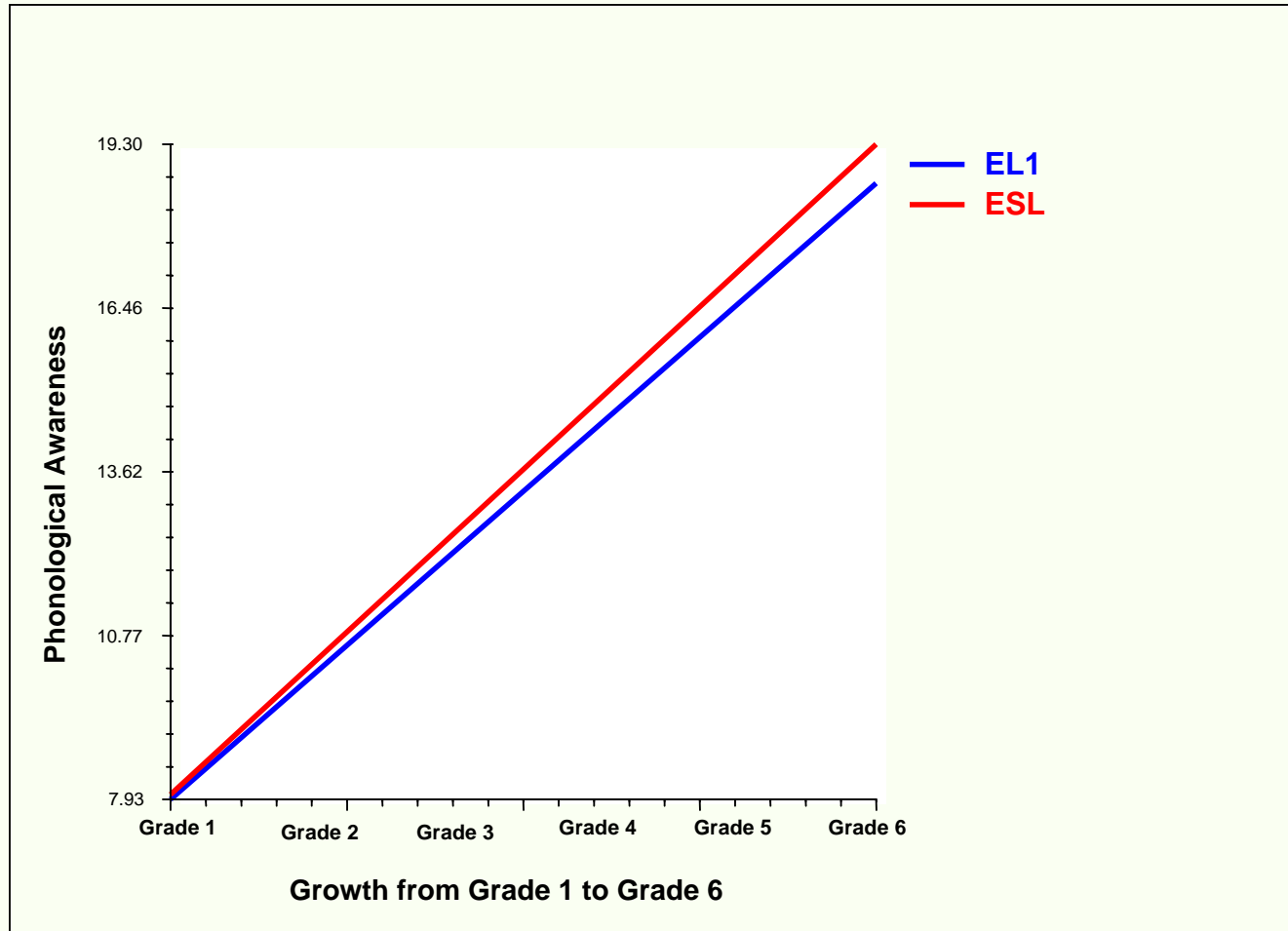
# Root Word Vocabulary in Grades 5 and 6: EL1 vs. ESL



# Phonological Awareness

- “boy” “toy” “bag” - which one begins with a different sound?
- Say “cowboy”  
Now say it without “cow”
- Say “stop”  
Now say it without the “s”

# Overall Development of Phonological Awareness: Grade 1 to Grade 6



# Word recognition and decoding

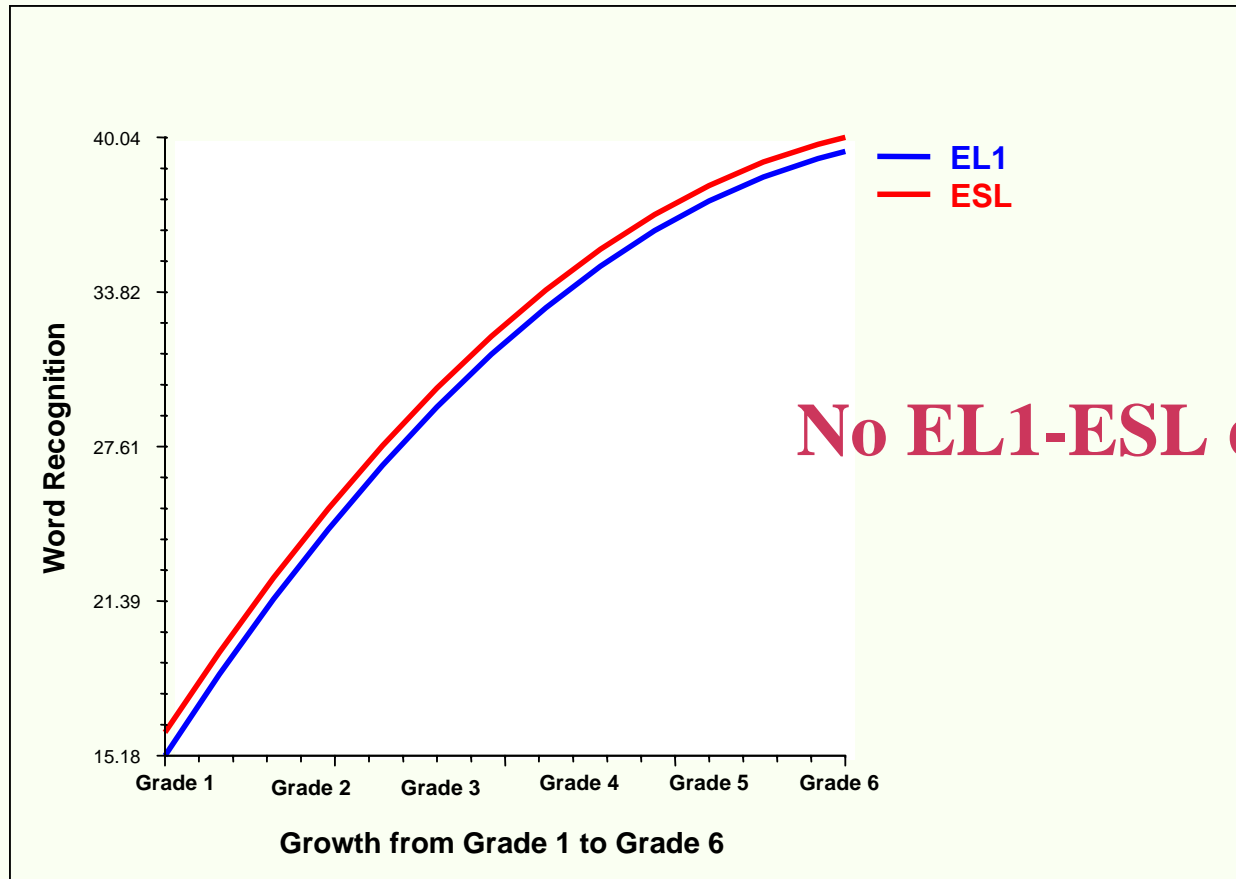
“real” words:

dog vase character recognition

“pseudo” words:

ift lase polender comprebension

# Word reading in EL1 and ESL from Grade 1 to Grade 6



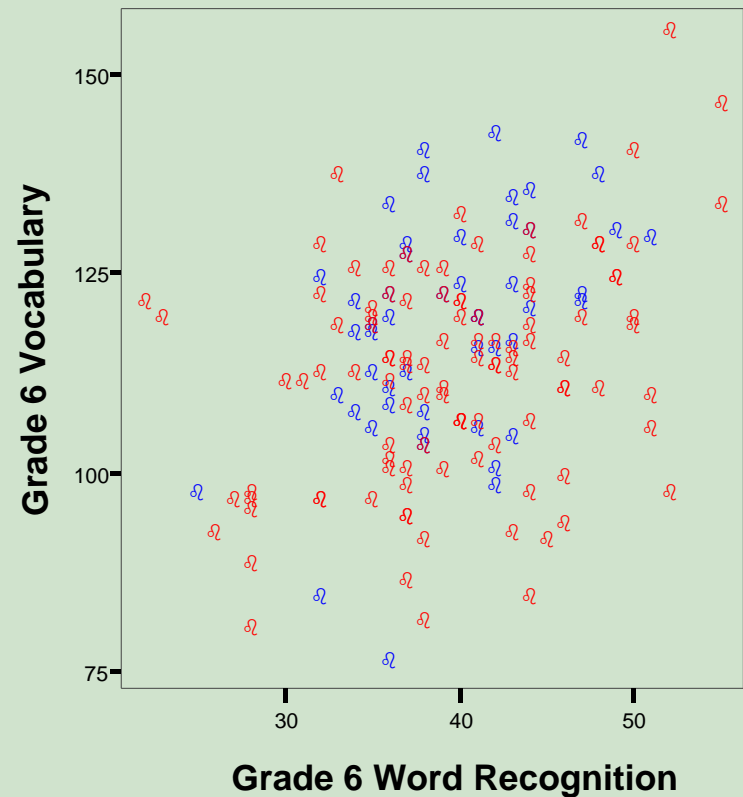
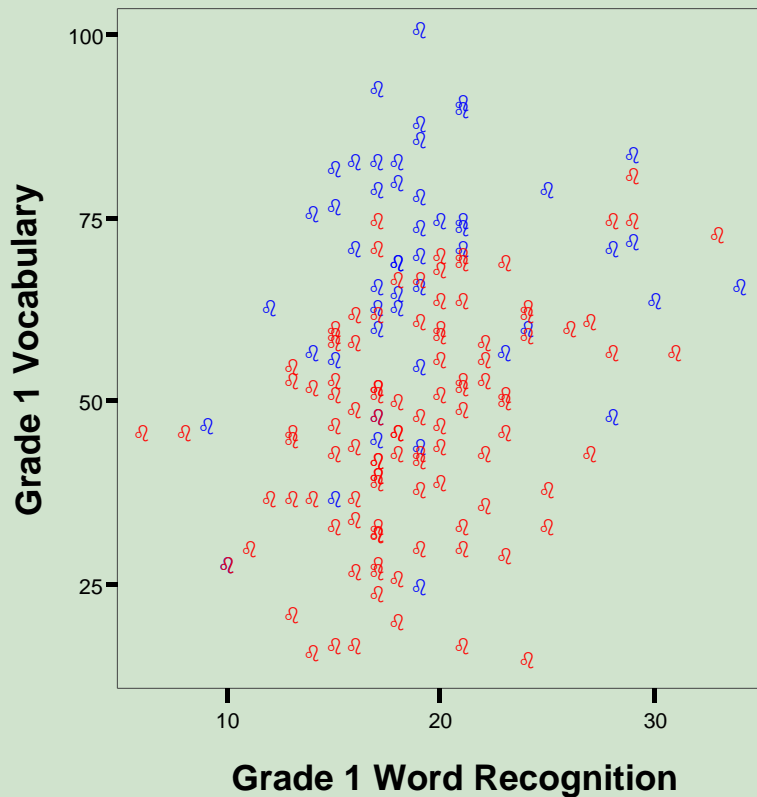
# The relationship between vocabulary and word reading skills

**Grade 1**

**Grade 6**

**EL1**  
**ESL**

**No EL1-ESL difference**



# The relationship between phonological awareness and word reading skills

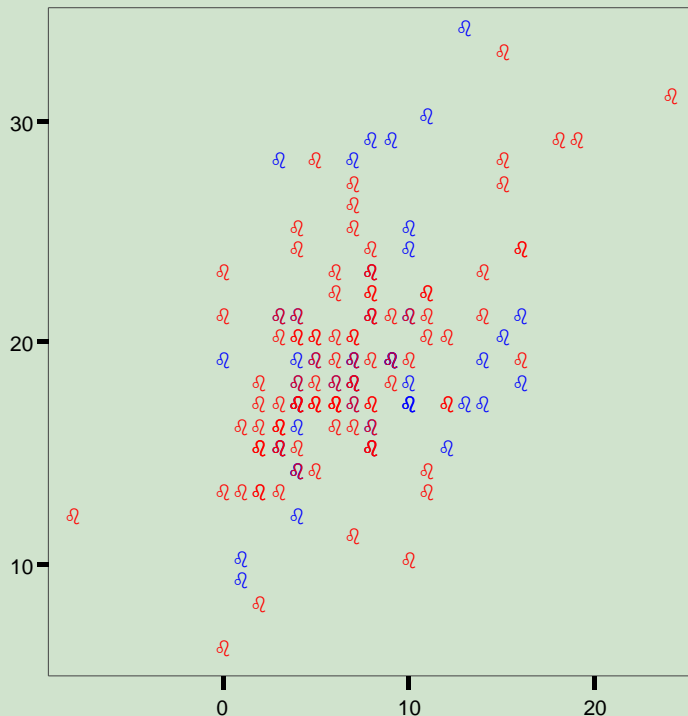
Grade 1

Grade 6

EL1  
ESL

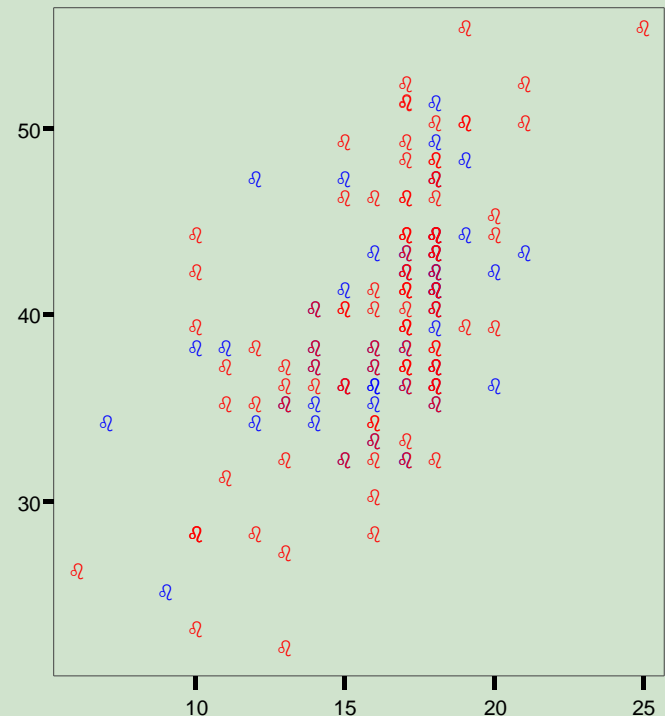
No EL1-ESL difference

Grade 1 Word Recognition



Grade 1 Phonological Awareness

Grade 6 Word Recognition



Grade 6 Phonological Awareness

# The question of “transfer” of skills between L1 and L2

- Correlation between L1 and L2 skills
- Effect of L1 characteristics on L2 skills

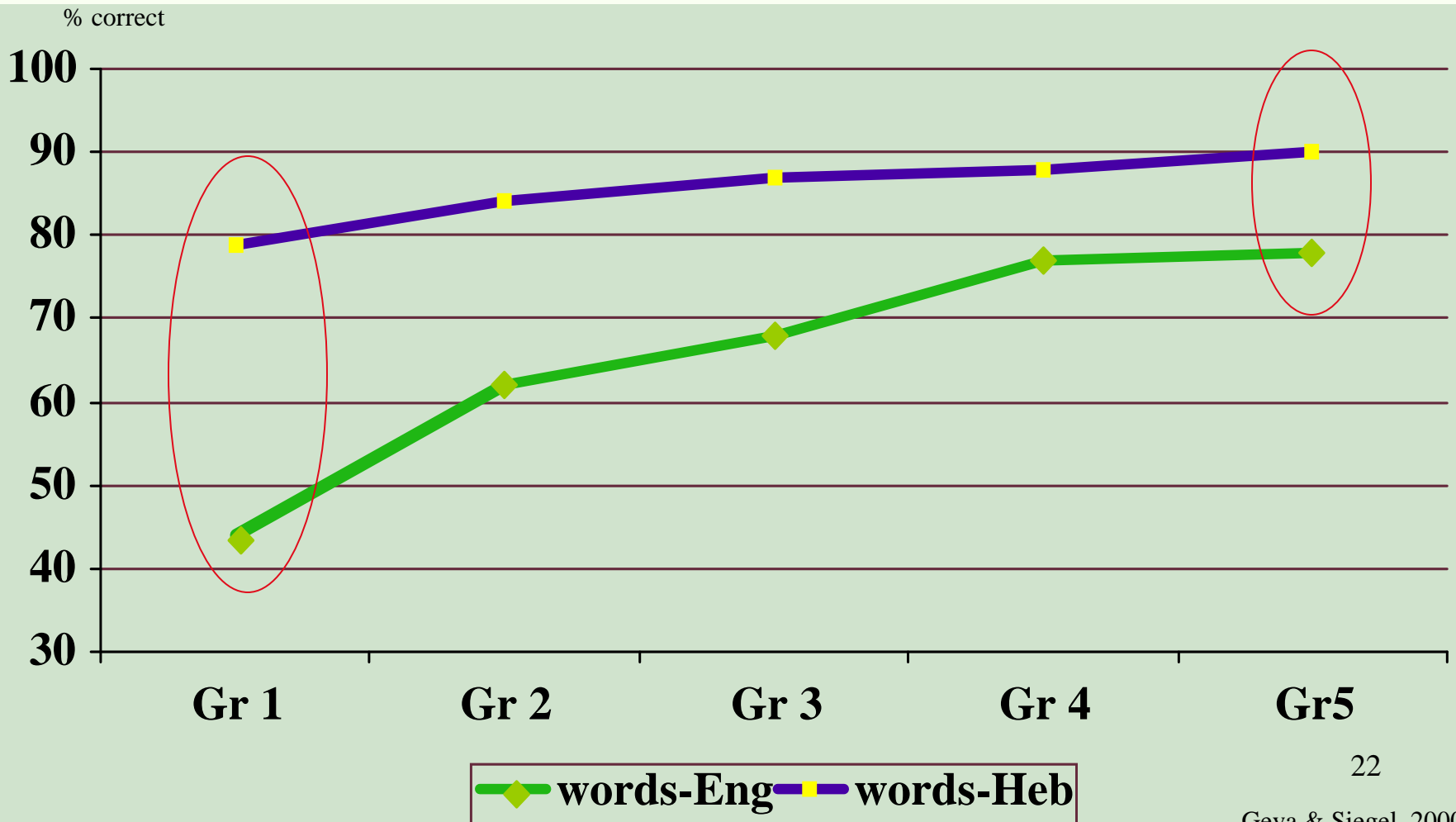
# Correlations among English predictors (Fall SK) and French reading a year later (Grade 1)

Variable	Vocab	<i>Letter ID</i>	<i>Ltr Sound</i>	<i>Elision</i>	<i>Blend</i>	<i>Snd Word Match</i>	Rapid Name.
Word Reading	.25*	.51**	.55**	.63**	.45**	.49**	-.49**
Story Reading	.22	.61**	.53**	.50**	.44**	.48**	-.35**

# Correlations among English and Arabic parallel measures

English	Arabic			
		Phono. Aware.	Morpho. Aware.	Word Reading
Phono. aware	<b>.55**</b>	.10	.35*	.44**
Morpho. aware	.37*	<b>.07</b>	.03	.19
Word Reading	.54**	.17	.17	.40**
Pseudo Reading	.56**	.14	.16	.37*

# Word recognition skills in English (L1) and Hebrew (L2): from Gr1 to Gr5

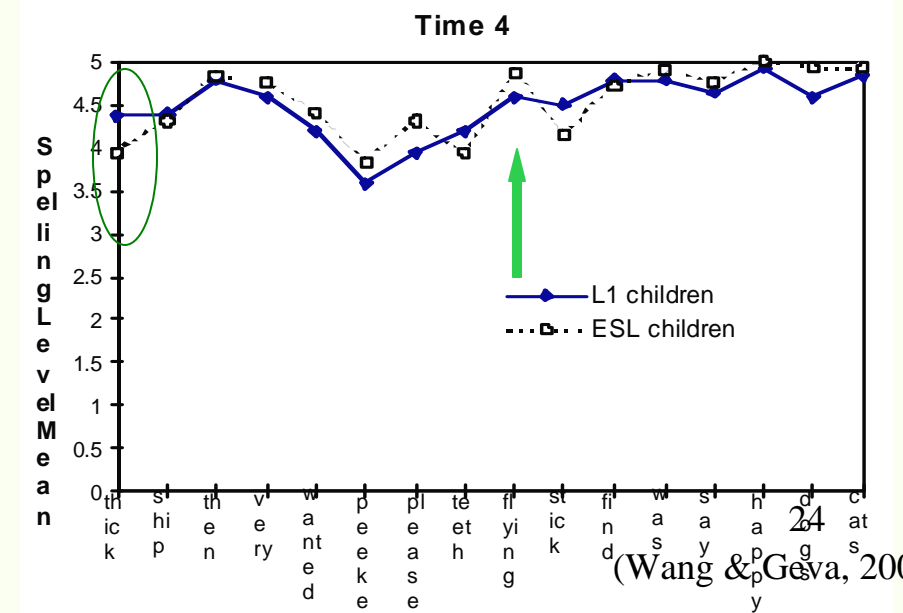
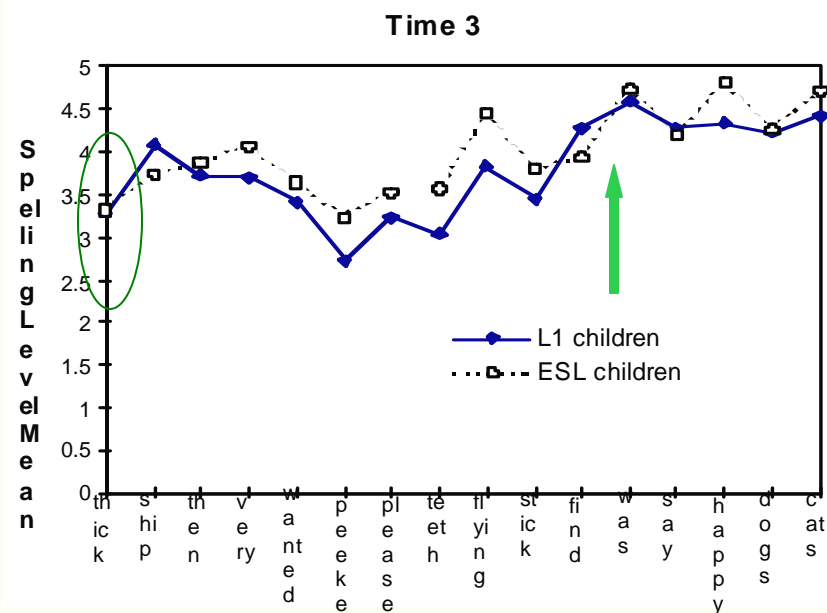
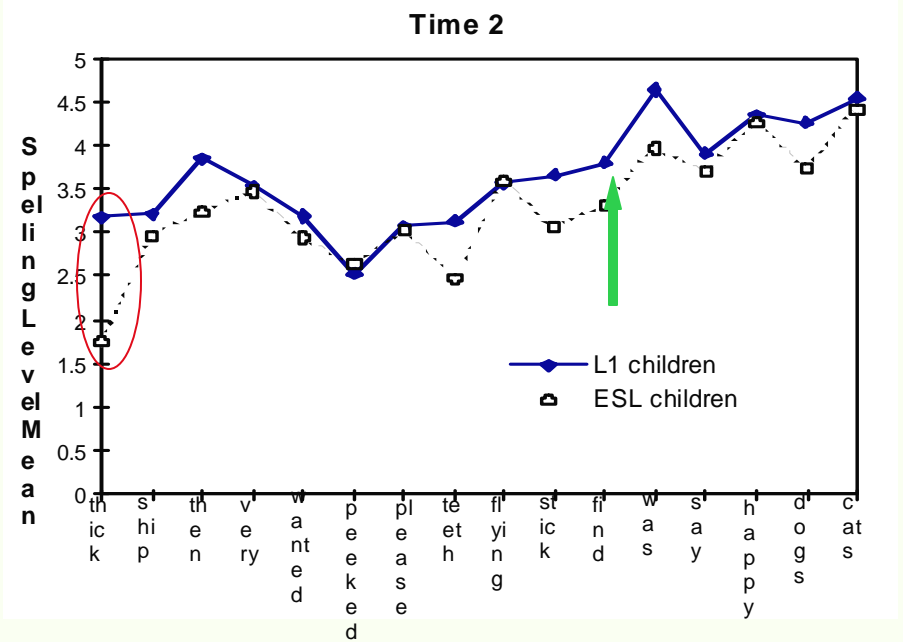
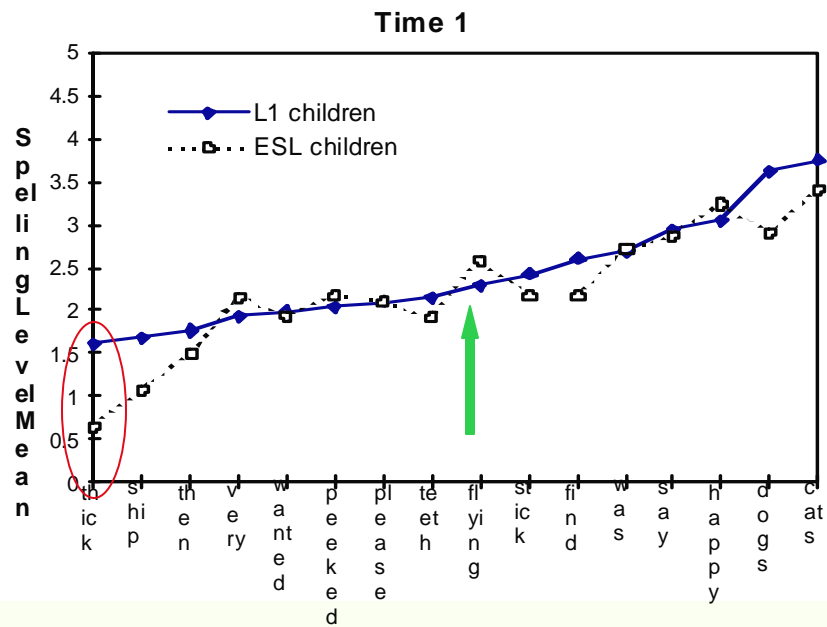


# Developmental Spelling Task

- CATS
- VERY
- HAPPY
- SHIP

- STICK
- PLEASE
- WANTED
- THICK
- PEEKED

# Spelling development in Cantonese immigrant children:



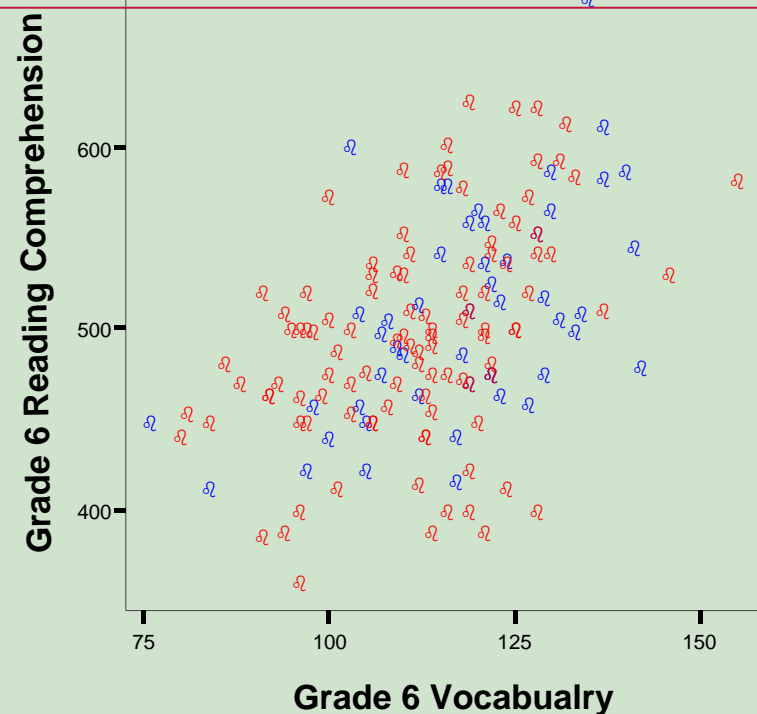
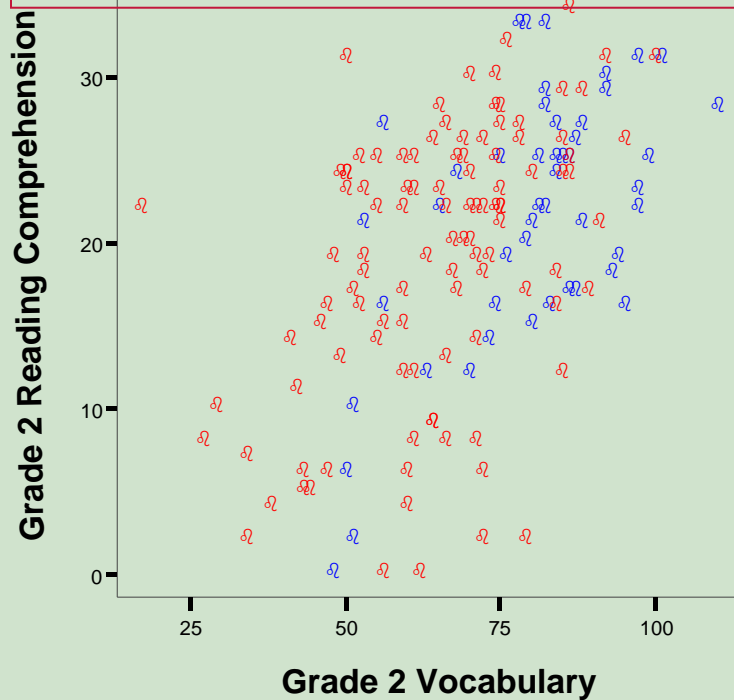
# The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension

Grade 2

Grade 6

EL1  
ESL

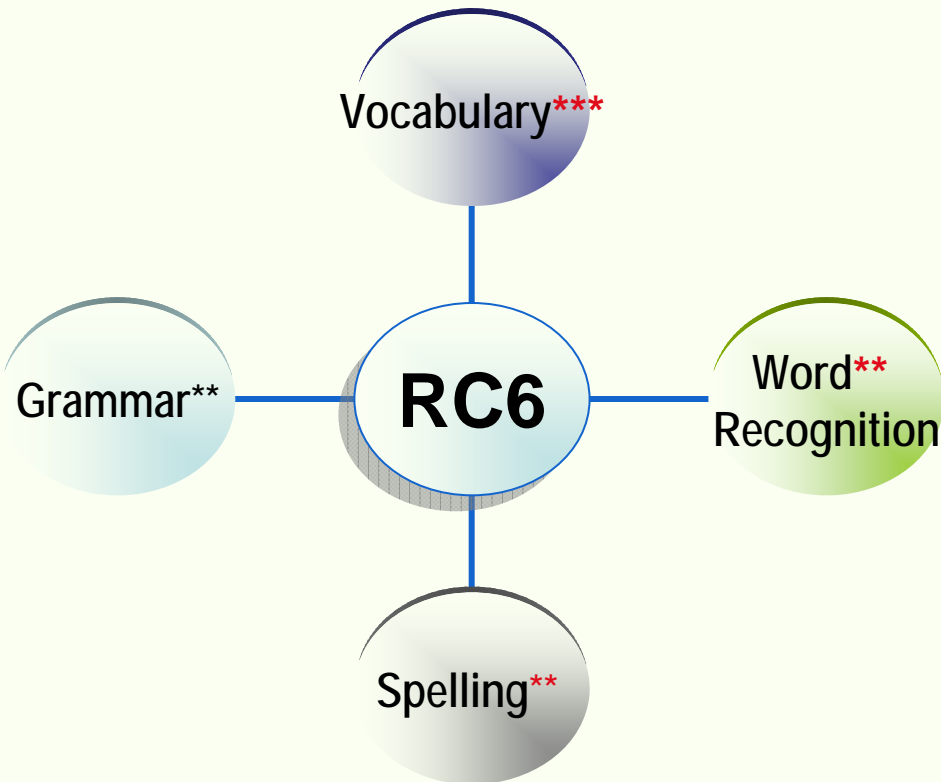
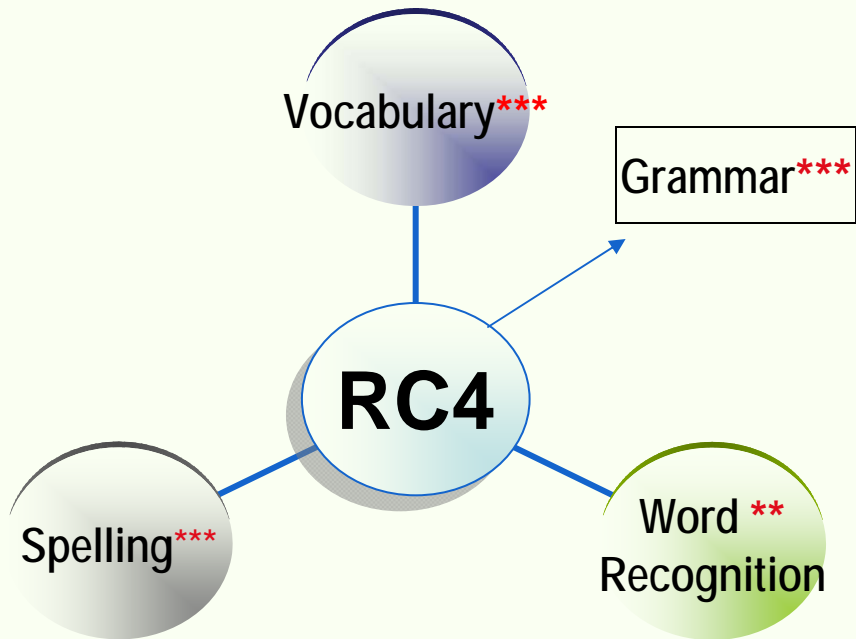
ESL < EL1 on reading comprehension (RC) and vocabulary  
The relationship between vocabulary and RC is the same



# Factors that affect reading comprehension (RC) in ESL

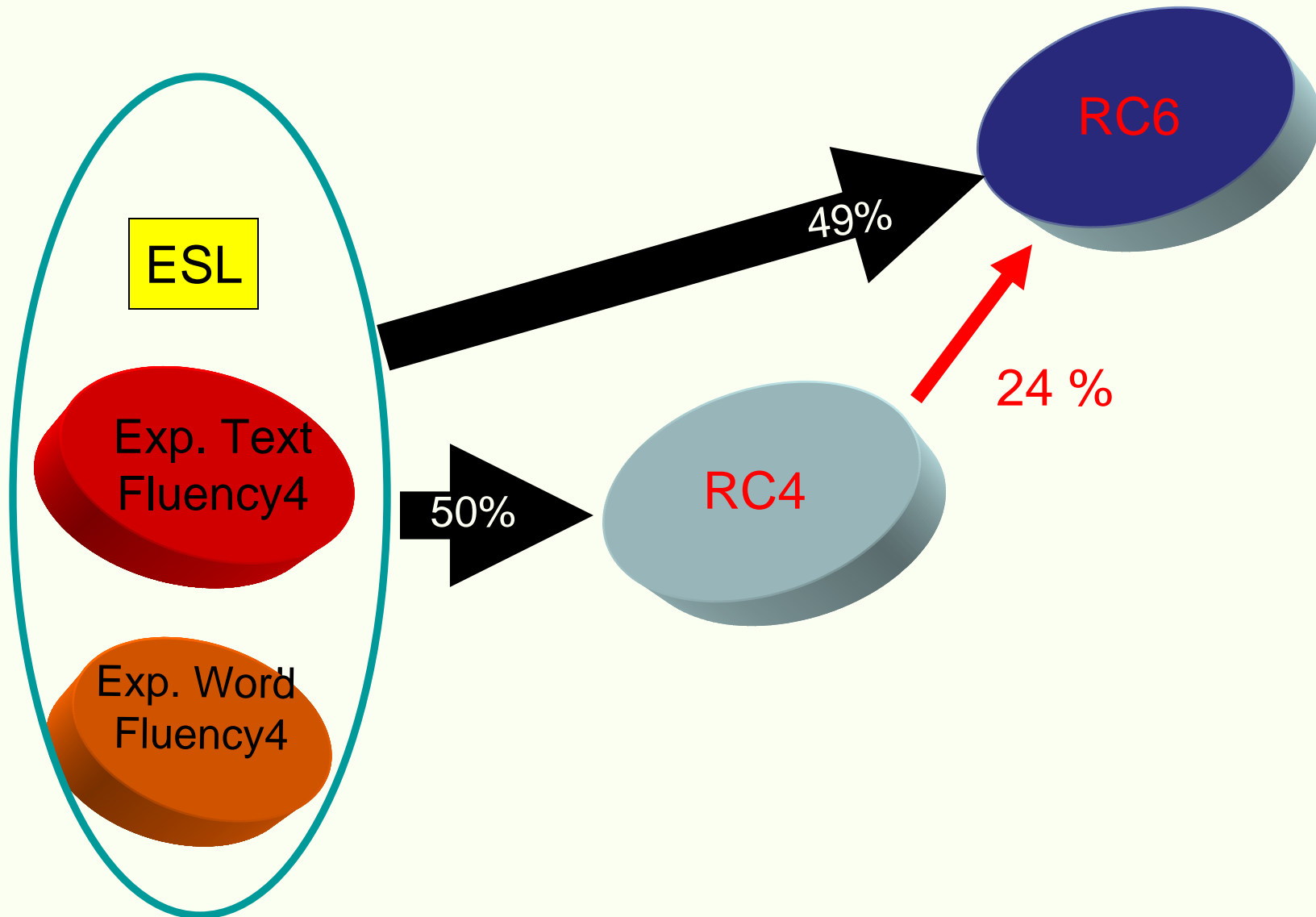
Grade 4

Grade 6



**This picture happens with different L2s**

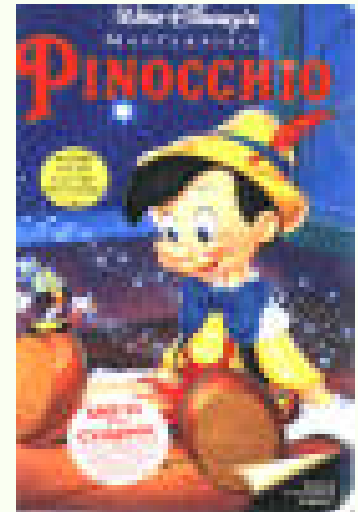
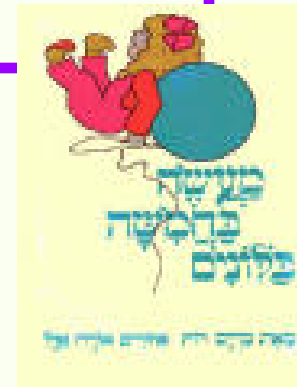
# How are **word** and **text reading fluency** related to reading comprehension (ESL children)?



# Cultural Knowledge

## Exposure to Print

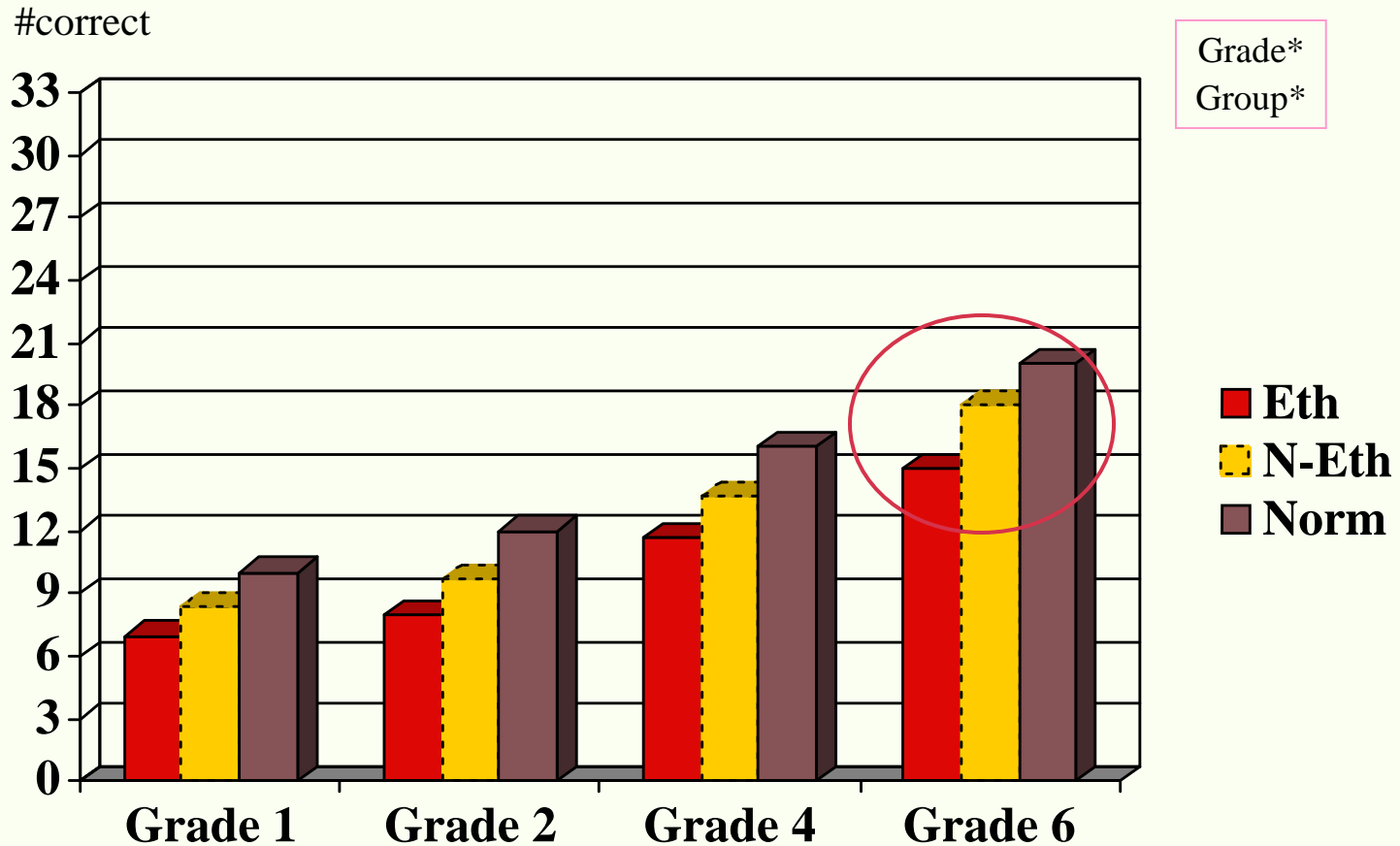
\*Print Exposure  
(*Title Recognition Test  
Children's books*)-



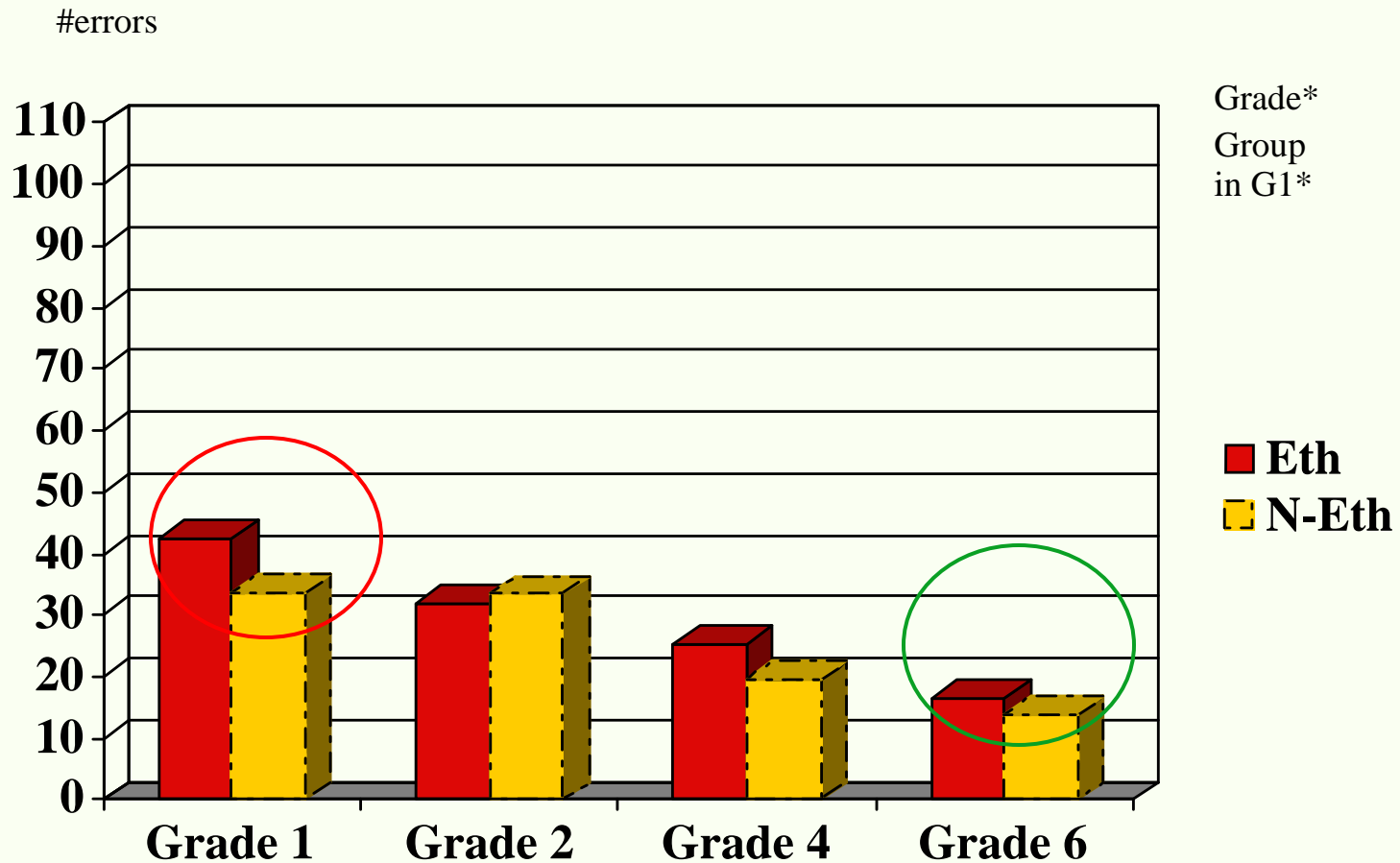
\***Knowledge of Famous Faces  
and Places**  
(*K-ABC*)



# Cultural Knowledge: “Faces and Places”



# Development in reading pseudowords



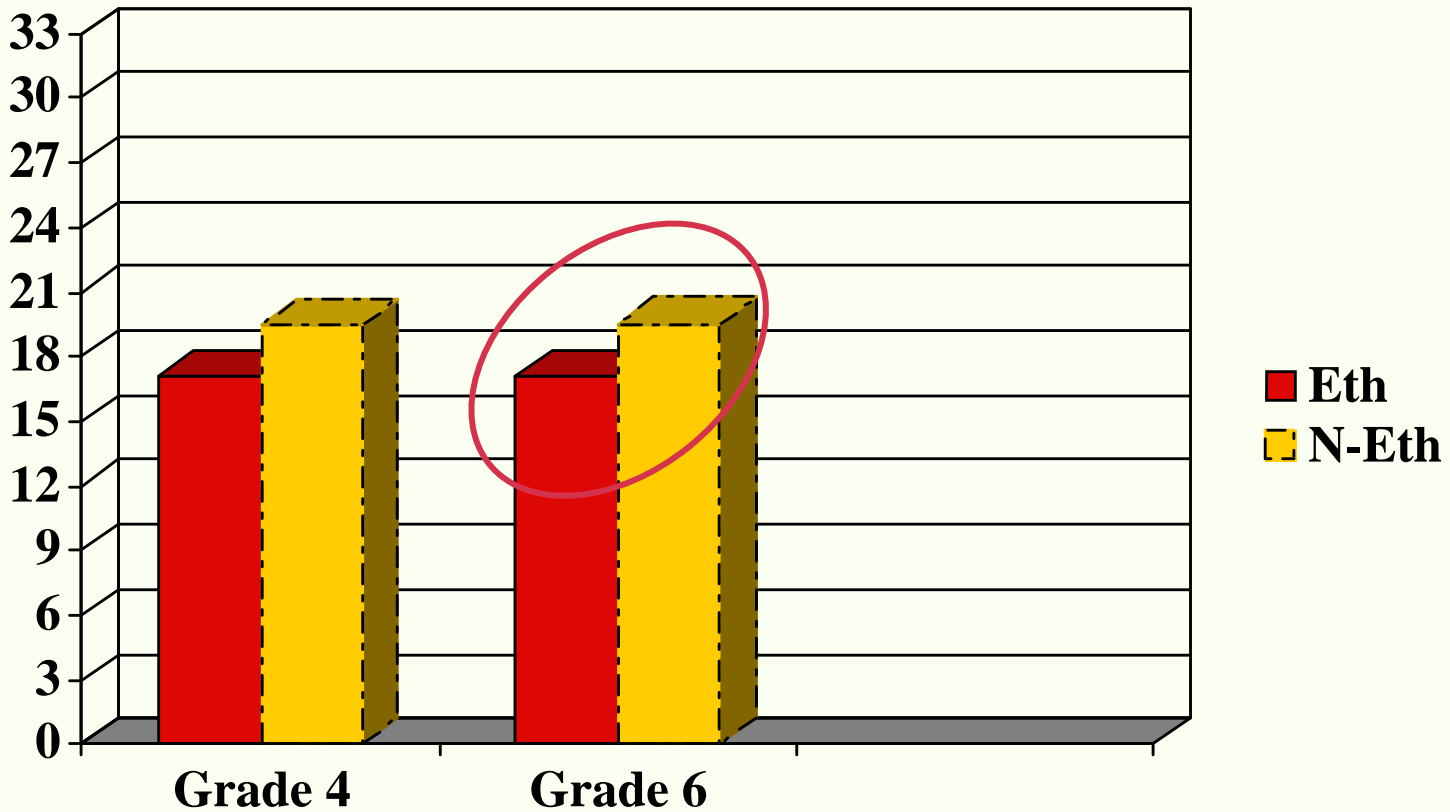
*Beyond grade 1 the groups are very similar*



# Reading Comprehension (RC)

- Ethiopian children comprehend better texts which contain topic-specific knowledge (e.g., how to cook special Ethiopian food) (Grade 2).

# correct



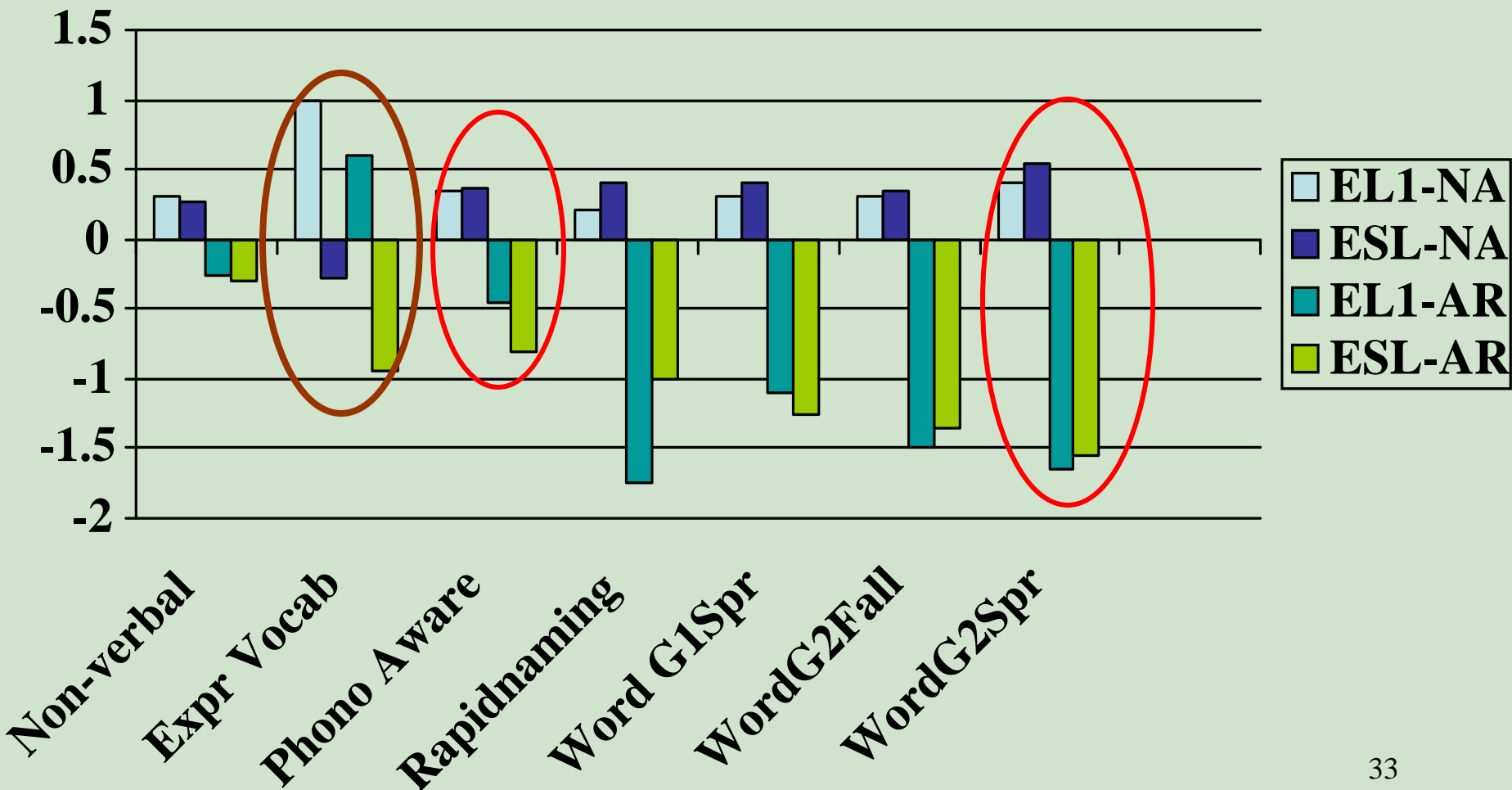
# Some Common Beliefs about ESL with Reading Difficulties

- Children experience difficulties in reading in their L2 because their oral language proficiency is inadequate
- In order to diagnose reading disability in L2s you must wait until language proficiency has developed (5-7 years)
- In order to diagnose reading disability reliably you must assess in the student's home language



# Profiles of at-risk and not at-risk EL1 and ESL children (Grade 2)

Mean Z scores



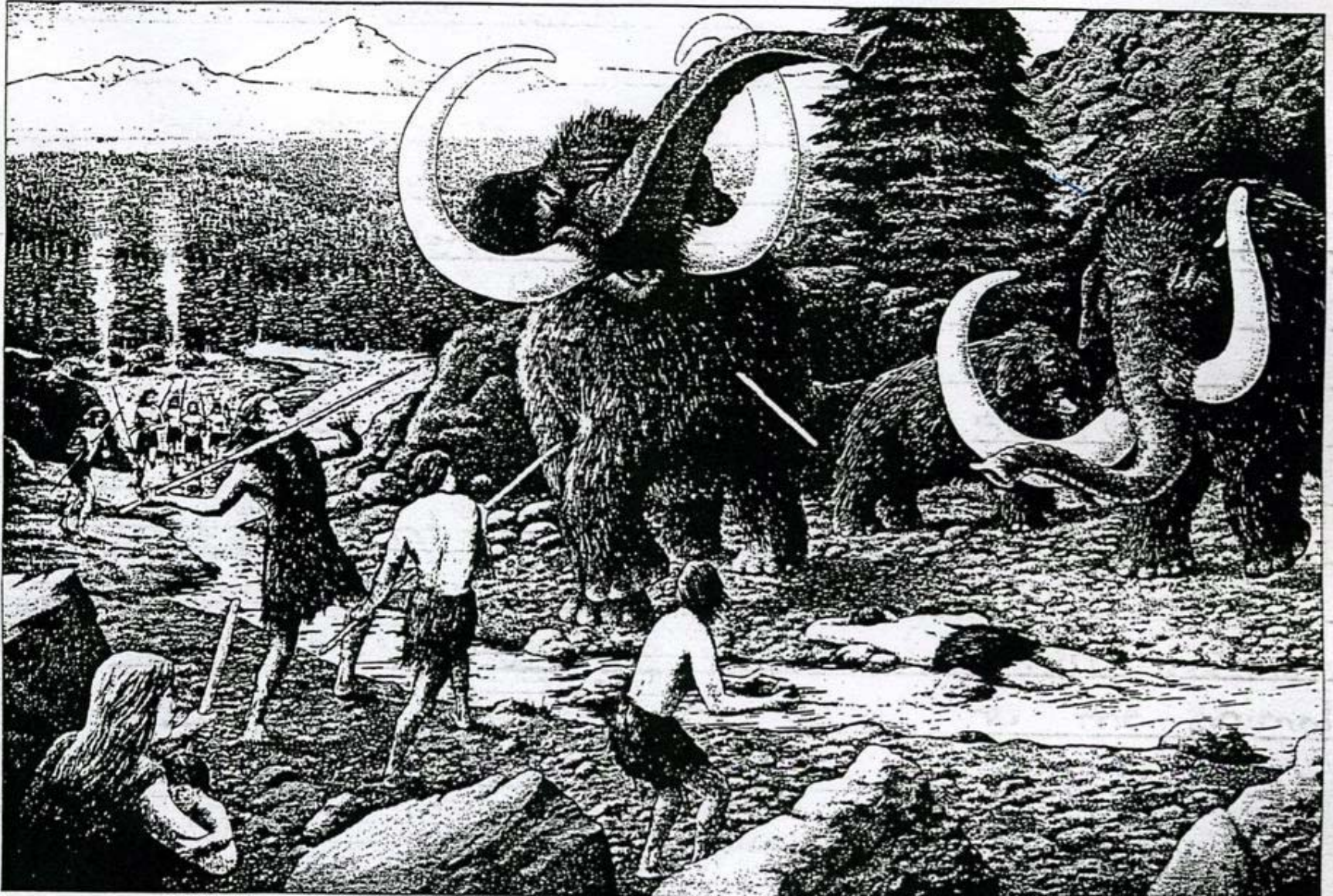
Date Feb 19/01

Tester J Thompson ID 12503

10222

STORY

War of men and creature



# ESL No-RD

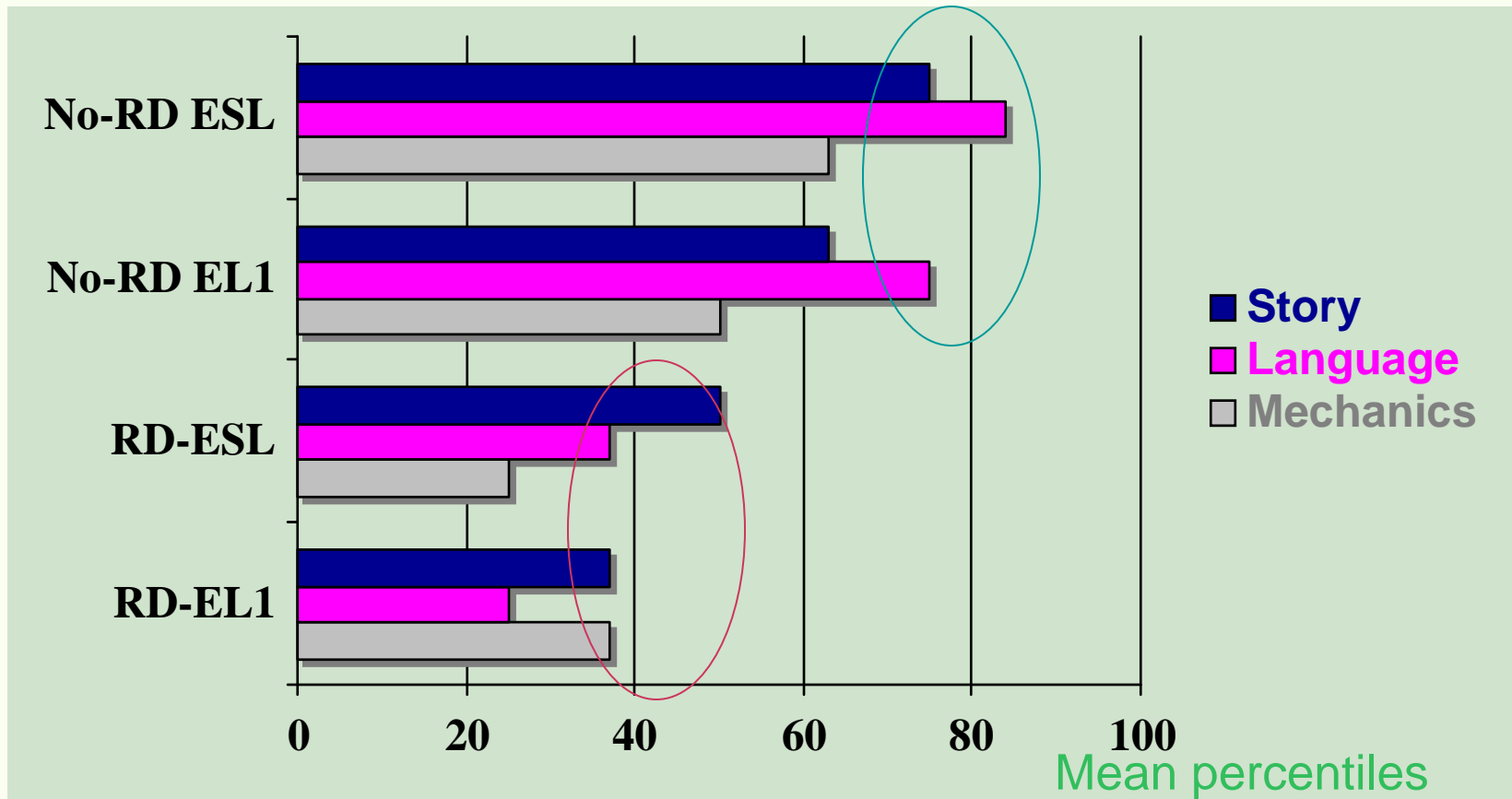
Once upon a time when cave men and women lived, there existed a forbidden jungle where wild animals, far greater than the tigers or lions lived. These animals were enormous, ferocious, and very hungry. So one man named Jarbi, set off to the woods in search of fire wood. Everyone said the woods were so dangerous that one-step in there, you'll be killed<sup>99</sup> but that man did not believe a thing they said. So while he was in the woods bushes were swaying, he also thought he heard footsteps, he looked back..... AHHHHHHH!!!

# ESL-RD

One day elfins kam to a villis  
and peopl got skind and gravt wutin.  
The peopl ros and spurs at the eleftins.  
The eleftins <sup>tu</sup> got skind and rut the peopl.  
~~pe~~ Sum uv the eleftins run a way  
and swim peopl run a way and mur  
peopl stop runing and trd daek and  
hupt and the eleftins run daek to  
and hupt the eleftins.



# Writing profiles: RD vs. No-RD



# What have we learned from the research that can inform practitioners, parents, and decision makers about the identification of ESL who might have a reading disability (RD)?

- ❑ Same % of ESLs and EL1 are dyslexic
- ❑ The overall profiles L2 and EL1 dyslexics are similar (except for oral language proficiency skills)
- ❑ Like monolinguals L2 learners classified as having difficulties in word level skills have difficulties with
  - ❑ word level skills: processing factors (e.g., phonological awareness, RAN, memory, auditory discrimination)
  - ❑ fluent reading and writing
  - ❑ reading comprehension

# What Clinicians and Educators Need to Know

## Do

- Assess the known predictors
- Assess in the L1 and L2 if possible
- Monitor progress and learning over time
- Look beyond language proficiency
- Provide direct instruction in reading skills
- Provide language enrichment opportunities
- Consider specific transfer from the L1
- Consider family background
- Consider development in siblings

## Do Not

- Delay assessment until OLP is “appropriate”
- Minimize importance of basic word recognition skills
- Assume persistent difficulties will “catch up” if ignored
- Rely on IQ to define RD among ESL learners
- Seek to establish a discrepancy to establish diagnosis
- Assume that persistent difficulties reflect “negative” transfer from the L1
- Use L1-based test norms

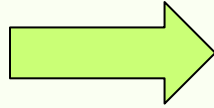
# Educational Implications

## Teaching L2s to read is **like** teaching L1s in many ways:

- Target developing automatic word recognition skills
- Aim for word text reading fluency
- Focus on academic language instruction
- Provide opportunities to read and write various age-appropriate materials
- Time on task
- Have high expectations
- Motivate
- Consider individual differences and adapt instruction

# Some examples of age and L1 and ESL appropriate techniques:

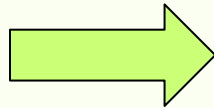
Stage 1



Jolly Phonics  
Synthetic phonics  
Cues for learning sight vocabulary  
Multiple sensory approaches  
Reading Mastery, &  
Language, vocabulary, literature...



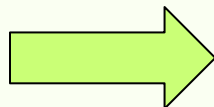
Stage 2



Synthetic phonics  
Reading Mastery  
Repeated Reading  
Cloze  
PHAST - Phonological and Strategy  
Training (Empower), &  
Language, vocabulary, literature...



Stage 3



Reading and Spelling Mastery  
Repeated Reading  
Cloze  
PHAST  
KWL - Know - Want - Learn  
Learning strategies  
Graphic Organizers  
Reciprocal Teaching, &  
Language, vocabulary, literature...

# Educational Implications

## Teaching L2s to read is **unlike** teaching L1s:

- ❑ Aim to enhance oral language skills
- ❑ Teach/enhance vocabulary, grammar, language comprehension - (beyond everyday skills, beyond “BICS”)
- ❑ Consider written and oral home language influences
- ❑ Automatic transfer of some language and literacy skills will occur, but some require explicit teaching
- ❑ Timely identification AND intervention is necessary; persistent reading problems are not going to go away
- ❑ Learning to read in 2 languages does not harm achievement
- ❑ Having well developed L1 reading and language skills is an asset that can help when learning to read L2

## Reading to ESLs in First Grade

### Explicit Teaching/The Art of Teaching Models skills and strategies

- Makes relationships overt
- Emphasizes distinctive features of new concepts
- Provides prompts
- Length of literacy activities is appropriate
- Adjusts own use of English during lesson

### Instruction Geared Toward Low Performers

- Achieves high level of response accuracy
- Ensures quality of independent practice
- Engages in ongoing monitoring of student understanding and performance
- Elicits responses from all students
- Modifies instruction for students as needed
- Provides extra instruction, practice and review
- Asks questions to ensure comprehension

### Sheltered English Techniques

- Uses visuals or manipulatives to teach content
- Provides explicit instruction in English
- Encourages students to give elaborate responses
- Uses gestures and facial expressions in teaching vocabulary and clarifying meaning of content

### Vocabulary Development

- Teaches difficult vocabulary prior to and during lesson
- Structures opportunities to speak English
- Provides systematic instruction to vocabulary development
- Engages students in meaningful interactions about text

# *So, What's so Special about Learning to Read in a Second Language?*

- It takes a long time
- Usually, it means learning to speak and read concurrently (unlike L1)
- Some elements and processes are common across L1, L2, L3...
- Depending on specific features of the spoken and written L1 and L2, certain elements may be more challenging to L2 learners from a given linguistic background
- Learning to read in L2 does not affect negatively reading in L1 - the opposite is true
- Having L1 reading skills can be an asset when learning to read L2
- Reading in two languages helps when learning a third

- What works for L1 works for L2
- Some beliefs about L2 are supported but others are not
- Cultural differences matter but are not the only cause for reading difficulties

Consider:

- individual differences
- parental education
- poor system expectations & biases
- Length of time in Canada
- SES

# Policy Implications

- Eligibility for ESL status and support
- Policies that reflect different L2 contexts
- Funding implications
- Professional training
- All teachers need to be trained about L2 learning



# Where to Next?

- What about reading academic texts?
- What about older students?
- What about newcomers whose education has been interrupted?

# Thanks to:

## Invaluable Funding Support-

- Social Sciences Research Council of Canada
- Transfer Grants - Ontario Ministry of Education
- University of Toronto



## Graduate Students (Former and Current)

Mahshid Azimi-Bolourian  
Dana (David) Shafman  
Fataneh Farnia  
Maureen Jean  
Emiko Koyama  
Adele Lafrance  
Kate Ndlovu  
Gloria Ramirez  
Barbara Schuster  
Zohreh Yaghoub-Zadeh  
Lesly Wade-Woolley  
Min Wang



Thank you.

[egeva@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:egeva@oise.utoronto.ca)

# Accuracy of teacher assessments of ESL who are at-risk for reading disability

## Steps

1. Teacher nominations of at-risk/not at-risk
2. Teacher ratings
3. Objective designation based on word level skills, RAN, PA

