

Using Read Naturally Curriculum to Help Students Improve Fluency and/or CASAS levels

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Teaching Context

I'm a lead teacher in a large suburban ESL program that offers day and evening classes. Average attendance is about 80 students every morning and 60 each evening. The ESL day classes are divided into 4 levels, with an additional class for pre-literate beginning students. Each class has 20 to 30 enrolled students. Students are tested with the CASAS and on that basis are placed in levels. Level 1 has students who score up to 200 on a 31 or 32 on the CASAS test. Level 2 has students scoring from 201 to 210 on the 33 or 34 B CASAS test.

Morning students attend class 3 1/2 hours a day 5 days a week. Our quarters are 12 weeks long and we retest students every 6 weeks or twice a quarter. Students average 75 to 100 hours of class time between tests.

Some students show progress after 6 weeks of class with most showing progress at 12 weeks. When level 2 students score 211 or higher on the CASAS, they are able to move up to the next level. There are, however, some students that plateau and are stuck at level 2.

The Problem

We have a constant stream of new students that want to join our classes. If students stay in any one level for more than a quarter, it starts a logjam that makes it harder to serve all new students waiting to enter the program. It's impossible to predict which students will show a significant improvement in the next round of testing from a CASAS score alone. It's also impossible to diagnose any specific weaknesses that a student might have in learning to read English. A slow reading rate (fluency) may be one weakness inhibiting faster progress to the next level.

Research Questions

1. Is it possible by testing reading fluency to predict a level 2 student's ability to show progress on the CASAS test?
2. Do reading fluency test results for level 2 students correlate in any way with CASAS results?
3. Does adding one-to-one reading fluency instruction for level 2 students with the Read Naturally materials actually help these students improve their fluency and/or their CASAS scores?

Data Collection

1. The students in the Metro North level 2 Intensive ESL class were CASAS tested prior to starting on April 5th, 2004.
2. Eighteen Level 2 students were individually tested to determine reading fluency with grade level 1.5 materials in the Read Naturally Series during the first 2 weeks of class.
3. Eight of the lowest scoring students were put in the Read Naturally tutored group and given an additional 30 minutes to 1 hour per week of 1-to-1 fluency practice for the next 8 weeks.
4. The ten fastest reading students were put in the control group.
5. Tutored students were retested for reading fluency at the end of the quarter in June.
6. All students were retested with the CASAS at the end of the quarter.

Data Analysis

I compared initial and final reading fluency rates for the students who received extra tutoring to see how much they improved. I compared initial and final CASAS test scores to determine overall progress to the next benchmark by all the students. I also used the initial reading rate from the control group for comparison with tutored group. Finally, I compared the control group's progress toward the next benchmark with progress by the tutored students.

Findings

Eight students were initially chosen for tutoring because their oral fluency was low. Six of these remained at the end of the project. Two of the students moved out of state. The control group was also reduced from 10 to 7 by student departures.

For 13 level 2 students who completed the quarter, initial reading fluency scores ranged from 22 to 73 words per minute. This is quite a large difference when compared with a range on the CASAS 33 or 34 from 200 to 210. It also seems clear that variation in reading fluency didn't directly correlate to the CASAS score. The line for CASAS scores stays relatively steady while the fluency rates rise and fall.

Fluency instruction with Read Naturally was given to low fluency students. The goal was to see if tutoring with Read Naturally would improve the students reading fluency and if that would allow them to pass the benchmark score of 211 on the CASAS. The average reading rate for these 6 low fluency students was 46.5 words per minute.

This compared to 66.6 words per minute average reading fluency in the control group.

The posttests for the tutored group showed their average reading speed increased from 46 words per minute (wpm) to 54 wpm as seen on the following chart. This rate was still well below the average rate of 66 wpm for the control group.

The tutored students began the quarter with an average CASAS score of 202 and scored an average 208 at the end of the research project.

The control group started slightly higher at an average 204 score and ended even higher at 212.

Since 211 is a CASAS benchmark used by our program to decide when students are ready to move up to the next level, the test scores created the following results. Of students receiving supplemental tutoring with Read Naturally, only two scored well enough to move up to the next class. Of the control group, five of the seven scored well enough to move up.

Conclusions

Research Question 1: Is it possible by testing reading fluency to predict a level 2 student's ability to show progress on the CASAS test?

Based on our experience it is possible to predict this. The Tutored group, which pre-tested at a lower oral fluency rate, made less progress on the CASAS than the Control group with higher oral fluency rates. With supplemental tutoring they were able to increase at 75% of the rate of faster readers, with an increase of 6 points on the CASAS after 3 months, compared with 8 points. It seems that students with slower oral reading rates can be expected to progress more slowly as measured by their CASAS scores.

There seems also to be a *minimum oral fluency* rate necessary for students to pass the benchmark 211 score on the CASAS, which is approximately 60 wpm. None of the tutored students reading less than 60 wpm at the end of the quarter passed the CASAS benchmark, while 2 of the 3 who were reading more than 60 wpm passed the benchmark. Five of the seven students in the control group who were reading 59 wpm or higher passed the benchmark.

Research Question 2: Do reading fluency test results for level 2 students correlate in any way with CASAS results?

When students score between 200 and 210 on the CASAS, it seems natural to assume that their ability to read is within a limited range. To see oral reading rates from 22 words per minute at the low end to 73 at the high end was surprising. This was a much larger difference in ability than anticipated. The goal of putting students with similar CASAS in the same class was to create a group with similar skills; however, there seems little correlation between reading fluency and CASAS scores at this level.

Research Question 3: Does adding one-to-one reading fluency instruction for level 2 students with the Read Naturally materials actually help these students improve their fluency and/or their CASAS scores?

Read Naturally probably helps students to increase their oral fluency. All of the tutored students showed an increase in fluency after tutoring. The average increase was from 46.5 to 54.5 wpm. They also showed a marked improvement on their CASAS scores of 6 points, though it wasn't enough to allow them to pass the CASAS benchmark and move up to the next level.

Staffing problems limited the number of tutoring sessions to a maximum of 8, and on average, students had only 6.33 due to absence on one of days tutoring was offered, since students were only given tutoring during their regularly scheduled computer time. It's certainly possible that with 12 sessions these students might have received enough drill and practice to allow them read faster than 60 wpm.

Next Steps

While these limited results can only be suggestive, they are enough to convince us to continue to use Read Naturally as a supplement to the ESL curriculum. The computerized version of the Read Naturally program will soon be available in our computer lab. Students will be able to use it at least twice a week. The number of Read Naturally lessons they can complete in one quarter will dramatically increase. I believe that this will allow our Level 2 students to increase their reading fluency and ultimately make it possible for more of them to move up to Level 3 at the end of a 12 week session.