

Systematic Phonics and Fluency Instruction

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Teaching Context

At the Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning in St. Paul, Minnesota, I teach in and coordinate the English Language Learning department, which serves three levels of adult non-native-English speaking learners – from high beginning (Level 2) to high intermediate (Level 4), or learners who score between 190 and 220 on the CASAS reading instrument.

The Problem

Those of us who work with these ELL students have had concerns that the lack of a solid foundation of phonics/phonemic awareness seems to hold some learners back from progressing in their English language development. It is also believed that this lack of a phonics foundation undermines learners' ability/willingness to take some risks. Without the proper tools, these learners are more intimidated, unsure and unwilling to forge ahead into new learning territory. They lack confidence and seem to have to make too many uninformed guesses in the course of their language learning experience.

Teachers in the ELL department are encouraged to approach phonics to some degree within the curriculum, but it's not always done, and when it is, it is often in a haphazard fashion. Some learners can and do benefit from at least some attention to phonics instruction because they have enough experience or education to apply what they are learning to what they already know. However, there are a number of learners for whom this more random approach to phonics instruction is woefully inadequate. These learners need a more comprehensive, systematic, well-organized and consistent phonics instructional program.

The issue is, then, whether/how a more thorough and systematic approach to teaching phonics within our ELL program would impact our learners' reading skills and progress. I have believed for some time that the lack of a solid foundation of phonics knowledge has been a real obstacle for some of our learners. Thus, this research project was conducted to learn whether and how an intensive phonics and fluency instructional program would impact our learners' reading skills and confidence.

Research Question:

What happens to learners' reading comprehension, decoding and fluency skills as a result of a systematic phonics and fluency instructional program?

In contrast to the more random nature of phonics instruction our learners currently get, the participants in this research project were involved in very structured phonics instruction and practice. They also received regular and systematic practice in reading sight words and sight phrases, as well as practice with reading short stories at their independent or instructional reading level and taking short comprehension quizzes.

As a result of taking part in this class, I expected learners' knowledge of phonics concepts, their ability to decode words and their reading fluency to increase to some degree. I also expected that the enhancement of these reading abilities would positively impact their reading comprehension ability, but I wasn't sure to

what degree. Would a one-grade level improvement within the relatively short time frame of this particular class be realistic? Time and experience would tell.

In the early planning stages of this project, I asked teachers of Level 3 and Level 4 in our department to think about which of their learners seemed to struggle with reading development, perhaps as a result of a weak foundation of phonics knowledge and awareness. Fourteen learners were identified from four different ELL classes and invited to start the phonics class, set to begin on March 15, 2004. Of the 14 learners identified for the class, six were included in the research. Three did not start the class, and the other 5 were not included because of missing classes or missing assessments. The class met three times per week, one hour per day, for ten weeks – for a total of 30 hours of instruction.

Data Collection

In the first few weeks of my contact with learners in this research project, from about mid-February to mid-March, I met with learners individually to conduct reading comprehension and decoding assessments. The standardized instruments used for this are from Basic Reading Inventory: Pre-Primer Through Grade Twelve and Early Literacy Assessments by Jerry L. Johns and published by Kendall/Hunt Publishing in Dubuque, Iowa. I also conducted assessments to measure reading fluency and knowledge/awareness of basic phonics concepts. These two assessments were of my own creation.

In summary, the following assessments were conducted prior to - or shortly after - the start of the class:

- Reading Comprehension (K-12 standardized instrument by grade level)
- Graded Word Lists (K-12 standardized instrument to measure decoding skills by grade level)
- Reading Fluency Check (Tape-recorded – 190 word passage at lower ELL 3 Level of difficulty and done later in the project - in early April - with those w regular attendance; included an analysis of the number of miscues and the reading time)
- Basic Phonics Assessment (Teacher-constructed instrument to measure knowledge of vowels, consonants and blends – involved listening/writing skills at letter, word and sentence levels)

Generally, the weekly three hours of class –meeting for one hour on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays - was structured to include about one hour of fluency practice in which we used the “Great Leaps Sight Phrases” and two sets of sight words – *The 150 Most Frequent Words* according to the American Heritage Word Frequency Book and the *Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary 220*. We also worked with many example words and sentences of the vowels, consonants, blends, phonograms or contractions we were studying at that time. Learners would sometimes practice with a partner, and we would also practice as a whole group doing choral reading as well as listening and repeating exercises.

About ten percent of the class time was spent reading basic, short fiction stories of about one-half page in length in order to apply phonetic principles and get practice with reading comprehension. The usual procedure was that learners would read the material silently, then listen as the material was read to them, and finally, practice reading the material aloud with a partner.

Following the reading and a short discussion, there would be a short quiz of about nine or ten questions – some were true/false, but most questions involved learners having to provide short answers. The results of two of these quizzes were kept and recorded as part of the evaluation of this project, while the results of others were returned to learners and were used for follow-up reading and discussion.

These basic readings were carefully chosen from ELL 2 or lower ELL 3 reading material – levels that were considered to be at the participants’ independent or instructional reading levels.

Finally, about 60 percent of the class was spent covering the following phonics topics:

- Review of consonant sounds
- Short vowel sounds
- Short vowel spelling patterns – CVC and CVCC
- Consonant endings
- Consonant sound rules
- Two-letter digraphs
- Two-letter beginning blends
- Three-letter beginning blends
- Ending blends
- Short vowel phonograms
- Long vowel phonograms
- Common contractions

In class, the instructional approach to each of these concepts generally involved the following procedures:

- Learners received a teacher-produced worksheet (of consistent format) which explained the concept and offered examples.
- Together, the instructor and the learners *read* about and *discussed* the concept and reviewed examples – at the word and sentence levels.
- Learners would *listen* to the sounds and examples as words and sentences were modeled.
- Learners would *say* and *write* word and sentence examples of the phonics concept.
- Learners would *listen to, say* and *write* more examples of the concept in the form of a short quiz at the conclusion of the lesson.
- The quizzes were collected, scored and recorded to be used in the evaluation of the learners' performance in the class as well as the evaluation of the effectiveness of the class. The scored quizzes were also shown to learners for follow-up review and discussion of the phonics concept.

Towards the end of the class/research project, I conducted a learner questionnaire with participants to learn more about the following:

- Their education background
- Their knowledge and current use of their native language
- The length of time they've been in the United States
- The length of time they've studied English
- Their current use of English
- Their perceived obstacles to learning
- Their perception of their progress
- What's still difficult for them – with regard to learning English
- What they would like to do more of in the future – to help them improve their skills

At the conclusion of the class, those in attendance completed the Basic Phonics Assessment (post-test). A few who were not in attendance did this assessment with me individually. Also completed individually, when it was possible, were the following:

- Reading Comprehension (K-12 standardized instrument by grade level)

- Graded Word Lists (K-12 standardized instrument to measure decoding skills by grade level)
- Reading Fluency Check (Tape-recorded – 190 word passage at lower ELL 3 Level of difficulty, and done later in the project - in early April - with those w regular attendance; included an analysis of the number of miscues and the reading time)

Data Analysis

To organize and begin analyzing the information gained in the class/project, an overview sheet entitled, “Organization of Information for Research Project” was developed on which the details of the performance of each of six participants was thoroughly delineated. This information includes the participant’s attendance, results of pre-class inventories, coursework/quiz results, results of post-class inventories, the learner literacy questionnaire and any other pertinent information related to the participant and his/her background, performance and feedback.

Once the information gathered about each participant was recorded in an organized fashion, I then arranged the most important quantitative data for all six participants onto a chart. It was then easier to start making comparisons of the pre and post class data for each of the learners. Using this chart, I began to identify some conclusions the data were indicating, as well as some questions which remained.

Finally, based on the results of the activities just outlined, for each participant I wrote a summary of the results of the assessment instruments, the learner’s feedback, my observations and evaluation as well as some suggestions for future learning.

Findings

To begin summarizing the key findings of this research project, four participants had an attendance rate of 70% or greater, one participant attended 59% of the class time, and one participant attended 37% of the class time. For the two participants with lower attendance, the pre and post reading comprehension and fluency measurements were incomplete.

Regarding the four more active participants:

- Three increased **reading comprehension** ability by one grade level; one remained the same;
- With regard to **word recognition/decoding** ability, one remained at the same grade level, one increased one grade level, one increased three grade levels and one increased four grade levels;
- In terms of **reading fluency** on the post-class measurement, all four read with fewer miscues – an average of 13 fewer, while three of the four spent more time reading the passage – an average of 27 seconds longer, and one read the passage in less time – 15 seconds.
- On the post-test to check **basic phonics knowledge**, three participants increased their score by an average of 16%. One participant, a Basic Phonics student, had not completed the pre-test.

Regarding the two less active participants:

- With regard to **word recognition/decoding** skills, the participant with 59% attendance increased her skill by two grade levels, and the participant with 37% attendance increased her skill by one grade level.

- On the post-test to check **basic phonics knowledge**, the participant with 59% attendance increased her score by 14%; the participant with 37% attendance increased her score by 18%.

Of all the participants, the years of formal education in their native countries ranged from none to 11 years; and the average length of time each had studied English in the United States ranged from eight months to two and a half years.

The decoding skills of the participants improved at a greater rate than reading comprehension.

All participants increased their knowledge/awareness of phonics concepts as a result of the class, but this didn't result in an increase in reading comprehension skills for all.

All participants increased their reading accuracy on the oral reading fluency measure, but all but one took longer to read the passage in the post reading. This may be due to the fact the participants were more aware of the sounds and/or wanted to read more slowly and carefully in order to enhance their performance.

See Appendix A for notes regarding each of the six participants:

Conclusions

In conclusion, I feel this research project was just what the facilitators had told us it would likely be: challenging, engaging, somewhat exasperating, but rewarding and enlightening as well. I have always believed that teaching very specific phonics skills to adult ELL learners in a very organized fashion would certainly impact their reading skills, just as much research has shown it clearly positively impacts the skills of children learning to read. While I thought that if all of us involved in this project worked hard and really applied ourselves, the impact would be positive, I didn't expect the gains to be as significant as they were, especially in word recognition/decoding and fluency, and especially with an average attendance in the class of about 18 hours! While these learners also had other English and reading instruction during this period, I feel these greater gains were the result of the intensive, interactive and responsive nature of the phonics class.

One specific factor which I still have questions about is the degree to which intensive phonics instruction may impact reading comprehension skills when learners are given more time in such an endeavor. While three out of four of the more active participants did make a gain of one grade level as measured on the K-12 standardized instrument, was that gain perhaps a result of also having been in their regular ELL class during this period? What about reading comprehension gains as measured by the TABE or CASAS? Those instruments were not used as pre and post measures for reading comprehension in this project. Would gains also be expected on these instruments, especially if learners spend more time studying and applying phonics concepts?

Thus, the intensive ongoing phonics class I am planning to conduct is basically an extension of the practitioner research project, where past learning will be applied to a new situation with the ongoing objective being the improved quality and effectiveness of adult ELL programming. As a part of this phonics class, I will conduct a comparative study be done with learners taking the phonics class and a control group of the same level of learners not involved in the phonics class in order to compare word recognition, fluency and reading comprehension gains.

Next Steps

I plan to develop a thorough, but manageable, scope and sequence of a foundational phonics course to be provided ELL learners who show a particular need in this area. The recommended manageable course

length would involve a 12-week (one trimester) session in which learners would meet five times per week for one hour each day for a total of 60 hours.

To determine which learners have a particular need for the intensive foundational phonics course, I will refine my basic phonics assessment tool which will measure a learner's ability to *hear*, *write* and *produce* English vowels, consonants and blends. There is also a need to produce clear guidelines to determine which learners would likely benefit the most from the intensive phonics course.

I will organize - and have available for ELL teachers - basic phonics reference information and sample lessons / worksheets following specific recommended scope and sequence of basic

phonics instruction. ALL ELL instructors would be expected to approach phonics instruction as part of their reading program, so that ALL learners would get some basic – although not intensive – phonics exposure and instruction. This practice, too, would allow instructors to continually monitor their learners' needs and progress related to phonics knowledge, with the expectation that there would be ongoing recommendations for the intensive phonics class.

In addition, learners would be offered materials in which they could study and practice basic phonics principles independently. This information will be included in the Learner Handbook (already in existence), which contains a lot of other useful reference information to promote independent learning.

In the phonics class, specific decoding, fluency and comprehension practice must be included in order to provide learners with the opportunity to apply what they're learning to a context. This practice will help enhance retention and the further understanding and application of concepts.

Here are some general instructional guidelines for the intensive phonics class:

- Direct phonics instruction: 60% of class time
 - Fluency practice and application: 20% of class time
 - Comprehension/contextual application 20% of class time
- Learners need to take pre-tests in specific phonics skills/knowledge, comprehension skills, decoding and fluency.
 - To measure the comprehension skills, the TABE, Level E is recommended because the content is more relevant and familiar to adult learners, and it is easier to administer.
 - Instructors need to keep a very specific record of what was done and how much time was spent on the various activities – to continually strive to improve content and delivery.
 - Learners need to be given good support materials and encouraged to study, practice and apply concepts outside of class.
 - Instructors need to seek lots of feedback from learners – what they like, don't like, want to try, how they feel they're doing – and record the findings.
 - Teachers of this class need to meet frequently to discuss issues, concerns, suggestions, etc. If only one teacher is conducting such a class, he/she needs to do a lot of independent reflection as well as regularly meet with his/her coordinator or supervisor.
 - Learners need to take post-tests in specific phonics skills/knowledge, as well as reading comprehension, decoding and fluency skills.

Participant # 1: 59% attendance

This participant stated that she can “feel” she is making progress in her reading development when she is actually reading – she feels more comfortable and more confident. While her decoding skills and knowledge of phonics concepts improved as a result of the class, she still struggles with comprehension – she took a post-test for reading comprehension which showed she’s reading at the Grade One level.

Participant # 2: 78% attendance

This participant’s knowledge/awareness of phonics concepts increased 21%, but her word recognition/decoding ability remained at the same grade level. Her reading comprehension ability improved by one grade level. Her post fluency measure still contained a high number of miscues; while her self-perception is improving, she is still very self-conscious and unsure of herself and her skills. She works full-time and is raising four children with her husband; she lacks the time for practice and says she only works on her skills at school.

Participant # 3: 37% attendance

This participant works full-time and said she has little time for practice outside of class. She came to the class with probably the lowest level of knowledge/awareness of phonics concepts, and increased that knowledge by 18% as shown on the post-test. She states, however, that spelling is still very hard for her and that she is still quite unsure of the sound and symbol relationships in English. She also stated that seeing, hearing and writing words over and over helps her to understand and remember phonics concepts.

Participant # 4: 70% attendance

This participant is quite a good reader – she had only 11 miscues on the fluency post-test. She also increased her phonics knowledge/awareness score by 14% and went up three grade levels on the word recognition/decoding measure. In spite of all this improvement, however, her reading comprehension score remained the same. She has a fairly strong phonics foundation and good decoding skills. This leads to the conclusion that the source of her lack of reading comprehension improvement probably is related to a combination of limited experience with and exposure to a variety of reading materials, which keeps her knowledge of vocabulary and concepts limited as well.

Participant # 5: 74% attendance

This participant received no formal education in her native country and has been studying English in the United States for about one year. The results of her post-tests showed remarkable gains – her miscues in the oral fluency measure were reduced by 40%, her phonics knowledge/awareness increased by 13%, her reading comprehension ability increased by one grade level, and her word recognition/decoding skills increased by four grade levels. This is after just 20 hours in the intensive phonics class.

At the time of the class, she was working part-time and stated that she spent quite a bit of time outside of class working on her English skills. She also stated that the class was helping her because she felt she could speak more comfortably and read more quickly. She also said she knew more sounds and symbols and was better able to make more “connections” in the English language.

Participant # 6: 74% attendance

This participant expressed in detail that he has experienced a great deal of frustration in the past with regard to his struggle to figure out the “system” of the English language and learn to read better. His speaking and listening comprehension skills have been quite good for some time – he managed to get to

and reasonably handle ELL Level 4 content, but it has been a real struggle for him. He said he has learned to read English up to this point by sight and memorization, but he also said he knew there was a system and a “key” to learning the language, just as there was a distinct system which had helped him learn Arabic at a young age. Therefore, he was very motivated to take this phonics class and he performed quite well in the class – his average score of the class quizzes was 82%, among the highest in the class.

The results of the post-testing included a decrease in his oral reading miscues of 32%, an increase of his word recognition/decoding skills of two grade levels, and even though he didn’t take a pre-test to measure his specific phonics knowledge/awareness, his post-test result was 83%, again, among the highest in the class. As he was completing this phonics post-test, the speed with which he completed the tasks and the confidence he displayed also clearly indicated an enhancement of his skills and his perception of his abilities.

With regard to reading comprehension skills, on the measurement used he was functioning at a high frustration level on the Grade One passage, and at the conclusion of the class, he was functioning at the independent/instructional level at Grade One.

In a conversation at the conclusion of the last assessment for the class, he said that before he took the class “everything was confusing”, and now he can read and write more quickly and confidently. He has clearly unlocked some doors for himself, and with more time and hard work, his ongoing application of phonics knowledge/awareness as well as his enhanced self-confidence ought to help facilitate the improvement of his reading comprehension skills.