

What Happens To ESL Learners' Phonemic Awareness When I Teach Phonemic Awareness with Phonics Instruction?

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Teaching Context

The teaching context for this study was a zero level ESL class. The participants were placed in this class based on a 0 or 0/1 BEST assessment given by the registrar in the consortium. Orally, the range of experience with the English language ranged from no words to, in the case of some, BEST speaking scores of almost one. Those that were literate, or semi-literate in their native language generally did not stay in this class long. They were usually already scoring in the low 180's on CASAS reading. Soon they picked up enough oral English to progress to beginning ESL. Those who were pre-literate or literate in a non-alphabetic language usually had scores on CASAS reading of less than 180. They progressed much more slowly since they had no or limited knowledge of the English alphabet. Often, they were also slow in penmanship because their motor skills had not been developed for handwriting. Consequently, those among that group often stayed in this class for some time.

During this study, this class met four mornings week from 9 a.m. to 12 noon. The first half of the class, from 9:00 to 10:30, focused on oral acquisition and basic communication around survival needs. During this portion of the class, visual acquisition of basic living skills was also taught in line with items on CASAS reading tests 27 and 28. These skills included visual discrimination of letters and words, recognition of signs for traffic, restrooms, bus transportation, and prices on food items. During the second portion of the class, 10:40 to noon, reading as the primary focus was taught. The overall objective of this zero level class was to get learners speaking to BEST 1 and reading above a score of 180 on CASAS.

The size of this class was small and the number in class at any given time was usually six to eight people. As in many adult programs, we had open enrollment and learners needed to drop out for personal, family, transportation, or employment reasons. During the time of this research, five individuals were in my class long enough for pre and post assessment. Considering each as a case study provided the best information.

Their real names were not used. Each was given a common American first name for reference in this report. Further information is provided in the report about each participant. Information about these individuals when they entered the program was as follows: Case study number one was Gail. Gail came from Gambia and had been in the U.S. for only one or two months. Study number two was a Somali woman called Sally. Sally had been in the U.S. for about four months. Susan was study number three. She also came from Somalia and had been in the U.S. for six months. Case study number

four was Tim. Tim came from Togo and had been in the U.S. for one month. Rita was case study number five. She came from Russia and had been here about one month.

The Problem

In general, pre-literate, non-literate, or semi-literate ESL learners have limited, if any, exposure to written language. For many, learning the English alphabet is a first step. This includes working to visually learn the letters, visually discriminate between letters, memorize the order of the alphabet, and print upper and lower case letters. Another interference is that many of the learners have no understanding that the words in any language can be broken down into a series of sounds. Those that have had some formal education in their native country may have some phonemic awareness, but certainly don't have English phonemic awareness. All have difficulty identifying the sounds of English when they hear them. Many pre-literate or non-literate ESL learners, have seemingly no awareness that written text conveys meaning. The problem, then, for ESL pre-literate, non-literate, and semi-literate learners becomes not only teaching these learners to read, but teaching them to read without their having had an oral English language vocabulary.

Research Question

Current reading research indicates that alphabetic (phonemic awareness and phonics) is a crucial component in the reading process. This finding, primarily from K-12 and ABE fields, led the research question: **What happens to ESL learners' phonemic awareness when they are taught phonemic awareness with phonics instruction?**

To study this research question, the sounds of the basic consonants and the long and short vowels were taught. The learners were expected to make improvements in phonemic awareness and English phonics in general. The strategies included practice in hearing and saying consonant and vowel sounds based on pages one and two of Phonics: Listening and Fluency published by the Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota ABE Supplemental Services, 2004, by Linda Strand and Marn Frank. These pages provide useful visual examples of the basic alphabet with simple enough text for even beginning ESL students to understand.

This practice of learning the whole alphabet was followed-up daily by concentration on a single letter, or a group of letters, such as *bcd*. These lessons were based on the texts Reading for Today published by Steck Vaughn and Sounds Easy by Sharron Bassano and published by Alta Book Center. These texts were particularly useful because of the visual representation of each word used for consonant and vowel examples. Not having an oral vocabulary from which to draw, the English language learners benefited from attaching meaning to new words.

After the words had been written on the board and the learners had copied them on their worksheets, the class practiced decoding the words. Part of the teaching strategy

was to go over each word phonetically so the learners could hear the sound corresponding to each letter. Following this, the learners were given dictation of words phonetically to gain practice at hearing the sounds and writing the corresponding letter. The words were again listed on the board so the learners could check their own work.

In order to add context to the meaning of the vocabulary and allow opportunity for more complex decoding, simple present or present progressive tense sentences were provided for the learners to copy and practice decoding. Learners, starting with the more accomplished readers, were offered chances to decode the sentences orally in class. Some sentences, once decoded, were also practiced in chunks for increased fluency. Depending on time and the capability of the class, learners practiced reading in pairs, or by guided reading, what they had copied. Accuracy in copying letters, punctuation, and capitalization was also checked. Looking to see that learners understood the difference between a line and a sentence and that words had been copied in correct sequence was part of the lesson. Some short stories featuring words containing the consonant or vowel in the lesson were also provided as an extension activity for those more advanced in the class. Of the twelve steps of a typical lesson listed below, the first seven would be considered the phonemic awareness portion.

1. Review sounds of alphabet
2. Goal of lesson - practice P and B
3. Give the vocabulary for the pictures
4. Learners copy the words
5. Learners practice decoding the words
6. Teacher goes over the words phonetically
7. Learners try to take dictation based on sounds
8. Words again provided so learners can check
9. Some words provided in sentences for context understanding
10. Learners copy sentences-teacher checks for correct order of letters, words, spaces, punctuation, etc.
11. Follow-up with guided or paired reading, fluency practice
12. Simple short story provided for higher level readers

The time allowed for the reading block was one hour and fifteen minutes. Of the reading block time, approximately one half hour was dedicated to phonemic awareness instruction. The half hour of phonemic awareness instruction was for four days a week for up to eighteen hours, or 36 days.

Data Collection

To begin, the learners in this group had been assessed by our registrar with the BEST and in CASAS 27 reading. Since most in Minnesota are somewhat familiar with the BEST and CASAS, those assessments are not described. Because Adult Options in Education is piloting the reading assessment, Let's Go Learn, that assessment was included in this study. Learners were also given the informal phonemic awareness

assessment provided in The Adult Reading Toolkit (ART) published by the Learning Disability Association of Minnesota (Appendix A). A discussion of each assessment follows.

The measurement tool, Let's Go Learn, is a reading assessment being piloted by the Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota. This assessment has a series of six subtests as follows: High-Frequency Word, Word Recognition, Phonics, Oral Vocabulary, Spelling, and Reading Comprehension. Appendix B is page four of the teacher's report explaining those subtests further. The assessment is completely on line and thus far has shown to be very user friendly. The learners at the zero ESL class level do get some time at a computer so knew how to use a mouse and select multiple choice.

Having been designed for K-12, the results are shown in grade level equivalencies. Appendix C shows page 3 of the teacher version of a learner's report. Grade level attainments for the six subtests are listed. Initial scores for most learners in this study were in the mid-kindergarten grade level. Also shown on that page is a graph visually indicating if the learner is below, at, or above grade level. Because these learners are adults, a grade level of 13.9 was entered on all assessments done and since this class was so low, the bar graph indicated grade level skills much below the three grade allowance. Feedback from the teachers using the assessment included suggestions to adjust for adult, low-level and beginning English Language Learners (ELL).

A third interesting feature of the report is a graph (Appendix D; page 8 of the teacher's report) which lists components of phonics mastered. Here again, none of my learners had initially shown any mastery of phonics skills. The graph starts at long and short vowel mastery and this class was still working on mastery of basic consonants. The teachers in our program have suggested that some lower level phonics skills, perhaps even a table for all the consonants, would be very useful for all ELL.

The informal phonemic awareness assessment I gave the learners (Appendix A), is a suggested teaching tool contained in the ART. Of the eight different components of that assessment, the first five were given. The recommendation on that assessment advises stopping at five if weaknesses are found. Of those five, the first component of the assessment asks learners to tell the first consonant sound, or letter, in words such as bed or hat. The second item asks learners to identify the first sound, or letter in a series of three words such as, red, run, rag. The third item asks learners to identify the ending sound different in a series of words such as cab, tab, mad. For the fourth item, learners are asked to say a word after hearing the individual sounds of a word. An example is /h/+ow/+s/. And in the fifth item, learners need to count the number of sounds in a word after listening to the individual sounds. Learners hear /f/+l/+a/+g/ and need to respond four.

To summarize pre-test results, most of the learners' sub-tests indicated mid-kindergarten grade level for Let's Go Learn. On the ART phonemic awareness, pre-test percentages correct on the first five assessment areas ranged from 20% to 75%. Post-test results for Let's Go Learn indicated most still in the mid-kindergarten level for all sub-

tests. Post-test percentages correct on the ART phonemic awareness assessment ranged from 50% to 95%.

Data Analysis

For the Let’s Go Learn Assessment a comparison was made between the pre and post-test grade levels on the six sub-tests (Appendix C). A comparison was also made on the pre and post-test graphs in the report prepared by Let’s Go Learn. Those graphs are the graphs which show deviation from the target grade (Appendix C) and the graph that shows if mastery has been achieved on the phonics sub-test (Appendix D).

For LDA’s informal Phonics Assessment, a comparison was made on the overall percentage of increase/decrease on the first five numbers of that assessment.

Data Collected by Case Study Gail

Let’s Go Learn Assessment

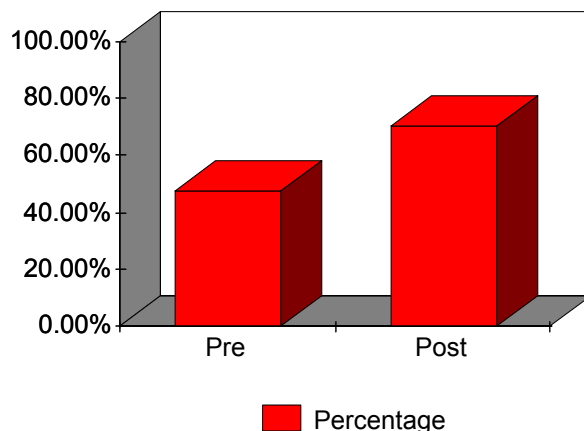
Sub-Test	Pre	Post
High Frequency Word	Mid-K	Low First
Word Recognition	Mid-K	Mid-K
Phonics	Mid-K	Mid-K
Oral Vocabulary	High First	High Second
Spelling	Mid-K	Mid-K
Reading Comprehension	Mid-K	Low First

LDA’s Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Sub-Test	Pre	Post	% Change
Initial Sound Identification	.5/4	3/4	+62.5%
Identification of Same First Sound	3/4	4/4	+25%
ID of Ending vowel and consonant	3/4	1/4	--50%
ID of sound/word	0/4	3/4	+75%
Counting Sounds Heard	3/4	3/4	-0-
Overall Percentage Correct	47.5%	70%	+22.5%

Visual representation of Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Percentage for Pre/Post Scores--Gail



Gail, a woman in her late twenties, came from Gambia. Her native language is Mandanko and she came to our program in October 2004 after having been in the U.S. for only about a month and a half. She had no English, her BEST score was zero, and her entry CASAS score was 172 form 27R. She reported having three years of education. Her entry goals were to improve English skills and to enter employment. Of the many very low learners we have had enter our program, she seemed particularly ill at ease. Her expression revealed a very real culture shock. She spent about two months working one on one with a skilled para-professional in the program. Although she could use a pencil, her hand seemed stiff as though unaccustomed to using a pencil. In the computer lab, moving a mouse was new to her.

Gail maintained consistent attendance. Her participation rate for this study was 83.3%. She was very determined to learn to speak, read, and write English. Gail overcame the emotional burden of having to leave her three children in Gambia. She excelled and shortly after the completion of this study, advanced to beginning ESL with reading scores approaching 190 on the CASAS. At this writing, she had become employed part time, but still attended school during the day and one evening a week when she could. She was happy to have progressed in English so much thus far.

**Data Collected by Case Study
Sally**

Let's Go Learn Assessment

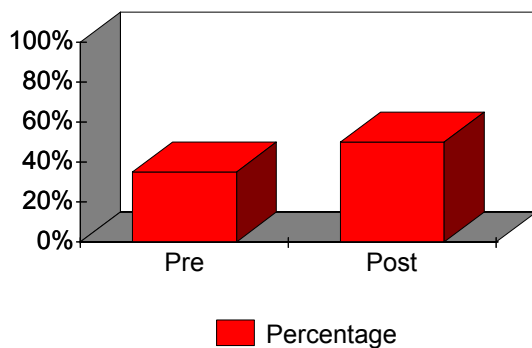
Sub-Test	Pre	Post
High Frequency Word	Mid-K	Mid-K
Word Recognition	Mid-K	Mid-K
Phonics	Mid-K	Mid-K
Oral Vocabulary	Mid-K	Mid-K
Spelling	Mid-K	Mid-K
Reading Comprehension	Mid-K	Mid-K

LDA's Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Sub-Test	Pre	Post	%Change
Initial Sound Identification	1/4	2/4	+25%
Identification of Same First Sound	4/4	3/4	--25%
ID of Ending vowel and consonant	1/4	1/4	--0--
ID of sound/word	0/4	0/4	--0--
Counting Sounds Heard	1/4	4/4	+75%
Overall Percentage Correct	35%	50%	+15%

Visual Representation of Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Percentage for Pre/Post Scores--Sally



Sally, a Somali woman in her forties, had been in the United States about four months when she started in our program in October of 2004. She indicated having three children under the age of eighteen. Sally's BEST score was one, but CASAS score was 153 on a 27R. No information was given about any formal education. Because she had some oral skills and some familiarity with the alphabet, she came into this class instead of

working with our para-professional one on one. Sally could form letters, but slowly and not always clearly. She understood the concept of repeating after the teacher quite well.

Sally missed school frequently because of health problems and because she and her husband have a child with cerebral palsy. Of the approximately thirty-six days in the study, she had attendance four days in a week only twice. Her participation rate was 63.8%.

Sally seemed to have a vision problem and often squinted. She tried glasses, but they didn't seem to help either. When given dictation on the sounds of the letters, she often did not hear the sound correctly. She participated well in class, but it was noticed that she responded verbally after she had heard other students respond. This could lead one to believe that she only repeated what she heard from the others rather than understanding what was requested. She had one on one tutoring when a volunteer was available, but did not seem to remember well.

At this writing, Sally was again missing school frequently. Her scores on CASAS rose to 174 on the 28R on her first post test. When given a lot of preparing before a CASAS test in April, she scored 182 on the 27R. When tested again in July without intensive review, she fell back down to a 174 on the 28R.

Data Collected by Case Study

Susan

Let's Go Learn Assessment

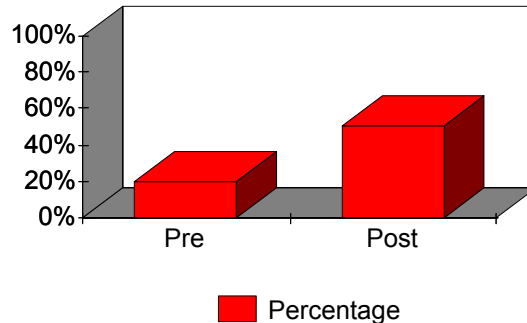
Sub-Test	Pre	Post
High Frequency Word	Mid-K	Mid-K
Word Recognition	Mid-K	Mid-K
Phonics	Mid-K	Mid-K
Oral Vocabulary	Mid-K	Mid-K
Spelling	Mid-K	Mid-K
Reading Comprehension	Mid-K	Mid-K

LDA's Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Sub-Test	Pre	Post	%Change
Initial Sound Identification	0/4	1/4	+25%
Identification of Same First Sound	1/4	4/4	+75%
ID of Ending vowel and consonant	2/4	3/4	+25%
ID of sound/word	0/4	0/4	--0--
Counting Sounds Heard	1/4	3/4	+50%
Overall Percentage Correct	20%	50%	+30%

Visual Representation of Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Percentage for Pre/Post Scores--Susan



Susan, a Somali woman in her forties, had been in the United States about six months when she started in our program in November of 2004. Her entry goals included improving English, entering employment and reducing public assistance. She had three children under the age of eighteen and was a single parent. Supplemental information on her entry reported that she had no previous education and that she was not literate in the Somali language. Also noted was that she needed some guidance to follow the reading test format. Her CASAS entry score was shown at 158 on a 27R.

Susan's attendance was usually two to three days a week with attendance at four days a week twice. Her participation percentage was 75%. Susan participated well in classes, but took a while to process. She often uttered words or partial words from the previous exercise before correctly saying the answer. When on English language software, it was noticed by our para-professional that she repeated well what she heard, but when the sound was taken away she made many mistakes. She often confused the letter or word in front of her with the word from the previous exercise. In class, unless special instructions were given for the others to remain quiet, she repeated what she heard the others answer. Susan wore glasses and seemed to struggle at times to determine the letters.

Susan's first post-test on the CASAS jumped to 174 on a 28R. After intensive review, a subsequent post-test, 27R, went to a 182. Recently, however, on another post-test without intensive review, she scored a 174 on a CASAS 27R. During this most recent post-test, it was observed on one test item that she focused on the number of the item rather than the content. She was not able to determine the number 13, but rather vacillated between calling it a 33 or a 31. She did well on several of the other items which she had seen in class many times.

**Data Collected by Case Study
Tim**

Let's Go Learn Assessment

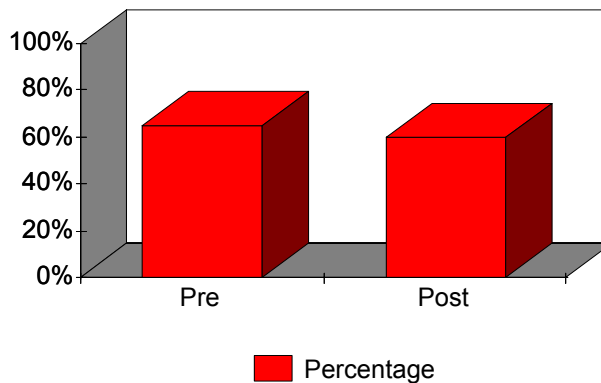
Sub-Test	Pre	Post
High-Frequency Word	Mid-K	Mid-K
Word Recognition	Mid-K	Mid-K
Phonics	Mid-K	Mid-K
Oral Vocabulary	Mid-K	Mid-K
Spelling	Mid-K	Mid-K
Reading Comprehension	Mid-K	Mid-K

LDA's Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Sub-Test	Pre	Post	%Change
Initial Sound Identification	2/4	2/4	-0-
Identification of Same First Sound	4/4	3/4	--25%
ID of Ending vowel and consonant	2/4	2/4	-0-
ID of sound/word	2/4	1/4	--25%
Counting Sounds Heard	3/4	4/4	+25%
Overall Percentage Correct	65%	60%	--5%

Visual Representation of Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Percentage of Pre/Post Scores--Tim



Tim, a 35 year old man, came from Togo Africa. When he entered our program he had been in the United States for about one month. His primary language was French.

He reported on entry that he did not have a high school diploma, but that he had had eight years of education. His goals were to improve his English skills and to obtain employment. Tim started with us in late November and had exceptional attendance through mid-January until he obtained employment with Marriott Hotels.

Tim was a very personable man with a pleasant appearance and that probably contributed to his getting a job in spite of fairly low English skills. After the end of January, his attendance dropped due to his employment. His hand writing was beautiful, but formed very slowly. Tim had obvious interference from French in learning the alphabet. His reading skills improved greatly along with his English speaking skills and he moved on to Beginning ESL before the conclusion of the 36 days of phonics instruction in this study. Since he was still in our program after the 36 days, he was post-test and included among the case studies. His participation rate was only 30.5%; he was able to attend only about one day a week by April.

Data Collected by Case Study

Rita

Let's Go Learn Assessment

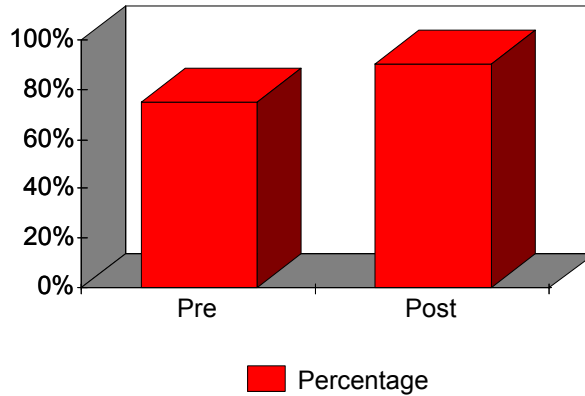
Sub-Test	Pre	Post
High-Frequency Word	Mid-K	Mid-K
Word Recognition	Mid-K	Mid-K
Phonics	Mid-K	Mid-K
Oral Vocabulary	Mid-K	High 2 nd
Spelling	Mid-K	Mid-K
Reading Comprehension	Mid-K	Mid-K

LDA's Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Sub-Test	Pre	Post	%Change
Initial Sound Identification	2/4	3/4	+25%
Identification of Same First Sound	4/4	4/4	-0-
ID of ending vowel and consonant	1/4	4/4	+75%
ID of sound/word	4/4	4/4	-0-
Counting Sounds Heard	4/4	4/4	-0-
Overall Percentage Correct	75%	95%	+20%

Visual Representation Phonemic Awareness Assessment

Percentage of Pre/Post Scores--Rita



Rita, a sixty-two year old woman from Russia, had the primary language of Russian. She came to us in early January and had been in the United States only a month at that time. Her goal was to improve English. She had four children, but all were older than eighteen. Her CASAS reading was over 180, but she was placed in Zero ESL because of such limited speaking of English. She reported that she had a high school diploma and attended ten years of education.

Rita had nice handwriting, wrote quite quickly, and even from her early days in class was able to follow seatwork expectations very well. Her academic background relative to the others in this study kept her at the head of the class. She could even be counted on to decode some previously unseen words. Because of lack of confidence, she was kept in the zero ESL class rather than advancing her in hopes that she would feel more comfortable. Rita was a pleasant lady who had excellent attendance until her daughter had to give up the family car to a brother who had obtained work. Rita dropped out from March 7 to April 20, a large portion of the instruction in this study. After obtaining bus transportation from the program, her attendance again became excellent. Her participation rate in the study was 38.8%. She had since gone on to beginning ESL even though her confidence was low. Eventually her strong academic skills put her so far ahead that she needed to go on.

Findings

First

From the Lets Go Learn Reading Assessment, only two learners, Gail and Rita, showed grade level gains on the six components. None of the learners showed grade level gains on the phonics sub test; the sub test of most interest in this study. Similarly, there were no gains for any learners on the graph and table available in the report. An interesting observation is that even the learners who showed increases in other sub tests did not improve on the phonics sub test as measured by that assessment. Both Gail and

Rita achieved a grade level of high second grade on the oral vocabulary sub test while Gail alone also showed increases in high frequency word recognition and reading comprehension.

Second

From LDA's informal phonemic awareness assessment, when comparing the overall percentage of increase/decrease on the phonemic awareness assessment, it was very encouraging to see that four of the five learners increased their total percentage of items correct.

Third

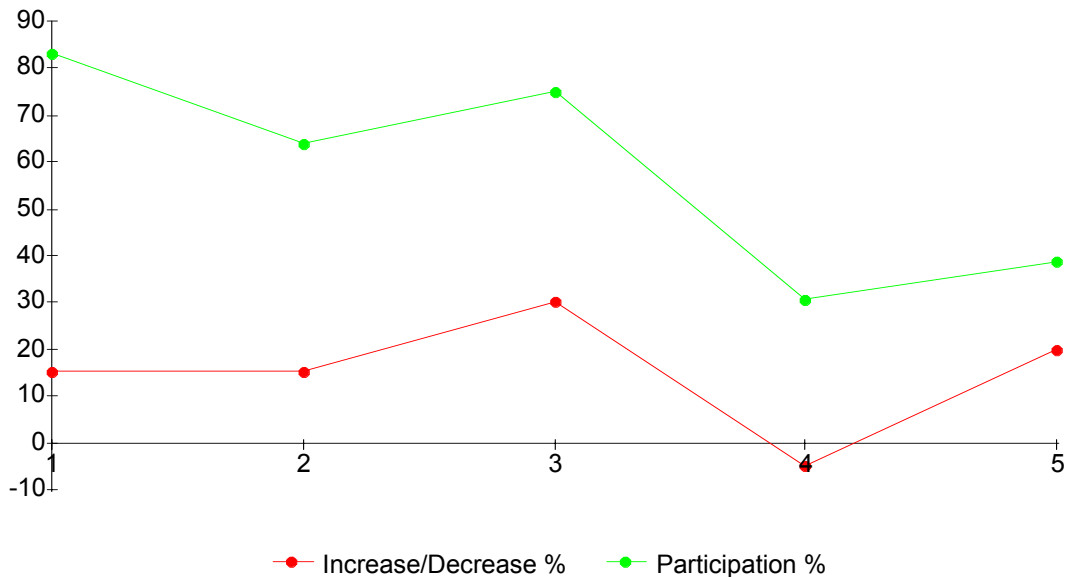
From LDA's informal phonemic awareness assessment, it can be seen that frequent and regular participation in phonemic awareness lessons results in higher improvement in phonics skills. The graph on page 14 which plots the data of each learners percentage of participation to each learners percentage of items correct on the phonemic awareness assessment shows a similar pattern. This visual shows a greater similarity, rather than a dissimilarity, in the line pattern of participation to increase in skills.

Conclusions

For the purposes of this study of phonemic awareness, the results from Let's Go Learn should be discounted. It was not designed for non-native English speakers in an adult program. The graph, which shows the deviation from the target grade, could not show any incremental gains. The phonics table, which begins with long and short vowels, does not provide for lower level assessment of single consonants or simpler components of phonics. It is to be hoped that the assessment can be adjusted to address adult English as a Second Language learners; especially low level learners. To do this, the assessment would need a way to start with a grade level appropriate rather than grade 13. The assessment would also need to be designed to compile mastery of the incremental aspects of phonics.

Based on this limited study of five participants, it may be concluded that providing teaching of phonemic awareness with phonics instruction is an integral part of teaching adult ESL learners. The graph below, with few exceptions, shows a similar pattern when the percentage of participation is plotted against the percentage of increase in phonemic awareness.

Participation to Increase



Phonics instruction with its emphasis on the sounds of individual letters improved the participants' ability to distinguish between the sounds of words. Their confidence in spelling increased as they increased their familiarity of sounds through the dictation strategy. Early in the study, two learners who attended the zero reading block and had been in this class last year, commented that spelling tests based on the phonetic sounds was a better way to spell.

Measures of small achievements showed learners that they have learned and have made progress. As the participants continued school into July, it was apparent that all the learners in this study had increased confidence at articulating the sounds of English.

Based on the results of the increases shown in the LDA's phonemic awareness assessment coupled with the participants' increased confidence, it may also be concluded that it is necessary to use other assessments besides CASAS and BEST for 0/1 level ESL. Their incremental improvements cannot be measured by silent reading tests, and perhaps the lack of obvious progress results in frustration or discouragement. Using other assessments that do document progress (however small) may be necessary to maintain or improve motivation and effort.

Next Steps

I plan continue to provide feedback to LDA as they study the Let's Go Learn reading assessment which hopefully can be used by all adult programs in Minnesota. I will also continue phonics instruction appropriate for zero level ESL. That instruction will be with lessons designed to increase phonemic awareness skills as assessed in LDA's phonemic awareness assessment.