

Implementing Phonemic Awareness and Beginning Phonics Instruction for Pre-Literate ESL Learners

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Teaching Context

The teaching context for this research study was at SHAPE (South Hennepin Adult Programs in Education) in a newly formed Pre-literate level of English. Initially the class served 2-5 students, but had grown to 15. At SHAPE a Pre-Literate level is determined by either an inability to complete the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) or scores on CASAS Reading Form 27/28 of 170 –183. The class met Monday through Thursday from 9am until noon.

The Problem

As in any class, despite the label of Pre-Literate there was a wide array of skills! There are students for whom the alphabet was laborious and those who caught on quickly. There were those for whom reading words is like swimming through concrete and those who read effortlessly.

I was especially concerned with 2 women (HM & SA) who, after attending for several months, continued to struggle learning the alphabet. I sensed a mental block also when I taught the sounds of letters. Finally, these women were often unable to read sight words and short sentences without the cues from other students. These 2 women appeared to lack phonemic awareness which resulted in an inability to decode and read words. Therefore I planned to implement strategies in phonemic awareness to improve their decoding skills.

There was also 1 man in my class who attended regularly. He had an easier time with decoding English words. I included him in my research making a total of 10 research participants.

Research Question:

The concerns described on the preceding page led to this research question:

What happens to learners' decoding skills when I teach phonemic awareness with phonics instruction?

To study this research question, the following activities were conducted:

1. On a daily basis learners pronounced, clapped and wrote the capital and small letters of the alphabet (.75 – 1 hour). They also held up their consonant cards and said the sounds for others to repeat (.75 – 1 hour).
2. Twice a week long vowel sounds were presented (75 – 1 hour). Students were invited to come to the board and read the vowels, say its sound and read the signal words.
3. Three times a week small words and short sentences were presented to go along with consonant sounds and 2-letter digraphs (.75 – 1 hour). Students were invited to read and write these short sentences.
4. Often sounds, words and sentences were clapped to help students hear the rhythm. A total of at least 4 hours per week was spent on phonemic awareness instruction which is one-third of the total class time.

Data Collection

Three types of data were collected during this research study:

1. Before the arrival of the recent group, sections of *The ART (Adult Reading Toolkit) informal Phonemic Awareness Assessment were administered to three of the students. This assessment did not measure what I was teaching at the time. Because the language and vocabulary in the instructions were often impossible for my students to understand, I found it to be inappropriate for the three students whom I used it with. Two of these students no longer attend because of illness and a job. I chose not to use the ART phonemic awareness assessment with the other 9 students who are part of my research. Time did not allow for me to replace this assessment, therefore I do not have quantitative results for phonemic awareness.
2. Only three students had taken CASAS Reading 27 before entering class. The other seven did not have the language skills necessary to take the CASAS, which happens frequently. Therefore, CASAS 27 was administered at the conclusion of the study as either a post test or pretest to all of the students. Additionally, CASAS 32A was administered to a male student and one of the women, both of whom have more ease with the language.
3. Anecdotal journaling of observations regarding student mastery of the alphabet, reading consonant cards, sight words and short sentences.

*The Adult Reading Toolkit: A Research-Based Resource for Adult Literacy Ed. 2 LDA (Learning Disabilities Association) of Minnesota 4301 Highway 7, Suite 160 Minneapolis, MN 55416 October, 2004

Data Analysis

Anecdotal journaling of observations and students' comments were studied and analyzed.

CASAS pre and post test scores were compared and point gains determined.

Attendance was tracked and a percentage figured.

See Chart A depicting the country of origin, length of stay in the US, formal education in native countries, attendance and CASAS scores (pre and post tests) and point gains.

Findings

The findings are based on six of the ten original participants whose attendance was at least 75%. Five of the six completed CASAS testing.

- Three students whose attendance was 75% showed gains on CASAS 27 ranging from 13 to 21 points.
- One student with 100% attendance showed a 14-point gain on CASAS 27.
- One student with 100% attendance received a pretest score of 202 on CASAS 32A.
- One student who was previously unable to test completed CASAS 32A and received a pretest score of 188. Her only other test score was a 5 on Oral Assessment.
- Despite instruction and peer coaching, one student was still unable to complete CASAS 27.
- Although the purpose of CASAS is to measure functional reading, not decoding, for five of six students in this limited study, CASAS scores or test taking completion improved as the possible result of participation in phonemic awareness and decoding instruction.
- Based on observation and student comments, the implementation of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction helps to unlock the code of American English for preliterate ESL learners.

Conclusions

This research project was challenging. It demanded detailed teaching and record-keeping. A barrier was a change in teaching assignment that occurred after beginning the Reading Research Practitioner Workshop. This required re-thinking and re-writing of the original

research question. The teaching changes also made it more difficult to initiate and follow-through on the research as even the files were in transition, which severely limited a sense of organization. Because a standardized assessment for measuring phonemic awareness or decoding skills was lacking, observation, student comments, and CASAS scores were important.

Whenever the sounds of consonants were taught, one male student commented, "this is so important!" He is from Guyana, so his native language is English. However, he has an easier time breaking down words than even his wife. He has had the most schooling of all my students (a few years). **Phonics instruction and phonemic awareness appeared to be a key for him to unlocking American English.**

Although SA had a 21-point gain on her CASAS, but she was still tenuous about reading in class. **Some students, even with dramatic CASAS gains, still need time and guidance to decode words.**

HM, the Somali woman of most concern frequently smiled and conveyed that she's too old to learn English! She and SA were the oldest (50's??) in my class. As reported earlier, she was still unable to complete CASAS testing. In her case, it appears that **age (and lack of literacy in the first language) may be a barrier to learning English.**

For many of the students, confidence in reading skills improved. SA appeared to have low confidence when she came to the board or read from her seat. She had a tendency to wait for English or Somali verbal cues from other students. HM seemed to have a higher confidence level than SA, as she laughed at herself easily and constantly. The student who scored a 188 on the 32A had a marked increase in confidence. She often volunteered to go to the board or raise her hand first to answer questions. She had also taken on a teaching role with SA and HM with a commitment to minimize speaking in Somali for explanations.

Next Steps

Although circumstances in my classroom make this research project challenging, I was able to learn more about the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics in reading instruction for preliterate learners. My next steps include:

I plan to conduct phonemic awareness instruction in a systematic organized fashion.

I feel the need for a more appropriate assessment in phonemic awareness and decoding at this level and would like to continue assembling those pieces to create one. Students like HM lack our American English framework of drawing a straight line, writing on a line or reading from left to right. How can we respectfully measure the skills they do possess?

Here at SHAPE there is a need to coordinate with the teacher of the next level a system to advance students to her class when they are ready. She's been full (21 students) and she

needs time to complete the curriculum she's initiated before adding new students (July or August).

While I wait for her to be ready my students who are more skilled in English respond more quickly to my questions not always allowing the others to take the time they need to process answers. Therefore, it's crucial for me to direct questions to individual students and give them the "wait time" to answer.

It is my responsibility (and hope) to continue to create a classroom environment where all students feel safe to participate and free from judgment. Overall, students are very supportive of each other as they are filled with empathy. They are all in agreement that the English language is "too hard, teacher!" But I am discovering ways (such as phonemic awareness instruction) to make it somewhat easier.

Name	Country of Origin	SHAPE start date	Formal Education in Native Countries	Attendance	CASA's - Pre	C
M.L.	Sudan	05-Jun-05	none	75%	27-174	2
S.H.	Somalia	01-Dec-04	none	75%	27-174	2
S.A.	Somalia	15-Jan-04	none	75%	27-170	2
G.M.	Guyana	02-May-05	none	100%	27-177	2
M.M.	Guyana	02-May-05	a few years	100%	no test	3
S. F.	Somalia	25-Apr-05	none	80%	Speaking - 5	3
H.M.	Somalia	24-Mar-05	none	80%	no test	1