

Does Phonics Instruction Increase Comprehension and Fluency? A Case Study

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Teaching Context

Our program in St. Paul, New Foundations, provides housing and support services to families in recovery from chemical dependency and who also may have a mental health or developmental disability. I assist individuals in planning and goal setting in the areas of employment and education.

The Problem

Learner persistence is an issue in most ABE programs. People's lives impact their education in ways we do not always understand. Sometimes the only evidence we have is that they are no longer attending. We often have no clue as to why. Was it the environment? Was my teaching relevant? Were they correctly assessed? Was it some unmet need or did life simply get in the way? In my job I often get to talk to adults about the "whys". They are all of the above and part of my job at New Foundations is to problem solve some of the barriers.

One person, in particular, had troubled me for several years. Cheryl was a 51-year woman in recovery for four years. This was her third and longest period of sobriety. She had a high school diploma but read at a GE of 3.0 (Test for Adult Basic Education – TABE). She had tested as having a lower than average IQ (WAIS) but still in the normal range. She had screened negatively for a learning disability. She frequently voiced her desire to learn to read better. She had enrolled three separate times in ABE classes, one of those times through adult special education. Despite her desire and apparent motivation, she dropped out before experiencing any progress or success. The last time she was enrolled at an adult learning center, life's variables seemed to be under control. She was not struggling with her addiction. She was in stable housing and had adequate income. She had enough time to attend school and received additional support from our program. She reported liking her teacher and felt positive about her prospects of improving her reading. And she dropped out.

At some point in my relationship with Cheryl, I made some assumptions about why she was unable to persist in her learning pursuits. I assumed that some of her personal and life style choices prevented her from attending school. Now I was wondering if her reading difficulty and her feelings of not making any progress were more the reason for her lack of persistence.

In talking with her I discovered some things that made me want to delve further into her difficulties with reading. This led me to a research question relating her comprehension and fluency to an in-depth reading assessment and instruction in phonics skills.

Research Question

What happens to comprehension and fluency when I provide direct on-to-one instruction based on diagnostic assessment of phonemic awareness and decoding skills?

To carry out my study of my research question, I implemented activities in interviewing, assessment, and phonics instruction.

I conducted a somewhat lengthy interview before we started instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding. We discussed at length Cheryl's previous school experience. We talked about how she felt about her ability to learn (or not learn). I asked how she thought her teachers viewed her. She talked about sitting in school and knowing she was going to fail. "I just knew before the teacher even passed out the test that I wasn't going to pass it. I always thought the teacher knew it too." I asked if she remembered when those feelings first appeared. I asked if she remembered ever thinking she was going to succeed. I wondered what made her want to try now to improve her skills. And, I wondered if she still planned on failing.

In her most recent attempt at school she reported feeling behind almost immediately. She was able to comprehend when other people read out loud, but was unable to make sense of anything she had to read for herself. She was a good guesser and had high verbal ability so I thought she was able to keep up with class discussions and probably appeared to understand the material. I asked her to bring in some of her class materials to see if we couldn't jump start her progress a little and maybe get her back to class. When we started reading I realized she had a very odd assortment of decoding skills. She knew some higher phonics skills but stumbled over simple vowel sounds. She appeared to have a pretty good sight word vocabulary but her fluency was poor. It was clear why she wasn't able to comprehend what she read.

Cheryl reported having memory problems and was always in special education classes at school. I didn't know if her low reading ability was due to developmental or cognitive impairments beyond my professional expertise or if she was missing some basic phonetic knowledge and if anyone had ever looked at that.

I wondered, too, about her prior school experience. We had talked some about high school but not specifically how she felt about her learning experiences.

Because I had access to cognitive assessments Cheryl had taken, I knew that increasing her reading ability would perhaps be an arduous task. I was careful not to promise any magic bullet and we discussed how long it might take to increase her reading comprehension even one grade level. But I suggested to Cheryl that we look at some of the reasons why she wasn't able to understand what she read.

We agreed to meet for at least 45 minutes three times a week. I felt the frequency of our meetings would be more important than the length of instruction time due to her reported difficulty with remembering. The first several meetings involved a series of assessments and the instruction, which followed, was based specifically on what we learned from those tests. At first I wondered if we shouldn't just start a systematic approach to a phonics program. But she had some decoding skills and I didn't want to waste time going over things she already knew.

I divided the instruction time into two parts. We spent the first 20 minutes or so on fluency. I used the *Reading Skills for Today's Adults* developed by Marshall Minnesota ABE, a variety of stories from graded published curriculum and some recovery material I rewrote for a lower readability. This time included pre-reading discussions, silent reading, listening and reading orally and sometimes writing answers to comprehension questions.

The remainder of the time was spent on decoding skills. I used the Multiple Component Lesson Organizer in the Adult Reading Toolkit (ART). It was a good way for me to stay organized since we were not moving sequentially through a phonics program but rather focusing on those skills that were weak. Each lesson included reviewing known sounds, introducing new sounds, reading and writing phrases with new sounds and fluency practice with new sounds.

We met a 43 times for a total of 32 hours of instruction.

Data Collection

We spent the better part of two weeks doing assessments. It sounds awful but it wasn't. It was actually interesting for both of us. I conducted the following assessments:

- Phonemic Awareness Assessment, ART, LDA of Minnesota
- Beginning Phonics Assessment I and II , ART, LDA of Minnesota
- Word Recognition – Graded word list K-12 standard
- Spelling – Graded list – K-12 standard
- Fluency – Calculated wpm with graded reading selection.
- Silent Reading Comprehension – TABE
- Word Meaning Test – NCSALL, Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS)

The first two assessments were necessary to gain a good understanding of Cheryl's decoding skills. I conducted the other assessments because I wanted to utilize the resources from NCSALL's Adult Reading Components Study. I thought it would be helpful to utilize the profile analysis and suggestions for instruction.¹ I retested for fluency and comprehension.

I conducted an interview to collect information about Cheryl's past and present experience in reading before instruction and revisited of the conversation about success and failure at the end of our project.

I also kept a reflective journal but didn't write as often as I intended.

Data Analysis

I compared the tests and entered the new data in the ARCS profile.

I analyzed the pre- and post-tests in fluency and comprehension.

I studied the information obtained in the interviews I did prior to instruction and after instruction, and I studied the information in my journal.

Findings

Cheryl's TABE improved from 3.0 to 3.5. This is a modest gain but may be significant since there were only 32 hours of instruction.

¹ The National Center for the Study of Adult Literacy and Learning hosts an interactive website where the results from The Adult Reading Components Study are used to create learner profiles. Each profile group shows a distinctive pattern and/or level of reading component skills. You can enter your learner's scores and compare them with one of the profiles to gain more understanding of your learner's needs as well as instruction suggestions.

Her fluency went from 60 wpm to 90 wpm.

Because I did not use a graded test for phonemic awareness and decoding, I don't have any quantitative data to report. I observed, however, that she used more decoding skills at the end of our project.

Conclusions

The data supports the conclusion that direct phonics instruction based on an individual's particular reading skills needs will improve fluency.

I am not confident, however, about the comprehension. In retrospect, I don't think the TABE was a good tool for measuring comprehension for a reader at this level. I don't have any real way of knowing if she made some good guesses or if she really understood the passages. And since the gain was modest it may not be all that significant. A better measure might have been improved ability to correctly answer the comprehension questions developed for the selected readings we used for the fluency part of our lesson. I think a running record of an improvement in the percentage of correct answers might be more convincing for me. I think we need better or additional tools besides the TABE to assess comprehension.

It was much easier to observe the improvement in fluency. At first her reading was very awkward. The words she grouped together did not make sense. There was a lot of word by word reading and frequent disregard for punctuation. I also observed that, like many learners who lack confidence, every time she stumbled or struggled she would look at me. At some point though (I can't say when because I was not a good journal keeper), she seemed to stay focused on the book or whatever printed material she was using.

The increase in fluency may have been due to an increased knowledge of phonics, or ... a shift in the learner's perception of herself. I am including part of a conversation that we had at the beginning of the project and one at the end of the project because I think it could be a significant factor for some adult learners.

Although I think the learner appreciated the use of authentic reading materials (the use of 12 step and recovery books), I found it a little harder to know if the learner was using her knowledge of phonics to decode when she is so familiar with the language in the recovery material. I thought she might be making good guesses.

I don't have a pre- and post for phonemic awareness, but I was surprised at what the learner could not hear. She has particular trouble with phoneme segmentation.

Cheryl spoke of feeling as though most of her teachers did not expect much from her. She was in special education classes starting at fifth grade. In spite of learning difficulties she graduated from high school. I asked how she saw herself as a student. Rather than seeing herself as someone with the persistence to stay in school, she saw herself as sort of a floater, as somewhat invisible to teachers and so she was just passed on from year to year. "They looked right past me. I wasn't a trouble maker and I always made sure I was dressed proper. They knew I would never do any better and I hated that that's the way they looked at me sometime. Like, the teacher would call on some kids even if they didn't have their hand raised because she figured they might know... but they never called on me. They weren't mean to me or nothing like that."

As we were wrapping up I asked some of the same questions that I had asked at the beginning. I again asked how she saw herself as a student. She said “You know, Pam. I wasn’t really gonna do this with you. I have always wanted to read better but I hate reading. I still do. I would never sit around and read a book. But here you come with all your little flash cards made up and stuff you wrote up for me and I thought, dag, she really thinks I can do this.”

Next Steps

Though the assessment and instruction for this learner was quite intense, I have a renewed appreciation for teaching decoding skills, even at the intermediate level.

I will continue to use the ARCS website. Though I might not have time to test and enter individual students, the profiles are composites and the instruction advice is helpful. (Why is it helpful? What I am thinking here is this: you want to adopt this practice because you want to assess/diagnose reading skills needs because you think it is important information to have in planning instruction – that attending to reading difficulties supports persistence.)

I am reminded not to underestimate the influence of the perception the learner has of how s/he thinks the teacher sees him or her.

I will investigate other tools for measuring comprehension.