

# **What Happens to Fluency When I Teach Daily Systematic Phonics?**

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## **Teaching Context:**

My English Language Learning (ELL) classes were part of Minneapolis Public Schools' Adult Basic Education (MPLS-ABE) program and at MPLS-ABE's largest site, Lehmann Center. My classes were level 4A classes comprised of mostly high beginning and low intermediate ELL learners. The CASAS reading scores for this level ranged from 195-220. Although our program tried to closely match learners' reading and speaking abilities with the ELL levels, there was usually a wide variety of reading abilities in each class. The classes consisted of Brazilian, Ecuadorian, Ethiopian, Somali, Mexican, Oromo and Togolese immigrants and refugees, with a daily average attendance of 18 learners. The makeup of the morning class was mostly East Africans, primarily Somali; whereas the makeup of the evening class was mostly Latinos, primarily Mexican.

The morning class met 5 days a week, from 8:30 - 11:45 a.m., with a total instructional time of 16.25 hours per week.

The evening class met 4 days a week from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. with a total instructional time of 10 hours per week.

## **The Problem**

Most of the learners in both classes had the basics of decoding and generally could read well. However, many were not fluent readers. I usually had learners read text aloud, as it allowed me to listen to their fluency and pick up on errors in decoding and pronunciation. I found that when many learners read text, it was in a very choppy and halting manner. Some learners struggled with longer words and new words. I believed that many of the learners, although in a level 4 class, lacked the knowledge of English vowel sounds. They constantly mispronounced words in their readings and stumbled over others. There were also others learner who, I felt, needed practice in more advanced phonics (final consonant blends and breaking words down to manageable pieces or chunks) to help them with their overall reading and fluency. Comprehension was also a problem with learners who were not reading fluently.

Learners also made comments on how they wanted to improve their reading, and others wanted to improve their writing and spelling skills. I wanted to find a way to help both sets of learners and decided on a daily systematic approach to phonics. The learners who needed help with their reading would benefit from the repeated readings of the

phonics lessons. At the same time other learners who needed help with their writing (mostly with their spelling) could gain an understanding of the English sounds and letters.

## Research Question

Based on my experience and knowledge that my students struggled with phonetic sounds and the concern that this caused problems in becoming more fluent readers, I formed this research questions: **What happens to fluency skills when I teach daily systematic phonics skills?**

To address my research question I used the following strategies:

- I built in 10-15 minutes of daily systematic phonics instruction as a regular part of each class. This activity was after our break, so the natural flow of each lesson would not be interrupted.
- I found from preliminary phonemic awareness activities that most learners didn't have problems with single consonant sounds. Vowel sounds tended to give learners in both classes the most problems. I started with long and short vowels and worked towards troublesome consonant blends.
- The next step was creating the phonics activities to be used in class. I looked at different phonics materials to create the lessons and made 3-ring binders with the phonics lessons. I wanted learners to share the binder for two reasons. The first was to create a better learning community and the second was to have them help one another if I wasn't able to assist them. I lead the class with the vowel sounds and had them repeat the words on the list. Next, I went around the room and asked individual learners to read the words. Finally, learners worked in pairs and read columns to each other while I went around the room to monitor pronunciation and decoding. Short spelling tests were given every few days to monitor progress.
- The phonics materials started with short A and long A (see Appendix A, Table 1) and continued on with the other vowels and vowel blends. When I listened to the learners read text, I noted problem areas, mostly consonant blends such as "th," "sh," "ch," and "st" and I included these in the phonics materials. I also added hard and soft C and G because many learners stumbled on these in their readings. Basically, each page was made up of words with that particular vowel sound. I also included sentences with many of the words in order to help with reading fluency and not just single word attacks. I was able to include *Great Leaps Sight Phrases* at the end. The learners really enjoyed moving on to short phrases and sentences after working on single words.
- Before I started the phonics instruction I spoke with the classes about reading into a microphone and the nature of the work I wanted to do. All of the learners agreed to participate. I found 3 different paragraph readings from a new edition of a text used in

the previous level (Level 3). The idea was to find material that wouldn't be difficult for the learners and something that they hadn't read before.

### **Data Collection**

- Prior to the daily phonics instruction, learners read two pages: A and B. After 3 months of systematic daily phonics instruction, learners again read two passages: A and C. I wanted them to re-read the same passage which was A. I labeled the first A passage reading A-1, done in March and the second reading passage, A-2, done in June. Doing this allowed me to measure fluency rates from a passage they had read earlier. I measured the fluency rates between two completely different passages, B and C.
- The evening volunteer did the readings for the evening class. He took the learners to a separate room, had them state their names into the microphone, and then read two passages (in March, A-1 and B., and in June, A-2 and C). After each passage he asked a simple comprehension question: "What does that mean?" I was the reading exercise administrator for the morning class and followed the same format as the evening class.
- I listened to each tape and wrote notes about the learners' reading fluency, pronunciation, and areas that caused them problems. These notes helped time to design the phonics materials I used in the reading research.

### **Data Analysis**

I created a spreadsheet for each class with the following information for analysis: (See Tables 2 and 3.)

- Learners' names
- Fluency rates of passages A-1, B, C, and A-2  
Calculation used for oral reading rate:  $Wpm = (\text{number of words in a passage} \div \text{reading time (in seconds)} \times 60)$   
A = 87 words      B = 101 words      C = 110 words
- Number of hours of instruction for each learner
- Country of origin
- Number of years of education in native country (self-reported upon entry into program)
- Pre- and post-CASAS scores (if available)

I totaled the number of hours of instruction to see if it made a difference in the fluency rate. I included the country of origin information because I wanted to know if there were patterns from learners from different countries that would help me in future lesson planning. The number of years of education in their native country was included because I felt it was important to see if that might have had more influence on their fluency than the systematic daily phonics instruction. Finally, I compared the pre-and post-CASAS scores as a way to see if there was improvement in CASAS scores with the phonics instruction.

Christine Smith, Deputy Director, NCSALL, graciously and expertly performed the statistical analysis of the data.

## **Findings**

The findings from my research are varied and don't really point in any particular direction. With this in mind, I feel that I can make the following statements:

1. The learners didn't significantly improve, as a group on fluency. The mean difference between reading A-1 and reading A-2 was 3.09 (n=20, s.d. 10.58). However, the mean difference between reading B and reading C was -.77 (n=20, s.d. 16.64).
2. There was improvement between readings A-1 and A-2. Learners improved on an average of 2.84 wpm between the readings (n=21. s.d. 10.38).
3. The improvement between readings A-1 and A-2 was also associated with better CASAS scores. The average of the pre-CASAS score was 207.18 (n=17, s.d. 6.17) and the average of the post-CASAS score was 211.71 (n=17, s.d. 5.51). The association is significant ( $t=158.5$ ,  $df = 16$ ,  $p = .000$ ).
4. Years of schooling positively related to both CASAS improvement and fluency improvement between readings A-1 and A-2. The more years of schooling learners had in their native country, the better they did on CASAS scores and improved fluency rates between readings A-1 and A-2.
5. Total hours of instruction didn't have any relation to their fluency rates or their post-CASAS scores.

## **Conclusions**

The answer to my research question, "What happens to fluency skills when I teach daily, systematic phonics skills?" is that the phonics instruction didn't directly improve fluency. However, learners made improvements in fluency rates when reading the same text and that was related to better CASAS scores. Learners, overall, improved

their CASAS scores significantly. The number of years of education in their native country is a significant predictor in fluency improvement.

I noticed that spelling improved throughout the three-month study. This could have been due to dictation or other factors, but it did improve nonetheless.

I had tremendous feedback from the learners in my classes. They recognize that they needed work with phonics and asked for more instruction. They wanted to practice the phonics work outside of the classroom. In fact, some evening learners from classes I didn't teach stopped in to practice phonics work with my class. They were from higher levels and felt the phonics practice helped with their pronunciation. They told me they hadn't learned the English vowel sounds in previous classes and really wanted to learn more.

I presented my phonics instruction methods and materials at the Minnesota Literacy Council's Partners in Literacy Conference last April. At the end of the presentation, higher-level learners from other programs approached me to tell me they felt phonics instruction was missing from their program's curriculum. They wanted to know where they could go to get help with phonics and spelling. It was very positive to get feedback from learners in other programs. They recognized the gaps in their English language learning and wanted to make sure they covered all areas of language acquisition.

### **Next Steps**

Because of positive feedback from learners, I will continue to have systematic phonics instruction over the course of the next school Year. It may not be on a daily basis, but it will be continued throughout the semester. I have also shared my materials with colleagues and will continue to do so.

I am pleased with the research that I performed. If I hadn't done the phonics work in a research format, I may not have done it as consistently or as frequently. The research format really helped me to keep the instruction systematic and daily.

Because of the findings between readings A-1 and A-2 (improved fluency rates between the same test), I will not have learners repeat readings orally two or three times to gain fluency.

Table 1

## Sample Lesson

## Long A

(Long A says its name, A)

VC -e

A - e	a - e	ay	ai	ai
ate	lake	ray	train	maid
mate	date	say	chain	stain
fate	name	day	pail	trait
hate	lame	may	fail	quaint
mane	fake	hay	jail	pair
cane	game	lay	vain	frail
made	brake	jay	paint	braid
fade	trade	bay	sail	faith
nape	grape	gay	gain	saint
cape	shape		grain	snail
gape	shade		brain	air
tape	quake		drain	flair
dame	frame		raid	chair

## Review Short A and Long A Sentences

1. The man ate the grape.
2. I had a fat cat.
3. The man has to pay the tax.
4. The vane is in the van.
5. He can play with the sad cat.
6. The man has faith.
7. Sam wears a cape.
8. Dan says the date.
9. Jane goes to the gate with Kate.
10. Pam plays a game by the lake.
11. Paint the chair.
12. Today is the first day in May.
13. The rat is in jail.
14. Dad uses the brakes.



Name	Reading A-1 wpm/std. dev. Mean: 79.80 3/9/04	Reading B wpm/std. dev. Mean: 77.83 3/9/04	Reading A-2 wpm/std. dev. Mean: 82.87 5/26/04	Reading C wpm/std. dev. Mean: 80.73 5/26/04	# of hrs. instruction 3/01/04- 5/31/04	Country of Origin	# yrs. educ. in native country	CASAS 2/18/04 form/ score	CASAS 5/18/04 form/ score
1	87 (+7.2)	73.01 (-4.82)	91.57 (+8.7)	94.28 (+17.55)	112.92	Mexico	13	33/207	34/218
2	96.6 (+16.8)	91.81 (+13.98)	102.35 (+19.48)	94.28 (17.55)	106.49	Togo	College	33/207	34/216
3	121 (+41.2)	99.34 (+21.51)	127.31 (+44.44)	124.52 (+43.79)	119.92	Somalia	12	33/200	34/213
4	90 (+10.2)	86.57 (+8.74)	104.4 (+21.53)	98.50 (+17.77)	81.59	Brazil	12	33/215	34x/217
5	52.72 (-27.08)	69.65 (-8.18)	71.5 (-11.37)	51.5 (-29.23)	109.75	Somalia	12	33/201	34/218
6	62.14 (-17.66)	80.8 (+2.97)	52.2 (-30.37)	57.39 (-23.34)	97.50	Somalia	N/A	33/206	34/209
7	40.15 (-39.65)	49.26 (-28.57)	47.45 (-35.42)	55.93 (-24.8)	57.25	Somalia	8	34/209	33/212
8	52.72 (-27.08)	50.5 (-27.33)	53.81 (-29.06)	50.76 (-29.97)	101.91	Somalia	8	34/207	33/217
9	104.4 (+24.6)	93.23 (15.4)	94.90 (+12.03)	104.76 (+24.03)	81.42	Mexico	9	34x/211	
10	85.57 (+5.77)	76.70 (-1.13)	79.09 (-3.87)	78.57 (-2.16)	87.08	Ecuador	8	32x/213	33/213
11	85.57 (+5.77)	85.35 (+7.52)	87 (+4.13)	77.64 (-3.39)	91.08	Mexico	11	33/213	34x/213

Name	Reading A-1 (wpm) Mean: 64.39 3/10/04	Reading B wpm/std. dev. Mean: 64.81 3/10/04	Reading A-2 wpm/std. dev. Mean: 66.22 5/26/04	Reading C wpm/std. dev. Mean: 60.89 5/26/04	# of hrs. instruction 3/01/04- 5/31/04)	Country of origin	# yrs. educ in native country	CASAS February form/ score	CASAS May form/ score
1	57.36 (-7.57)	68.86 (+4.05)	56.73 (-9.49)	56.89 (-4)	141.76	Somalia	8	33/207	
2	96.66 (+32.03)	106.31 (+41.50)	67.79 (+1.57)	65.34 (+4.45)	170.83	Somalia	1	34/203	33/203
3	27.47 (-37.46)	N/A (-64.81)	25.09 (-41.13)	N/A (-60.89)	90	Somalia	6	32x/208	N/A
4	85.57 (+20.64)	96.19 (+31.38)	98.49 (+32.27)	101.53 (+40.64)	121.83	Ecuador	12	33/218	
5	84.19 (+19.26)	90.44 (+25.63)	80.30 (+14.08)	76.74 (+15.85)	169.13	Ecuador	6	33/212	34/213
6	52.2 (-12.73)	48.48 (-16.33)	52.72 (-13.5)	52.8 (-8.09)	121.25	Ethiopia		33/209	34/201
7	41.76 (-23.17)	40.94 (-23.87)	56.73 (-9.49)	49.62 (-11.27)	134.75	Ethiopia		33/207	34/216
8	87 (+22.07)	85.35 (+20.54)	93.21 (+26.99)	83.54 (+22.65)	87.4	Somalia	9	33/206	34/206
9	40.46 (-24.47)	44.23 (-20.58)	47.02 (-19.20)	50 (-10.89)	188.33	Somalia	5	33/191	32x/203
10	76.76 (+11.83)	67.33 (+2.52)	84.19 (+17.97)	71.52 (+11.63)	189.25	Somalia	8	34x/216	35/211

