

# Does Direct Instruction in Decoding Increase Reading Comprehension?

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## Teaching Context

I teach a class of Hispanic and Somali ELL adults, meeting five days a week in the morning. They range from high beginning to intermediate level with CASAS reading scores from 210 to 239. Most of the students have had several years of schooling in their first language, although one student has had only two years of first language instruction. Average attendance is about 10-12 students in class every day, but it may not be the same 10-12 students. Because of variations in attendance, it is difficult to have a systematic approach to phonetic instruction. The content of reading instruction is influenced by two factors. First, students want to increase their abilities to read and understand school papers, daily newspapers, magazines, medical instructions, and job applications. This is closely aligned with the need to increase their scores on the CASAS test.

## The Problem

Comprehending written English is a problem for all my students. While more years of school in their first language seems to help with English comprehension, it is difficult for students to decode words, read fluently, and understand a variety of vocabulary words. After initial research into reading and testing students for phonemic awareness, I discovered the students did not have a good foundation in word decoding. I was concerned that this may restrict their comprehension and their confidence in their reading ability.

## Research Question:

Initially, I considered working with students to increase their vocabularies, but after discovering that students lack decoding skills, I felt the need to approach the problem from the beginning. The question, therefore, is related to decoding: **Will the direct instruction in decoding of words help adult English language learners increase their reading comprehension?**

I did the following activities to research this question.

I discussed the reading research on decoding and comprehension with the six students in this class.

I spent a short time each class period introducing letter sounds, especially vowels, consonant blends, word beginnings and endings, word families, etc. I also presented sight words to the class. To reinforce these skills, the class worked on spelling and fluency. Spelling quizzes were occasionally given after the class had worked on sounds, word families or sight words. I did not pre-test the students in spelling. Rather, it was an opportunity to judge whether they could hear the individual sounds and spell words correctly. Fluency skills were reinforced through silent reading, listening, and pair work. Students worked with authentic materials: newspapers,

children's school papers, store flyers, etc. Each student read the selection silently. Next, I read the selection aloud. Students asked questions about the pronunciation of individual words. An additional amount of time was spent comprehending the reading materials and decoding individual words as they appeared in the text. Although some of the higher level students may already have known many of the words, it was a good review and gave them an opportunity to refine their pronunciation skills.

## **Data Collection**

- A background survey was administered at the beginning of the research in February. The survey asked for educational background, what types of materials they currently read, how often, and what new materials they wish to better understand.
- The CASAS test was administered in February and in April.
- A phonemic awareness test was administered in February and April.
- Spelling quizzes were given to check understanding of word sounds.
- Student feedback was solicited: Do they feel more comfortable with reading? What is their personal assessment of their reading comprehension?

## **Data Analysis**

I analyzed data from:

- CASAS pre-test and post-test
- Phonemic awareness pre-test and post-test
- Spelling quizzes to check understanding of word sounds.

Data from the two tests were put into a grid and compared. I calculated the mean and median scores and standard deviations for the two tests. Using information from the questionnaire, I gained information about each student's reading history and attitudes concerning reading.

## **Findings:**

The data (see Table 1) shows that all six students increased their scores in the phonemic awareness test. Four students increased their CASAS test scores, and the CASAS test scores of 2 students decreased. The student with the lowest CASAS pre-test score had the biggest increase in the post-test.

Because the sample size was so small, the significance of the increases in phonemic awareness and CASAS scores cannot be stated officially. Also, since there was no control group

in my study, the growth shown cannot be positively attributed to the direct decoding instruction that I did.

## **Conclusions**

I drew these conclusions from my research:

- I pre- and post-tested the students with the CASAS test, because that is the assessment our program uses to measure reading gains. A reading comprehension assessment which is designed (more than the CASAS) to measure reading comprehension may have been a better assessment to use..
- Students appreciated the use of authentic materials and the program should strive to use these materials whenever possible. Teaching intermediate ELL students should include the whole scope of reading instruction; advanced decoding, fluency and vocabulary.
- I feel students gained confidence in their abilities to read and understand from this instruction which included decoding.
- An assessment which measures decoding may be a better indicator of increased decoding skills than the CASAS test.
- Student assessment needs to cover all aspects of reading. LDA of Minnesota is currently looking at different tests and will make this information available to all adult programs.
- Three months is a short time to significantly increase reading comprehension for busy adult student students.

## **Next Steps**

I am going to continue instruction in basic decoding with beginning readers and more advanced decoding skills with intermediate readers. I am going to continue to use authentic materials in my phonics instruction.

Table 1

	Days in School	CASAS pre Mean: 221 Median: 219.5 S.D.11.7	CASAS post Mean 222.3 Median: 222 S.D.8.3	Phonemic pre Mean: 31.8 Median: 32.5 S.D. 2.9	Phonemic Post Mean: 38.3 Median: 38.5 S.D. 1.3	Age	# yrs. educ in native country	Yrs. study- ing English
1	29	206	215	32	38	34	8	3
2	28	224	226	38	40	26	2	3
3	45	207	209	33	36	34	15	6
4	29	235	231	27	39	24	9	4
5	23	215	218	28	37	24	9	4
6	32	239	235	33	40	23	14	7