

# **What Happens To Phonemic Awareness When Direct Alphabetic Instruction Is Implemented?**

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## **Teaching context**

I am an ESL teacher at the Adult Education Center in Marshall, Minnesota, which is part of the Southwest ABE, Marshall Region. When I did my action research I taught a morning class, which met Monday-Friday from 8:00-12:00. There were ten students enrolled. Of these, seven were regulars, attending 3-5 times a week. Their CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System) scores ranged from 2 on the Oral to 237 on the reading test. These adults from many parts of the world, but primarily East Africa, were seeking to meet requirements for the workforce. This was an open enrollment class; newcomers could start in class any time.

## **The Problem**

My class range in reading was vast, and when new people come in I needed to find a way to get them “up to speed” quickly so that the whole class could move on. Most people did not get to stay very long as they were seeking employment. As a good base in phonics is so important to learning how to read, I decided to address instruction in phonemic awareness with newcomers with no oral proficiency or phonemic awareness in English and who are not literate in their first language. I selected two new students, Adam and Brenda, for my case study. They arrived in the U.S. in March from Ethiopia and enrolled in school on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

## **The Research Question**

For my research study on phonemic awareness, I developed the following research question: “What happens to phonemic awareness when oral proficiency and alphabetic instruction are implemented for 30 min. a day, three times a week, over a two month period?”

In my instruction to increase phonemic awareness skills, I used Phonics: Listening and Fluency, Audio CD-student book, a program created by Linda Strand, and the Adult Reading Toolkit (ART), a tool developed by Marn Frank at the Learning Disabilities Association. As a result of this instruction, I expected the results to be increased communication, phonemic awareness and word recognition.

To increase phonemic awareness, I had the students:

- Pronounce the letters and say the name of the letters
- Listen to the tape of the alphabet and letter pronunciation
- Manipulate letter tiles (and later form words with them)
- Find authentic material with letters and words they could recognize
- Finally, teach the 100 Fry Words +

## **Data Collection**

I gave the informal phonemic assessment in the ART and the Bader Inventory. I asked them the six oral questions for the CASAS and they could answer only two of the six, so we began working on alphabet awareness. After the two-month period, I gave the ART assessment and Bader Inventory again. I also gave CASAS 27 and 28.

I kept a running journal on how each individual learned. I also kept attendance and field notes and the medical records that they shared with me.

From the beginning I decided to analyze the information and data and decide how to proceed in my class. If the scores showed a marked improvement, I would decide if this is enough time or if more/less time should be spent on these lessons.

## **Data Analysis (see description page)**

I analyzed both pre- and post data using the three aforementioned instruments. The CASAS, in my opinion, is not a good measure of phonemic awareness, as its primary purpose is to measure functional reading skills. I used the Bader Inventory and the ART assessment to analyze gains in phonemic awareness skill. The first session with the ART was fine for Adam, but Brenda would not attempt it. The final one was better, and they showed much more confidence.

## **Findings**

Both students showed improvement in their oral skills in the ART assessment and Bader Inventory. I thought it was amazing that they went from a +2 Oral to 189 (Adam) and 172 (Brenda) in the CASAS reading test in just under a month. Then they leveled off. I will revisit this in the future and find out if that is typical in a large group of students. The parts of the test that they missed had to do with measuring and other life skills, not phonemes.

I discovered that I like the Bader Inventory, but you must have time and/or an assistant in order to complete it and do an effective job. Adam increased his reading ability but scored lower than I expected on the oral interview. Brenda scored higher on the Bader oral and I was very pleased with that. Both of these students had some health problems during the time of the study and I believe that may have changed the results. (See Profiles)

This case study cannot be generalized to reflect the learning pattern of any group. I would like to pursue it with more classes and see what I find.

## **Conclusions**

The CD and the ART KIT were very good instructional materials, but students began to memorize the CD. I believe these instructional materials helped with the problem of both oral proficiency and phonemic awareness. However, you need fresh material to add to your tools. There needs to be more adult appropriate instructional materials developed for the preliterate level.

I have several questions as a result of my instruction in phonemic awareness: What do you do with the dyslectic adult second language learner? Is there a plateau? Do illiterate adults learn in the same way (go through the same stages) as literate adults?

I feel good about what I learned. I see the need to continue to teach sight words and words in context but phonemic awareness is also important, especially to my advanced students. I discovered big gaps with them while I was helping the core students. I do wish we had one year to do the research because I would like to share where these students are a year from now.

### **Next Steps**

I will continue to use these methods to teach my class and will also add a few other materials that I came upon on the way. I think it was beneficial for all of my students.

I will limit my instruction to twenty minutes, two times a week instead of three. After the initial increase in awareness, it tapered off so I think twice a week may still meet the need without over working the concepts. I must be aware of all the students needs, and time is of the essence.

In the future I may explore what learning styles work best with phonemic awareness or how phonemic awareness can be taught with many different learning styles in mind.

## **CASAS**

This Test is administered to all people in our consortium. It is designed to measure student performance on critical skills that adults need in order to function in daily life, in the community and in the workplace. Students are asked six questions before they take an inventory. If they cannot pass these they are given an oral score and that is all. If they pass they are given the inventory.

## **THE ART KIT**

“A Research Based Resource for Adult Literacy”

To quote the Introduction “The ART was developed by LDA of Minnesota to bridge current reading research with reality and practice. It covers five components of reading.

- Phonemic awareness
- Beginning phonics skills
- Intermediate decoding
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension

I used only the first chapter and the Phonemic Awareness Assessment with my students.

## **BADER**

Reading and Language Inventory by Lois A. Bader

The Bader was designed to determine appropriate placement of students in instructional materials. A thorough assessment includes:

1. Personal interview
2. Observations
3. Informal and formal testing
4. Diagnostic teaching.

I used all but the written language and the math assessment.