Intensive Phonics Instruction

An Action Research Project

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Introduction

Immigration has become a major factor in today's education. Every year more students who speak English as their second language and to varying degrees of fluency join our classes bringing with them unique learning needs. Students in upper elementary and secondary school often arrive in our country with little to no English reading ability. The problem then becomes how best to teach them to read while simultaneously developing their speaking and listening skills. Research has shown us that the practices most effective for teaching children to read are also effective when instructing adult learners (Tindall & Nisbet, 2010) but this research centers on native English-speakers and there is little known about adult English as a second language (ESL) learners. Another problem with implementation of these strategies is that basic reading strategies and phonics are rarely taught in higher grades (Clarke, 2006) so when are these older learners to receive this instruction?

Past research of reading and language acquisition adds to the list of problems by indicating that teaching children to read in a language they are not yet orally proficient in is a risk factor for reading problems later in life (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The problem then becomes one of time; it takes an average of two to three years in an immersion program for a student to become orally proficient in the English language (Fortune & Tedick, 2003), two to three years that students do not have in today's high-stakes testing driven education system.

Is it really true that teaching reading in conjunction with oral fluency sets a student up for problems in the future? Is it possible to reduce the time required for a student to become proficient in a language? What can I do as a teacher to help my students who are facing these challenges? These are all questions that I struggle with every day as an ESL teacher. This action research project was originally conceived of in an effort to answer the last question.

Review of Literature

Lesaux and Siegel (2003) recognized that many ESL students who struggled with reading were not getting the intervention they needed because their struggles were being attributed to a lack of oral proficiency with English. They designed a study where kindergarten through second grade students were tested on their phonological and syntactic awareness skills as predictors of reading performance. At the end of the study the sample included 790 native English speakers and 188 ESL speakers, with a total of 33 different native languages. Students were tested each year and participated in the district-wide reading program. Results indicated that English language proficiency was not an indicator of reading difficulties and these could better be predicted through phonological awareness assessments.

In 2008, Vanderwood, Linklater, and Healy questioned the use of nonsense words in the assessment of reading performance. A total of 134 ESL students were studied, 90% of which were native Spanish speakers. Their results did suggest that early literacy measures can be used to predict reading performance for ESL students. This study is limited in its generalization by the fact that the ESL participants primarily spoke the same first language and it is one that shares a common grapheme system with English.

Hayes-Harb (2006) recognized that Arabic speakers in particular struggle with learning to read in English. They hypothesized that this is at least in part due to the fact that in Arabic vowels are generally not written and words with a similar consonant pattern share a similar meaning base. In contrast, English is highly dependent on vowels and it is not unusual for the changing of one letter in a word to change its entire meaning. They conducted two studies in which Arabic-speaking ESL students were compared to non-Arabic ESL students and native

English speakers. The first experiment required students to look at a word for one second and then determine if the next word presented was the exact same or was missing a letter. Arabic speakers did score lower than the other groups, but not significantly. Since this study was limited by the fact that words were presented in isolation and we read in context, a second study was conducted. Participants were asked to read four passages for comprehension and circle the occurrences of a consonant or a vowel. When placed in context, Arabic readers had a much more difficult time identifying all of the occurrences of the target letters. It was theorized that this may be a result of Arabic and English having very different graphemes and Japanese and Korean speakers did struggle with this task as well, though not to the same extent as the Arabic speakers. Final analysis of the data did indicate that Arabic speakers struggle with reading English at least in part due to the fact that their first language does not utilize vowels to the extent English does.

Two studies were reviewed that considered the effect of direct phonics instruction for older readers. Karen Edwards (2008) sought to determine if high school students were given a review of phonics, would this improve their reading skills? One class of struggling ninth grade students (16 in total) was given fifteen minutes of phonics instruction three times a week for seven weeks. The goal of the instruction was not to present new ideas but to remind students of the phonics they had studied in their early school years. All students showed significant improvement on the Slosson Oral Reading Test, with an average gain of 1.1 grade levels. This improvement continued and when tested again in the second semester of their tenth-grade year students not only produced higher scores but reported enjoying reading more and even reading for pleasure.

In 2010, Tindall and Nibet reported that research-based strategies effective for native speakers are also beneficial for second language learners. They report five components of reading that are essential to include, regardless the age of instruction. Students must be given explicit instruction on phonological awareness, word identification, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The skills of phonological awareness, word identification, and vocabulary are particularly important for ESL students as they often struggle to hear the sounds of English and lack understanding of how the English language works.

The Problem

The number of English language learners in schools grows every year. The past two years have been especially challenging for Hamtramck Academy's program as we received a good number of upper elementary and middle school students who spoke and read little to no English. These students have the added challenge of learning a new alphabet and writing system as their first languages are Cyrillic script-based and do not share the Latin roots of our English alphabet. These students need to go from being emergent readers to grade-level fluency in as short a time as possible. Immigrant students are only given one year before their scores on the MEAP count towards a school's adequate yearly progress (Michigan Statewide Assessment Selection, 2011). While research does indicate the ESL students can make tremendous gains in reading when provided with proper intervention (Canderwood, Linklater, & Healy, 2008), expecting a student to go from not even knowing the alphabet to reading at an upper elementary to middle school reading ability is not reasonable but that is the challenge facing my students.

I began thinking about how I could help these students become the best readers they could be and reach grade-level fluency in as little time as possible. Knowing that vowels are the hardest part of English to learn (Hayes-Harb, 2006), I started wondering if basic, direct, intensive

phonics instruction would be effective for these students. I wanted to answer the question: Will intensive and direct phonics instruction help English language learners become better readers more quickly than the general English language development that has been provided to them in the past?

Intervention

After considering several reading programs already available in our school I realized that none of them provided the kind of intensive phonics instruction I was seeking. I met with our school's reading specialist and our kindergarten and first grade teachers to discover what programs they felt worked best for our struggling and younger learners. I then took this information, and using the basic concepts presented in the spelling curriculum Words Their Way (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008), I developed a curriculum that used word family based phonics instruction in combination with intensive sight word practice. A general lesson format along with a list of materials is provided in Appendix B.

I applied my intervention in three of my English language development groups. The groups were grade-level and English ability based and all but one of the students qualified as immigrants under federal guidelines (having lived in the U.S.A. for less than three years) (Education). The first group consisted of three boys, two repeating the second grade and one in the third grade. The second group consisted of two boys and a girl. One of the boys was born in America to Bengali-speaking parents and struggles with reading; he is currently being tested for dyslexia. The other boy is in fourth grade and from Yemen. The girl is in third grade and is the strongest reader of all the participating students though she has been in the country for less than two years. The third group was made of middle school students: two sixth grade boys and a seventh grade girl. All of the students scored in the twentieth percentile or below as compared to

their grade-level peers across the nation. Profiles of students included in the study are available in Appendix A.

All students were given the spelling pre-test provided with the Words Their Way curriculum to determine their beginning level. All students scored at the letter name-alphabetic level and so all students were begun at the same level of instruction though activities and reading texts were varied somewhat according to grade-level. Progress monitoring of their spelling development is provided in Appendix C.

Students were also tested on their sight word ability using the sight word assessment from Reading A-Z (Holl). Students who passed the first level moved to the second level of sight words from Reading A-Z. Continuing levels were developed from the Dolch-Sight Words Master List that had been divided by grade level (Gunn, Gordon, Lirette, & Lavelle, 2007). Students practiced the sight words every day by reading them to me from flashcards. Once a week they read the words from a single page assessment sheet as I marked their accuracy and timed them. When students could consistently read the entire list with no mistakes and in a short amount of time they were advanced to the next level. Progress monitoring data is provided in Appendix D.

Results

All students took the NWEA reading test in September, again in January, and will take it a third time in May. In order to be able to make compressions between the previous method and the new intervention only students who attended our school for both the academic year of 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 were included in the results. Due to the fact that the May testing cycle has not yet taken place, fall to winter growth rates were compared to determine the efficacy of the intervention.

The use of the NWEA test also allowed for students to take the same test both years but not receive the same items. Since the test is responsive to students' responses the items are leveled and students will not see the same item more than once. The difficulty of each item is determined not by a student's grade-level but by their accuracy on the proceeding items so a student in second grade may meet the same item as one in seventh if their abilities are the same. (Association, 2012) These things would not be possible if utilizing the students' MEAP scores as this is a paper and pencil test with each student taking their own grade-level test. This test is also administered from the third grade on and so the second graders in this study would not have taken the test. The results would further be compromised by the fact that the majority of these students did not take the MEAP last year and those who did were not counted in the determination of adequate yearly progress due to their recent immigration.

A table of student scores can be found in the Appendix E for reference. The standard English development methods utilized in 2010-2011 did produce growth in most students. The students grew between 13 and 81% between the fall and winter testing cycles of the 2010-2011 school year. Two students did show a loss of 33 and 82% respectively. However their spring scores did show a total growth of 90 and 200% for the school year so the loss may be attributable to an outside factor. The mean growth for all students was 16%.

Testing for the 2011-2012 school year showed growth between the fall and winter as well. Students grew between 12 and 520%, with three of the seven students growing more than 225%. The mean growth for all students was 159%. One student did show a lower percentage of growth as compared to the 2010-2011 school year; in 2010-2011 he grew 83%, in 2011-2012 he grew only 18%.

The data is very clear that the targeted phonics-based intervention was more effective in improving reading scores. The amount of difference in growth could not be explained wholly by the fact that all students have been in the country for at least one year prior to the implementation of the intervention. While this is a factor which should be considered, if the original instruction was fully meeting the needs of the students there would be no need for intervention.

Further Considerations

In depth, full-experimental style research is needed into the language acquisition process for students whose first language does not have a similar grapheme system as the second language. Much of the research on second language acquisition, especially in the United States, focuses on native Spanish speakers. This makes logical sense as this is the largest group of language learners in our country, but there is a growing number of learners from other languages and it is unclear if these learners acquire English in the same ways or if different methods would be more effective for them.

The largest hindrance to my intervention was the time available to implement it. Students were only available for thirty minutes a day, four days a week and in that time I had to teach phonics, spelling, reading strategies, and general English vocabulary development. Time was also taken away by the need to set aside the intervention and address topics and skills they needed immediately in class. Administration of standardized tests (NWEA, MEAP, ELPA) also took away from instructional time, an average of three weeks' time was lost to administer each test. As this was a trial of an unproven method and an in-house curriculum, the administration was not willing to devote more instructional hours to it. It is my hope that when presented with the results of this trial the administration will be willing to expand the program to 60-90 minutes a day, five days a week.

Another hindrance I faced was finding reading material that supported the phonics instruction I was trying to provide but was appropriate for older audiences. There is a plethora of readers and short stories for lower elementary students that focus on word families and other basic phonetic concepts but virtually nothing for older readers. I was able to utilize some of the decodable and read aloud books available from Reading A-Z but when I switched to these texts from the word family and phonics instruction based texts progress monitoring scores began to decline and the students' progress seemed to slow. There is a need for reading practice texts to be developed that are appropriate for older beginning readers.

Conclusion

This action research project shows that ESL students in upper elementary and secondary grades can benefit from intensive, direct phonics instruction. Best practices for teaching reading are best practices, no matter the age of the student. Reading for meaning cannot be ignored but early reading instruction must emphasize phonics and decoding so students will have the skills to comprehend higher level texts (Edwards, 2008). Higher level reading skills such as questioning, author's purpose, and directed notes also cannot be ignored (Clarke, 2006) but should be integrated into all classes and subjects.

Time is a major factor in this equation though so phonics instruction needs to be quick, fun, and immediately applicable to the general classroom if it is to be effective (Edwards, 2008). Students whose first language does not share the graphemes of English will especially benefit from instruction that trains them to focus on the vowels and phonemes of words (Hayes-Harb, 2006).

This project began as an idea and I was given a very limited scope in which to test it. It is my hope that when I present the final results after the May NWEA testing cycle, approval will be

granted to expand and further test the curriculum. Work is still needed in the development of activities which focus on phonological awareness as well as the identification of practice reading texts appropriate for the grade-level. I would also like to see a greater emphasis on vocabulary and regular classroom application. It is my hope that continued collaboration with administration and colleagues will lead to the development of a curriculum that addresses the specific needs of our basic and low intermediate English language learners in the areas of reading and language development.

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Appendix List

- A- Student profiles

- B- Basic lesson format and material list for short a unit

- C- Progress Monitoring: word family spelling words

- D- Progress Monitoring: sight word practice

- E- NWEA Reading Test Scores

Appendix A: Student profiles

Name	11-12 Grade / ELPA level	Sex	First Language	Year of Immigration	Parent English Ability	Sibling English Ability
Abu	2 (repeating) Basic	M	Bengali	2010	mother: *none* father: *low intermediate*	no siblings
Jafrul	2 (repeating) Basic	M	Bengali	2010	mother: *none* father: *basic*	Brother: *first grade, low intermediate*
Aniut	3 High Intermediate	M	Bengali	birth	mother: father:	no siblings
Sabab	3 Low Intermediate	M	Bengali	2010	mother: *intermediate* father: *lives in Bangladesh*	Brother: *seventh grade, low intermediate*
Shaima	3 Low Intermediate	F	Arabic	2010	mother: *none* father: *intermediate*	Brothers: *seventh grade, low intermediate; kindergarten, basic* Sister: *fourth grade, proficient*
Zackary *brother of Abdulla*	4 Low Intermediate	M	Arabic	2010	mother: *native speaker* father: *high intermediate oral ability but does not read or write English*	Brother: *first grade, low intermediate*
Abdulla *brother of Zackary*	6 Basic	M	Arabic	2010	mother: *native speaker* father: *high intermediate oral ability but does not read or write English*	Brother: *first grade, low intermediate*

Appendix B: Basic Lesson Format, Materials List for sample unit

<u>Lesson Format</u>:

- Review the difference between short and long vowels. Review vowel sound of the unit.

- Read aloud book for the day. Some kind of signal for word family of the day such as raise your hand or snap your fingers every time you hear a word belonging to today's word family.

- Decodable book for the day. Reading format varies between partner read, circle read, silent read, read and repeat, etc.

- Word work: worksheet for the word family to improve vocabulary, handwriting, and general literacy.
  **While students are working individually they take turns reading their sight words to me.

Activities:
  Word Card Sort: match the word to the picture
  Spin-Spell-Sentence: spin the CD, spell the word pictured, use it in a sentence
  Journal: choose words from the word wall and illustrate them or use them in sentences

Last day of unit:
  Play review game.
  Spelling test: show them the picture card, say the word, use in sentence, say the word
  Sight word speed test while working on a word search or other fun sheet

Sample Materials List: short a unit

Reading:

       Two Fat Cats (http://www.littlebooklane.com/WdFamRdrs.htm)
       Pat's Cats (Word Family Readers)
       Jan and Stan (Word Family Tales)
       Dan the Tan Man (Reading A-Z Decodable)
       Grandpa Dan's Nap (Word Family Mini-Storybooks)
       I Like To Dance (http://www.hubbardscupboard.org/printable_booklets.html#WordFamilyBooklets)
       A Nap For Zap (Word Family Tales)

Read Aloud Books:

       The Cat in the Hat
       The Fat Cat Sat on the Mat
       Angel Child, Dragon Child
       Animals Should Definitely Not Wear Clothing
       Caps for Sale

Activities:

       Spin, spell, sentence
       Word card sort
       Word Family Journals
       Hopping Frog Game

Worksheets:

       Cut-and-paste vocabulary sheets
       Alphabetical order sheets
       Word search
       Sentence completion
       See-Read-Write
       Letter Boxes

Appendix C: progress monitoring, word family spelling

X = spelled word correctly on written assessment

Blank = did not take assessment

Otherwise the spelling provided by student is reproduced

November 4, 2011: -at family

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
cat	X	X	X	X			
rat	X	X	X	X			
bat	X	X	X	X			
mat	X	X	X	X			
fat	X	X	X	X			
that	X	X	X	X			
brat	X	X	X	X			
pat	X	X	X	X			
hat	X	X	X	X			
flat	X	X	X	X			

November 11, 2011: -an, -ad families

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
dad	X	X	X		X	X	X
sad	X	X	X		X	X	X
pan	X	X	X		X	X	X
fan	X	X	X		X	X	X
mad	X	X	X		X	X	X
van	X	X	X		X	X	X
pad	X	X	X		X	X	X
can	X	X	X		X	X	X
than	ven	X	then		thean	X	X
grad	X	X	X		X	gad	X

December 8, 2011: short a review

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
rag	x	x	x	x	x	x	wrag
bag	x	x	x	x	x	x	pag
wag	x	x	wrag	x	x	x	x
flag	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
brag	x	x	x	x	x	x	prag
snag	x	x	sag	x	x	x	x
tag	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
tap	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
map	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
lap	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
cap	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
trap	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
snap	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
clap	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
cat	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
brat	x	x	x	x	x	bat	prat
man	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
plan	x	x	x	clan	x	x	x
mad	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
grad	x	x	x	x	x	gad	gad

December 21, 2011: -op, -ot, -og families

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
mop	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
pot	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
dog	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
log	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
frog	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
pop	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
jog	x	x	x	x	x	gog	x
chop	x	x	x	x	x	shop	shop
spot	x	x	spat	x	x	x	x

February 6, 2012: -en, -et, -eg families

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
hen	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
pet	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
leg	x	lag	x	x	x	x	x
peg	x	pag	pag	x	x	x	x
men	x	x	man	x	x	x	x
net	x	pet	x	x	x	x	x
egg	x	eeg	x	x	x	x	ege
beg	x	bed	x	x	x	x	peg
jet	x	x	x	x	x	jat	x
ten	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
wet	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
pen	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
fret	x	frat	fet	x	x	x	x
pencil	pensel	pansl	x	x	pencle	pen	pensal
regular	regler	ragelr	relegr	regler	regler	wreg	reglon

February 15, 2011: -ug, -ut, -un families

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
tug				x	x	x	x
sun				x	x	x	x
mug				x	x	x	x
nut				x	x	x	x
shut				x	x	x	x
run				x	x	x	x
bun				x	x	x	x
jug				x	x	x	x
hut				x	x	x	x
cut				x	x	x	kut
bug				x	x	x	x
rug				x	x	wug	x
shrug				x	srug	x	chrug
snug				x	x	x	x
shun				x	x	x	x

March 1, 2012: -ill, -ip, -ig families

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
drill	brel	x		x	x	dril	til
pill	fel	x		x	x	pil	pil
hip	hep	x		hipp	hipp	c	x
ill	ell	x		x	eill	elil	x
flip	flep	x		flip	flip	x	x
dig	deg	x		dig	dig	x	x
lip	lep	x		lipp	lipp	x	x
wig	weg	x		wigg	wigg	x	x
twig	tweg	towig		twigg	tuigg	x	tuge
fig	feg	pig		figg	figg	x	fige
grill	grel	x		x	x	gril	girl
ship	shep	x		x	x	x	x

March 29, 2011: VCe words

	Jafrul	Abu	Sabab	Shaima	Aniut	Zackary	Abdulla
store	x	x	x				x
nine	x	x	x				x
pinecone	pincone	pineone	pinecome				x
dine	x	x	x				x
lake	x	x	x				x
ignore	egnore	einore	iknore				ingnore
snake	x	x	sakes				sanake
adore	x	x	x				adare
core	x	x	x				care
spine	x	x	x				sayn
cake	x	x	x				x
mistake	mestake	x	mastke				mastak

Appendix D: Progress Monitoring: Sight word practice

Level 1	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time
Jafrul	29/32 0:59	32/32 0:39	32/32 0:39	32/32 0:37			
Abu	30/32 0:33	31/32 0:34	31/32 0:27	32/32 0:26	32/32 0:24		
Sabab	30/32 0:34	31/32 0:24	31/32 0:34	32/32 0:26	31/32 0:26		
Shaima							
Aniut							
Zackary	24/32 0:47	25/32 0:52	27/32 0:52	32/32 0:40	32/32 0:45	32/32 0:32	
Abdulla							

Level 2	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time
Jafrul	31/37 1:53	36/37 1:12	36/37 1:00	37/37 0:50	34/37 0:56	36/37 0:40	37/37 0:41
Abu	34/37 0:44	36/37 0:33	35/37 0:25	36/37 0:24	36/37 0:28	36/37 0:23	
Sabab							
Shaima	36/37 0:25	37/37 0:21	37/37 0:22				
Aniut	36/37 1:00	37/37 0:40	36/37 0:29	37/37 0:29			
Zackary	33/37 1:38	32/37 1:04	35/37 1:05	37/37 1:10	37/37 0:52	36/37 0:39	37/37 0:33
Abdulla	31/37 1:17	34/37 1:12	36/37 1:01	37/37 0:48	37/37 0:48	37/37 0:40	37/37 0:36

Level 3	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time
Jafrul							
Abu							
Sabab							
Shaima	39/39 0:36	39/39 0:23	39/39 0:22				
Aniut	39/39 0:36	38/39 0:39	39/39 0:41	39/39 0:29			
Zackary							
Abdulla	38/39 1:04	37/39 0:56	36/39 0:51				

Level 4	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time
Jafrul							
Abu							
Sabab							
Shaima	52/52 0:27	52/52 0:29					
Aniut	51/52 0:45	52/52 0:50	52/52 0:39	50/52 0:38	52/52 0:41		
Zackary							
Abdulla							

Level 5	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time	accuracy/ time
Jafrul							
Abu							
Sabab							
Shaima	50/51 0:27	50/51 0:25	50/51 0:28	51/51 0:26			
Aniut							
Zackary							
Abdulla							

Appendix E: NWEA Scores and Growth Percentages

2010-2011 School Year

Grade	Name	Fall Reading	Winter Reading	Spring Reading	Spring Goal	Winter Growth %	Spring Growth %
2	Jafrul	150	143	169	171	(-33%)	90%
2	Abu	146	163	164	167	81%	86%
3	Sabab	152	155	172	173	14%	95%
3	Shaima	139	153	163	160	67%	114%
3	Aniut	148	158	164	169	48%	76%
4	Zackary	155	141	189	172	(-82%)	200%
6	Abdulla	145	149	164	158	31%	146%

AVERAGE GROWTH PERCENTAGE: 16%

2011-2012 School Year

Grade	First Name	Fall Reading	Winter Reading	Spring Reading	Spring Goal	Winter Growth %	Spring Growth %
2	Jafrul	154	156		171	12%	
2	Abu	153	156		170	18%	
3	Sabab	163	170		175	58%	
3	Shaima	165	193		177	233%	
3	Aniut	171	177		182	55%	
4	Zackary	149	201		159	520%	
6	Abdulla	152	174		162	220%	

AVERAGE GROWTH PERCENTAGE: 159%