

Connecting Word Study and Reading

By

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Abstract

How is phonics instruction best taught to first and second grade students? Should phonics be taught explicitly or should phonics be taught when needed? This action research explores a combination of both of those beliefs. The purpose of this action research was to notice how additional instruction and practice with phonics strategies and skills affect my students' phonics learning. Ten students in an urban, independent Midwest school worked to connect their *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012) spelling patterns with identifying those word patterns in various texts while reading. This research took place over five weeks and allowed students to be set up for success through a gradual release of responsibility. This action research project confirms the importance of phonics instruction for beginning readers in first and second grade.

Introduction

When you walk into the lower-school campus of my school, you will notice classrooms full of books, comfortable areas to read including near the lit fireplace in the living room. You will find students reading books while walking through the halls, reading in classrooms on bean bag chairs or under the paper mache tree, and you will find teachers reading aloud to their students at all times of the day. Throughout the lower school, the love of reading is something that we, the teachers, pride ourselves in. We work to find books our students can love and make connections to. We, as teachers, have an important job to do. We help our students learn how to read and as students get older we teach them to read to learn. This sounds like the ideal environment, but when you dig a little deeper you may find that I have some areas of concern regarding literacy instruction. For example, we do not use any kind of coordinated reading program to guide our literacy instruction. Literacy expectations and objectives for students are determined by each grade-level teaching team with no real scope or sequence to build upon reading and writing skills from grade to grade.

As a first and second grade teacher, I have noticed elements missing from these objectives since I have been teaching at this school for the last four years. As first graders, phonics and decoding are skills that are being learned, but many second grade students continue to struggle in this area. Phonics is an important part of learning to read especially for early readers. The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns and to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). At my school, the only resource we have for any sort of phonics instruction is *Words Their Way*, “a developmental approach to phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction” (Bear, Invernizzi,

Templeton, & Johnston, 2012). This word study approach has been successful in teaching my students to learn to spell but I have observed that during small group instruction my students do not apply these learned patterns when reading. I believe that my students need something more than this piece of explicit phonics instruction to help them become better readers.

Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2012) is used as word study throughout the lower school. This word study is used by all grades kindergarten through fifth grade in various ways. In the first and second grade classrooms, this is a significant component of our literacy time. Students are grouped based on their spelling stage as determined by a qualitative spelling inventory. Our whole lower school runs on a six-day cycle. In my classroom, we introduce new word sorts to small groups of students on at the beginning of each cycle. Each day students sort their words and they complete various activities independently to practice writing their words. Spell checks are taken at the end of each cycle. The goal is that all students will score 80% or above on their spell check, which is typically what we see. We notice that many students are able to apply their learned spelling patterns in their writing but are not using the learned patterns to decode words when reading. We may include some phonics instruction while working with small reading groups, but nothing connects back to the word patterns that students are using during our word study time due to the way these small reading groups are set up.

Our literacy block can range from 60 minutes to 90 minutes a day, depending on the day in our cycle. During our literacy block, there are two full time teachers pulling small groups to work on various skills and objectives while our first and second graders rotate through some of the Daily 5 activities such as: read to self, independently work on words, and listen to reading. One day during the cycle allows for individual reading conferences with students.

Most of our first graders and a many of our struggling second grade readers continue to work toward decoding unknown words. We are introducing and modeling strategies such as stretching the word slowly or looking for chunks that are familiar. I wondered if a combination of these strategies and re-teaching phonics patterns in context *in addition to* Words Their Way instruction would help my students become more successful in phonics and decoding. This lead me to ask: How will additional instruction and practice with phonics strategies and skills affect my students' phonics learning?

Literature Review

Effective reading instruction has been a hot topic for quite some time. Our society is constantly being “flooded with information and much of that information is in print version” (Pressley & Allington, 2015, p.17). We can access an overwhelming amount of information through newspapers, blogs, and Internet websites, just to name a few. Our society “depends heavily on a literate citizenry” (Pressley & Allington, 2015, p.17). Much of what we do on a daily basis requires us to be able to read. With the new Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010) in place for many schools, students are expected to meet higher, more rigorous literacy standards than ever before. Teachers, elementary through high school, work to help their students become skilled readers. Being a skilled reader requires one to be able to recognize words, decode, and make meaning all at once. Phonics skills, in addition to decoding, are essential for setting students up for reading success. This means “the process involved in word recognition becomes so well practiced that they can proceed extremely quickly and almost effortlessly, freeing up the reader’s cognitive resources for comprehension processes” (Fletcher-Campbell, Soler, & Reid, 2009, p.24). Reading takes a lot of effort at first and only after years of practice will it become fluent and effortless (Pressley & Allington, 2015). This

leads me to wonder how do we know which path is best to take in helping our students to become skilled readers? How do we help our students to eventually become skilled readers?

The Importance of Letter-Sound Relationship

In order for students to become good readers, students first need to learn to identify letters and letter sounds. The relationship between letters and letter sounds is known as the *alphabetic principle*. One method of teaching the alphabetic principle is called phonics instruction. Phonics plays an important role in learning to read (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Once our students can begin to put sounds together, they can begin to decode and read words. More experienced readers know the English language is full of irregular patterns and sounds. As students become more aware of these irregularities, children are better able to analyze words as they become more complex (Stahl, 1998). Attention to the relationship between letters and sounds through phonics will help with decoding unknown words and will help beginning readers master many spelling patterns to become fluent readers (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). When children learn to recognize letter combinations it makes word solving more efficient (Pinnell & Fountas, 2007, p.39). Reading involves recognizing words and then understanding the meaning of these words, with the ultimate goal of understanding the text (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005, p.367).

Phonics Instruction

There has been a “great debate” on how reading and phonics should be taught in classrooms (Chall, 1996). Some educators believe reading skills should be taught in isolation from reading. Others thought that reading skills should be taught only when needed and the focus should be on making meaning from a text. Sometimes the way in which reading is taught is

decided by an entire school district; other times individual schools or even a classroom teacher may determine how reading would be best taught in the classroom.

Some educators and researchers believe that reading skills should be taught in isolation. This is known as the *skills emphasis* approach (Pressley, 2014). When using this approach, teachers explicitly teach skills such as phonics, decoding, comprehension, or vocabulary. These skills are taught and practiced in isolation. In reviews of research supporting this approach, Stahl (1998) consistently found that early and systematic phonics instruction is more effective than later and less systematic instruction... (p.344). Whole language, or *meaning emphasis*, is another approach to teaching students to read. Those who believe in this approach believe in teaching skills within the whole. This means teachers would begin teaching with a text (the whole), then we would focus on the skills only as needed. The belief of this approach is that specific “skills, are best taught in the context of the story, not taught in isolation or practiced only in worksheets” (Pressley & Allington, 2015, p.19). The teacher does not teach from a pre-determined scope and sequence but gives students information to understand what they are reading while they are reading (Stahl, 1998,). Some believe that phonics is better taught in the act of reading and writing genuine texts for authentic purposes than taught directly and explicitly by teachers (Pearson, 2004, p. 221). Teachers of whole language believe that they should teach phonics only as needed, along with authentic literature. Whole language teachers believe that “if we can be patient, these skills will come from meaningful exposure and spontaneous opportunities for mini-lessons” (Pearson, 2004).

A *balanced approach* to literacy falls between explicit phonics instruction and a whole language approach. The balanced approach is at the center because it supports early and explicit instruction in decoding and comprehension strategies and combines it with evidence for

meaning-emphasis for vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation (Pressley & Allington, 2015). There are many components to balanced literacy. Some of those components include read aloud, shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, interactive writing, and word study. A balanced approach “retains the practices that have proven useful from each era but transforms and extends them, rendering them more effective, more useful, and more supportive...”(Pearson, 2004, p.245). Students do not all learn the same way. Some students who struggle with the beginning stages of reading may benefit from explicit phonics instruction. Those who pick up decoding more quickly may not need explicit skills instruction and might benefit from the whole language approach. Using a balanced approach “helps children integrate what they already know with new strategies, skills, and content that will best serve their new and developing reading interests” (Lapp & Flood, 1997, p.699).

Children’s Literature

Several researchers have discussed the benefits to using children’s literature to help enhance phonics instruction (Lapp & Flood, 1997; Trachtenburg, 1990). When quality literature is used in conjunction with phonics instruction, learning opportunities are maximized for beginning readers (Trachtenburg, 1990, p.652). Trachtenburg explains her whole-part-whole sequence as one successful way of doing so. This involves reading a book just to enjoy listening to the whole book. Next, phonics instruction is provided using the book that was read. Then students have the opportunity to apply the new skill while reading another text.

Word Study

Word study is another component of the balanced literacy approach. “Humans have a natural interest in finding order, comparing and contrasting, and paying attention to what remains the same despite minor variations” (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnson, 2012, p.2).

Comparing and contrasting spelling features allows students to make sense of words and their patterns and also notice that there are exceptions to these patterns. Pinnell and Fountas (2007) note that efficient word solvers look for and find patterns in the way words are constructed. Noticing patterns and chunks in words can help with quicker decoding of words in a text. When readers can use a variety of strategies for decoding words quickly and efficiently, students can then focus more on comprehension (Pinnell & Fountas, 2007, p.41).

Constructivist theory suggests that individuals create their own new understandings, based upon an interaction between what they already know and new knowledge (Richardson, 1997, p.3). Word study through *Words Their Way* occurs “through hands-on activities that reflect basic cognitive learning processes” (Bear et al., 2012, p.2). Students should be “guided toward discovering patterns and generalizations among the words they examine” (Bear & Templeton, 1998, p.230). Not only is it important to study how words work, but it’s also important to “learn how to apply this information when encountering unfamiliar words in their reading (Bear & Templeton, 1998, p.229).”

I have found that there are pros and cons to focusing explicitly on phonics skills or meaning making. Using a combination of both through a balanced approach incorporates explicit instruction as well as authentic ways of incorporating the skills needed to be a good reader. In the current action research, I wanted to find out if using balanced literacy and the gradual release of responsibility would help my students make a direct connection between their word study patterns and words found in a text while reading.

Methods

The purpose of this action research was to examine the effects of a phonics approach on student learning. My research question was: How will additional instruction and practice with phonics strategies and skills affect my students' phonics learning?

Participants and Setting

This action research took place at an urban, independent school located in Minnesota. This school has two divisions- the lower school (K-5) and the upper school (6-12). There are approximately 261 students at the lower school campus. There are two full-time classroom teachers in every homeroom. The average student-to-teacher ratio is 13:1. At the lower school, 35% of the student population are students of color. 23% of all families received financial assistance on tuition during the 2015-2016 school year.

There were ten participants in this action research. To select participants, I used a nonsense word list assessment (Appendix A) to help me to know which phonemes my students understood and to notice how they blended these phonemes together to read words. I did this with all 29 students in the classroom to determine their understandings of sound/symbol relationships. Using these nonsense words allowed me to determine who could possibly benefit from additional phonics instruction. I scored students based on their ability to decode common sounds (consonant, vowel, consonant or CVC words) to less common sounds (consonant, vowel, consonant, silent e words or CVCe and consonant, vowel, vowel, consonant words or CVVC) in nonsense words. Students who scored below 80% on part one the nonsense word assessment were eligible to be participants for this action research. There were 17 out of 29 students who scored below 80% on the short vowel nonsense word list. After I collected more data on all students through the Qualitative Spelling Inventory (Bear et al., 2012) and the oral reading passage assessment from the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment Systems* (Fountas &

Pinnell, 2011), I was able to narrow down ten students who I believed would benefit from additional phonics instruction. Three of the students selected were second grade students and seven of the students were in first grade. Table 1 gives more background for each of the students who participated in this action research. All parents signed consent forms allowing their child to participate in this action research.

Table 1

Action Research Participants Background Information

Student	Background Information
1A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, female - Sees reading specialist - Nonsense word assessment: 5 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: C (below grade level)
2A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, male - Nonsense word assessment: 17 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: D
3A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, male - Nonsense word assessment: 16 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: E
1B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, male - Sees reading specialist - Nonsense word assessment: 25 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: D
2B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, male - Nonsense word assessment: data missing - Instructional reading level: E
3B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, male - Nonsense word assessment: 31 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: D
1C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second grade, female - Sees reading specialist and private reading tutor - Nonsense word assessment: 26 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: I (below grade level)

2C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second grade, male - Sees reading specialist and private reading tutor - Nonsense word assessment: - Instructional reading level: H (below grade level)
3C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second grade, female - Nonsense word assessment: 27 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: J
4C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First grade, male - Nonsense word assessment: 17 words read correctly out of 35 - Instructional reading level: I (above grade level)

Data Collection and Analysis

During this action research data were collected using three methods in order to triangulate. Triangulation allowed me to take in and see different viewpoints. This helped me to notice any themes.

Nonsense words. I administered a nonsense word list at the beginning and end of the study to note any changes in decoding skills after additional phonics instruction was given. I gave the word list to students in a one-on-one setting. I scored students' words either correct or incorrect. The nonsense word list began with short vowel sounds, followed by blends, vowel digraphs and ending with two-syllable words. Students were also timed for this assessment. I recorded how many words each student read in two minutes.

Oral reading passage. Another type of data I collected was students' reading proficiency using the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). My co-teacher and I met with each student one-on-one and read a passage aloud until a student's instructional level was found. While reading the passage aloud at his/her instructional reading level, the teacher noted errors in word recognition and decoding using a running record of the oral reading.

These data were collected at the beginning and end of the study using the same instructional level.

Observational data. The third type of data collected were open ended conversations and small group observations. I took notes two to three times per cycle for each student. My notes were kept in a three ring binder and each page was sorted by group. Each page in the three ring binder had each student's' number and space allotted for note taking. I worked with students in small groups and independently by reading short stories and poems that align with the patterns they were studying. Observations and conversations with students helped me to determine if students were learning the word patterns and I noted if students were internalizing and applying these patterns while reading with extra exposure.

Collecting these three types of classroom data helped me to notice any differences in reading skills after I provided additional phonics instruction.

Procedures

This study began at the end of September 2016 and concluded in mid-November 2016. It lasted a total of seven weeks. I spent the first week doing pre-assessments. For the next five weeks I provided direct instruction followed by another week of post-assessments. Table 2 shows the schedule of word study patterns each group was given exposure to through reading and writing.

Table 2

Word Patterns Studied for Each Instructional Cycle

<u>Cycle Number</u>	<u>Group A</u> Mixed Short Vowel Word Families	<u>Groups B and C</u> Contrasting Short and Long-Vowel Sounds and Patterns (CVC and CVCe)
Cycle 1	-an, -un, -in	Short i versus long i in CVCe
Cycle 2	-ad, -eb, -ab, -ob	Short o versus long o in CVCe
Cycle 3	-ag, -eg, -ig, -og, -ug	Short u versus long u in CVCe
Cycle 4	-ill, ell, -all	Short versus long review
Cycle 5	-ack, -ick, -ock, -uck	Final /k/ sound -ck, -ke, -k

I split students into three groups (A,B,C). These groups were made according to phonics ability in conjunction with reading levels. I worked with groups B and C on the same word study patterns but they were at significantly different reading levels so I needed to create two groups out of these students. I provided additional phonics instruction through guided reading. Students read in small groups, with a partner, or independently to reinforce word patterns that aligned with their *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012) spelling pattern during our six-day instructional cycle.

Each cycle was set up for a gradual release of responsibility (Table 3).

Table 3

Six Day Instructional Cycle

Day of Cycle	Instruction Given
Day 1	- Introduce new word sort
Day 2	- Practice spelling words independently - Read words as a group - Building words that followed each groups phonics patterns - Find and highlight words that followed the phonics pattern in a short poem
Day 3	- Practice spelling words independently - Read words as a group - Find and highlight words that followed the phonics pattern in decodable text -Read as a group -Reread with a partner
Day 4	- Practice spelling words independently - Read words as a group - Read a new text as a group (may be decodable or not) - Reread with a partner
Day 5	- Practice spelling words independently - Teacher meets one-on-one with students and listens to him/her read noting whether or not they notice their word patterns in a text.
Day 6	- Read a new text as a group - Reread with a partner - Weekly spell check

I set up each cycle so that beginning was heavily scaffolded. A typical word study cycle involved introducing students to a new word pattern (either short vowels or differentiating between short and long) at the beginning of the cycle. Each day participants would practice reading and sorting their patterns both independently and in our small reading group. Then for the next couple of days, participants would get a decodable poem, passage, or story that would use many of the same patterns they were learning during word study. Students went into the text with a highlighter to highlight words that followed their word study pattern before reading the text. Next, participants read the story along with the small group and then again with individual partners, making sure to notice their patterns. After a few days, students moved away from

decodable texts and into books at their instructional level. Students were then responsible for making the connection between their patterns they were studying and then applying what they know about those patterns in reading. On day five of the cycle, I met one-on-one with students and completed running records to note errors, self-corrections, and to notice if students were applying their new word patterns while reading.

The design of this instructional intervention gave students opportunities to gain more exposure to word patterns and phonics through both *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012) in addition to decoding similar patterns while reading. I hoped to find that being intentional about connecting word study patterns would benefit my students' phonics skills and overall reading proficiency.

After I collected pre and post assessment data, I analyzed the data to note any differences in students' decoding after additional phonics instruction had been given. I then looked for any themes or patterns that emerged by examining the pre and post assessment results in addition to open-ended conversations and observations with the students involved with the action research.

Results

Nonsense Word Assessments

All ten participants took the pre-nonsense word assessment at the beginning of October and the posttest was given mid-November. Participants read CVC words and some of those words contained blends or digraphs found at the beginning or end of a word. In addition to CVC words, the second grade participants also read words with long vowels (CVVC or CVCe).

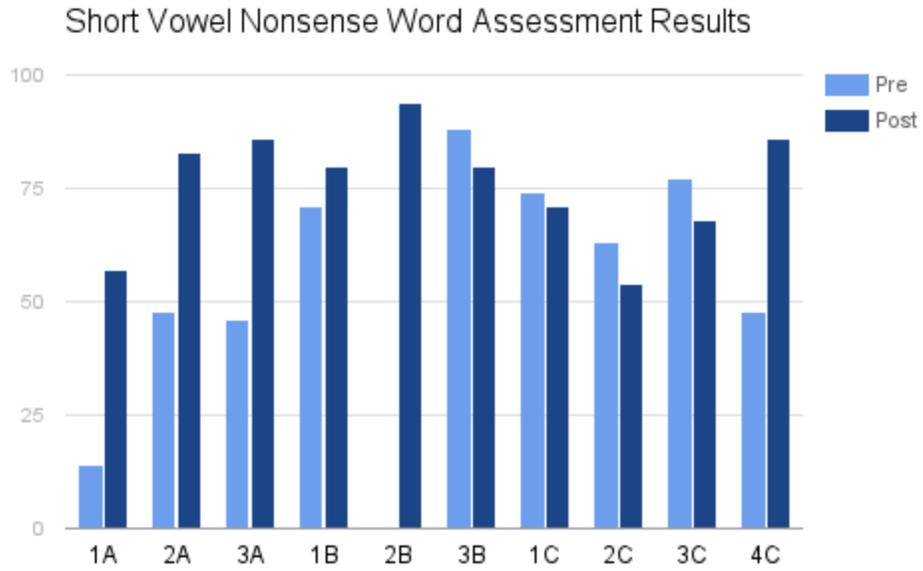


Figure 1. Short vowel nonsense word assessment results. This figure shows the pre and posttest scores by percent.

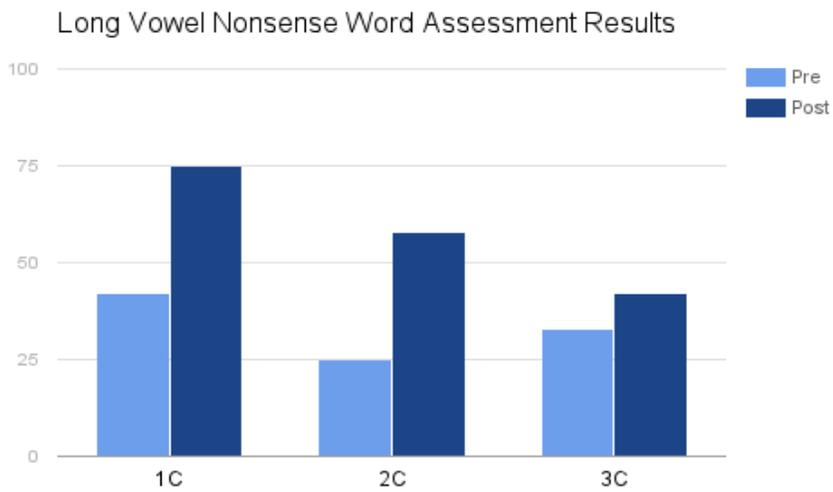


Figure 2. Long vowel nonsense word assessment results. This figure shows the pre and posttest scores for the second grade students who took part two of the nonsense word assessment.

The pre and posttest scores are represented in Figures 1 and 2 by percent of words read correctly out of 35 possible words. The pretest data for student 2B is missing so there was only a posttest score. Almost all first grade participants with the exception of 2B and 3B, made short vowel gains on the short vowel nonsense word assessment after additional phonics instruction. The highest gain was participant 1A who made a 43% gain in words read correctly. The lowest gain was participant 1B who made a 6% gain. The average gain was 35% more words read correctly. None of the second grade participants made short vowel gains. There was an average loss of 9% of the words read correctly by the second graders. When analyzing the errors the second graders made on part one, I noticed that most of the errors were in the vowel sound. Those students typically replaced the short vowel with a long vowel. Participant 1C used the long vowel sound instead of a short vowel sound in five of the ten misread words, participant 2C used the long vowel sound instead of a short vowel sound in seven of the 16 misread words, and participant 3C used the long vowel sound instead of a short vowel sound in six out of 11 misread words. The second grade participants all made long vowel gains when reading the first 12 words from part two of the nonsense assessment. The average gain was 33% more words read correctly.

I also timed participants during the reading of these nonsense words. I measured how many words participants could read in two minutes and then compared that to how many words participants read *correctly* in those two minutes. There were 35 words on part one of the nonsense word list. Table 4 shows the pre and post timed scores and notes any positive or negative changes.

Table 4

Nonsense Words Read in Two Minutes

Student	Pre Test Words Read Out of 35	Post Test Words Read Out of 35	Change	Pre Words Read Correctly	Post Words Read Correctly	Change
1A	12	18	+6	2	11	+9
2A	14	19	+5	10	18	+8
3A	15	25	+10	7	21	+14
1B	16	35*	+19	12	28	+16
2B		21			19	
3B	13	17	+4	11	11	0
1C	28	17	-9	19	11	-8
2C	35*	16	-19	22	11	-11
3C	33	35*	+2	25	24	-1
4C	22	26	+4	10	23	+13

*Indicates participants who read words in fewer than two minutes.

Oral Reading Passage

I calculated and analyzed reading accuracy for each of the participants. I collected data at the beginning and end of the study to note any changes in phonics skills and decoding. Once the instructional level was found, participants were asked to read the same text again at the end of this action research. Participants' pre and post accuracy information is shown in percentages in Figure 3.

Although gains were slight, all but one participant made gains in accuracy from pre to post benchmark assessment using the same instructional level. Participant 1B had a 1% loss in accuracy. The largest gain in accuracy was made by participant 2B by 8%.

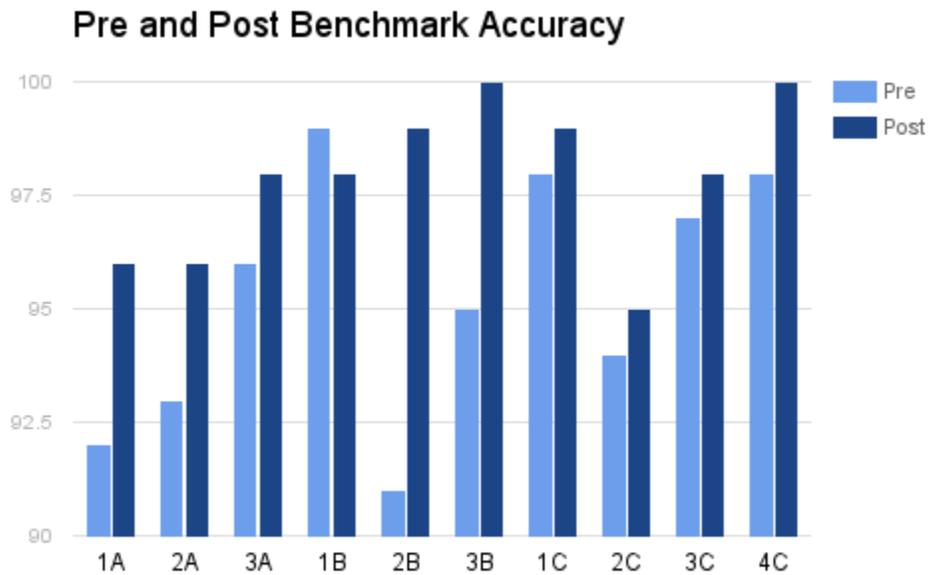


Figure 3. Pre and post benchmark accuracy. This figure shows student accuracy in reading the same passage before and after instruction.

Observations

All three groups were engaged during spelling and reading instruction. New word patterns kept students engaged, as they were eager to find words that fit in each column or find words that were *oddballs*--words that do not follow the patterns. Students in all three groups enjoyed the challenge of finding and highlighting their spelling patterns in various texts. They often compared with each other to make sure words were not missed. When it was time to read

the text, most students were on task and following along with the exception of a couple of students. Those students had a difficult time following along when it was not his/her time to read aloud. Their attention was on something other than the text. By the end of the cycle, students were bored of reading their word list. Even though students did not always enjoy it, I continued to do this activity because I wanted students to be able to read these words quickly without hesitation. Some students still could not do this at the end of the cycle.

I was surprised to find that the second grade scores on the nonsense word assessment were worse after instruction. The words studied during word study were both long and short vowels. After thinking back, I feel that I focused more on the long vowel patterns and not so much on the short vowel sounds.

During cycle one, students in groups B and C were practicing in the short and long vowel i (tin, lip vs. time, bike) word sort. The following cycle was sorting short and long o (rope, joke). At first, students relied heavily on my help with recognizing which words belonged to which columns (short vowel or long vowel) during word study. Eventually, they began to pick up on the word sorting activity and were able to do it independently with little to no support. It was helpful that this sort repeated (CVC and CVCe) with different vowels (a, i, o, u). Some students continued to have difficulty identifying *oddballs*--words that do not follow the patterns (example: give and some do not make long vowel sounds so they are called oddballs)--throughout the study.

At the beginning of the study, many students relied heavily on my scaffolding to find words in a text that followed their word pattern. It was difficult for students to take words they were just beginning to recognize and then locate them in a text with many other words. Eventually, group members helped each other identify words or noticed words that should not have been highlighted and were able to explain why. An example of this was when group C was working on highlighting words in a text. Student 3C told another student that he should not have highlighted the word *done* because “done has a (short) /u/ sound but it has a (letter) o in it.”

Another interesting finding was that once students could identify words with the silent e in a text, they were inconsistent in noticing words with a silent e if it was a multisyllabic word (outside) or had a suffix (rules). We had to slowly look at some words to determine if they made long vowel sounds or not.

Case Studies

After looking closely at the data that were collected, I noticed an opportunity to add two case studies to help me better understand results from this action research. Looking at these specific case studies helped me to examine the effects of a phonics approach on student learning. Two case studies in particular had very different experiences with this action research project.

Participant 3A began this action research focusing on short vowel sounds with the participants in group A. He scored low on his initial qualitative spelling inventory and only read 16 out of 35 words correctly on the nonsense word assessment. After two cycles of working on distinguishing between short vowel sounds and reading simple decodable books with few words

on each page, I found these tasks were too simple for him. He was quick and accurate when reading decodable texts and he scored 100% on both of his short vowel spell checks. I moved him into group B which seemed to be a better fit. After completing three cycles with group B, his posttest nonsense assessment scores showed that he was able to read 30 out of 35 words correctly. That means he read 13 more words correctly after additional phonics instruction was given. Participant 3A is a very quiet and timid student. In time, I felt that he grew more comfortable working with me and some of his classmates. I also think working in small reading and spelling groups helped to build his confidence. He was always engaged, participating, and following along during small group instruction.

Another participant, 3B, seemed to struggle through this study. He read 31 out 35 words correctly on his pre nonsense word assessment and showed a weakness in the area of common long vowels on the qualitative spelling inventory. Each week, he showed understanding on how to sort his words. After a few weeks, participant 3B could independently identify and highlight his word study words in a text. He proved to be an accurate reader that self-corrected for meaning, but needed to stop and sound out each word even if the word followed the long vowel pattern (CVCe) when reading. Even after reading a text multiple times, he had difficulty with fluently decoding text. Participant 3B also struggled with spelling his words. His words went home for additional practice each cycle. In his nonsense word post assessment, participant 3B read 28 out of 35 words correctly. That is three fewer than he read during the pre assessment. Many of those were vowel errors as he replaced the short vowel sounds with long vowels in six

of the seven errors. I feel that maybe I should have moved him to group A. I often wondered if group A would have been too easy as he was successful in decoding short vowels. Maybe he needed to feel more successes as a reader?

Discussion

The findings from this action research have the potential to change how I approach phonics instruction in my classroom. Many of the measures showed a growth in phonics and decoding skills after additional phonics instruction had been given. Providing additional phonics instruction, using a balanced approach, and using a gradual release of responsibility set many students up to be successful. Using the gradual release of responsibility allowed my students to work closely with me to learn their word study patterns and then apply those patterns when reading text. By the end of the cycle students had the responsibility of identifying familiar word patterns in a text and had gained the confidence to read them.

I found that connecting word study with reading helped my students be more aware of the words they were reading in a text. They were able to identify word patterns in their texts even if they were not the exact words but followed the same pattern (CVC, CVCe). Before this study, I did not explicitly connect word study and reading. Students practiced their words with the expectation of learning to spell them and then applied those word patterns in their writing. This instruction gave those words another purpose. Students could directly see another reason why those word patterns were important to use and know as they were finding them in books, poems, and around the school. Through this action research, I wanted my students to become successful

decoders. Recognizing these letter combinations made solving words faster allowing my students to focus more on comprehension.

Limitations

Although there were positive outcomes, there are limitations to the current study. There were things that I was not able to control and some things that I would do differently.

After conducting this action research, there are a few data collection points that I would have found helpful to include. My original plan was to find the rate of each student's reading benchmark assessment. Finding the reading rate for levels below Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011) level J is not typically done because these readers are often reading word by word so I decided against it. Many of these students had difficulty decoding and were reading word for word during the pre-assessment. After reading the same passage a couple of months later, students seemed to have read more smoothly and at a quicker rate. I am curious as to how it would have turned out.

Another set of data I would have liked to collect on all participants was part two of the nonsense word list. Group C completed both lists and I was able to compare pre and post results, but group B only read part two at the end of the study. Both groups B and C spent a significant amount of time looking at words with a silent e and I am curious as to how they would have done if I had done pre assessment.

Implications Moving Forward

As I move forward, I will continue to work to intentionally connect our word study with reading for those students that need additional phonics instruction. Purposeful connections helped students recognize and decode words that followed familiar patterns.

Unfortunately, this action research only lasted a couple of months. Both groups B and C were just being introduced to other common long vowel patterns (ai, ea, ou, etc.) and I wonder if there would be continued success in making the connections between word study and reading? I will continue to be intentional in connecting word patterns in the context of reading. It is important for students to see the connection between understanding these patterns and how they connect to reading so that they continue to notice these patterns for quicker decoding.

This information will be helpful to bring to my first and second grade teaching team. Because of the overall gains, whether slight or significant, this connection seemed to benefit many of my first grade students and the three struggling second grade students. This information would be helpful for those looking to incorporate more phonics instruction into their small reading groups. I will be an advocate for incorporating more phonics instruction in all of our first and second grade classrooms.

Finally, phonics instruction is crucial for first and second grade students to become successful readers. With the lack of scope and sequence and expectations, I felt I was stuck on knowing what was most important or what needed to take priority in literacy instruction. I knew that the *Words Their Way* (Bear et al., 2012) approach was not enough phonics instruction for my students nor was it meant to be. Through this action research project, I received the

affirmation I needed to make decisions that were in the best interest of my students. I was able to explicitly teach phonics skills to small groups of students and help them apply their new skills while reading a text. Helping my students recognize patterns in words helped them to become more accurate word solvers.

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APPENDIX A
Nonsense Word List Part I**Nonsense Word List Part I**

cal	fes	lim	poz	tuv
suz	kep	yik	toj	zas
thak	whev	shim	moch	whup
chob	jash	vuch	whib	peth
stek	brov	glan	clus	drit
trid	skez	grov	plaj	crup
blux	snim	bret	blod	trat

APPENDIX B
Nonsense Word List Assessment

Nonsense Word List Assessment

Part I: Short Vowels, Digraphs, Blends

Directions: Time the reader for two minutes. Mark each correct beginning, middle, and ending sound with a + or -. Note strengths and weaknesses on the bottom.

c-a-l _ . _ . _	f-e-s _ . _ . _	l-i-m _ . _ . _	p-o-z _ . _ . _	t-u-v _ . _ . _
s-u-z _ . _ . _	k-e-p _ . _ . _	y-i-k _ . _ . _	t-o-j _ . _ . _	z-a-s _ . _ . _
th-a-k _ . _ . _	wh-e-v _ . _ . _	sh-i-m _ . _ . _	m-o-ch _ . _ . _	wh-u-p _ . _ . _
ch-o-b _ . _ . _	j-a-sh _ . _ . _	v-u-ch _ . _ . _	wh-i-b _ . _ . _	p-e-th _ . _ . _
st-e-k _ . _ . _	br-o-v _ . _ . _	gl-a-n _ . _ . _	cl-u-s _ . _ . _	dr-i-t _ . _ . _
tr-i-d _ . _ . _	sk-e-z _ . _ . _	gr-o-v _ . _ . _	pl-a-j _ . _ . _	cr-u-p _ . _ . _
blux _ . _ . _	snim _ . _ . _	bret _ . _ . _	blod _ . _ . _	trat _ . _ . _

Words read in two minutes: _____

Notes:

APPENDIX 3
Nonsense Word List Assessment Part II**Nonsense Word List Assessment Part II**

dake	leab	pime	zove
sube	baim	vleet	kime
sool	puej	whoam	yeat
sambex	plonteb	trublen	habrock
tweeban	scrizbuf	whoplesk	plumbop
quidjusk	sinktrop	trodlew	scrunish

APPENDIX 4
Nonsense Word List Assessment

Nonsense Word List Assessment

Part II: Long Vowels (CVCe, CVVC), Two Syllables

Directions: Have the reader read each nonsense word. Time the reader for two minutes. Mark each correct beginning, middle, and ending sounds in the boxes below.. Note strengths and weaknesses on the bottom.

d-a-ke	l-ea-b	p-i-me	z-o-ve
s-u-be	b-ai-m	vl-ee-t	k-i-me
s-oo-l	p-ue-j	wh-oa-m	y-ea-t
s-a-m-be-x	pl-o-n-t-e-b	tr-u-bl-e-n	h-a-br-o-ck
tw-ee-b-a-n	scr-i-z-b-u-f	wh-o-pl-e-sk	pl-u-m-b-o-p
qu-i-d-j-u-sk	s-i-n-k-tr-o-p	tr-o-dl-ew	scr-u-n-i-sh

Words read in two minutes: _____

Notes: