The Benefits of Systematic Phonics Instruction

With First Grade Students

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Abstract

Twenty first grade students enrolled in a rural Midwest school participated in this study.

The purpose of the study was to determine if the implementation of a systematic phonics program improved the students' written vocabulary acquisition. Progress was made in phoneme segmentation fluency as well as in nonsense word fluency through the use of a systematic phonics approach to reading. Benefits of the systemic phonics instruction curriculum was determined by five monthly assessments using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Emergent Literacy Skills. Results indicated that as a class the students improved their vocabulary skills.
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Chapter I: Introduction

As a first grade teacher for fourteen years, the researcher was looking for ways to improve her students’ reading skills. After trying several different phonics curriculums, she wanted to test the hypothesis that a systematic approach to phonics would be beneficial to students’ literacy. She decided to investigate systematic phonic instruction for her graduate project and determine if this approach to phonics did indeed increase the student’s written vocabulary acquisition.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program in a rural mid-western first grade classroom improved students’ written vocabulary acquisition. The research questions were: (1) How did the professional literature define systematic phonics instruction? (2) According to the literature reviewed what were the benefits of implementing a systematic phonics program? (3) What characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program were identified in the professional literature? (4) According to the literature reviewed, what contributed to the successful implementation of a systematic phonics program? (5) Did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics instruction program was implemented?

Justification

The researcher believed that a systematic phonics program would benefit the students in this rural mid-western first grade classroom. This belief was based on the experience of previously using a systematic phonics program and found that it was beneficial. The benefits to the students were that they had learned the skills to decode
and understand the structure of the words. Support for her belief was found in the professional literature where Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) and Smith (2003) stated that the teaching of phonics at an early grade would enhance students’ reading abilities.

What prompted the researcher to propose the action research project was that the district’s literacy curriculum was changed and the systematic phonics program was eliminated. The researcher believed that a strong phonics background was necessary for teaching first-grade students to read. Therefore, the researcher wanted to use the systematic phonics strategy to exemplify benefits of the program so that other first grade teachers might want to use this type of instruction in their classrooms.

**Definition of Terms**

**Alphabetic Principle:** The basic understanding in an alphabetic writing system that each significant speech sound has its own graphic counterpart.

**Analogy Phonics:** An instructional strategy that focuses on using parts of words the children already know to identify new or unfamiliar words.

**Analytic Phonics:** An instructional strategy that uses the whole-to-part approach.

**Blending:** The ability to act on a printed word breaking it into parts, giving each letter or letter combination its corresponding sound, and pronouncing the word.

**Core Words:** Basic words that follow simple patterns.

**Decode:** The ability to analyze spoken or graphic symbols of a familiar language to ascertain their intended meaning.

**First-Grade Class:** A group of children that are six or seven years old.
**Grapheme:** The smallest part of written language that represents a phoneme in the spelling of a word.

**Patterns:** Simple letter order that forms words. For example, consonant-vowel-consonant could form the words dog, cat, fin, etc.

**Phoneme:** A minimal sound unit of speech that, when contrasted with another phoneme, affects the naming of words in a language, as /b/ in book contrasts with /t/ in took.

**Onset:** The consonants preceding the vowel of a syllable.

**Rime:** A vowel and any following consonants of a syllable, /ook/ in book.

**Segmenting:** The division of a word into its component phonemes or speech sounds.

**Synthetic Phonics:** An instructional strategy that uses the part to whole approach.

**Systematic Phonics Instruction:** A method of instruction that stresses letters and sound correspondence in a very directed and systematic teaching strategy.

**Word Endings:** Letters (Suffixes) added to the end of a word to form a new word.

**Written Vocabulary Acquisition:** Words students have mastered in terms of reading, spelling, and comprehension.

**Limitations and Appropriate Use of Results**

This project was limited by two factors. First, the group was demographically homogeneous coming from similar racial and economic backgrounds. Second, this study was conducted over a ninety-day semester, so the long term benefits cannot be assessed. Finally, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other settings, grade levels, or student populations. However, the results of this study could be used by teachers to inform their decision about using systematic phonics instruction in their classroom.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

The purpose of this chapter was to review the literature pertinent to a systematic phonics instruction program. The specific research questions investigated throughout this project were: (1) How did the professional literature define systematic phonics instruction?

According to the literature reviewed what were the benefits of implementing a systematic phonics program?

(3) What characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program were identified in the professional literature?

(4) According to the literature reviewed, what contributed to the successful implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program?

(5) Did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics program was implemented?

Research question (1): How did the professional literature define systematic phonics instruction?

According to the literature, systematic phonics instruction was defined as “an orderly, planned and coordinated instructional progression sometimes set to a set of activities and materials, and sometimes to the schedule of materials” (Villaume and Brabham, 2003, p.480). According to Ehri (2001), systematic phonics instruction (SPI) taught beginning readers the major grapheme-phoneme correspondence and how these were used to decode and spell words. In addition, she stated that grapheme referred to letters and phonemes referred to the sounds they made. Ehri also explained that this instruction was to be done in a clearly defined sequence. She concluded that the grapheme-phoneme correspondence is the basis of the alphabetic principle. Grapheme-phoneme correspondence was the ability to match letters with the sound they made.
The alphabetic principle was the basic understanding that each significant speech sound had its own graphic counterpart as noted by Ehri (2001). A graphic counterpart was the written letter that corresponded with a sound. She emphasized that due to the complexity and variables of the English language it was difficult to learn. This made systematic phonics instruction even more important to teach because children had difficulty deciphering the complex system on their own (Ehri). Therefore, SPI was espoused as a logical and developmentally appropriate method for children to learn language.

Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) stated a primary goal of a systematic phonics instruction program was to teach students to read words in or out of text in a prescribed sequence. In support of this goal, Ehri (2001) acknowledged that phonics instruction was thought to not only help students read words, but also comprehend what they had read. She continued that systematic and explicit phonics instruction was most effective when introduced early. Thus, Ehri concluded that kindergarten and first grade students would benefit the most from a SPI program.

Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) as well as Ehri (2001) emphasized that systematic phonics programs clearly identified a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships and then organized the introduction of these relationships into a logical instructional sequence. In addition, Smith (2003) identified that the teaching of phonics should begin with simple regular forms and then progress to more complicated and irregular words. Armbruster et al. also noted that effective phonics instruction should include four different components. These components were: (a) alphabetic
knowledge, (b) phonemic awareness, (c) vocabulary development, and (d) the reading of text.

Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) stated that systematic phonics instruction should provide practice with letter-sound relationships in a predetermined sequence. Further, the researchers noted that as children learned to use these relationships they were more efficient at decoding words. Ehri (2001) came to the conclusion that the aim of systematic phonics instruction was to help children acquire alphabetic knowledge and used it to read and spell words.

An example of a structured, systematic, and multi-sensory phonics program was Saxon Phonics and Spelling Saxon (2003). This method of teaching beginners to read and spell used the sounds for each letter or letter cluster and the rules governing the use of those sounds. When students understood the sound/letter relationship then they could be considered successful, independent readers. Additionally, the publisher viewed this phonics series as strictly supplemental and should be used in conjunction with a basal reading program.

It could be concluded that systematic phonics instruction is a predetermined planned curriculum that is implemented in a specific sequence as described by Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) as well as Villaume and Brabham (2003). As a result of this planned curriculum, students recognized the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes in order to formulate vocabulary words. In addition, Saxon (2003) asserted that the ultimate goal of a systematic phonics instruction program was reading comprehension.
Research question (2): According to the literature reviewed what were the benefits of implementing a systematic phonics program?

Smith (2003) stated that systematic phonics instruction was important for beginning reading instruction because it stressed the how to read instead of what the students had read. He explained that for the how process children were first introduced to core words and patterns, then word endings, rimes, and onsets would be added as students learned the material. He continued to state this process followed a very prescribed and definite order. Furthermore, Smith noted that students were taught how words were segmented and blended as part of the SPI. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) recognized that the SPI approach helped students decode difficult and unfamiliar words. Moreover, they noted that the hallmark of SPI was direct teaching of a set of letter and sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence. These strategies were successful because they built on students’ prior knowledge, meaning that as students learned the basic concepts, then additional strategies were introduced.

Smith (2003) recommended that SPI be used early in a child’s reading instruction. He continued to state that it was most successful if introduced in kindergarten or first grade because that was the critical time when children were learning to read. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) concluded that the SPI made a large contribution to children’s reading growth in the early years of instruction because it was systematic and carefully sequenced. Students benefited from SPI because the phonemic concepts were introduced, reinforced, reviewed often and practiced.

One example of SPI was Saxon Phonics and Spelling (2003). The Saxon pedagogy dispersed instruction, practice, and assessments throughout the lessons and
school year. After every fifth lesson, students completed a written and oral assessment.

In addition, Saxon Phonics and Spelling publishers asserted this pedagogy was highly effective because it allowed students to gain then retain critical phonics and reading skills. The core of the Saxon Phonics and Spelling was based on three premises (a) instruction is incremental and distributed across the grade level; (b) practice is continual and distributed across the level; and (c) assessment is cumulative and distributed across the level. The Saxon series was a success oriented program because it enabled most children to develop a solid foundation in phonics that led them to become successful readers and spellers. The premise for success of the Saxon program was that it built on students’ prior knowledge and the new learning was presented incrementally in the lessons. Each increment was reviewed throughout the year, and provided every child the exposure needed to achieve success.

While the previously cited authors explained the benefits for typically developing students, Chall (1996) explained that the systematic approach was beneficial to students with reading or learning problems. Chall noted that because of the sequential manor in which phonics was taught, students with learning difficulties analyzed words and sounded them out phonetically. Another benefit of systematic phonics instruction was that it was helpful to students of all socioeconomic groups as noted by Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001), because of the prescribed manor it is taught and lack of cultural bias. A qualitative study by Van Horn (1999) found Saxon Phonics helped build students’ self-esteem because it enabled them to have successful reading experiences.

After reviewing the literature, the benefits of systematic phonics instruction, as exemplified in the Saxon Phonics and Spelling Program (2003), were evident in three
major ways. First, SPI proved to be most helpful when introduced early in a child’s reading instruction as proposed by Smith (2003). Second, Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) as well as Smith concluded that SPI taught students how to decode words in addition to forming new words. Third, it was a teaching strategy that proved to be beneficial to all socioeconomic groups and students with learning difficulties. Hence, the benefits of SPI warranted its inclusion in the early childhood literacy curriculum.

Research question (3): What characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program were identified in the professional literature?

Chall (1996) stated that an effective systematic phonics program must include specific instruction in the areas of listening, writing, seeing, and saying. She continued to state that students must be able to apply what they have learned. Also, Chall mentioned that the teacher should introduce the concepts both orally and visually, then students should be given time to practice what they have learned. She recommended that this should be followed by teacher evaluation with feedback given to the students and additional instruction provided when necessary.

Ehri (2001) stated there were several approaches to teaching phonics systematically, “these include synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset-rime phonics, and phonics through spelling” (p.3). The two most commonly used are synthetic and analytic phonics instruction. Ehri explained that synthetic phonics program taught the part-to-whole approach while analytic phonics used the whole-to-part method. She continued to explain that phonics, through spelling, taught children to segment words and to write the phonemes in words. Furthermore, she suggested that phonics, in the context of a sentence, taught children to use letter-sound
correspondences along with context clues to identify unfamiliar words. Ehri proceeded to note that analytic phonics taught children to use parts of written words they already knew to identify new words. Equally important, Ehri recommended that the children were taught to use part of these words to decode unfamiliar words by pronouncing the shared rime and blending it with the new onset.

Allington (2005) recommended that a systematic phonics program should include instruction in five areas. This was accomplished by phonemic awareness instruction, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension using a variety of techniques. The Saxon program corresponded to Allington’s recommendations in three of the five areas, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. Further, the Saxon program included lessons on alphabetizing and handwriting. In an earlier work on SPI, Chall (1996) suggested that published programs include textbooks, workbooks or worksheets. However, Chall noted that teachers should not rely heavily on workbook pages, but allow student to use manipulatives such as letter tiles to help formulate words. Chall added that teacher created materials might also be beneficial to students. The Saxon series incorporated all of these suggested best practices and developed a multi-sensory program that used auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic teaching techniques. Ehri (2001) concluded that although systematic phonics programs differed in several ways, they generally involved direct instruction from the teacher. In the Saxon program direct interaction was the primary mode of teaching reading.

As found in the literature, the five key characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program included phonemic awareness instruction, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In addition to these characteristics, a successful SPI
program included a variety of visual and tactile instructional aids to help students learn to read.

**Research question (4): According to the literature reviewed, what contributed to the successful implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program?**

Ehri (2001) had two recommendations for a systematic phonics instruction program. First the program should be implemented by knowledgeable teachers who are dedicated to the program. Second, Ehri continued to explain that in order for a systematic phonics instruction program to be effective it had to be combined with other forms of instruction such as a basal series, thus creating a comprehensive program. Saxon (2003) concurred with Ehri in that this program could be used in addition to any basal series. In addition, she added that it was important for administrators as well as the teachers to be aware of this fact. Both Saxon and Ehri strongly emphasized that SPI was only one component of an effective reading program.

Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2001) recommended three types of the materials were needed for an effective systematic instruction program. They included (a) books and stories that contained controlled vocabulary words as well as (b) letter tiles and (c) alphabet cards for students to use to manipulate words on their own. The Saxon Phonics and Spelling programs provided the teachers with easy to use lesson scripts with clearly defined objectives and summaries of the lessons. The kits also contained the materials needed for all of the lessons including fluency readers, books with controlled vocabulary, worksheets, letter tiles, and game card activities.
Therefore, successful systematic phonics instruction should be used by a knowledgeable teacher with the support of the administration and use a variety of teaching materials. It should also be used as a supplement to a basal series.

Conclusion

Upon completion of the review of literature, the researcher drew two conclusions. First, systematic phonics instruction (SPI) was defined by Villaume and Brabham (2003), Ehri (2001) and Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn (2001) as an extremely organized plan of instruction in which information was presented in a prescribed manor with Saxon Phonics and Spelling (2003) being an example of a SPI program.

Second, a systematic phonics instruction program should be used in conjunction with other reading strategies and should be carried out by knowledgeable teachers with the support of the administration. Materials needed for successful implementation of a program included texts with controlled vocabulary as well as letter tiles and alphabet cards. In a SPI, program students were taught that there was a direct correspondence between letters and sounds and how they were joined to form words (Smith, 2003). Chall (1996) recognized that SPI was a proven beneficial strategy to all types of students, including those with learning problems. Smith also advised that SPI be introduced early in a child’s reading instruction. Ehri (2001) concluded that there several approaches to teaching systematic phonics instruction, but should be executed by knowledgeable teachers. Allington, (2005) identified phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension as necessary components of a successful program. Ehri concluded that SPI was just one strategy used to teach children to read and this program should be used in conjunction with other reading instruction techniques.
After reviewing the literature, the researcher became familiar with systematic phonics instruction and believed it to be beneficial strategy that she wanted to reintroduce to her students. To that end, the researcher began planning and implementing her action research project.
Chapter III: Methods and Procedures

The purpose of this project was to determine if the implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program in a rural mid-western first grade classroom improved students’ written vocabulary acquisition. The research questions were: (1) How did the professional literature define systematic phonics instruction? (2) According to the literature reviewed what were the benefits of implementing a systematic phonics program? (3) What characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program were identified in the professional literature? (4) According to the literature reviewed, what contributed to the successful implementation of a systematic phonics program? (5) Did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics instruction program was implemented?

In order to answer the fifth research question, did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics program was implemented? The researcher gathered data following reading instruction for her first-grade students using the Saxon Phonics and Spelling Program (2003). To assess the progress of her students and to determine if students’ written vocabulary instruction improved, the researcher used the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; Good & Kaminski, 2003) assessment at the beginning of the school year to establish a baseline for the project. In addition, DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) monthly progress monitoring was also conducted by the researcher. A second DIBELS assessment was conducted after the first semester in January 2006 to assess students’ mastery of the basic phonics concepts while using this instructional strategy.
Participants

Twenty first-grade students participated in the study whose ages ranged from 6 to 7 years old. They were enrolled in a homogeneous classroom in a small rural school in a Midwestern state with ninety-percent being European American. Conversely, the pupils were a developmentally and academically diverse group. They were developmentally diverse in the sense that they varied widely in the social skills, time on attending at a task, and overall maturity. Academically the class was diverse in ability to master concepts, retain information, and apply the content. The class was evenly split in terms of gender with ten males and ten females.

Treatment/Intervention

The intervention used during this project was the implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program. Students were instructed using the Saxon Phonics and Spelling Program (Saxon, 2003) grade one program. The project measured the student’s progress over the course of the first semester from August 2005 to January of 2006. During that time, a Saxon Phonics and Spelling lesson was planned and implemented every school day. The lesson was scheduled for mid-morning after the formal reading instruction from the basal reader. The length of the Saxon lesson averaged 40 minutes ranging from 35 to 45 minutes depending upon the material to be taught.

The Saxon program was a highly structured, systematic, multi-sensory program that was based on the philosophy of incremental development of new skills and continual review throughout the year (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2002). The first grade Saxon program focused on phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, alphabetizing,
handwriting, and fluency. The daily lessons were comprised of three main parts: lesson warm-up, new increment, and application and continual review. The first portion of the lesson was for reviewing skills using various kinesthetic activities. Letter tiles were used in place of paper and pencil to form words and practice spelling. The second segment was for introducing new concepts. This phase included phonics activities, handwriting, and spelling rules. Meanwhile, letter cards and picture cards were used to visualize the concepts. Additionally, sight words were also taught during this phase of the lesson. The third segment rotated through different activities including worksheets for school and home, a fluency reader, small group activities, and assessments.

Instruments/Protocols

The DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) was an instrument tool used in the study to assess students' progress. The DIBELS consisted of booklet for each student that contained four assessment instruments of which only two were used for this project (see Appendix A). The two assessment instruments measured phoneme segmentation and nonsense word fluency. The two that were not included measured letter naming and oral reading fluency. The reasons for their exclusion was that each assessment was only administered once during the school year. Letter naming was assessed at the very beginning of the school year and oral reading fluency at the very end. Therefore, neither pre- nor post-test data was not available pertaining to letter naming and oral reading fluency.

Students' booklets contained instructions for administering the DIBELS assessment, words for them to segment and read, as well as a scoring page. Scores from the booklet were entered in a database that ultimately provided print outs of individual
student and class scores that were given to the classroom teacher, building administrator, and sent home to parents (who only received their child’s score).

**Procedures**

To begin the project, the researcher approached the principal of the elementary school and presented her proposed action research project to him. After discussing the benefits of the project, he approved of and supported the conducting of the study. Upon receiving approval of the principal, the researcher sent a letter home with the students informing their parents of the action research project (see Appendix B). Important components of the parents’ letter were that results were to be used for research purposes and that all scores would be reported in the aggregate. This meant that their children’s individual scores could not be discerned or interpreted. There were not any objections by parents to their children participating in the project. With approval by the principal and support of the parents, the researcher started the project.

The phonics instruction was implemented using whole group method in the first grade classroom. The Saxon script or prescribed lesson plan was followed by the instructor. Components included the review of previous skills, the introduction of the new material that was often modeled by the teacher, and finally a practice section. Weekly written evaluations were given to the whole group as well as individual oral evaluations. According to DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) guidelines, students should be assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year. Additionally, DIBELS allowed for monthly progress monitoring.

For this study, monthly progress monitoring as well as the beginning and mid-year evaluations were used. Due to the time restraints of this project, the end of the year
evaluation was not considered as part of this study. Specifically, data from phoneme segmentation fluency and nonsense word fluency assessments at the beginning and middle of the school year were used in this study.

The initial DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) assessment was given by a team of school staff in the library. The assessment team consisted of nine classroom teachers, two intervention specialists, a speech pathologist, a special needs teacher, and the school principal. A small group of students was assembled and each of the three indicators of the assessment was conducted by members of the assessment team (Note: Letter naming was only assessed during the initial assessment. Therefore, it was not considered during this study.) Results were recorded during the assessment on the test booklet and later were entered on the data base. By having the results printed for the teacher they could be used for intervention and progress monitoring.

The DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) assessment of phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF) and nonsense word fluency (NWF) were administered and analyzed using the standard format and materials prescribed by DIBELS. Data was collected and analyzed for purposes of intervention and justification of the systematic phonics program. During each segment of the evaluation students were given oral directions on how to respond and the actual evaluation was done in the one minute time frame. For the PSF assessment, students orally provided responses for the phonemes heard in each word as the evaluator recorded the results in the students score booklet. At the conclusion of this portion of the test, the results were counted and recorded on the score sheet. The student then proceeded to another station where the NWF segment was administered. Again, students were given oral directions and then shown a paper with the nonsense
words listed on it. This segment was also timed for one minute and the evaluator recorded the results in the students' booklet. At the conclusion of this segment, the results were counted and recorded on the score sheet. Finally, after the students were evaluated the results were put into the school DIBELS data base and the results were distributed to the classroom teachers and administration. The data was examined so conclusions and interventions could be made.

The PSF assessment section measured the child's ability to segment individual phonemes. This was a direct measure of phoneme awareness. An example was when the student was told the word fish. The child should then be able to articulate the individual sounds /f/i/sh. The teacher assessing the students would record their results in their test booklet.

The NWF assessment section measured the child's ability to read nonsense or not real words. Specifically, it measured the ability to link letters with sounds (alphabetic principle) and uses that knowledge to decode three-letter syllables that are alone nonsense words. Some examples of nonsense words included in the assessment were wub, vus, zel, and ros. The teacher administering this segment of the test would record the student's results in their scoring booklet during the one minute timed assessment.

Timeline

In August 2005, the researcher approached the school principal and asked for his approval of the project. Upon receiving his approval, a parent letter was sent home during the first week of school.

The researcher began instructing her students using the Saxon Phonics and Spelling program (2003) on the first day of school. A routine for learning phonics was
quickly established as they progressed in the program. The weekly evaluations were beneficial to monitor the student’s progress and provide intervention when needed.

The initial DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) assessment was given during the third week of school in early September. In addition, the researcher measured students’ progress on a monthly basis using the DIBELS progress monitoring instrument that corresponded exactly to the benchmark DIBELS assessment conducted in September and January. The monthly data was collected in October, November, and December.

**Data Analysis**

Students’ scores from the September and January DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) were written the test booklet and entered into a database. Scores from the October, November, and December supplemental DIBELS assessments were recorded on a graph and kept by the researcher. After all five assessments were completed, the researcher received print outs from the two school wide DIBELS assessments and along with the graphs from the supplemental assessments, entered the data into a spreadsheet for analysis.

First grade benchmarks established by Good, Kaminski, and Smith (2003) for the phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF) portion of the test were as follows: students who scored less than 10 were considered to have a deficit, a score of 10-35 was considered to be an emergent reader and a score of 35 or more was an established reader. This meant that students should be able to segment 35 individual sounds in words during the one-minute assessment to reach the benchmark goal.

DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) established separate goals for January and September nonsense word fluency (NWF) portion of the test. September benchmark
goals were as follows, 13 or less was considered to be at risk of not becoming a fluent reader, a score of 13-24 was considered to be at some risk, and a score of 24 or more was considered a low risk. The January benchmark were 30 or below was to be at a deficit, 30-50 was an emergent reader, while 50 or above was considered to be an established reader. This meant that students should be able to read 50 nonsense words or more during the one-minute assessment to be considered and established reader.

Conclusion

With procedures clearly delineated and implemented, data collection commenced at the beginning of the school year. In order to answer the research question, did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics instruction program was implemented, monthly assessments were conducted leading to the final DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) assessment in January of 2006. Upon collection of the data, the researcher began to analyze the data and interpret the results.
Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of a systematic phonics instruction program in a rural mid-western first grade classroom improved students’ written vocabulary acquisition. The research questions were: (1) How did the professional literature define systematic phonics instruction? (2) According to the literature reviewed what were the benefits of implementing a systematic phonics program? (3) What characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program were identified in the professional literature? (4) According to the literature reviewed, what contributed to the successful implementation of a systematic phonics program? (5) Did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics instruction program was implemented?

In order to answer the fifth research question, data was collected using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS; Good & Kaminski, 2003) assessment instrument that was administered at monthly intervals from September 2005 to January 2006. For the purpose of this study, the phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF) and nonsense word fluency (NWF) sections of the DIBELS was used in data collection. Both PSF and NWF are considered the building blocks of vocabulary acquisition and emergent literacy (Allington, 2005). According to Good and Kaminski (2003), PSF was defined as the ability to pronounce the individual sounds that comprise a word. In addition, Good et al. defined NWF as the ability to recognize and pronounce any word. In this case, the words are not real words, but require the student to use decoding and pronunciation skills.
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

In order to determine students’ progress in acquiring the basic vocabulary skills of phoneme segmentation fluency and nonsense word fluency, data was collected using the results of the DIBELS assessment at five monthly intervals. Results indicated that all twenty students’ vocabulary skills improved during the semester. The specific indicators of their improvement were the benchmark goals established by Good, Kaminski, and Smith (2002). For phoneme segmentation fluency, the benchmark goal was 35 individual sounds per minute. If students reached or exceeded this benchmark, they were considered to be established readers. Readers was a term used by Good et al. on the DIBELS progress report given to the parents, teachers, and school administrators. This term should be interpreted that students are readers in the area of phonemic awareness, which include PSF and NWF. Students who scored at 10 or below were considered to be at a deficit, while students who scored in the 10-35 range were considered to be emergent readers.

The results of the first of five assessments conducted in September indicated that five students were in the 10-35 range, two in the 35-45 area, and the remaining thirteen were in the 45 or above area. The lowest score for the class was an 11 while the highest student scored a 69 creating an average score of 45. This meant that 80% of the class was either at or exceeded the benchmark goal.

During the months of October, November, and December, students’ progress was assessed and monitored by the researcher. The data from these three interim assessments were collected and analyzed as part of this project. In October, two students were in the 10-35 range, three in the 35-45 area, with the remaining fifteen students at 45 or higher.
The class average in October was 50 with 63 being the highest score achieved and 16 the lowest score. This meant that 90% of the class met or exceeded the benchmark goal of 35.

In November, the same twenty students were evaluated using the DIBELS progress monitoring process. This time the class average was 55 with 72 being the highest score achieved and 22 the lowest. One student remained in the 10-35 scoring range with one in the 35-45 area. The remaining eighteen students scored at 45 or higher. Hence, 95% of the students in the class met the benchmark goal of 35 in November.

The December progress monitoring results indicated that the class as a whole had an average score of 59. The highest score achieved this month was a 78 while the lowest score was 24. Overall, one student continued to be in the 10-35 range while the remaining nineteen students had achieved a score of 45 or higher. Again, 95% of the class met the benchmark goal of 35 this month.

In January, the winter or mid-year DIBELS assessment was given by the team. Results indicated that nineteen of the twenty students evaluated were at the benchmark goal of 35 or higher. One student evaluated scored a 26 which put him in the category of an emergent reader. It was determined after the January assessment that twelve students were in the 45-70 range with the remaining seven at 70 or above. The class average for January was 63 with 88 being the highest score achieved and 26 the lowest score. In summary, 95% of the class had reached the benchmark goal of 35. In order to see the progress students made in phoneme segmentation fluency over the course of the
semester, the percentage of students reaching the benchmark score of 35 at the five monthly DIBELS assessments during the first semester are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Phoneme Segmentation Fluency for Months September through January.

The data indicated that over time, the percent of students reaching the benchmark goal of being able to pronounce 35 phonemes per minute increased the first three months and then maintained that percentage the final two months of the study.

Nonsense Word Fluency

Along with assessing students’ progress in phoneme segmentation fluency, their nonsense word fluency (NWF) was assessed as well. For the purpose of this study, students NWF progress was assessed five times at monthly intervals. The twenty students who participated in this study were evaluated using the DIBELS (Good & Kaminski, 2003) in the school wide assessments conducted in September 2005 and January 2006. These same students were also given monthly DIBELS progress
monitoring assessments during the months of October, November, and December by the researcher in this project.

The September through November benchmark goals established by DIBELS for this segment of the evaluation were based on the number of nonsensical words a student could read and pronounce in one minute. Students receiving a score of 13 or below were considered to be at risk, students receiving a score of 13-24 were considered to be at some risk and students receiving a score of 24 or higher were considered to be a low risk. Therefore, a score of 24 or above was considered the benchmark for being a competent student. For the final two assessments, in December and January, according to the DIBELS guidelines, the benchmark goals changed from 24 nonsensical words per minute to 50 words per minute.

During the September assessment, no one received a score below 13, three students were in the 13-24 range, and seventeen students were in the 24 or above area. The class average score that month was 42 nonsensical words pronounced per minute with 93 words being the highest score achieved and 14 the lowest. This meant that 85% of the class met the benchmark goal of 24 or scored higher.

In October, the progress monitoring for the nonsense word fluency was conducted by the researcher. The class average this month was 52 nonsensical words pronounced per minute with 107 words being the highest score and 20 words being the lowest. There were two students who scored in the 13-24 range with the remaining eighteen in the 25 or higher range. This meant that 90% of the class had met the benchmark goal during this month.
November’s class average for nonsense word fluency was 60 nonsensical words pronounced per minute. The highest score was 116 words and the lowest score was 20 words. This time one student remained in the 13-24 range, with nineteen students having scores of 25 or more. This meant 95% of the class had obtained the benchmark goal during the month.

During December, the benchmark goal changed from 24 nonsensical words to 50. Results for December’s progress monitoring were as follows. Thirteen students reached the benchmark goal of 50 or higher, with the remaining seven scoring at 49 or below. This meant that 65% of the class reached the higher benchmark goal in December. This month the class average was 63 words per minute with 136 being the highest score and 22 the lowest.

The DIBELS assessment was given by the school wide team in January for the mid-year results. Seventeen of the twenty students achieved the benchmark goal of 50 or above this month. Three students scored below 50 with scores of 36, 40, and 45. The class average for January was 78. A high score of 142 was achieved with five students reaching 100 or above. Therefore, it was determined that 85% of the class had reached the benchmark goal of 50 or above in nonsense word fluency. The percentages of students reaching the benchmark goals according to the DIBELS guidelines at each monthly assessment are presented Figure 2.

The benchmark goal for September, October, and November having students pronounce 24 nonsensical words per minute. In December and January, according to the DIBELS guidelines, the benchmark goal was changed to having student pronounce 50 nonsensical words per minute.
The data indicated that as a class, students made progress in pronouncing the number of nonsensical words per minute in the first three months of the project. The dip in the percentage of students meeting the benchmark goal from November to December was due to the change in the benchmark from 24 words per minute to 50. In January, when the new benchmark goal of 50 was used, the percentage of students reaching the benchmark increased.

**Summary**

The twenty first grade students who participated in this research project were instructed using the systematic phonics approach made progress toward increasing their vocabulary acquisition through phoneme segmentation fluency and nonsense word fluency instruction. They were able to use the tools and skills they were taught to sound out and analyze written texts. According to the DIBELS test results, 95% of the students reached the benchmark goal of 35 in phoneme segmentation with progress being
achieved each month. In addition, 85% of the students in this study reached the
benchmark goal of 50 for the nonsense word fluency during the mid-year evaluation.
Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of a systematic phonics instruction (SPI) program in a rural mid-western first grade classroom improved students’ written vocabulary acquisition. The research questions were: (1) How did the professional literature define systematic phonics instruction? (2) According to the literature reviewed what were the benefits of implementing a systematic phonics program? (3) What characteristics of a systematic phonics instruction program were identified in the professional literature? (4) According to the literature reviewed, what contributed to the successful implementation of a systematic phonics program? (5) Did written vocabulary acquisition in the rural mid-western first grade classroom improve when a systematic phonics instruction program was implemented?

Meaning of Findings

The findings clearly indicate that students made progress in learning how to decode and pronounce words over the course of the semester. It is worth noting that an assessment instrument developed independently from the curriculum measured the students’ progress. This means that the lessons of the Saxon Phonics and Spelling program (Simmons, 2003) that teach phonemic awareness skills were written without regard for assessment protocols of the DIBELS instrument developed Good and Kaminski (2003). The independence of the curriculum teaching methods and assessment procedures, DIBELS, lend credence to the findings.

In the area of phoneme segmentation fluency, these findings were important to students learning the very basics of vocabulary acquisition, because they must first learn to recognize and pronounce each phoneme in a word. The Saxon Phonics and Spelling
program (2003) helped students learn these phonemic recognition and pronunciation skills so they could use them on their own. How well they learned these skills was evident in the results of the monthly DIBELS assessments. The students made steady progress in the first three months of the school year increasing the percentage of students who met or exceeded the benchmark goal of 35 sounds per minute. In September, the percentage was 80% and by November 95% of the class reached the benchmark goal. In December and January, that 95% achievement was maintained, which meant that 19 out of 20 students consistently over the last three months of the study mastered PSF. Being able to pronounce phonemes was an important step in the pronunciation of whole words, which leads to the discussion of the nonsense word fluency (NWF) results.

For the assessment of students’ NWF, the percentage of students reaching the benchmark goal increased in the first three months and then again from the fourth to fifth month assessments. The results do not appear as linear as the PSF results, because the benchmark changed in December from 24 words per minute to 50 as instructed in the DIBELS (Good, Kaminski & Smith, 2003) guidelines. In the area of nonsense word fluency, first grade students’ ability to sight read they types of words has been determined to be very limited. For example, an adult could recognize the word *chat* as a legitimate word. However, a first grade student would identify the same word as a nonsense word. Therefore, it is important for students to learn how to pronounce whole words so that they can increase their reading fluency. Together these findings meant that students can isolate phonemes and then pronounce words fluently, which led to the ability to read complete sentences with the goal of comprehension.
The reliability of the findings was strengthened by the process of assessing the students with the same DIBELS instrument by different assessors in the five-month period. The first and last assessments were conducted by teams with the researcher administering the DIBELS instrument during the middle three months. The different assessors’ results appeared to indicate a consistent increase in the percentages of students meeting the benchmark goals. In other words, the students’ increase in phonemic awareness and pronunciation is what the researcher with her years of teaching experience expected them to learn over the course of the semester.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of a systematic phonics instruction (SPI) program in a rural mid-western first grade classroom improved students’ written vocabulary acquisition. The twenty students in the class were instructed for five months using the Saxon Phonics and Spelling program (Simmons, 2003) which was one example of a SPI program. Results of the DIBELS assessments, conducted at five monthly intervals from September to January, indicated that most of the students reached or exceeded the benchmark goals in the areas of phoneme segmentation fluency and nonsense word fluency. The conclusion to be drawn from this study was that a SPI program might be an effective method to increase students’ literacy skills.

Recommendations

At this time, the researcher did not feel a need to change any of the procedures having to do with the five-month study. The project was completed according to plan without any changes needed to be made. A reason that changes were not needed was that the researcher was familiar with the Saxon Phonics and Spelling program (Simmons,
2003) and had used the program in her classroom for several years. The only change the researcher made to the program was to assess the students three more times during the semester. Therefore, the researcher was well versed and competent to implement the intervention/treatment portion of the project.

One recommendation the researcher would make would be to extend the project's timeline from one semester or half a year to a whole year. This longer period of time to conduct the study would allow for more types of literacy skills to be assessed. Namely, these skills would be for students to be able to read complete sentences and comprehend passages. These skills are usually taught the second half of the school year through the Saxon Phonics and Spelling program (Simmons, 2003). The point was that students' progress in becoming emergent readers could be documented in detail with nine monthly DIBELS assessments. This detailed assessment and analysis could help teachers see the connection between early reading skills and having students become proficient readers. The connections were developmental in nature, from segmenting phonemes to reading words to becoming fluent in reading words together in a sentence to understanding the meaning of the passage.

Conclusions

In this study, which was conducted over a ninety-day fall semester in a rural midwestern school, a SPI program increased first grade students' abilities to segment phonemes and read nonsensical words. Results of five monthly DIBELS assessments indicated a majority of the students learned how to pronounce phonemes and words. Learning these basic literacy skills was an important step to help students become fluent readers.
References


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Dynamic Inquiry
by Literacy

Appendix A

First Grade Scoring Booklet
VBELS® Benchmark Assessment

This packet contains 2 pages of student stimulus materials. The student response forms are not back to back and saddle stapled. The same form is used by each teacher for each benchmark assessment throughout the year. The second part contains student stimulus materials. Make one copy for each person who is doing the benchmark testing. They can be laminated and three-hole bound for reuse.

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills™ 6th Edition

DIBELS®

First Grade Scoring Booklet
DIBELS® Benchmark Assessment

Edited By:
Roland H. Good III
Ruth A. Kaminski
University of Oregon
Dynamic Measurement Group, Inc.

Available:
http://dibels.uoregon.edu/

Instructions:
This packet includes 2 parts: the student response form and student stimulus materials. The student response forms are photocopied back to back and saddle stapled. The same form is used by each student for each benchmark assessment throughout the year. The second part is the reusable student stimulus materials. Make one copy for each person who is doing the benchmark testing. They can be laminated and comb bound for reuse.


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First Grade Benchmark Assessment

Name: ___________________________ Teacher: ___________________________
School: __________________________ District: ___________________________

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| Date                        |                         |                         |

| Letter Naming Fluency       |                         |                         |
|                             |                         |                         |

| Phoneme Segmentation Fluency|                         |                         |
|                             |                         |                         |

| Nonsense Word Fluency       | CLS          | WRC          | CLS          | WRC          | CLS          | WRC          |
|                             | Correct      | Errors       | Correct      | Errors       | Correct      | Errors       |
|                             | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     |

| DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency| Correct      | Errors       | Correct      | Errors       | Correct      | Errors       |
|                            | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     | (median)     |

| Retell Fluency (Optional)  | (middle score)| (middle score)|             |              |             |              |

| Word Use Fluency (Optional)| (Optional)   | (Optional)   | (Optional)   |              |             |              |

CLS = Correct letter-sound correspondences.
WRC = Words recoded completely and correctly as a whole word.

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Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

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Borch /p/ /or/ /ch/ creek /k/ /r/ /ea/ /k/ ___/7

Grabbed /g/ /r/ /a/ /b/ /d/ bags /b/ /a/ /g/ /z/ ___/9

Hit /l/ /i/ /t/ kissed /k/ /i/ /s/ /t/ ___/7

Get /g/ /e/ /t/ pouch /p/ /ow/ /ch/ ___/6

Roared /r/ /or/ /d/ whale /w/ /ai/ /l/ ___/6

Broke /b/ /r/ /oa/ /k/ meet /m/ /ea/ /t/ ___/7

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Worth /w/ /ir/ /th/ points /p/ /oi/ /n/ /t/ /s/ ___/8

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Worked /w/ /ir/ /k/ /t/ fight /fi/ /ie/ /t/ ___/7

Error Pattern:
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Meet /m/ /ea/ /t/ yours /y/ /or/ /z/ ___/6

Kiss /k/ /i/ /s/ stones /s/ /t/ /oa/ /n/ /z/ ___/8

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At /a/ /t/ bag /b/ /a/ /g/ ___/5

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### Phoneme Segmentation Fluency

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Total: ___

Error Pattern:
August 21, 2005

Dear Parents and Families,

This letter is to inform you that I am completing my graduate studies at Defiance College. As part of my curriculum at DC I need to conduct a research project. I have chosen to do my project in the area of Systematic Phonics Instruction specifically using the Saxon Phonics and Spelling program. Your child will be part of my study. I will be instructing them in the area of phonics using the Saxon program and monitoring their progress using the DIBELS. I will not be using any personal names or data, just general information on how the class progresses as a whole.

Mr. Rittichier is aware that I am conducting this research project and supports my investigation. If you do not wish to have your child be part of my study, please contact me at school at your earliest convenience. If I have not heard from you by September 1, 2005 then I will assume that it is fine for your child to be part of my study.

As always, I appreciate your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Showalter