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Explicit Instruction to Improve Phonics and Decoding Skills in Elementary Newcomers

Madison Gates

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Explicit Instruction to Improve Phonics and Decoding Skills in Elementary Newcomers

Madison Gates

Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education: Teacher Leadership

Abstract

The present study investigated the effects of daily phonics and decoding instruction on Newcomer English Language Learners (ELL). Participants ($n = 10$) were identified as first year students in the United States, attending the same elementary school in Iowa. Participants' literacy scores were measured using the FAST Early Reading Letter Sounds assessment, FAST Early Reading Nonsense Words assessment, and the FAST CBMReading assessment. Upon receiving their scores on the assessments, participants received fifteen minutes of explicit instruction each day, in their respective ELL class, for eight weeks. Results from the dependent samples two-tailed *t-test* revealed that there was not a significant difference between the pretest and posttest on any of the three assessments. While, on average, students did improve from the pretest to the posttest, there was not a significant difference following the intervention. More research is needed to better understand which instructional materials are most effective at improving literacy skills in Newcomer ELLs.

Keywords: Newcomer ELLs, phonics, decoding, segmenting, literacy, Superkids, FAST

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Explicit Instruction to Improve Phonics and Decoding Skills in Elementary Newcomers

Immigration has steadily grown in the United States, outnumbering all other countries in the world. According to the Iowa Department of Education (2020), English Language Learners (ELLs) are one of the fastest growing populations in U.S. schools. At the national level, ELLs make up about ten percent of students; at the state level, ELLs make up about six percent of students in Iowa (Iowa Department of Education, 2020). While the number of ELLs in Iowa's schools continues to rise, the academic gaps that exist between ELLs and native English-speaking students continue to rise as well.

In the Iowa City Community School District (ICCSd)—the fifth largest district in the state of Iowa—all ELL students (K-12) take the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) in the Spring of each academic year. In the Spring of 2019, of the ELL students in Elementary schools, less than a quarter of each grade, K-6, performed proficient. In the Spring of 2020, of the ELL students in Elementary schools, again, less than a quarter of each grade, scored proficient (Grage, 2020).

The data shows that the percentage of proficient students made little (or no) growth from one year to the next. This can be attributed to the growing number of ELLs, including the number of Newcomer ELLs, who are attending school in the United States for the first time. The Iowa Department of Education (2020) notes that ELs, with the appropriate instruction and highly-qualified educators, are capable of achieving the same high levels of learning as their native English-speaking peers.

Purpose of the Action Research

In addition to the ELPA21 assessment, all students in the ICCSD, participate in FAST (Functional Analysis Screening Tool) testing, which includes: Curriculum-Based Measurement for Reading (CBMReading) and Early Reading assessments. Over the duration of four years (2017-2021), data from the CBMReading, Early Reading, and ELPA21 assessments has shown that English Language Learning (ELL) Newcomers at the Elementary level have made little to no growth (in comparison to their grade-level expectations) in reading, from one reporting period to the next. Currently, Newcomer students are excluded from reading intervention groups due to their limited knowledge of the English language. Of the approximately one-hundred English Language Learners (ELLs) in the identified Elementary school, the researcher predominantly works with the Newcomer students, averaging between ten to fifteen Newcomers per academic year—majority of which are in first through fifth grade.

This action research study focuses on the effects that explicit phonics instruction—in small group ELL class—has on the reading (decoding and fluency) growth of Elementary ELL Newcomers. More specifically, the research will aim to answer the question: Does explicitly teaching letter knowledge, segmenting and blending, improve decoding and reading fluency of Newcomer ELL students in grades first through fifth, who are enrolling in formal schooling for the first time?

Review of Literature

What is Phonemic Awareness, Phonics and Decoding?

Early literacy skills in Elementary-aged students relies on several components, including alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding (Roshan, 2019). Extensive research has been done on each of these literacy components, suggesting that early instruction and detection—primarily in kindergarten and first grade—are strong predictors of later reading success (Kamps et al., 2007). The same is true for English Language Learners, who, like their native English-speaking peers, learn to read in similar paths and patterns (Baker et al., 2016).

In the United States, as early as preschool and kindergarten, native English-speaking students begin developing alphabetic knowledge; this pertains to a student's ability to identify letter names and the sounds that correspond to each letter (Roshan, 2019). By the end of kindergarten, students are expected to identify all twenty-six letters and produce forty-one letter sounds (Iowa Department of Education, 2018). Simultaneously, students begin practicing phonemic awareness skills—the sounds, syllables, and overall sound structures of words, regardless of the written form of a word.

Following alphabetic knowledge, primary students begin learning and applying specific phonics skills. Phonics, sometimes referred to as phonetics, is the part of language that pertains to the explicit teaching of sounds in words (Roshan, 2019). Phonics instruction, which makes up a great deal of primary learning in schools, includes the process of learning the sounds of individual letters or phonemes (as part of a whole). When put together, phonemes make up a whole word, which students can read by decoding (Roshan, 2019).

Decoding refers to breaking apart phonemes or parts within a word, in order to read a word. Regardless of whether a word is real or pseudo (fake), the word can be decoded by

applying phonics skills (Roshan, 2019). For example, in kindergarten, students begin to decode two and three letter words such as /c/a/t or d/o/g. Researchers have argued that decoding, at its core, is a fundamental component of early literacy success. Automaticity—or decoding quickly and with little to no thinking—is an early predictor of later reading success (Roshan, 2019).

Literacy instruction for Primary Students

Literacy instruction in primary grades is made up of five essential components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Each of these components makes up the English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core curriculum (Kamps et al., 2007). Teachers of primary students teach whole group lessons that encompass these components. However, not all students respond positively to whole-group instruction.

Beginning in 2002, the United States enacted No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which ensured that educators must make additional efforts to close the achievement gap between proficient and under-achieving students (Gerber et al., 2004). In response to this law, schools across the nation turned to a multi-tiered system of support. In this model, all students receive Tier I whole group instruction. Students who are not proficient on literacy assessments receive Tier II instruction, which consists of small group targeted instruction. Students who still are not proficient on literacy assessments then receive Tier III instruction, which includes intensive, targeted instruction. Extensive research has shown that this systematic process of supports for English-speaking students has been successful in closing the achievement gap, especially when identified and targeted in early Elementary grades. The same is said to be true for other populations, including English Learners (Gerber et al., 2004).

Arguments and Benefits of Instruction for ELs

Limited research has been done to suggest appropriate literacy instruction for primary grade English Learners (ELs). Researchers agree that the five components of literacy (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) are necessary for ELs to learn, however the process, timing, and focus of instruction has been argued (Lovett et al., 2000).

Arguments

While many researchers have supported the use of phonics instruction for non-ELs in early primary schooling, there remains a lack of research regarding ELs (some of which are receiving formal schooling for the first time). Dated researchers have argued that the English language is far too complex to attribute successful reading to that of phonics instruction.

Opponents of phonics instruction argue that there are far too many exceptions to the phonics rules that are taught to students. In his study with primary ELs, Roshan (2019) found that asking ELs to remember specific phonetic rules is far too robust, as ELs are simultaneously trying to develop their English proficiency. Thus, Roshan (2019) argued that phonics instruction should only make up a small portion of literacy instruction for ELs in schools and that instead, educators should first focus on language, vocabulary and comprehension.

In similar research with kindergarten and first grade ELs, Kane (1999) found that teaching phonics relies on context within a sentence, therefore phonics should not take precedent in primary literacy instruction but should be used as an additional strategy to learn how to read. Kane's findings suggest that EL students need to learn decoding skills within context, rather than isolation. Through his qualitative research, Kane found that when teachers use context to teach early decoding skills, students are in fact able to apply predictable reading skills and read at levels above their instructional level (Kane, 1999).

Benefits

Other researchers, however, have shown that early literacy instruction for ELs does in fact yield positive results. In his research primary students, Roshan (2019) found that phonics instruction is beneficial because students who are able to successfully decode phonemes, can transfer the skills to new, unfamiliar words and in fact decode them as well. This means that, for students with limited vocabulary, they can still read a word. Decoding plays a crucial role in allowing a student to read a word, regardless of whether they know the meaning of the word or not. A student who can decode words, then, can read more fluently than a student who cannot decode words. This type of instruction and literacy skills is most effective when considering students in early Elementary school (under the age of eleven) (Roshan, 2019).

Lovett et. al. (2000) have also determined that reading difficulty or disability of students in later grades, can be attributed to earlier literacy components, including the ability to apply phonemic awareness and decoding skills. It became evident, through various research with primary grade ELs and non-ELs, that developing decoding strategies in early readers paid dividends to readers in later years (Lovett et. al., 2000). As the reading level increases from one grade level to the next, students who are able to decode rapidly (or automatically) can focus more on what they are reading and comprehend more of what they are reading.

Literacy Instruction for ELs

The limited research that has been conducted with Elementary ELs, has identified successful instruction for improving phonetic literacy skills for ELs. While in initial assessments and instruction, native English-speaking students outperform their ELL counterparts, over extended periods of time, ELL students catch up to (or outperform) their L1 peers (Lesaux &

Siegel, 2003). Bilingualism, implicit and explicit instruction have all yielded positive phonetic growth in primary ELs, contributing to this reading growth.

Bilingualism

Schools across the U.S. have implemented bilingual programs, providing literacy instruction in both students' first language (L1) and English (L2). Students with strong L1 phonemic awareness skills are able to transfer those skills when learning to read English (Baker et. al., 2016). Bilingual programs have proven to support ELs in applying phonetic rules and learning to decode in English. Research in highly populated Spanish-speaking Elementary schools has yielded substantial growth in kindergarten, first and second grade bilingual learners (Slavin & Cheung, 2004).

While the Bilingual learning model has been successful in many schools across the United States, the number of teachers who are qualified to implement bilingual services is not enough to keep up with the need across the nation. Likewise, while some areas do experience pockets of like-cultured ELs, in many parts of the nation, schools have ELs that represent various cultures and upwards of thirty different languages, making the bilingual model nearly impossible to implement (Baker).

Implicit Instruction

Implicit instruction has become a favored instructional method with ELs (likely due to the lack of knowledge in how to best support ELs' literacy development). It is also known that fewer ELs have access to implicit phonics at home in English than their native English-speaking peers (Yu, 2015). Implicit instruction allows ELs to learn from experiences and shared readings at school. Buddy systems are one model of implicit instruction for ELs. This model allows students with higher level English proficiency to read alongside lower level ELs, modeling good

reading and providing corrective feedback. This model has proven to contribute to improved nonsense word fluency and content-based reading fluency (Yu, 2015).

Big Books, another instructional resource for implicit instruction, exposes ELs to instructional level vocabulary and language structure. Through modeling, ELs learn appropriate English syntax (or sentence structure) as well as new receptive and oral vocabulary. Students' syntactic awareness—or the relationship between words in sentences—is a key predictor of later reading success (Lesaux & Siegel, 2003). While this model of instruction has accounted for improved oral language proficiency for ELs, it has not yielded necessary phonetic growth for long-term success (Stuart, 1999). While there is an immediate benefit from instruction, the growth is inadequate to reduce the gap in reading performance and grade-level expectations (Linan-Thompson et al., 2007). Therefore, implicit instruction alone, does not resolve the gap between ELs and their native English peers.

Explicit Instruction

In a comparison study, Shen (2003) found that ELs who received explicit instruction, made far more growth than their peers who received only implicit instruction. When analyzing ELs growth in middle grades, it was found that students who only received implicit instruction, remained remediated, while students who received explicit instruction, performed as well as or above their non-EL peers. While the focus of phonics instruction often remains on primary grades, explicit, intense instruction contributes to ELs reading success in grades K-5 (D'Angiulli et al., 2004).

In following the multi-tiered system of support, Tier II and Tier III supports are used to provide ELs with explicit instruction in phonetics. This model means that ELs (and other underachieving learners) receive twenty to thirty minutes of intensive, targeted instruction in a

small group setting, two or more days per week. Educators use research-backed curriculum resources to support these learners. One system that has been widely used is Jolly Phonics. Jolly Phonics has been identified as an effective means of teaching young ELs how to decode early words and improve their receptive vocabulary knowledge (Kwan, 2005).

Implicit and Explicit Instruction

ELs who begin schooling in early primary grades are less discrepant than their non-EL peers, therefore, it makes sense that younger ELs (rather than older) will be able to close the achievement gap at a quicker rate. When ELs begin schooling in middle grades (third and up), there is great need for combined instructional methods (D'Angiulli et al., 2004). ELs most often have smaller English word banks, lack proper grammar and structure and have fewer chances of reading English (compared to non-ELs) (Yu, 2015). For this reason, reading instruction of ELs (of all ages) is most beneficial when balanced: a combination of implicit and explicit instruction, where students learn through experiences, but also through targeted instruction at the phonetic level (Shen, 2003).

Challenges

Learning to read in a first language is highly demanding, therefore it is no wonder why learning to read in a second language is even more demanding. As previously mentioned, lack of English exposure at home plays a key part in the divide between native English-speaking peers and ELs (Slavin, & Cheung, 2004). In addition, challenges such as socioeconomic status play a key factor in learning to read, however, they do not prevent an EL from learning to read in English. At first, low SES ELL students perform lower than their low SES native English-speaking peers. However, low and high SES ELs typically make more growth than low and high

SES native English-speaking peers, in grades K-5 (D'Angiulli et al., 2004). Overcoming these gaps, includes implementing the appropriate instruction in early grades.

Newcomer ELs

In addition to identifying instructional needs for the EL population as a whole, it is essential that we address the needs of Newcomer ELs. Newcomer ELs are identified based on two characteristics: 1) they were new to the country in the last year or 2) they have scored emerging (level 1 or 2 of 5) in all four domains (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) on the state-identified English language proficiency assessment. For the purpose of this research, EL Newcomers are identified by conducting the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21) (Iowa Department of Education, 2021).

Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and Decoding Instruction in Newcomer ELs

While there is a great deal of research that suggests early literacy instruction for non-ELs and ELs contributes to later reading success, little research can be found on when Newcomer English Learners (ELs) are ready to engage in and acquire phonemic awareness and phonics skills for decoding. Previous research has allowed scholars to make some assumptions about the timing and process of phonetic instruction for Newcomer ELs.

Scholars have believed that teaching phonemic awareness and decoding skills is not beneficial as ELLs cannot distinguish between sounds in English, nor can they make correct sound-symbol correspondence due to the variance in sounds that exist in different languages. In addition, scholars have suggested that non-native English-speaking students will not retain phonetic skills due to the lack of connection and understanding between the word that is decoded and its meaning. Thus, researchers who oppose phonics instruction for ELLs recommend that

students must gain a better grasp of oral language and vocabulary before receiving phonetic instruction (Kane, 1999).

Recent research supports the notion that EL children who start out delayed in reading can in fact make substantial growth, if identified early and provided with research-backed intervention. In a study, Vanderwood et al. (2008) collected data from 134 ELLs in an Elementary school, where majority of those students were classified as Newcomers. In his study, the researchers gave 1st-grade ELL students a nonsense (decodable) word assessment three times throughout the year. Vanderwood et al. (2008) found that students made an average growth of over 36 sounds from the initial assessment to the last. Then, two years later, in 3rd-grade, the researchers assessed those same 134 ELL students using an oral reading fluency assessment. Again, Vanderwood et al. (2008) found that the ELLs made significant growth in their ability to read decodable words. The research team concluded that early literacy intervention, with a focus on nonsense (decodable) words, can have a significant impact on the reading success of ELs, including those identified as Newcomer ELs.

Other studies have demonstrated similar findings. Data collected from 240 kindergarten students receiving whole-class phonics instruction (using the Jolly Phonics Program) for two full years, made substantial growth. Throughout the course of the study, students were given a letter naming assessment, letter sound assessment, and pre-primer word decoding assessment. The data collected from each assessment showed that ELs were equally successful at obtaining and retaining early literacy skills as their non-EL peers (Kwan, 2005). This research supported the notion that Newcomer ELs are capable of learning word-level skills before acquiring a great deal of oral English proficiency. In fact, the study proved that the oral language of the students involved in the study was not impacted in a negative manner.

In order to provide Newcomer ELs with research-backed instruction, Newcomer ELs must receive appropriate instruction in early grades. When ELs are included in reading instruction and interventions, they respond similarly to their native English-speaking classmates (Linan-Thompson, et al., 2007). A combination of implicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction as well as explicit instruction in alphabetic coding, phonemic awareness, and fluency, can yield appropriate growth in Newcomer ELs (Kwan, 2005).

Alphabetic Coding

Alphabetic coding includes associating sounds with the written alphabet. Young ELs require explicit phonics instruction in order to learn the sound-symbol correspondence of a language, regardless of their first language. This is part of the early literacy stage for any child learning English—native or non-native English speaking. Through explicit instruction of phonology, students can begin to rapidly recall a letter name and its corresponding sound (Kwan, 2005). Kindergarten and first grade EL students who were consistently exposed to the alphabetic coding instruction for one to two years, showed the most progress, however, Newcomer ELs can also benefit.

Phonemic Awareness and Fluency

After mastering alphabetic coding, EL students should begin to develop phonemic awareness skills. Phonemic awareness includes isolating sounds to decode them in two or three letter words (Kwan, 2005). Kwan's research showed that all of the students in the study, native English speaking or EL, were able to decode pre-primer (two or three letter) words. A student who has been taught and learned phonemic awareness skills, then, can blend individual sounds in a word to decode it. When explicitly taught, Newcomer ELs in primary grades can blend sounds together to decode words (Kwan, 2005).

Direct, systematic phonics instruction known as synthetic phonics, rather than whole word (or whole language) teaching is most successful for ELs. This process includes the presentation and teaching of individual letters or groups of letters to make sounds. Studies have found that the most effective method includes using manipulatives that represent the letter(s) and using them to read words (Kwan, 2005). Research findings have also determined that ELs who are taught to individually blend and segment words, are able to retain early literacy skills and in turn, read at higher levels in the academic years that follow (Shen, 2003).

When Newcomer ELs master phonemic awareness and can apply phonetic skills, they then are able to read more fluently. Fluency, in turn, contributes to an ELs ability to comprehend what they are reading (Quirk & Beem, 2012). Research has shown that ELs who received explicit instruction in first grade were able to meet benchmark reading goals—nonsense word fluency and content-based reading fluency—by the end of the year. It is important to note that, at this point, an EL can become a word-caller, meaning they can call out words in a text, but without fully understanding their meaning (Quirk & Beem, 2012). It is then necessary to address the comprehension of Newcomer ELs in order to support their long-term literacy growth.

While many Newcomer ELs may not attend school until part way through the school year, it can be assumed that these students will exhibit substantial growth in reading. English language proficiency cannot be used as the sole indicator of how well ELs can respond to reading instruction; ELs can make growth with the same instructional resources as non-ELs, they simply need more of it (Goldenberg, 2020).

This research intends to apply and decipher whether Newcomer ELs can make measurable literacy growth in their first two years of formal schooling in the United States, when receiving a combined approach of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and

comprehension. While current research has begun to address how Newcomer ELs in grades kindergarten and first grade respond to phonetic instruction, there is limited knowledge about how Newcomer ELs in grades second through sixth learn to read and at what rate they do so.

Methodology

Participants

This action research took place in an urban city in a K-6 elementary English Language Learning (ELL) classroom. The participants in this action research study include ELL Newcomer students in kindergarten, 1st grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade, and 5th grade. The research focused on ten students: four kindergarteners (three male and one female), one 1st grader (female), two 3rd graders (female), one 4th grader (female), and two 5th graders (male). All of the students in the study have lived and attended school in the United States for three or fewer years. All students have had good attendance in school.

In order to be identified for inclusion in this research, students had to be classified as ELL Newcomers. In this district, there are two different components that lend a student to be classified as a Newcomer. First, if an ELL student has been in the country for less than one year (or took an extended leave out of the country and missed schooling), they are considered a Newcomer. Secondly, a student is identified as a Newcomer if he or she scores all ones—in reading, writing, listening, and speaking—on the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century (ELPA21). In rare cases (as you will see in this research), some students are identified as a Newcomer if they have extreme disproportionalities to their like-peers and would benefit from additional ELL instruction.

Research Design

This action research was quasi experimental, focused on the relationship between explicit phonics instruction and the reading fluency of Newcomer ELL students in their first year of learning. The research answered the following research question: Does explicitly teaching letter

knowledge, segmenting, and blending yield benchmark decoding and reading fluency in elementary Newcomer ELL students in their first year of learning English?

Description of the Intervention

After reviewing the pretest data and consulting with the Instructional Design Strategist (IDS) for the school, instructional materials and focus were identified for this research. Students assessed on letter knowledge received instruction with the Superkids Kindergarten materials, students assessed on nonsense words (early decoding) received instruction with the Early Reading Routine (adapted by the district from multiple intervention programs), and students assessed in benchmark passages received instruction using the National Geographic Reach curriculum. Students received fifteen minutes of explicit letter knowledge, blending and segmenting instruction (using instructional materials from the district's Superkids curriculum and Phonics for Reading) at the start of each ELL class, for a total of seventy-five minutes per week. All students will receive instruction from the same certified ELL teacher, during their designated ELL class time.

The four kindergarten students will receive instruction as a group, with their ELL teacher. These students will receive daily letter knowledge instruction, in coordination with the Superkids Kindergarten curriculum. The first-grade student will receive daily one-on-one letter knowledge instruction with her ELL teacher, as well. One of the third-grade students (AD) will receive one-on-one letter knowledge instruction with her ELL teacher, while the other third-grade student (MRJ) will receive Phonics for Reading decoding instruction with another student and her ELL teacher. The fourth-grade student and fifth-grade student (AD) will receive Phonics for Reading decoding instruction together with the ELL teacher. The fifth-grade student (GJF) will receive one-on-one letter knowledge and early reading instruction with the ELL teacher.

Data Collection

This action research used quantitative data. Quantitative data was collected by using a Dependent Samples *t*-test. This allowed the researcher to determine whether students improved from the pretest to the posttest, as well as the rate of growth in a eight-week time period. Each student's pretest and posttest was dependent upon their current literacy status, all of which are part of FAST (Formative Assessment System for Teachers). Based on their beginning of year data, students were monitored using FAST EarlyReading Letter Sounds, FAST EarlyReading Nonsense Words, or FAST CBMReading.

The FastBridge assessments have been proven reliable. FastBridge indicates that there is evidence of reliability, with limited to no error in results. In addition, the research-based assessment resource also states that the validity of the assessments is ongoing, but that there are current means to determine the validity of the FastBridge assessments (Christ, 2015, p. 22).

At the conclusion of the eight weeks, students were assessed using the Winter FAST assessments. The assessments were conducted by classroom teachers and student data was compiled into an online database called Panorama Student Success. The researcher used the data from the Fall and Winter FAST reading assessments to determine whether explicit letter knowledge, blending and segmenting instruction in ELL had substantial impact on the fluency scores of K-6th grade Newcomer ELL students in their first year of learning English. The researcher compared the growth that each student made from Fall to Winter when receiving explicit phonics instruction. Classroom teachers also progress monitored students weekly, using the designated assessment to document and analyze each student's weekly growth. The researcher compiled the data weekly and analyzed the growth over the eight-week period, from pretest to posttest.

Description of Variables

This research includes both independent and dependent variables. The independent variable is the instructional strategy; the use of explicit segmenting and blending instruction to improve decoding and reading fluency for Newcomer ELL students. The dependent variable is the fluency score for each student, measured by the number of letter sounds, number of nonsense words, or number of words read correctly per minute on the identified FAST (Formative Assessment System for Teachers) assessment. Several other important factors may also influence the results of the study, including student age, gender, ethnicity, home language, parental English proficiency, and length of time in the United States.

Ethics

Based on the Northwestern Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption components, this action research is exempt. The research poses minimal risk to participants. This research does not pose any risk to the students, but instead offers additional strategies and instruction for improving student decoding skills. In addition, the research was conducted in a school. This research was conducted in the students' assigned Elementary school, during their designated ELL instructional time. The research also involves normal educational practices or diagnostic tests. This action research utilizes the earlyReading Letter Sounds, earlyReading Nonsense Word, and grade-level CBMreading assessments as both the pre- and post-assessments—the pre-assessment being the data collected in the Fall of 2021 (at the start of the school year) and the post-assessment being the Winter reading data—as well as the weekly progress monitoring. The educational practices will be research-backed strategies, supported by the district-approved Superkids Curriculum and Phonics for Reading.

Findings

Data Analysis

Upon the ELL students being identified as Newcomers, the students were placed into their respective ELL instructional groups. The researcher collected initial data from the start of the school year, which indicated that all Newcomer students were in need of literacy support, according to their ELPA21 score and their FAST Reading score. Based on each student's background in literacy and his/her score on the beginning of the year pretest, students' literacy scores were monitored using the Formative Assessment System for Teachers.

A dependent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there was a significant change in students' literacy scores after eight weeks of explicit phonics and decoding instruction. Table 1 below shows the results from the test. The FAST Early Reading Letter Sounds assessment revealed that on average, students improved their scores from the pretest to the posttest, when receiving daily letter knowledge instruction. Students were able to accurately identify more letter sounds on the posttest than the pretest. The FAST Nonsense Word assessment revealed that the student improved their scores from the pretest to the posttest. The student was able to rapidly read more nonsense words in one minute on the posttest than the pretest. The FAST CBMReading assessment also revealed that students improved their scores from the pretest to the posttest. Students were able to accurately read more words in a minute on a content passage on the posttest than the pretest.

Table 1

t-Test Results for Students Assessed on FAST Reading

Variable	<i>n</i>	Pretest	Posttest	<i>t</i> -test
		Mean	Mean	
FAST Early Reading Letter Sounds	7	3.42	11.86	0.12
FAST Nonsense Word	1	11	30	NA
FAST CBMReading	2	12	27	0.04

However, results from the dependent samples two-tailed *t*-test revealed that there was not a significant difference between the pretest and posttest on any of the three assessments. While, on average, students did improve from the pretest to the posttest, there was not a significant difference following the intervention.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The results of this research were noncomplementary. At first glance, the growth from the pretest to the posttest on all assessments indicated that the intervention contributed to the growth of each student's literacy skills at the letter identification and decoding level. However, the t-test indicated that the results were not significant. Given the nature of the study and the many limitations, it can be concluded that the intervention does contribute to growth, but may need additional time. The researcher will continue to implement and alter instruction for Newcomer ELLs for an extended time.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. First off, there were only ten students who were eligible to participate based on the requirements. The limited number of students made it difficult to gather a robust amount of information and therefore there was limited data to use. In addition, the students varied in age from kindergarten to fifth grade, however, in some grades, there was no like-peer comparison. For example, seven of the students were in kindergarten so they could be compared to their like-peers, however, there was only one fourth grade, therefore there was no like-peer comparison. In addition to comparison of grade level peers, there were also many different languages represented in this study. It is unclear whether students who spoke one language were able to progress quicker than students who spoke another language.

It is also worth mentioning that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, several of the students had extended absences during the eight weeks, therefore, they did not receive the intervention in its entirety. It is possible that their absences contributed to their stagnant or limited growth in literacy over the eight weeks.

Future Research

Additional research is needed to determine which instructional materials contribute the most to Newcomer ELLs phonics and decoding skills. While previous research suggests that Jolly Phonics contributes to literacy success of elementary students, there is limited knowledge about its effects on Newcomer ELL students. All students in this study received instruction from the Superkids curriculum, however, it is unclear whether another set of instructional materials would be more supportive of Newcomer ELL growth in phonics and decoding.

There is also need for additional research on the effects of explicit phonics and decoding on Newcomer ELL students who speak different languages. While there is current research about the distance of many languages from the English language, there is limited knowledge about the rate of learning written literacy as well as which instructional materials contribute to it.

Conclusion

The literacy skills of Newcomer ELLs continue to be of much importance as the number of ELLs entering the United States, continues to rise. The academic gaps that exist amongst ELLs and their native English-speaking peers is at the forefront of many school districts across the country, however, the solution to overcoming these is yet to be determined. In Iowa, where ELLs make up six percent of students in school, the growth of ELLs has been stagnant or minimal over the previous few years.

Previous research suggests that literacy instruction for ELLs can be beneficial, given the right instruction. Jolly Phonics, for example, has yielded many successful outcomes for elementary ELL students in various studies. However, there remains limited knowledge and controversial beliefs about the ability of Newcomer ELLs to learn phonics and decoding skills in their first year of schooling in the U.S.

This action research indicated that ELL Newcomers are capable of learning phonics and decoding skills in their first year of schooling. While the dependent t-test indicated that the results were not significant, it is important to recognize that all students improved their literacy knowledge from the pretest to posttest in eight weeks. English Language Learning researchers have indicated over multiple studies that ELLs need additional time for learning and processing. It can be concluded that ELL Newcomers, when given more than eight weeks of daily phonics and decoding instruction, can make substantial growth and close the achievement gap in some academic areas.

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