A STUDY OF EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS TO TEACH SIGHT WORDS IN KINDERGARTEN

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover if there is a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods. The three methods researched in this study are the Language Experience Approach, Journey’s, and Literacy by Design. The research was conducted by collecting sight word data from three different schools. Each school in the study uses a different method to teach sight words. The percentage of student growth from the pre-test to the post-test in the area of sight words was recorded and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and A Statistical Program (ASP) software. Findings indicate that there is not a significant difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods. There are several areas warranting further study. The school may want to consider extending this research to investigate other variables including whether or not students attended school prior to kindergarten, whether or not students qualify for free and reduced lunch, student attendance rates, and students in other grade levels. Schools may also want to consider conducting a study that compares student growth in the area of sight words between classrooms using the same method.

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In the fall of 2010, an action research plan was completed as a requirement of a graduate course in teaching elementary reading. The focus of the action research plan was the reading program in the kindergarten classroom at a private school located in the Midwest, hereafter referred to as HMS. After analyzing the results of the action research plan, the teachers in this classroom chose to incorporate the Language Experience Approach as an instructional method to increase student sight word knowledge. Data was collected using the pre/post-test method. It
was determined that student sight word knowledge increased from the pre-test to the post-test.
For that reason, the Language Experience Approach continues to be key component of the
dergarten reading program at HMS.

In addition, this researcher worked with two other Midwestern schools, each utilizing
different reading programs as required by the school district. Therefore, each school has a
different method for teaching sight words in kindergarten. One, LMS, utilizes the Journey’s
Reading Program and the other, HES, utilizes Literacy by Design.

Practice under Investigation.

The practice under investigation is the instructional methods chosen to teach sight words
at each school. It is important for schools to use data to drive decisions regarding which methods
are the most effective for teaching sight words in kindergarten.

School Policy to Be Informed by the Study.

Each of the schools in this study use a different reading program and therefore have a
different method for teaching sight words to kindergarteners. HMS uses the Language
Experience Approach, LMS uses Journeys, and HES uses Literacy by Design. Looking at the
effectiveness of various methods will provide data to inform any curricular decisions related to
reading programs or methods to be utilized by the schools as well as other schools in their
district.

Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study.

Language, specifically vocabulary development, plays a critical role in early literacy
have shown the importance that learning vocabulary plays in children’s ability to learn to read
and, ultimately, in their success in school” (Wasik, 2010, p. 621). For this reason, sight word
instruction continues to be a key component of literacy instruction in schools. Each of the schools highlighted in this study use different methods to teach sight words in kindergarten.

The Language Experience Approach is one method used to teach sight words. At the beginning of each week a new sight word is introduced during Message of the Day. The sight words are referred to as “Words of the Week” or W.O.W. words. After each W.O.W. word is introduced, students are encouraged to look for the word in the classroom, around the school, and at home. W.O.W. words are also explored during station time, shared reading, guided reading, and content area instruction.

The Journey’s Reading Program is another method used to teach sight words. Two new sight words are introduced each week during whole group instructional time. Each day students practice the new sight words in different ways. The new sight words are also explored during small group time.

Literacy by Design is yet another method that utilizes a focus on sight words. Sight word instruction occurs during daily five stations and during guided reading. The program recommends several strategies to teach and reinforce sight words.

Statement of the Problem.

There are countless reading programs available for schools to purchase. For this reason, it is difficult for schools to decide which program they should be using.

Purpose of the Study.

The goal of this research project is to expand on the action research that has already been completed in an attempt to determine the effectiveness of current instructional methods in the area of reading and more specifically looking at the area of sight word knowledge. The results of
this research will help inform the teachers and administrators at HMS, LMS, and HES about the effectiveness of three methods currently being used to teach sight words. The following research question is addressed in this study:

RQ1. Is there a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods?

Null Hypotheses.

H₀₁. There is not a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods.

Anticipated Benefits of the Study.

As a result of this study, literacy instruction in each of the schools may be improved. The knowledge gained from this research will be shared within the school learning community and other interested educators and will provide data to inform future decisions.

Definition of Terms.

Language Experience Approach (LEA): This approach uses the child’s own language and experiences in developing literacy (Yellin, 2008, 245).

Sight Words: Words that can be recognized instantly and pronounced without resorting to the use of word analysis (Crawley, 2004, 25).

Summary.

LMS and HES are elementary schools located in the Midwest. Each school uses a different method to teach sight words to kindergarteners. This research investigates the effectiveness of each method in comparison to the Language Experience Approach, which is
used at HMS and has already been determined as an effective method to teach sight words to kindergarteners.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

“Language and, specifically, vocabulary development play critical roles in early literacy development” (Wasik, 2010, p. 621). There is no question that children enter school with significant differences in the extent of their vocabulary knowledge. According to Biemiller and Slonion (2001), “these differences grow larger [during] the early grades” (Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli Jr., and Kapp, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, Hart and Risley (1995) and Snow (1982, 1991) state that “Decades of research have shown the importance that learning vocabulary plays in children’s ability to learn to read and, ultimately, in their success in school” (Wasik, 2010, p. 621). Therefore, it is imperative that early childhood educators focus on sight word development as soon as the students enter kindergarten.

After completing an extensive review of the literature published in peer-reviewed journals, it is understood that researchers’ views about developing sight word recognition skills are diverse. For example, Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O’Hara, and Donnelly (1996/1997) used the BWI program to teach students how to read and remember a number of sight words. In this program, students are taught a set of sight words and then instructed in how to use those words to identify other unknown words. However, the authors found their students had trouble recalling the initial set of sight words they had been taught (Gaskins et al., 1996/1997). Trying to remedy this problem, the authors discovered that children appear to move through phases of sight word learning. Gaskins et al. (1996/1997) identified four phases of sight word learning: pre-alphabetic, partial alphabetic, full alphabetic, and consolidated alphabetic. The authors discovered that their students were unable to use key words to identify unknown words because
they had not moved through the first two stages of sight word learning. They decided that in order for students to be successful in the BWI program, the children needed to have the sight words “bonded in memory in a fully analyzed form” (Gaskins et al., 1996/1997, p. 318). They started to move students through each of the four phases with the intention of helping the students develop a procedure for analyzing and learning these words. They also added components to their instruction that had not been previously included, such as self-assessment activities and partner-sharing. They found after applying these strategies that their students were much more successful in sight word mastery.

Two additional methods of vocabulary instruction, embedded vocabulary instruction and extended vocabulary instruction, are also commonly used in primary classrooms (Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli, Jr., and Kapp, 2009). Embedded instruction involves introducing many sight words and word meanings during story read-alouds. This type of instruction is beneficial because it is time efficient and provides students with definitions within a meaningful and supportive context. According to the National Reading Panel, these are two critical features of effective vocabulary instruction (Coyne et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, in this type of instruction, new words are introduced within a fixed narrative that does not provide students with exposure to words in varied contexts. Also, this type of instruction does not actively engage students in learning tasks that require them to interact with word meanings (Coyne et al., 2009).

Extended vocabulary instruction focuses on providing students with extensive opportunities to discuss and interact with words outside of story readings. This type of instruction expands the depth of word knowledge which has important implications for listening or reading comprehension. “How well, or deeply, a word is known determines whether or not it
can be discriminated from other words and understood in novel contexts” (Coyne et al., 2009, p. 3). There are a number of benefits associated with this type of instruction. For instance, students receive more exposure to vocabulary. Another benefit is students are able to interact with vocabulary words outside the constraints of the story narrative. This allows the teacher to demonstrate how vocabulary words can be used in multiple contexts (Coyne et al., 2009).

Nagy (2007) and Nagy and Scott (2000) affirm that this type of instruction is effective: “Because this instruction encourages deep processing of word meanings and challenges students to move beyond memorizing simple dictionary definitions to understanding words at a richer, more complex level, students may become more attuned to novel words they encounter and better able to infer word meanings incidentally” (Coyne et al., 2009, p. 3).

Unfortunately, this type of instruction requires more instructional time per each word taught. Therefore, fewer words are introduced and taught in a given amount of time, and teachers are faced with the difficult task of deciding which words to teach (Coyne et al., 2009).

After reviewing the research related to these two types of vocabulary instruction, it was determined that the most effective method for teaching sight words includes components of both. For this reason, the Language Experience Approach (LEA) has been identified as the best instructional method to increase sight word knowledge. Experts believe that the LEA reflects a positive balance between embedded instruction and extended instruction by introducing and exploring sight words in the context of whole and meaningful literature.

McCormick (1988) identifies the Language Experience Approach (LEA) as a best practice in the area of reading. He asserts that use of the LEA in the classroom has many benefits. One of these benefits is that it brings together writing, reading, art, and language. In addition, it extends the learners’ creativity in storytelling through writing. The LEA helps
learners understand that what they think and say can be written. It is learner-centered and demonstrates that the learners' thoughts and language are valued. Finally, it provides reading material that is predictable and readable because it uses the learners' natural language.

McCormick is not the only expert to identify the LEA as a best practice in the area of literacy. In fact, many experts in the field have identified the LEA as an effective instructional tool and have encouraged early childhood educators to incorporate it into their classrooms.

Landis, Umolu, and Mancha (2010) agree that drawing from students’ experiences and views to develop instructional materials is beneficial when teaching reading and writing. They claim that the “LEA provides opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to build vocabulary and spelling proficiency, participate in phonics analysis, develop reading comprehension, foster creative writing, and make connections between reading and writing, along with other educational benefits” (Landis, 2010, 582).

Penno, Wilkinson, and Moore (2002) claim “the nature of the teacher-child interactions and the way in which vocabulary is presented and reinforced are critical factors in children’s learning” (as cited in Wasik, 2010, p. 623). It is especially important for teachers to present and explain words in a meaningful context that will facilitate recognition of these words not only during the designated reading period, but also throughout the entire school day. Incorporating literacy across an entire theme or unit and weaving it into the content areas influences how children hear, understand, and use these words. Wasik claims that this ultimately shapes how well children internalize and recall vocabulary words (Wasik, 2010).

According to Ehri and Robbins (1992), “the most effective way for beginning readers to store sight words in memory is to fully analyze the sounds in the spoken word and to match those sounds to the letters in the printed form of words (Whitaker et al., 2006, p. 15). Consequently,
the kindergarten teachers promote letter-sound correspondence when introducing new sight words by providing children with a specific sound and asking them to identify the matching letter.

Roe, Smith, and Burns (2009) suggest, “The larger the store of sight words a reader has, the more rapidly and fluently he or she can read a selection. Comprehension and reading speed suffer if a reader has to pause too often to analyze unfamiliar words” (Roe, 2009, 115). It makes sense that if a student has to pause every time he/she comes to an unknown sight word, he/she will not be able to read fluently enough to comprehend the meaning of the words.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design.

The research design is a quasi-experimental design using quantitative data. The independent variables are the methods being used by each school to teach sight words. The dependent variables are the individual scores of the students. These scores are reflected as percentages of growth from the pre-test to the post-test.

Study Group Description.

The study group for this research consisted of three kindergarten classrooms. The group from HMS consisted of 17 students. The group from LMS consisted of 20 students. The group from HES consisted of 17 students.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments.

All data was collected using the pre/post-test method. The data from HMS was collected using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. The data from LMS was collected using the K2 Kindergarten Assessment. The data from HES was collected using the Core Word Reading Assessment. Each student was tested on the same list of 15 sight words.
These 15 words are included on each school's list of words required for kindergarteners. Scores were gathered from situations where actual growth could have taken place as a result of the methodology being used. The results were recorded and coded to complete a statistical analysis.

*Statistical Analysis Methods.*

A Statistical Package (ASP) software was used to complete the statistical calculations in this study. An Analysis of Variance, or ANOVA, was used to calculate the results. The alpha level was set at 0.25 for this research. Microsoft Excel was used to assemble the data from the research.

**FINDINGS**

To determine student growth in the area of sight words, data was collected from each of the classroom teachers. Assessments in this area were given at the beginning of the school year in September. After these pre-tests were given, additional assessments were given at the end of each quarter with the last assessment date at the end of the third quarter in March. Each student was assessed on the list of sight words required by each school district. Growth was recorded on the master record sheet as part of their literacy assessment each quarter. Since each school used a different list of sight words as part of their assessment, a common list of words was compiled prior to analysis of the data. Fifteen words were selected as common words tested by each school used in the study. An ANOVA was used to determine the relationship between the percentage of student growth from pre-test to post-test and the instructional method used. The following tables depict the results of this analysis.

Table 1

| Summary of Descriptive Statistics for Each School |
Three kindergarten classrooms were selected to be studied to determine if there is a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods. Pre/post test data was collected in September and March and a percentage of growth was determined for each student in all three classrooms. The students were divided into three groups based on method used to teach sight words (Language Experience Approach, Journey’s, Literacy by Design). Group 1 was made up of the students who were taught using the Language Experience Approach. Group 2 was made up of the students who were taught using the Journey’s program. Group 3 was made up of students who were taught using Literacy by Design. The mean of Group 1 was 0.89. The mean of Group 2 was 0.40. The mean of Group 3 was 0.86. The standard deviation, or SD, of Group 1 was 0.089. The standard deviation, or SD, of Group 2 was 0.280. The standard deviation, or SD, of Group 3 was 0.136. There is not a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods. An Analysis of Variance, or ANOVA, test was used to determine that there was not a significant difference between the groups that were analyzed. This indicates that method used to teach sight words did not affect student growth in sight words mastered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of ANOVA Test of Significance of Results for Methods Used to Teach Sight Words
After the data was divided into three equal groups based on the method used to teach sight words, an ANOVA test was completed to test the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis states there is not a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods. The data collected from method shows the sum of squares, SS, was 28128.2. The degrees of freedom, DF, was 2. The mean squared, MS, was 14064.1. The Fisher Ratio, F, was 37.0497. The test reported a p-value of 1.34899. This is significantly higher than the alpha level of 0.25. The null hypothesis is not rejected, which suggests that the method used to teach sight words does not affect the percentage of growth for students.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There was a null hypothesis identified at the beginning of this study. The null hypothesis stated that there is not a difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods. The null hypothesis was not rejected. The results of this study indicate that there is not a significant difference in student growth with sight words mastered between students who have been taught using three different methods.

As a result of this study, data shows that the method used to teach sight words does not significantly impact the percentage of student growth from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. The results of this study indicate that the Language Experience Approach, Journey’s, and Literacy by Design are each effective methods to teach sight words in kindergarten.
There are several areas warranting further study. A Multiple Stepwise Regression Analysis (MSR) could be conducted in order to determine the effectiveness of each method in comparison to the other two methods used in the study. This type of analysis would provide a ranking of the methods being used and would provide the schools with information about which method is truly the most effective.

An additional study could be done with students who attended school prior to kindergarten (i.e. pre-school) and students who did not. While this study measured sight word knowledge of kindergarteners at the time the test was completed, it did not indicate whether or not the students who demonstrated mastery on the word lists had been exposed to them earlier than the students who did not demonstrate mastery. A study in this area may prove worthwhile.

Another study that schools may want to consider is a comparison of student growth in the area of sight words between classrooms using the same method. Since the classrooms are in the same school district, they are required to use the same overall program to teach reading, however, the instructional methods used by individual teachers within the district may differ. It would be interesting to compare schools within the district as well as individual classrooms within a school to determine if any differences arise there.

An additional study could be done to look at other variables such as the rate of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch or attendance rates of students. This would provide insight into the amount of support students are receiving at home which could be impacting their performance at school. A study in this area may prove worthwhile.

Finally, schools may want to consider extending this research to the other grade levels in the building. This study was specifically conducted at the kindergarten level because that is where the focus on sight word instruction is the most prevalent. However, sight word instruction
does not stop at the end of kindergarten. Students continue to practice and review sight words throughout their elementary career. It would be interesting to complete this study with second or third graders to determine if the results are the same.
REFERENCES


