

Improving Literacy of L1-Non-Literate and L1-Literate Adult English as A Second Language Learners

Julie Trupke-Bastidas
Andrea Poulos

Abstract

This research focuses on effective practices for teaching reading to both adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners acquiring literacy for the first time in English and learners who are already literate in their first language. This study examines if learners' phonemic awareness and decoding are improved when using a whole-part-whole instructional method that combines a focus on higher and lower-level skills. Participants include nine females from East Africa: five non-literate (L1-non-literate) and four literate (L1-literate) in their first language. Participants were given pre and posttests of phonemic awareness and decoding and then whole-part-whole reading instruction for 10 weeks. This intervention impacted L1-non-literate participants the most. Those learners who scored the lowest on pretests showed the most gains on the posttest.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with the task of designing instruction for a class with learners not literate in any language and learners with literacy in another language, practitioners may ask: How can I meet the needs of both learners? This study examines if learners' phonemic awareness and decoding skills—several of the component skills essential for reading, and potentially skills helpful to learners of varying literacy levels—are improved when using a whole-part-whole instructional method. This method combines higher-level and lower-level skills by teaching whole words in a context, then examining particular words to practice a letter-sound or phonemic awareness skill, and then reading the whole words again later in a sentence or story context.

Literature Review

To understand the basis for using a whole-part-whole instructional method, we first examine second language (L2) research on the components of reading. Researchers have long held that reading is an interactive process involving different components (Adams, 1990). Grabe (1991, p. 383) states that “reading involves both an array of lower-level rapid, automatic identification skills and an array of higher-level comprehension/interpretation skills.” Research has shown that readers have limited cognitive capacities available for use while reading, and having an efficient lower-level system allows readers to focus their limited capacity on comprehending text (Perfetti & Lesgold, 1977; Stanovich, 1991). Thus, developing automatic word recognition skills is important for L2 readers to be able to comprehend text (Bernhardt, 1991; Eskey & Grabe, 1988; Geva & Ryan, 1993; McLaughlin, 1990; McLeod & McLaughlin, 1986; Segalowitz, Poulson, & Komoda, 1991).

Word recognition consists of three component processes: orthographic, phonologic, and semantic. *Orthographic* is being able to visually analyze the composition of words including letter processing and memory (Greenberg, Ehri, & Perin, 1997). *Phonologic* involves recognizing the phonemes (individual sounds) in a word (Greenberg et al., 1997). *Semantic* is recognizing the meaning. The interaction between orthographic and phonologic processing is often described as *decoding*, which is one component examined in this study.

L2 studies demonstrate the importance of word recognition skills in reading (Baker,

Toregeson, & Wagner, 1992; McLeod & McLaughlin, 1986). L2 studies also highlight that learners' first language (L1) may influence the speed and difficulty of acquisition of word recognition skills in the L2 since there may be some transfer and interference from the L1 (Brown & Haynes, 1985; Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003; Haynes & Carr, 1990; Morray, 1982; Ryan & Meara, 1991). Also, L2 studies point out that those with lower decoding have lower reading levels (Favreau & Segalowitz, 1982). Learners can build decoding skills through practice but these skills might not transfer automatically from the L1 to L2 (Gaziel, Obler, & Albert, 1978; Walters & Zatorre, 1978). Thus, based on the L2 studies on lower-level skills, one can conclude that orthography and phonology are key areas that may need improvement for most beginning ESL readers literate in their native language (L1-literate), especially beginners, while also needing a focus on higher-level skills.

The majority of L2 studies conducted thus far have been on highly educated learners who are highly literate in the L1 (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Tarone & Bigelow, 2005). Research has shown there is an advantage for overall acquisition of English for those learners who have some level of literacy in their native language (Bigelow, Delmas, Hansen, & Tarone, 2006). However, this study involves some participants who have not acquired literacy in any language and never previously received formal education. Therefore, these learners are acquiring literacy for the first time in ESL classes. The next section defines literacy and presents the additional skills learners who are becoming literate will need to acquire to improve their reading in English.

Literacy has been defined as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (Perfetti & Marron, 1995, p. 1). For non-literate learners in the L1 (L1-non-literate), acquiring literacy in English means learning the *alphabetic principle* (Perfetti & Marron, 1995), that reading builds on speech and that phonemes (sounds) are represented by different letters. Learners just developing the alphabetic principle are starting to activate their orthographic and phonological processing. Thus, learners need to develop phonological awareness, or “the ability to attend to the phonological or sound structure of language as distinct from its meaning” (Center for Dyslexia, 2004, p. 1). Many L1 studies have shown a strong relationship between phonological awareness and learning to read (Grabe, 1991).

One kind of phonological awareness particularly important for emerging readers is phonemic awareness, which refers to the “ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words” (McShane, 2005, p. 2). “Phonemic awareness is usually learned through reading and writing an alphabetic language” (Perfetti & Marron, 1995, p. 33). Phonemic awareness is important for acquiring literacy and is improved through becoming more literate (Perfetti & Marron, 1995). Studies on L1-non-literate adults have shown that they have little or no phonemic awareness skills and do not perform well on phonemic awareness tasks that involve the manipulation of phonemes in their native language (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Kruidenier, 2002).

In particular, Young-Scholten and Strom (2006) studied 17 adult immigrants and refugees' English proficiency and reading ability. They found levels of English instruction and native language schooling were linked to English reading level. Those less proficient in reading English exhibited less phonemic awareness in English than those more proficient in reading. These less proficient adults showed similar results with children since they had more syllable

and onset/rime awareness than phonemic awareness (Strom & Young-Scholten, 2004, p1). This study and others have shown that adults can learn to segment speech in the L1; thus, there is no critical period for acquiring this (Morais, Content, Bertelson, Cary, & Kolinsky, 1988), and instruction may improve adults' phonemic awareness (Kruidenier, 2002).

The Reading Research Working Group (RRWG) was formed to review the research on reading and provide suggestions for improving literacy. They recommend an explicit focus on phonemic awareness instruction for native speakers. Specific suggestions include: (1) focus on one or two types of phonemic awareness tasks at a time; (2) focus on segmenting and blending, which may be most useful to learners; and (3) use letters as well as sounds for instruction (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 50).

In addition to focusing on phonemic awareness, L1-non-literate learners need to develop decoding skills; that is, knowledge of the letter-sound relationship (i.e., the relationship between orthography and phonology). To decode, learners must be able to: 1) recognize letters, 2) identify and produce the sounds represented by the letters, 3) blend the individual sounds in sequence, and finally 4) recognize the word. As discussed earlier, this instruction may also be beneficial for beginning L1-literate ESL learners. Instruction to build learners' knowledge of the letter-sound relationship is commonly referred to as phonics.

Based on their review of the literature, the RRWG recommends instruction in phonics for native speakers. They state, "explicit, systematic phonics instruction is most effective for beginning readers" (Kruidenier, 2000, p. 49). However, when applying these recommendations to ESL learners acquiring literacy in English, there are important differences to consider. First, Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer (2005, p. 4) state that, "Alphabets [phonics and phonemic awareness] instruction with native English speakers generally assumes high oral language skills and vocabulary." L1 readers often know 5,000 to 7,000 words before beginning formal instruction in reading (Grabe, 1991; Singer, 1981). Second, beginning native English readers' oral skills are usually much higher than beginning ESL readers so "instructional strategies that rely on oral comprehension of vocabulary and use of nonsense words to teach sound-symbol correspondence are not likely to be successful with English language learners" (Burt et al., 2005, p. 1).

While there are few studies on what specific phonics instruction works with L1-non-literate ESL learners, there is research on what general instruction works best with them such as having materials relevant to their daily lives (Condelli, 2002, p. 1). Hood (1990, p. 59) states, "For beginning learners of English who are illiterate in L1, the process needs to begin with development of context-embedded, cognitively undemanding language; that is, language which is about very familiar things and is closely tied to actions and events. Such language can begin to be developed in both spoken and written modes." Thus, nonsense words or words about unfamiliar things are unlikely to be useful or effective words to focus on with learners.

Some researchers and practitioners recommend teachers incorporate phonics by combining enabling skills (visual and auditory discrimination of letters, sounds, and words; blending letters to sound out words; teaching sight vocabulary) with language experience and whole language approaches (Bell & Burnaby 1984; Holt & Gaer 1993; Vinogradov, 2001; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Perfetti and Marron (1995, p. 22) state, "Instruction in decoding not only can

be embedded in meaningful tasks and materials, it can also be done in a whole language classroom.” This is consistent with the research that identifies reading as a combination of higher-level and lower-level skills. Thus, a combined approach may be useful for L1-literate and L1-non-literate learners. This method of combining enabling skills (lower-level) with whole language activities (higher-level skills) is referred to in this study as *whole-part-whole* reading instruction (adapted from Moustafa (n.d.) and Strickland (1998)).

There is a lack of data showing if these methods do help beginning ESL learners improve their lower-level skills. This study seeks to contribute to research on using phonemic awareness and phonics instruction with L1-literate and L1-non-literate learners. Along with several others not included in this article, this study seeks to investigate the following questions:

1. *How does the whole-part-whole reading instruction intervention over ten weeks impact phonemic awareness, word list decoding, and story text decoding for learners with and without L1 literacy?*
2. *In which phonemic awareness skills (initial sound, same sound, rhyme, blending, segmenting) and letter-sounds do the learners show the most gains following ten weeks of whole-part-whole instruction?*
3. *What qualitative differences exist between learners who improve most and least overall after using this instruction for ten weeks?*

Participants

This research was conducted in a beginning literacy ABE/ESL class in a metro area learning center. The class met for three hours, four times a week in the evening. Participants in the study included nine females (see Table 1) ranging from 23 to 52 years old. All participants were from East Africa. The participants had a wide range of previous educational experience and literacy skills.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information and Educational Background

Participant	Country	Languages	L1-Literacy	Yrs. Prev. Ed.	Age
Sahra	Somalia	Somali	No	0	23
Vicki	Somalia	Somali	No	1 (Somalia) 5 (US)	26
Rani	Ethiopia (Oromo)	Somali, Oromo, Amharic	No	0	31
Neli	Ethiopia	Amharic	No	0	43
Ava	Somalia	Somali	No	0	51
Greta	Somalia	Somali	Yes	2 (Somalia) 2mo. (US)	42
Susan	Somalia	Somali	Yes	8 (Somalia)	52
Kelli	Somalia	Somali	Yes	8 (Somalia)	44
Ana	Somalia	Somali	Yes	9 (Somalia)	37

Methods

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted in three phases: pretesting, ten weeks of instruction, and posttesting. The pretest interview included demographic information and questions about the participant's attitude toward reading, frequency of reading outside of class, and materials read outside of class. The posttest interview included the same questions and also inquired about participant's opinion of the reading instruction over the ten weeks.

Participants were given three tests both as pretests and later, as posttests. The first instrument was a phonemic awareness test that included five separate components adapted from *The Adult Reading Toolkit – Edition 4* (LDA, 2005). These components included identifying initial sound, same sound, and rhyming words as well as blending and segmenting. The second instrument was a decoding word list test from *Sylvia Greene's Informal Assessment Level 1* (2006), which provided diagnostic information about a learner's word analysis ability that indicated the letter combinations mastered. The third instrument was a *BADER Reading and Language Inventory* (Bader, 2005) story passage at the participant's reading level. The level of reading passage was determined by having participants read a graded word lists. The list the participant was able to read without reading more than four words incorrectly determined the level of the passage they read for the test. All testing was conducted individually with each participant. Present at each session was an interpreter who spoke the participants' native languages and English. The interview questions and phonemic awareness test were responded to orally. All responses were tape-recorded and analyzed following the administration of the test.

Other data collected throughout the ten weeks included observations of classroom activities, copies of student work, and informal student feedback. The researcher also kept a journal with notes about the lessons, in particular, what went well and what might need to be improved. Additionally, attendance of the participants was recorded.

Instruction

The researcher examined the participants' pretests including what phonemic awareness skills and letter-sound combinations the majority needed to work on. Based on these findings, the researcher incorporated whole-part-whole reading instruction in the class for ten weeks. This reading instruction integrated whole language methods that focus on building higher-level skills with phonemic awareness and phonics instruction that focus on building lower-level skills. The lower-level skills were practiced using words learners focused on in the week's lessons, already knew from previous lessons, or had in their vocabularies. Components of whole-part-whole reading instruction include:

- A focus on parts of words after learners have learned the words or at least can recognize them.
- After the focus on the parts of words, the whole words are practiced again or examined in a sentence or story context.
- Words for study are those from the thematic unit or from a story that has been read to them or that they have read in unison or on their own (adapted from Strickland, 1998; Moustafa, n.d.).

Each week's lessons revolved around a life skills theme such as shopping, health, and employment. Within these themes, the researcher chose several words that contained the sound or phonemic awareness skill to practice along with one rime for the "part" portion of

the whole-part-whole instruction. The specific phonics and phonemic awareness or “part” practice included the following components:

- *Letter-Sound Activity*: For about 30 to 45 minutes each week, the researcher focused on a particular sound in a word and used that as a transition into showing other examples of words learners may know that also have the same sound. The letter-sound focus included short vowels, long vowels, digraphs (*ch, sh, th, ph*), or consonant blends (*pl, cl*, etc.). Activities to practice included a word dictation followed by sentence writing.
- *Phonemic Awareness*: Some weeks for about 10-20 minutes the researcher used words in the thematic context of the week’s activities or a reading to focus on phonemic awareness activities such as identifying phonemes, rhymes, and blending.
- *Onset/Rimes (Word families)*: Onsets are the consonants in a syllable prior to the first vowel and rimes are the first vowel and everything after it in a syllable. For example, in the word *play*, *pl* is the onset and *ay* is the rime. Each week, the researcher reviewed and/or presented new rimes that appeared within a story that had been read to, with, and by learners. For example with the rime *ay*, the instructor would also have learners practice *pay, say, day, may*, etc. The onset/rimes were presented and practiced using various activities.

The complete whole-part-whole instruction included two components: about 1.5-2 hours per week of direct reading instruction (whole) using whole language methods and about 1.5-2 hours per week of phonics and phonemic awareness activities (part). Over the ten weeks, this whole-part-whole reading instruction consisted of a total of 30-40 hours. However, not all participants attended all class sessions so the amount of instruction each participant ended up receiving varied.

The participants’ scores on all three assessments for both the pre and posttests were calculated. The word list decoding and story text tasks consisted of word reading, so the number of words read correctly was counted. Since the number of words in the story text varied based on the level of text, the percentage of words read correctly was calculated to enable a comparison of participants’ scores. The researcher used judgment in accepting correct responses that were slightly varied due to an accent. Data were examined to identify who was most and least improved. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed for any themes.

Results

Research Question One

First we examine the results for the first research question: *How does the whole-part-whole reading instruction intervention over ten weeks impact phonemic awareness, word list decoding, and story text decoding for learners with and without L1 literacy?*

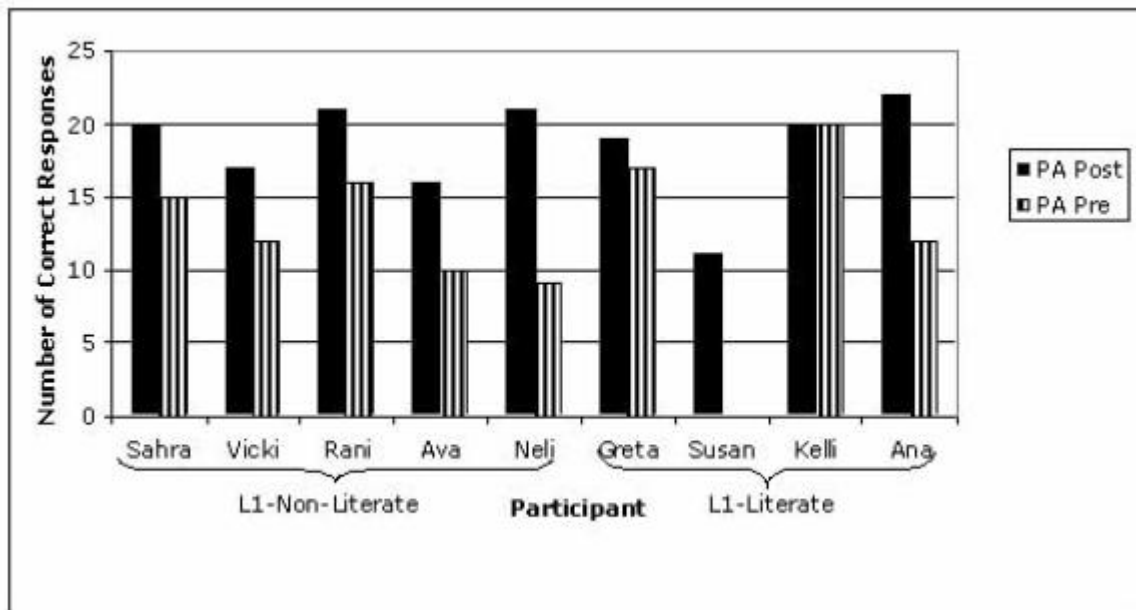
Phonemic Awareness

Eight of the total of nine participants increased their phonemic awareness on the posttest, and one participant (Kelli) scored the same number of correct answers. In particular, those who showed the most improvement included one of the L1-non-literate learners (Neli), and two L1-literate learners (Susan and Ana). Those who showed medium gains in phonemic awareness included the remaining four L1-non-literate participants (Sahra, Vicki, Rani, Ava). Those who showed the lowest gains in phonemic awareness were two L1-literate learners

(Greta and Kelli).

The total number of correct responses was 25 and the average increase in the number of correct responses for all participants on phonemic awareness was 6.22 responses. On the phonemic awareness test, L1-non-literate learners (Sahra-Neli in Figure 1) showed consistent gains, whereas the L1-literate learners varied more in their gains (Greta-Ana in Figure 1). However, since there were small numbers of learners, these results can only suggest there is a difference between the two types of learners and are not definitive.

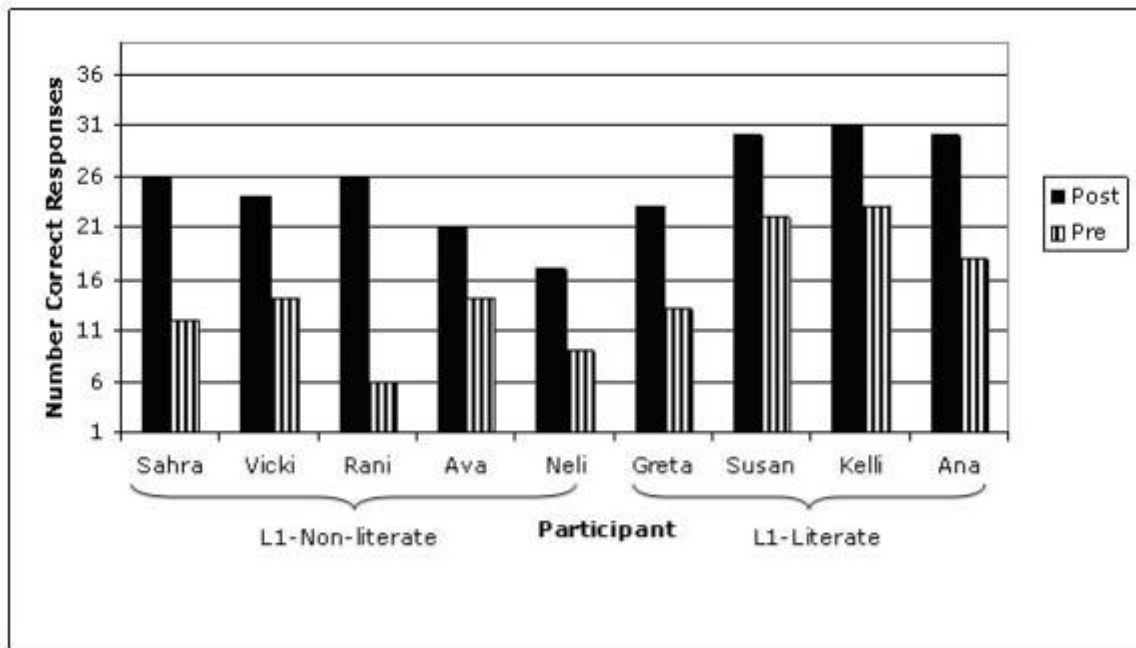
Figure 1. Number of Correct Responses on Pre and Post Phonemic Awareness by Participant



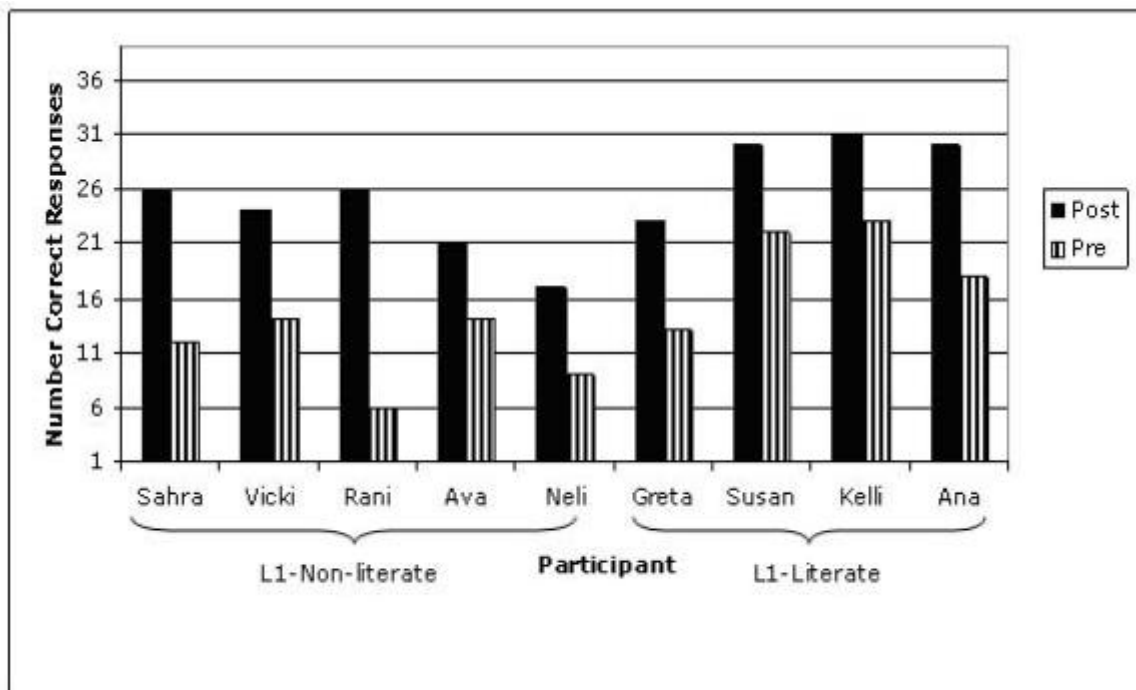
Word List Decoding

All participants demonstrated improvement on the posttest on Sylvia Greene's *Informal Assessment of Word List Decoding*. Those who showed the most improvement were two L1-non-literate learners (Rani and Sahra) and one L1-literate learner (Ana). The number of correct responses possible was 38. The mean increase in the number of words read correctly for all participants was 10.77; all participants increased by 7 words or more.

Figure 2. Number of Correct Responses on Pre and Post Word List Decoding by Participant



Story Text



Overall Gains

To determine which participants improved the most on all three tests combined, an overall ranking was calculated to compare the participants. The overall ranking was calculated by summing the rank of each participant on each test (determined in comparison with the other participants) and then ranking each participant's sum total in comparison with the other participants. For example, Rani had the seventh highest improvement on the phonemic awareness test (rank of 7), the highest improvement on the word list decoding test (rank of 1), and the highest improvement on the story text decoding (rank of 1). Therefore, her total rank

(i.e., the sum of her ranking on all three tests) is 9. Nine is the lowest ranking of all participants (Neli and Sahra are next with 10) and therefore, she is assigned an overall rank of 1 (i.e., most improved on all three tests in comparison to other participants). Those who had the lowest combined ranking (i.e., most improved) were Rani, Neli, and Sahra (all L1-non-literate participants). Those with the rankings showing lowest gains on all three tests consisted of Ava (L1-non-literate) and Kelli and Greta (L1-literate participants).

Research Questions Two and Three

Research Question #2: *In which phonemic awareness skills (initial sound, same sound, rhyme, blending, segmenting) and letter-sounds do the learners show the most gains following ten weeks of whole-part-whole instruction?* The three learners with the most gains in phonemic awareness (Neli, Susan, and Ana) showed the majority of these gains in initial letter sound, same sound, and blending sounds. Identifying rhyming words seemed to be mastered by two of those learners (Neli and Ana) prior to the pretest. On word list decoding, the learners that improved the most (Rani, Sahra, and Ana), overall showed these gains in decoding clusters and short vowels. These learners scored at high levels of proficiency in consonants (80% correct responses or higher). This is consistent with the results of all participants. Additionally, the lack of improvement by Rani and Ana in long vowels was also consistent with the other participants.

Research Question #3: *What qualitative differences exist between learners who improve most and least overall after using this instruction for ten weeks?* Those learners who showed the most overall gains were the following: Sahra, Rani, and Neli. These three learners all had strong oral skills, a willingness to communicate with others, and L1-non-literacy. Those learners who showed the least improvement overall were: Ava, Greta, and Kelli. All three of these learners did not have as strong oral skills and seemed more reluctant to speak in class. Additionally, Greta and Kelli shared literacy in their L1, and high pretest scores on all three tests. These two appeared to grasp the concept of sounds and benefit from this instruction in their writing. However, Ava did not have literacy in the L1, but in contrast to the other L1-non-literate learners, was frequently absent or complained of illness and headaches during the class. She often left during time spent on phonics to pray or complained of headaches and tiredness. She also worked another job outside of class and was one of the oldest students. While she had some letter-sound knowledge of consonants, she often struggled with vowel sounds. She responded better to the instruction when it focused on reading stories.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

As outlined above, the action research achieved some interesting outcomes:

- The whole-part-whole reading intervention overall impacted L1-non-literate participants more than L1-literate participants. Those learners with the lowest pretest scores on the phonemic awareness and story text appeared to have the most improvement on the posttest.
- In the area of phonemic awareness, the learners who improved the most showed the most gains in identifying: a) initial sound of a word that was spoken to them, b) same letter sound, and c) a word by blending individual sounds (e.g., that /h/ + /ow/ + /s/ is “house”).
- In the area of decoding word lists, the learners who improved the most showed the most gains in decoding: a) clusters and b) short vowels. These learners showed the least gains in decoding long vowels.

· The qualitative characteristics of most improved learners overall were strong oral skills, a willingness to communicate with others, and L1-non-literacy. Those with the least overall improvement had lower oral skills and seemed more reluctant to speak in class. (In addition, two of these learners were already L1-literate and the tests used didn't show their gains well, and the third was often tired, sick, or absent.)

Interpretation

Based on the results of how the intervention affected the L1-non-literate and L1-literate participants, it seems that whole-part-whole reading instruction is useful, in particular, for the L1-non-literate learners. This intervention appears to benefit L1-non-literate learners in acquiring phonemic awareness, decoding words, and reading stories. With a few exceptions, this study also shows that the L1-non-literate participants mostly had lower performance on the pretests than the L1-literate participants. This is consistent with the literature that demonstrates a lower performance on decoding of adult learners who are not literate in any language. The case can thus be made for the effectiveness of incorporating this type of content-based phonics/phonemic awareness activities into a beginning level ABE/ESL class.

The results also demonstrate that L1-literate learners did not benefit as much from this intervention in improving these skills. This may imply that for the L1-literate learners, the instruction was not helpful in increasing phonemic awareness and decoding. However, there are a few other plausible explanations for the lower gains. First, many of the L1-literate learners scored high on the three pretests. Therefore, they may not have been able to show their progress because they approached the limit of scores on the pretest, and they did not have as much room to improve on these assessments. On the word list decoding pretest where Greta and Kelli had lower scores (with 33% and 59% correct answers respectively), they showed more improvement than on the other tests, with gains of 20 and 27% respectively. Hence, when these learners had more room to show improvement on the test, they did so.

Second, L1-literate learners may not have benefited as much from this instruction for improvement on these three tests as the L1-non-literate participants because in comparison, their decoding was strong in most areas. While these learners still lacked some skills in decoding vowels, digraphs, and clusters—key differences from Somali and English—their skills were still stronger than most L1-non-literate learners. This is consistent with literature that shows learners may need some instruction in letter-sound knowledge, especially where there are differences in the L2 from the L1, but L1-literate learners may need less intervention or instruction than L1-non-literate learners.

While the results on these particular assessments show L1-literate learners may not have benefited as much as L1-non-literates for reading, interestingly it is possible they may have benefited from this instruction in their writing, spelling, and comprehension skills. These areas were not assessed in this study; however, the researcher emphasized activities to help improve the spelling for these learners since they didn't have as much difficulty decoding many of the words. Also, during the whole language portion of the reading instruction, an emphasis was on comprehension. An improvement in spelling and writing was observed by the practitioner on weekly dictation activities. Also, these learners appeared to understand texts read in class by successfully completing comprehension activities. Thus, perhaps the "part" instruction was still helpful for the L1-literate learners in their writing rather than in their reading, and the "whole" instruction was helpful in building reading and vocabulary comprehension. All of these findings are good news for the teacher with limited lesson

planning and class time who wants to be certain that every minute in class counts as much as possible for as many as possible!

There are two more questions to address from the results from this research. Why did three of the L1-non-literate participants have the same or stronger phonemic awareness skills than two of the L1-literate participants? This is probably because these three L1-non-literate students in particular had been attending this class for many months prior to the beginning of the study and therefore, received instruction in phonemic awareness previously, while the two L1-literate participants with the same or lower scores had just begun attending this class a few weeks prior to the beginning of the study.

As stated, most of the learner gains in phonemic awareness recognition were in the areas of: first letter sound, same letter sound, and blending sounds. This is gratifying since these components were the majority of the emphasis in the instruction. In addition, there may have been “washback” from the pretest and instruction in class which may have helped learners understand better how to answer the questions on the oral test. This is also gratifying, since we as teachers are so often trying to help our learners prepare for a variety of tests both within our programs and to help them reach other life-goals.

The difficulty that learners had with the last component (counting the number of phonemes) was also not surprising given the difficulty of the task and the inherent confusion over what to count—the syllables, number of letters, or phonemes—even after receiving explicit directions. Many learners were observed counting the letters or syllables before answering the question. Also, since this task seems to require a great deal of metalinguistic understanding to arrive at the correct answer, it is understandable why this would be a challenging component. Based on these results, it seems questionable whether there should be much emphasis on this area of instruction because of its difficulty. It is only speculation, but perhaps this is one area of phonemic awareness that is only truly developed after one has acquired high levels of literacy in a language.

Again, in word list decoding, the letter-sound components most focused on in instruction were the areas where learners show the most improvement: clusters and short vowels. On the other hand, the finding that long vowels recognition did not improve and in fact decreased, may have actually resulted from the strong focus on short vowels and only a brief focus on long vowels, which may have caused confusion for learners, and they over-generalized the short vowel sounds to words with the long vowel sound. This is perhaps a caution to be certain to teach each needed point with plenty of redundancy built in, as was done with the first three components.

Another finding with pedagogical implications is the fact that individual consonants, regardless of being in initial or final position in a word, were mastered by most learners. At the start of the research, most learners had some phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge, which was likely in the consonants of the words. Learners’ consistent strength in identifying consonants on the pretest seems to imply that learners acquire these letter-sound correspondences with relative ease and may not require explicit instruction in each consonant sound. Perhaps once learners have some phonemic awareness, some of the consonant sounds are just acquired while learning to read words by sight. With time so limited, teachers may not want to spend much time if any on this area. This finding also highlights the importance

for teachers of some type of pre-assessment of the learners before spending too much time on a learning area in class.

The particular characteristics of those who improved the most were L1-non-literacy, strong oral skills, and a willingness to communicate. The first factor of L1-non-literacy was expected because these learners mostly had lower performance on the pretests and therefore, had more opportunity to show improvement. The other two factors appear to be related and while there was no assessment in these areas for this study, these characteristics seem to also be what distinguished these learners over the other L1-non-literate participants and some of the L1-literate participants. Perhaps having stronger oral skills affected their responsiveness to the whole-part-whole instruction because they already knew the meaning of many words and were then able to apply the letter-sound instruction to words they already had in their oral vocabulary.

Importantly, it seems that focusing on the sounds and words in context was quite helpful because learners were familiar with many of the words, and could use that oral knowledge to then examine the letters and recognize the words in written form more readily. In addition, since these were words that appeared many times throughout the thematic unit, the learners would encounter them many times and this may have increased their motivation or desire to learn strategies to help them identify them quickly. Also, learners seemed to enjoy reading the stories each unit. Many stated they would read them at home or were observed reading them before class or during the break. Having high-interest relevant readings that included the words that were focused on in the phonics practice seems to have helped build even more motivation to read.

The L1-non-literate learner who was one of the least improved learners was Ana. Unlike the most improved L1-non-literate learners Sahra, Neli, and Rani, she appeared confused many times with instruction and often complained of headaches and tiredness. This may mean that ultimately instruction in the component skills may not be helpful for some learners, may not be helpful for some learners at certain stages of reading or second language acquisition, or some learners may just acquire skills at a slower pace and may need even more repetition and review. These results also highlight the importance of having a variety of instructional methods as part of an ABE/ESL class to meet various learning styles and abilities.

Based on this research project, there are some final recommendations to make. First, a balance of lower-level skills and higher-level reading practice seems to be important. Throughout the study, the researcher was challenged in balancing the focus on phonics skills and text reading. Learners seemed to lose their attention or get bored when a lot of time was spent on specific letter-sound skills in one class or one week of instruction. Additionally, incorporating the review of sounds (e.g., asking learners how to write a word and prompting them by making the sound of the letter), when working on other activities, especially with writing, seemed to be useful in helping learners apply the skills they learned. Also, as the findings show, some learners (particularly L1-literate learners) in a low-level class may have stronger decoding skills than others. The focus for this portion of the instruction for these learners could include spelling and writing so that they are also challenged and make learning gains. Also, it might be useful to provide these learners with more advanced decoding instruction (separate from the other learners) that is focused on the phonetic components

where these learners in particular have gaps (i.e., long vowels). One learner explained this clearly by stating, “If I can write it, then I can read it.”

Conclusion

This study shows that for most participants using a whole-part-whole instructional method in which whole words are presented in a context then examined to practice phonemic awareness or letter sound skills was effective. This instruction seemed to improve their phonemic awareness, decoding of individual words, and decoding words within a story text. In particular, those learners with the most improvement were L1-non-literate learners. It appears that combining a focus on top down whole language activities with bottom up skills helped these learners improve their phonemic awareness and decoding in English. Research has shown that having stronger bottom-up skills can help free learner’s attention to comprehending text—the main purpose for reading. Thus, these learners built skills that can help them with comprehending text. Further studies are needed that take into account the oral skills of learners along with the decoding and phonemic awareness. Research should also be duplicated with different demographic groups and more L1-non-literate and L1-literate learners, as well as with several kinds of control groups. More studies such as these could help guide researchers and practitioners to finding what instructional techniques are most useful for particular ESL learners acquiring literacy in English. While more research needs to be conducted to test this content-based instructional method of teaching reading, this study provides some exciting insights as to how to assist L1-non-literate learners acquiring literacy in English for the first time while also providing beneficial instruction for L1-literate learners.

Authors

Julie Trupke-Bastidas has taught ESL for over 3 years in various Adult Basic Education settings. She received her M. A. in TESOL from the University of Minnesota and completed coursework for a license in Adult Basic Education. This paper is based on her master's research.

Andrea Poulos is the Academic/Workforce Coordinator at Lincoln Adult Education Center. She has taught ESOL for over 15 years, including at the Minnesota English Center and in Argentina. She received her M.A. in TESOL from the University of Minnesota.

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Participants' names have been changed to respect their privacy.