

The Effect of Sight Word Instruction on the Reading Achievement of Second Grade Students

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of sight word instruction on reading fluency for second grade students. The participants in this study were second grade students enrolled in a Baltimore County public school during the 2018-2019 school year. The students were randomly divided into two groups. The treatment group received small group guided instruction with a focus on sight word fluency four days a week for four weeks in addition to traditional whole group reading lessons. The control group received regular small group guided reading instruction and traditional whole group reading lessons. The results of the study indicated that both groups increased their reading levels, however, the hypothesis that sight word instruction would increase reading achievement was not supported when looking at the data. Additional research with the focus on sight word fluency should be conducted to determine reading achievement.

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Improving student's reading achievement is the most important goal in reading instruction. Research shows that early reading instruction, especially during the preschool to kindergarten years, needs to take place immediately to provide a solid reading foundation. Brown (2014) suggested that, "Language, literacy and reading development in the prekindergarten years proceeds through several levels of foundational skills with skills and behaviors becoming more complex and more proficient as children get older" (p.37) In the early stages of reading, students are learning to sound out words, make meaning of the words in a sentence, and make meaning of the text. This can be difficult for students who don't have a solid phonics background or lack the proper knowledge of how to use the reading strategies they have learned. A challenge for many educators can be finding which intervention is best to use to close the gaps when students are falling behind grade level and what to do to intervene ahead of time.

Second grade is a crucial time for students as their reading skills are becoming more developed and refined. Students can either excel into third grade or fall further behind. Not many studies have been conducted to show what to do when this problem occurs. It is known that sight words should be read with automaticity. Teachers may start to see problems with comprehension and fluency when students are spending too much time decoding words.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to determine if explicit sight word instruction increases guided reading levels for second grade students.

## **Hypothesis**

The use of sight word instruction will not have an impact on students' reading level.

## **Operational Definitions**

The independent variable is sight word instruction. The operational definition is the use of flash cards and sight word intervention strategies from Jan Richardson's book, "The Next Step Forward in Reading Intervention." The dependent variable is reading achievement. The operational definition is the guided reading level assessed from Reading A-Z.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the effect of sight word instruction on the reading fluency of second grade students that are reading below grade level. Best teaching practices, such as learning sight words, or high frequency words, is a specific reading strategy that has been examined in a variety of educational studies. The first section is a background of early reading skills and covers a broad analysis of developing effective reading strategies in the early childhood years. The second section is about challenges in reading instruction and using a balanced approach with reading interventions. The last section is about the types of explicit sight word instruction and sight word fluency in reading instruction. It also describes the overall effects of sight word instruction, combined with other reading strategies, on the success of an early reader.

#### Early Literacy Development

There are many components to the reading block for English and Language Arts in elementary school. Teachers are expected to teach phonics, phonemic awareness, high frequency words, reading comprehension, guided reading, writing, and grammar. There have been many research studies, particularly related to reading instruction, conducted over the years that have been proven successful and given teachers many ideas about best practices in teaching children how to read. One aspect that can be concluded about reading interventions is by building strong foundational skills, teachers can lay the groundwork for increasing reading fluency and comprehension (Solari, Denton, & Haring, 2017). However, the researchers in the article, *How to Reach First-Grade Struggling Readers*, go on to explain that reading skills shouldn't be taught separately and in isolation, but should go hand in hand so that the students

can make sense of what they are learning. For example, the authors explain that in kindergarten, students are learning letters and sounds, but should still be exposed to text and begin to communicate orally about what is being read to them. Comprehension, which is a higher-level skill, shouldn't be held off until later years, but worked into what students are already learning when developing early reading skills (Solari et al., 2017).

Good readers can determine the meaning of a text they are reading, and part of building meaning is understanding word vocabulary and reading the words fluently. This is where sight word recognition comes into play. Kaskaya (2016) points out that children should be reading words automatically when reading a text and how this is an important precondition in reading fluency. If students know and can read sight words automatically, they are more likely to make meaning of the text faster and comprehend what they are reading, which is why sight word instruction is an important aspect of the reading block. Students should only be spending time sounding out words that are decodable and only using their working memory to read high frequency words. Also, once students start to see familiar words frequently, they should begin to read these words on sight, which helps them become better readers.

The authors of the article, *Rethinking Sight Words*, went into detail about using students background knowledge of words when helping them learn new words. Miles, Rubin, and Gonzalez-Frey (2018) found that there were two types of sight word learning: "The first is based on repetition and whole-word storage; the second is based on analysis and storage of grapheme–phoneme relations to secure the spelling and pronunciation of the word in memory, along with the word's meaning" (p.715). The sight words the researchers used were grouped together based on regular and irregular spellings so that students could categorize words when using their prior

knowledge. This helped the students keep sight words in their working memory longer and they were able to show improvement between pre and post test scores for reading target words.

When teaching students how to read, many aspects must be taken into consideration when addressing each student's individual needs. Student's home life, prior educational experiences, and their psychological disposition can all affect their success with reading. Some students may be motivated intrinsically to do well, and others may need more encouragement or one on one help. Some students require more practice for things to "stick with them" and others may pick up strategies right away. These are all things that need to be understood before diving into the reading block. Teachers also need to be made aware that they are not to teach strategies in isolation, but in a sequence that makes sense to student's developmental needs and in ways that are also developmentally appropriate (Solari et al., 2017). According to Snow and Matthews (2016) most classrooms consist of students reading at many different levels, which is why the authors stressed the important of early reading interventions taking place even before the preschool age.

### **Importance of Foundational Skills in Reading Instruction**

One of the biggest challenges for educators is closing the gaps in reading instruction. Students are coming from many walks of life and bringing with them different experiences and background knowledge. Brown (2014), explained that reading development in the prekindergarten years builds through several levels of foundational skills, with skills and behaviors becoming more in depth as children get older. Therefore, instruction beginning in the preschool years will give students a stronger understanding of print and any gaps in learning will keep students further behind. Brown (2014) found that according to the National Reading Panel, foundational skills that are learned in the beginning of school are based around three main

categories: “phonemic awareness, knowledge of high frequency words, and the ability to decode words” (p. 37). During the early childhood years, students should also start to be able to demonstrate that they can communicate effectively what they comprehend, use expressive vocabulary, and ask and answer questions about key details in a text (Brown, 2014). Many children are starting kindergarten lacking these basic reading skills that are usually taught naturally at home or daycare facilities.

The goal for many teachers during the kindergarten to third grade years is to make sure students have the underlying foundational skills needed to become better readers. Students are given the strategies they need to read many types of text. As students get older, the grade level texts start to become more complex, and if students are weak in any areas of foundational skills or reading fluency, they could start to struggle or fall behind. However, by determining the area of weakness, teachers can target areas of need and catch students up. If students are where they need to be according to grade level standards, teachers in the intermediate grades can focus on reading to learn, whereas before students were just learning to read. Snyder and Golightly (2017) explain that “As children begin to master basic reading skills, teachers can integrate higher level reading skills such as fluency and comprehension into their daily instruction” (p. 53). Children start to think beyond the text and connect texts as they learn multiple subjects.

There are many factors that can lead to a reading deficit in the early childhood years. However, there have been many studies that support common characteristics among children who are experiencing some type of reading deficit and would benefit from reading interventions. Snyder and Golightly (2017), go on to explain that these common features include a lack of phonemic awareness, lack of familiarity with the letters of the alphabet, and lack of sufficient vocabulary and oral language skills. If these areas are weak or not addressed early on, these

deficits can grow into significant reading deficiencies that will be hard to modify as children mature. Bad habits sometimes remain or take longer to change. These deficits in reading can then translate to impacting students in other areas of school as well; both behaviorally and academically.

When determining best practices for reading interventions, most studies have a common theme regarding the best approach to helping struggling readers; a balanced approach. Using phonics skills (foundational skills) along with whole language skills (words and meaning) will produce the most positive results in moving students forward with reading fluency. Since sight words don't always follow the basic, foundational rules, it is important to teach sight word recognition as it is beneficial to know words that do not follow the predictable pattern of letter-sound relationships (Snyder & Golightly, 2017). Many teachers struggle with a balanced approach and tend to go heavy on one type of instruction over the other. However, it is crucial that teachers support word fluency and comprehension, especially since students who struggle with word recognition also experience difficulties in comprehension (Solari et al., 2017).

### **Sight Word Instruction**

There are many types of instructional approaches that can be used when addressing deficits in reading. With that said, sight word recognition can be taught using a variety of strategies. There are many studies that compare different types of sight word interventions. For example, the "reading racetrack" has been studied as one way to improve sight word recognition. This type of drill is used by identifying words that students do not know and using those words on a racetrack with seven different words repeated four different times and out of order. A student can't move onto a new racetrack, or new group of words, until they have mastered reading 90 words per minute with zero errors (Sullivan, Konrad, Joseph, & Luu, 2013).

Another sight word intervention that has been previously studied is a comparison of two interventions called “Traditional Drill (TD) and Incremental Rehearsal (IR)” (January, Lovelace, Foster, & Ardoin, 2017). The traditional drill consists of exposing students to a group of unknown words and shuffling the words until the student masters them. Then the next day, the words are presented again. The incremental rehearsal works in the same way as TD but mixes the new group of words with previous words learned. Both interventions are very similar to flashcards and have both been proven effective, however, when conducted over time the TD yields the most results.

This unique sight word study was conducted in 2008 and the findings from the research seemed appropriate for addressing sight word recognition in a new way. The study used peer tutoring to teach struggling readers their sight words and increase fluency. In the article, *Effects of Prerecorded Sight Words on the Accuracy of Tutor Feedback*, Van Norman and Wood (2008) state that “Peer tutoring (PT) is an evidence-based, cooperative learning strategy that increases student’s engagement with academic content” (p. 96). Students who were at risk in reading were taught how to tutor each other using rerecorded sight words to provide feedback. By using this strategy effectively, students can tutor each other (with the proper modeling and feedback in the beginning) and the teacher doesn’t have to constantly monitor. Students can complete this intervention with each other while they are working independently or waiting to meet with the teacher in a small group.

In a different study that looked at reading fluency and word recognition, Turner (2012) focused on using connected written texts and reading material using the same words repeated several times to help teachers assist with the development of automatic word recognition. This kind of approach gave the reader a better chance to concentrate on comprehension instead of

solely relying on decoding text and losing meaning in the process. Turner (2012), also explored “repeated reading” of a text which allowed readers to read a text multiple times which would therefore, increase their word recognition and increase their ability to decode text automatically.

### **Summary**

There are many different approaches to sight word instruction that have been studied and tried during reading interventions. Most research shows a strong correlation between early literacy instruction with reading achievement. Reading interventions that occur sooner in a child’s life will have a better chance of closing any gaps in reading and provide the appropriate support. Although Terrell and Watson (2018) go on to describe how “rich home literacy environments” and exposure to “rich oral language” provide an important foundation for the more structured classrooms in school, teachers can’t rely on all students having a positive or supportive home life and should therefore understand the appropriate interventions needed to support a variety of direct and indirect practices in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Design**

The purpose of this study was to determine if explicit sight word instruction increases guided reading levels for second grade students. The design that was used for this study was quasi experimental. A pretest, treatment, and posttest were used to design the study and determine effectiveness of the intervention. A treatment and control group were used to conduct the study. The control group received no additional sight word instruction while the treatment group received explicit small group instruction in addition to general reading instruction. The independent variable used was sight word instruction. The dependent variable used was reading achievement on F&P benchmark. The null hypothesis is that there is no effect of sight word instruction on the improvement of students' reading levels compared to the students who are receiving general reading instruction.

#### **Participants**

The participants in the study consisted of twenty-two second grade students at an Elementary school in Baltimore County. Eleven students in the class were male, and 11 students were female. Students were tested using the Fountas and Pinnell A-Z assessment. Students in the treatment group received guided reading with additional sight word instruction. Students in the control group received guided reading instruction. Students ranged from ages seven to eight years old. The school is a title 1 school located in a middle-class area of Baltimore County.

## **Instrument**

The treatment used to assess reading achievement was Fountas and Pennell (F&P) Benchmark assessment. F&P consists of reading a text and answering comprehension questions. The assessment is given throughout the school year in the fall, winter and spring. F&P starts at level A (Kindergarten) and goes to level Z (Grade 5). Students continue to move through levels until they are scored “independent” at a reading level. Instructional levels are also determined for teachers to use to form reading groups and provide instruction. Words per minute, accuracy rate, error rate, and self-correction rate are also recorded. All reading components are assessed and used simultaneously to determine a student’s reading level.

The use of F&P as a verified assessment resource is a great benchmark assessment for teachers to use to determine how a student is growing with their reading skills over time. One of the main components is reading comprehension in conjunction with words read correctly per minute. F&P follows similar guidelines to that of the National Reading Panel (2000), which determined with research that the best approach to effective reading instruction is one that incorporates all combinations of reading techniques. F&P allows for teachers to determine a student’s reading fluency, words that they are missing for phonics instruction, and level of comprehension.

## **Procedure**

This study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of sight word instruction on students reading achievement for second grade students. All students in the second-grade class were benchmarked in the winter of 2019 to determine their independent reading level. Students were timed as they read fiction and nonfiction text in order to determine reading fluency and

answer questions about what they read. Students in the class were then split into two groups using random sampling. Over the course of four weeks, the treatment group received regular reading instruction and small group instruction with the addition of a sight word intervention during small groups four times a week. The control group received regular reading instruction and small group instruction with no additional interventions given. At the end of the four-week treatment, students were given the same F&P assessment to see if any growth was made on their independent reading level.

Analysis Plan: the 2-group t-test was used to test for statistical significance on the F&P pretest. This statistical test established whether the two groups differed on average prior to the study. The two-group t-test was also used to test for statistical significance on the F&P posttest. This statistical test established whether the two groups differed on average after the study. In addition, Cohen's D effect size was calculated to measure the amount of difference between the treatment and non-treatment independent of scale and sample size. The change in F&P scores from pre-to-post was computed at pre and post treatment.







## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the use of explicit sight word instruction would improve the reading achievement with second grade students. The null hypothesis, that there would be no effect of using sight word instruction to improve a student's reading ability, was tested using the difference between the treatment and control sample groups. As a result of the study, it was determined that the difference between the gains made by the treatment and control groups wasn't large enough to conclude that sight word instruction was the reason for success over the customary approach to reading instruction.

#### **Implications of Results**

Despite random sampling to form the control and treatment groups within the second-grade class, it was determined that the treatment group was already at an advantage before the study began. According to the pretest and posttest data, the advantage that already existed was maintained throughout the study. It was also possible that with more time for sight word instruction in small groups, there may have been a more significant difference in the data. Both the treatment and control group made progress, but it cannot be concluded that sight word instruction causes better reading than the traditional, whole group approach.

#### **Theoretical Consequences**

There are many teaching approaches that have been researched and practiced for building strong reading skills in primary education. Although Kaskaya (2016), puts an emphasis on the need for reading words automatically and how this is an important component in reading fluency, teaching skills in isolation may not be the best approach. When analyzing the results

from the sight word study that was conducted with second grade students, the growth that was made by the treatment group wasn't significantly higher than the control group. It is possible that teaching reading comprehension, fluency, and foundational skills cohesively, rather than in isolation, will benefit beginning readers.

### **Threats to Validity**

The threats to validity that were concluded from this study were three main issues: an advantage at the start of the study for the treatment group, the length of the study, and student background. Since the data showed the treatment group was already at an advantage at the beginning of the study, it would be difficult to imply that their growth in reading levels was due to sight word instruction. The treatment's advantage occurred despite random sampling to form the two groups. The length of the study was only monitored over a short period of time. With more time students in the treatment group may prove to make more growth than the control group. Students are coming from many different backgrounds. Some students have very supportive families that work with them at home, which may also help improve their reading fluency, which can make it difficult to determine exactly what caused the students to be successful. With a larger sample and perhaps more sites, it would be possible to statistically control for student background variables.

### **Connections to Previous Studies and Existing Literature**

Educators can learn many positive strategies when it comes to the best approach for sight word instruction. Sight word instruction is an important component in reading instruction and shouldn't be forgotten. Snyder and Golightly (2017) refer to the importance of high frequency words because not all words follow specific phonics rules. This can be confusing for young

children and cause them to spend time trying to sound out words that don't make sense. Therefore, they explain that it is important to teach high frequency words so that students are aware of these words and can recognize them automatically. Many of the previous studies that were mentioned in chapter 2 have a common factor; teaching phonics skills, whole language skills and comprehension in a balanced literacy classroom will yield the best results in reading achievement.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The effect of sight word recognition on second grade student's reading achievement showed no significant advantage between the traditional teaching approach and explicit sight word instruction in small groups. After analyzing the study, it can be determined that a balanced approach to reading instruction can help students make progress with their reading abilities regardless of the particular sight word instruction. Using A-Z can be a beneficial approach to reading instruction, especially when all components from the program are used correctly. It is also a good tool for identifying where students are struggling specially. When using Fountas and Pennell in the beginning of the year, teachers can use this information to form guided reading groups with a focus on specific reading skills that need to be strengthened and monitor progress throughout the year.

### **Conclusions**

Since the treatment group had a prior advantage despite using random sampling to form the grouping, it cannot be concluded that sight word instruction differentially affects reading achievement of second grade students. Using explicit sight word instruction during small groups, as opposed to solely using the traditional approach of whole group reading instruction,

yielded similar growth. Both the treatment group and the control group showed gains on the posttest, but the difference in gains between the treatment and control groups was not statistically significant. It cannot be determined, therefore, from the present study, which approach proved to be more successful.

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