

The Impact of Word Study on Letter-Sound Knowledge

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Introduction

Identifying, practicing, understanding, and manipulating letters and sounds are essential skills for all first grade students. Letter-sound relationships encompass aspects of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics skills. In order to attain and retain these skills, students must first be taught letter-sound relationships, as well as familiar letter-sound patterns, through phonics instruction. It is vital that these skills are taught and learned, as letter-sound relationships are the building blocks for reading. When students enter second grade, they must be able to read grade level texts, which incorporate all aspects of phonics skills. If students have not been previously taught to identify, understand, and apply letter-sound patterns, they will spend more time relearning this material, rather than advancing to second grade content. Therefore, in order to successfully read and comprehend grade level material throughout an individual's academic career, a student must first demonstrate knowledge of letter-sound relationships via phonological and phonemic awareness. Once students have mastered letter-sound relationships, as well as various phonics skills, it is expected that their reading fluency, as well as reading level will progressively increase. One specific way to build knowledge in letter-sound relationships in children is through the implementation of word study.

Why is Letter-Sound Knowledge Important?

Knowledge in letter-sound relationships is considered to be the most important early literacy skill for children to acquire (NELP, 2009 as cited by Skibbe, Gerde, Wright, & Samples-Steel, 2015). An essential part of learning to read and write is the understanding that letters and combinations of letters make up particular sounds and words. Knowledge of letter-sound relationships gives students a degree of independence in learning to recognize words and understand words. It develops students' visual images of words because it allows them to attend

to the letter components of the words and their sequencing (Fletcher, 2009). Without knowing letter-sound correspondences, learners are deprived of a fundamental means of recognizing and producing known words and of figuring out new ones when reading and writing (Fletcher, 2009).

Learning to read typically evolves in different phases along a continuum starting with the transition from a non-reading pre-alphabetic phase in kindergarten, to a partial alphabetic phase, and finally to a full alphabetic phase of reading during first grade (Schaars, Segers, & Verhoeven, 2017). Because kindergarten and first grade are vital years in reading development of young children, it is necessary that they master letter-sound relationships during these years, in order to progress as fluent readers. If students experience a deficit within knowledge of letter-sound relationships, there is a high predictability that these students will experience difficulty reading and ultimately be later readers than their peers (Schaars, Segers, & Verhoeven, 2017).

The ability to discriminate individual sounds in language is critical for children when developing an understanding that letters of the alphabet correspond to sounds in English (Skibbe et al., 2015). Early reading is dependent on children having some understanding of the internal structure of words. Additionally, explicit instruction in letter-sound skills is very effective in promoting early reading (Chard & Dickson, 2017). Students who are given the opportunity to manipulate letters to make sounds/words, identify phonemic patterns within words, use hands-on tools to decode words, and are given ample guidance to practice phonics via word study, will build letter-sound knowledge, ultimately improving reading proficiency.

What is Phonological Awareness, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics?

Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics are all areas that work to develop a child's letter-sound understanding. These three terms are closely related with learning

in one area reinforcing the others. However, the three terms are not the same or interchangeable (Fletcher, 2009). Phonological awareness is a broad skill that encompasses identifying, manipulating, and understanding units of oral language. It is the ability to pay attention to, identify, and reflect on various sound segments of speech (Bear, Invernizzi, Johnston, & Templeton, 2012). At a young age, children can hear and use individual phonemes easily when talking to others and listening to others speak to them. However, simply speaking, listening, and understanding words is not phonological awareness. When children are phonetically aware, they are able to dissect the parts of a word that they hear or read. Each part of a word, including the vowels, consonants, syllables, and sounds (phonemes) make up its phonetic structure.

Spoken language can be broken down in many different ways, including sentences into words and words into syllables, onset and rime, and individual phonemes. Manipulating sounds includes deleting, adding, or substituting syllables or sounds. Being phonologically aware means having a general understanding at all of these levels (Chard & Dickson, 2017). However, phonological awareness does not happen all at once. It develops gradually over time and progresses from a sensitivity to big chunks of speech sounds, such as syllables and rhyme, to smaller parts of speech sounds, such as individual letters (Bear et al., 2012). The skills that make up the broad scope of phonological awareness lie on a continuum of complexity. The continuum starts as early as preschool and includes rhymes and songs, progressing into sentence segmentation, reiterating that language is broken into words. The center of the continuum is made of activities related to segmenting words into syllables and blending syllables into words. Moving along the continuum involves segmenting words into onsets and rimes and blending onsets and rimes into words.

The most sophisticated level of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness, the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate units of sound. Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness. When a word is broken down into its smallest part, individual sounds, or phonemes, the term “phonemic awareness” is used. While phonological awareness breaks words into sentences, phonemic awareness breaks words into individual sounds. It is a closer look at the individual sound segments in a word. Phonemic awareness includes isolation, blending, segmenting, and addition, substitution, and deletion of letters in a word. When using phonemic awareness, children attend to sounds and recognize that there is a connection from sounds to print.

Phonics teaches the connection between word sounds and written letters. The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds. Once readers recognize that sounds are linked to letters, they can then form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns. Phonics allows students the opportunity to practice, manipulate, identify, and understand letter-sound patterns through a variety of methods. As students progress through phonics learning, they will draw on their phonemic awareness skills, knowledge and understanding (Fletcher, 2009). Various methods of phonics include teaching students to recognize single-letter correspondences. As students can identify and apply single-letter correspondences, phonics then teaches students to recognize and write letter combinations that are easier (beginning readers) or more complex (progressing and advanced readers). Overall, the goal of phonics is to teach students to apply all knowledge and understanding of letter-sound relationships, phonological awareness, and phonemic awareness within their reading and writing.

What is Word Study?

“Word Study” is an instructional approach developed by Kathy Ganske. It is aimed at improving children’s spelling, vocabulary and phonic word recognition and phonological awareness (Jeffes, 2014). Word study is based on the notion that a student’s spelling ability can serve as a guide for instruction. According to Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2004), there are four goals of word study. The first is to teach children that there are systematic relationships between letters and sounds. The second is to understand that written words are composed of letter patterns representing the sounds of spoken word. The third is to recognize words quickly and accurately, as a way to obtain meaning from them. The last goal is to blend sounds to read words and segment words into sounds to spell. The implementation of word study can look differently in the way it is structured, however, it always works to accomplish the former four goals.

In most word study implementation, students have the opportunity to manipulate letters to make words, sort words by patterns, play phonemic games, and participate in a variety of teacher guided activities. In a word study approach, teachers and students must both take the job of word detectives. In doing so, they both must attempt to make sense of word patterns and their relationships to one another. During word study, spelling ‘rules’ are not dictated by the teacher for students to memorize, rather, spelling patterns and generalizations are discovered by students (Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009). Allowing students to detect spelling generalizations on their own works to support their understanding of orthography, knowledge that students can apply as they are reading and writing.

Impact of Word Study on Letter-Sound Knowledge

Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics knowledge can be challenging for children, as many phonemes in English can be associated with multiple letters (e.g., car and key). Therefore, some children are extremely likely to face challenges in mastering these skills, especially those with disabilities and English language learners (Skibbe et al., 2015). However, when educators work to help children identify how speech sounds combine to form syllables, words, and sentences, through the use of tools and word study approaches based on scientific research, children are much more likely to succeed.

Having knowledge of letter-sound relationships is fundamental to future reading success, and participation in phonics activities, especially word study, has a positive influence on beginning reading (A. Evangelisti, personal communication, November 29, 2017). If students do not know letters, they do not know words, and thus will not know how to read. Therefore, knowledge and application of letter-sound correspondences needs to be taught, practiced, and nurtured in the earliest stages of reading instruction for all children (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008). In order to teach, practice, and nurture letter-sound relationships, teachers must work each day to provide instruction that allows for explicit word study. Word study works to dissect, manipulate, segment, blend, identify, and understand words as a whole, as parts, and as individual sounds. This is the kind of explicit instruction needed for students to grow in their phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and phonics skills as it gives students ample opportunities to build knowledge and generalizations about words. The benefits of the implementation of word study as a way to foster letter-sound relationships are endless.

According to Allison Evangelisti, a reading specialist in a metro-area school district, when word study is implemented in a classroom, specifically in primary grade levels, it

encourages students to form a deeper knowledge of the way sounds and words work, both individually and cohesively (A. Evangelisti, personal communication, November 29, 2017). Because word study works to integrate engaging strategies of manipulation, building, brainstorming, sorting, and writing words in a variety of ways, students are consistently given a plethora of learning tools. While one specific strategy may be difficult for one student, there will most likely be many others that work for him/her. In the process of supporting students' reading and writing development, word study forces children to understand and exploit the relationship between these literate processes. Through word study lessons, teachers can explicitly teach students what they need to know about the English spelling system, while also keeping them engaged and motivated through hands-on word study activities that promote inquiry and critical thinking (Williams et al., 2009). Once students have taken part in word study lessons, while also engaging in a variety of word study strategies, their understanding of letter-sound relationships is likely to improve. In a research study done by Gottardo and Rubin (1991), they found that children who received phonics instruction through word study performed better on phonemic-awareness tasks than did children who received whole-word instruction (as cited by Bear et al., 2012). Growth in letter-sound knowledge thus leads to independent and strategic application of these skills in reading, writing, and spelling areas.

Effective Word Study Practices

While there are a variety of ways to implement word study lessons into the classroom, one thing is for certain, scheduling time to integrate word study is not just advised, it is essential. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2013) research, the structure of a guided reading lesson should include word study, the practice of phonics, every single day. Because phonological awareness is to be guided by a teacher to meet the phonological understanding per student,

research has suggested that word study lessons are most effective when taught in small groups (Bear et al., 2012). For most educators, small group lessons of word study are taught within the time period of a guided reading lesson. In this way, word study instruction can be explicitly aligned to build on student reading skills as well. The following paragraphs discuss two of the most critical ingredients of a word study lesson.

One of the most effective practices for teaching word study is through the use of building, blending, segmenting, and extending words (A. Evangelisti, personal communication, November 29, 2017). This allows students the hands-on opportunity to manipulate magnetic letters, letter cards, or individual letter tools to form word parts. In doing so, students are actively exploring the alphabetic layer, examining the relationship between letters and sounds. They are learning to match single letters and pairs of letters to specific sounds in order to create words. The main purpose of building, blending, segmenting, and extending words is to teach beginning readers word families so that they can use their knowledge of these spelling patterns in other words they encounter in their reading. There are several hundred word families readers should know. Students who can use individual letters to build words within specific word families will then have the ability to process such words accurately and efficiently. This approach to word study instruction has been recognized and supported by many of the foremost scholars in reading (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008).

Another approach to word study lessons which is practiced daily among literacy educators is that of sorting. There are a variety of sorting methods that students can participate in. However, the most common sorting method is word sorting. Word sorting involves students examining words on small pieces of paper, and then placing words within columns or groups, based on specific patterns within the words. Patterns may include short vowels, long vowels,

beginning blends, digraphs, final blends, consonant patterns, rhymes, etc. For example, a student may be instructed to sort a group of words based on long a vowels or short a vowels. Depending on the current phonological knowledge of the student, he/she may then be challenged to brainstorm additional words to add to each group. It is important that students can not only identify word patterns and sort them accordingly, but also pull from prior knowledge to add additional words. According to the authors of *Words Their Way*, word sorting helps to draw students' attention to words, as well as the structural features within words (Bear et al., 2012). This allows students to form generalizations about words and word families, and use their knowledge of word sorting to identify these generalizations as they are reading.

Conclusion

In today's realm of education, there are a plethora of theories that claim to have the most substantial effect on student reading achievement. However, one specific foundation of reading success that rises above the others is knowledge in letter-sound relationships and patterns. While this knowledge can be achieved in a variety of ways, the most beneficial and effective method of building a child's letter-sound knowledge is through the implementation of word study. Word study provides hands-on approaches and tools, along with explicit instruction and guided practices that allow for increased growth. When students are given opportunities to manipulate, build, brainstorm, write, sort, identify, and examine letters, sounds, and word parts, they are thus able to build word generalizations, leading to automatic identification when reading words in a text. Therefore, implementation of word study leads to growth in knowledge of letter-sound relationships and patterns, ultimately leading to reading success.

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