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Using Word Wall Activities in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Abstract

This article describes an action research study of student word identification. The targeted population consisted of Pre-Kindergarten students in three elementary schools located in mid-western communities. Post intervention data indicated an increase in students' word identification skills. The researchers recommended that word wall activities should be used for the implementation of improvement of word identification skills. Teachers planning to use word wall activities should determine at which rate new words would be introduced within their classroom.

Young children thrive in a classroom that uses a variety of instructional approaches. Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara and Donnelly (1997) discovered that many students learn to identify words without explicit instruction. Rereading favorite books and composing text seemed sufficient to get children on the road to word identification. One of the drawbacks of teacher directed instruction was the limitation of students' creativity to devise strategies for learning words on their own.

According to Sanacore (1997), there was too much teacher-directed instruction and not enough student-engaged learning. Students' opportunities for self-expression were suppressed when a totally teacher-centered approach was used exclusively.

It was imperative that the classroom had a variety of instructional approaches. The elements students must acquire to have successful word

identification skills are: phonemic awareness and decoding skills, fluency in word identification, construction of meaning, vocabulary, spelling and writing. An essential part of the reading process involves learning to read in various ways (Ehri, 1991, 1994).

St. John, Manset-Williamson, Chung and Michael (2005) examined data from three years of early reading interventions. Their study found that early reading reform found a margin of difference in reading related outcomes. There was no evidence from the study that direct/explicit instruction improved reading outcomes.

We believe that a wide variety of experiences are necessary to establish a firm foundation for literacy. The use of a word wall is one instructional strategy that enhances children's word identification. The purpose of this article is to describe an exploratory study about using

a word wall and accompanying activities to increase student's word identification.

Guiding Learning Theory

A learning theory that is relevant to the experimental study of using word wall activities in early childhood classrooms is Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). He further related the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to an embryonic state in which the future developmental levels are within the child, ready to bud or flower under the guidance and tutelage of an adult or advanced peer. Vygotsky explained that what the child can do today with guidance, is what the child will be able to do independently tomorrow. He also believed that children with the same mental age would likely have different zones of proximal development, explaining the variation in rate of individual learning.

Instruction in word wall activities to increase word recognition skills uses the theory of the ZPD in several ways. Instructional programs take children where they are in their developmental level and lead them with guidance into new areas of development. Scaffolding has positive effects on reading instruction. Repetition and positive reinforcement may be used until the new skill becomes part of the child's independent development level. Teachers can individually prescribe instruction to meet individual needs. The word wall activities can be used in conjunction with Vygotsky's theory. Teachers assess what level the students are at and lead them with guidance to become independent with word recognition skills.

Importance of the Word Wall and Activities

A word wall is a systematically organized collection of words displayed on a large wall within the classroom. Word wall activities are a segment of the 4 Blocks Literacy framework developed by Cunningham and Allington (1999) and utilized in thousands of elementary classrooms. The word wall is a tool to promote group learning and helps develop a core group of words. "Word walls are created and directly linked to reading and writing activities in the classroom. They are references of what has been learned and practiced" (Wagstaff 1999, p.1). Word Walls introduce words that are simple to learn. The words are reviewed weekly and used to improve vocabulary and students' written work. Words are arranged alphabetically to aid the students during writing times. Students can refer to the Word Wall to help with spelling of basic sight words.

Although many young children may have a number of high frequency words in their spoken vocabulary, their ability to identify them in print, quickly and accurately is critical to becoming fluent independent readers. Supporting the developments of oral language and early literacy should be an integral part of every classroom (Bereiter, et al. 2003).

Incorporating activities for children to experience a wide range of literacy activities helps lay the foundation for word identification. Emphasis should be placed on playing with sounds and enjoying books, stories and writing. Medley (2002) wrote "according to research, the purpose of a word wall is to help children develop critical reading skills." Cunningham (2000) warns that having a word wall is unproductive unless we are also "doing" the word wall. She discussed the importance of making the word wall interactive whenever possible.

Participants

Four pre-kindergarten teachers and their students participated in the study. The teachers taught in four different preschool facilities located in the mid-western United States. The students that participated in the study were in the four year old preschool classes. The study included a total of 42 preschool children with an average age of 4.5 years old. The four participating schools were from four different districts in mid-western communities with an average student body of three hundred and twenty students in regular and special education programs. All four sites were located in the same mid-western state.

Site A

Site A was a one-story brick parochial preschool consisting of three preschool classrooms, which was adjacent to a church. This site had a current enrollment of 51 students. The attendance rate at Site A was 95.4% with a mobility rate of 13.3%. The school population was comprised of 56.4% White, 18.6% Black, 18.2% Hispanic, and 6.8% Asian/Pacific Islander. Thirty-eight percent of those students came from low-income families. Permission letters were sent home with all students in the 4-year-old preschool program (n=15).

Site B

Site B provided services to special needs children from surrounding school districts. Students qualifying for English as a second language and bilingual programs from the district also attended site B. The school population was comprised of 56.4% White, 18.6% Black, 18.2% Hispanic, and 6.8% Asian/Pacific Islander. Low-income students accounted for 19.8% of the total student body. Permission letters were sent home with all students in the 4-year-old preschool program (n=4).

Site C

Site C was the only pre-kindergarten through third grade elementary school in the district. The school was a one-story brick building with 18 classrooms. There was an approximate current enrollment of 280 students in regular and special education programs. The mobility rate of Site C was 10.5% and the attendance rate was 95.6%. The school population was comprised of 96.2% White, 1.2% Black, 1.1% Hispanic, 1.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.3% Native American students. Low-income students accounted for 28.5% of the student body. Permission letters were sent home with all students in the 4-year-old preschool program (n=12).

Site D

Site D had an approximate enrollment of 461 students in regular and special education programs serving pre-kindergarten through grade 4. The average class size at pre-kindergarten was 20 students. The mobility rate was 31.6% and the attendance rate was 91.8%. The school population was comprised of 21.1% White, 75.5% Black, and 3.4% Hispanic. Low-income students accounted for 98.2% of the student body. Permission letters were sent home with all students in the 4-year-old preschool program (n=14).

Materials

A subtest (Word Identification) of the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests (1998) was used to measure pre and post word identification. At the beginning of the study, students were individually asked to identify words from form G of the subtest. The same procedure was followed at the end of the study using form H of the subtest. The study lasted approximately 16 weeks.

We chose the following high frequency words for our study: *students' names, my, and, the, in, a, up, cat*. Numerous word wall activities are available to use. For the current study, we

chose the following activities: *letter formation, rhyming words, using the word in a sentence, put the word to music, sing and clap, highlighting, spell and clap, search for the word in classroom books, blast-off, ball bounce, flashlight spotlight and soccer ball strategy.*

Procedures and Results of the Current Study

Adhering to procedures for introducing new words and incorporating activities outlined by Cunningham and Allington (1999) we gave each of the four teachers the list of words and activities with instructions to implement the word wall activities for 10 minutes per day into the existing curriculum. A series of learning activities were scheduled within the instructional plans. Whole class and small flexible groups were scheduled to include word identification strategies that promote emergent literacy skills. The teachers were also asked to keep a weekly journal with observational notes about the study during Weeks 1 through 16.

Week 1:

- Collect permission letters from parents
- Go over goals with students
- Woodcock Reading Mastery pre-test

Week 2:

- Teachers introduced the word wall using the students' names to explain letter formation.
- Students were prompted and told explicitly about the process to follow to make the word relevant.

Week 3:

- discussion of what makes words
- introduced the word *my*
- used the strategy of manipulating magnetic letters and rhyming words to the same sounds.

- each child used the word in a sentence.

Week 4:

- Introduction of Word Wall activities
- strategy using magnetic letters which allowed the students to form words.

Week 5:

- introduced the word *and*
- reviewed the words the students had learned
- students use the words in a sentence and put the words to music.

Week 6:

- introduced the word *the*.
- students sing and clap the newly introduced word.

Week 7:

- introduced the word *in*.
- highlighting the word on the word wall using a pointer
- having the students, as a group, spell and clap the word.

Week 8:

- reviewed the learned words from the word wall.
- students searched for the words in the classroom books.

Week 9:

- introduced the word *a*.
- blast-off activity strategy.

Week 10:

- introduced the word *in*.
- pretending to bounce a basketball while saying the letters and pretending to shoot a basket while saying the word.
- The students took turns choosing their favorite word wall words while using the bouncing ball strategy.

Week 11:

- introduced the word *up*.
- reviewed all the words they had learned.

- the teachers used a flashlight to spotlight the words as the students identified them.

Week 12:

- word wall review
- children used their favorite strategy while identifying their learned words

Week 13

- Soccer Ball strategy.
- The researchers had the students pretend to dribble a soccer ball with their feet and shoot for a goal when they finished saying the word.

Week 14:

- reviewed all of the word wall words
- The teachers used a strategy called, *On-the-back-Cross-Checking*.

Week 15:

- Review Word Wall

- Allow students to choose their favorite word wall activities

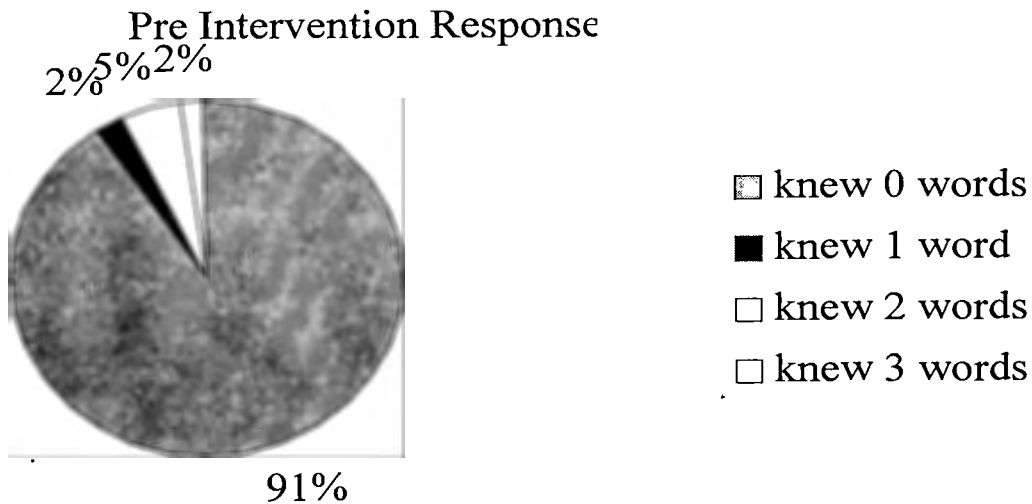
Week 16:

- Conduct Woodcock Reading Mastery post test

The data from the copyrighted Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests (1998) at the four preschool facilities were aggregated and presented in Figure 1. The students were administered the Word Identification Form G subtest at the beginning of the study. At the end of the study, the 42 preschool students were post tested using Form H.

Figure 1 represents the pre intervention responses from the 42 prekindergarten students. Before the study, 91% of the students knew 0 words.

Figure 1.



At the conclusion of the study, 7% of the students knew 0 words, 19% recognized 1 word, 29% correctly recognized 2 words and 45% of the students knew 3 words. These results are represented in Figure 2.

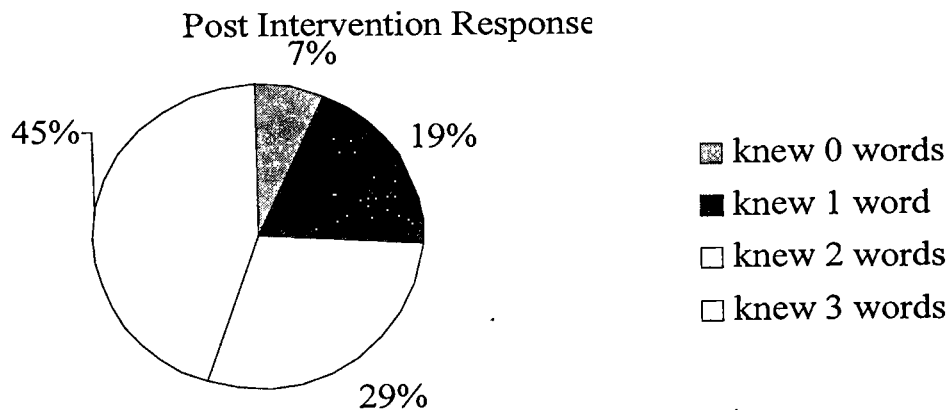


Figure 2.

The number of 42 preschool students who identified zero words prior to the intervention decreased by 84%. At the end of the study, there was a 43% increase from the number of preschool students who knew 3 or more words.

Discussion

It is not surprising that the present study demonstrates that classroom word walls and word wall activities promote word identification. We were surprised to learn that none of the teachers in the study had previously used a word wall in their early childhood classrooms.

The teachers' anecdotal records yielded some important points to consider. The teachers noted that the preschool students were highly engaged in the word wall activities. The teachers involved in the study felt creativity and enthusiasm were benefits that helped increase the amount of student learning and word recognition. Overall, the teachers felt that the weekly word wall activities ran smoothly and would not deviate from the schedule. The teachers also felt that the introduction of new words should

be made on a timely basis over the course of the study.

Further Consideration

Additional inquiry in active processing, automaticity, reading fluency and word meaning would benefit the students. Emergent readers require reading readiness strategies structured specifically to meet the literacy needs of each student. Learning to identify words in print quickly and accurately is critical to students' development as fluent, independent readers. When students read and understand words quickly and automatically, they are able to focus on the meaning of the text. Word study should be an active process connecting meaningful reading and writing.

We feel that teachers who are searching for ways to increase students' word identification skills would benefit from using a word wall and word wall activities. The introduction of new words and subsequent activities provide an interactive process for aiding in the improvement of students' word identification skills. We believe that teachers need to be flexible and enthusiastic

in the classroom and in their approach to learning new words.

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