

Does a multi-sensory approach to phonics improve spelling competencies?

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Introduction

A small scale intervention was carried out with a Year Three class to investigate issues with learning phonics and to investigate if a multi-sensory approach to teaching phonics would improve spelling competencies. A multi-sensory approach was taken following a reconnaissance where both pupil and colleague responses highlighted the previous method was 'boring' and 'repetitive' as it focussed on seeing and repeating sounds. This multi-sensory method hoped to engage and motivate pupils, drawing on work by Morin (2015) and Shaprio (2008).

The intervention

A sample group of children was selected; using the Single Word Spelling Test administered by the school, I chose children who scored sixteen and under, thus representing my lower attaining pupils. The new method was taught for twenty minutes each morning and afternoon over the course of two weeks, focusing on key sounds that were lacking in my classroom; such as 'ea,' 'oo,' 'ou,' 'th,' 'ow,' 'er,' 'ir,' 'o-e,' 'es'.

A selection of visual stimuli was used, such as seeing the basic sound, sounds in words, as seen in the table below, and accompanying pictures/objects. The sound was said in a variety of ways; volume, pitch and accent. A 'chunking' method was used to sound the word on our fingers, e.g. 'p-ou-n-d, pound.' Partner work was used to spell the sound/word to a partner using 'chunking', the learners used their bodies to write using a 'magic finger', acted out the words containing the sounds and took part in physical games and quizzes.

Sound	Intervention word
ea	Steam
oo	Foot
ou	Pound
th	Third
ow	Powder
er	Further
ir	Shirt
o-e	Poke
es	Rushes

Table 1: Accompanying words for intervention sounds.

Methods used

- Initial base line data collection from the implementation of the Single Word Spelling Test; this allowed me to identify key sound errors and my sample group.
- Semi structured interviews with both pupils and staff
- Observations of children during the intervention to see which strategies they applied.
- Textual analysis of the Interim test following the intervention and the Single Word Spelling Test in July.

The most important findings

Children responded well to the multi-sensory approach. Although only a snapshot in time, Single Word Spelling Test scores increased for my sample group. The sample group voiced how they enjoyed it and felt it helped them. I observed children applying the 'chunking' strategy following the intervention.

Pupils highlighted their preference for the new method. The increase in scores and pupils use of the strategy was fed back in staff meetings.

The study would be more reliable if it was taken across a wider range of classes and schools. It is impossible to say that it was the intervention alone that developed children's spelling competencies, due to other intervention work carried out by colleagues and the change in children's maturity over the course of the year.

Conclusion

A multi-sensory approach to phonics does raise spelling competencies within a classroom. It increased pupil motivation and this transferred into an increase in scores for the Single Word Spelling Test. Children applied strategies learnt following the intervention.

I feel I have developed as a teacher leader; I am more confident to engage in debates with colleagues; yet I am more critical as I have engaged with research and theory.

The intervention impacted on my colleagues in that the intervention suggested a new method in which to deliver phonics. Using my data I could highlight how the study was a success yet explain how it could be adapted for future use within school.

References

Shapiro, L., (2008) Delivering phonological and phonics training within whole-class teaching British Journal of Educational Psychology 78 (4) pg 597- 620

Morin, A., (2015) Multi-Sensory Instruction: What you need to know. <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childrens-school/instructional-strategies/multisensory-instruction-what-you-need-to-know>

A graph to show the change, from September 2015 to July 2016, in key spelling sound errors targeted by the intervention.

