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ABSTRACT

THE USEFULNESS OF TEACHING VOWEL GENERALIZATIONS WAS STUDIED USING THREE TREATMENT GROUPS, WITH TWO SECOND-GRADE CLASSES IN EACH TREATMENT. THE STUDY WAS CONSIDERED A PILOT INVESTIGATION TO PROVIDE DIRECTION RATHER THAN A DEFINITIVE RESEARCH STUDY. IN TREATMENT 1, THE MCKEE READING FOR MEANING PROGRAM WAS FOLLOWED, INCLUDING THE TEACHING OF ALL VOWEL LESSONS AND ACCOMPANYING WORKBOOK PRACTICE. IN TREATMENT 2, THE SOUNDS OF LONG AND SHORT VOWELS WERE TAUGHT, USING THOSE LESSONS OF THE MCKEE PROGRAM WHICH TEACH ON THE HEARING LEVEL ONLY. NO LESSONS IN ASSOCIATING OR USING VOWELS WERE TAUGHT. TREATMENT 3 OMITTED ALL ITEMS PERTAINING TO VOWELS AND SUBSTITUTED LESSONS IN INTERPRETIVE SKILLS AND BROAD READING. PRETEST SCORES ON THE STROUD PRIMARY READING PROFILES, LEVEL 1, WERE COMPARED WITH POST-TEST SCORES ON LEVEL 2 OF THE SAME TEST. THE AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION SUBTEST SCORES SHOWED A DRAMATIC, STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT GAIN FOR TREATMENT 2, WHICH WAS NOT TRUE OF THE OTHER TREATMENTS. TREATMENT 2 RESULTED IN A SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER MEAN SCORE FOR TOTAL READING THAN DID TREATMENTS 1 OR 3. FURTHER RESEARCH IS SUGGESTED. TABLES AND REFERENCES ARE INCLUDED. (CM)

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TEACHING ABOUT VOWELS IN SECOND GRADE

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Background

Discussion in recent years about beginning reading has shifted from the "Phonics vs Whole Word" debate to the current cliche "What Phonics and When?" Chall (1) skimmed the surface to arrive at the conclusion that the primary child's task was "decoding"--a linguistic euphemism which means that his task is "to convert the printed word to the spoken word that he already knows when he hears it."

Despite the emphasis on vowels in some beginning reading

programs, it would seem that the first task should be to get children started in reading in the most efficient and most reliable manner, i.e., through the use of context and consonant letter/sound associations: context because it is essential for focus on meaning and its use is persistent through all levels of maturity in reading; consonants because they are generally consistent in their sound representation, they represent two-thirds of the letters in English words, they supply the configuration clues for rapid identification of words at mature levels, and they are sufficient in most words as phonic clues to the identification of that word.

Nevertheless, in most programs the teaching of vowel generalizations persists at some level, usually at grade two. How much does this teaching about vowels help children in reading? We have some evidence to suggest that the value is minimal.

First, over the past several years, tests have been administered to Glenview children who learned to read at home. These children, about 2% of the kindergarten population, were able to read at third grade level on the Durrell Oral Reading Tests. They performed as well on a vowel test of nonsense syllables as a typical third grader, yet most of these kindergarten children had been taught nothing about vowel generalizations. This finding suggests that experience in reading led these children intuitively to some understanding of the sound representation of the vowel letters

in the framework of a syllable.

Second, Hillerich (2) compared groups of children in first grade who were taught vowel generalizations with groups using the consonant/context approach. The comparison of 742 first graders indicated that those taught vowels did not score as well on a reading achievement test. Furthermore, the major difference between the groups was in the subtest of comprehension, where those not taught vowel generalizations scored better. These findings support the thought that "The more we teach about vowels, the less we are teaching reading for meaning."

From another standpoint, studies of the consistency of letter sound representation have been reported by a number of people, including Clymer (3) and Bailey (4). Clymer researched the guides in four basal readers, grades 1-3. He listed the generalizations (consonant, vowel, syllable) that were taught, and then examined the vocabularies of the same books to see how frequently the generalizations held true. Bailey followed Clymer's procedure, except that she considered vocabularies through sixth grade.

These two studies reveal that consonant generalizations--which do not even include the highly regular consonants--have a high percentage of "utility" or consistency. Conversely, only six of the vowel generalizations reached the 75% level established by Clymer as the point below which a generalization has questionable

value. Further, of the six, two generalizations are so broad that they have little or no value in terms of their assistance in unlocking a strange word.

What has been said so far suggests that (1) first grade children learn to read better without being taught vowel generalizations, (2) experience in reading results in some understandings about vowels among successful readers, and (3) logical analysis of our language reveals few consistencies when we deal with vowel generalizations. From these findings one might conclude that time can be better spent in second grade on things other than vowel generalizations. On the other hand, logic and "what works with kids" are not always the same. The following investigation was an effort to discover empirically whether or not the teaching of vowel generalizations contributed to success in reading at the second grade level.

Procedures

The investigation established three treatment groups with two second grade classes in each treatment. Teachers were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate and their comfort--if not inclination--in a given treatment. Because of the lack of random selection of teachers and because of the need for development of materials for two of the treatment groups, this study must be looked upon as a pilot, providing direction, rather than as a definitive research study.

Treatment #1. Teachers in this group followed the McKee program (5) as provided in the guide, teaching ALL VOWEL lessons in step 3 and providing practice in the workbook for those lessons.

Treatment #2. Teachers in this group developed understanding of the sound of "long" and "short" vowels, using those lessons in step 3 of the McKee program which teach on the HEARING level. They were provided a listing of vowel lessons from the second grade readers at the HEARING level, all of which were taught to this group. No lessons in ASSOCIATING or USING vowels were taught. Instead, lessons were developed to follow the HEARING level which provided for exploration of possible pronunciations for the various vowel symbols. These lessons were patterned after the Glenview approach in spelling but were taught from the reading viewpoint, i.e., the children moved from symbol to sound instead of from sound to symbol.

Treatment #3. Teachers in this group omitted all items pertaining to vowels. For these lessons they substituted lessons on interpretive skills, broad reading, and discussion of library books.

The Stroud Primary Reading Profiles, Level 1, administered as a matter of policy at the end of grade one, were used as pretest scores for these children and provided some measure of the

initial comparability of the groups. At the end of second grade, all groups were administered Level 2 of the Stroud as a posttest.

Results

Table 1 shows results of testing at the end of grades one and two for the three treatment groups. Auditory discrimination is reported separately, since this subtest is not included in the total reading score on the Stroud test. The number of children in each group has been reduced because only children with all test scores were included in the tabulation. Further, it must be pointed out that test scores on Level 1 and Level 2 of the Stroud (Grades 1 and 2) are not comparable, so lower scores in grade 2 do not represent a loss.

Table 1

Stroud Pre- and Posttest Results by Treatment

			Total Reading		Auditory Discrimination	
			Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
	N	Aptitude	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 1	Grade 2
Treatment #1						
A	14	22.9	95.4	83.6	98.6	30.8
B	16	21.4	105.2	89.1	94.9	34.3
Total	30	22.1	100.6	86.5	96.6	32.7
Treatment #2						
A	21	21.9	110.8	101.5	94.7	36.9
B	23	22.0	101.3	97.4	97.2	37.2
Total	44	21.9	105.8	99.4	96.0	37.1
Treatment #3						
A	23	21.3	97.5	98.7	96.5	36.0
B	19	20.4	96.7	84.9	89.5	30.8
Total	42	20.9	97.2	92.4	93.3	33.7

It can be observed in Table 1 that Treatment #3 was lowest in aptitude for reading and also lowest on both grade-one pretests. Nevertheless posttest scores fell between the total scores for Treatments #1 and #2.

Treatment #2, typical in aptitude, was slightly higher on

the total reading pretest, but was considerably higher than either of the other groups on the posttest. Most dramatic was the auditory discrimination score.

Inspection of the groups within treatments suggests as much difference within treatments (between classes) as was found between treatments. However, analysis of variance for the three treatments, reported in table 2, leads to rejection of the observation that more variance exists within groups than between groups. An F of 6.05 is significant at less than .01.

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Treatments

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square
Between	3,016.9	2	1,508.5
Within	28,153.9	113	249.2
Total	31,170.9	115	271.1

The two-tailed test for t indicated that treatment #2 resulted in significantly higher scores than treatments #3 or #1 ($p < .05$ and .01, respectively). The difference in mean scores for treatments #3 and #1 was not significant.

Discussion

Obviously a study of this limited population can lead to no strong generalizations about children and reading. However, it does suggest a few things. Primarily, it adds support to the belief that the teaching we do of vowel generalizations may contribute nothing directly to skill in reading. The poorest in total reading achievement was treatment #1, where vowels were taught.

Secondly, we see that auditory discrimination scores apparently have little to do directly with reading achievement. This is implied by exclusion of the auditory discrimination score from total reading score and is indicated especially by comparison of pretest scores on that subtest with pretest scores in total reading.

Nevertheless, results in Table 1 clearly indicate that auditory discrimination can be improved through teaching that is directly related to that skill (Treatment #2). What effect does this learning have on using a dictionary for pronunciation? (The most difficult task for children in using a dictionary for pronunciation seems to be discriminating the vowel sound in a key word, reproducing it in isolation, and inserting it into the strange word.)

Fruitful areas for further research might include more definitive investigations of the teaching of reading without vowel generalizations and also the influence of the exploratory approach (Treatment #2) as it might contribute to improved use of the dictionary for pronunciation. Certainly unfruitful investigations, in the somewhat biased view of this author, are those which distort the orthography or the semantics of our "unphonetic" language in order to begin with "consistency." Besides, what is more consistent than consonants. Perhaps we should be grateful for the "inconsistent" vowels, which force good readers to use context and, therefore, to read for meaning. Or what is reading for?

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