Developing phonological awareness through the teaching of common two-letter rime units to at risk Year One students will increase their reading accuracy at word and prose level.

ABSTRACT

Most students begin the process of learning to read long before they attend school. They hear similarities and differences in sounds and gradually develop the ability to identify the different sounds that make words and to associate these sounds with written words. They begin to manipulate, segment and blend sounds and participate in word play with sound patterns and rhyme. The degree to which this phonological awareness is encouraged and developed, effects early reading ability.

The hypothesis of this study is that developing phonological awareness through the teaching of common two-letter rime units to at risk Year One students will increase their reading accuracy at word and prose level.

This study investigated the efficacy of a strategic phonological awareness intervention approach for a small group of Year One children who demonstrated early reading difficulties. The participants were selected when diagnostic testing revealed common deficits. The teaching targeted explicit instruction in developing awareness of two-letter rime units and the ability to blend and segment words containing these units. Intervention students were withdrawn from class in a group for ten sessions of 35 minutes over a period of two weeks.

Six boys and girls who coincidentally all came from non-English speaking homes participated: three in the intervention group and three in the control group. All of the children exhibited an ability to remember several high usage words but demonstrated expressive and receptive phonological difficulties and delayed semantic and syntactic development.

When comparing the pre and post test results of the two groups, the children who received phonological awareness intervention had made more gains in their phonological awareness ability and reading accuracy than the control.

The findings suggest that explicit phonological awareness intervention may be an efficient teaching strategy to improve phonological awareness and reading accuracy in children who have not learnt these skills in the mainstream.

INTRODUCTION

Competence in early language literacy provides a strong foundation for successful reading. One of several necessary components of this process is the development of phonological skills. These skills encompass the ability to recognize that spoken words consist of smaller components and that these units can be manipulated. Many children identified as having problems with reading have not sufficiently developed these skills. Children from culturally diverse backgrounds, similar to the students at the study school, may have particular difficulties with phonological awareness. Exposure to language at home, exposure to reading at an early age, and dialect all affect the ability of children to understand the phonological distinctions on which the English language is built (Lyon, 1994). Dr. Lyon also pointed out that these reading deficits in many children can be prevented if diagnosed early and a research based intervention is implemented.

Many children learn to identify and write letters prior to commencing school and usually attach a common sound to most letters before leaving Prep. But some students experience difficulty reading words accurately and automatically in Year One. This could be due to factors across the model for understanding literacy learning disabilities and could include incorporating phonemic awareness, rapid renaming, poor oral language and inability to pronounce words accurately (Munro 2002).

The students in this study experience difficulty transferring their limited phonemic knowledge, and early understanding of phonology, to the use of onset and rime segmenting and blending. The teaching of phonological awareness skills, in particular the teaching of onset and rime, has been shown to enhance word reading.

 Torgesen, Wagner and Rashotte (1997) support this theory that reading disabilities are most commonly caused by an inability of students to process the phonological

features of language while the Davis, Morgan and Torgesen research (1992) supported the hypothesis that explicit instruction in blending and segmenting improved the skills of students in segmenting words into phonemes resulting in enhanced ability to read new words.

Other researchers (ERIC 1999; Munro & McCusker, 2002) concur, stating that whilst oral language develops spontaneously from social interactions, reading does not automatically emerge with exposure. The processes of phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness, must be explicitly taught. Munro also states that for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who often do not have rich phonological knowledge and phonemic awareness upon which to base new learning, being taught under constructivist modes has the effect of compounding their disadvantage (Munro, 1998,1999, 2000a). The strong correlation between lack of phonological awareness and reading failure suggests that some students need explicit phonological awareness training in order to learn to read.

Ellis (1997) also notes that a body of research supports a strong relationship between early phoneme awareness and later reading success, and links some reading failure to insufficiently developed phoneme awareness skills. He goes on to state that 'Intervention research clearly demonstrates the benefits of explicitly teaching phoneme awareness skills. Many children at risk for reading failure are in general education classrooms where phoneme awareness training is not part of their reading program.'

Phonemic awareness can be taught and learned. Effective strategies include teaching students to: identify a particular sound in a word; recognize the same sound in different words; recognize one word that begins or ends with a different sound from a

group of three or four words; segment and blend the sounds in a word; and manipulate sounds in a word through deletion, addition, and substitution of other sounds.

Teaching phonemic awareness , a deeper level of phonological awareness, helps students learn to read and spell. Effective instruction moves the student from awareness of a particular sound to an association of that sound with a letter symbol. Once letter symbols are introduced, students should be able to manipulate the sounds within words by using the letter symbols.

Board of Directors of the International Reading Association (1998) reiterates the fact that phonemic awareness predicts reading success. They speculate that an explanation may be that phonemic awareness supports understanding of the alphabetic principle – an insight that is vital in reading alphabetic orthography. They note that the logic of alphabetic print is apparent to learners if they already know that speech is composed of a sequence of sounds. In learning to read, they discover that it is those units of sound that are represented by the symbols on a page, but printed symbols may appear arbitrary to learners who lack phonemic awareness.

The efficacy of phonological awareness intervention for children at risk of reading disorder has received increasing attention in recent literature both internationally and closer to home, in Australia. The Australian Government National Inquiry into Reading cites a strong body of evidence which supports the study's hypothesis by suggesting that children will be greatly assisted in learning to read if their reading tuition includes systematic, explicit, direct instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension (DEST, 2001).

Munro (1998) believes there are important implications for literacy programming in diagnosing difficulties and implementing appropriate instruction when phonological processes are deficient. Munro (1998) outlines a sequence for teaching segmenting

words into a sequence of sounds and suggests that being able to segment words orally into sounds is a critical foundation for learning to recognise unfamiliar words efficiently.

The present study aims to further this research through examining the impact of small group teaching of phonemic awareness orally and through the segmenting and blending of two-letter rime units. Assessment of the resultant impact on word reading accuracy at word and prose level will be conducted post-intervention with the prediction being that through this explicit teaching, improvement will be evident.

METHOD

Design:

The study uses a case study OXO design. Gains in reading accuracy at word and prose level, following explicit teaching of phonological awareness through segmenting and bending strategies, are monitored for a group of Year One students. The study compares two groups of students, a control group and an intervention group.

Participants:

The students chosen to participate in the study are currently in Year One, with ages ranging from 6-7 years. Students were chosen based on their lack of movement between their Observation Surveys in November 2007 and February 2008 which were administered to all students at this level (February 2008 results: Table 1). The classroom teacher identified them as children who may benefit from additional tuition in phonological awareness and the development of segmenting and blending strategies to assist with decoding of regular phonetic words. They are all from non-English speaking backgrounds and lack familiarity with the language of literacy and the sense of word play which many children experience naturally prior to commencing school and in Preparatory class.

They are considered at risk with Text Reading Levels remaining below Level 5, but are not involved in the Reading Recovery program.

Fig. 1   Observation Survey Results February 2008

Student	Text Level	ROL	Letter ID	CAP	Word Test	Write Voc	HRSW	Burt
X1 TS	0	23	51	12	5	12	23	6
X2 LT	3	5	52	13	12	13	26	16
X3 AL	4	12	52	15	11	11	28	13
Y1 SR	1	26	54	18	14	16	29	23
Y2 LP	2	20	53	17	7	15	28	15
Y3 NH	2	18	49	17	10	8	18	13

Where X = Intervention Group and Y= Control Group

Procedure:

In pre-testing for this study students were assessed using the Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test, The Rime Unit Test (3-letters words only) which measures RAN of two-letter rimes. Running records were taken on Prose Passages A and B (Appendix 2) based on the two-letter rimes to be taught.

Students were not given the Letter ID test as they had scored well on this but had not transferred their knowledge to manipulation of sounds in words. However, the knowledge of single sounds and the sound-letter links they already had were taken into account when designing the intervention. All children had difficulty with a/u confusion so it was decided to include 'a' as the beginning vowel for rimes to be taught. This not only reinforces the 'short a' sound but trains the children to listen carefully for the final sound.

Students were withdrawn each morning in the group of three for thirty-five minutes per day for 10 consecutive school days. The Reading Recovery area was used due to its non-threatening and friendly ambience, together with the storage of materials needed for the intervention. The intervention sessions employed interactive activities that focused on phonological awareness- specifically blending and segmenting (Appendix 1). It was ensured that children were given practice reading highly decodable texts that contain the rimes that have been systematically targeted during the previous sessions.

The teaching style was relaxed and activities were conducted in a play way, with time for reinforcement and reflection. Each session was based on the Collins Model which has been recommended for use with children experiencing oral language difficulties. Each skill was modeled, tried, repeated several times, reinforced with new words and followed by immediate feedback. Children then read some text to monitor how skill

was transferred to prose reading. The students verbalized their own learning and when and how to use the new skill. The teacher provided on-going feedback and praise for all attempts and, based on efficacy, evaluated and modified the teaching, gradually giving more responsibility for the learning to the students.

The lessons consisted of explicit instruction in phonological awareness of 5 two-letter rime units. One unit was introduced every second session with revision of previous session's units the next day. It was considered more important to teach the strategy of using onset and rime than increasing the quantity of rimes to be learnt in the intervention. Each day, students were asked to identify the rime units to be learnt through card games, suggest rhyming words related to each rime unit and complete blending and segmenting activities using magnetic letters and letter beanbags.

Activities followed the recognized pathway to teaching segmenting and blending. Children recognize then create rhyming words orally, identify initial and final sounds, then segment words into syllables and/or sounds , for example onset and rime. Eventually they blend sounds to form words and perform manipulations such as deletions and substitutions (Catholic Education Office Speech Pathology Department, 1999).

Data:

To investigate the validity of the hypothesis, data was collected in the following areas:

1) Word Reading: 3-sound, 3-letter words
2) Prose Reading (3-sound, 3-letter words): Starfall.com texts
3) Phonological Awareness: Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test

The students who were chosen for the control group remained in the mainstream classroom but were also tested with the same materials, pre and post intervention. The

growth shown by the intervention students was compared to that of the control group and trends observed. Individual growth was also observed and discussed.

Raw scores were converted to a percentage of the possible score for each task.

Data from this assessment was later used to design an appropriate intervention for the control group.

Materials:

Assessment
Actual materials used during this study included:

Pre-test & Post-test using the Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test.
Pre-test & Post-test using the Rime Unit Test (Block 1).
Decodable Texts A, B and C taken from Starfall.com website (Appendix 2)

Lessons:
Sound Waves CD Level 1 and Sound Charts.
magnetic letters
Highlighters
Apples
Glitter tray
letter beanbags (consonants blue and vowels red)
whiteboard
puppets
Games from "A Sound Way" (1995)

RESULTS

Results indicate support for the hypothesis that developing phonological awareness through the teaching of common two-letter rime units to Year One students with reading deficits will increase their reading accuracy at word and prose level. The results suggested that structured phonological awareness intervention led to growth in phoneme awareness and word-recognition performance. The word reading accuracy of all students in the intervention group indicates improvement in all areas of testing. Gains made by the intervention students were greater than those of the control group as shown through the comparison of the pre and post testing scores (Figure 2, below).
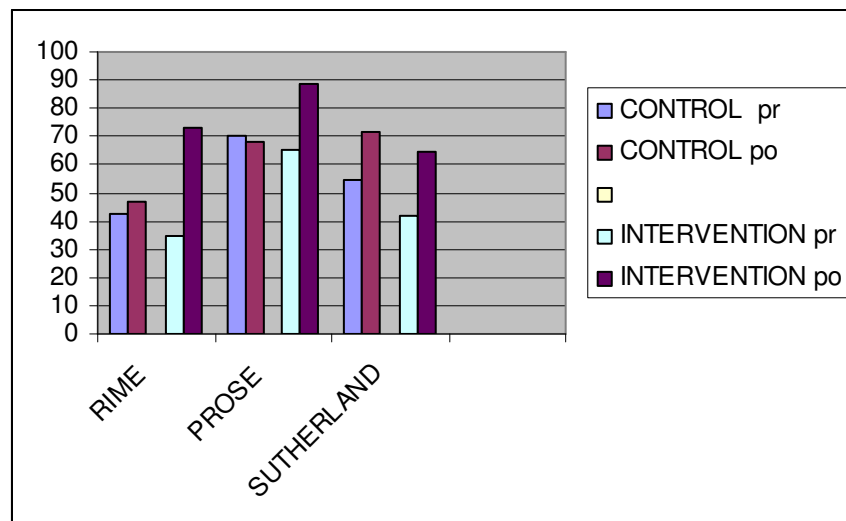
It should be noted that although the percentage growth looks large, the difference in scores in these tasks could be a few correct or incorrect answers.

Two students improved their phonemic awareness substantially with one student making smaller gains having greater learning difficulties in all areas. All students also made gains in text accuracy. Two students in the control group made small gains but one scored lower on the post test, indicating a lack of sustained growth over the period.
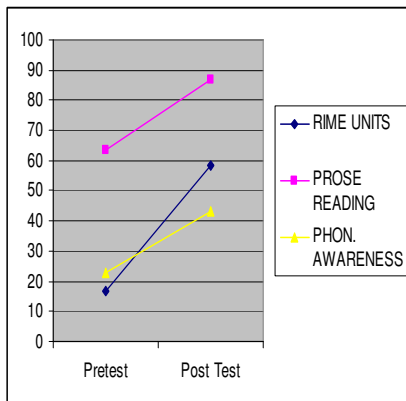
This study's prediction that explicit instruction in phonological awareness and blending/segmenting rime units is supported by these results.

Learning trends for each student in the intervention were positive, showing gains in phonological awareness, RAN of two-letter rime units and improved word accuracy in strongly decodable prose reading (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

This data seems to suggest that the intervention group not only learnt the required rimes, but also began using the strategy to read through analogy.
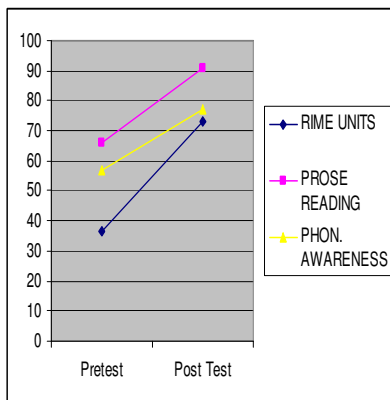
Intervention Group Individual Progress

Fig 3: STUDENT X1

Strong growth was evident in all areas, particularly RAN of two-letter rime units. The student still had difficulty with short a when in context of –ag. Inflexible orthographic memory of 'jug' interfered with progress.

Fig 4: STUDENT X2

Student X2 also showed strong growth in recognition of rime units, as well as overall improvement. Self-efficacy increases correlated with word reading success.

Fig 5: STUDENT X3
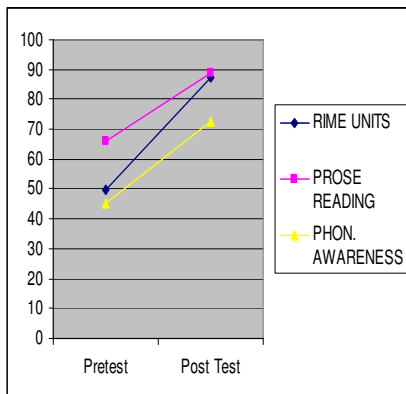
Again, a marked growth in rime unit RAN was evidenced together with overall improvement. This student's writing showed evidence of transference of skills.

DISCUSSION

This study's prediction that explicit instruction in phonological awareness and blending/segmenting rime units will improve word reading accuracy is supported by these results. The students made sizable gains by comparison to the control group.

Anecdotal evidence collected through observations in sessions showed that the students were also verbalizing the process of finding the vowel and then segmenting the words presented in order to decode them. Prior to this, the students were sounding letter by letter and their speed of reading was acutely slower and less accurate.

All students attended all sessions and showed enthusiasm to be going to the special area each day. It is possible that the individual attention and praise was a contributing factor to their success as their self-efficacy rose. Small group size in an otherwise distraction free environment also makes for optimum learning opportunities.

Only one child from the control group scored at a lower level on a post test and when this was discussed with the class teacher, it was noted that she had missed two days school and was still recovering from an illness. Under better circumstances she may have showed growth over the period of time.

Research has shown that the focus on teaching rime units to students was a valuable approach because of the natural division between onset/rime (Treiman, 1991). The intra-syllabic onset/rime distinction hastens word development and words that share rimes are more easily decoded by analogy (Goswami & Bryant, 1990). This study supports this research as evidenced by the students' ability to transfer the skills learnt at word level to continuous prose.

Implications for teaching practice are, as consistently suggested by this study and previous related research, that direct, systematic instruction in phonological

awareness makes significantly greater contributions to children's initial and subsequent progress in reading, writing, spelling and comprehension, than do alternative approaches involving unsystematic or no phonological awareness instruction. When these skills are taught early, the need for costly and often belated intervention programs is minimised.

Further research on the degree to which children from non-English speaking backgrounds are marginalised through constructivist education programs in the early years may provide valuable evidence to support the implementation of such systematic, explicit phonological awareness and oral language training in primary schools.

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APPENDIX 1

INTERVENTION LESSONS
Three Year One students
Small group instruction
10 sessions of approximately 35 minutes
Pre and Post testing as outlined below.

PREDICTED OUTCOMES:
The activities within the intervention are designed to develop and automatise
phonological and phonemic knowledge using onset and rime.

At the conclusion of the intervention students will be able to:
- Accurately say each rime targeted both in isolation and in the context of single
  syllable words
- Distinguish between words that have and don't have the targeted sound
- Suggest other words that belong to the word family
- Verbally make and break single syllable words containing the selected rime
  units.
- Recognise and use the letter cluster that belongs to the rime unit
- Accurately and quickly read unknown words that contain the selected rimes.

These students are working at the word level of the MOTPL model (Munro, 2007)
where they need to further develop their understanding of rime families and word
structure. The strategies they need are converting letter clusters to sounds and
segmenting words into functional units and recoding.

Activities have been designed to cater to a variety of learning styles.

Assessment Procedures:
Pre and Post Testing:
Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test
Rime Unit Test (Block 1)
Running Records – decodable texts pre and post tests
Anecdotal notes on observations during sessions
Tests administered individually before and after the intervention sessions.

Lesson Plans

Remediate short 'a' sound
Rime Units - at, -an, -am, -ap, -ag.

LESSON ONE: **Remediate short 'a' sound**

	THE TEACHER WILL	THE STUDENTS WILL	TIME
WARM-UP	Revise consonant phonemes. Sound Waves CD. Track 1 Level 1	Children will chant to music and perform the actions.	5 mins
EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION	Cut up an apple and share it. Apple begins with 'a'. Teacher says 'a – apple'. 'a' is a quick sound. Ant begins with 'a' too. Say 'Ants on apples, a, a, a'.	Children repeat 'a' – apple. Students hold fists in a ball to make a round apple shape. Make two fingers walk over the apple like an ant. Students practice chant and locate 'a' sound box on chart. Repeat after teacher.	5 mins
READ WORDS	Use enlarged BLM A26 from Sound Waves (shape of an apple). Brainstorm other words that begin with 'a'. Write in apple. Teacher says each word again.	Students suggest other words that begin with 'a'. Repeat after teacher. Discuss any difficult words and suggest a synonym if necessary.	5 mins
SEGMENT/ BLEND	Refer to apple chart and say, 'These words begin with 'a'. Can you come and put a ring around the part of the word that says 'a'.	As child circles 'a' he says, eg 'a for alligator, a, a, a'. Repeat for other words. Other students mime the word in response.	5 mins
WRITING TASK	Prepare the glitter tray. As students write, remind them that 'a' is closed at the top just like the little fist they made in an apple shape. Don't open it and let the ants run in! (This will help differentiate between a/ u).	Students copy letter 'a' in glitter, on the window, on the whiteboard, etc.	5 mins
SENTENCE WRITING	With students' help, construct a sentence using three or more 'a' words from the new chart. Read with expression, emphasizing the 'a' words.	Students choose their own 'a' words and say in a sentence, then write it in workbooks. Draw a red apple around the 'a' words.	5 mins
READING PROSE	1.Teacher revise words in apple chart, saying 'a, alligator' 3. Write children's sentences on cardboard strips for future reference.	2. Students read aloud their sentences.	5 mins
REFLECTION	Say, 'Today I wanted to teach you about 'a'. Tell me what you learnt.	Students may offer – 'we learnt that it was a short quick sound' 'we can hear it at the front of those words' 'we know it is shut at the top so the ants can't come in' etc.	5 mins

LESSON TWO   **TEACH '–AT' RIME**

	THE TEACHER WILL	THE STUDENTS WILL	TIME
WARM-UP	A Rhyme in Time (A Sound Way P 96). There was a cat who grew so - There was a snail who read my -	Students complete the sentences with a rhyming word.	2 mins
EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION	Announce today's focus: Rime unit – at. At is a little word itself, but we can put consonants with it to make new words that rhyme.	A child comes to whiteboard and on request slides the 'a' and the 't' together and says rime.	5 mins
READ WORDS	1.Say words selected for rime: cat, fat, hat, sat, mat. Teacher uses beanbags letters to make 'cat'. Point out that the vowel sound 'a' is red. This is where the rime starts, Write word on a chart. 4. Teacher writes each word in turn on the chart.	2. Students repeat after teacher. 3. Students use other consonant beanbags to create a word that was practiced earlier for –at.	5 mins
SEGMENT/ BLEND	1. Use puppet to say words from chart broken into segments – onset and rime. e.g. c-at. Tell students puppet can't say words the way we do, can they teach him? 3. Then, tell students that if they can read cat, they can read 'zin'.	2. After teacher says segmented word, children say whole word by blending sounds. Children say other –at words. 4. Get students to make new rhyming words with magnetic letters, real and nonsense.	5 mins
WRITING TASK	The teacher provides some cues to assist the student to recall how to complete the task.	Students read words from chart and write in workbooks. Highlight the rime, remembering it starts with the vowel.	5 mins
FLIP BOOKS	The teacher guides, prompts and provides feedback as the student engages in the task.	Students then locate –at in flip books and make words by changing the initial sound.	5 mins
SENTENCE WRITING	Teacher makes up a sentence connecting two of the rime words. May be funny.	Students make up a similar sentence and write interactively as a group. Take turns if time allows.	5 mins
READING PROSE	Read children a prose passage containing the words. See Appendix 2.		5 mins
REFLECTION	Praise children's efforts and participation. Ask what they have learnt today that will help them become better readers and writers.	Children respond telling ways that learning rimes can help them read faster or decode new words.	5 mins

Lessons 4 (-an), 6 (-am), 8 (-ap) and 10 (-ag) follow the same pattern. Vary the medium for writing to add interest.

LESSON THREE   **CONSOLIDATE '–AT' RIME**

	THE TEACHER WILL	THE STUDENTS WILL	TIME
WARM-UP	Odd Man Out (A Sound Way P 101). Meet the family. All the members of the family rhyme. Listen carefully and hold up your Odd Man Out card when you hear a word that doesn't belong.	Students listen and hold up card when non rhyming word is heard eg mat, cat, sat, tin, fat. Students may attempt their own families when confident.	2 mins
EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION	Announce today's focus: Revise rime unit – at.	A child comes to whiteboard and on request slides the 'a' and the 't' together to show how we made the rime yesterday .	5 mins
READ WORDS	Read word lists and add any more words that students may have thought of. Display.	2. Students repeat after teacher. 3. Race game for speed reading practice of these (and other day's revision words).	5 mins
SEGMENT/ BLEND	1.Use puppet to say words from chart broken into segments – onset and rime. E.g. c-at. Tell students puppet can't say words the way we do, can they teach him? 3. Then, tell students that if they can read cat, they can read 'zin'.	One child breaks the words into segments using puppet (as teacher did previously). Other students take turns to point to part of the word being read.	5 mins
WORD GAMES	The teacher provides some cues to assist the student to recall how to play games and/or read words.	Students play word games with the selected revision words eg Snap, Bingo, Concentration.	5 mins
WORD SLIDES	The teacher guides, prompts and provides feedback as the student engages in the task.	Students use word slides to match reading words and create more, both real and nonsense.	5 mins
SENTENCE WRITING	Teacher makes up a sentence connecting two of the rime words. May be funny.	Students make up a similar sentence and write independently.	5 mins
READING PROSE	Shared reading of prose passage selected to give practice using new skills to decode text. Note when children are segmenting an unknown word and give positive reinforcement.		5 mins
REFLECTION	Praise children's efforts and participation. Ask what they have learnt today that will help them become better readers and writers.	Students reflect on what they have learned focusing on identifying what they know now that that they did not know before.	5 mins

Lessons 5 (-an), 7 (-am), 9 (-ap) and follow the same pattern. Vary the medium for writing and the games to add interest and keep the children motivated.

APPENDIX 2

Phonetic Prose Passages used in Pre and Post Testing.

Both tests have the same readability score.

Teacher reads title before children begin to read and asks the children to articulate what they will do when they come to a hard word.

PASSAGE A
PRE-TEST

Zac is a fat rat.

Zac sat on a can and the ants ran to the jam in the can.

Zac had a plan to make the ants go.

He sat on some ants.

The ants ran and ran and Zac had a nap. 44 words

PASSAGE B – POST TEST
(INCLUDING OTHER RIMES TO TEST SKILLS TRANFERRENCE)

Peg is a red hen.

Peg got in a jet and got set to go.

A fat cat got in the jet too.

The little cat sat next to a fat rat.

The jet went in the sky.

The pets went in the sky too. 45 words