Abstract

Many students in their second year of schooling are just beginning to emerge as readers. Some of these students who make the transition from Prep to Year 1 display reading difficulties and become candidates for reading intervention programs such as Reading Recovery. Only some of these students receive the intervention while the others are left to further their reading skills in a ‘normal’ classroom environment. These students are often the ones that are difficult to move in regards to text levels. They make very slow progress in reading and fail to make connections with onset and rime unit patterns. There has been a lot of research that indicates that phonological awareness is vital knowledge when learning to read and that onset and rime knowledge is an important component of phonological awareness and learning to read.

The hypothesis for this study is that teaching explicit onset and rime units to year 1 students with reading difficulties improves their rime unit knowledge and self efficacy in reading and increases students instructional text level.

In this study, 2 groups of students results were compared; a control group and an intervention group, who were taught explicit onset and rime units over a 2 week period. The students in the intervention group were withdrawn from their regular classroom literacy activities for 10 half hour sessions. The students in the intervention group were taught 10 explicit rime units following analysis of the Rime Unit Test (Munro 2002). The teaching was specifically targeted at words that contained 2 and 3 letter rime units, and mostly 1 or 2 letter onset letters.

Results indicate support for the hypothesis as the scores of all students in the intervention group showed remarkable improvement in their rime unit knowledge from pre to post testing. There were also improvements in the students self efficacy in reading both from test results as well as observations from teaching sessions. Gains in text levels were made, although not huge, enough to see that if these types of explicit teaching sessions were to continue, that further gains in text levels would be made.
**Introduction**

Some students who make the transition from Prep year to Year 1 have difficulties in reaching reading targets and benchmarks. Clay (2002) suggests that if you ask teachers to identify young children making slow progress they can do this fairly accurately before standardised tests can do this in a reliable way. These students are identified as being ‘at risk’ of developing reading difficulties and are often classed as ‘poor’ readers.

Clay (2002) defines reading, like thinking, as a complex process. The reader has to produce responses to the words the author wrote. In some way the reader has to match his or her thinking to that of the author. Munro (2007) has integrated the areas of text processing into a model known as Multiple Levels of Text Processing or MLOT. The model describes how we read by processing text at a number of levels, which include word, sentence, conceptual, topic and dispositional levels. Early readers work at a word level which involves letter clusters, rime families, written words and word structures. At a word level, readers look at how words are written, said and what they might mean. When using the model, it is expected that as reading develops, readers move throughout the levels of the model. Early readers with reading difficulties struggle to move beyond the word level. When reading they get so caught up on working out what individual words are that they forget what they were reading. Clay (2002) supports this by adding that smart readers ask themselves very effective questions as they read to reduce their uncertainty about what they are reading. Poor readers ask themselves rather trivial questions and waste their opportunities to reduce their uncertainty. Hence they get caught up on reading words

Beaton (2004) states that proficient reading is one of the most important intellectual tasks a child will accomplish in his or her lifetime. It is an ability that depends upon a number of component skills and takes several years to master fully. Early literacy educators aim to make children proficient readers by trying to master their reading skills. Some children need more help with their skills than others.

As cited by Hines, Speece, Walker & DaDeppo (2007), Jenkins and O’Connor (2002) believe learning to read is accomplished by most children without individualised instruction. However, for a sizeable proportion of young children, mastering the initial skills of decoding is an extremely difficult task. The ability to decode is a prerequisite for comprehension of text since decoding difficulties overload memory working capacities.

Previous research and studies for these reading difficulties suggests it could be due to student’s lack of knowledge of onset and rime patterns. Hines, Speece, Walker & DaDeppo (2007), define onset and rime as words that are made up of syllables; syllables are in turn composed of onsets (initial consonants or consonant clusters) and rimes (the vowel and final consonant/s). Anthony et al (2003) states children have the natural ability to hear onset and rimes. Sherman (1998) describes that some students lack the ability to draw necessary parallels between words with the same rime units. He goes on to say that they do not make the analogy between two or more words with the same sound automatically. This is what causes inaccurate reading. Therefore, educators should aim to teach children who have difficulties reading onset and rime units as the ‘hearing’ part of it occurs naturally anyway.
Instead of reading the word ‘cat’, a child experiencing problems with onset and rime might attempt to read it as c-a-t, instead of seeing the rime unit ‘at’ and adding c to it to make c-at = cat. Furthermore, children experiencing difficulties with onset and rime would not be able to read or make the connections with same rime unit words such as fat, mat, pat, rat etc. They do not see that by knowing the ‘at’ rime unit, that they can read the above mentioned words by changing their onsets. Hines, Speece, Walker & DaDeppo (2007) state that teachers cannot teach every word that a child may encounter, so children must develop skills to apply their knowledge in new situations. Therefore educators of early literacy must expose and explicitly teach these skills required so that children can apply the knowledge learned to new situations. This type of learning is supported by Munro (2007) who has often stated that in order to teach children comprehension, we first have to teach them how to comprehend. This same statement can be applied to any area of reading, in particular, onset and rime units as used in this study. Students first have to be taught the rime units, and then be shown how to change the onsets; ie teach them how to do the skill.

As cited in Hines, Speece, Walker & DaDeppo (2007), Adams (1990) states it is relatively easy to break the onset away from the rime but difficult to break either the onset or the rime into its phonemic components.

Research of Fountas and Pinnell (2001) indicates that you can teach students about the building blocks of language by showing them the patterns in words and helping them hear such patterns. Again, we must teach the students the ‘how to’ part in order to build on their knowledge and skills.

Further support for this study shows suggestions that there is a special link between early onset and rime awareness and reading development. Stahl and Murray (1994) reported a strong connection between early reading and the ability to separate an onset and rime in a sample of 113 kindergarten and first grade children, but a much weaker relationship between separating rimes into phonemes (individual speech sounds). They concluded that onset and rime awareness was one of the first steps in acquiring the alphabetic principle. Later research of Stahl and McKenna (2000) states that a key insight in developing early reading abilities is that one can break up an onset and rime.

As cited by Johnston (1999), Fox (2000) states the study of onset and rime offers a friendly route to phonics and decoding. The fewer demands for phonemic awareness (awareness of individual sounds), blending, memory, and phonics rules (letter-sound patterns) make decoding with onsets and rimes a much more accessible strategy for young, inexperienced, and at-risk readers.

Self efficacy in reading is an important component for all readers, whether good or poor. Building of self efficacy continues as one develops reading skills and becomes more independent with their reading. For those who are strugglers, we must address their problems as quickly as possible. As cited by Hines, Speece, Walker & DaDeppo (2007), Elbaum & Vaughn (2003) & Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998) state that beginning readers who are poor decoders usually continue to fall behind in reading, which negatively affects their overall academic performance, self esteem and motivation. Therefore, we must find out exactly what difficulties affect our early readers as early as possible so that their skills can be addressed and they don’t continue to fall behind in their reading, nor in their self efficacy.
The ability to read onset and rime units requires the use of both phonic knowledge and an awareness of phonemes. Holten (2004) states that phonemic awareness has been proven to provide an important foundation for success in reading. We must build on children’s phonic knowledge and their phonemic awareness and show them that they can make changes to words and their meaning by manipulating phonemes. By doing so, this study aims to teach explicit onset and rime units to year 1 students with reading difficulties and improve self efficacy in reading, and increase student’s instructional text levels.

**Method**

This study uses a case study OXO design. Gains in onset and rime knowledge as well as text levels are monitored for students in Year 1 experiencing reading difficulties. It compares 2 groups of Year 1 students; a control group of 7 students, and an intervention group of 8 students.

**Participants**

All students chosen in this study are aged between 5 and 7 years and were identified as students ‘at risk’ of developing reading difficulties after concerns from classroom teachers of the slow progress these students were making. 2008 Pre Test Observation Survey results (see Figure 1) were used to formally identify these students as being ‘at risk’ and in need of assistance with literacy. Of particular interest were student’s text levels, Writing Task, Word Test and Burt Word Test results. Word test results were of interest as they provide information into the knowledge that children have both when reading and writing.
### 2008 Pre Test Ob Survey results

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<th>Burt Word</th>
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<td>33</td>
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</table>

### Figure 1

All students in the intervention group were on the tentative selection list for Reading Recovery, and those in the control group identified as being ‘at risk’ and difficult to move in regards to text levels. It should also be noted that all of the students chosen in the intervention group display difficulties when concentrating for extended periods or in group situations. They are students who appear to ‘tune out’ easily or need things repeated and revised continuously.

### Materials

- Students were assessed using the following testing materials:
- Rime Unit Test (Munro 2004) : first 95 words only
- PM Benchmarks through the use of Running Records (Clay)
- Self Efficacy Scale (Munro 2006)
- List of self made target words (see Appendix 2)

Lesson Materials included:

- Magnetic letters
- Flashcards featuring target words (words derived from appendix)
• Self made sentences featuring target words (see appendix)

• Butchers paper (poster size) and textas

• Student exercise books and writing pencils

• Self made games containing rime units -Snakes and ladders, Bingo, dice games, snap, real or made up (students change onset and decide if the word is real or made up), concentration

Procedure

Data was gathered and analysed for the students in this study following pre testing in the following:

• Rime Unit Test (Munro 2004) : first 95 words only

• PM Benchmarks through the use of Running Records (Clay)

• Self Efficacy Scale (Munro 2006)

• Observation survey results (Figure 1) were also taken into consideration.

Following pre-testing, intervention took place in the form of 10 half hour teaching sessions which include up to 8 quick activities that were designed to improve the students onset and rime knowledge, as well as self efficacy, and raise reading levels (see Appendix 1, teaching session overview). All sessions were conducted in a withdrawal room attached to the regular classrooms. This room provided privacy for the students and minimal noise and disruptions. These sessions were conducted across a 2 week period and were highly repetitive, containing quick activities to keep the students interest levels at bay.

Results

The results from this study show that all students in the intervention group benefited from the explicit teaching of onset and rime units and made remarkable gains. It also shows that students self efficacy in reading improved. As the observer while administering the tests and teaching the sessions, it was interesting to watch the students gain confidence in their abilities. During pre testing and when we first began the teaching sessions, many of the children hesitated while reading words, taking a long time to try and work them out, or were chunking words slowly or even sounding them out. By the end of the sessions it was noted that the children were much more confident as they knew the rime units and how to change onsets. It became automatic for them, even with the units we did not cover in the teaching sessions. Very little gains were made by the students in the control group in comparison to the gains made by the children in the intervention group.
Pre & Post Test Results for Text Levels using Running Records:

Figure 2    Intervention Group

Figure 3    Control Group

All students in the intervention made some gains in their reading levels from pre test to post test (see Figure 2) with the exception of student D and F. Although they didn’t actually gain a level, it was noted that their text level at pre test was at an instructional level, and post test results reveal that the level had become easy (although when tested on the next level it was hard, so for the purpose of this study their text levels remained the same). Student E made significant gains in his reading level during this period. This is consistent with the gains made in the onset rime unit test (Figure 4) and also from my observations in the teaching group. Students A, B, C G and H all increased their text levels by 1 throughout the study. Although this may be seen as a minor gain, it still supports the hypothesis in this study.
The above graph (Figure 4) compares the results of the pre and post rime unit test. It shows remarkable improvement for all students in this group. The best improvements were made by student G who made an improvement of 36% in their rime unit knowledge. Closely followed were student A and B who both made an overall gain of 35%. All three of these students in the group attended all of the teaching sessions.

Student C made an improvement of 29%. This student was absent for 2 of the teaching sessions yet still made great gains. It was noted that this student went from sounding out individual sounds in the pre test to looking at the rime unit and then segmenting the unit rime and onset in the post testing. Although not individually timed when testing, the post test was completed much more quickly for this student and her confidence was greatly boosted. A comment made was “I can read these words now”. This student really believed she could, and made attempts at all of the words during post testing.

Student E demonstrated the greatest knowledge during pre testing. He made an overall improvement of 25%. Out of all of the words on the test, there were only 2 that he read incorrectly during post testing. Although not included in the results, when prompted to go back and have another go at the words, he was actually able to read them right as he saw that he read the previous units correctly and knew what they were. The class teacher of this student commented that this student had really ‘taken off’ in the classroom with a noticeable improvement in his reading abilities and also in his writing, particularly with the onset and rime units taught.

Student D made an improvement of 17%. This student was absent for 2 of the teaching sessions. Although the gain was not as high as the students mentioned above, the results are still higher than majority of the students in the control group. This is the same for student H, who missed one session. She made an improvement of 13% in her rime unit knowledge.
Student F was also absent for 1 session. However, managed to make an improvement of 27%. This student was extremely shy and it took a few sessions for her to speak out in the group and interact without being prompted.

![Graph showing control group results](image)

**Figure 5  Control Group**

The above graph (figure 5) compares the results of the control group in pre and post testing of the rime unit test. Minimal gains were made for rime unit knowledge in this group with the exception of student I and O, who made gains of 20% and 17%. The other 5 students made minimal gains of between 4% and 7%, much lower (half again) of that of student H from the intervention group. During the time between pre and post testing, these students had no exposure to explicit onset and rime teaching in their classroom. They did however, study word families for their spelling.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pre Test score</th>
<th>Post Test Score</th>
<th>% gain from pre-post test</th>
</tr>
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**Table 1** Results of Self Efficacy Test

The above table (Table 1) shows the results of pre & post testing for the self efficacy scale. A scoring system was devised to determine a percentage of gains made in self efficacy from pre and post testing. The table reveals that all students in the intervention group made improvements in their self efficacy. Student F made an excellent gain, showing an increase of %14. Student H displayed low confidence throughout the teaching sessions, yet by the end of them, made a gain of 8% when her self efficacy was measured.

Student I and K in the control group both showed decreases in their self efficacy, even though they were the only 2 students to make gains in their test levels during this study (see Figure 3). The other students in the control group only made minor gains.
Discussion

The results from this study support the hypothesis that explicit teaching of onset and rime units to year 1 students with reading difficulties improves their rime unit knowledge and self efficacy in reading and increases student’s instructional text level. It is fair to say that even though only minor gains were made in student’s text levels, it has made a difference to the overall reading abilities of these students. We must remember that students in this study are in their second year of schooling and have an instructional reading target level of between 15 and 20 by the end of the school year. Not even being half way through the year, these students, armed with onset and rime knowledge and increased self efficacy, as well as teacher awareness of their reading difficulties, would be expected to make further progress as the year continued.

All students in the intervention group made great gains in their onset and rime unit knowledge. This continues the support for research mentioned earlier from Sherman (1998) in regards to student’s ability to draw parallels between words. Once shown how to, and given the opportunities to practice, gains in knowledge are seen. The study also supports the research of Holten (2004) who investigated building on children’s phonic knowledge and phonemic awareness by showing them how to manipulate phonemes. It was also noted that the children were able to read both real and made up words during the sessions. Although this initially was used as a skill to be able to decode words, the children in the group gained some comprehension knowledge as they were questioning themselves and others as to whether words were real or not. They got a lot of enjoyment from the activity that required them to add sounds to rime units. Each time we met, they asked whether we could do this activity. Even though this was not originally in my teaching overview, I decided to include it in every session as I could see it was raising the student’s self efficacy and created a real ‘buzz’ in the teaching sessions.

Included as part of the teaching sessions was the opportunity for children to create onset and rime words through writing. Two different activities provided the opportunities to either write words they knew with the rime unit, and later to write a teacher made sentence. The sentence was kept simple as all children were at various points with their writing. They were also kept simple so that all children could re-read their sentences at anytime, and also to make the children feel good about themselves and improve their self efficacy. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) support writing as part of the learning and state that reading and writing are interrelated. What is learned in one area makes it easier to learn in another. This was also done as many children learn differently through multiple intelligences. Some need to see, some need to hear, some need to write in order to best learn. I also included this activity as the concentration levels of these children were low. They needed varying activities so that they weren’t just reading. Other activities for the students included, making, breaking, games, and reading. Various textures materials were also used. Examples of these materials included textas, magnetic letters, card, pencils, poster sized paper, lists, and dice. This helped keep the children interested and left very little opportunity for boredom.

Student attendance affected the results slightly. Students C, D & F missed some of these teaching sessions. Therefore, their gains could have been slightly higher had they attended all sessions. For those students in the control group who had no teaching sessions at all, their gains and results were overall much less than those of the children in the intervention group. Research from Foorman and
Torgesen (2001) states that children who come to school with weakness in talent for learning to read more slowly than other children will require more repetition in order to solidly establish critical word reading and comprehension skills. As these students missed vital teaching sessions, they missed out on the repetition required to help establish stronger word reading skills.

The biggest suprise to come from this study was the self efficacy test results of student I and K who both had decreases in their self efficacy even through they both made gains in their text levles (these 2 studenst were the only 2 to make any gains in text levels in the control group – see Figure 3). Recalling the study from, Speece, Walker & DaDeppo (2007), who cite Elbaum & Vaughn (2003) & Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998), that beginning readers who are poor decoders usually continue to fall behind in reading, which negatively affects their overall academic performance, self esteem and motivation. This is certainly proven in the case of student I and K who have continued to spiral in their self efficacy levels.

During this study I did find that the test for self efficacy (Munro) has its own implications for students in younger grade levels, in this case in Year 1. The students in this study displayed difficulties with concentration and found the test difficult. They often required questions to be repeated as they lost track half way trough a question. Some students forgot what the faces meant (when answering the questions)and there for just pointed to any face. This could be a valid reason for suprising results when comparing pre and post tests. With this point taken into account, good judgement was used when observing the children and their reactions when working with them in the teaching sessions.

Explicit teaching of onset and rime units needs to be continued for these students in the intervention group. It would be wise to include those from the control group as ther results show that they require the same explicit teaching. This can be done in a regular classroom environment during ‘teaching groups’ in literacy sessions, or done separately as intervention. Clay (2002) describes that the observation of what goes on in classrooms has uncovered differences in the time allocated to children and activities. High progress children receive a greater number of opportunities to learn than low progress children Therefore, the children in this study need to be given greater opportunities to make greater gains.

Onset and rime knowledge is only one way of increasing childrens text levels and self efficacy. The students in this study would need to be re-tested in other areas so that they can make even greater gains in their reading development. Sherman (1998) advises that no single skill defines a reader. No lone strategy works in isolation. By laying down diverse ideologies, we can work together to ensure that young children become strong and successful life long readers. Educators need to ensure that assessment is ongoing and applicable to the needs of students. Futhermore, they need to look beyond ‘scores’ and get to the core of children’s reading difficulties by analysing and teaching them explicit skills.
Bibliography


Internet Resources


Testing Resources

Rime Unit Test (Munro 2004) : first 95 words only

Nelson PM Benchmarks Kit 1

Self Efficacy Scale (Munro 2006)
Appendix 1

Pre and post test using the following:

- Rime Unit Test (Munro) : first 95 words only
- Nelson PM Benchmarks for Running Records (Clay)
- Self Efficacy Scale (Munro)

Components of teaching sessions:

Test (5 mins)

1 on 1 Test onset and rime words from previous session (from teaching session 2-10 only, see Appendix 2)

Revise (2 mins)

Recall rime unit from previous session. Read words made on list to revise (from teaching session 2-10 only, see Appendix 2).

Tune in (5 mins)

Introduce new rime unit using magnetic letters. Show rime unit and have letters and blends surrounding the unit so that children can practice making new words, keeping the rime, and changing onset (model first, then have students practice with a partner). Share with group and show how to make words using different onsets.

Making new words (3 mins)

Each child has their own bag which contains rime unit and letters of the alphabet. They must place letters at beginning of rime unit and decide whether the word is real or made up, and practice reading the words.

Write list (5 mins)

Children help devise a group list of rime unit words, either real or made up. They must share with the group if the word is real or made up. If it is real, they must put the word in a sentence to show they know the meaning.

Write sentence and read (5 mins)

Children write a self made (from teacher) sentence containing rime words from current session (see appendix 4).

Read (2 mins)

Children read new rime words from a list as quickly as they can (whole group activity)
Game (5 mins)

Students end session with one of the games which contain current rime unit (could include anyone of the following - snakes and ladders, Bingo, dice games, snap, real or made up (students change onset and decide if the word is real or made up), concentration.
### Appendix 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Appendix 3

Description of Teaching Unit

Outcome: This unit will improve student’s knowledge and ability in reading onset and rime units, as well as improving text levels and students self efficacy in reading. 10 teaching sessions of made up of 30 minutes with short and sharp activities to keep students interested and able to concentrate.

Rime units taught in the following sequence across 10 sessions: in, an, aw, at, ab, ap, ip, it, ell, ail,

Follow components of teaching sessions in Appendix 1 for all 10 sessions. Before beginning teaching sessions, Pre tests need to be completed. Following Completion of the 10 sessions, post testing needs to be conducted (see Appendix 1 -Testing Materials).

Session 1:
- Rime unit focus :in
- Use following onsets : b,d,f,g,k,p,t,w,sh,gr,sp,th

Session 2:
- Rime unit focus :an
- Use following onsets: b,c,d,f,j,m,n,p,r,t,br,cl, fl, gr, pl, sp

Session 3:
- Rime unit focus :aw
- Use following onsets : l,p,r,s,cl,dr,fl,th,str

Session 4:
- Rime unit focus : ab
- Use following onsets: c,d,f,g,l,t,bl,cr,dr,fl,gr,sl

Session 5
- Rime unit focus : at
- Use following onsets: b,c,f,h,m,n,p,br,ch,dr,fl,th,sp,pl

Session 6
- Rime unit focus : ap
- Use following onsets: g,c,l,m,n,r,s,t,z,fl,cl,sh,sl,dr,wr
Session 7

- Rime unit focus: ip
- Use following onsets: d, h, k, l, n, p, r, s, t, z, fl, wh, ch, cl, dr, gr, sh, sl, tr, sn, str

Session 8

- Rime unit focus: it
- Use following onsets: b, f, h, l m n p s k, gr, sl, sp, sp

Session 9

- Rime unit focus: ell
- Use following onsets: b, c, f, s, t, w, sh, sp, n

Session 10

- Rime unit focus: ail
- Use following onsets: b, f, g, h, j, m, n, p, r, s, t, w, fr, sn, tr
Appendix 4

I saw a bin made of tin with a fin. It went for a spin and hit me in the chin. It made me grin.

Dan the man saw Gran, Nan and Jon with a fan. The clan had a plan to make a flan in a pan.

I saw a dog with a black paw and claw eating through a straw.

A fab crab called Gab got in a cab and had a blab.

Nat the fat cat had a hat, mat and bat. She liked to chat with Pat the rat.

I had a map in my lap and had a nap. Mum gave me a tap and clap to wake me from my nap.

Kip went to the tip and got a zip and pip. He did a flip on a ship and ate a chip.

Kit can sit in the pit with Mit and spit.

Nell fell when she rang the bell with a shell and had to tell.

Gail went out in the hail to get a nail. She ran on the trail and saw a frail snail.