

A Case Study of the Integration of Sight Word Instruction to Enhance Students' English Reading

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Abstract

Reading proficiency has been thought of as a fundamental basis of other learning skills and subjects. Also, it plays an influential role on learners' confidence and motivation. However, it has been found many learners, especially EFL beginning learners, think reading is quite challenging. They think it is difficult to recognize words and comprehend the reading, and oral reading is not quite easy for them as well. On the other hand, studies have indicated that sight words are able to facilitate fluent and successful reading. Hence, this study aimed to explore the effects of integrating sight word instruction in an elementary English class to improve students' English reading. In this case study, one intact class of fifteen fourth graders in an elementary school participated in a 16-week study, and they were further divided into low-achieving and high-achieving groups. Four instruments were employed, including storybooks, an English achievement test, a questionnaire of responses to the sight word instruction, and quizzes. The results were shown as follows:

1. The implementation of sight word instruction significantly enhanced the participants' reading achievement, including word recognition and reading comprehension. The low-achieving group outperformed significantly in reading comprehension.
2. The implementation of sight word instruction improved the participants' oral reading fluency, including accuracy and speed. The high-achieving group had a significant enhancement in speed.
3. The participants also held positive responses to the use of sight word instruction. Finally, some pedagogical implications are offered.

Keywords: sight word instruction, English reading achievement, oral reading fluency, e-storybooks

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Introduction

Reading plays an important role in language learning because it not only assists learners to acquire knowledge but also to build other academic skills (Harrison, 2004). It is regarded as the foundation of other skills and it influences learners' confidence, interest, and learning motivation (Huey, 2000). Students with poor reading skills may encounter a wide range of difficulties both in school and life (Bennett, Brown, Boyle, Racine, & Offord, 2003; Chambers, Dunn, & Rabren, 2004). Likewise, the majority of middle grade students are struggling readers. Over 60% of U.S. 4th and 8th graders fail to demonstrate reading proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2015). Therefore, helping students become fluent readers is the central goal of reading instruction (Galloway, 2016; Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Fluency is viewed as a critical component of proficient reading because it is a key link between word recognition and comprehension (Bashir & Hook, 2009). Several researchers (Crawford, Tindal & Stieber, 2001; Hintze, Callahan III, Mathews, Williams, & Tobin, 2002; Speece & Ritchey, 2005) have proved that reading fluency is an important predictor of general reading outcomes, including comprehension. Fluent readers are able to recognize words in text accurately and automatically with a minimal amount of attention. They are able to read text silently or orally with speed and good comprehension. Hence, developing reading fluency is an important element in reading.

In terms of English education in Taiwan, reading ability has been highly emphasized, and as a result, students are encouraged to read simple stories and plays in elementary schools according to the Grade 1-9 Curriculum guidelines published by Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2006). However, the insufficient number of words that elementary school students in Taiwan have learned makes them have difficulties in reading the written texts (Hsu, 2008; Shen, 2009). Also, students of English as a foreign language (EFL) who are consistently impeded by unfamiliar words usually feel frustrated and gradually lose motivation for further reading. Therefore, efficient and reliable instructions and interventions for word-level reading are important for elementary readers.

Among a variety of approaches in reading strategies, sight word knowledge is regarded as an essential element in developing early reading foundation skills (Ehri, 2005; Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Wagner, 2008; Yang, 2006). Sight words are the words with high frequency in text and they should be recognized on sight instantly (Carlson, 2008), such as a, is, of, and I. Many of these words cannot be decoded or applied to phonetic rules (Browder & Lalli, 1991), including one, was, said, and so on. Most of them are function words, and they are mostly pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions. Nouns are excluded from the list typically (Carlson, 2008). In other words, sight words are the words with high frequency, irregularity, and function-word status. The most popular list is called the Dolch Sight Word List that consists of 220 words, and these words make up approximately 50 to 75 percent of words appearing in print (Frantantoni, 1999).

If sight words are known well enough, students may increase more confidence in reading (Bossard, 2008). They are able to recognize these words rapidly without having

to sound them out. If they have to decode each word, they may feel frustrated. In addition, sight words assist students to achieve text-reading fluency. Good readers cannot afford the time to dwell on too many words, or they may lose the speed and fluency necessary for determining the author's message. Once sight words can be retrieved rapidly from memory, more time and attention can be left for more challenging words and for reading comprehension. Therefore, teaching sight words could be an important component of reading programs to assist learners in achieving successful reading skills (Ehri, 2005; Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner, 2002; Yang, 2006). Some studies have shown that teaching sight words is beneficial for students' reading fluency and comprehension, especially for beginning and struggling readers (Fossett & Mirenda, 2006; Suha, 2003; Van der Bijl, Alant, & Lloyd, 2006). However, the above studies were explored in the setting of English as the first language. Hence, it may be worth investigating in the setting of English as a foreign language setting.

On the other hand, reading storybooks can provide students with incidental exposure to written or oral context (Nation, 1990). The context and real communicative situations of stories help to convey the meanings of vocabulary items so that students are able to remember the vocabulary more easily (Elley, 1989). Shown in some researches, applying storybooks in EFL teaching facilitated students' English learning, especially in words acquisition (Hsieh, Wang, & Lee, 2011; Shen, 2009; Yang, 2009). Through storybook teaching, students' concentration and inner motivation can be stimulated. By means of the meaningful input from storybooks, the language in the story is better acquired and retained. Therefore, to facilitate students' sight word learning, it is likely to use storybooks in sight word instruction.

As a result, the purpose of this study was to explore whether applying sight words with the aid of storybooks improved students' English reading achievement. In addition, students' attitudes toward this program were investigated as well. This study aimed to find out answers to the following questions.

1. How effectively does the implementation of sight word instruction improve the participants' English reading abilities, including word recognition and reading comprehension?
2. How effectively does the implementation of sight word instruction improve the participants' English oral reading fluency?
3. What are the participants' responses to the sight word instruction?

Methodology

Participants

One intact class of 15 fourth graders in Taiwan was involved in this case study for 16 weeks. There were eight male students and seven female students in this class. In school, all of the participants have learned English as a required subject for two 40-minute classes per week for one year. The researcher was the instructor in this study, integrating sight word instruction in the 40-minute morning self-study time twice a week.

Instruments

Storybooks. In this study, the teaching materials consist of 16 storybooks (Table 1) published by San Huei Publishers. Each storybook contains three to six sight words. The instructor listed the sight words in the beginning, and then started to tell the story. Then, the participants worked together to guess the main ideas of the story and the sight words. Various activities were employed to help the participants to recognize the sight words and to read out the story fluently.

Table 1: Storybooks & Timetable for Sight Word Instruction

Week	The content of the instruction	Target sight words
1	Pretest: oral reading section of the EAT	
2	Pretest: reading achievement; section of the EAT	
3-1	Storybook 1: New Socks	I, want, new, of
3-2	Storybook 2: Three	three, have, but
4-1	Storybook 3: Go, Go	they, go, to
4-2	Review	
5-1	Storybook 4: Up and Down	we, up, down
5-2	Storybook 5: Helpers	help, at, the
6-1	Review & Quiz 1	
6-2	Storybook 6: Run	run, said, jump
7-1	Storybook 7: Me Too	me, too, eat, read
7-2	Storybook 8: My Dog	and, you, ride
8-1	Storybook 9: That Hat	that, is, my, pretty
8-2	Review & Quiz 2	
9-1	Storybook 10: Mr. Shape Man	for, his, two, look, he
9-2	Storybook 11: Bubbles Everywhere	on, with, them, make
10-1	Storybook 12: Baking A Cake	put, in, some, and, funny
10-2	Storybook 13: The New Car	got, so, let, come
11-1	Review & Quiz 3	
11-2	Storybook 14: The Magic Man	live, a, can, has, fly, walk
12-1	Storybook 15: A Mouse In The House	over, under, into, out
12-2	Storybook 16: Winnie And The Cat	she, her, red, black, yellow, blue
13	Review & Quiz 4	
14	Post-test: oral reading	
15	Post-test: reading achievement	
16	Questionnaires	

An English Achievement Test. To examine the participants' reading abilities and oral reading fluency, an English achievement test was conducted before and after the treatment. The vocabulary and sentence patterns used in the test are all selected according to the competence indicators of the English learning area in the Grade 1-9 Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2006), and this test was reviewed, revised, and verified by three experienced English teachers to reach the expert validity.

The reading ability part consists of 25 questions, testing participants' word recognition and reading comprehension abilities. As for the oral reading fluency part, the participants read a story adapted from Perfect Poems for Teaching Sight Words (Ellermeyer & Rowell, 2005). In order to measure exactly the amount of progress participants made during the treatment, the story was not taught in this study. The participants' oral reading performances were evaluated based on the criteria of speed and accuracy (Penner-Wilger, 2008). Speed was assessed by measuring the average number of words participants read correctly per minute. Accuracy was assessed by counting the percentage of words the participants read correctly.

A Questionnaire of the Responses to the Sight Word Instruction. A questionnaire, revised based on the items of two studies (Lin, 2010; Tsai, 2010) was designed to investigate the participants' responses to sight word instruction. The 18 items were explored the participants' opinions of the selected stories (Q1-Q8), feedback of the instruction (Q9-Q14), and attitudes toward their English learning (Q15-Q18) (see Appendix A). The questionnaire employed a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The content of the questionnaire was also examined by two professors in order to achieve expert validity.

Quizzes. Four quizzes were designed based on the sight words and sentences targeted in the storybooks. Each quiz with 10 question items was employed to check the participants' learning progress after the instruction. These quizzes were given in the 6th, 8th, 11th, and 13th week.

Results and Discussion

English reading abilities

Shown in Table 2, the results of the paired sample T-test in the part 1 in the English Achievement Test, displayed there were significant differences in the overall reading abilities ($t = -5.47, p = .000$), including word recognition ($t = -7.18, p = .000$) and reading comprehension ($t = -3.16, p = .000$). The results indicated that the use of sight word instruction could help students improve their reading abilities.

Table 2: Results of the Participants' Reading Achievement

	(Pre-test)		(Post-test)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
(<i>N</i> = 15)						
Word recognition	61.73	21.73	83.20	15.28	-7.18	.000*
Reading comprehension	60.26	24.10	77.20	15.76	-3.76	.000*
Overall Reading Achievement	60.50	22.92	80.20	15.52	-5.47	.000*

Note. * $p < .05$

As for the four quizzes, the results shown in Table 3 demonstrated that the participants improved continuously in their reading during the instruction. Moreover, a significant difference was found between Quiz 1 and Quiz 4 ($t = -3.94$, $p = .001$), indicating that the participants made a significant improvement after the instruction.

Table 3: Results of the Four Quizzes

($N = 15$)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Quiz 1	77.67	20.78		
Quiz 2	80.33	17.98		
Quiz 3	84.67	18.07		
Quiz 4	92.67	11.63		
Comparison between Quiz 1 & Quiz 2	2.67	8.42	-1.23	.120
Comparison between Quiz 1 & Quiz 3	7.00	17.09	-1.59	.067
Comparison between Quiz 1 & Quiz 4	15.00	14.76	-3.94	.001*

Note. * $p < .05$

To obtain more detailed information, the participants were divided into high and low achieving groups based on their scores from the pretests of reading abilities. The participants with scores in the upper 50% were designated as the High Achieving Group (HAG), while the other half were designated as the Low Achieving Group (LAG). With regard to word recognition, shown in Table 4, there was no significant difference between the improvements of the LAG and the HAG ($t = 1.70$, $p = .112$). As for reading comprehension, the average percentage of improvement for the LAG and the HAG was 25.5% and 7.12% respectively. This difference was found to be significant ($t = 2.34$, $p = .036$), revealing that the LAG made a more significant progress than the HAG in reading comprehension.

Table 4: Comparisons of Low-achieving and High-achieving Groups in Reading Achievement

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Improvement of Word Recognition				
Low achieving group ($N = 7$)	26.57	11.82	-5.95	.000*
High achieving group ($N = 8$)	17.00	9.97	-4.82	.001*
Differences between high & low achieving groups			1.70	.112
Improvement of Reading Comprehension				
Low achieving group	25.5	18.75	-3.85	.003*
High achieving group	7.12	9.30	-2.03	.044*
Differences between high & low achieving groups			2.34	.036*

Note. * $p < .05$

The results showed a significant improvement in the students' word recognition by the assistance of sight words. The possible explanation for this is that abstract sight words can be acquired and better retained through the storybook teaching. The context of the storybooks provided the participants with comprehensible input which enabled them to grasp the use or the meanings of sight words more clearly, even though most sight words are function words. The pictures in the storybooks also

served as clues, helping the participants to guess and imagine the meanings of unfamiliar sight words. Therefore, the participants' word recognition was effectively enhanced. Similar findings have been found in previous studies, which reported that storybook teaching would be beneficial for word acquisition (Collins, 2005; Hsieh, Wang & Lee, 2011; Robbins & Ehri, 1994).

As for reading comprehension ability, the participants also made a significant progress. It is likely that more of the participants' attention could be left for text comprehension since the frequent words have been recognized more quickly by sight. Therefore, the time to decode the words is shortened, bringing them more time and attention to the reading passage through the instruction. They are able to understand the information from the text and comprehended the contents more easily. This finding is consistent with the statement reported by (Ehri, 2005; Yang, 2006) that if sight words are known well enough, learners are assisted to increase reading fluency and comprehension.

In addition, further analysis showed that the LAG made more progress than the HAG in reading comprehension. It is likely that the treatment not only enlarged their vocabulary bank but also supplied more self confidence in reading for the participants in the LAG, and as a result significantly improved their reading comprehension. Difficulties in recognizing words create obstacles to acquiring the message in the text. As long as the participants had sufficient word knowledge, they could overcome the reading barrier and achieve reading comprehension more easily. Therefore, the sight word instruction offered more significant assistance to the participants of the LAG in reading comprehension. These results correspond with previous findings that the sight word instruction is essential for emergent, beginning, and struggling readers to improve their reading ability (Fossett & Miranda, 2006; Van der Bijl, Alant, & Lloyd, 2006).

Oral Reading Fluency

Significant improvements were found in the results of the participants' English oral reading fluency test in the terms of accuracy and speed. As shown in Table 5, there were significant differences in the posttests of the participants' English oral reading accuracy and speed respectively ($t = -7.91, p = .00$; $t = -6.01, p = .00$).

Table 5: Results the Participants' Oral Reading Fluency

	(Pre-test)		(Post-test)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
(<i>N</i> = 15)						
Speed	10.91	14.31	20.31	18.54	-6.01	.000*
Accuracy	39.72	26.60	60.14	25.87	-7.91	.000*
Oral Reading Fluency	25.32	20.46	40.23	22.21	-6.96	.000*

Note. * $p < .05$

Likewise, in terms of oral reading accuracy, shown in Table 6, there was no significant difference between the improvements of the high and low achieving groups ($t = 0.74, p = .475$). In terms of oral reading speed, the HAG increased on average by about 14 words read correctly per minute while LAG increased on average

by about 7 words read correctly per minute. The results in Table 8 show a significant difference between the improvements of the high and low achieving groups ($t = -2.44$, $p = .03$), indicating that the HAG made more progress in their reading speed.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Improvement of Speed				
Low achieving group ($N=7$)	7.07	5.23	-4.27	.001*
High achieving group ($N=8$)	14.03	5.12	-6.13	.002*
Differences between high & low achieving groups			-2.44	.030*
Improvement of Accuracy				
Low achieving group	22.50	11.31	-5.26	.001*
High achieving group	18.62	9.08	-5.80	.000*
Differences between high & low achieving groups			0.74	.475

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 6: Comparisons of the Participants' Improvements in Oral Reading Accuracy

The results of this study revealed that the employment of sight word instruction effectively improved the fourth graders' oral reading fluency. All the participants showed a significant improvement in their oral performance based on the criteria of accuracy and speed after the treatment. It is likely that the practice of the pronunciation of sight words helped the participants to improve their oral reading ability. The activities designed for the instruction may have helped the participants not only to recognize words by sight but also to become familiar with the sounds of the words, corresponding to Levy, Abello, and Lysynchuk's (1997) study.

With regard to accuracy, the participants made significant improvement after the treatment. A possible explanation is that instruction provided the participants with numerous opportunities to practice unfamiliar words orally. Through repeated aural and oral practice, the participants' pronunciation was effectively improved. In terms of speed, all of the participants significantly increased the speed of their oral reading. That means the number of words read correctly per minute was increased during the treatment. Sight words received sufficient oral practice during the treatment so that they were identified in the text rapidly and automatically, and this possibly enhanced the participants' speed of oral reading. Besides that, further analysis showed that the HAG made more improvement than the LAG in reading speed after the sight word instruction. It is likely that the participants in the HAG may have higher average proficiency, including a stronger vocabulary foundation, stronger ability to interpret the text, and more confidence to read the text aloud. The higher reading skills may allow the participants in the HAG shorten the time in comprehending the texts. In contrast, the participants of the LAG may need to spend more time decoding new words due to their limited proficiency. Therefore, they may need to have more opportunities for repeated reading practice to make more significant improvement in oral reading speed.

Responses to the Sight Word Instruction

According to the descriptive statistics results, the participants' feedback demonstrated positive responses to the sight word instruction of storybooks and this program, and

they agreed that the instruction contributed positively to their English learning achievement. The descriptive statistics of the questionnaire results were displayed in Table 7.

Table 7: Results of the Questionnaire Responses

Items	Domain	SA	A	D	SD	M
1-8	opinions of the selected stories	62.9%	27.6%	7.6%	1.9%	3.51
9-14	feedback of the instruction	60%	23.8%	7.6%	8.6%	3.35
15-18	attitudes toward their English learning	56.7%	20%	15%	8.3%	3.25
	Overall Questionnaire	59.9%	23.8%	10.1%	6.2%	3.37

Note. SA= strongly agree; A= agree; D= disagree; SD= strongly disagree. Rating from 4 points (strongly agree) to 1 point (strongly disagree).

Based on the results, it is likely that the pictures and interesting plot drew the participants' attention and increased their willingness to learn the words that appeared in the stories. This result is similar with the findings of Ellis and Brewster's (1991) study, in which storybooks with enjoyment attracted students' attention and cultivated their positive attitude. Also, most of the participants thought this program was interesting and reduced their anxiety in English reading. It is likely that the participants built more self-confidence during the treatment. They do not have to worry about the application for the phonics rules. As long as they recognized the sight word, they can read it out quickly, helping improve reading fluency and giving the participants feelings of success in reading. With the increased self confidence in reading, the participants' learning anxiety may be reduced, and their learning attitudes may also be enhanced positively.

Implications & Suggestions

Based on the results of this study, two pedagogical implications for educators and curriculum designers are proposed, as follows.

First of all, since the implementation of the sight word instruction was found beneficial for young learners' reading achievement, it is recommended that a sight-word learning environment can be created into the classroom. Teachers can display the sight word cards that have been introduced in class on the classroom wall. Teachers can also do quick word wall games and activities such as bingo, go fishing or using the sight words to make sentences. In this way, students not only review the sight words but also build visual memory and automaticity with these words. With repeated visual exposure to sight words, students should be able to gradually acquire mastery of these words.

The sight word instruction can also be implemented in English remedial programs, since it offers significant assistance for low achievers to improve their reading ability.

Teachers can conduct the remedial program in the morning self-study time or lunch break. Games, chants or songs are also recommended to be integrated into the sight word instruction to create a relaxing learning environment and reduce low achievers' fear and rejection of English.

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Appendix A

A Questionnaire of the Responses to the Sight Word Instruction

item	Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	The teaching materials increased my interest in learning English sight words.				
2	Using stories to learn English sight words can help me concentrated on learning.				
3	The pictures presented in the teaching materials help me understand the meanings of English sight words.				
4	The teaching materials heavily made me feel that learning English sight words was very boring.				
5	The teaching materials made me want to understand more about foreign culture.				
6	I felt bored with the teaching materials because there were too many repetitions of sentence patterns.				
7	I hope I can keep on using stories to learn English in the future.				
8	After this English sight word program, I would like to read more English stories.				
9	I feel this English sight word program is interesting.				
10	I dislike this English sight word program.				
11	In this English sight word program, I always feel relaxed.				
12	In this English sight word program, I often felt nervous if the teacher asked me to answer English questions.				
13	I believed that others could understand the teaching materials better than me.				
14	In this sight word program, I often felt nervous.				
15	The sight word instruction improved my English achievement.				
16	After having this sight word program, I learned more vocabularies.				
17	After having this sight word program, I can read English sentences quickly.				
18	After having this sight word program, my English oral reading ability is getting fluently.				

Note: SA=strongly agree; A=agree; D= disagree; SD=strongly disagree