

A Study on Early Reading Intervention To Enhance Reading Ages of Primary 2 and Primary 3 Pupils

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Abstract: There is a small group of pupils who enter the primary education system without sufficient reading skills. Without intervention, these pupils' reading deficit will accumulate over the years. As reading is the key to academic success, in January 2006, a one-year reading intervention programme was designed to enhance these pupils' reading ages. 17 Primary 2 pupils, who were about 8 years old and 15 Primary 3 pupils, who were about 9 years old, were selected to undergo an intervention programme. Using Schonell Graded Word Reading Test, the reading ages of these pupils were determined before the commencement of the intervention programme. In order to be admitted into this programme, the pupils' reading ages must be below their chronological ages, unless their teachers strongly appeal for an exception to be made. The other determining factors were their school-based oral and written examination results and teachers' recommendations. The class sizes for the intervention programme are smaller compared to the mainstream. For Primary 2, the class size for the intervention programme is 17 compared to 30 for the mainstream. For Primary 3, there are 15 pupils who are participating in this programme, as compared to 40 per class for the mainstream. The selected pupils are taken out from their mainstream classrooms during English periods; 17 periods per week for Primary 2 and 13 periods per week for Primary 3. During these periods, the intervention programme focuses on decoding skills. This paper examines the effects of teaching phonics, building up pupils' phonological awareness and lexical store and repeated readings on the pupils' reading ages. The mid-year results of the intervention programme show that all pupils have benefited from this programme as all reading ages have increased. For Primary 2, 13 pupils registered a double-digit increase in their reading ages, while only 6 Primary 3 pupils were able to do so. The paper also shares other findings and the implications of these findings.

Keywords: reading intervention, weak readers, phonics, onsets and rimes, repeated reading.

INTRODUCTION

School Profile

Chongzheng Primary School is a neighbourhood school, situated at Tampines Street 21.. As a neighbourhood school, its pupils come from the nearby residential public housing.

Presently, it enjoys an enrolment of 1900 pupils. There are about 330 pupils in the 11 Primary 2 classes and 342 pupils in the 9 Primary 3 classes. The strength of its teaching staff is 86.

The English Department is being assisted by two Learning Support Co-ordinators (LSC), running a Learning Support Programme (LSP). One LSC dedicates her time fully to the programme, while the other LSC dedicates only 10 periods per week to the LSP. The other periods are spent teaching the mainstream students. The LSP is aimed to assist P1 and P2 pupils who are very weak in reading. In February each year, all Primary 1 pupils undergo a test called Singapore Word Reading Test (SWRT). The very weak readers, who are categorized under Levels 0 and 1, are shortlisted to undergo the Learning Support Programme. On average, about 30 pupils are admitted into this programme each year. The pupils are discharged from the LSP if they meet 2 criteria – reading ages are above their chronological ages and they score 50% or more for semestral examinations, school-based examinations, which are held in May and November. The LSP is not offered beyond Primary 2.

Area of Concern

Reading is the key to academic success. Hence, the introduction of LSP to enhance the reading ability of very weak readers. However, the reality is, there are weak readers in Primary 1 and 2 but they are not in the LSP. Their needs and reading deficit are not being addressed as Primary 1 and Primary 2 teachers are not providing the necessary literacy support to enhance their reading ages. The mainstream teachers are not equipped with the necessary skills to enhance our pupils' decoding skills. Teachers are not confident in teaching phonics as they have not been trained in that area. Even if teachers have the skills, the teachers are not applying the skills as not everyone in the class needs phonics instruction. Teachers could practise differentiated teaching then. However, they are not equipped to do so and this is aggravated by their lack of confidence.

Hence, classroom teaching is pitched for teaching average readers, not weak readers. Then, there is an issue of teaching other components in the English syllabus. Reading is not the only components. The situation is aggravated as reading is tested only twice per year, during the semestral examinations in May and November.

As the LSP is offered at Primary 1 and 2 levels only, Primary 3 results and teachers' feedback indicate that there are few pupils who need continued support when they enter Primary 3. These are the pupils who failed to be discharged from the LSP at the end of Primary 2 and some who have been discharged but due to no or lack of literacy support, their reading deficit starts to accumulate again. Due to these reasons, they would be struggling in Primary 3 and Primary 4. When they reach Primary 5, they would be emplaced in a stream called EM3, a stream for academically weak pupils

where they study subjects such as Foundation English (instead of English Language) and Foundation Math (instead of Math), academically less demanding subjects.

Profile of weak readers

Most of the weak readers do not speak English at home. Neither do they use English during their interactions with their friends of the same race. They speak English only when they have to communicate with their teachers or friends from other races. However, during these occasions, they tend to use Singapore Colloquial English (SCE) or what is locally termed as 'Singlish' instead of Singapore Standard English (SSE). Generally, they come from lower income families, where the parents are not proficient in English due to their low academic achievements. Due to the lack of a print rich environment at home, they have not acquired the habit of reading for pleasure. All these are consistent with the general profile of weak readers mentioned by Lonigan (2003) and Snow (1998).

Enhancing the reading ability of weak readers provides the key to their academic success. Therefore, in order to assist them to experience success, a reading intervention programme was introduced in January 2006.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 'Principles of Best Practice: Finding the Common Ground', Mazzoni & Gambrell (2003) highlight that 'best practices involve a "custom fit" – not a simple "one size fits all" – approach.' This is more so in our effort to assist weak readers. Most of our teachers conform to the standard syllabus provided by the school, failing to cater the needs of the weak readers. The standard syllabus certainly does not address the literacy needs of weak readers as it is designed for pupils who already have at least a basic foundation on reading skills. The reading deficit seen in these pupils is further aggravated by the fact that most teachers are not equipped to handle differentiated teaching that is needed in these classrooms. Hence, the deficit of the weaker readers is not being addressed.

Customizing a programme to suit the specific needs of these weak readers is a better option in enhancing their reading ability. A study by Shippen, Houchins, Steventon & Sartor (2005) highlights the effectiveness of a highly structured, explicit, teacher-directed instruction for weak readers. These highly structured instructions that incorporate the explicit teaching of phonics through decoding skills and onsets and rimes are reliable strategies in enhancing pupils' retention, which would have a positive impact on their reading ability (Gunn, et. al. 2000 & Levy and Lysynchuk 1997).

The explicit instruction on phonics is supported by onsets and rimes. This strategy enables pupils to predict the pronunciation of words which they have not learnt based on their knowledge of words similar in spelling patterns (Goswami, 1991). This phonological prediction depends on the orthographic analogies. The more analogies are found in the spelling patterns, the easier the prediction would be. The argument for onsets and rimes is compelling if one agrees that there are 38 common rime patterns which enable a reader to decode 654 one-syllable words and these rimes are also useful to partially decode words that are longer, more difficult and multisyllabic (Fry, 1999).

In order to ensure the efficacy of the explicit instruction on phonics, weak readers must be provided with the opportunities to practise the skills through reading. August and Hakuta (1997) find that the phonological awareness of weak readers can be sharpened if they are exposed to reading and opportunities to converse about the text that they have read. Regular practice is given an emphasis to transfer the knowledge in the short-term memory to the long-term memory. This is further supported by studies where it is reiterated that students have to use the "new words that they encounter so they can eventually 'own' them as part of their speaking, reading and writing." (Savage, 1989) Therefore, hearing a teacher reading a book is vital but that is not sufficient. Teachers must provide ample opportunities for weak readers to speak the new words that they just learnt to read, read a text where that words appear frequently and write using the words.

The two platforms identified to enhance pupils' fluency are repeated reading and paired reading. Samuels (1999) defines repeated reading as a strategy for building fluency in which a student rereads a passage until meeting a criterion level. This strategy supports the research findings by August and Hakuta (1997) and Savage (1989). Paired reading on the other hand is based on the constructivist approach. Meisinger, et. al. (2004) find that partner reading facilitates the development of fluent

reading. This can be achieved as the amount of time students spend on reading connected text is increased.

In 'A Comparative Study of Small Group Fluency Instruction' (2005), Kuhn discovers that repeated reading is effective in enhancing pupils' automaticity. However, in the same study, Kuhn finds that pupils' word recognition was enhanced at the expense of comprehension. This is so as classroom teachers hold an unsubstantiated assumption that once readers achieved a given level of fluency, they are able to automatically shift their attention to comprehension of text. However, this is not an area that concern this study as the main focus of this project is to enhance the reading ages of identified weak readers.

THE INTERVENTION

Based on the literature review, the school embarks on a reading intervention programme. As the mainstream teachers do not have the luxury of time to carry out explicit instructions to enhance the reading ability of their weak readers, a customized curriculum is developed to cater the needs of the weak readers. The objective of the reading intervention programme is to enhance the reading ages of participants so that the gap between their reading ages and chronological ages could be narrowed.

Selection of Pupils

An exercise to select a small group of Primary 2 and Primary 3 pupils to undergo the reading intervention programme was done in January. The first phase of identifying suitable pupils was through a referral system. All P2 and P3 English Language teachers were asked to refer weak readers who were not in the Learning Support Programme (LSP), a programme initiated by the Ministry of Education. Pupils in the LSP are excluded as they are already receiving reading intervention treatment on a daily basis. Teachers referred their pupils based on pupils' reading ability reflected during reading activities in class, pupils' performances during 2005's oral examinations and they must be in the lowest percentile for school-based end of year English Language examinations.

For the second phase of selection, the reading ages of pupils were determined. This was done by using Schonell Graded Word Reading Test. Pupils were selected to be in this programme only if their reading ages were below their chronological ages, unless their teachers strongly appealed for an exception to be made. At the end of this phase, 17 Primary 2 pupils and 15 Primary 3 pupils were selected to undergo a one year intervention programme.

Class Size

Herbert & Taylor (2000) emphasise the effectiveness of small class size for an intervention programme. In their study, it was found that '... intervention in small-group formats has been shown to help at-risk monolingual English readers ...'. This is parallel with the profile of the school's weak readers. The usage of mother tongue languages is very high due to their low socio-economic status (SES). Generally, they do not use English language at home and rich-literacy resources are not available at home, which is consistent with their parents' educational background. The infrequent use of English language also occurs in school.

Number of Intervention Periods Per Week

The weak readers undergo the intervention reading programme during curriculum time. When the mainstream pupils are having their daily English lessons, the selected weak readers are taken away to undergo the reading intervention programme. They are taken out from their classes during English periods; 17 and 13 periods per week for Primary 2 and Primary 3 respectively.

The Reading Intervention Programme

The absence of early reading experiences causes reading deficit. In order to counteract this, the reading intervention programme revolves around literacy rich activities and environment. The strategies adopted for the intervention programme are based on a combination of strategies highlighted in the literature review.

Phonics Instruction

Pupils are exposed only to the basic phonics instruction such as the phonemes of short and long vowels and consonants. The 15 Primary 3 pupils had been exposed to phonics instruction when they were in the LSP in 2005. On the other hand, the 17 Primary 2 pupils had been exposed to a more limited phonics instruction when they were in Primary 1. It is also noticed that basic phonics instruction needs to be incorporated as this group of pupils have low retention of the decoding skills that had been taught to them earlier. Besides the structured phonics instruction, pupils are also exposed to ad hoc phonics instruction. As and when a pupil is having difficulty in pronouncing a word, the teacher would scaffold the pupil through phonics instruction, though the focus of the lesson might not be on phonics.

Onsets and Rimes

The other essential component of this intervention programme is onsets and rimes. This aspect of instruction focuses on similarity of word beginnings (Example: br, bl, cl and ch) and similarity of word endings (Example: _at, _it and _en). The awareness of rhymes is an important skill that assists pupils in their subsequent reading experiences. When the teacher teaches pupils the pronunciation of word 'pen', pupils are also exposed to words such as ten, den and hen. After emphasizing the ending sound of the first word, by analogy, pupils are scaffolded to pronounce the other words. This isolated teaching of analogy is followed by providing opportunities for pupils to apply this phonological awareness to actual reading. Books focusing on the targeted onsets and rimes are used to achieve this. The other platform used to showcase pupils' skill in using onset and rimes is Readers' Theatre. Pupils are exposed to scripts that embody the concept of onsets and rimes. The highlight of this was when they were selected to perform Readers' Theatre during a Ministerial visit in May 2006. In order to inject some elements of fun, the onsets and rimes instruction is sometimes concluded by having a Bingo game. Each pupil is given a bingo card, consisting of a few words. The teacher will pick and read a card. If the word reads by the teacher rhymes with one of the words reflected on pupils' bingo card, they are to cover it. The winner is the one who manages to cover four words, either straight or diagonally.

Repeated Reading

After the explicit phonics instruction and onsets and rimes, pupils need to practise what they have learnt. This opportunity is provided through repeated reading sessions. Pupils need to constantly apply the knowledge that they have gained. What is being

taught in phonics and onsets and rimes must not be isolated from actual reading process. In order to provide the availability of wide range of resources for the reading activities, the school prescribes an online resource and purchase graded books and books of different genres. These resources contain high frequency words, pitched at the right level of difficulty for this group of pupils.

The first phase of repeated reading process starts when the teacher models the reading of a book. This is done after the targeted phonics and onsets and rimes instructions have completed. For the second phase, echo reading is conducted, where pupils echo after the teacher reads a sentence. The echo reading provides a non-threatening reading process, where pupils read together, hence no one would notice their mistakes. After the echo reading, choral reading takes place. The teacher does not provide scaffolding at this stage. All pupils read together, while the teacher monitors and observes pupils' performances. Thereafter, pupils graduate to paired reading, where one reader is of higher reading age than the other. While paired reading is in process, the weakest pupils join the teacher for a reading circle. These pupils are seated in a circle, together with the teacher. Each of them takes turn to read. The teacher and other pupils will provide the necessary assistance if a pupil is unable to pronounce any words. During this process, the teacher takes a back seat role, unless no one else could render the assistance. This form of peer instruction helps to build pupil's confidence.

For some pupils who need more practices, the reading process continues at home. As the online resources are photocopyable, they bring home the reading booklets and colour their personalized booklets. At each stage of the repeated reading process, the teacher or pupils would give immediate corrective feedback to a reader.

Blending

The last stage of the reading intervention programme focuses on blending activities. The blending activities are conducted through group work or games. The teacher might place a stack of cards. Pupils are required to blend as many words as possible from this stack of cards. In order to excite the pupils, a competition among groups or pairs is held. Another blending game that is conducted is by using a clock face. Instead of numbers, the border of the clock face is pasted with segments of words such as 'bl', 'cl', 'ock', 'd', etc. Pupils are to move the clock's two hands. When the two hands are separately pointing at 'bl' and 'ock', they have successfully formed a word and they are to write it on a card. At the end of the game, the teacher checks the accuracy of the words formed by the pupils. This activity is in line with some of the activities recommended by Rasinski (1999).

RESULTS

Data Analysis

The effectiveness of the reading intervention programme is measured by using the reading ages of the pupils. The objective of the programme is to increase the reading ages of the pupils so that the gap between their reading ages and their chronological ages could be narrowed or closed. Before the intervention programme, most of their reading ages were below the chronological ages, with the exception of those who were appealed by their teachers to be included in the intervention programme even though their reading ages were above their chronological ages. The target is to increase their reading ages to their chronological ages, if not higher than their

chronological ages. Therefore, the pupils' reading ages taken in the beginning of the year are used as the baseline. In October, pupils' reading ages were taken again, using the same instrument. This marks the end of a year long intervention programme. Table 1a reflects the increase in reading ages made by Primary 2 pupils. While Table 1b illustrates their reading deficit before the intervention and at the end of the intervention.

Table 1a: Increase in Reading Ages Made by P2 Pupils from Jan to Oct 2006

S/N	Name	Baseline (Jan 2006)		Post-Test (Oct 2006)		Increase by months
		CA	RA	CA	RA	
1	CPX	7:5	6:9	8:3	8:6	+21
2	TBY	7:3	6:6	8:1	8:8	+26
3	TWH	8:0	7:3	8:9	9:3	+24
4	MAA	7:5	7:1	8:3	9:6	+29
5	NS	7:9	7:1	8:7	8:10	+21
6	RS	7:7	8:0	8:5	8:8	+8
7	T	7:5	6:8	8:3	8:2	+18
8	RF	7:1	7:1	7:11	8:6	+17
9	MN	7:7	7:1	8:5	11:3	+50
10	NA	7:2	8:7	8:0	10:10	+27
11	FNF	7:5	7:8	8:3	9:8	+24
12	JK	8:0	6:7	8:10	8:3	+20
13	YK	7:6	6:9	8:4	9:9	+36
14	KWC	7:4	7:0	8:2	8:6	+18
15	AM	7:9	7:2	8:7	8:9	+19
16	WYS	7:6	7:3	8:4	9:3	+24
17	AK	7:2	6:3	8:0	8:0	+21

Table 1b: Reading Deficits of Primary 2 Pupils in Jan and Oct 2006

No	Pupil's Initial	Baseline (Jan 2006)			End of Year Post-Test (Oct 2006)		
		C.Age	R. Age	+ / - (mths)	C.Age	R.Age	+ / - (mths)
1	CPX	7:5	6:9	-8	8:3	8:6	+3
2	TBY	7:3	6:6	-9	8:1	8:8	+7
3	TWH	8:0	7:3	-9	8:9	9:3	+6

4	MAA	7:5	7:1	-4	8:3	9:6	+15
5	NS	7:9	7:1	-8	8:7	8:10	+3
6	RS	7:7	8:0	+5	8:5	8:8	+3
7	T	7:5	6:8	-9	8:3	8:2	-1
8	RF	7:1	7:1	0	7:11	8:6	+7
9	MN	7:7	7:1	-6	8:5	11:3	+34
10	N	7:2	8:7	+17	8:00	10:10	+34
11	FNF	7:5	7:8	+3	8:3	9:8	+17
12	JK	8:0	6:7	-17	8:10	8:3	-7
13	YK	7:6	6:9	-9	8:4	9:9	+17
14	KWC	7:4	7:0	-4	8:2	8:6	+4
15	AM	7:9	7:2	-7	8:7	8:9	+2
16	WYS	7:6	7:3	-3	8:4	9:3	+11
17	AK	7:2	6:3	-11	8:0	8:0	0

C. Age – Chronological Age
R. Age – Reading Age

Based on Table 1a, all P2 pupils registered an increase in their reading ages. From January to October, their chronological ages increased by 10 months. However, their reading ages increased more than that, except for 1 pupil. The highest increase in reading ages was 50 months, while the lowest was 8 months. On average, the P2 pupils improved their reading ages by 24 months. Before the intervention, their average reading age was 85 months. At the end of the intervention, their average reading age increased to 109 months. The post test results also indicate that 16 out of 17 pupils registered a double digit increase for their reading ages, ranging from as low as 17 months to as high as 50 months.

Due to the significant improvement made by these pupils, they managed to close the gap of their reading deficit. Before the intervention, 76% of them had a reading deficit between 17 months and 3 months and 24% of them had no reading deficit. At the end of the intervention, only 12% (2 pupils) had reading deficit. For these 2 pupils, even though they had reading deficit, they had nevertheless narrowed their reading deficit.

Generally, the intervention programme managed to close the reading deficit of Primary 2 pupils.

Table 2a: Increase in Reading Ages Made by P3 Pupils from Jan to Oct 2006

S/N	Name	Baseline (Jan 2006)		Post-Test (Oct 2006)		Increase by months
		CA	RA	CA	RA	
1	JT	8:0	7:6	8:10	8:3	+9

2	MH	8:5	5:7	9:3	7:4	+21
3	MS	8:3	6:6	9:1	10:9	+51
4	TWS	8:2	7:9	9:0	9:1	+16
5	NS	8:0	7:10	8:10	8:10	+12
6	TYF	8:0	7:4	8:10	8:9	+17
7	YM	8:9	8:0	9:7	11:4	+40
8	SK	8:4	7:7	9:2	10:3	+32
9	MZ	8:1	5:6	8:11	6:4	+10
10	OJH	8:5	5:2	9:3	6:0	+10
11	LJM	8:3	6:1	9:1	7:0	+11
12	SCH	8:4	6:7	9:2	7:7	+12
13	WAW	8:10	6:0	9:8	7:0	+12
14	MN	8:7	7:6	9:5	12:4	+58
15	NS	8:0	7:10	8:10	11:8	+46

Table 2b: Reading Deficits of Primary 3 Pupils in Jan and Oct 2006

No	Pupil's Initial	Baseline (January)			End of Year Post-Test (Oct)		
		C.Age	R. Age	+ / - (mths)	C.Age	R. Age	+ / - (mths)
1	JT	8:0	7:6	-6	8:10	8:3	-7
2	MH	8:5	5:7	-34	9:3	7:4	-23
3	MS	8:3	6:6	-21	9:1	10:9	+20
4	TWS	8:2	7:9	-5	9:0	9:1	+1
5	NS	8:0	7:10	-2	8:10	8:10	0
6	TYF	8:0	7:4	-8	8:10	8:9	-1
7	YM	8:9	8:0	-9	9:7	11:4	+21
8	SK	8:4	7:7	-9	9:2	10:3	+13
9	MZ	8:1	5:6	-31	8:11	6:4	-31
10	OJH	8:5	5:2	-39	9:3	6:0	-39
11	LJM	8:3	6:1	-26	9:1	7:0	-25
12	SCH	8:4	6:7	-21	9:2	7:7	-19
13	WAW	8:10	6:0	-34	9:8	7:0	-32
14	MN	8:7	7:6	-13	9:5	12:4	+35
15	NB	8:0	7:10	-2	8:10	11:8	+34

C. Age – Chronological Age

R. Age – Reading Age

Table 2a shows that from January to October, all Primary 3 pupils registered an increase in their reading ages, ranging from 9 months to 58 months. On average, the P3 pupils improved their reading ages by 24 months. 14 out of 15 pupils registered a double digit increase.

In January, their average reading age was 82 months. By October, their average reading age increased to 106 months. During the 10 month period, 2 pupils registered an increase of 10 months to their reading ages. 1 pupil's reading age increased by 9 months only; indicating that his reading deficit widened. While the rest, 12 of them, registered an increase of more than 10 months to their reading ages.

In January, all P3 pupils had reading deficit, as reflected in Table 2b. At the end of the intervention, 53% of them still had the deficit and 47% managed to eliminate the deficit.

Discussion

The post test results show that the reading intervention programme has successfully increased the reading ages of all participants. It seems that both groups did equally well. On average, both groups gained 24 months in their reading ages. However, other data indicates that Primary 2 results are better than Primary 3's. At the end of the intervention period, more P2 pupils had eliminated their reading deficit. This illustrates that the intervention programme had more impact on Primary 2 pupils than Primary 3 pupils. Hence, we can conclude that the earlier the intervention, the better the results would be.

There were 3 Primary 2 pupils who joined the intervention programme despite the fact that their reading ages were above their chronological ages. The impact of the intervention on their reading ages seems to be inconclusive. At the end of the intervention, 2 of them benefitted from the programme. The gap between their reading ages and chronological ages widened. For 1 pupil, it seems that the intervention was quite detrimental. Although her reading age was still above her chronological age, the gap was narrowed.

CONCLUSION

As reading is the key to academic success, our weak readers need to be assisted at the earliest stage possible. The chances of reducing the reading deficit are higher if we start the intervention programme early. An early intervention programme is crucial so that the weak readers could cope with the academic demand.

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