Syllables, can they help us read?

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Name and signature of faculty mentor  

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Abstract

This thesis is to explore the relationship between a Spanish immersion class’ syllable recognition level and their running records test results. The students’ native language is English; therefore, they are not speaking Spanish at home. The only place where the target language of Spanish is spoken is in the classroom. In Spanish, a predictor of early reading skills is syllable recognition. Students’ ability to recognize syllables should match up to the running record scores at the end of the school year.

This information is based on a correlational study to observe the relationship between students’ reading comprehension and their capacity of syllable recognition. The students were introduced on a weekly basis to a set of syllables for each consonant. Then, the following week students were assessed on their ability to recognize the syllables they had learned the previous week. The syllables were assessed in random order. The researcher then scored them on a test, giving the students a score out of five points for each syllable set; except for the letter Qq which was out of a score of two points. A check was given for each correctly read syllable.

The study found that there was a positive correlation between syllable recognition and students’ running records scores. A numerical number was assigned to correlate to each letter; running records use a letter to represent the level. At the end of the study, out of 24 students, 22 met grade level expectations, reaching a reading level B (3) and beyond, proving a correlation between syllable recognition and running record scores. The study is significant for helping immersion teachers and students focus on syllable recognition in reading. This will help to pinpoint the syllables that students are having difficulty with. Working more closely with just those syllables will help to increase reading fluency.
Chapter I-Problem

Introduction

There is a need for learning an L2; an L2 can be any new language that is not your language spoken at home. Spanish has become a very popular language to learn. Not only is Spanish spoken in many other countries, but here in the United States. According to Antón (2011) there was a high increase of a Latino population in the United States. “As a major international language with approximately 400 million speakers” (Antón, 2011).

Furthermore, with the increase of Latinos it is important for people to be able to communicate in Spanish. According to the U.S. Census there was 55 million Latinos living in the United States as of July 1, 2014. With the ability to communicate in Spanish with the growing Latino population, future generations will become more diversified citizens of our world.

Learning a second language does not hinder a student’s learning of the content curriculum that is required by the school. Being bilingual helps students become better learners. As Pritchard and O’Hara (2008) discovered that bilingual readers are able to use the same strategies to help them read in both languages. It is important to teach students strategies that will transfer between the two languages and help them to read in their L1, as well as in in their L2. According to Lund, Werfel, and Schuele (2008) students that are learning Spanish and English outperform on phoneme segmentation skills than students whom are learning only in English.

Problem to be Investigated

There is a strong emphasis on kindergartners to read at grade level before they move on to the first grade. The students in the Spanish immersion classroom have to be reading at a B (3) level on the Fountas & Pinnell running records assessment. The students take the same
assessments as their peers in a traditional English classroom, only their assessments are in Spanish. This means the students in the Spanish immersion classroom are not just learning the kindergarten curriculum, but also are learning a new language. This study is situated in a One-Way Spanish Immersion program where students are expected to meet all the same curriculum standards as their traditional kindergarten counterparts. In this immersion kindergarten, students are required to have a certain reading level, be able to write a story with a beginning, middle, and end; as well as be able to add and subtract. Exactly as mentioned earlier, these kindergarteners are facing the challenge of passing the same assessments, while also acquiring a new language.

Based on the researcher’s classroom experience over a six-year period, the most challenging area of reading for immersion students is decoding words. If a student cannot find parts or chunks of words that are familiar, they will not be able to dissect the words to read. Therefore, the students’ reading skills are affected and the student will not advance. Students in a Spanish Immersion kindergarten classroom just started to learn letters, sounds, syllables, and sight words of Spanish language. The researcher wonders that if the students have a strong foundation in syllable recognition, are they able to decode and encode words to benefit their reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary building? Can immersion teachers at early grade levels assume that strong syllable recognition leads to a solid reading foundation? Can they predict that the student will be able to perform well on their running record?

This study was designed to consider the questions into consideration to explore if with increased syllable recognition capacity, the kindergarteners in the researcher’s class will perform better on the running record tests. The foundational rationale for this exploration is that when students were able to recognize and decode syllables they are be able to read at grade level and age appropriate books on their own. Luque, López-Zamora, Álvarez, and Bordoy (2013) state
that phonemes are replaced by syllables. Syllables are part of a bottom-up approach; students learn phonemes, then phonological, and then syllables, which help students, read entire words. The article proved beneficial for both teaching individual phonemes first, then moving onto syllables. Students need to learn the sounds of each letter to be able to form syllables; using syllables to replace phonemes. Without the knowledge of syllables, reading in Spanish will be difficult for students to decode and read fluently.

**Justification for the Study**

If the study showed a positive relationship between participating kindergarten students and their running record scores, this study can inform other immersion teachers or kindergarten teachers who teach students learning different languages the importance of teaching the students the syllables. The study will also help other teachers understand the importance of fundamental reading skills, therefore, emphasize basic reading skills. Particularly, future Spanish immersion teachers can help students by focusing on the syllable units of words.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

The research question for this study was “What effect does the increased capacity of syllable recognition have on Spanish immersion kindergarten students’ fluency building?” The researcher used running record scores as a tool to demonstrate her kindergarteners’ fluency development. The researcher hypothesizes that if students have a good syllable recognition they will perform better on their running records, which indicates that they read more fluently. In order to narrow down the research focus, the area of fluency will be the study focus. At the early kindergarten level, the research did not focus on the students’ comprehension; yet, since the students had just started to learn the very basic blocks of Spanish language and they relied heavily on pictures. Demonstrating fluency on letters, syllables and sight words a critical
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predictive factor for their future literacy success. When students had fluency they were able to read books that are more difficult in their later grade levels, therefore, their reading levels will be advanced accordingly.

The variables in the research will be the students’ reading level as assessed from Fountas & Pinnell end of the school year score. In addition, the students’ syllable recognition test score. The independent variable will be the syllable recognition score, and the dependent variable is the students’ final reading score.

**Definition of terms**

The following definitions are important in this project, and will be defined below.

**Syllable:**

Constitutive: According to Merriam-Webster dictionary “syllable” means, “one or more consonant sounds preceding or following.”

Operational: In this study, “syllable” will refer to a consonant and vowel together when reading words. For example, the student reads ma/no to say mano. They are able to recognize the two syllables and read the entire word.

**Running record:**

Constitutive: According to Reading A-Z, “running record” refers to “assessing a student's reading performance as she/he reads from a benchmark book.”

Operational” In this study, “running record” will refer to the grade level test, to assess at what level the student is fluent in his/her reading. The more syllables the students can recognize; the higher fluency level the students will have.
(Spanish) Immersion:

Constitutive: The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “immersion” as “a method of learning a foreign language by being taught entirely in that language.”

Operational: In this study, “immersion” refers to the researcher’s kindergarten classroom where the students’ first language is English, and they are being taught the kindergarten curriculum in Spanish.

(Reading) skill:

Constitutive: The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “skill” as “to make a difference.”

Operational: For this project, “skill” will refer to a students’ reading level; their baseline score and final score.
Chapter II - Literature Review

Literature Review

Knowledge of Sounds and Reading Skills

Young-Suk, and Pallante (2012) researched students that were tested from eight kindergarten classrooms in five private schools with 163 kindergartners. Students were assessed three times throughout the school year. Students were tested using DIBELS for number of syllables that they were able to say correctly. Although, they focused more on phoneme segmentation, using the Bateria III Woodcock-Muñoz Pruebas de Aprovechamiento-Revisada. “Positive relations suggest that fluency in access to and use of phonological awareness and letter-name knowledge is a critical foundation of early literacy skills in Spanish.” (Young-Suk, and Pallante, 2012) Being able to recognize a letter and its correspondence sound is an important part of reading to help form syllables. The study proved that if students know the letter names, and sounds, they are able to blend them together to be able to form syllables and read words.

Defior, Guitiérrex-Palma, and Cano-Marín (2012) completed a study that included 85 children in the 5th grade. They were assessed on 6 different tests. Including short-term memory, phonological awareness, stress awareness, word spelling, word reading, and reading efficiency. “Given that the study was performed in advanced stages of written language acquisition, the SA (stress awareness) measure was expected to be the best predictor of reading and spelling performance.” (Defior, Guitiérrex-Palma, and Cano-Marín, 2012) The study does find that there is evidence of phonological awareness, leading to syllable stressing that is early indicators of reading skills.

Brice and Brice (2009) state that little research in Spanish phonological awareness in comparison to the research of English phonological awareness has been done; that phonological
awareness studies the units of sounds that are bigger such as syllables. When reading in Spanish it is important to be able to read syllables and to pull words apart as syllables. Each consonant has its own set of syllables that are important to learn. Learning to read and write in Spanish it is vital to be able to distinguish syllables.

Chetail and Mathey (2013) stated that syllables are a way to help students read. The study included forty 5th graders from two French elementary schools. They were tested on CV syllables, and CVC syllables. There seems to be a phonological path in reading. Students need to start with recognizing the names, and sounds of letters. Then students move onto recognizing and reading syllables. Finally, they are reading words, proving that syllables are important to be able to read.

Álvarez, Cottresll, and Alfonso (2009) state that there are clear syllabic boundaries that should help students spell correctly in the Spanish language. The study included 24 students; ages 18-22 at the Universidad de La Laguna. The study shows there is mixed results from different studies if being able to split syllables can help writing in a language such as Spanish. If students are taught the phonemes they will be able to transfer that information into reading syllables, and reading words.

Pérez Cañado (2005) states that Spanish is a transparent language, allowing a more phoneme-grapheme correspondence than English. Once the syllables are learned, spelling, as well as reading can be much easier.

Studies claimed that syllable recognition was critical in children’s language development, particularly, their Spanish language development. If students are capable of recognizing individual phonemes, then they will be able to read by putting together all the individual sounds. According to Atwill, Blanchard, and Gorin (2007) the most important element for children to

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begin reading is to be able to manipulate phonemes. Manipulating phonemes is a predictor in how well a child will be able to read.

Cullatt, and Setzer (2006) argued, “In Spanish, the syllable is an important unit of analysis. Spanish has “consistent syllabic cues” and clear syllable boundaries” (Cullatt and Setzer, 2006). They conducted a 12 weeklong study where they observed and tested students in two half-day kindergarten classrooms verbally. The students were part of a Spanish/English dual language program, where instruction goes between two languages. Only the students that showed comfort in both languages were tested. The students were assessed in recognizing rhyme, rhyme generation, identifying initial sound, and syllable alliteration. Although with a small sample, the syllable alliteration students “displayed better sound and syllable alliteration” (Cullatt and Setzer, 2006).

**Phonemes and Reading Skills**

Research has shown that reading is closely related to recognizing individual phonemes. Bailystok, Majumder, and Martin (2003) state that bilingual children learned phonemic structure easier than their monolingual peers, and have an advantage in learning to read. Even students who were in an immersion class and were minimally bilingual were outperforming students in traditional English classrooms.

Cuetos and Suárez-Coalla (2008) state that people that read a transparent language like Spanish are able to focus on letters or syllables without having to concentrate on the entire word; besides individual phonemes in Spanish we can concentrate on syllables. Most common syllables are composed of a consonant and vowel.
Reading Skills

Anthony (2006) states that a child’s reading skill will fluctuate over time. As a child’s cognitive ability changes their reading skills will change. As the students’ phoneme awareness changes over time, they will be able to be more capable of new reading skills. Their phoneme awareness will change over time and they will begin to read more individual phonemes as well as begin to read syllables.

Syllables and Reading Skills

There is research to support that being able to read syllables will affect reading words. Tolchinsky, Levin, Aram, and McBride-Chang (2011) did a study that included forty-three kindergartners in Spain. Children were able to read 67% of words, “Syllable deletion was significantly associated with word reading” (Tolchinsky, Levin, Aram, and McBride-Chang, 2011). In the Spanish testing there was a correlation with testing initial syllable deletion and reading words.

According to Goikoetxea (2005) children in Spanish education find manipulating syllables in words much easier to do. Manipulating and having an awareness of syllables is a good predictor of reading skills. Students are hearing and able to distinguish the syllables to be able to manipulate words. Once the syllables are learned students will take off in their reading capabilities.
Chapter III - Methodology

Introduction

The researcher gave a baseline and final running record. As well, as creating a syllable recognition weekly test; the students would read syllables one-on-one with the researcher the week after the syllables were taught.

Research Methodology

The study aimed to explore what effect does the increased capacity of syllable recognition have on Spanish immersion kindergarten students’ fluency building, the goal is for the researcher to find if there is a connection between syllable recognition and running record scores. Students practiced throughout the week being able to recognize and read syllables. Approximately November 2015 through May 2016 the researcher taught syllables to the students. Each week there is a different letter, and the syllables that go along with that letter. There will be specific lessons that will go along with each set of syllables throughout the week. The design is focused on students’ recognition and reading syllables, so when they are tested on a running record they are able to recognize those syllables to read the book. A running record was assessed before syllables were taught to receive a baseline of all of the students’ knowledge. There was a final running record done when all syllables were taught, to observe the change in scores.

Methodology

This thesis is a correlational study. A correlational study was used to help understand if there was a connection between the two variables of syllable recognition and reading fluency; to observe if there is a correlation between the students’ reading level and their syllable recognition.

The participants in this study are male and female kindergarten students in the same Spanish immersion classroom at a Suburb Elementary School, part of a public school in
Michigan. There was four, five and six year-olds participating. All the students returned signed consent forms, therefore the total of participants in the study are 24. The 24 students were in the kindergarten Spanish immersion classroom. There were 14 females, 10 males. When the last running record was given, the ages of the students were 23 five year olds, and 1 six-year-old. 5 of the students had Spanish immersion preschool. The students’ ethnic background was 19 Caucasian, 1 Asian, 1 Hispanic, and 3 that were bi-racial (Hispanic/Caucasian). No one spoke Spanish at home; the only place the language was practiced was at school with their classroom teacher.

The scores for running records are determined by the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Benchmark Kit (See Appendices for examples of student scored running records) that Suburb Elementary School uses to assess reading levels. Students are scored on how many errors and self-corrections they have made. The syllable test is a researcher design test. Fountas and Pinnell created the Reading Benchmark kit, the tests are designed to match a book that a student read as a cold read, so they have not had time to practice. The researcher designed the syllable test to only test the syllables for each consent letter.

Each student will spend a few moments every week reading the syllables to the researcher. The syllables assessed were the syllables from the prior week. Students will receive a score normally out of 5 possible points, the students studied the syllables for Qq there were only 2 possible points; for a grand total of 117 possible points. The researcher followed protocol for running records, which the Suburb Elementary School has put, in place. The researcher administered a running record to each student, to receive a baseline score, before any syllables were taught. A running record score was written down on a spreadsheet with a random number given in place of the child’s name. Once syllables began to be taught, the students will have
access to both syllable centers, from Wednesday to Friday of each week. The following Tuesday after syllables were taught, the researcher assessed a syllable test to each student. The score was written down on the test, but only the child’s number will appear, not their name.

**Technology**

The researcher scored running records in a Microsoft Excel worksheet. Since running records are a district assessment, the actual test was put in the students’ assessment folder, which was kept openly in the classroom. Parents during conferences, as well as the principal, and any other teachers saw the running records if the student needs to be in a child study. The researcher created a syllable assessment that was scored on the student’s test, and put away in the black filing cabinet.

At the end of the project the researcher looked at the final running record, and final scorings of all syllable tests. To see what if any correlation between findings of syllable recognition and the students’ final running record score. For 22 out of 24 students in the immersion classroom there was a correlation. Students’ scores that met the year end reading level and went beyond.

**Procedure**

During the week, for each set of syllables the students would have had hands on experience manipulating syllables that they were learning that week. The students would have access to syllable dice. The students would throw the die with the syllables they were learning that week. On Wednesdays, they would read the syllable. On Thursday, the student will throw the die and write the syllable. As time continues, on Thursday they would have another die added so students have a chance of forming real words that they can read, and write.
Along with a syllable dice center, students would have access to a puzzle syllable center. It has the same concept as the dice, but students would be able to manipulate this center a bit more. They would have the current syllables available, as well as, former syllables. They were able to read syllables and a greater chance of forming real words.

The following Tuesday, the researcher had assess students on the previous syllables that they were taught the prior week. The student had a strip in front of them with the syllables typed out. The syllables were in random order. The researcher had a separate form in front of them. The syllables were in the same order, as the student sees them. The researcher checked off each syllable, the student read correctly. The researcher scored how many they received correctly. When all syllables were assessed there was a final score given; as well as a final running record score given.

Throughout the school year students learned and practiced syllable recognition. During whole group instruction student learned and wrote the syllables. On Wednesdays the students used dice that had the syllables written on them. They would throw only one die on Wednesdays; they would read what would show up. On Thursdays the students would use two dice, occasionally when they would roll the dice it would create a real word, but not always. On Fridays the students could use puzzle pieces that were similar as the dice. They had syllables written on the pieces. Students would match up the pieces that matched and read the word.

**Description of Internal Validity**

The internal validity that could affect students’ scores are several in this study. Dealing with kindergartners can be difficult due to their young age. The researcher had students ranging from 4 year olds to 6 years olds throughout the school year.
Problems that can occur during testing can include noise in the classroom. During the time the researcher assessed, students had playtime. There is a considerable amount of noise during this time. The students could be distracted by what is happening, or they may want to play instead of doing work. At this age, the child is often very concerned about playing with their classmates. This may cause the child to rush and flaw the data.

Two more potential problems include, the time in which the assessment is given and condition of the student. At the time of the assessment, it’s nearly the end of the day. The student could be hungry, not concentrating, or tired from a long day at school. Kindergarten is often the first time kids are gone all day from their homes and families. They are often tired or extremely emotional by the end of the day.

Another problem that could be encountered is that they would have to go to the bathroom, and will not ask to go until they are done with the assessment. So many students at the kindergarten level want to complete a task to make their teacher happy. If students are aware they need to complete a task, but in their minds all they can think about is going to the restroom, they would rush through the assessment making errors.

**Discussion of External Validity**

The external validity of the research project, if results are favorable, the project can be implemented on a larger scale in more Spanish immersion kindergarten programs; for now the project has a small pool of participants from which to work with. As well, the centers, and assessments that will be used for this project, are not the only resources being used; yet will be the only ones that will be included in the study. This study was conducted over a 23-week period and included only the correlation of syllable recognition and final running record score.
Conclusion

The students would take a syllable test every Tuesday after being taught. The students had experience manipulating the syllables by making non-sense words and real words with syllable dice, and syllable puzzles.
Chapter IV - Findings

Introduction

The researchers' goal was to find out if there was a correlation between students running record score and their syllable recognition. There was a baseline and final running record score given, as well as weekly syllable tests given.

Findings

The first scatter plot explains students' syllable recognition test results. It is very important for students to recognize syllables to begin to read. The scores are out of 117 syllables. There are 29 letters in the Spanish alphabet; five of the letters are vowels, and 24 consonants letters that are put together with vowels to create syllables. Each consonant taught has five syllables except for the letter Qq that only has two syllables.

Throughout the school year test scores were getting better. At the beginning it was difficult for some students to recognize syllables. Towards the middle and end of the year the scores were getting much better. Students had a better understanding of syllables and were recognizing them not only in the test but also as a well in books. Students were blending syllables together to read and create words.
Table #1

Final Reading Scores

[The image contains a scatter plot with labeled axes and data points, representing final reading scores.]

*Syllables, can they help us read?*
Looking at the scatter plot Reading Scores, the reading goal for the end of kindergarten is a level B or 3. Testing the students starting in November to May, the goal for students was to recognize syllables they would reach a level B (3). There were 2 students that read at level E (11), 10 students read at level D (9), 8 students read at level C (7), 2 students read at level B (3), and 2 students that read at level A (0).

For 22 out of 24 students that scored well on syllable recognition, they also scored at the level B (3) or above. As the syllable recognition scores increased so did the reading level scores. The scores went hand in hand; the more syllables the students were able to recognize the better their reading score was at the end of the school year.

Two students at the end of the school year scored below 59 on the syllable recognition and scored at a level A (0) reading level. The two students had a very difficult school year. They will be repeating kindergarten, one student in Spanish Immersion, and the other in a traditional English setting classroom. One student was denied admittance into the Young 5’s program, and was not ready to enter into kindergarten. The second student was very immature, would have benefited in a half-day program.
Table #2

Syllable Recognition Scores

![Syllable Recognition Scores](image-url)
Findings #2: The students read with fluency and were moving up in reading levels throughout the school year as they learned more syllables. Looking at the first scatter plot Syllable Recognition Scores, there were 24 students. The X-axis shows the student number and the Y-axis shows the score. Out of 24 students there was 19 students that scored between 100-117. 3 students scored from 80-99 syllables and 2 students that scored 59 and below. The two students who score was below 59 will be repeating kindergarten. For 22 students in the class they met or exceeded reading grade level of a B (3).

The researcher observed that students were able to quickly find the pattern to syllables; that each constant was paired with the vowels. The weeks that were more difficult were when the students were tested on Cc and Gg. These particular letters have a soft sound and a hard sound; depending on which vowels they are paired with. Students would make the hard sound for all five vowels instead of a soft sound for the e and i pairings.

Findings #2: At the beginning, students recognized a pattern to the order of the syllables so when they were tested they would say the syllables in order; for example, ma, me, mi, mo, mu. The vowel pattern was often repeated to sound out the syllables. The students also would say /m/ /e/ is me, instead of just reading the syllable as a whole unit. Those patterns lasted for a few weeks, and then students were able to recognize and read the syllable during testing.
Table #3

![Baseline Chart]

**Reading Level Results**

The X-axis is the student’s number and Y-axis is their reading level. The baseline scatterplot shows us where all the students began. They all had difficulties reading a level A (1). They were kept at a level A (1) text, until they could pass the level. This is all before any syllable instruction had begun.

This study was conducted over a 23-week period and included only the correlation of syllable recognition and final running record score.

**Conclusion**

There was a correlation between students reading scores and their syllable recognition. There were students who read 80-117 syllables out of 117 syllables. Were reading at a level 3 (B) or beyond.
Chapter V - Conclusion

Conclusion

Syllable recognition is good for kindergarten to pinpoint the exact difficulties the students are having and to work on to build reading fluency. The syllable recognition testing can be repeated in the first grade if students are new to the district, or for all students so the teacher has a better understanding of which syllables the students know and remember for the previous year.

Throughout the school year the syllable testing results were matching with the running record scores. At the beginning some students were struggling with syllables and struggled on reading. Once they had syllable recognition they were able to build fluency with their reading. In Spanish syllable recognition and reading go hand in hand for early literacy indicators. 22 students out of 24 increased their reading levels by meeting or exceeding reading expectations. With each set of syllables, the students were learning, their reading and fluency was increasing. Proving that syllable recognition is important to Spanish reading levels.

Implementing a syllable recognition test into a lower elementary classroom is very helpful. Allows for the teacher to pinpoint exactly what syllables the students are having a difficult time with. With knowing exactly which syllables the students are having difficulty with the teacher can work on those syllables and skills while in whole group instruction as well as small groups.

According to Goikoetxea (2005) children in Spanish education are manipulating syllables in words with more ease. Students that have the ability to manipulate syllables and have an awareness of syllables is a good predictor of early reading skills. Students are also hearing syllables and able to distinguish the syllables to be able to manipulate words. When they see syllables no matter the words they will be able to break up the word to read, by finding the parts
that they know. Once syllables are mastered, students will have ease with fluency and decoding of unknown words.

According to this research there is a correlation between reading scores and syllable recognition. The next step that can be taken is correlation between higher reading scores and three letter syllables that are two consents and a vowel.
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Appendices

Examples of Student Syllable Recognitions Results

Student #2
Syllables, can they help us read?

Student #13
Syllables, can they help us read?

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<td>5/15</td>
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Syllables, can they help us read?
Examples of Student Running Record Results

Student #2
Syllables, can they help us read?

Student #13

Student #19
Syllables, can they help us read?