

ENHANCING READING SKILLS IN SPED LEARNERS: EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A LESSON PLAN FOR FOUR-LETTER WORDS

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ABSTRACT

Reading is a crucial skill that underpins academic achievement and personal development. This action research explores the means for teachers to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of a four-letter word lesson plan for Sped learners with difficulty in reading. Based on the responses of the Sped teacher participants after evaluating the lesson plan, an action plan has been crafted. It is recommended to provide multiple methods and devices to engage with the lesson. Designing new and pleasant activities that vary the difficulty levels is also to be considered. Using assistive tools or devices that support text and speech activities shall be of great help too. Some more strategies are encouraged to be implemented. This study contributes to mean further benefits in evaluating and gathering feedbacks from specific people who are skilled and knowledgeable enough to help in improving a designed lesson plan.

Keywords: Lesson-plan, reading enhancement, special education teachers, qualitative, action plan

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a vital role in a student's academic success. It is one of the most important skills an individual learner must need to master. It is a prerequisite of all learning areas. It serves as a gateway for every learner to learn the different subjects because when a learner has a difficulty in reading, he/she may also encounter difficulties in all subject areas (Tomas et al., 2021). In addition, reading is a skill that involves several fundamental elements that work together to foster literacy. These elements consist of vocabulary knowledge, phonics, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and reading fluency.

Many children all over the world struggle in reading as cited by Oxford Learning (2019, June 20). *Why Students Struggle with Reading (& What To Do If Your Child is Falling Behind)*. Difficulty with reading is a common problem—about one in five people (including children) struggle with reading in some way. In addition, according to the United Nations Department of Social Affairs Statistics Division. *Sustainable Development Goals* (2019, May). There were an estimated 617 million children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age— more than 55% of the global total—lacked minimum proficiency in reading in 2015. One third of those children were out of school and urgently needed access to education. About two thirds of them attended school but did not become proficient, either because they dropped out or because they did not learn basic skills. Despite years of steady growth in enrolment rates, non-proficiency remains disturbingly high. They are highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 88% of Children (202 Million) of primary and lower secondary school age were not proficient in reading. Central and Southern Asia was not faring significantly better. 81% of children (241 Million) were not proficient in reading.

In the Philippines, according to the World Bank's 2022 data on learning poverty as cited by Chi, C. (2024, January 11). *Explainer: With students' poor literacy, were all teachers now 'reading teachers'?*. Philstar Global. At least 90% of Filipino children aged 10 struggle to read or understand simple text. Moreover, according to the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Philippines came in sixth among the worst countries in reading, sixth in mathematics, and third in science, ranking 77th out of 81 countries worldwide. Furthermore, results showed that the average reading score for OECD countries was 476, while the average score for Filipino students aged 15 was only 347. A huge part of these census were children that have received Special Education services, statistically as cited by National Center for Education Statistics (2024, May). *Students with Disabilities*. In the school year 2022-2023, the number of students ages 3–21 who received special education and/or related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was 7.5 million, or the equivalent of 15% of all public school students. Moreover, Approximately 50% of children in special education programs (about 5% of public school children) have a learning disability, and approximately 80% of children with a learning disability have a reading difficulty (Hamilton et. al., 2006).

Reading difficulty is defined as a challenge or a problem that individuals encounter when trying to read or understand written texts. These challenges may manifest in different forms, such as difficulty in decoding words, comprehending meaning of texts, and/or retaining and remembering what has been read. This can be caused by many factors such as an impairment in the cognitive and psychological process like dyslexia, developmental delays, intellectual disability, speech and language impairment, autism, other health impairments, difficulty in sustaining attention such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or even environmental factors like lack or limited access to reading resources or

lack access to education. Students with reading difficulties often struggle with reading fluency and reading comprehension. Reading fluency is defined as the speed and accuracy of decoding words. Meanwhile, reading comprehension is the ability to understand what you were reading (Mullin, 2019). Both of these factors were huge indicators for the success of teaching learners to read effectively and efficiently. For learners in Special Education, achieving the balance between the two can be particularly challenging, thus making sure that these children receive effective reading intervention and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a must, so that they may hone their reading skills, unlock their potential, and thrive in other aspects.

This action research focuses on a lesson plan aimed at teaching four-letter words to Grade 7 SPED students. The goal is to evaluate the lesson's effectiveness in improving students' reading fluency and comprehension

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This action research explores the means for teachers to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of individualized education programs (IEP) for Sped learners with difficulty in reading. It specifically sought to answer the following:

1. What are the teachers' feedback on the contents of the lesson plan?
2. What actions can be implemented based on the feedback to further improve the lesson plan?

3. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The importance of this study lies in its focus on helping struggling readers by teaching them four-letter words, which can significantly improve their word recognition, reading fluency, and confidence. Research shows that explicit phonics instruction, especially focusing on decodable words, is essential for developing foundational reading skills in struggling readers (Ehri & McCormick, 2021). Four-letter words, which follow predictable phonetic patterns, provide an accessible way to practice decoding and recognition, key components for reading success (Bowers & Wolf, 2020). By targeting these simple, high-frequency words, this study aims to offer effective teaching strategies that can support learners with reading difficulties, helping them build a strong foundation that they can build upon as they progress (Torgesen & Hudson, 2020). Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of evidence on how focused phonics-based instruction can boost struggling readers' fluency and self-confidence, improving their overall literacy development (Moats, 2019).

Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on evaluating a lesson plan aimed at teaching four-letter words to struggling readers in an elementary school setting over 6-8 weeks. The data will be collected through pre- and post-assessments, classroom observations, and student feedback to assess improvements in word recognition, reading fluency, and confidence (Torgesen & Hudson, 2020). However, there were some limitations. The small sample size and short duration of the study mean the findings may not be generalizable to larger or more diverse groups, and the impact of the intervention may not be fully captured in such a brief period (Ehri & McCormick, 2021). Additionally, individual differences in students' learning needs may affect the consistency of the results (Bowers & Wolf, 2020). Therefore, while the study provides useful insights, further research with larger samples and longer interventions is needed for broader conclusions.

4. METHODS

This research will employ a quasi-experiment design, utilizing pre-tests and post-tests to gather information on four letter word recognition skills among grade seven learners with reading difficulties. The chosen methodology was suitable because it allows for a clear comparison of learners' reading abilities in a four letter word before and after targeted intervention, providing measurable outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional strategies implemented.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN

The qualitative research design aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a lesson plan designed to teach four-letter words to learners experiencing reading difficulties. The study will involve a group of learners in a classroom setting, where the researcher will implement and assess the lesson plan through a cyclical process of planning, observing, and reflecting. Data will be collected through observations, interviews, pre- and post-test assessments, and students and teachers feedback, with a focus on understanding the learners' responses, progress, and challenges. The data will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights related to the effectiveness of the lesson plan. The research will proceed through iterative cycles, beginning with the planning and implementation of the lesson plan, followed by observation of student performance and engagement. After each cycle, the researcher will reflect on the results, make necessary revisions to the lesson plan, and repeat the process to continuously improve the intervention. This design emphasizes the practical, real-world application of teaching strategies, with a focus on meeting the needs of students with reading difficulties.

Research Participants

The participants of this study include five teachers of school A who were specializing in special education. They were asked to evaluate and critique the lesson plan used in the observed classes. The classes were conducted in the same school. These teachers also experienced making lesson plans for classes with LWD's. They were also assigned in the mainstream classroom and received teaching assignment for learners with special needs. The inclusion criteria are designed to ensure a representative sample that aligns with the objectives of the research focusing on the lesson plan in reading four-letter words to enhance the learners' reading abilities.

To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, informed consent was obtained and they were assured of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and were provided with clear information regarding the purpose and procedures of the research.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

This study utilized thematic analysis. According to the template of Creswell (2013), this aims to produce a detailed and systematic recording of the themes and issues present in the study and addressed in the interviews, and to link the themes and interviews together under a reasonably exhaustive category system (Burnard, 1991).

For evaluation, the Sped teachers' feedback are intended to be analyzed for common themes and suggestions for the enhancement of the lesson plan. The first step in the data analysis is managing and organizing the data. Creating a new document and pasting obtained qualitative data, such as interview transcripts or field notes, into the document, and then attaching labels such as headings and subheadings for each participant or group of participants to make navigating the document easier.

Then, start the coding process by highlighting different data to identify it with a category or theme, applying the designated color to the relevant sections of text that represent each code, and separating the data into different sections using different colored highlights and headings in the document to identify the data easier.

Next, the fourth step includes developing interpretations based on emerging themes and patterns and assessing these interpretations. In this step, the researchers analyze the data within each theme, examining the relationships and meanings embedded in the text.

Finally, the fifth step involves representing and visualizing the data. These visual representations provide a comprehensive overview of the qualitative data and support the communication of research findings (Reichard, 2023).

Data Collection

The researchers facilitated the in-depth interviews with the Sped teachers who observed the classes where the lesson plan on reading four-letter words was used. Before this step, a letter to conduct the research data gathering was submitted to the head of School A and upon obtaining the permit to interview and classroom observation, a letter of consent was given to the identified participants. This will be followed by creating an interview guide, which shall be rigorously validated by a panel of experts. After receiving approval, the identified participants will be informed about the study's purpose and objectives and be provided with the informed consent form (ICF) with its contents explaining the details. Participants shall indicate their consent through a structured signature. The scheduling of the IDI was carefully coordinated, with dates and time based on the convenience and explicit cooperation of the participants. The participants were given a brief orientation by the researchers to inform them of the duration of each session which may last at least fifteen to thirty minutes and will not extend beyond an hour. They were also made aware of their rights to withdraw their participation from the interview should they feel or observe inconvenience during the session.

Data Sources

The data of this study were taken from the participant's responses to the questions from the interview. The questions were stipulated in the interview guide that are based on the goal of this study. The participant's thoughts and suggestions during the (IDI) in-depth interview were recorded through a recording mobile device. The inquiry included gathering of the Sped teachers' comments and recommendations to improve the study. The researchers provided the participants with the abstract and goal of the study at the beginning of the interview to have a firm discussion.

7. RESULTS

Profile of the Participants

There were five Sped teachers who were interviewed in the study. These teachers were asked to observe classes with students who have learning disabilities. The researchers conducted an interview with a five (5) in-depth interview (IDI) with three female Sped teachers and two male Sped teachers. There are two participants, one male and one female who are already in the Sped teacher II position, while the rest are in the Sped teacher I position. The teachers' experience in Sped ranges from two to six years in service.

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Participants Code	Position	Sex	No. of Years in Sped
IDI 001	Sped Teacher I	Female	3
IDI 002	Sped Teacher II	Male	6
IDI 003	Sped Teacher I	Female	3
IDI 004	Sped Teacher I	Male	2
IDI 005	Sped Teacher II	Female	5

After the conduct of the in-depth interview, themes and core ideas were drawn out of the participants' responses.

Participants Feedback on the Lesson Plan

Table 2. Participants' Feedback on the Lesson Plan

ESSENTIAL THEMES	CORE IDEAS
Aligned with Learning Objectives	Clearly focusing on the intended outcomes
	Targetting specific skills
	Engaging learners to ensure that the objectives are attained
Limited Accomplishment	Missing interactive elements
	Lacking visuals and audio
	Insufficient drills complied
Constrained Strategies	Allotting limited time for activities
	Incorporating less interactive games
	Adopting minimal flexible schedule

From the participants' responses regarding the evaluation of the lesson plan, various themes and core ideas were drawn. Essential themes such as aligned with learning objectives, limited accomplishment, and constrained strategies floated.

The first feedback collectively means that the lesson plan has been aligned with the learning objectives. This implied that it is clearly focusing on the intended outcomes. This is evident with the following responses

The lesson plan shows a clear focus on the outcomes intended for learners' competence. (IDI 001)

It follows the intended learning outcomes throughout the lesson. (IDI 002)

It seems really evident that the lesson plan is tailored to the objectives of the lesson. Another idea is that it targets the specific skills of the learners. Some participants reiterated this.

The target skills are incorporated in the activities the teacher is giving to the learner from the start and till the end of the session. (IDI 005)

The session includes activities that cater the target learning skills of the learners. (IDI 003)

Another core idea is engaging learners to ensure that the objectives are attained. These are apparent in the responses of some participants.

The teacher made sure that the learner is enjoined in the drill and this is aligned to the target skill according to the lesson plan. (IDI 002)

The activities are interactive and very engaging to the learners. They really participated. (IDI 003)

However, limited accomplishment floats as another essential theme among the feedback of the Sped teachers. This is elaborated through the core ideas such as missing interactive elements, lacking visuals and audio, and limited accomplishment.

The activities need to be interactive, especially using audio materials or devices. (IDI 001)

There are drills that do not have enough visual aids.

(IDI 003)

Some visuals are not enough for one activity. It should be supplemented with audio as well. (IDI 002)

It seems that the lesson is not very accomplished when there are no additional devices. (IDI 005)

Medyo lacked videos or pictures to support the activity. (IDI 004)

Not enough visual materials are prepared for the child to see more. (IDI 003)

The final essential theme that emerged is about constrained strategies. This implies that there are more elements to consider in order to improve the lesson plan. Core ideas for this theme include allotting limited time for activities,

incorporating less interactive games, and adopting minimal flexible schedules. These are stressed in the following responses of the participants;

Some activities took only a short time, and it's not sure if the learner has already grasped it. (IDI 001)

Short drills may have disadvantages to special learners.

(IDI 003)

Activities that are not very interactive may end up useless. This should be addressed. (IDI 002)

The learners with special needs seem to miss the fun and excitement because there were less games and digital activities. (IDI 005)

The allotted time may be extended when the learner is slow in accomplishing the tasks. (IDI 004)

The schedule should be convenient to the learners' learning pace. (IDI 004)

Action to be Taken to Improve the Lesson Plan

Based on the study's findings regarding the feedback of the Sped teacher participants on the contents of the lesson plan for reading four-letter word among Sped learners in School A, various considerations need to be taken. While the lesson plan focuses on targeting the learning outcomes, it shows weaknesses in terms of sense of accomplishment and strategies. Therefore, suggestions are hereby extended. To further the efficiency of the lesson plan in terms of accomplishment, it is recommended to provide multiple methods and devices to engage with the lesson. This would include visual aids from the internet or any application, and cut out materials. Also hand-on activities are helpful. Some verbal instructions may be better to be clearly given rather than through writing. Designing new and pleasant activities that vary the difficulty levels is also to be considered. Using assistive tools or devices that support text and speech activities shall be of great help too. Some more strategies are encouraged to be implemented such as breaking down tasks into smaller steps to help the learners focus on a specific skill one at a time and then master it. Include activities that would challenge their critical thinking skills that are tailored to their competence a well. In structuring the words, especially those with four letters to be read, using real-life objects or cases shall be helpful to show directly what these words mean and then they shall be able to grasp a better understanding of what they are reading.

8. DISCUSSION

Participants Feedback on the Lesson Plan

The first essential theme drawn from the responses of Sped teachers is aligned with the lesson objectives. This includes core ideas such as clearly focusing on the intended outcomes, targeting specific skills, and engaging learners to ensure that the objectives are attained. Some qualitative study explores teachers' approaches to lesson planning, assessment design, and the incorporation of higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). It underscores that aligning lesson plans with clear learning objectives and integrating HOTS can significantly enhance student performance (IRE Journals). Also, according to Wilson (2022), when the learning objectives are well-crafted, they help students better understand course activities and increase student performance on assessments.

The second essential themes is concerned with limited accomplishment. This leads to the participants' suggestions to use audio-visual materials that would further the effect of the lesson plan. The study of Alabi et.al (2021) concluded that audio-visual method of teaching had positive effect on student's academic performance. From interactive digital resources to online learning platforms, technology has given educators innovative tools to create dynamic and inclusive learning environments. Students, in turn, have benefited from increased access to information, personalized learning experiences, and opportunities for collaboration (Ascione, 2023). Additionally, integrating multisensory techniques—such as tracing, hearing, and visualizing words—has been shown to benefit students with reading challenges, especially those with dyslexia (Birsh, 2018).

Lastly, according to Chaidi and Drigas (2022), in recent years, the sciences of education have turned their attention and have already recognized the importance of games and even digital games as a learning tool, emphasizing the benefits for students with or without educational needs. On the issue of adopting minimal flexible schedule as one of the core ideas, it is important to note that flexible scheduling improves academic and social outcomes by aligning instructional strategies with the unique learning styles and paces of students in special education (Koc et al., 2022).

Four-letter words, incorporating consonant blends and vowel sounds, offer an accessible yet challenging focus for struggling readers, supporting systematic practice and skill-building. Such an approach aligns with differentiated instruction, as it allows teachers to tailor lessons based on students' needs and provide varied support, a key strategy in effective literacy instruction (Tomlinson, 2014).

9. CONCLUSION

This action research aims to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of a lesson plan focused on teaching four-letter words. By involving teachers as evaluators, the study seeks to enhance instructional practices and improve reading

outcomes for Grade 7 SPED students. This study may emphasize the importance of repetition and practice in enhancing fluency. Additionally, integrating multisensory techniques is beneficial to students with reading challenges. Continuous progress monitoring and feedback also play a crucial role in addressing reading difficulties, ensuring that teachers can adjust instruction as needed to support student growth. Lastly, the reflective nature of action research promotes teacher professional development, encouraging educators to evaluate and adapt their practices based on the suggestions. This study not only contributes to instructional strategies but also emphasizes the importance of evidence-based practices in improving literacy outcomes for students with reading difficulties.

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