COMPARISON OF PHONICS AND LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACHES IN TEACHING WRITING IN FIRST GRADE

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare the phonics approach to the language experience approach in determining writing improvement of first grade students.

The research on major principles and practices of current approaches to teaching writing notes that the use of the language experience approach in teaching writing is an effective method since the student’s own interests and experiences are used. This type of writing experience is an interactive process in which listening, reading, speaking, and writing are taught concurrently rather than in sequence.

The phonics method of teaching writing is also an effective method of teaching writing since it helps students understand the purposes of writing and reinforces the connection between sounds and spelling, so that eventually, they are able to use that knowledge to write meaningfully.

A writing workshop was set up in the classroom. The workshop contained six centers. The centers were used on a daily basis on a rotating schedule.

All students demonstrated writing improvement using phonics and language experience methods. The combination of phonics and language experience approaches seemed to benefit most, if not all, of the students. The phonics improved students’ confidence in writing, and the language experience allowed students to write about topics which were of interest to them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1-THE PROBLEM
- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
- Development of the Problem ......................................................................................... 1
- Need for the Study ......................................................................................................... 3
- Purpose of the Study ..................................................................................................... 3
- Research Question ........................................................................................................ 3
- Definition of Terms ....................................................................................................... 3

## CHAPTER 2-THE LITERATURE REVIEW ...................................................................... 5
- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5
- The Language Experience Approach ............................................................................ 5
- Whole Language Approach .......................................................................................... 7
- Grammar Approach ...................................................................................................... 9
- Phonics Approach ......................................................................................................... 10
- Facilitating the Writing Experience .............................................................................. 12
- Important Strategies in Teaching Writing ................................................................. 15
- Writing as an Interactive Process ................................................................................ 15
- Principles and Practices of Current Approaches to Teaching Writing ....................... 17
- Summary ..................................................................................................................... 18

## CHAPTER 3-METHODOLOGY ......................................................................................... 20
- Purpose ......................................................................................................................... 20
- Research Design ........................................................................................................... 20
- Population and Sample ............................................................................................... 20
- Assumptions and Limitations ....................................................................................... 21
- Procedure ...................................................................................................................... 21
- Instrumentation ............................................................................................................ 23
- Method of Analysis ...................................................................................................... 24

## CHAPTER 4-PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA ........................................ 25
- Demographics ............................................................................................................. 25
- Language Experience Guidelines ................................................................................. 25
- Phonics General Procedures ......................................................................................... 27
- Findings and Results .................................................................................................... 28

## CHAPTER 5-SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ....................... 29
- Summary ....................................................................................................................... 29
CHAPTER 1
THE PROBLEM

Introduction

For many years, there has been a heated debate by the proponents of whole language and phonics, over the benefits of using a whole language or language experience approach as opposed to using a phonics approach to teaching reading and writing. "Phonics? Whole language? If you have children in elementary school, you have probably heard about these dueling methods of teaching reading.... The passion is fueled in part by a simple fact: reading achievement in the U. S. is low" (Collins, 1997). This study investigated various methods of teaching writing which include the language experience approach, whole language, grammar, and phonics.

Development of the Problem

This researcher chose to study writing skills of first grade students because their writing samples were in need of improvement. Research in the area of writing points to the need for implementation of a different teaching method (from phonics) to improve writing (Chamot, & O'Malley, 1994). A possible solution to this problem is to implement the use of the language experience approach in teaching writing (Van Allen & Allen, 1982). This researcher currently uses the phonics method of teaching writing and finds that
the writing samples are phonetically correct, however, the quality of writing is poor, lacking description and interest. The students write what they are asked to write, which may or may not be of interest to them.

This study hypothesized that there would be a change in writing samples with the implementation of a language experience approach in teaching writing because the writing may be more interesting to the students, since it will come from their own experiences and their own language. In the language experience approach, some benefits include: 1. students can write what they say, and read what they have written; 2. the story is meaningful to the student because it comes from his or her language and his or her own personal experiences; 3. the writing comes from an experience that all students have in common; 4. the text can easily be understood because it comes from the students' ideas; and 5. students are involved in a literature-based curriculum of their own choosing (Richard-Amato, 1996).

In the grammar-based approach of teaching writing, Hillocks (cited in Simich-Dudgeon, 1989) found that there was a significant loss of quality in writing, and that the use of sentence combining was much more effective. The students seem to benefit most when grammatical concepts are contextualized and they are able to take an active role, as in discussions.

In the phonics approach to teaching writing, also called the skills-based approach, discrete sounds are taught along with the writing of the sounds. Handwriting skills are developed first, followed by copying of words, then sentences, and finally paragraphs. In this approach, the assumption is that the students will eventually integrate the individual skills in order to write meaningfully (Adams, 1995).
In the whole language approach to teaching writing, meaningful literature is introduced and language is not chopped up, but is learned from whole to part. Learning experiences are authentic, and students master skills in the context of their use (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

Need for the Study

Writing scores are very important in both district and state assessments of student writing skills. There is a need to be able to clearly express thoughts and feelings in writing. An investigation of the language experience approach compared to phonics may demonstrate that the needs of the students are better met when they are able to use their own language and experiences in the writing process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to compare the phonics approach to the language experience approach to determine which method was most effective in improving the writing skills of first grade students.

Research Question

Which method of teaching writing is most effective in improving first grade students' writing skills?

Definition of Terms

Language Experience Approach: “The language experience approach is predicated on the notion that students can write by dictating to the teacher
what they already know and can express verbally, and that they can then read that which has been written" (Richard-Amato, 1996, p. 203).

**Whole Language Approach:** “This approach to literacy development is based on the belief that language should not be separated into component skills, but rather experienced as a whole system of communication” (Chamot, & O’Malley, 1994, p. 20).

**Grammar Based Approach:** The grammar based approach is 1) a description of syntactic structure (phrases, clauses, sentence types; roles of elements within larger structures) 2) a prescription for how to use structures and words 3) rhetorically effective use of syntactic structures 4) the functional command of sentence structure that enables us to comprehend and produce language (Weaver, 1996).

**Phonics Based Approach:** The phonics based approach is the explicit teaching of sounds and the blending of sounds into words...associating sounds with letters in a predictable pattern (Adams et al., 1995).

**Phonemes:** Phonemes are the individual sounds that letters make.
CHAPTER 2
THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Many researchers conclude that the benefits of using the language experience approach in teaching writing include: 1. students can write what they say, and read what they have written (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), 2. the story is meaningful to the student because it comes from his or her language and his or her own personal experiences (Banks & McGee, 1993), 3. the writing comes from an experience that all students have in common (Richard-Amato, 1996), 4. the text can easily be understood because it comes from the students' ideas (Richard-Amato, 1996), and 5. students are involved in a literature-based curriculum of their own choosing (Richard-Amato, 1996).

Topics covered in this chapter include other methods of teaching writing which are whole language, grammar, and phonics.

The Language Experience Approach

“In this approach (language experience) students learn that what is said can be written down and that what has been written down can be read” (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994, p. 20).

Students are able to write by dictating to the teacher what is already known to them and that which they are able to verbalize. Since the story
recounts students' personal experiences it is a good start toward meaningful writing experiences (Banks & Banks, 1993).

Van Allen's famous lines explain the rationale for using language experience texts. He says, "What I can think about I can talk about. What I can say I can write. What I can write I can read. I can read what I write and what other people write for me to read" (cited by Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992, p. 178).

As an example, adaptation of the language experience approach may begin with a spontaneous or a planned experience that all students have in common such as a story, a song, a picture, or a trip to the local shopping center. After the shared experience, the students brainstorm ideas while the teacher writes key words on the board or transparency. In some versions of this approach, each student then contributes to a group story or paragraph that is written by the teacher. Students can read what has been written and copy it into their notebooks. After a period of time, students can begin to read and write simple, short stories more independently as they acquire higher stages of language capability (Richard-Amato, 1996).

Perhaps the biggest advantage is that the text is appropriate both cognitively and linguistically since it comes from the students themselves.... The students' own ideas are encouraged and validated, thereby enhancing self-concepts and fostering independence. The unit of study is the created story or product rather than isolated sound and letter correspondences, words, and sentences. (Richard-Amato, 1996, p. 204)

Using versions of the language experience approach allows teachers to begin at individual stages of writing skills for each student. The use of a
literature-based curriculum involves students and heightens awareness of the power of language. The connection between reading and writing becomes more apparent. The students are motivated and guided through a workshop approach to writing which allows them to take advantage of the classroom community they and the teacher have established (Richard-Amato, 1996).

**Whole Language Approach**

In the whole language approach, meaningful literature is introduced. Language is not chopped up, but is learned from whole to part. Learning experiences are authentic, and students master skills in the context of their use. "This approach to literacy development is based on the belief that language should not be seperated into component skills, but rather experienced as a whole system of communication" (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994, p. 20). Activities in a whole language classroom could include journal writing, reading aloud by the teacher, sustained silent reading, student choice about what is read and written, and higher level thinking skills and discussions about what is read. Students are given many opportunities to interact with authentic texts, particularly, meaningful literature, and they are able to use language and writing for personal communicative purposes (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

"The whole language approach is based on the assumption that the introduction to reading must be meaningful and it should be developed from real communicative situations in the life of learners" (Goodman, cited in Simich-Dudgeon, 1989, p.6). The link between oral language and print should emerge naturally, rather than be explicitly taught (Simich-Dudgeon, 1989).
We have learned a lot of things. One of those things is that language is learned from whole to part.... It is when you take language away from its use, when you chop it up and break it into pieces, that it becomes abstract and hard to learn. (Goodman, cited by Richard-Amato, 1996, p. 63)

There are some concerns about using the whole language approach to teaching writing because, “Workbooks and graded readers are not used in a whole language classroom, so some teachers worry about the danger of neglecting decoding instructions” (Richard-Amato, 1992, p. 184). The learners have the freedom to select reading books that are personally meaningful, and the way in which they will use the information they obtain. The students are usually eager to communicate what they have learned in writing as well as orally (Richard-Amato, 1996).

In whole language education, teachers help learners do things they cannot already do. Skills are taught in the context of their use and mastered gradually, while students are engaged in authentic, meaningful experiences, that frequently they have chosen. With reading and writing processes, the teacher first aims for fluency, then clarity, and lastly correctness, which follows the natural sequence of development of the ability to read and write (Weaver, 1996).

“In newer approaches to reading and language arts instruction, the meaning of what is read and written is considered to be more important than the separate skills underlying reading and writing” (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994, p. 283).
Grammar Approach

Weaver (1996), states that the empirical research does not support teaching grammar in isolation. There was a significant loss of quality in writing when using a grammar-based approach in teaching writing and that the use of sentence combining was much more effective in improving student writing (Hillocks, cited in Simich-Dudgeon, 1989).

The quality of student writing was not raised with the study of traditional grammar. An emphasis on a grammar-based approach “resulted in significant loss in overall quality. Sentence combining methods, or the practice of building complex sentences from simpler ones, was found to be more than twice as effective as free writing, as a means of enhancing the quality of student writing” (Hillocks, cited in Simich-Dudgeon, 1989, p. 9).

Whatever the reasons, it is abundantly clear that the empirical research does not support the belief that teaching grammar in isolation will typically improve writing.... If our rationale for teaching grammar is primarily to improve students’ writing, then it would seem that a much more limited and more focused treatment of grammar has a better chance of being effective.... In other words, our efforts at teaching grammar should probably focus on helping students revise and edit their writing, partly because whatever is first learned during revising and editing may eventually be incorporated into drafting, or into rehearsal for writing. (Weaver, 1996, p. 104)

The students seem to benefit most when grammatical concepts are contextualized and they take an active role. The study of grammatical terminology was less effective than discussing, revising, and manipulating sentences (Weaver, 1996).

Weaver (1996), concludes that: (1) studying grammar in isolation is not the most effective use of instructional time if better writing is the intended goal,
(2) young children understand grammatical constructions naturally, without the use of direct instruction, (3) grammar is best absorbed through copious amounts of reading, (4) writing is as critical as reading, but students need to be taught how to combine sentences and manipulate syntax.

**Phonics Approach**

In the phonics approach to teaching writing, discrete sounds are taught along with the writing of the sounds. Systematic instruction of writing, beginning with dictation, helps students understand the purposes of writing and reinforces the connection between sounds and spelling. In the Open Court teaching series, Adams (1995), says that handwriting skills are developed first, followed by copying words, then sentences, and finally paragraphs. In this approach, the assumption is that the students will eventually integrate the individual skills in order to write meaningfully.

"The skills-based approach, also called the phonics approach, is characterized by the assumption that learners learn how to read by mastering discrete elements of language at the onset of reading instruction (Simich-Dudgeon, 1989, p. 5).

The core of the phonics method of teaching is the saying and writing of the sounds used in spoken English. The child learns to combine the sounds into words he knows. Meaning of the words is taught along with the writing by using the new words in original sentences. Good study habits are also acquired because each pupil is required to apply his knowledge of phonograms and the spelling rules in his written work.
He uses his mind and not his memory alone and thus acquires a mental discipline that will serve him in all education and in life.... The teaching of phonics and the analysis of the sounds and the composition of words properly belongs in the teaching of written spelling. (Spalding & Spalding, 1986, pp. 23-24)

If phonics instruction is to be successful, it must be systematic. It can’t just start in the middle. A daily routine is established to teach the blending of sounds into words. The teaching of writing begins with dictation and a writing strand that allows students to understand the uses and purposes of writing as they are learning to write. The students’ print awareness and the structure and conventions of the written language are reinforced by these experiences (Adams, 1995).

Dictation is a starting point for fluency, but it also serves as a springboard for self-correction through proofreading. It also provides practice in the all-important associations between sounds and spellings, which provides a link between reading and writing and powerfully reinforces both (Adams, 1995).

Beginning writers traditionally learn to write through a bottom-up process which is similar to how reading is taught. “The mechanics of handwriting are developed first, followed by copying of words and sentences, exercises for punctuation and spelling, and finally development of paragraphs or longer compositions on assigned or free topics” (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994, p. 283). Most basal reading series present these separate writing skills which are analogous to the various reading skills presented. These separate writing skills are presented in most basal reading series. This is called the traditional approach, in which the building blocks of the reading and writing processes are mastered separately. The assumption underlying this approach is that students
will eventually be able to integrate the separate skills and be able to understand what they read, and will be able to write meaningfully (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994)

Facilitating the Writing Experience

The facilitating of the writing experience is enhanced by the use of affective activities which provide motivation to the students. Students' experiences are important to this approach since the writing comes from these shared experiences. The experience can then be dictated to the teacher on an individual basis, or as a whole group. The teacher's role is to serve as an editor after students are satisfied with the content and organization of their writing. The writing environment plays an important part in the writing experience. Students need to feel as though they can take risks in order to obtain their very best writing efforts. Introducing believable characters into the classroom so that students can write about concerns or problems is also a method of creating an atmosphere where students can take risks comfortably.

Richard-Amato (1996), says that writing needs to be an interactive process where all the students' past experiences and prior knowledge are relevant and important to the writing experience. Listening, reading, speaking, and writing should all be integrated and practiced together, rather than as separate skills. Students write about topics that are of interest to them instead of assigned topics. Younger students (pre-kindergarten to grades one or two) can benefit from pretend play. An example of this would be a housekeeping corner where children can discuss questions about their families. Students can then write a short story about one of the topics that was discussed.
The students' experiences are very important to the language experience approach. Activities, like going on a field trip, a movie, a food-tasting session, a picture, a poem, a story, and so on, contribute to the students' ability to capture what they have experienced in descriptive writing. The students discuss the experience with the teacher and fellow students, then they dictate a story while the teacher writes it on the board, a flip chart, or overhead transparency. This method is particularly interesting because it allows students to scaffold upon other students' ideas (Richard-Amato, 1996).

Experiences with music, poetry, story-telling, role play, drama, and affective activities often provide motivation and can lead to some highly relevant, exciting topics. Students need to begin the writing process with a certain amount of confidence, which can come in part from their exposure to versions of the language experience approach. The writing process itself involves brainstorming for topics of interest, gathering information, allowing that information to settle into some sort of overall plan...putting the words down on paper, consulting others, and revising. (Richard-Amato, 1996, p. 73)

Weaver, (1996), says that the students need to be guided through the intermingled phases of the writing process. This means establishing a writers' workshop in which writers can work on their pieces at their own pace, and in their own idiosyncratic way. The teacher should serve as an advocate, rather than an adversary, and as an editor, rather than as a critic or judge. This means helping students with sentence structure and editing until they are satisfied with the content and organization of their writing (Weaver, 1996).

Frank (1995), believes that effective communication flourishes in an environment where persons can risk exposing their real lives. They should be allowed to tell what they are really thinking and this information should be treated with respect. In this type of environment there is acceptance, open
communication, freedom, absence of stress, seriousness, and a bottomless barrel of stimulation. There are some steps that teachers can take to hasten the development of a comfortable home for writing growth. These would include: sharing your own excitement about writing, respect the written word, remove obstacles to writing, encourage carefree inventiveness, provide plenty of time, let them write without stopping to correct, write together often, provide directions that challenge, and always make a way to share writing.

Gregory (1994), offers a suggestion that allows children to be comfortable with writing by adding a touch of whimsy to the first few weeks of school by introducing two imaginary classmates, Suzy Q. and Alfred Banananose, who experience the same nervousness the children sometimes feel. Ask what the two imaginary students look like. What color are Suzy’s eyes? What’s she wearing? What does Alfred look like? After the students’ have come up with descriptions of the characters, it’s time to think about their personalities. Is one bossy and the other shy? What are they most afraid of? The details need to be very realistic so that the students can really identify with the characters. Next, two life-size kids need to be cut out of cardboard and clothed in construction paper or fabric scraps. Faces are then painted on, and shoes, buttons, and so forth are added. Name tags should be attached and this dynamic duo can be displayed in a prominent place. Alfred and Suzy Q. each have a book bag, so that when students have a problem, they can write it anonymously on a sheet of paper and tuck it into one of the bags. Occasionally, the slips should be handed out to the students so they can offer advice as either Suzy Q. or Alfred (Gregory, 1994).
Important Strategies in Teaching Writing

According to Richard-Amato (1996), the research about writing and the current approaches to teaching writing focus on allowing students to move along three phases of the writing process: Planning, composing, and revising. Communication of meaning is the major objective of writing, so students should be allowed the opportunity to share their writing with classmates, parents, and the community.

The following strategies are offered by Richard-Amato (1996), about how to teach writing successfully: (1) find out as much as you can about your topic, (2) brainstorm for ideas (discuss with peers, the teacher, family members, and others in the school or community), (3) make a plan (map out or cluster your ideas), (4) think about the structures you are using but do not let them interfere with what you want to say, (5) begin writing (do not worry about making mistakes), let your ideas flow, (6) rewrite making whatever changes seem necessary, (7) think of writing as a process through which the product develops gradually, (8) consult with peers, your teacher, etc., (9) rewrite and consult as many times as necessary, and finally, (10) share your writing with others (Richard-Amato, 1996, p.57).

Writing as an Interactive Process

An important contribution of recent theories on the reading and writing process is the principle that language should be experienced and taught as a whole. An implication of this principle is that listening, reading, speaking, and writing should be taught concurrently rather than in sequence. Accompanied by this integration of language skills is the use of authentic texts for listening and
reading. The focus in writing is to communicate ideas of personal importance to a larger audience than the teacher alone. The students are allowed to select books and stories that were written as literature rather than special stories that were written to develop particular reading skills. Likewise, students write about topics of genuine interest to them and share their writing with an audience larger than the teacher alone (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

The writer (like the reader) brings to the process his or her own values, relationships, experiences, prior knowledge, culture, dreams and goals, and expectations.... Good writers often consult or conference with other writers to ask for their reactions, comments, and suggestions...the third component is other texts (written and oral) including stories, drama, essays, novels, song lyrics, periodicals, miscellaneous books, and so on that can serve both as sources of information and as models. Because the process of writing is an interactive one, the evolving product therefore does not belong solely to the person who produced it; rather it belongs in varying degrees to all influences contributing to its development and to the reader who ultimately determines its meaning on a personal level. Thus, the product is truly reflective of a communal effort. (Richard-Amato, 1996, p. 71)

Quintero and Rummel (1996), describe how pretend play can stimulate purposeful writing for younger children in pre-kindergarten through grades 1 or 2. A housekeeping corner or some version of a pretend home can be set up to inspire childrens’ voices. After sufficient time for play, the following questions can be asked of a large group of children: What are some things that you do together as a family? At home? Outside the home? What about household chores? Who does what in your family? What is your job? How do you feel about this? Do you think your job should change? Why? What would happen if you didn't do your chores for one day? Three days? A week? Next divide the children into smaller groups to encourage more participation and discussion
and to explore other questions such as: What if a family member is not doing his/her part? Will this make you upset? What can you do about it? What if they get mad? What do you think is a good way for everyone to cooperate and do their job? Next, have children write a short story about something they have discussed, while giving them the option to write about their own family, a friends’ family, or a pretend family or event (Quintero & Rummel, 1996, p.147).

**Principles and Practices of Current Approaches to Teaching Writing**

The major principles and practices of current approaches to teaching writing include: (1) readers’ prior knowledge assists comprehension; (2) text structure affects the level of comprehension; (3) learning strategies assist comprehension; (4) students read literature and other authentic texts; (5) writing involves three recursive phases of planning, composing, and revising; (6) students write to communicate their own ideas; and (7) students share their writing with others (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994).

Research in writing and composition has also contributed to a re-evaluation of how writing should be taught in schools.... The current emphasis on writing as a process allows the writer to move back and forth between three phases of planning, composing, revising in an effort to think through the meaning to be communicated, to fashion the most effective means of communicating meaning to a particular audience, and to revise the product so that it communicates more effectively. Because communication of meaning is the major writing objective, students discover for themselves how effectively they are communicating their ideas by sharing what they write with classmates, teachers, parents, and others in the school community. (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994, p. 285)
Summary

Each method of teaching writing (except possibly the grammar approach) has its strengths and weaknesses.

The language experience approach uses the students’ own experiences which can be used as a motivating factor. The students are able to understand and relate to the writing since it comes from their own personal experiences. However, it relies on using the teacher to write sentences and stories that are dictated by the students. This can be difficult to accomplish in a classroom setting of twenty or more students.

The whole language and language experience approaches are very similar since both approaches agree that the teaching approach should be from whole to part rather than part to whole. They both use the students’ own experiences as a foundation for future learning experiences.

Hillocks’ (cited in Simich-Dudgeon, 1989) research on the teaching of grammar verifies that time would be much better spent by helping students revise and edit their writing once they are satisfied with the content and organization.

In the phonics-based instruction to teaching reading and writing, dictation is used on a regular basis, and the blending of sounds into words is used on a daily basis. The weakness of using this method for the teaching of writing is that students tend to use words they can sound out or spell phonetically instead of using descriptive words that better fit the students’ feelings or experiences.

Research indicates that facilitating the writing experience involves using student experiences (such as trips, food tasting, movies, etc.) which can be used as a motivating factor to produce writing that is meaningful to the students.
Writing is an interactive process that cannot be separated from speaking, reading, and listening. Authentic experiences should be used. Younger children can benefit from the use of imaginary characters or from pretend play.

The major principles and practices of current approaches to teaching writing include prior knowledge, text structure, use of learning strategies, literature and authentic texts, three phases of writing (planning, composing, and revising), writing for communication, and sharing writing with others.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to compare the phonics approach to the language experience approach in determining writing improvement of first grade students. The research question was: Which method of teaching writing (phonics or language experience) is most effective in improving the writing skills of first grade students?

Research Design

This study used the descriptive research design because this method allows the researcher to use observations, interviews, and tests. "Its purpose is not to give value to sets of relationships between events, but simply to draw attention to the degree two events or phenomena are related" (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p.61). "One obvious advantage or strength of the descriptive method is its ease of use. It produces data that are accurate and representative. It describes "what is" (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p.71).

Population and Sample

This study has as its sample twenty first grade students in a K-6 elementary school. The sample represents one-third of the first grade students
in the school. This research sample contains five English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

Assumptions and Limitations

One of the main reasons it was decided to use the language experience approach to teaching writing is because it appears to be particularly well-suited to the needs of ESL students. A limitation is that first grade students are reluctant to write because they are only beginning to learn to read and write. Vocabulary and spelling can also be limiting factors since many students do not want to write a word unless they know they are spelling it correctly. The two methods (phonics and language experience) may spill over into each other since both are done on a daily basis.

Procedure

This study compared two styles of teaching writing by assessing which method produced more growth in writing samples compared over a five month period. The two methods compared in this study were the phonics method and the language experience approach to teaching writing. The district adopted curriculum is phonics-based instruction for the teaching of reading and writing. This researcher uses phonics instruction every morning to teach reading. The language experience approach to teaching writing occurs in the afternoon. The two methods may spill over into each other since both are done on a daily basis.

This researcher continued with the usual method of teaching writing which is the phonics method. In addition to the phonics method, a writing
workshop was set up in the classroom. There were six centers in the writing workshop. These centers were: (1) illustration, (2) painting, (3) writing, (4) computer, (5) reading, and (6) teacher conferences.

In the illustration center, the students had many different types of paper (construction, tissue, bright, regular, and colored), markers, string, glue, glue sticks, and yarn. The purpose of this center is to give students the opportunity to illustrate their stories before, during, or after they have begun the writing process.

The painting center consisted of water color and tempura paints and construction paper. This center allowed the students to illustrate their stories.

The writing center consisted of many different colors and types of paper, chalkboards, markers, pencils, pens, and very importantly, a word wall. The word wall is a large area (at least 6' by 6') where words are displayed for the students to read and use in their writing. It was made up of word lists found in the back of the book Language Experience Activities (Van Allen and Allen, 1982) which were written on sentence strips. These lists include names for games, words used frequently, and 100 high-frequency words in rank order, which were also included in spelling tests and used in writing assignments over the course of a semester. In addition to these words, approximately two or three words were added daily which came from shared experiences of the students. For example, the students did a writing activity that used words to describe feelings. After brainstorming, these words were written on the chalkboard, then later transferred to the word wall.

At the computer center, the students were free to write and illustrate stories on the computer. The computer was used daily for twenty minutes.
The reading center is an area where students are free to read books which can be used as models in their own stories. Books such as Brown Bear, Brown Bear, Over in the Meadow, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, will be included in the reading center so that students can be inspired to do good creative writing by reading quality literature.

The teacher conference center was used by the teacher to conference on a regular basis with each student. During this time, the teacher read the stories created by the students. The teacher never criticized but offered recommendations and suggestions on how he or she could make changes to the stories to make them more interesting to the readers. Once a week, the students were allowed to share their favorite writing sample with their classmates so that their audience extended beyond just the teacher.

Once the students had completed a favorite writing, they published it. The books, poems, jokes, and other writing samples that had been chosen for publication were rewritten, edited, illustrated and then bound for use in the reading center so that other students could enjoy them.

**Instrumentation**

Ten writing samples of both phonics and language experience activities were collected beginning in December, 1998. One sample of phonics and one sample of language experience writing was collected each month for five months. These samples were read and evaluated by two second grade teachers in order to ensure impartiality, fairness, and objectiveness. These teachers have a combined teaching experience of thirty-seven years. Both have taken many writing workshops and both have Masters' Degrees.
Method of Analysis

The second grade teachers were instructed to assess their perception of growth in writing skills. These evaluations will be shared with grade level teachers in both first and second grades.
CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Demographics

This study was conducted with twenty first grade students in the Paradise Valley School District in Phoenix. The population included five ESL students, four of whom were Hispanic, one Turkish, and fifteen English speaking students. There were ten boys and ten girls, ages six to eight.

Two second grade teachers assessed the writing growth of the students as determined by writing samples provided each month, from December, 1998, to April, 1999.

Language Experience Guidelines

The data for the study was collected in a writing portfolio for each student. The students had access to their portfolios and added to them regularly. They also chose to eliminate several papers that they did not want to publish. The writing samples were collected beginning in December and continued until April.

The first writing sample, a language experience process, was collected in the month of December. About two weeks were spent reading, discussing, and comparing different versions of the story The Gingerbread Man. Several "Gingerbread" activities were completed by the students. For one of the
activities, gingerbread man cookies were given to the students. They were asked to take a bite of the cookie. The results were then graphed (who bit a head, a leg, or an arm first?). A group story was completed by the students and written on the chalkboard by the teacher. The group story specifically focused on what happened in the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story. The students copied the story into their notebooks, then they were encouraged to write different versions of the group story. These stories were proofread by students and teacher, then rewritten on a gingerbread paper and displayed on the bulletin board.

Another language experience activity came about because of a suggestion made by a teacher at Ottawa University named Lillian Hentel. During one of her classes, she related her experience at writing with younger students and how she had created a fictitious character from outer space named “Mr. MEPS” to whom the students wrote letters. Inspired by her success, this researcher created a character named Doofus the Dragon. The students wrote letters to Doofus asking many questions. Doofus then returned their letters answering each question and asking them questions about their families and what they liked to do. This activity began in December, 1998, and will continue until May 18, 1999.

On March 22, 1999, a science unit about plants was studied. The books *Tree of Life* and *Welcome to the Green House* were read, videos watched, and discussions held about the parts of a plant, what it needs to grow and how it grows. This unit continued for two weeks. A tear-art picture of a flower made of construction paper was completed by the students. On April 12, 1999, the students planted seeds, watered them, and watched them grow. They were
then asked to write a story about Spring and the changes that happen during this season.

The majority of the language experience writing came from the writing workshop that was set up in the room [for description, see Chapter 3, Methodology]. The book, Language Experience Activities (Van Allen & Allen, 1982), was particularly helpful in setting up the workshop. Each writing period, which lasted for about 60 minutes, was begun with a story or poem, and followed by discussion. Ideas for writing were brainstormed by the students and written on the chalkboard by the teacher. When students felt that they were comfortable and had a topic about which to write (generated by the reading and discussion), a six center rotation began. Six centers were used because it allowed for groups of students small enough to be able to conference with each student at least every other day. The students were divided into five groups so that there were only four students per group. Four students went to approximately three centers each day for a period of about twenty minutes, except the computer center, where only one student was allowed at a time.

**Phonics General Procedures**

The Open Court curriculum guide (Adams, et al., 1995) was used for the phonics dictations. The Open Court phonics system is based upon a set of wall sound cards which contain the sounds, letters, and letter combinations that appear in reading and writing. During the reading lesson these sound cards are reviewed on a daily basis. Approximately every other day, a dictation lesson accompanied the reading lesson. Early dictation began by the saying of a word, then the breaking down of the word into individual sounds so that the
students could write the words. Dictation continued into the writing of sentences. This procedure began very early in the year and will continue until the end of the year.

The students have been receiving the phonics method of writing instruction since the beginning of the year, and because they have been taught to try to sound out words in order to spell them, this method of teaching writing has overlapped into the language experience activity writing. Likewise, the language experience writing has overlapped into the phonics writing.

Findings and Results

The second grade teachers looked for improvement in phonics and in the language experience activities, that demonstrated improvement in content and quality of content in writing, as determined by the ability to write more fluently, to be better able to write in proper sequence, to include more complex concepts, and to use more adjectives and adverbs which make writing more interesting. The evaluators defined growth as beginning with one or two words in December and progressing to being able to write a paragraph in April.

The findings were that five students showed some growth in phonics while remaining about the same in the language experience activities. Their language experience activity writings were at a higher level from the beginning. Four students showed limited growth because all of their work (phonics and language experience) were at a higher level from the beginning, but they didn’t seem to progress. Seven students showed growth in both phonics and language experience writing. Only four students showed a great deal of growth in both areas.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary
The purpose of this study was to compare the phonics approach to the language experience approach in determining writing improvement of first grade students.

The research on major principles and practices of current approaches to teaching writing notes that the use of the language experience approach in teaching writing can be an effective method in teaching writing since the student's own interests and experiences are used. This type of writing experience is an interactive process in which listening, reading, speaking, and writing are taught concurrently rather than in sequence. The students are allowed to select books and stories and write about topics that are of genuine interest to them.

The phonics method of teaching writing is also an effective method of teaching writing since it helps students understand the purposes of writing and reinforces the connection between sounds and spelling. The focus of the phonics method of teaching writing is that students be able to make a connection between the sounds and the spellings of words so that eventually they are able to use this knowledge to write meaningfully.

A writing workshop was set up in the classroom. The workshop contained six centers where students could read, write, and illustrate
stories as well as conference with the teacher. The writing centers were used on a daily basis on a rotating schedule. Each student had the opportunity to go to three of the six centers each day. Alternating days, students went to the other three centers, which gave the teacher the opportunity to conference with each student every other day.

**Conclusions**

The second grade teachers found that four of the twenty students showed limited growth in both areas (phonics and language experience). Sixteen of the students showed growth in either phonics or language experience, and of those sixteen students, eleven showed growth in both areas.

All students demonstrated writing improvement using phonics and language experience methods. The overall improvement was assessed after five months, but since the two methods were used interchangeably, it was not possible to compare the quantity of growth solely from one method.

The combination of phonics and language experience approaches in teaching writing seemed to benefit most, if not all, of the students. The phonics helped to improve the students’ confidence in writing because they were very familiar with the sounds and spellings in the written word. The use of the language experience approach in teaching writing benefitted the students because it allowed them to write about topics which were of interest and importance to them. They very much enjoyed being able to illustrate their writing, and often got ideas for future writing by doing an illustration before doing the writing.

The addition of writing centers to the classroom improved student
attitudes about writing. The quality and content of writing also improved with the use of the language experience approach because students enjoyed writing when given choices about topics.

**Recommendations**

Continued use of the integration process using both methods is highly recommended, since both processes demonstrate strength missing from the other.

The researcher found that improvement in writing would have been easier to assess if samples of students' writing had been collected from the beginning of the year to the end of the year rather than just collecting samples from December through April.

Another method of assessing student writing growth might be to compare the writing growth of a similar group that did not use both learning processes, to determine whether integrating the two processes actually accelerates writing skill growth.
REFERENCE LIST


