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Kindergarten literacy assessment of English Only and English language learner students: An examination of the predictive validity of three phonemic awareness measures

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Abstract

The study assessed the ability of English phonemic awareness measures to predict kindergarten reading performance and determine factors that contributed to growth trajectories on those measures for English Only (EO) and English language learner (ELL) students. Using initial sound fluency (ISF), phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF), and a combined phoneme segmentation task (CPST), students' beginning of kindergarten scores were used to predict end-of-kindergarten Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) and reading (WRMT-R/NU). Regression analyses revealed that ISF and CPST early in kindergarten predicted variance in NWF and WRMT-R/NU. PSF did not predict reading performance over ISF or CPST. While gender was a significant factor in the growth curves across the measures, results revealed no significant difference for EO and ELL students.
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Keywords: Early literacy; Phonemic awareness; Reading assessment; Kindergarten; English language learners

As federal policies continue to emphasize the prevention of reading disabilities for at-risk students, educators and researchers alike have become progressively more concerned with identifying early literacy risk factors. Most children formally enter the school system in kindergarten, which makes the kindergarten year critical in determining and utilizing preventative measures. Identifying and providing intervention to kindergarteners who are

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likely to experience reading problems are critical to later success in school. Without early identification and intervention for students with reading problems, Juel (1988) and Scarborough (1995) have shown that poor readers in first grade are likely to remain poor readers in fourth grade and beyond. For students who are behind in reading and literacy development, the opportunities to "catch-up" to peers diminish over time (Good, Simmons, & Smith, 1998). As Mathes and Torgesen (1998) observed, in order to reduce reading failure, we need to allocate resources for early identification and prevention.

Early literacy measures

The National Reading First Assessment Committee (Kame'enui, 2002) concluded that comprehensive school-wide early literacy assessment systems should be used to screen, monitor progress, diagnose, and measure student outcomes. Screening assessments can be utilized to determine which children are at risk for reading difficulties so that intervention can be provided.

Recent scientific advances in early literacy assessment have provided schools with access to information about students' foundational beginning reading skills. Over the past decade, researchers have made significant progress in improving educators' ability to accurately and reliably assess students' early literacy skills (Good & Kaminski, 2003; Torgesen, 2002). A large body of research suggests that individual differences in phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge in the early grades are strong predictors of success in acquiring beginning reading skills (Good, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2001; O'Connor & Jenkins, 1999; Torgesen et al., 1999; Vanderwood, Linklater, & Healy, 2008). In kindergarten, phonemic awareness has gained prominence because of its critical role in reading development. Phonemic awareness (PA) is the awareness of sounds in spoken words and the ability to manipulate the sounds in spoken words (Wagner, Torgesen, Laughon, Simmons, & Rashotte, 1993), which is essential to developing later reading skills (O'Connor, Jenkins, & Slocum, 1995; Torgesen, Morgan, & Davis, 1992). Although assessing alphabetic knowledge is simpler because the number of items to asses is relatively small and each item is distinct from the others, measuring PA early in kindergarten is more challenging because some letters have multiple sounds and, therefore, the wide variety of possible letter combinations complicates the task.

Most studies evaluating student performance on phoneme segmentation tasks do not measure this skill until well into kindergarten or beginning of first grade (Felton & Pepper, 1995; Good et al., 2001; Juel, 1988; Kaminski & Good, 1996; Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2006). Creating a measure that can maintain predictive strength throughout kindergarten for a skill that changes rapidly over the year is difficult: a single outcome measure that can be used to monitor progress over the course of a school year must simultaneously avoid floor effects for a task that is hard at the beginning of the year while avoiding ceiling effects for a task that is relatively easy for many kindergartners at the end of the year. Developers of the Dynamic Indicators of Beginning Early Literacy (DIBELS. Good & Kaminski, 2003) addressed the problem by creating a measure of first-sound choices (Initial Sound fluency: ISF) for early assessments and a production task requiring sequential segmentation (Phoneme Segmentation Fluency: PSF) for assessments toward the end of kindergarten. The problem with this solution is that it creates a measurement shift that makes it difficult to gauge progress continuously. A single measure that would not need to be changed during

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