

IMPROVING PHONEMIC AWARENESS USING WHOLE-PART-WHOLE  
READING INSTRUCTION AND THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH  
WITH SEMI-LITERATE AND NON-LITERATE KAREN-SPEAKING ADULTS

by

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*To my friends and family  
who always believed in my ability to complete this project  
and who supported me every step of the way*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Chapter One: Introduction.....                          | 1  |
| Research on Adult Reading Instruction.....              | 3  |
| Whole-Part-Whole Instruction.....                       | 4  |
| Language Experience Approach.....                       | 5  |
| Research Question.....                                  | 5  |
| Capstone Overview.....                                  | 5  |
| Chapter Two: Literature Review.....                     | 7  |
| Definitions.....  | 7  |
| Phonemic Awareness and Decoding Instruction.....        | 8  |
| Critical Period for Reading.....                        | 10 |
| Word-Initial Consonants.....                            | 11 |
| Karen Writing System.....                               | 13 |
| Whole-Part-Whole Instruction.....                       | 14 |
| Language Experience Approach.....                       | 15 |
| Studies examining the Language Experience Approach..... | 17 |
| Summary.....  | 20 |
| Chapter Three: Methodology.....                         | 23 |
| Research Paradigm.....                                  | 23 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Participants.....   | 25 |
| Location and Setting.....                                 | 26 |
| Roles.....  | 27 |
| Informed Consent and Confidentiality.....                 | 28 |
| Data Collection Techniques.....                           | 28 |
| Demographic information interview.....                    | 28 |
| Pre-test of phonemic awareness.....                       | 29 |
| Teaching journal.....                                     | 31 |
| Interview of students’ response to instruction.....       | 32 |
| Post-test of phonemic awareness.....                      | 32 |
| Instructional Procedures.....                             | 32 |
| Data Analysis.....  | 35 |
| Summary.....  | 35 |
| Chapter Four: Discussion.....                             | 36 |
| Methodology Review.....                                   | 36 |
| Results.....  | 39 |
| Increase in ability to detect word-initial phonemes ..... | 39 |
| LEA, phonemic awareness activities, and engagement.....   | 42 |
| Connection to L1 literacy.....                            | 45 |
| Participation and results.....                            | 46 |
| Results of sections #1 and #2.....                        | 47 |
| Revisiting the Literature Review.....                     | 49 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Chapter Five: Conclusion.....   | 53 |
| Study Summary.....  | 53 |
| Reflections.....  | 55 |
| Implications for Study.....   | 56 |
| Limitations.....  | 58 |
| Suggestions for Further Research.....                                     | 59 |
| How Findings May Be Used or Disseminated.....                             | 59 |
| Conclusion.....   | 59 |
| Appendix A: Demographic Information Interview Questions.....              | 61 |
| Appendix B: Interview of Students’ Response to Instruction Questions..... | 63 |
| Appendix C: Phonemic Awareness Pre-test.....                              | 65 |
| Appendix D: Phonemic Awareness Post-test.....                             | 68 |
| References.....   | 71 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|           |                           |    |
|-----------|---------------------------|----|
| Table 3.1 | Student Demographics..... | 26 |
|-----------|---------------------------|----|

## LIST OF FIGURES

|            |   |    |
|------------|---|----|
| Figure 4.1 | Pre- and Post Test Results from Section #3..... | 40 |
| Figure 4.2 | Pre- and Post-Test Results from Section #4..... | 41 |
| Figure 4.3 | Pre- and Post-Test Results from Section #1..... | 47 |
| Figure 4.4 | Pre- and Post-Test Results from Section #2..... | 49 |

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My interest in teaching adult learners who are not literate in their first language started when I was a volunteer tutor with an ESL program in a southern suburb of the metro area. The teacher usually asked me to work with an older Somali woman who was not literate in her native language and who was learning to read for the first time in English. Her progress seemed very slow when compared to the other students in the class who were literate in their first language. She seemed to understand more when I worked with her individually, but in the class with the other beginning students it looked as though she had a hard time understanding what was going on. We completed worksheets and practiced the alphabet, but it felt as though something was missing. She was able to name the letters, but wasn't able to "sound out" new words. She could say the letter names, but not the letter sounds that were attached to the letters. The other students came to the beginning class with background knowledge that put them at an advantage right away when it came to learning English. They understood that letters corresponded to sounds. It felt as though we should have been starting from the very beginning with phonemic awareness instruction. We were using the material that the other students were using, and I would work with her individually, but looking back on it, I don't think that we were going back far enough to teach the fundamentals of reading such as phonemic awareness skills and decoding.

After a few months of working with her, I started to wonder if there were more effective teaching tools that I could use. Since Somali has a strong oral storytelling tradition and Somali was strictly an oral language up until 1972, I thought that using her language background and culture could bring about an improvement of her language skills in English. I wondered what techniques I could use to make it easier for her to grasp the letter-sound connection such as having her tell me a story in English that I would write it down and using her own story to practice separating a word into its phonemes.

For adults who are not literate in their first language, learning to read and write in a second language can be especially challenging. Adults who know how to read and write in their first language can transfer literacy skills and concepts that they are familiar with in their first language when learning to read and write in another language. For example, adults who are able to read an alphabetic language such as Spanish or German can transfer this concept of sound-letter correspondence to learning to read and write in English. However, many of the refugees that are coming to the U.S. have had limited formal schooling and may not have the background knowledge in reading and writing that they could use when learning to read and write in English. Knowledge that literate people assume is understood like the concept of “word” or letter-sound correspondence needs to be explicitly taught to those who are non-literate. These students who have no literacy in their native language (L1) have different needs than those who are literate in their L1. Their beginning goals will be different. For example, those who have no formal schooling will have goals that include learning to hold a pencil, write left to right,

raise one's hand to get permission to speak, and work with other students in groups and pairs (Vinogradov, 2001). Educators may assume that beginning ESL adult students come to class with these skills, but for those adults who have little or no formal schooling, these skills need to be explicitly taught along with literacy skills.

### Research on Adult Reading Instruction

This current study explores the issues associated with adults who are learning to read and write for the first time in a language other than their first language or who have limited formal schooling in their native language and are learning to read and write in English. Teachers who work with adult ESL learners may be interested in seeing how whole-part-whole instruction in the context of the language experience approach benefits those adults who are not literate or semi-literate in their native language and are learning to read and write in English. These learners will also benefit from additional research on reading instruction, since the process of learning to read as an adult has not been as thoroughly studied as K-12 reading instruction (Kruidenier, 2002; McShane, 2005).

Much of the research on reading instruction has focused on K-12 education with little emphasis on reading instruction for native English speaking adults and even less research focusing on reading instruction for non-native English speaking adults (Kruidenier, 2002; McShane, 2005). Research with adults has tended to focus on adults who are literate in their first language and overlook adults who are non-literate in their first language (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Van de Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2006). The ABE Reading Research Working Group (RRWG) has completed a report that identifies gaps in the research in reading instruction for both native and non-native

English speaking adults (Kruidenier, 2002). The RRWG studied the research that has been done in the K-12 field and the research that has been done with adults. The RRWG was unable to find any research relating to the alphabetic abilities of non-native English speaking adults. In the past few years, more research on LESLLA (Low-Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition) learners has been appearing (Geudens & Hogeschool, 2006; Kurvers, Vallen, & Van Hout, 2006; Van de Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2006). This research relates to the current study because the current study looks at the alphabetic abilities of non-native English speakers to determine if explicit teaching of alphabetic will improve their ability to identify word-initial consonants.

#### Whole-Part-Whole Instruction

The current study will be using the concept of whole-part-whole instruction with a class of adult English language learners who are from the Karen ethnic group from Burma. In whole-part-whole instruction, a story is read and select words are taken from the context and then broken down into smaller parts like onset and rime (Moustafa, n.d.). For example, the word “sat” starts with the onset /s/, and is followed by the rime /at/.

Whole-part-whole instruction is important because explicit reading instruction that focuses on individual learners’ needs often is not provided; teachers do not have the information that they need about learners’ needs to be able to individualize the lessons (McShane, 2005). In addition, teachers may assume that these adult students are able to read and write in their native language (Vinogradov, 2001), and, therefore, do not need to be taught phonemic awareness and decoding skills explicitly in English. Phonemic

awareness instruction is used to teach how whole words are made up of smaller parts called phonemes and awareness of phonemes needs to be explicitly taught (McShane, 2005). Using whole-part-whole instruction is important because it introduces words in a “whole” context and then breaks them into “parts.”

### Language Experience Approach

The language experience approach (LEA) is a way to generate a familiar context and familiar words because the teacher uses stories that the student creates. LEA is a concept that has been shown to work well with adults learning to read in their L1 because it uses the strengths and interests of adults in order to capture their interests and creates an awareness of how reading and writing is connected to their lives and how it can be of use to them (Farris, 1992). LEA also has the advantage of using language that is familiar to the student because it is student-generated.

### Research Question

This study will focus on improving the English literacy skills of Karen-speaking adults who are non-literate or semi-literate in their first language. The study will examine the question: Does explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction using whole-part-whole instruction in the context of the language experience approach help these learners make the connection between letters and sounds in English to improve their ability to detect word-initial phonemes?

### Capstone Overview

Chapter One has introduced the concept of whole-part-whole instruction in the context of LEA. LEA uses words and concepts that are familiar to the students because

the language is student-generated. Student-generated language will be used in the whole-part-whole context in order to concentrate on teaching phonemic awareness skills focusing on the sound-letter correspondence for word-initial consonants. Chapter Two will review the research that has been done on explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction, whole-part-whole instruction and using LEA with adults. Chapter Three will explain the methods that will be used to see how the whole-part-whole instruction in the context of LEA benefits adult Karen-speaking participants who are learning to make the sound-letter connection in English. The data will be analyzed in Chapter Four. The final chapter will summarize the research and provide recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this study is to examine whether explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction using whole-part-whole instruction in the context of student generated language using LEA helps adult Karen-speaking participants who are not literate or semi-literate in their first language learn to make the connection between letters and sounds in English to improve their ability to detect word-initial phonemes. In order to address the questions in the current study, this chapter will examine prior research done with L1 literate and L1 non-literate learners specifically in the areas of phonemic awareness, the Karen writing system, whole-part-whole instruction, and LEA.

### Definitions

Before reviewing the literature, there are a number of terms defined below that will be used throughout this capstone. McShane (2005) provides the definitions for the first three terms.

- *Phonemic Awareness*: The ability to hear individual sounds within words.
- *Decoding*: The use of knowledge of letter-sound correspondence to “sound out” words.
- *Alphabetics*: The combination of phonemic awareness and decoding.

There are also a number of different terms used to define literacy levels for adults. Huntley (1992) defines four categories of literacy:

- *Pre-literate* learners have not been exposed to literacy in their native language either because a written form does not exist or it is rarely used.
- *Non-literate* learners come from societies that do have a written form of the language but for some reason have not become literate in their native language.
- *Semi-literate* learners have limited reading and writing ability in their native language.
- *Non-roman alphabetic* learners have literacy in a written form of language that does not use the roman alphabet.

The participants in this study are non-literate and semi-literate in their native language. The Karen language has a written form, but these adults have not learned how to read and write or have only limited reading and writing ability in Karen.

#### Phonemic Awareness and Decoding Instruction

This section will cover the reasons for teaching phonemic awareness and decoding skills explicitly to adults who are learning to read, studies that examine the critical period in learning phonemic awareness skills, and the reasons to focus on word-initial consonants for adults who are beginning readers.

For beginning adult readers, it is important to teach phonemic awareness and decoding explicitly because adults who are learning to read for the first time rely more on trying to memorize the whole word rather than using decoding skills to sound it out (Greenberg, Ehri & Perin, 2002; Kruidenier, 2002). This beginning stage for adults is similar to the theory that states that the way that children learn to read is in three stages (Van de Craats, Kurvers & Young-Scholten, 2006). The first stage is the logographic

stage where children try to memorize whole words. The second stage is the alphabetic stage where children try to sound out the words using what they know of sound-letter correspondence. The third stage is the orthographic stage where they apply the sound-letter correspondence rules so quickly that they don't need to think about doing it and decoding becomes automatic. Non-literate adults who are learning to read for the first time in English start from stage one since they attempt to memorize whole words, and they will need explicit phonemic awareness training and decoding instruction in order to advance to the alphabets stage (Kruidenier, 2002; McShane, 2005).

The following study shows how adults who are learning to read rely more on memorization than decoding skills. In order to see if children and adults would make similar errors in reading and spelling, Greenberg, Ehri and Perin (2002) tested 72 adults in literacy classes and 72 children. All participants tested at the third to fifth grade reading level and spoke English as their native language. The participants were tested in four areas: reading sight words, decoding non-words, spelling words, and determining if pairs of words rhyme based on their spellings. In the sight word reading the children used decoding skills more often than the adults when reading unknown words. The adults were more likely to guess when they didn't know the word. In the task of decoding nonwords, adults read the nonwords as real words more often than the children. In the spelling task, children were more likely to spell words phonetically than the adults. Adults misspelled words as other words more often than the children. For example, the word "fortunate" was spelled as "force." In the rhyming task, adults were less able to identify rhyming words than children. Both groups were equal in determining words that

were not spelled similarly and did not rhyme (girl/jump). Adults scored lower than children in determining words that were spelled differently and rhymed (fuel/mule) and adults scored lower in words that are spelled similarly and rhymed (make/take). This study shows that adults who are learning to read need explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction to learn to decode unknown words.

### Critical Period for Reading

By examining the results of studies of children and adults who were learning to read in their native language, Young-Scholten and Strom (2006) found that adults who are learning to read are able to learn phonemic awareness skills. Therefore, the researchers conclude that adults of any age can learn how to read and there is no critical period for reading. Similarly, Kruidenier (2002) found that adults who learn to read later in life have similar phonemic awareness skills as adults who learned to read as children. Young-Scholten and Strom (2006) studied a group of ten Somali speaking adults and seven Vietnamese speaking adults. Of this group, nine had some former schooling and eight had no previous schooling in their home country. The participants who scored higher on the reading test also scored higher on the phonemic awareness tests. Phonemic awareness comes with learning to read, and it has been shown that adults who are learning to read can develop phonemic awareness skills. This points to the conclusion that there is no critical period for reading, and adults of any age can develop literacy skills (Kruidenier, 2002; Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006).

Another study shows that phonemic awareness skills come as a result of learning to read and do not relate to age. A study conducted by Morais, Cary, Alegria and

Bertelson (1979), determined that manipulation of phonemes needs to be explicitly taught and phonemic awareness does not automatically happen with increased cognitive ability related to age. The researchers tested a group of non-literate adults and adults literate in their L1 (Portuguese) who had been taught to read after age fifteen. The researchers found that the non-literate adults had greater difficulty in adding and deleting phonemes at the beginning of words than the adults who had been taught to read. The non-literate adults also had more difficulty adding or deleting one phoneme from one non-word to make another non-word than the literate adults. In a similar study, “non-readers” were found to have the most difficulty with initial phoneme deletion and with phonological fluency compared to “readers” (Loureiro et al., 2004). These studies show that in order to teach adults who are not literate in any other language there will need to be explicit instruction in how to manipulate phonemes.

#### Word-Initial Consonants

This study will focus on teaching word-initial consonants because several studies have found that initial phoneme awareness is a strong predictor of future reading skills for children learning to read in their L1. Hulme (2002) tested seventy-two native English-speaking children who were at the beginning stages of reading to determine if phoneme awareness or onset-rime awareness was the better predictor of future reading skills. The children were tested twice over a fourteen month period on reading ability, vocabulary and phonological awareness. The phonological awareness test assessed ability to identify initial phonemes, final phonemes, and onset and rime. Hulme found that children who were able to identify the initial phonemes of onset clusters were the better

readers.

A study by Treiman (as cited in Adams, 1990) showed that children have an easier time detecting the initial sound of a word if it stands alone at the beginning of a rime rather than being part of a consonant cluster. In the assessment, Treiman used a puppet and asked the children to tell her when the puppet heard its “favorite” sound. In one session, the favorite sound was /s/ and in the other session the favorite sound was /f/. The children were able to detect the favorite sound in 87 percent of the cases when the initial consonant stood alone before the rime as in /sap/. When the favorite sound was part of an initial consonant cluster as in /ski/, the children were able to detect the favorite sound only 72 percent of the time. This assessment shows that children have a more difficult time hearing the individual phonemes of an onset when they are part of a consonant cluster.

This study will concentrate on the word-initial sound because the initial consonant sound is easier to separate from the rime than separating a word into its individual phonemes (Adams, 1990). The participants will first be introduced to the concept of sound-letter correspondence with the phoneme that has been shown to be the easiest for children to detect – the initial consonant sound. The end sound is the second easiest to detect with the middle vowel sound being the most difficult for children to detect. By concentrating on the initial consonant sound, it will create a base of sound-letter correspondence that can be expanded to word-final and medial phonemes once participants are comfortable with identifying the initial sound.

## Karen Writing System

Non-literate adults need to be taught to make the connection between sounds and letters; whereas adults who are literate in another language may be able to transfer what they know of sound-letter correspondence to the new language if the writing systems are similar (Shank, 1986). In this study, the participants are members of the Karen ethnic group from Burma who speak the Karen language and have come to the United States from refugee camps in Thailand. Literacy levels vary among the Karen people depending on their access to educational opportunities. The participants in this study are self-reported non-literate and semi-literate because of their differing access to education. Since 1949 there has been a conflict between the ethnic Burmese and the Karen people which has resulted in over 135,000 Karen people re-locating to refugee camps in Thailand. Educational opportunities vary at the camps where there is some schooling available for children (Gustafson, Echelberger & Ouellette, 2009).

There was no written form of Karen until the 1800s when missionaries used the Burmese writing system to write Karen (Gustafson, Echelberger, & Ouellette, 2009). In the Karen written language, the sounds and letters correspond, but the letters are not roman characters. Therefore, the letter-sound knowledge is not as easily transferred since the writing systems differ (Shank, 1986). The Karen writing system consists of consonants and vowel markers (Drum Publications Group, 2009). Karen is a tonal language meaning that words are differentiated by tones so that a word with the same phonemes can have different meanings depending on the tones that are used (Karen Language Place, 2009). For example, the sound combination /ma/ can have six different

meanings depending on the tone (Gustafson et al., 2009). There are six tones in Karen and the tone markers follow the consonant and vowel marker combination (Drum Publications Group, 2009). Since the Karen writing system differs from the English writing system, letter-sound correspondence in English will need to be explicitly taught.

#### Whole-Part-Whole Instruction

Whole-part-whole instruction is a method which is used to teach words in context, break them down into their smaller parts like phonemes, and then read the words again in context (Trupke, 2007). This section will examine two studies which used whole-part-whole instruction. Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos (2007) studied how explicit decoding instruction using the whole-part-whole method benefits L1-literate and L1-non-literate adult English language learners. Over the course of a ten-week period, the researchers devoted 1 ½ to 2 hours per week to direct reading instruction, which involved using whole language methods and 1 ½ to 2 hours to decoding and phonemic awareness activities, which is the “part” of the whole-part-whole instruction. Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos found that eight out of nine of the participants’ scores increased in phonemic awareness. One scored the same on the pre- and post-test after using the whole-part-whole method. The participants with the biggest overall gains in phonemic awareness, word list decoding and story text decoding were three L1-non-literate participants. This study shows that both L1 literate and L1 non-literate participants benefit from explicit phonemic awareness instruction.

Another study that shows the benefit of explicit phonemic awareness instruction as part of the whole-part-whole method was conducted by Evans (2008) with a group of

five adult participants in a high-beginning level ESL classroom. The participants' literacy level in their L1 varied. One student was L1 non-literate, two students were literate in a roman alphabetic language and two students were literate in a non-roman alphabetic language. Evans conducted a seven-week study about the effects of teaching onset and rime in a whole-parts-whole context. Two new word families were introduced each week in a story. During the study the researcher used the term "word families" in order to describe the concept of onset and rime. For example, the word "rake" is in the word family "-ake." "R" is the onset and "-ake" is the rime. Also included in the word family "-ake" are "take," "make," and "fake." The post-test results showed that all five of the participants improved in their ability to decode words. The researcher found that the most improvement for the majority of the participants was in the part that focused on rime. The researcher stated that the introduction of the word families was made significant because they were introduced in the context of a story that the participants read and analyzed for meaning before concentrating on the onset and rime.

#### Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a method of teaching reading in which the student tells a story in his or her own words, and the teacher writes it down word for word. This story is then used as a reading passage for the student. Since this is the student's own story, it is of interest to the student and contains vocabulary that is familiar to the student. Adult students who do not read in their native language bring life experience that teachers can use when teaching these learners to read and write (Farris, 1992). Adult non-literate and semi-literate students may have no schooling or limited

formal schooling, but they have a knowledge of the world and life experiences that younger children who are first learning to read do not have. These life experiences can be captured and used in LEA.

Adult non-literate native English speaking students have been found to respond positively to learning from text that has personal meaning for them (Farris, 1992). For example, Farris writes that dictating a story told in the student's own words can be an effective teaching method because it is familiar language that is of interest to the student. LEA was originally developed for kindergartners and first-graders learning to read in their L1 but has been used effectively with adults learning to read in their L1 (Farris, 1992).

By using LEA, the students are able to tell their own stories about their life experiences, and because it is familiar language, that language can be used to practice reading and writing in English. Storytelling has a number of significant benefits on oral language and literacy skills (Gere, Kozlovich & Kelin, 2002; Malo & Bullard, 2000; McCaleb, 2003; Roney, 1996). Much of the research has centered around storytelling and the benefits for children, but there are benefits for adults learning another language as well. Adults who are learning another language may be "storied in their first language but not their second" (Carroll, 1999, p.3). Adults that come from oral language cultures in which storytelling is a strength can build upon what they know of storytelling. Some things that children learn when practicing storytelling such as learning the concept of a story with a beginning, middle and end and following many strands of the plot (Malo & Bullard, 2000), are concepts that adults may have internalized with oral storytelling in

their first language. Adults can use these strengths to their advantage. Some of the additional benefits of storytelling are an expanded vocabulary, learning the rhythms of the language, and increasing listening skills (Malo & Bullard, 2000).

### Studies examining the Language Experience Approach

This section will examine five studies using LEA with adults. The first two studies look at adults learning to read in their L1. The last three studies look at adults who are learning to read in their L2.

The first study examines the effectiveness of using materials that are of interest to the adult student to practice reading in the L1. Farris (1992) tells the story of Jim, who was a farmer and liked country music. The tutor discovered this and typed up some lyrics which they used to practice reading. The tutor also used Jim's specialized farming knowledge and vocabulary to practice reading farm journal articles and advertisements. Jim was able to relate to the material and so using material that he was interested in provided motivation in learning to read.

Additional studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of using student generated language as reading material with adults learning to read in their L1. Rigg (1983) conducted a case study of a forty-five year old woman named Petra who was learning to read in her native language of Spanish. The tutor showed Petra a picture and Petra told a story about the picture in Spanish. The tutor transcribed word-for-word the story that Petra told about the picture and used this text as Petra's reading material. Petra also dictated letters to her sister. The tutor wrote down the letters and made one copy for Petra to send to her sister and one copy for Petra to keep and re-read. The tutor used materials

that were familiar to Petra. The tutor brought in food labels that were similar to foods that Petra had in her kitchen. Through these food labels Petra started to understand the concept of “word” versus “letter.” LEA provided the motivation for Petra when learning to read.

Another study shows how using student generated language can motivate adults. Kenneth Mattran (1981) conducted a case study with a fifty-seven year old second language learner who was a self-reported non-literate in her native language. Mattran started with a series of spelling pattern exercises but noticed that the learner seemed to tire of them after about three lessons. He decided to add meaning to the literacy learning by using LEA. He had the learner answer three questions, and the answers were typed up for the learner to practice. He pointed out the sight words from the learner’s story and created a list. He continued this method for ten weeks until she graduated to reading for comprehension from longer texts. After four months she was reading at the fourth grade level. The learner was motivated to learn once she was encouraged to use material that she had generated using LEA.

Using LEA to generate stories can have a positive effect for groups of adults learning English. Sheila Carroll (1999) conducted a study with adult Chinese-speaking English language learners. For three months, Carroll observed the participants who were encouraged to tell stories about their personal experiences. The participants practiced idioms by telling a story from their lives using the idiom. The participants also told a story from their childhood. They practiced for a week and learned new vocabulary in the process in order to convey their story. At the end of the week, their families were invited

to listen to the presentation of the stories. Carroll noticed that the participants had increased self-confidence while speaking and improved listening comprehension. Their vocabulary also increased with the learning of new words to tell their stories. This study focused on oral skills, but increasing the participants' vocabulary is important because "the words they can speak can inevitably become the words they will read and write" (Carroll, 1999, p.6). The use of LEA with this group of participants increased their vocabularies and confidence.

In the last study in this section, Schlicher (1983) examined the use of LEA to teach reading in English to a non-native speaker who had been learning to speak English for four months. Schlicher tutored Amaba, a native of Ethiopia who was non-literate in her first language. Schlicher motivated Amaba using LEA by tailoring her lessons to emphasizing her goals of going to the grocery store without someone to translate for her, learning to read recipes in English, and reading to her son. She started with a lesson on making pancakes that would give Amaba a chance to read labels at the grocery store, read a pancake recipe and create a story about pancakes using a wordless picture book. Schlicher started by having Amaba create her story using the picture book. Amaba created the story and Schlicher copied it down word for word. In the first story that Amaba created, the sentences were very short, and she described the pictures. Four months later, Amaba created another story from the same picture book that showed how her ability to create a story improved. Her sentences were longer, and she explained why the character was doing what she was doing. Use of LEA improved Amaba's ability to tell a story in English. The study does not give examples of how Amaba's reading or

writing ability improved over time, but her speaking ability improved and using LEA gave her the motivation to achieve her goals. Thus, LEA has been shown to be effective in providing motivation for L1 non-literate adults who are learning to read in English.

### Summary

Much of the research in the area of adult literacy has focused on adults who are acquiring literacy skills in their first language (Kruidenier, 2002; McShane, 2005). For the studies that have been done with adult second language learners, the majority of the research has been done with adults that are highly literate in their first language (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004). The current study attempts to address a number of areas that have not yet been fully researched. First, the current study focuses specifically on a population of adults that other research has not covered. The participants are Karen-speaking adults from Burma who are non-literate or semi-literate in their first language and are learning to read in English. Studies about the literacy skills in English of this particular cultural group have not been conducted and research on L1 non-literate and semi-literate adults is still limited. Secondly, the study will examine two methods that have been researched separately but not in combination with each other. This study will examine the use of LEA in the context of the whole-part-whole method. In LEA studies with adults, there have not been any examples of researchers incorporating the whole-part-whole method of explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction along with LEA. In the studies that used the whole-part-whole method to teach phonemic awareness, the context or “whole” was selected by the teacher and not generated by the participants. The current study will look at the effectiveness of using LEA to generate material for the “whole” of

the whole-part-whole method with L1 non-literate and semi-literate Karen-speaking adults.

The aim of this study is to see if using the whole-part-whole instruction method focusing on word-initial consonants in a language experience approach context will improve the phonemic awareness skills of Karen-speaking adult English language learners. My study will look at the whole-part-whole method with the “whole” being words and stories that participants have generated using LEA. The teachers will write down stories that participants have created and these stories will be used as the “whole” in the whole-part-whole method. LEA brings extra motivation to participants because it brings forth their own experience and relates to their own lives in a personal way. The participants will practice phonemic awareness and decoding using the material that they have generated. At the end of six weeks of instruction the participants’ scores on the post-test will be examined and compared the pre-test results to see if the participants have increased their ability to detect word-initial phonemes.

Chapter Two has reviewed the research on phonemic awareness and decoding skills of children and adults, the whole-part-whole instruction method and LEA. The phonemic awareness section specifically covered the research on the need for explicitly teaching phonemic awareness and decoding skills to adult beginning readers. Also included in Chapter Two was an overview of the Karen writing system and the effect that it may have on the semi-literate Karen participants who are learning to read in English. The literature has shown that the whole-part-whole method is effective with adult non-native speakers in teaching phonemic awareness and decoding skills. It has also shown

that LEA is effective in motivating adult beginning readers. Integrating the motivating aspect of LEA into the whole-part-whole method may prove beneficial when teaching phonemic awareness and decoding skills to beginning adult readers who are non-literate or semi-literate in their native language.

Chapter Three will look at the methods that will be used to determine if the combination of whole-part-whole instruction and LEA benefits non-literate and semi-literate adults in increasing their ability to detect word-initial phonemes. Chapter Three will give an overview of the research paradigm, the participants, the location and setting, the data collection techniques, instructional procedures, and the methods for analyzing the data.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to explore whether explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction using whole-part-whole instruction in the context of student generated language using LEA helps adult Karen-speaking participants who are non-literate or semi-literate in their first language learn to make the connection between letters and sounds to improve their ability to detect word-initial phonemes. This chapter will cover the research paradigm, a description of the participants, the location and setting of the study, the roles of the research participants, the informed consent and confidentiality process, the data collection techniques including a description of the student interviews, the teaching journal, the pre- and post tests, instructional procedures and data analysis.

### Research Paradigm

This study used classroom-based research based on the action research model which allows instructors to examine their teaching practices and evaluate what they can change in order to improve their teaching and the learning of their students (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Phillips & Carr, 2006). In action research, the researcher is a participant, and it can be conducted on a small-scale such as in a single classroom (Burns, 1999). McNiff and Whitehead (2006) outline six steps for conducting action research. The steps include: looking at what is going on in the classroom, choosing an issue,

determining possible solutions, trying one of your solutions, collecting data, and evaluating your findings. Once these steps are completed in action research, the researcher evaluates the findings and tries other solutions. This study has utilized these steps to conduct this classroom-based research, but this research was limited to a six-week instruction period and, therefore, did not reflect the cyclical nature of action research. The researcher looked at what was going on in the classroom and saw that the non-literate and semi-literate Karen students seemed to guess how to pronounce words rather than trying to sound them out. This issue became the focus of the research. The researcher thought that possible solutions would be to focus on teaching the students how to listen for sounds at the beginning of words. Data was collected using student interviews, a pre- and post-phonemic awareness test and an online teaching journal. The data will be analyzed and discussed in the following chapters.

The data collected was both qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative data was collected using a pre-test and post-test. Using a pre-test helped to determine the participants' phonemic awareness before the intervention, and the post-test helped to determine the participants' phonemic awareness after the intervention. Using this quantitative data collection method provided a way to conduct research that was objective and gathered hard data (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The scores on the pre- and post-test of phonemic awareness were examined to see whether progress was made by the participants.

The data was also triangulated using qualitative methods such as: a demographic interview conducted on the first week of the research period, an interview of the students'

response to the instruction conducted on the last week of the research period and observations recorded in a teaching journal. The demographic interviews provided a way to gather information about participants' backgrounds and literacy levels in their L1 that would not be gathered otherwise in the classroom. Using the teaching journal to record observations during the study about the participants and instructional strategies showed how the participants progressed throughout the course of the study and examined the teaching strategies that worked the best.

### Participants

The participants were three adult English language learners who are from the Karen ethnic tribe from Burma. At the beginning of the study, seven students participated in the pre-test of phonemic awareness and the demographic interview, but only three of the seven participants completed the full six weeks of the classroom instruction and participated in the post-test of phonemic awareness and the interview of students' response to instruction. The ages of the three participants range from the early-thirties to the early-forties. One of the participants is L1 semi-literate, and two are not literate in their first language. They have been in the United States from less than a year to over two years. None of the participants have had formal schooling in their home country. (See Table 3.1)

| Table 3.1                   |     |                          |                     |                                  |
|-----------------------------|-----|--------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Student Demographics</i> |     |                          |                     |                                  |
| Student                     | Age | Literacy (self-reported) | Time in U.S.        | Formal Education in home country |
| A                           | 38  | Non-literate             | 1 year and 5 months | None                             |
| B                           | 32  | Non-literate             | 11 months           | None                             |
| C                           | 43  | Semi-literate            | 2 years 2 months    | None                             |

### Location and Setting

The participants were students at an adult learning center in a metropolitan upper Midwest city. At this site, the learners attend class for four hours a day, five days a week. The program is designed to help new immigrants learn English job skills in order to get a job. The learners are receiving public assistance in exchange for participating in this program. The learners can stay in the program for up to two years. They meet weekly with a job counselor who monitors their attendance in class. The ages of the learners range from those in their twenties to those in their sixties. Many of the learners have children.

There are four levels of English classes at this site. Each class has around twenty to twenty-five students. The classes are taught by trained ESL professionals, and volunteer teachers assist the classroom teacher with small groups once or twice a week. A majority of the students are Karen from Burma, but there are students from other countries such as Mexico and Somalia. Some students are literate in another language, while some have never attended school before. This site has a program in which the

students learn job skills at the site. There is a donation center, and the students sort clothes, toys, and household items. The students practice job skills and English skills during their time at the donation center; in addition, they are learning computer skills. Some English lessons are enhanced with educational software using computers.

The participants in this study are part of a pull-out group of five to ten students chosen by the classroom teacher and taught by volunteer teachers for one hour of their four-hour school day two to three days per week. This group of students receives extra help in literacy skills because most of the students in the pull-out group are not literate or are semi-literate in their L1.

### Roles

A number of people assisted the researcher with gathering data in this study. The roles that individuals played will be explained in this section. The classroom teacher chose the participants who needed extra help with literacy and conversation skills for the pull-out group. The researcher had been a volunteer teacher for the pull-out group for one hour every Monday morning for two years before the start of the research period. The researcher asked only the Karen-speaking students from the pull-out group to be participants in the study although the pull-out group consisted of students from other language backgrounds as well. The researcher conducted the pre-and post-tests of phonemic awareness with the help of a Karen-speaking interpreter. Two other volunteer teachers participated in this study, one who taught the pull-out group on Wednesday mornings and one who taught the pull-out group on Friday mornings. The researcher prepared the one-hour lessons for the volunteer teachers. The volunteer teachers did not

know who in the pull-out group was a participant in the study and the teachers' observations recorded in the online teaching journal included all of the students in the pull-out group.

#### Informed Consent and Confidentiality

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study through a Karen-speaking interpreter. Participation was completely voluntary with no negative consequences if a student chose not to participate or chose to opt out of the study once it had begun. The results of the pre- and post-tests of phonemic awareness and student interviews were known only by the researcher and the Karen-speaking interpreter. The two volunteer teachers who kept a record of the students' reactions to the lessons did not know who in the pull-out group was a participant in the study and recorded their observations for the entire group. The participants' names do not appear anywhere in the results. In the report on individual comments and progress, each student was referred to using an identification letter.

#### Data Collection Techniques

Three different types of data collection techniques were used in order to triangulate the data. The student interviews and teaching journal collected qualitative data, and the pre- and post-test of phonemic awareness gathered quantitative data. (See appendices A and B for the student interview questions and appendices C and D for the pre- and post-tests of phonemic awareness.)

#### Demographic information interview

The first data collection technique was the interview to collect demographic

information of the participants. An interview was conducted individually with each of the participants with the help of an interpreter who speaks the participant's L1. The demographic information interview included questions about the participant's background including age, previous schooling, length of time in the U.S., languages spoken, literacy in other language(s) and questions about reading including the participant's feelings about reading and what the participant would like to be able to read.

#### Pre-test of phonemic awareness

The pre-test of phonemic awareness gathered information about what participants knew about identifying word-initial phonemes at the beginning of the research period. The participants were tested to see whether they were able to hear a phoneme and choose a picture that started with that phoneme, if they could visually identify letters, and if participants were able to produce the initial phonemes of a single word and produce the same initial phoneme of a list of three words.

Each participant was called from the classroom individually for the pre-test of phonemic awareness and the demographic information interview. The only individuals present during the pre-test and interview were the researcher, the interpreter and the participant. For each participant the pre-test of phonemic awareness was conducted after the demographic information interview.

Parts of the pre-test were adapted from the phonemic awareness test in *The Adult Reading Toolkit – Edition 4* that was produced by the Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota.

Section #1 was an aural test of phonemic awareness. The students were shown

two pictures and asked to identify the picture that started with a certain sound. For example, the participant was shown a picture of a car and a house. The researcher said, “Point to the picture that starts with /k/. Car. House. /k/.”

Section #2 was a letter recognition test. The researcher showed the participant a card with a letter and three words. The participant was prompted to point to one of the words. For example, the first practice item shown was “**k** ring, king, sing.” While pointing to the letter “k” on the left, the researcher said, “Point to the word that starts with this letter.”

Section #3 was a test to see how well participants could produce the initial phoneme of a single word. For example, the researcher said, “Tell me the first sound in ‘kind’.” To be marked correct, the participant needed to answer, “/k/.”

Section #4 was similar to section #3, but instead of listening to one word and telling the initial sound, the researcher read a list of three words and asked the participant to say the initial sound of all three words. For example, the researcher said, “Tell me the same first sound in ‘cut,’ ‘can,’ ‘cat.’” To be marked correct the participant needed to answer, “/k/.”

Participants were tested using word-initial phonemes that are found in the Karen language and in English: /s/, /t/, /m/, /n/, /l/, /b/, /d/, and /p/. The participants were not tested on phonemes that are not found in the Karen language such as /f/, /v/, and /z/ (Drum Publications Group, 2009). The nine target phonemes were chosen because they are familiar to Karen speakers. For this reason, /f/, /v/, and /z/ have not been included as target sounds.

Since English can have letters with more than one pronunciation, the target list of sounds was chosen to be initial consonant sounds where the letters and corresponding sounds match fairly regularly. For example, as an initial sound, “b” is generally pronounced /b/. For the reason of having a one-to-one correspondence between the letter name and letter sound, “g” was not chosen because it can be pronounced differently as in “girl” and “giraffe.”

### Teaching journal

The teaching journal for this study was kept electronically using an online blog. The blog was kept private so only the researcher and two volunteer teachers were able to read and access the material recorded on the blog. The teaching journal allowed the researcher and volunteer teachers to record their observations of the lessons and suggestions for improvement. The one-hour lessons were taught on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The researcher taught on Mondays, one of the volunteer teachers taught on Wednesdays, and another volunteer teacher taught on Fridays. For each lesson, the teacher recorded the student attendance, a lesson overview, the students’ initial reaction to the lesson, what worked well, and any additional comments or suggestions for improvement. These suggestions allowed for the researcher to make changes in the upcoming week’s lesson. These observations were used to determine the patterns that emerged and tailor lessons based on students’ reactions. These observations were recorded to show what instruction methods kept the students engaged and what needed to be improved. The feedback received from the researcher and volunteer teachers allowed for changes and revisions to be made by the researcher for the next week’s

lessons. This type of sharing was more easily done online because the researcher and volunteer teachers did not see each other regularly during the week.

#### Interview of students' response to instruction

The interview of student's response to instruction, conducted at the conclusion of the research period, included questions about how the participants felt about the six weeks of phonemic awareness instruction and LEA. The students were asked about the picture or story that they enjoyed the most, what they liked about this story, what they liked about using the stories to practice reading in English, what activities they liked and how they feel about reading in English.

#### Post-test of phonemic awareness

The post-test of phonemic awareness was conducted by the researcher with the assistance of a Karen-speaking interpreter after the interview of students' response to instruction. The post-test was similar to the pre-test of phonemic awareness. The test items were the same for each section, but the order in which the questions were asked differed from the pre-test of phonemic awareness.

### Instructional Procedures

In the six weeks of instruction, the participants' stories were the starting point for the phonemic awareness and decoding lessons. There were fourteen one-hour lessons during the six weeks due to holidays and teacher absences. The researcher taught on Mondays, one volunteer teacher taught on Wednesdays and one volunteer teacher taught on Fridays. The list of words that the students generated on Mondays was examined by the researcher to determine the target phoneme of the week. The target phonemes for this

study were /s/,/t/,/m/,/n/,/l/,/b, /d/, and /p/. The activities to practice the target phoneme for the week were taught by the two volunteer teachers.

Every Monday, the researcher showed the participants a new picture, and the participants dictated a story that the researcher wrote down on the board. For example, in the first lesson the teacher showed a picture of two women in a kitchen. One was cutting a tomato and one was holding a glass and smiling. The students came up with this list of words and short phrases: table, glass, knife, knife cut, water, kitchen, pot, tomato, onion, cut, woman, two woman cut tomato, stove. Since there were three words that started with /t/, the teacher chose /t/ to be the sound of the week. The researcher circled the word “tomato” and chose students to come up and circle other words that start with /t/. The researcher erased the first list of words and started another list with “tomato,” “table,” and “two.” The students were then asked to come up with other words that start with /t/. They came up with this list of words that start with /t/: teacher, tiger, Tuesday, today and tree. The students were given magazines to find pictures for these words and glue them into the “Book of Letter Sounds,” which was like a picture dictionary that the students created themselves.

On Wednesdays, the participants started by reviewing the picture and the words from Monday. The next activity was the “green card game” to identify word-initial phonemes of Monday’s words. Each student was given a green piece of paper and if the teacher said a word that started with /t/, participants held up the green card. If the teacher said a word that did not start with /t/, the participants did not hold up their card. Another activity to practice identifying word-initial phonemes was a sound-picture matching

game. The teacher said a sound from the list of target sounds and asked participants to show a picture flash card of a word that started with that sound. For example, the teacher said the sound /b/ and asked a student to show a picture of a word that started with /b/. Next, the participants compared phonemes. With the picture flash cards, the teacher created activities where participants grouped words together that started with the same sound. For example, if one group of words started with /s/, and another group of words started with /t/, the teacher made two columns on the board, and the participants categorized the words that started with /s/ and /t/. Another activity that was used to practice word-initial phoneme comparison was an activity in which the teacher gave each student two cards with two different sounds like /l/ and /d/. For example, if the teacher said the word “dog,” the students needed to show the card with the letter “d.”

On Fridays, when the participants were able to identify the word-initial sounds for the target sounds, they practiced with games such as picture bingo in which the participants needed to mark the picture of the word that started with a certain sound. The students also practiced listening for the initial phoneme in the “fly-swatter game.” For this game, picture flash cards were placed face up on the table. Two students were given fly-swatters, and one student was in charge of saying one of the initial phonemes. The two students with fly-swatters needed to hit one of the pictures that started with this word-initial phoneme.

Starting with their own stories allowed participants to practice breaking words into “parts” using familiar words, so they could concentrate on identifying the initial phonemes instead of memorizing new vocabulary.

### Data Analysis

In order to analyze the effectiveness of the instruction, results of the three data collection tools were compared. First, the results of the pre- and post-test were compared to see how the number of correct answers changed following the instruction. The results of the interview were examined to see if there was a relationship between the L1 literacy of the participants and their improvement based on the results of the pre- and post-test. Lastly, the qualitative data from the teaching journals was analyzed for the effectiveness of individual lessons and the comments from the participants about their learning to see what kinds of patterns emerged.

### Summary

Chapter Three described the classroom-based research paradigm that was used in this study. Also included in Chapter Three was a description of the participants in the research and the setting and location of the research. The methods that were used include: student interviews conducted in the participants' L1 with the assistance of an interpreter, recording observations in a teaching journal and a pre- and post-test of phonemic awareness. Chapter Four will analyze the data that has been collected and discuss the results of the pre- and post-tests, the student interviews and the results of the observations recorded in the teaching journal.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

This study was designed to focus on the English literacy skills of Karen-speaking adults who are non-literate or semi-literate in their first language. The research focused on the following question: does explicit phonemic awareness and decoding instruction using whole-part-whole instruction in the context of the language experience approach help these learners make the connection between letters and sounds in English to improve their ability to detect word-initial phonemes? Chapter Three provided an overview of the methodology of the study including the reasons for modelling the classroom-based research after action research, a description of the participants, the location and setting of the study, the informed consent and confidentiality process, the data collection techniques including a description of the student interviews, the teaching journal and the pre- and post-tests of phonemic awareness, instructional procedures and data analysis.

Chapter Four will present an analysis of the data collected and discuss the results of the learners' ability to detect word-initial phonemes in the context of the language experience approach using the whole-part-whole instruction method. The results of the student interviews will be analyzed, along with the results of the teaching journal, and the participants' answers from the pre-and post-tests of phonemic awareness.

### Methodology Review

The demographic information interview which was conducted on the first week of

the study provided a way to collect participants' demographic information, their expectations about learning to read and their personal opinions about the lessons. The demographic information interviews were conducted with the help of a Karen-speaking interpreter on the same day as the pre-test. The questions covered demographic information about the participants including age, the length of time in the U.S., languages spoken, years of schooling and literacy in another language. (See Table 3.1) The participants were also asked what they would like to be able to read in English and how they feel about reading in English.

The pre- and post-tests of phonemic awareness consisted of four sections and were conducted individually with the assistance of a Karen-speaking interpreter. Section #1 asked the participant to identify the word that started with a certain phoneme. The participant was shown two pictures and asked to point to one of the two pictures that started with a certain sound. For example, the participants were shown a picture of a pen and a table and directed to point to the picture that starts with /p/. Section #2 was a letter recognition test. The researcher asked the participants to point to one of three words that start with a letter. For example, the participants were shown the three words, "meat, neat, seat" and were asked to point to the word that started with the letter "m." Section #3 and Section #4 were tests of phonemic awareness to see if the participants could produce the word-initial phoneme. Section #3 asked the participants to produce the initial phoneme of one word. For example, the researcher said the word "bed," and the participant was asked to produce the initial phoneme, /b/. Section #4 was also a test of phonemic awareness, but in this case the participant was given a list of three words with the same

initial phoneme and asked to say the same initial phoneme of all three words. For example, the researcher read the list, “tab, ten, toss,” and the participant was asked to produce the same first sound, /t/, in all three words. The pre- and post-test utilized the same items in each test, but the order of the individual items was changed.

A teaching journal provided a way to examine the students’ reactions to the lessons. During the study, each teacher recorded his or her observations after each class throughout the six weeks of instruction. The teachers recorded what worked well and suggestions for improvement, the students’ reactions to the lesson along with an overview of the day’s lesson and the students’ attendance. The teaching journal recorded impressions of the entire class, along with the three participants involved in this study, although only the results of the three participants of this study are discussed here. When the teaching journal was analyzed, a number of patterns appeared. The teaching journal provided a record of the observations from each lesson. The students were especially interested in pictures relating to families. They were also motivated when the lessons had activities and games in which the students worked together and learned from each other in a fun, relaxed way to practice the target sounds. The teaching journal was a valuable tool and provided a record of the participants’ reactions to the lessons during the six weeks of instruction. It allowed the researcher and the volunteer teachers to capture what went well and what improvements were needed. The teachers’ observations and participants’ comments were taken into consideration when the researcher planned the next week’s lesson. The teaching journal also gave insight into some of the test results.

The post-instruction interviews provided a way to determine the participants’

feelings about reading in English and their personal opinions about the lessons. The interview of students' response to instruction was conducted on the eighth week of the study with the assistance of a Karen-speaking interpreter. The post-instruction interview, which was conducted on the same day as the post-test, covered information about the students' reactions and feelings about the lessons. This interview asked the participants about the story that they liked the most and what they liked about this story, what they liked about using the stories that they created to practice reading in English, the activities that they liked to practice letter sounds and how they feel about reading in English.

### Results

When analyzing the data, four themes emerged: the students' ability to detect word-initial phonemes increased, the use of LEA and games to practice phonemic awareness seemed to increase engagement, there appeared to be a connection between the students' literacy level in the L1 and the test results, and there seemed to be a connection between the participation in class and the participants' ability to detect word-initial phonemes. The results of sections #1 and #2 of the pre- and post-tests will also be discussed.

#### Increase in ability to detect word-initial phonemes

Overall, there was an increase in students' ability to detect word-initial phonemes as evidenced by the results of sections #3 and #4 of the pre- and post-test of phonemic awareness, the observations recorded in the teaching journal and the students' responses from the post-instruction interview, which asked about students' reactions to the instruction.

The greatest increase in correct responses from the pre-test to the post-test was seen in sections #3 and #4 which both measured production of word-initial phonemes. In section #3, participant A produced zero word-initial phonemes on the pre-test, but she produced all eight word-initial phonemes correctly on the post-test. (See Figure 4.1) Participant B also produced zero word-initial phonemes correctly on the pre-test, and produced one phoneme correctly on section #3 of the post-test. Participant C produced one word-initial phoneme correctly on the pre-test and five correctly on the post-test.

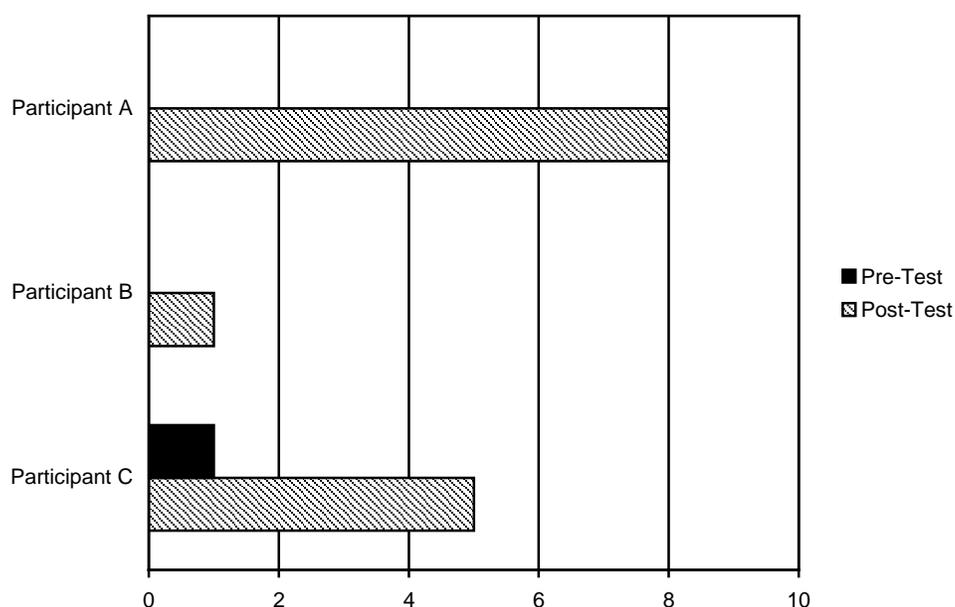


Figure 4.1: Pre- and Post Tests Results from Section #3, Reporting Initial Phoneme of One Word

The results of section #4 also showed that the participants correctly produced word-initial phonemes more often on the post-test than on the pre-test. (See Figure 4.2) In section #4, the students were asked to produce the initial phoneme of a list of three words; in the pre-test, both participants A and B produced zero correctly, and participant C produced two correctly. All participants produced more word-initial phonemes

correctly in the post-test compared to the pre-test. Participant A produced seven out of eight correctly, participant B produced three correctly and participant C produced six correctly.

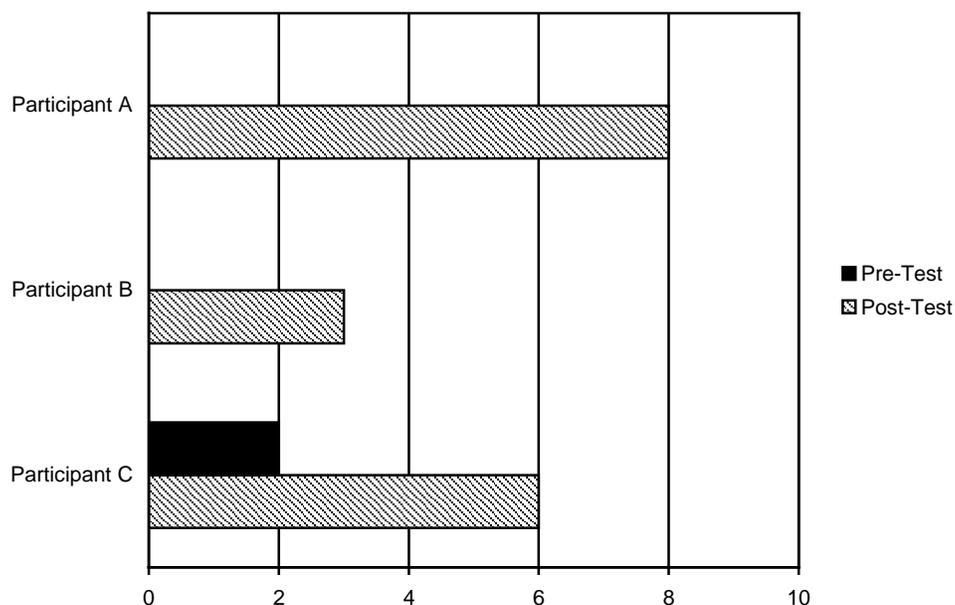


Figure 4.2: Pre- and Post-Test Results from Section #4, Reporting Same Initial Phoneme in a List of Three Words

Overall, the results of sections #3 and #4 show gains in the number of word-initial phonemes that the participants identified correctly, showing that the intervention did positively affect their ability to produce word-initial phonemes.

When the participants gave an incorrect response, often it was because the participants answered with the initial letter instead of the initial phoneme. For example, when asked for the initial sound for the word “moon,” some participants answered with the letter “m” instead the sound /m/. Responses in which the participants answered with the letter name instead of the letter sound were counted as incorrect.

The interview of students' response to instruction also provided some insight into the students' feelings of how they were able to grasp the concept of letters corresponding to sounds at the end of the study. One participant answered that she can write the letters but can't read the words, one participant answered that she can remember some sounds and some she can't, but she liked the pictures, and one participant answered that he knows how to read "one-by-one" and knows how to read sounds. Reading "one-by-one" may mean that he could say the sounds of individual letters. In the interview of students' response to instruction, the participants said that they weren't able to sound out whole words, but were able to sound out individual letters. In the teaching journal, the teachers observed that the students were able to say the sounds of individual letters after practicing them.

#### LEA, phonemic awareness activities, and engagement

Use of LEA and games and activities to practice phonemic awareness seemed to increase engagement and motivation from the participants and impacted the results overall. As evidenced by the observations recorded in the teaching journal, the students seemed even more engaged when the picture was of children and families. It may be because all of the students in the study had children and were able to relate to the pictures and the students were familiar with the vocabulary to describe members of the family such as "father," "mother," "daughter" and "son." The interview of students' response to instruction reinforced the impressions that the teachers observed during the lessons and noted in the teaching journal. In the interview of students' response to instruction all three participants chose the picture of the happy family as their favorite. As Mattran

(1981) demonstrated in his research, choosing topics that are relatable to participants is a motivating factor in the learning process.

The teacher who taught on Wednesdays observed that the students seemed engaged and enthusiastic about seeing the picture again on the second day of instruction. During the first day of every week of instruction a new picture was introduced. When the picture was shown to the students again on the second day of instruction on the first week, the students reacted enthusiastically to the picture and started to name words in the picture spontaneously. The teacher observed that the students remembered a lot of the words from the previous lesson; therefore, these were the words that would be used during the second day's lesson to practice letter sounds.

On the first day of each week, the students came up with the list of words that started with the target sound. After they created the list, the students seemed to enjoy looking for pictures in magazines to match the words. The students would find pictures that matched the target sound that weren't on the list, but they were familiar with that word and added it to the list after finding the picture. For example, one student added the word "TV" to the list of words that start with /t/ after finding a picture of a TV in the magazine. This also happened in other weeks when the students added words like "peas" and "pillow" when the target sound was /p/ and the word "microwave" when the target sound was /m/.

The students were able to come up with a list of about eight to twelve words to describe each picture, but coming up with a list of words that started with the target sound was more difficult and took more time. The teacher encouraged students to come

up with words they knew from memory, but some students looked in their journals for other words that they had written down in class. Most of the time the students didn't know how to pronounce the words from their journals, but they would spell it out and the teacher would write it on the board. This caused some confusion when the initial sound of the word was different than a word that started with the same letter, but a different initial sound. For example, when the target sound was /s/, one student found the word "shoe" in her notebook. The teacher explained that although "shoe" starts with the letter "s" it doesn't start with the /s/ sound. This also happened when the target sound was /t/ and the student found the word "Thursday" in her notebook, which does start with the letter "t" but not the sound /t/. The students seemed confused about this at first, but the teacher showed that the combination of "t" and "h" produced a different sound.

The students seemed enthusiastic about a number of games that were introduced to practice letter sounds. One game that was played on the second day of instruction every week was the "green card game." The teacher observed that the students seemed to enjoy this game each week. The rules of the game were the same each time, but it provided enough variety each week because the words and target sound changed each week. There were other team games that were not played each week, but the students seemed to enjoy. One was the "fly-swatter game" in which two students were given a fly-swatter and had to hit the pictures of the words that started with the sound that they heard. One day when the activity was a repeat of the previous day's activity of looking through magazines to create more flash cards, the teacher observed that the students were hesitant about looking at the magazines again. The games were a way to keep students

engaged while practicing the target sounds.

#### Connection to L1 literacy

Another observation that emerged was that the participants who showed the greatest gains were also non-literate in their L1. This result corresponds to the results found by Trupke-Bastidas and Poulos (2007) who found that the biggest gains in phonemic awareness were made by three L1 non-literate participants. In the current study, the student who made the greatest gains on sections #1, # 3, and #4 was participant A, who was non-literate in her L1 and had been in the United States one year and five months. Participant A, who was not literate in another language, had more correct answers on sections #3 and #4 than participant C, who had some literacy in his native language. (See Figures 4.1 and 4.2) Participant B who was also non-literate in her native language made the smallest gains, but factors other than her native language literacy level may have played a part.

In the demographic information interview, when asked what they would like to be able to read in English, two of the participants who were non-literate in Karen replied that they wanted to practice speaking more than reading. Both of these participants were non-literate in Karen. The participant who was semi-literate in Karen answered that he likes everything about English. There may have been a number of reasons why only the non-literate students said that they wanted to practice speaking more than reading. Since the non-literate participants have no previous experience with communicating ideas through reading or writing in their L1, they may not see the value of being able to read in English because they have always learned and conveyed ideas through speech. Another reason

that the non-literate students want to practice speaking more than reading may be that communication through speech is more important to their daily activities when communicating with their children's school or talking with their doctor.

The last question on the demographic information interview yielded a consistent answer from all participants regardless of literacy level. When asked how they feel about reading in English, all three participants answered, "happy." Because this answer is only one word and there was no follow up question, it is hard to say exactly what the participants meant. All three of the participants had good attendance, so this seems to indicate that attending school was important to them. All three participants did not have the opportunity to attend school in their home country, so this answer may indicate that they are happy to be given a chance to attend school and learn literacy skills that will help them succeed in the U.S.

#### Participation and results

There seems to be a relationship between participation in class and the results of sections #3 and #4 of the post-test. Participant A, who showed the greatest gains on sections #3 and #4 of the post-test, was also the student who participated the most in class and who generally took the leadership role in the class. She seemed to catch on to the instructions and concepts quickly and would explain things to the other students. Participant B showed the smallest gains on sections #3 and #4. She spoke the least in class and generally did not speak unless asked a direct question and even then sometimes answered in Karen for another Karen student to translate to English. Participant A would often translate participant B's answer into English, and participant B would repeat it

softly in English. On the first Wednesday when the class practiced the target sound /t/, participant A and participant C caught on quickly to the listening activity. Participant B had a difficult time with the activity and waited to see if the other students showed their card before putting up her card. Participant B showed the least amount of improvement from the pre-test to the post-test. Participants A and C seemed engaged throughout the lessons and showed a greater amount of improvement on the post-test.

### Results of sections #1 and #2

Although sections #3 and #4 showed that there was an increase in the ability of the students to detect word-initial phonemes, sections #1 and #2 showed different results.

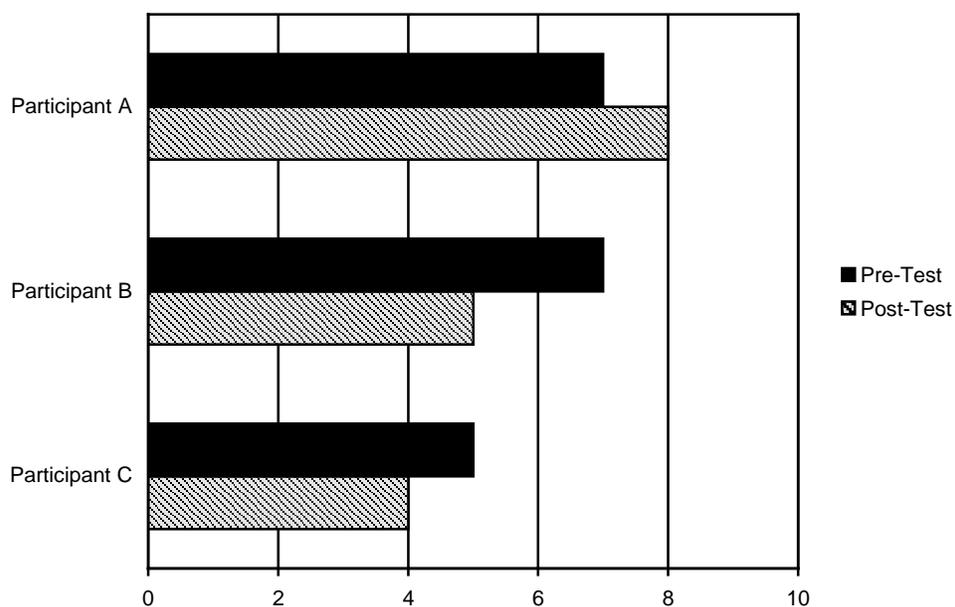


Figure 4.3: Pre- and Post Test Results from Section#1, Identifying Initial Phonemes

The results varied on the four sections of the pre- and post-test. The results from section #1, the aural test of phonemic awareness, were unexpected. (See Figure 4.3) In

this section the students were shown two pictures and asked to identify the picture that started with a certain sound. For example, the participant was shown a picture of a car and a house and the researcher said, “Point to the picture that starts with /k/.”

One participant’s score increased from the pre-test to the post-test while the two other participants’ scores decreased slightly. Although the reason cannot be pinpointed, several factors may have played a part. First, there was no time limit put on the test, so the participants were given an unlimited amount of time to answer. If they did not point to an answer within a few seconds, they were encouraged to choose one of two pictures. If there had been a time limit, the pre-test scores would have been affected, because if the participants did not answer within a certain amount of time, it would have been marked incorrect. Another factor that could have played a role in the results was the fact that they only had two choices for each question. The original test had three choices but was modified because the researcher had thought that two pictures would be sufficient. Having a choice of two pictures instead of three increased the odds of getting the correct answer by guessing.

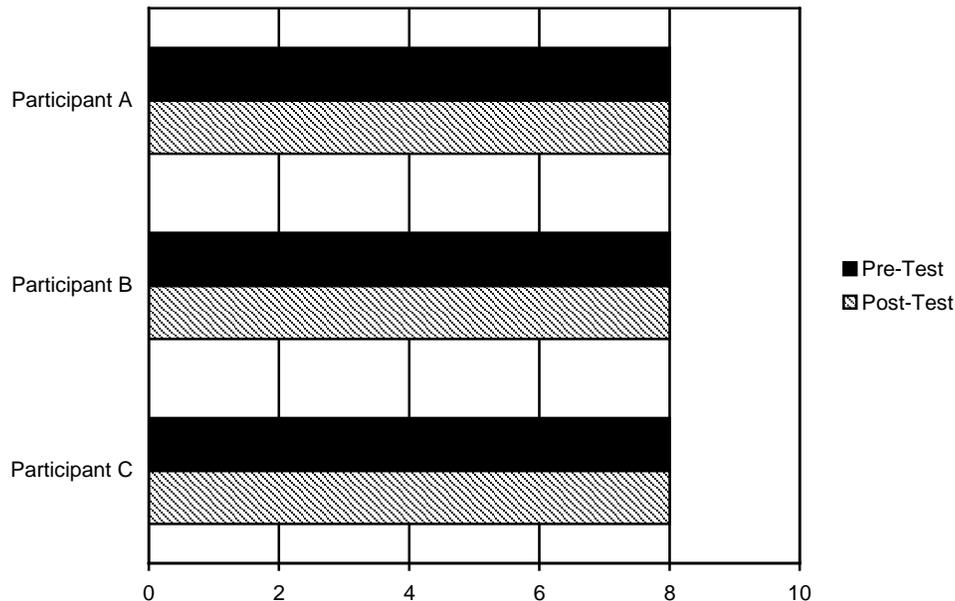


Figure 4.4: Pre- and Post-Test Results from Section #2, Letter Recognition

The scores from section #2 were identical on the pre- and post-test. (See Figure 4.4) All participants identified all eight of the letters on the pre- and post-test. This result demonstrated that letter-identification was a skill in which they were already proficient.

#### Revisiting the literature review

All three of the participants demonstrated a greater ability to recognize word-initial phonemes in the post-test compared to the pre-test, therefore, supporting the position that adults are able to learn phonemic awareness skills and are not limited by a critical period for reading (Young-Scholten & Strom, 2006).

Allowing the students to create their own “story” to describe the picture using the Language Experience Approach generated interest and motivated the students to practice what they had learned. One of the volunteer teachers observed that the students showed excitement about seeing the picture again on the second day and started describing the

picture spontaneously. The students were motivated by the familiar language that they had practiced two days before. Other studies have demonstrated a similar effect. Using LEA to increase motivation was demonstrated by Mattran (1981) who used language generated by the participant to motivate her to learn to read. After four months of using LEA, the participant was reading at a fourth-grade level. Both studies demonstrate that LEA can be used to motivate adult participants.

The group dynamic played a role because students learned new vocabulary from each other. Increasing vocabulary is an important part of increasing literacy (Carroll, 1999), and participant B said that she liked practicing new vocabulary. When the teacher showed the picture at the beginning of the week, the students were the ones to describe it using their own vocabulary. Since the vocabulary was participant-driven, the students became each others' teachers. They were not only reinforcing the vocabulary that they knew, but they also taught each other new vocabulary.

Because the study included only six weeks of instruction, the length of the stories did not increase as in the four-month case study done by Schlicher (1983). In Schlicher's study, the participant started by using very short sentences to describe the pictures, but after four months, her sentences were longer, and she explained the motives for the characters' actions. With enough practice and time the participants in the current study may have been able to show some changes in the length of their sentences, but the study was limited by the period of six weeks of instruction.

Some observations from the teaching journal agree with the research that states that the beginning stage of reading for adults is similar to children (Van de Craats,

Kurvers & Young-Scholten, 2006). The observations showed that adults in the first stage of reading try to memorize words rather than sounding them out. In the second week of instruction, the teacher pointed to the word “bedroom,” and one participant read it as “daughter.” The participant had learned the word “daughter” previously, but the word “bedroom” may have been an unknown word. Therefore, when asked to read the word “bedroom” the participant may have answered with a word that she was familiar with, “daughter,” instead of the unknown word, “bedroom.” At this point in the lessons, the students had only practiced one target sound, /t/, so the students were unable to sound out whole words and, therefore, relied on trying to memorize whole words. The teacher did notice a change as the weeks of instruction progressed. For example, on the last week of instruction one of the participants read all of the words on the board correctly, except she read the word “boy” as “baby.” The fact that they both start with the same initial sound shows that the participant may have recognized that the word started with the sound /b/.

Another observation that agreed with previous research was that the students had a more difficult time identifying the initial consonant sound when it was in a consonant cluster. The students had a more difficult time identifying the initial sound in “spaghetti” and “dress” than words that did not start with a consonant cluster. This observation is similar to the results of the study by Treiman (as cited in Adams, 1990) that showed that children have less success identifying the initial phoneme when it is part of a consonant cluster.

Chapter Four has presented the findings of this study; these findings include the results from the student interviews, observations from the teaching journal, the results

from the pre- and post-test of phonemic awareness, the general findings and how the findings relate to the studies discussed in the literature review. Chapter Five provides a conclusion of the study including a study summary, reflection on the value of this study, the implications for the study, limitations of the current study, suggestions for further research and how the findings will be used and shared with others.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Chapter Four provided a discussion of the results of the study. The results of the qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques were analyzed and the findings were discussed. This chapter concludes this study by presenting a summary of the study, reflecting on the value of this study, discussing the implications and limitations, providing suggestions for further research studies, and offering some final comments.

### Study Summary

This study was conducted with a group of Karen-speaking students in a low level ESL classroom in an upper Midwest city. The purpose of this study was to see whether explicit instruction of word-initial phonemes using the whole-part-whole method in the context of LEA could help low-level learners make the connection between letters and sounds and improve their ability to detect and produce initial phonemes of words. The study used a classroom-based research method modeled after the action research method. The data collected was both qualitative and quantitative and collected through a number of means including student interviews, a teaching journal and a pre- and post-test of phonemic awareness.

The data collection tools provided results that showed that the participants increased in their ability to detect and produce word-initial phonemes of the target sounds during the six weeks of instruction. The largest gains for all three participants were shown in the post-tests that asked the participants to produce the word-initial phoneme of

one word and a list of three words that started with the same initial phoneme. The observations from the teaching journal showed similar results. The observations recorded gave insight into the post-test results. The participants that were the most engaged during the lessons showed the greatest improvement. The teaching journal showed that the pictures that most engaged the learners were ones that involved families with small children because the learners related to these pictures. The participants were also motivated to practice using the word-initial phonemes by team games and activities. The interview of students' response to instruction results corroborated with the observations of the teachers. The teachers noticed that the students were engaged when the story was about families with young children, and when asked in the interview of students' response to instruction about their favorite story, all of the participants chose the picture of the family with three small children jumping on their parents' bed while the parents watched smiling. Comparing the pre-test and post-test results and analyzing the results of the teaching journal and student interview answers showed that the participants increased in their ability to produce word-initial phonemes for the six target sounds.

Research with adult non-literate and semi-literate English language learners is a growing field, but the number of studies is still small in comparison to research done with adult English language learners who are literate in another language (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Van de Craats, Kurvers, & Young-Scholten, 2006). It is important to continue to do research with this population of students to provide them with the most effective teaching tools and continue to build on the skills that they have. I have found that using materials that engage the students motivates them to learn. Using LEA not only engaged

the students, but allowed the students to use the vocabulary that they know to practice other skills. The students provided the words, and the teacher helped them to break the words into phonemes using the whole-part-whole method. Concentrating on word-initial phonemes provided them with a foundation since initial phonemes are the easiest to identify (Adams, 1990).

### Reflections

The reason that I decided to research this method for teaching phonemic awareness was that I saw that the L1 non-literate and L1 semi-literate students were trying to memorize the whole words instead of sounding them out letter by letter. I wanted the students to see the connection between the letters and sounds. In the six weeks that my research was conducted, I focused on initial consonants because that was what research has found to be the easiest for students to identify (Adams, 1990).

Each week the students learned one consonant sound for a total of six consonant sounds during the study. At the end of the six weeks of instruction all three students showed improvement in their ability to hear and produce word-initial consonant sounds. I believe that learning the concept of letters connecting to sounds will provide a foundation for the students to continue to learn the other sounds of the consonants and vowels, so eventually they are able to sound out whole words.

From this study I learned that the students were most enthusiastic about using the letter sounds when they were practicing them in interactive games. They liked the color pictures because they could more easily relate them to real-life objects and they encouraged each other during team games and activities, such as the “fly-swatter game”

in which students needed to listen carefully to choose the correct picture to earn a point for their team. I learned that with this method the teacher needs to be strategic in choosing the sounds that the students will practice because the teacher cannot choose the words that the students will produce each week. I had an advantage in this study because all of the students spoke Karen as their first language. Therefore, I was able to research the Karen language to find phonemes that were present in both Karen and English and use those as my target sounds.

I learned that flexibility is the key with LEA. The teacher comes up with the activities, but the students come up with the words. Since the teacher cannot predict what words the students will generate, the target sound for the week may be different from what was expected. As the weeks progressed, the number of sounds that were left to cover diminished, so it became important to choose a picture that had objects that started with the target sound and objects with which the students were familiar. For example, when the target sound was /s/, a picture with snow was chosen, so there would be at least one word that started with the target sound of /s/. Throughout the six weeks, I chose activities to engage and motivate the students and used what they knew to help them practice phonemes.

#### Implications for study

With explicit instruction focusing on word-initial phonemes, the students were able to increase their ability to detect and produce initial phonemes of words as shown by comparison of the results from the pre- and post-tests which measured the participants' ability to produce word-initial phonemes. Activities that focused specifically on word-

initial phonemes helped the students become familiar with the target phonemes and allowed them to practice hearing and producing the word-initial phonemes in a way that was enjoyable to them as evidenced by the observations recorded in the teaching journal. The observations recorded in the teaching journal illustrated that the students showed enthusiasm for describing pictures using words that they knew and that using these words for the week's activities for practicing letter sounds let them concentrate on learning the phonemes. The students also liked the pictures, especially using the magazines because the pictures were all in color, and two of the three participants mentioned in the interview of students' response to instruction that they liked the color pictures. The students especially liked the pictures with families and children because they had young children and could relate to the pictures. When I saw the students' enthusiasm for pictures with families and children, I chose pictures that had families and children in them to engage the students. The students liked the variety of games that were used to practice letter sounds. They seemed especially enthusiastic when playing team games in which one of the students was the "teacher."

Since the participants' oral English vocabulary was limited, the participants did not tell full "stories" about the pictures, but they did describe the pictures using vocabulary that they knew. With a group of students who are at a more advanced language level, the stories that the students generate to describe the picture may be longer and include longer phrases and sentences.

Because of the specific needs of adults who are learning to read in English but are not literate in their native language, I propose that adult learning centers provide classes

specifically for adults who are not literate in another language. This group of language learners needs specialized instruction at a more basic level than students who are literate in another language. In the current study, learners who were not literate or semi-literate in their L1 benefited from explicit instruction in recognizing and producing word-initial phonemes. These participants showed improvement with focused instruction on the target sounds that were introduced during the six weeks of instruction. Non-literate adults who are learning to read for the first time in English need explicit phonemic awareness training and decoding instruction (Kruidenier, 2002; McShane, 2005). The students who are not literate in another language need explicit instruction in the letter-sound connection in order to be at a similar level to their peers who are literate in another language.

#### Limitations

There were a number of limitations in this study. First of all, the small number of participants makes it impossible to generalize the findings. Seven students took the pre-test, but only three of the participants completed the six weeks of instruction and the post-test. The other limitation is the relatively short length of the study. There were fourteen one-hour classes held during the six weeks of instruction. The results of test #1 were also limited by not providing time limits. If there had been a time limit, the results would have better reflected the participants' knowledge of word-initial phonemes. The results were also limited by the lack of a control group, so there was no way to compare the results of the participants in the study group to a control group who did not have similar instruction.

### Suggestions for Further Research

One suggestion would be to conduct a study with a control group of L1 non-literate or semi-literate learners. This would allow the researcher to compare the results of the group who had direct instruction of word-initial phonemes to those who did not receive direct instruction to see if the explicit instruction made a difference in their ability to identify word-initial phonemes. Another suggestion for further research is to conduct a similar study with a group of learners who did not have a similar language background since all of the participants in the current study spoke Karen as their first language. A third suggestion is to conduct the research over a longer period of time and introduce two or three vowels sound during the instruction period so learners could practice creating their own words using the consonants and vowel sounds that they had learned.

### How Findings May be Used or Disseminated

A copy of this capstone will be housed in the Hamline University library. It will also be available online on the Hamline website. I also plan to share the results of my study with the teachers of the learning center where I did my research.

### Conclusion

My hope is that this research contributes to the growing base of research on non-literate adult learners who are learning to read for the first time in another language. Adults who are learning to read in English need explicit instruction in how letter and sounds connect. With patience and practice the students in this study were able to learn and grow in their ability to identify phonemes and create a base on which to continue to improve their literacy skills. I will continue to use the methods that I have learned in this

study in my classes. I will find out what motivates students to learn and use this knowledge to help them find the connection to literacy. In our society, learning to read is important not only for getting a job, but for reading directions on a bottle of medicine, paying bills and other daily activities. I feel that every student can learn, but we as teachers need to know how to engage our students and start from the knowledge base that they have. Non-literate students can feel lost in a class of literate students even if they are both in a beginning level class. That is why it is so important to lessons specifically designed for non-literate students to learn in an engaging way that is tailored to their level.

APPENDIX A

Demographic Information Interview Questions

**Demographic information interview Questions**  
*Researcher Copy*

**Student ID** \_\_\_\_\_

How old are you?

How long have you been in the U.S?

What languages do you speak?

How many years of schooling have you had?

Are you able to read Karen? Are you able to read other languages?

If yes to the above question, what do you read in Karen or another language?

What would you like to be able to read in English?

How do you feel about reading in English?

## APPENDIX B

### Interview of Students' Response to Instruction Questions



APPENDIX C

Phonemic Awareness Pre-test

## Pre-Test Answer Sheet

Student ID \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 1: Phonemic awareness

Researcher says, "Point to the picture that starts with /k/. Car. House. /k/."

#### *Practice items*

\_\_\_\_\_ /k/ car, house

\_\_\_\_\_ /h/ hat, cat

#### *Test items*

\_\_\_\_\_ /s/ soap, bear

\_\_\_\_\_ /t/ pig, top

\_\_\_\_\_ /p/ pen, table

\_\_\_\_\_ /m/ milk, socks

\_\_\_\_\_ /n/ necktie, peas

\_\_\_\_\_ /d/ pants, dog

\_\_\_\_\_ /b/ bus, pink

\_\_\_\_\_ /l/ duck, lamp

### Section 2: Letter recognition

Researcher says, "Point to the word that starts with this letter."

#### *Practice Items*

\_\_\_\_\_ **k** ring, king, sing

\_\_\_\_\_ **f** mind, kind, find

#### *Test Items*

\_\_\_\_\_ **l** hook, book, look

\_\_\_\_\_ **d** sock, dock, mock

\_\_\_\_\_ **m** meat, neat, seat

\_\_\_\_\_ **p** lot, pot, dot

\_\_\_\_\_ **s** rock, lock, sock

\_\_\_\_\_ **t** take, make, bake

\_\_\_\_\_ **n** deck, peck, neck

\_\_\_\_\_ **b** moat, boat, coat

### Section 3: Phonemic Awareness

Researcher says, "Tell me the first sound in \_\_\_\_."

#### Practice Items

Fan /f/ \_\_\_\_\_

Kind /k/ \_\_\_\_\_

#### Test Items

Bed /b/ \_\_\_\_\_

Soup /s/ \_\_\_\_\_

Deer /d/ \_\_\_\_\_

Late /l/ \_\_\_\_\_

Take /t/ \_\_\_\_\_

Moon /m/ \_\_\_\_\_

Need /n/ \_\_\_\_\_

Pair /p/ \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 4: Phonemic Awareness

Researcher says, "Tell me the same first sound in \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_."

#### Practice Items

cut, can, cat \_\_\_\_\_ (k)

yes, yoke, yell \_\_\_\_\_ (y)

#### Test Items

tab, ten, toss \_\_\_\_\_ (t)

sat, sun, sip \_\_\_\_\_ (s)

peach, pear, pile \_\_\_\_\_ (p)

door, deal, dog \_\_\_\_\_ (d)

mat, meal, mode \_\_\_\_\_ (m)

need, net, near \_\_\_\_\_ (n)

bath, bill, bat \_\_\_\_\_ (b)

late, life, leave \_\_\_\_\_ (l)

APPENDIX D

Phonemic Awareness Post-Test

## Post-Test Answer Sheet

Student ID \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 1: Phonemic awareness

Researcher says, "Point to the picture that starts with /k/. Car. House. /k/."

#### *Practice items*

\_\_\_\_\_/k/ car, house

\_\_\_\_\_/h/ hat, cat

#### *Test items*

\_\_\_\_\_/t/ pig, top

\_\_\_\_\_/b/ bus, pink

\_\_\_\_\_/d/ pants, dog

\_\_\_\_\_/n/ necktie, peas

\_\_\_\_\_/p/ pen, table

\_\_\_\_\_/l/ duck, lamp

\_\_\_\_\_/s/ soap, bear

\_\_\_\_\_/m/ milk, socks

### Section 2: Letter recognition

Researcher says, "Point to the word that starts with this letter."

#### *Practice Items*

\_\_\_\_\_ **f** mind, kind, find

\_\_\_\_\_ **k** ring, king, sing

#### *Test Items*

\_\_\_\_\_ **b** moat, boat, coat

\_\_\_\_\_ **m** meat, neat, seat

\_\_\_\_\_ **p** lot, pot, dot

\_\_\_\_\_ **t** take, make, bake

\_\_\_\_\_ **l** hook, book, look

\_\_\_\_\_ **n** deck, peck, neck

\_\_\_\_\_ **s** rock, lock, sock

\_\_\_\_\_ **d** sock, dock, mock

### Section 3: Phonemic Awareness

Researcher says, "Tell me the first sound in \_\_\_\_."

#### Practice Items

Kind /k/ \_\_\_\_\_

Fan /f/ \_\_\_\_\_

#### Test Items

Moon /m/ \_\_\_\_\_

Pair /p/ \_\_\_\_\_

Take /t/ \_\_\_\_\_

Soup /s/ \_\_\_\_\_

Bed /b/ \_\_\_\_\_

Deer /d/ \_\_\_\_\_

Late /l/ \_\_\_\_\_

Need /n/ \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 4: Phonemic Awareness

Researcher says, "Tell me the same first sound in \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_."

#### Practice Items

yes, yoke, yell \_\_\_\_\_ (y)

cut, can, cat \_\_\_\_\_ (k)

#### Test Items

sat, sun, sip \_\_\_\_\_ (s)

peach, pear, pile \_\_\_\_\_ (p)

door, deal, dog \_\_\_\_\_ (d)

bath, bill, bat \_\_\_\_\_ (b)

need, net, near \_\_\_\_\_ (n)

late, life, leave \_\_\_\_\_ (l)

mat, meal, mode \_\_\_\_\_ (m)

tab, ten, toss \_\_\_\_\_ (t)

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