Reading Instruction on YouTube: Insights from Searches on Five Key Reading Topics

by

Katelyn J. Bryant

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts Graduate Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development Ontario Institute for Studies in Education University of Toronto

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Abstract

The recognition that YouTube, a free-access video sharing website, is being widely used as a source of public information has lead medical researchers to conduct studies on health-related videos. However, it appears that educational researchers have not explored YouTube videos about reading instruction, given that no published studies could be located on this topic. The current study conducted controlled searches related to the “big five” areas of early elementary reading instruction as identified by the National Reading Panel (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension). Search results were recorded and the top 40 “most relevant” videos on each topic were analyzed to determine information about viewership, format, content, and creators of the videos. Results indicated that while YouTube videos addressing all five areas of reading instruction were prolific and highly viewed, users would need to be critical, informed, and tech-savvy in order to find relevant videos from credible sources.
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Introduction

The rise of the Internet has changed the way that people share and access information on a variety of topics, including reading instruction. The use of the Internet to bring fast, free “streaming” video content to millions of users has been an advancement of particular interest. YouTube, a hosting site for online video, is currently estimated to be the third most visited site on the Internet, after Google and Facebook (DoubleClick Ad Planner, 2012). Although YouTube has widespread potential for acting as a source of information about how to teach reading, little is known about the content that exists and how widely it is being accessed. The current study explored reading-related YouTube content that maps onto five key topics in elementary reading instruction as identified by the expert review conducted by the National Reading Panel.

Video Over the Internet

Early Internet users wanting to access video information typically had only the option of downloading complete video files and subsequently watching them on their computer. This kind of “non-streaming” video viewing method is comparable to buying a DVD or book, which can be watched or read at leisure.

However, the development of streaming video technology has allowed millions of Internet users fast access to online video content. As opposed to requiring a user to download a complete file before it can be viewed, with video streaming small amounts of information are transmitted at a time. A “video player” makes sense of this information and allows the viewer to watch it in “real time”, much the same way as listening to the radio, but with the possibility of starting or stopping the video at any point (Hartsell & Yuen, 2006).

A new era for streaming video dawned in February 2005 with the registration of the site “YouTube” (YouTube Timeline, 2012b). YouTube is a website that was created to allow people to easily upload their own video content so that it could be viewed by others over the Internet. Prior to sites such as YouTube, the average user may not have had access to the technology necessary to allow them to store their videos or share them with a wide audience. However, YouTube allows users who have access to basic video capture devices, a computer, and Internet access to create and upload videos that can be seen by millions of other Internet users. Over 48 hours of video are uploaded every minute, and YouTube currently receives over 3 billion views per day (YouTube Statistics, 2012a).

The process of uploading YouTube videos is free and fairly simple. In order to upload videos, a user must first sign up for a free account. From their account page, they can hit “upload”. When a video is uploaded, the user must assign it a title and choose what category it belongs to from a pre-determined list (for example, Education, Music, Comedy). As well, users are asked to provide a description of the video and list descriptor words, called “tags”, to help others find and view the video. For example, tags for a video that shows a reading comprehension lesson might include “strategies, school, lesson, demonstration, summarizing, main idea”. All content on YouTube is categorized by users, and is not viewed by anyone at YouTube prior to being made public.
Analysis of YouTube Videos

Given the popularity of YouTube and the huge number of videos it hosts on a variety of topics, scientific interest in the video content available has emerged in the last several years. This is particularly true as it relates to videos about health information. For example, recent studies have considered YouTube as a source of information on topics such as infantile spasms (Lim Fat, Doja, Barrowman & Sell, 2011), melanoma (Babamiri & Nassab, 2010), prostate cancer (Steinberg et al., 2010), tanning bed use (Hossler & Conroy, 2008), and immunization (Keelan, Pavri-Garcia, Tomlinson & Wilson, 2007). These studies have each tried to develop their own techniques for analyzing YouTube videos. The techniques employed by the three most recent studies will be described below.

Most recently, Lim Fat, Doja, Barrowman and Sell (2011) selected five terms that they thought were most likely to retrieve videos about infantile spasms. They evaluated the first 25 videos that YouTube generated for each search term to determine if they were relevant to infantile spasms. For the relevant videos, they rated information about the video using their self-created “Medical Video Rating System”. This included five questions about the technical quality of the video (e.g., “Was the amount of light in the video adequate to allow proper visibility?”), which were coded as “Adequate” or “Inadequate”, one question about diagnostic accuracy, which was coded as “Yes”, “No”, or “Impossible to Determine”, and one question about the quality of the example for teaching purposes.

In 2010, Babamiri and Nassab explored YouTube clips about melanoma. Their study made determinations about who had uploaded the clips (the public, news or television, medical professional, advertiser or non-profit organization), whether the video was “professional” or “amateur”, and the apparent target audience of the clip. They coded whether or not the video addressed the following topics related to melanoma: risk factors, diagnosis, treatment prevention, prognosis, and general information.

In another study, Steinberg and colleagues (2010) used a variety of search terms and found 51 YouTube videos relevant to prostate cancer. They collected direct information from YouTube about each video, including the title, video length, number of views, and viewer ratings of videos (this is an older feature of YouTube that no longer exists). They also made determinations about the video author, the author affiliation, the intended audience (layperson or medical) and whether the video made references to other resources, including websites. As well, they had raters determine whether the content was overall “excellent”, “fair” or “poor”, based on their own criteria, and whether there was bias “for”, “neutral”, or “against” treatment and/or screening.

The above three studies demonstrate that analysis of YouTube video content is a new area of interest, and there are no established techniques or procedures for such analysis. Some studies have collected basic information directly from YouTube (e.g., length of videos) whereas others have developed their own coding schemes to rate content. Most studies have used a descriptive approach, whereas some studies have tried to answer particular research questions by employing statistical techniques (e.g., are videos created by medical professionals more likely to promote accurate information?). Interestingly, these previous studies have been fairly limited in the amount of information they have attempted to obtain, and have addressed different things (e.g., technical quality of the videos vs. accuracy of information vs. video popularity). Past studies have not attempted to access the full range of data available on YouTube about videos, such as statistical information about video viewers’ genders and ages. It is clear that this is an emerging area of research interest, and that techniques used to analyze YouTube content are still developing.
Reading Instruction on YouTube

Medical researchers, when justifying their interest in studying YouTube videos about medical topics, have indicated that they see increasing numbers of patients who use the Internet and YouTube to garner information. As well, they note the possibilities offered by YouTube as a platform for medical educators to host instructional content. For example, Knosel, Jung, and Bleckmann (2011, p. 1558), suggest that “YouTube and similar social media websites offer new educational possibilities that are currently both underdeveloped and underestimated in terms of their potential value”. Other studies such as those conducted by Jaffar (2012), Clifton and Mann (2011), and Akagi (2008) have also articulated the potential value of using YouTube videos in areas such as nursing education and anatomy education.

Given the belief in the value of YouTube for accessing and sharing information within the medical field and the realm of medical education, why not within the field of elementary education? As within the medical field, elementary education contains topics of great interest to a variety of stakeholders. Some of these topics give rise to considerable controversy. One such topic is reading instruction, an area of major focus within elementary education that has long been the subject of discussion and debate (e.g., Anderson, 2000). Reading stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and teacher educators may find YouTube a fruitful platform for finding and disseminating information about reading instruction. YouTube may be particularly relevant to consider given the potential value of video in conveying effective literacy practice to practitioners (e.g., Schrader, Leu, Kinzer, Ataya, Teale, Labbo, & Cammack, 2003; Koc, Peker, Osmanoglu, 2009).

Five Key Topics in Reading Instruction

Although reading instruction is a topic of great potential interest, it differs from topics such as “infantile spasms” because of its breadth. For example, while the term “infantile spasms” retrieved only 794 possibly relevant videos in a YouTube search, the term “teaching reading” retrieved over 46,000. Thus, attempting to exhaustively review all videos on YouTube related to reading instruction would be beyond the scope of a single study. For the current study, a manageable focus was created by choosing five key topics relating to reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). These topics, often referred to as the “Big Five”, were the focus of a major review study conducted by the National Reading Panel, a US-based expert panel tasked with reviewing evidence and making recommendations about effective ways to teach reading. They examined studies whose design permitted causal inferencing about the relationship between specific instructional activities and reading achievement levels. The core topics that were selected by the panel for review will be explained in detail below.

Phonemic awareness. The term “phonemic awareness” refers to children’s ability to recognize and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words, called “phonemes”. Phonemic awareness falls under the broader construct of phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate sound structure in spoken words. However, whereas phonological awareness refers to sound structure at any level (e.g., rhymes, syllables, individual sounds), phonemic awareness refers only to the level of individual sounds. Phonemic awareness can be broken up into a variety of subskills, including blending (hearing individual sounds in words and blending them into a word) and segmenting (being able to say each sound in a word).
The National Reading Panel’s findings related to phonemic awareness supported the general conclusion that phonemic awareness instruction is a valuable part of a complete reading program and instruction in these skills is associated with positive gains in reading outcomes (both single word reading and comprehension). While the Panel noted that a variety of phonemic awareness skills can be taught to some effect, their analysis of the data suggested that teaching students specifically to segment and blend seemed to have a greater impact on reading outcomes than teaching a wide range of phonemic awareness skills. As well, the National Reading Panel found that teaching children phonemic awareness skills with letters is more effective than teaching without letters. For example, letters could be incorporated into phonemic awareness instruction by having students segment the sounds in a word, and then have them choose letters to represent those sounds, or showing students letters while having them orally blend sounds together. The report suggested that teaching phonemic awareness is appropriate for students from preschool to 1st grade, and older disabled readers.

**Phonics.** In the National Reading Panel report, “phonics” is defined as teaching children the systematic and predictable relationships between sounds (from spoken language) and letters (in written language). There are a variety of phonics teaching approaches discussed by the National Reading Panel, including the “synthetic approach”, where children are systematically taught a set of letter-sound correspondences (like “p”, “ow” and “ch”) and then encouraged to use this knowledge to decode words, and the “analogy approach”, where students are encouraged to identify new words by comparing them to known words (e.g., a child who knows the word “cat” could use this knowledge to decode the word “bat”). Overall, the Panel found that systematic phonics teaching was more effective than no phonics instruction or incidental, non-explicit phonics instruction, regardless of the approach. “Systematic” phonics teaching occurs when educators explicitly teach a pre-determined sequence of letter-sound correspondences. In general, the Panel noted that phonics instruction was an important part of a balanced reading program. The research reviewed on phonics instruction indicated that such instruction is most effective for first grade and kindergarten children, including those at risk for later reading difficulties. It also was found to be related to improved spelling outcomes in students in first grade and kindergarten. Although the studies included in the National Reading Panel did not allow conclusions to be drawn about how the content of phonics programs (e.g., what letter-sounds are taught) influenced their effectiveness, they noted the importance of considering the types of letter-sound relationships taught in phonics programs and the probable importance of teaching children a complete set of letter-sounds, including vowels.

**Fluency.** The term “fluency” in the National Reading Panel report refers to children’s ability to read connected text with speed, accuracy, and expression. The National Reading Panel looked at two possible ways to promote reading fluency: repeated oral reading and increased individual silent reading time. The Panel found good evidence that repeated oral reading with feedback was an effective way to build reading fluency, but did not find evidence that silent reading time (e.g., Drop Everything and Read; DEAR) improved children’s reading fluency.

**Vocabulary.** In terms of “vocabulary”, the National Reading Panel pointed out that there are many different definitions of this term. The panel defined vocabulary as students’ knowledge of word meanings, not their recognition of words in print (sometimes referred to as “sight vocabulary”). The panel’s findings indicated that vocabulary could be effectively taught through both direct methods (e.g., having students explore the meaning of words and how they relate to known words), and indirect methods (e.g., exposing students to new words in storybook
reading). They also found that vocabulary was taught best using multiple exposures and active engagement. As well, they discussed the importance of teaching words that would be useful in many contexts, and “restructuring” vocabulary learning tasks so students knew what was expected and could optimally learn from the activity.

Text comprehension. The National Reading Panel report also examined the evidence pertaining to reading comprehension instruction. The panel’s review of the evidence indicated that instructional programs that encouraged children to use multiple comprehension strategies in a flexible manner promoted children’s reading comprehension. The panel identified the following individual comprehension strategies as having research in support of their effectiveness: comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, the use of graphic organizers, the teaching of story structure, answering questions generated by the teacher, generating questions, and summarization. The report also discussed the importance of developing students’ awareness of their own thinking, explaining and modeling the comprehension strategies students were expected to use, and then allowing students the opportunity to practice strategies with increasing independence.

Research Questions

The overall goal of the current study is to provide a preliminary survey of available YouTube content that relates to reading instruction, by focusing on some of the important reading instruction topics identified by the National Reading Panel. To achieve these goals, more detailed research questions were developed:

- Are videos related to the Big Five areas of reading instruction available on YouTube?
- How many videos exist? Do some of the Big Five topics have more video content than others?
- How highly viewed are these videos?
- Who is viewing these videos?
- What format is used for the videos?
- Who is featured in the videos?
- What kind of information is presented?
- Does the information provided relate to the findings in the National Reading Panel report?
- Who is creating these videos?

The purpose of answering these questions is to contribute to a better understanding of whether people are using YouTube as a source of information about reading instruction, and the nature of the videos that are available on the chosen topics.

Methods

A variety of steps were undertaken in order to collect data for this study. Methodology included both content categorization methods, similar to past studies in the medical literature, as well as the use of YouTube-provided statistics.

First, search terms were selected that addressed each of the Big Five foci of literacy instruction outlined in the National Reading Panel report. Then, searches were conducted and basic information was collected on the first 40 videos identified by each search. Each of these
videos was watched to determine their relevance to reading instruction. For relevant videos, a variety of additional information was recorded, including information about their format, content, and creators. High quality videos were also chosen as “recommended”.

Choosing Search Terms

YouTube videos can generally be found in one of two ways: an individual is directed to the video from some outside source (e.g., a friend, a website, or a Google search), or an individual performs a YouTube-based search for videos. When conducting a YouTube-based search, the choice of appropriate search terms is especially important as the results that are accessed heavily depend on the specific terms that are used. The search terms have a strong impact on the accuracy of the results (are the retrieved videos closely related to the topic of interest?) as well as the scope of the results (do the results reflect the full range of videos available on the topic of interest?).

Including common words in the search term (e.g., “reading”, “teaching”) may sacrifice accuracy of results if they are underspecified. For example, just using the term “reading” might generate videos about “speed reading”, “celebrities reading tweets about themselves”, or a trailer for the movie “Burn After Reading”. However, using less popular and/or more specific search terms may limit the scope of the results. For example, the term “reading instruction” may retrieve less relevant results than “teaching reading”, because people may not include the term “instruction” in their video descriptors. Using only a few search terms may also limit the scope of the results, because relevant videos described using other words may not be found. For example, using the search term “letter sounds” may retrieve different relevant videos than the search term “phonics”.

For the purposes of this study, search terms were selected in a standardized way to provide a snapshot of the kinds of videos a typical searcher might retrieve. Search terms were created by adding “teaching” to each of the Big Five reading instruction domains taken directly from the National Reading Panel report. As such, the search terms employed were: “teaching phonemic awareness”, “teaching phonics”, “teaching fluency”, “teaching vocabulary” and “teaching text comprehension”. The term “teaching” was added to each of the specific reading domains in an attempt to find videos that highlighted instruction. No quotations were used when typing in the search terms. Using quotation marks around a phrase ensures that the complete phrase is found in the video’s title, description, or tags, as opposed to one or more of the single words. This search method can improve the accuracy of the results; however this is an advanced searching technique that would probably not be employed by typical users.

Conducting Searches

YouTube searches for videos were conducted over a 3-day period in May 2012. Each search term was typed into the YouTube search engine (www.youtube.com). The results were automatically ranked by relevance. This is the default setting, and would probably not be adjusted by most users. The specifics of how YouTube selects the most relevant videos are secret (Codex-M, 2012), however, it is suspected that the search process determines the most relevant results not only by matching the search term to keywords associated with the video (i.e., in the title, description, and tags), but also by taking into account information about viewership of the video and its relationship to other videos. At the time the study was conducted, YouTube relevance results were not personalized for different users, but were rather the same across different computers.
During the 3-day period that the searches were conducted, YouTube statistics were recorded for all 200 videos, since these can fluctuate on a daily basis. Some of these statistics were found on the main page (number of views, likes, dislikes, and comments for each video). As well, many of the videos had further information about viewers available on the YouTube “statistics” function page. This was accessed by clicking a graph icon to the right of the view count. These private statistics can be hidden from view (“disabled”) by the video uploader, however most videos have statistics that are publically viewable. From the statistics page, information about the number of people that added the video to their list of favourites was recorded. Also, the age/gender of the top three viewer groups was recorded for each video. At the time the data were recorded, demographic information about viewers’ country of origin was not easily determined, since it was displayed in a map format that was difficult to interpret.

Determining Relevant Videos

Once the initial searches had been conducted and key information about the preliminary set of 200 videos had been recorded, each video was watched to determine if it was relevant to elementary reading instruction in an English-as-a-first-language environment. For example, videos were not considered relevant if they depicted English instruction in Japan, reading instruction in a high school setting, programs for second language learners, adult programs, or an approach to teaching math fluency. Additional information was only collected about those videos that were deemed relevant by the researcher.

Recording Static Information

“Static” information about each relevant video (that is, publically verifiable information that does not change) was recorded next. The data collected included the length of the videos in minutes, the dates the videos were placed on YouTube, the categories the videos were stored under, the names of the channels that the videos were hosted on, and the URL for each video. The video length was viewable on the “counter” directly below the video, and the channel name and date the video was created were found under a series of buttons in a line beginning with “Uploaded by ______ (channel name) on ______ (date)”. In order to view the category, the “show more” button was pressed. All of this information was available for every video. With the exception of length, this information was not analyzed further, but was rather used to identify the video.

Recording Information About Video Format

Data were collected about the audio/video quality of videos, their format, and who appeared to be featured in them.

Audio and video quality. Audio and video quality were each rated as either 1, “acceptable” or 0, “unacceptable”. The quality was considered “unacceptable” if it was so poor that it made it virtually impossible to hear or see what was taking place in the video.

Video format. The format of each video was categorized using labels that were generated inductively. “Audiovisual” videos were those in which no people were visible, but audio and/or video elements were used (for example, an animated promotion for a product or a slideshow with a voiceover). “Taped lectures” were videos that were clearly a recording of a talk that was given publically, for example a professor teaching a class or a recording of a
“Talking head” videos were those in which a person or persons were recorded speaking to the camera. “Classroom demonstration” videos were those that featured a teacher and one or more students engaged in an activity. Videos were categorized as “other” if they did not fit into any of the previous categories. Videos could be coded as fitting into more than one category. For example, a video might contain a classroom demonstration, and then slides with a voiceover to explain what happened in the demonstration.

**Video participants.** An attempt was made to determine who was in the videos. Videos were coded as either being with or without students. In terms of adults in the video, any person who was acting in the role of a “teacher” (or who explicitly said they were a teacher) was coded as such. This sometimes included people whose primary position was as a tutor, educational therapist, or other similar position. If a person in the video explicitly made note that they were a professor or had a PhD, they were considered a “professor”. Other possible labels were “parent” and “literacy expert”. The term “literacy expert” was used when people were not seen teaching and did not self-identify as a teacher or a professor, but presented themselves as knowledgeable about literacy instruction. The apparent gender of adults featured in the videos was also coded.

**Recording Information About Video Content**

Information about video content included making judgments about whether the video included explanations and/or activities, rating such explanations and activities against National Reading Panel recommendations, and determining if videos mentioned research. Notes were also made about the content of each video, and videos that appeared to be both high quality and interesting were chosen as “recommended”, based on the procedures described below.

**Nature of content.** For those videos that addressed an instructional technique or concept, it was noted whether “explanation”, “activities”, or both were provided.

**Alignment with National Reading Panel recommendations.** Each video was assessed based on how well it addressed the relevant concept from the National Reading Panel (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension). For each of these five skill areas assessed by the National Reading Panel, a checklist was made based on the research-based suggestions for reading instruction outlined in the National Reading Panel report. A member of the National Reading Panel evaluated this checklist and agreed with its contents. The checklist can be found in Appendix 1.

**Research.** Videos were coded as mentioning research if they used the word “research” or explicitly mentioned studies. No attempt was made to further clarify the nature of the research or where or how it was conducted.

**Notes about content.** Descriptions of each video’s content were recorded. Anecdotal notes about quality were also made by the researcher.

**Recommended videos.** Videos were chosen as “recommended” if they gave a clear explanation of the literacy concept that addressed at least 2-3 relevant recommendations from the National Reading Panel, or provided an entertaining activity example that corresponded to one or more of the instructional foci identified by the National Reading Panel. Only non-profit videos were chosen. All recommended videos were viewed by two other literacy professionals.
Determined Video Creators

An attempt was made to determine who posted the video on YouTube, and whether the individual or organization that posted it was involved in a for-profit enterprise. The first step to determine the creator was to watch the video. If the creator of the video was mentioned in the video (either verbally or in writing), this name was recorded and the source of information about the creator was coded as “Video”. If no information about a creator was provided in the video, the comment section was checked next. If a creator name was provided, it was recorded and the source of the sponsor was coded as “Comments”. If a website link was provided in the video comments, it was followed to see if a creator name could be determined. If so, the creator’s name was recorded and the source coded as “Comments”. If neither the video nor the comments contained a sponsor name or weblink, the channel was explored to try to determine who posted the video. This was accomplished by clicking on the channel name and then reading the “About” section in the channel. If this contained a link or a sponsor name, this was pursued and the source was coded as “Channel”. If no creator could be determined by looking at the video, comments, or channel, then videos were coded as having “No Creator”.

Once the creator was determined, efforts were made to determine if the individual or organization that posted the video was part of a profit-making organization. Any creator that recommended or demonstrated the use of a commercial product or service produced by their own organization was considered to be a “For-Profit” creator. Creators were also considered “For-Profit” if they directed users to their own for-profit website on their video or channel. “Non-Profit” creators were those who either did not direct users to outside programs or websites that they produced, or directed them only to websites that explicitly contained information stating that they were a non-profit organization. Videos without an identified creator were assumed to be non-profit.

Results and Discussion

In the first section, the search results will be presented, including the number of results for each of the five search terms and which results were considered relevant. After this, information about video viewers and the format of the 144 relevant videos will be discussed. The following section, which is divided into the five key reading topics identified by the National Reading Panel, will address the content of the videos. Following this, information will be presented about who posted the videos.

Video Search Results

The number of videos retrieved for each search term are shown in Table 1, along with the percentage of the top 40 results for each topic that were considered relevant.
Table 1

*Search Results for Big Five Search Terms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Term</th>
<th># of Results</th>
<th>% Relevance of Top 40 Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>teaching phonemic awareness</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching phonics</td>
<td>3100</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching fluency</td>
<td>1180</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>10,400</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching text comprehension</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were an impressive number of search results for each of the five search terms. However, looking at the raw results numbers did not provide a clear sense of how many *relevant* videos existed on each topic. Given search limitations, the search terms chosen may have retrieved results that were limited in accuracy and/or scope. A better understanding of the possible prevalence of YouTube videos about Big Five topics can be improved by considering not only the raw number of results, but also the characteristics of the search terms and the percentage of the first 40 results that were relevant. Below are some interpretations of the number of results for each search term.

**Phonemic awareness search results.** Phonemic awareness is a term that is specific to reading instruction, and is probably the most frequently used term to refer to activities that involve recognizing and manipulating the individual sounds in spoken words. As such, it was not particularly surprising that the top 40 results for the term “teaching phonemic awareness” were all considered relevant. Given that this term retrieved results that were both accurate and of reasonable scope, 483 results is probably a fairly accurate estimate of the number of YouTube videos available on phonemic awareness instruction. Although there are probably other related videos available that are categorized using descriptors other than phonemic awareness (for example, other terms such as “sound awareness” or even “phonological awareness”, or more specific terms such as “blending” or “segmenting”), no other productive search term that could generate many other results could be determined.

**Phonics search results.** There were many results for phonics, most of which were accurate. Phonics is a very reading-specific term, which probably contributed to the generation of more accurate results. Even the results that were considered “non-relevant” for the purposes of this study (e.g., because it was clear they were intended for a non-English speaking context) contained relevant information to teaching English letter-sound correspondences. As such, it seems likely that thousands of phonics-related videos exist on YouTube.

The high number of phonics videos on YouTube may be explained by the nature of phonics instruction. Although teaching a systematic, explicit phonics program probably requires considerable expertise, basic letter-sound correspondences (e.g., that the letter “p” makes the sound /p/) may be more easily conveyed in a short video than something more complex such as comprehension strategies or repeated reading procedures. This more “discrete” nature of basic phonics instruction also lends itself well to commercial programs, which are highly prevalent and easily advertised on YouTube. Thus, the nature of phonics instruction itself may lend itself to being demonstrated and promoted using video.

**Fluency search results.** Of the 40 fluency videos, 25 addressed reading fluency in a primarily English-speaking context. The other videos addressed reading fluency in a non-
English language environment, or addressed writing or math fluency. This supports the assertion that the term “fluency” has several meanings outside of just reading instruction, which may limit the accuracy of the results it retrieves. However, although “fluency” is a general term, no additional terms could be thought of that would uncover many other relevant results. Thus, 1180 is probably an overestimate of the number of fluency-related videos on YouTube.

**Vocabulary search results.** Although “teaching vocabulary” retrieved over ten thousand videos, only 25% of the first 40 videos were relevant. Vocabulary is a term relatively specific to language, but it does not always refer to in-depth instruction in word meanings in an English-speaking context. Most of the videos that were not considered relevant addressed the acquisition of oral vocabulary in a second language. Therefore, 10 400 is probably an overestimate of the number of videos about English-language vocabulary instruction that exist. However, it is very hard to accurately estimate the number of vocabulary related videos on YouTube, since the descriptors of so many videos contain the word “vocabulary”.

**Text comprehension search results.** The search term “teaching text comprehension” retrieved 586 results, and 75% of the first 40 results were relevant. Of the videos that were not relevant, five addressed reading comprehension in a second language environment, and the other five were advertisements for a “speed reading” program called ZOX Pro.

The search term “teaching text comprehension” contains words quite specific to reading instruction, thereby retrieving fairly accurate results. However, other descriptors could be used to describe text comprehension activities, in particular descriptors that do not include the word “text”. Indeed, searching the term “comprehension strategies” retrieves over 2000 videos, many of which appear to be different from those found when searching for “teaching text comprehension”. Thus, 586 videos is probably an underestimate of the number of videos on reading comprehension instruction available on YouTube. There could be thousands of YouTube videos on this topic.

**Overall search results.** The results indicated that there are many videos on YouTube that relate to reading instruction in general, and there are hundreds of videos available that are directly relevant to teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. Overall, of 200 videos considered, 144 were directly relevant to reading instruction in an English-speaking context. Most of the remaining videos were still generally related but were focused on the needs of students (sometimes adults) in an English-as-a-second-language environment.

The results did not allow for a precise determination of the number of relevant YouTube videos about phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension instruction. However, some estimates were made. Phonics and text comprehension may be the best represented Big Five topics on YouTube, with thousands of applicable videos estimated to exist on each. It was somewhat harder to make judgments about vocabulary (because of the high number of second-language vocabulary videos) and fluency (because the term is quite general), however they probably have close to 1000 related videos. The specificity of the term “phonemic awareness” means that the number of videos retrieved (approximately 500) is probably a fairly accurate estimate of the overall relevant number of YouTube clips on this topic.

**Video Viewers**

**Number of views.** YouTube does not provide statistics about the number of unique viewers that watch each video, however it does provide information about how many times a
video has been viewed. The 144 relevant videos had been viewed a combined total of over one million times. There was a great deal of variation in the number of views each video had, for example, some had thousands and some had less than a hundred (see Appendix 2 for graphs that show the distribution of views across each of the five topics). This made it very hard to make summary statements about the pattern of viewership for each topic. The current study design also did not allow for any determination of why certain topics or videos had more views than others. For example, the popularity of individual videos could be explained by how many “highly searched” terms they used as descriptors, the quality of their content, or simply the length of time they were available to view. In terms of the popularity of certain topics (e.g., phonics), this might be explained because they attract controversy, are more easily conveyed in short clips, or represent areas of interest more firmly embedded in the “public consciousness” about reading instruction. Although the data available cannot address such issues, it does clearly demonstrate that YouTube is an extremely popular source of information on reading instruction.

**Viewer demographics.** The YouTube-generated demographic data indicated that video viewers were overwhelmingly female. YouTube’s demographic information does not convey aggregated counts of all viewers, but rather a listing of the three demographic groups that view each video the most often. For the 98 videos with viewer demographic information provided, the most popular primary demographic was females age 45-54 (50%), followed by females aged 55-64 (26%) and females aged 35-44 (11%). Males of any age were the most popular demographic for 12% of the videos, with the remaining 1% being females under 17 or over 65. Across the three most popular demographic groups provided by YouTube for each video, the top three groups by far were females aged 45-54 (30%), females aged 35-44 (27%), and females aged 55-64 (21%). Males aged 45-54 was the next most represented (12%), followed by males 35-44 (6%). Other demographic groups were not well represented among video viewers.

Overall, these results indicated that viewers were primarily women, and that most viewers were over the age of 35. This information maps very well onto the demographics associated with primary school teachers in Canada and the United States. In 2006, Statistics Canada reported that 84% of preschool and primary teachers were female (Turcotte, 2011), and in the United States, the National Center for Education Information reported that 84% of K-12 in 2011 were female, with 78% over the age of 30 (Feistritzer, 2011). Although there was no way to use the data obtained in this study to determine who was viewing the videos (i.e., teachers or other groups), the demographic match between video viewers and teachers suggests that teachers may be a key group that is consulting YouTube for information about reading instruction. Other possible groups that may fit these demographics could include parents (particularly mothers) or other professionals interested in reading (such as reading tutors or teacher educators).

**Viewer interaction with videos.** In general, viewers’ use of the “interactive” features of YouTube was fairly low. Although 48% percent of the videos had at least one “like”, 19% had at least one “dislike”, and 35% had at least one comment, the average video did not generate a lot of viewer interaction. Across all of the relevant videos, the ratio of views to likes was more than 1400 to 1.

Only 11 of the 144 videos had more than 5 comments. Many of these 11 videos were highly viewed and/or appeared to be of high quality. Comments were mostly appreciative comments, for example “cool stuff”, or “I’ll be teaching 3rd grade next year and would like to use these strategies...” (comments on Knatim, 2009), “how I wish your books could reach Philippines”, “I love this video, gona used for my kids.Thanks for posting.”, “This is great! You should have a reading show on TV!!!” (comments on GenkiJapanNet, 2010). Occasionally,
viewers posted questions that were sometimes answered by the video creator or by representatives from other organizations. These representatives appeared to be watching the comments and trying to use them to promote their method or product.

Overall these results suggest that viewers were quite passive while watching these videos about reading instruction, and that they were not engaging around the content in the same way that might be seen in blogs or discussion forums. A brief observation of the kind of comments made on videos indicated that they seemed to be mostly appreciative, with occasional questions. People did not seem to be using the commenting feature to share resources or information, or to discuss literacy instruction in depth. This makes sense, because the current organization of YouTube’s comments section does not make it easy for people to engage with each other or carry on conversations. It seems that people are seeking these videos as a passive source of information rather than as a launching point for discussion in the comment section.

**Video Format**

**Length.** The average length of the 144 relevant videos was 3 minutes and 52 seconds long (range: 31 seconds to 45 minutes and 29 seconds). A graph depicting the distribution of video lengths is shown in Appendix 3. This distribution was right skewed, with most videos being of very short duration (59% of the videos were 0 to 3 minutes long). YouTube limits most users to adding videos under 10 minutes in length, however, even for the videos that were over 10 minutes, only 2 were longer than 11 minutes. Overall, the YouTube videos in this study were short in duration.

**Audio/video quality.** In general, videos had reasonable video and sound quality. Only 5 videos received “unacceptable” video quality ratings because they were virtually unviewable, and only 2 had “unacceptable” sound quality. These findings make sense given that people have widespread access to video recording equipment that can produce high quality videos.

**Video format and participants.** The 144 relevant videos took a variety of different formats. Of the videos, 33% of them depicted only a classroom demonstration, 33% featured only a person or persons talking, 10% were purely audiovisual and 7% were a taped lecture (e.g., from a university course). The remaining videos featured a combination of different formats, often a classroom demonstration accompanied by an audiovisual component or by somebody providing an explanation. Only one video, a clip from a movie, did not fit any of the other categories. Overall, very few of the videos were audiovisual only and many (49%) contained a classroom demonstration of some kind. This suggests that YouTube may be being used to depict reading instruction in the classroom in a way that text-based formats may not be able to deliver.

In terms of who was featured in the videos, most often, the videos featured teachers (73%). However, the fact that videos featured teachers does not mean they were teacher-created, although this was sometimes the impression that was conveyed. Ten percent of the videos featured professors, and 6% featured “literacy experts” who did not mention any formal qualifications. The remaining 11% of videos featured a student (1), a parent (2), or no expert (i.e., they were audiovisual only). Eighty-five percent of the adults featured in the videos were female. The high percentage of females in the videos is again reflective of the demographics of teachers in Canada and the United States.
Video Content

Findings about video content are divided into five sections that correspond to each of the Big Five areas in the National Reading Panel report. Each section considers the nature of the explanations and activities related to each reading topic, and how well the explanations and activities map onto the findings in the National Reading Panel. Recommended videos are also provided.

Phonemic awareness videos.

Explanations of phonemic awareness. Several videos very explicitly stated that phonemic awareness was a subtype of phonological awareness dealing specifically with students’ ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds in words. However, many videos provided unclear or incomplete explanations that failed to capture the essentials of the construct or presented explanations that did not clearly differentiate between phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and phonics. For example, one video explained phonemic awareness as “the ability to distinguish and manipulate different sounds…rhymes set to music are a natural and fun way to develop phonemic awareness” (MrsRLeite, 2011). The video then went on to discuss using rhyming songs in the classroom, with no focus on individual sounds in words. In another video, the explanation of phonemic awareness was appropriate, but the rest of the video focused on teaching individual letter-sounds and did not explain how this related to phonemic awareness (TheAngelinator, 2010). Only two of the videos explicitly mentioned research. In general, it was not surprising to find confusion in the definitions between phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and phonics since these terms may often be used interchangeably or incorrectly (even, for example, by educational diagnosticians; Chappell, Stephens, Kinnison, & Pettigrew, 2009, and first-year teachers; Cheesman, McGuire, Shankweiler, & Coyne, 2009).

Demonstrations of phonemic awareness instruction. Phonemic awareness activities depicted included blending, segmentation, elision, sound matching, phoneme identification, and generating words that began with a particular phoneme. Half of the videos reviewed included at least one activity that was related to phonological (as opposed to phonemic) awareness, which either included rhyming activities (generating rhymes, identifying rhymes, or singing rhyming songs) or activities that focused on blending/segmenting syllables. Although many of the demonstrations were quite entertaining and involved simple games and songs that children would find enjoyable, often the activities demonstrated were not accurate portrayals of phonemic awareness activities. Many of the games involved rhyming or syllables and did not clearly address students’ development of segmenting and blending skills. Some videos did not contain any demonstration of working at the level of individual sounds at all, which could contribute to the confusion around the concept of phonemic awareness.

Alignment with National Reading Panel findings. In terms of the National Reading Panel recommendations regarding how to best teach phonemic awareness, there were three main findings. The first was that phonemic awareness instruction was more effective when there was a focus on limited skills (particularly blending and segmenting), the second was that teaching phonemic awareness with letters was particularly effective, and the third was that phonemic awareness is best taught in kindergarten and grade one, or to struggling older readers.

Only one video explicitly stated that phonemic awareness instruction should focus on one or two skills. In addition to that video, two videos showed blending and segmenting skills only. Both of these showed how to segment words into sounds by representing sounds with
tokens, and then re-blend the sounds together. Although 38% of the videos included some focus on either blending or segmenting individual sounds, these were either shown as a sole skill or in conjunction with other phonological awareness skills.

Ten of the 40 videos showed phonemic awareness skills combined with the use of letters. For example, for one video a teacher was playing a singing game where students changed the first sound in their classmates’ names. The teacher held up each student’s name card, and covered the first letter with the new letter as they said the sound. If the student’s name was “Beth” and they were starting with the /r/ sound, the teacher would hold an R over Beth so it became “Reth”.

Overall, it was difficult to determine the ages and grades of the students. Most appeared to be in kindergarten or grade one, or struggling.

In general, the videos did not capture the National Reading Panel findings on teaching phonemic awareness. Most of the videos failed to emphasize focusing on only one or two skills, particularly segmenting and blending. It was encouraging to note that letters were incorporated in some of the activities; however, this was generally done at a fairly superficial level that did not require students to really manipulate sounds in conjunction with letters. Although most of the videos appeared to show phonemic awareness activities being used with an appropriate age group, this was rarely stated explicitly. The average viewer might not have easily realized the importance of doing phonemic awareness activities early in literacy development.

**Recommended phonemic awareness videos.** There were several recommended videos that addressed phonemic awareness. One was a strong explanatory video, while the others provided high-quality example activities.

1. Phonological Awareness, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McJldIFIpC8

   This is a brief taped lecture by a professor that gives an excellent overview of phonemic awareness and explains how it is differentiated from phonological awareness and phonics. Information is provided on how to teach phonemic awareness, much of which is drawn directly from the National Reading Panel findings.

2. Phonemic Awareness Read Aloud: Using Stories to Develop Phonemic Awareness Skills
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3NERmURt_w

   This video is a classroom demonstration of a read-aloud where the teacher periodically stops to invite students to “guess” a secret word by blending sounds together. This helps build students’ awareness of the individual sounds in words.

3. Read Aloud Extension Activity- Using Stories to Develop Phonemic Awareness
   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlVHb3w4EKQ

   This video is a companion video to “Phonemic awareness read aloud”, where the teacher explains the idea behind the phonemic blending.
4. Where’s the Sound? Listening for Beginning, Middle, and Ending Sounds
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm3NvUxaY0k

This video shows students in a classroom sorting objects by stretching out the sounds in their names and sorting them according to their medial sounds. This is a good way to develop students phonemic awareness by having them segment words and identify their sounds.

5. Awesome Alliteration: Building Awareness of Initial Letter-Sounds
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKXl-1UrPGY

This video depicts a fun activity that builds phonemic awareness and reinforces students’ knowledge of several consonant letter-sounds. Students listen to a spoken word and determine its first sound, which is matched to a letter.

Phonics videos.

Explanations of phonics. Forty-three percent of the videos contained an explanation of phonics instruction. Only two of these explicitly mentioned research. Many of the videos with phonics explanations featured the same expert, Debbie Hepplewhite, who created the systematic, synthetic phonics program “Phonics International”. She provided clear, integrated explanations of systematic phonics teaching. Most of the other videos failed to provide high quality explanations of phonics instruction. Some explanations were extremely confusing and inappropriate. For example, one video suggested that to teach phonics, you should first “teach the vowel sounds”. However, no explanation of what these sounds were was provided. Then, the video suggested having the children “break up the words” and draw pictures to help them remember each part. It gave the example of the word “wonderful”, in which none of the vowels make their most standard sounds. Underneath the word was drawn a picture of a medal, a deer, and a cup full of water (eHow, 2010). In general, there seemed to be a sharp divide between videos showcasing highly prescribed commercial programs and general videos presenting information about phonics instruction haphazardly.

Demonstrations of phonics instruction. Thirty-seven percent of the videos contained some modeling of how to teach phonics skills. Sixty percent of the videos addressed teaching vowels in addition to consonants. Fifty-three percent modeled or discussed the importance of teaching short vowel sounds, whereas 27% addressed teaching long vowel spellings. Thirty percent of the videos indicated the importance of teaching letter-sounds that have a greater than one-to-one correspondence (e.g., vowel digraphs like “ai” “oa” “ea”).

It was encouraging that 60% of the videos addressed teaching vowels; however, very few did it in a systematic way that included both short vowels (which, although they are represented by one letter, have fairly confusable sounds), long vowels (which are typically represented by two letter patterns, e.g., “ai”, “ee”, “ie”, “oa”, “ue”), and special vowels (such as r-controlled vowels “ar”, “ir/er/ur” and “or”, “oi”, and “ow”). Short vowels were a more common focus than long vowels and/or special vowels, perhaps because they are the “usual” sound for the single vowel letters a, e, i, o, and u. Overall, the findings about vowel instruction suggest that this type of instruction was not addressed in the YouTube videos in a comprehensive manner. Often phonics instruction was reduced to general ideas about “teaching the sounds that letters make”, with a particular focus on consonant letters. This can be
contrasted with a systematic approach to teaching students how to represent all 40 or so of the sounds of English using common letters or letter patterns.

Alignment with National Reading Panel findings. In terms of the National Reading Panel findings on effective ways to teach phonics, only 27% of the videos discussed or demonstrated a systematic approach to phonics instruction. Sixty-three percent demonstrated or promoted teaching phonics in an explicit way, as opposed to incidentally through story reading or other implicit forms of exposure. Thirty-seven percent of the videos recommended or depicted follow-up activities where students had the opportunity to apply phonics skills. The age of the students was not mentioned in any of the videos, although many of them appeared to include students in kindergarten or grade one.

While there was an encouraging number of videos that promoted taking the time to explicitly teach phonics, few videos explained or depicted a systematic approach to phonics. This is a key departure from the findings of the National Reading Panel. Many videos did promote follow-up of skills and appeared to be geared to an appropriate age group.

Recommended phonics videos. Only one recommended phonics video was found. This was a teacher-friendly explanation of phonics instruction in a kindergarten classroom.

1. How Can a Teacher Teach Phonics to Young Children
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ER7zHnv78Q

In this video, a classroom teacher gives a short explanation of the importance of teaching letter-sounds in Kindergarten. She suggests teaching 1-2 letters per week and recommends not introducing letters in the order of the alphabet. She advises teaching the short vowel sounds first, and suggests teaching 4-5 consonants and a vowel at a time. She emphasizes the importance of repetition, and practicing blending once students know individual sounds. This video does not discuss the importance of teaching letter-sounds that have more than one letter to a sound, for example long vowels like “ai”, “ee”, “ie”, “oa”, “ue” or r-controlled vowels, “ar” “er/ir/ur”, “or”.

Fluency videos.

Explanations of fluency. Seventy-two percent of the videos contained an explanation of fluency instruction. Many of the explanations were not clear or detailed, and often reflected concepts other than those discussed in the National Reading Panel. For example, fluency was defined as it relates to oral vs. silent reading, or discussed in relation to the role of background knowledge and understanding of vocabulary words. As well, although some grasp of effective reading fluency instruction was implied in the suggested activities, how to teach reading fluency was not clearly explained or was often mixed in with other reading instruction concepts not directly related to fluency (e.g., reading comprehension strategies). Some of the videos included teachers talking about how they would assess fluency, but not how they would teach it. Only one explanation explicitly mentioned research.

Overall, there was a lack of appropriate explanations of fluency instruction. Most videos did not clearly describe reading fluency or how to teach it. None of the videos communicated clearly that fluency requires that students read a text with speed, accuracy, and expression, and that fluency is best developed through guided practice.
**Demonstrations of fluency instruction.** Forty percent of the 25 relevant videos contained some modeling of teachers teaching reading fluency. Eight of the 25 videos showed teachers simply reading to students. While reading aloud is often an enjoyable activity that can be a valuable part of a literacy program, it is not an optimal way for individual students to develop their own reading fluency. Seven videos advocated for using repeated reading with students, which is a positive finding. However, only two of these explicitly noted the importance of providing students with feedback, an important component for students’ growth. Two videos used a partner reading with feedback strategy. Finally, six of the videos explained how to choose text that is at an appropriate level for students to read independently. Although this is important, simply providing students with text at their level is not enough to ensure that they get reading practice along with the feedback necessary to make progress.

**Alignment with National Reading Panel findings.** The main finding of the National Reading Panel on fluency instruction was that repeated reading (with feedback) was an effective way to increase students’ fluency, whereas just encouraging them to read on their own was not. Encouragingly, none of the videos promoted silent or “increased reading” (e.g., programs such as DEAR, Sustained Silent Reading) as a strategy that could directly improve students’ reading fluency. However, not many of the videos promoted repeated reading, and those that did rarely addressed the importance of students getting feedback from a peer or adult.

**Recommended fluency videos.** One excellent example of a fluency activity was chosen as recommended.

1. Poetry Club: Practicing Fluency and Expression
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-ANiJfAgB0

   This video shows a teacher using an engaging poetry-reading activity to build reading fluency. In the video, she explains that students will select a poem and practice reading it many times before performing it. She then models the difference between choppy and fluent reading. The video ends with a demonstration of the students’ final oral readings of their poems.

**Vocabulary videos.**

**Explanations of vocabulary.** Of the 19 relevant videos, 63% of the videos contained an explanation of vocabulary instruction. Six of them explicitly mentioned research. Four videos appeared to give reasonably good explanations of vocabulary instruction: a mini-lecture on principles of vocabulary instruction that drew on research, a discussion of a vocabulary project from a university, a teacher-friendly explanation of a research article on a vocabulary teaching strategy, and a video that addressed many key elements of effective vocabulary instruction, including how to choose the right words, how to help students understand word meaning, and the importance of giving students independence and practice using new words in multiple contexts.

   It was interesting that many videos provided vocabulary explanations. Perhaps this is because this concept is less understood, and those wanting to promote it would need to explain why it is important in a literacy program. This might also explain the higher frequency of citing research in the explanations.
**Demonstrations of vocabulary instruction.** Twenty-six percent of the videos contained some modeling of how to teach vocabulary to students, although many more discussed vocabulary activities. The examples in the videos included a mix of direct and incidental vocabulary instruction. Eleven of the videos addressed direct, explicit instruction. Of those videos, 8 taught words directly and 3 taught both words and strategies for predicting word meaning. For the 11 videos that taught words directly, no explanation was provided as to how the words were chosen, however two appeared to teach high-utility words. For the videos that addressed word-learning strategies, two focused on using context cues and one also advocated for teaching students to use word part clues (i.e., morphological information). One of the videos mentioned teaching students “word learning” strategies but did not specify what strategies. Three videos addressed implicit vocabulary instruction, and two of these only discussed implicit instruction. These videos addressed building students’ vocabulary by exposing them to oral language (2 of the videos), reading aloud to them (2 of the videos) and having them engage in independent reading (2 of the videos). Eight videos implied follow up opportunities to continue to practice the words, and 3 videos clearly addressed the importance of giving students exposure to the words in different contexts.

**Alignment with National Reading Panel findings.** The videos that depicted direct and/or indirect methods of vocabulary instruction aligned with National Reading Panel findings that vocabulary could be effectively taught using both methods. However, not all of the videos showed high quality examples of vocabulary instruction. The videos often did not indicate the importance of giving students multiple exposures to words and teaching words that would be contextually useful. As well, many of the videos showed a passive rather than an active and engaging style of teaching students vocabulary. In general, although the videos gave overall examples of appropriate ways to teach vocabulary (e.g., direct methods such as instruction in word meanings or indirect methods such as reading to students), many elements of the National Reading Panel findings were not captured.

**Recommended vocabulary videos.** High quality vocabulary videos included a research-based explanation of vocabulary instruction as well as a teaching demonstration video.

1. Teaching Vocabulary
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3Z-KqVm4eo

This video is a mini slideshow lecture on teaching vocabulary. It explains that vocabulary is essential to reading, above and beyond just decoding and fluency, using studies to support this idea. It discusses both expressive and receptive vocabulary, and explains the National Reading Panel findings on vocabulary instruction. It discusses the three-tier system for choosing vocabulary words to teach, discusses incidental and explicit vocabulary instruction strategies, and explains the importance of developing “word consciousness”.

2. Teaching Vocabulary using Word Wall
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tEjDdFoB2k

This video is a classroom demonstration of a teacher doing a multi-component vocabulary lesson on the word part “mono” and the word “monotone”. The teacher explains the prefix, defines the word, and has students use the word in various sentences. The teacher
and students demonstrate talking in a monotone voice. Students then fill out a worksheet with the word, a sentence, and an illustration.

**Text comprehension videos.**

**Explanations of text comprehension.** Of the 30 relevant videos, 30% contained an explanation of text comprehension instruction. Two of these explanations explicitly mentioned research. Three videos gave extremely clear explanations of text comprehension instruction and discussed the importance of explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies to students, such as predicting or summarizing. Many of the other videos lacked any real explanation, and instead described a program or vaguely discussed the importance of ensuring that students understand what they read.

**Demonstrations of text comprehension instruction.** Sixty-seven percent of the videos contained some modeling of how to teach text comprehension to students. Eleven of the thirty videos that addressed text comprehension instruction either mentioned or demonstrated the importance of purposeful reading, that is, reading as a meaning-making activity. Nine of the thirty videos addressed the importance of explicitly teaching comprehension strategies, and eleven modeled some such strategies. The most common strategies addressed were question generation (7 videos), predicting (6 videos), and summarizing (6 videos). Some of the other strategies in the videos were clarifying, connecting to prior knowledge, inferring, visualizing, and trying to identify main ideas. Ten of the videos demonstrated that reading comprehension strategies should be taught in an integrated fashion, and that students should be able to apply multiple strategies when reading a piece of text.

With respect to how reading comprehension strategies should be taught to students, a variety of ways were shown or discussed. Seven videos showed or discussed the importance of direct instruction of reading comprehension strategies. Eight videos demonstrated or promoted someone modeling for students how to use the strategy. Eight videos addressed some kind of guided practice for the strategies, and thirteen videos showed students using strategies or mentioned the need for students to apply their knowledge as they read.

**Alignment with National Reading Panel findings.** Many videos did not clearly convey the importance of teaching students to be strategic readers, nor did they discuss the importance of providing the scaffolding necessary for students to become independent readers over time and with practice. Videos sometimes gave weak examples such as simply reading books aloud and asking a few questions, or having students use strategies that they had not explicitly been taught.

However, several videos did exemplify the National Reading Panel recommendation that students should be taught to monitor their own understanding and should be taught a variety of comprehension strategies that can be applied flexibly while reading. Several videos demonstrated specific strategies that the National Reading Panel found to be effective, including cooperative learning, question generation, and summarizing. Fewer videos depicted answering teacher-generated questions, and there were no videos that demonstrated the use of graphic organizers or the teaching of story structure. In addition to the strategies that the National Reading Panel found effective, the videos also depicted other strategies including activating prior knowledge, predicting, inferring, and visualizing.

**Recommended text comprehension videos.** Three videos that gave excellent demonstrations of comprehension strategy instruction in the classroom were found.
1. Before, During and After Questions: Promoting Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sd1FlXxpVIw

This is a classroom demonstration video that shows a teacher guiding her students in using an “asking questions” strategy to promote reading comprehension. Students generate and share questions before, during, and after reading, and then track their own understanding throughout the reading session.

2. Summarization 6 Reciprocal Teaching Pt 1
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oXskcnb4RA

This video explains the protocol for reciprocal teaching and gives a classroom demonstration of it in practice. This 4-stage process includes predicting (including a stage for confirming and rejecting predictions), clarifying (asking and answering questions about the text), questioning (asking deep questions about purpose), and summarizing. The teacher reviews the process with students and then they break out into guided reading groups, supported by the teacher.

3. Summarization 6 Reciprocal Teaching Pt 2
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8gSIcSyypk

This is a companion to the above video, which continues to show students engaged in reciprocal teaching.

Video Creators

Who created the videos and the rationale for their creation was not always transparent. Although many gave explicit information about their creator either in the video itself, in text, or in the video comments, some videos did not. As well, when the videos featured “experts” who gave their name and qualifications, they did not always clearly state their affiliation. Therefore, determining who posted the videos and whether or not they were part of a for-profit enterprise was a challenge, and gave interesting insight into the “masked” nature of YouTube video creators. Although many of the videos were created by non-profit organizations, many of the videos had for-profit creators.

Non-profit. It was determined that 47% of the analyzed videos were created by non-profit agencies. Of these, over half were created by the organization The Balanced Literacy Diet, which contributed 40 of the 144 relevant videos on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. The Balanced Literacy Diet website (www.balancedliteracydiet.org) explains that the site was created by university- and school-based experts with the support of the Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment. The Melissa Institute is a non-profit organization aimed at preventing violence and promoting safer communities through applying research-based knowledge. They developed their website in the hope of improving literacy outcomes for all students and preventing the “spiral of failure”.

Three other non-profit organizations that had contributed at least two videos were Reading Rockets (2 videos), Curriculum Services Canada (2 videos) and Best Practices Weekly (2 videos). According to their website (www.readingrockets.org), Reading Rockets is a national multimedia project funded by the U.S. Department of Education that offers research-based and
best practice information about reading instruction. Curriculum Services Canada (www.curriculum.org) is a non-profit agency for quality assurance in learning products and programs. Best Practices Weekly (www.bestpracticesweekly.com) offers educational stakeholders free, teacher-friendly summaries of high quality educational research.

The fact that non-profit organizations were using YouTube to disseminate information about effective literacy instruction suggests that they consider it to be a platform with a fairly wide audience. It was encouraging to note that viewers looking for reading-related information on YouTube would have some access to videos produced by non-profits, which may provide a more trustworthy source of information about teaching reading than videos created with profit-making intentions.

For-profit. The remaining 53% of videos were created by for-profit organizations. Publishing companies and other companies offering programs or services (such as training or tutoring) were very highly represented. Publishing companies with at least two videos included Heinemann Publishing, Northpoint Horizons Educational Publishing, SRA/McGraw-Hill, Sopris West, and Stenhouse Publishers. Companies offering other for-profit services that had produced at least two videos included Bonnie Terry Learning, Bureau of Education Research, Have Fun Teaching, Phonics International, Phonics Bug, Pride Learning Centers and Save the Teacher.

In addition to these more “traditional” businesses attempting to promote their products or services online, 9 of the videos were produced by “eHow”. eHow is not like the other companies in that content is not generated in an attempt to sell a product or service. Instead, eHow hires video creators to cheaply make videos on a variety of prescribed, popular topics generated using computerized algorithms. For example, if an algorithm determined that people often search “How to Teach Reading Comprehension”, someone would be commissioned to make a short video with this title. These videos generate profit by directing video viewers to an associated advertisement, the revenue for which is received by eHow. This kind of business model is sometimes referred to as a “content farm” or “content mill”. There is some suggestion that these kinds of videos may lack quality, since there may be no investment on the part of eHow or the video maker to produce high-quality content, as long as the content can draw a viewer to an advertisement (Gillette, 2011; Roth, 2009).

Overall, it required quite a bit of ingenuity and a strong understanding of how YouTube content is organized to unearth the identity of some of the profit-making organizations that were posting YouTube videos. At first glance, these videos often appeared to be simply teaching examples posted for explanatory or interest purposes as opposed to subtle advertisements. Videos posted by eHow were particularly tricky to interpret at first glance, as they appeared to be videos posted by friendly amateurs on important topics, rather than videos with questionable information specifically targeted to generate views that would lead to advertising revenue.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

Conclusions

The current exploratory study attempted to provide a snapshot of YouTube videos related to reading instruction. The study gave a sense for the popularity of YouTube videos about reading instruction, the kind of content that exists, and who is creating and accessing such content. As well, a variety of insights were gained into the organization of YouTube and some
of the challenges of conducting studies that explore this relatively new platform for sharing and accessing information. Several key findings are highlighted below.

**Viewership, content, and video creators.** Perhaps the most obvious and yet important conclusion of the study was that YouTube is indeed being used to share and access videos about reading instruction. This was convincingly supported by the sheer number of videos that addressed the limited subset of topics considered in this study. It is clear that videos about reading instruction are attracting many viewers, and it is very plausible, given the demographic findings, that literacy stakeholders (particularly teachers) are using YouTube as an information resource. These findings suggest the importance of considering how YouTube is being used to gain information about teaching reading, and also point to the potential that YouTube has to disseminate information about reading instruction to various audiences.

With respect to the nature of their content, videos most often provided explanations of concepts or demonstrations of reading instruction in a classroom environment. This aligns with the recognition of the possible utility not only as a straightforward source of information, but also as a platform for providing exposure to classroom practice. This finding may be of particular interest to teacher educators who are interested in incorporating multimedia into their instruction, or to pre-service or in-service teachers who are looking for models that they can emulate in their classrooms.

Although the findings of the current study point to the potential promise of YouTube as a source of information about reading instruction, one of the challenges of this medium is the range of quality of the videos. This study considered the content of videos in light of its reference to research in general, as well as its alignment with the findings of the National Reading Panel. Although some videos provided relevant and accurate information by these standards, many did not, suggesting that the quality of YouTube video content may require close scrutiny before supporting it as a good source of information for reading stakeholders.

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of the study was the high number of videos produced by people and organizations with profit-making interests. YouTube is clearly being leveraged for its revenue-generating potential. Moreover, although the use of YouTube by for-profit organizations was prolific, it was also extremely subtle at times. Significant detective work was often required in order to determine the author of the videos, many of which had a misleading “amateur” flavour and/or did not appear to explicitly promote a product or an approach.

People searching YouTube for videos about reading instruction would benefit from being aware of the difficulty in determining the source of the videos, and from understanding strategies for distinguishing profit from non-profit video contributors (the most useful being to take a careful look at the creator’s channel). This need for YouTube information-seekers to have the skills necessary to evaluate the credibility of videos and the possible biases of their creators is very much in alignment with the movement for “information literacy”. Information literacy has been defined as the skills necessary to “find, evaluate, and use information effectively to solve a particular problem or make a decision” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1989, p. 4). Information literacy is considered particularly important in a participatory web environment, where authority is blurred, authorship is unclear, and information is easily transmutable (Spiranec & Zorica, 2010; Farkas, 2012).

**Understanding the inner workings of YouTube.** This study provided insights into the organization of YouTube that may be beneficial to both YouTube users and researchers wanting to conduct studies on YouTube content. A central consideration, both from a methodological and a user perspective, is how content is stored and how search terms access content.
Conducting this study affirmed the importance of understanding that YouTube content is organized by users. By adding a title, description, and tags to a video, video creators can attempt to describe their content in a way that will help others to find it. However, there is no top-down quality control system or taxonomy that is used consistently by content creators. Therefore, discovering videos on any topic requires guesswork as to what terms may be used to describe relevant videos. Any attempt to exhaustively identify videos on a given topic would require careful selection of terms that would tap the full scope of videos on that topic. However, even the use of highly specified search terms cannot always guarantee accurate results. The only surefire way to determine the accuracy of a video result is to watch the video, an important fact to understand if one is claiming to comprehensively explore the videos that exist on any given topic.

In addition to providing an interesting practical perspective on how YouTube content is organized, the current study also went “deeper” into the methodologies of YouTube research by collecting YouTube-provided statistical data. Although previous studies have explored YouTube content, no studies were found that systematically collected and considered YouTube statistics. This study demonstrated that interesting information is available about video viewers’ age and gender. Since the study was conducted, a new feature that lists the top locations (i.e., country of origin) of viewers has been added.

Limitations

Although this study provided an important first examination of YouTube as a source of information about reading instruction, several important limitations must be noted. These include limitations in the scope of the study and the generalizability of the results, and limitations regarding the type of conclusions that can be drawn from the data presented.

Generalizability of the results. Although this study has presented a broad consideration of reading instruction on YouTube, the only topics explicitly addressed were the limited subset found in the National Reading Panel report. These topics are not reflective of the full range of themes or topics related to teaching reading. Videos are likely available on many other reading-related concepts such as print awareness, word-solving strategies, grammar instruction, reading motivation, supporting English language learners and so on. As well, many videos may be available on specific programs or approaches to reading instruction such as the “Daily Five”, “inquiry-based learning”, “peer assisted learning strategies”, “multi-sensory approach”, “guided reading”, “reciprocal teaching”, “shared reading”, “sight word drills”, and so on. Thus, this study is not a comprehensive picture of YouTube videos relating to all possible topics about reading instruction.

In addition to only focusing on particular topics, the study employed a limited subset of search terms for the topics chosen. Given this, the findings of the study may not even generalize to all videos on the five topics that were explored in detail. The results of the current study are best interpreted as information about the kinds of videos that YouTube users would most likely see when searching for information about phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, or text comprehension.

Data collection methods. The current study employed data collection methods that were able to capture some information about the videos that were explored. Data must not be over-interpreted or used to answer research questions that are better addressed by techniques not employed by this study. From the data provided in this study, it is not possible to answer questions such as “which videos are the most interesting?”, “which of the Big Five topics has
more viewership?” or “do non-profit videos provide higher quality information than for-profit videos”? These questions would require their own methodology to answer: one that would probably require careful development of reliable rating systems to capture some of the rich information about YouTube videos.

Future Directions

There are many fruitful future directions for researchers wanting to conduct studies on YouTube videos as a source of information about reading instruction. These could involve: broadening or narrowing the scope of content considered, developing more advanced methodologies for capturing information from videos, or studying video viewers in more depth. Additional work could also explore topics such as the value of YouTube as a platform for disseminating research about reading instruction, or the value of using YouTube clips as an instructional tool.

Broadening or narrowing the scope. The idea that other topics could be explored is probably the most obvious direction for future research. As in medical research (where research has focused on different medical conditions), it may be interesting to understand the type of information YouTube videos portray on a variety of reading-related topics. For example, a study could be conducted about information about “guided reading” available on YouTube. Other options for this work would be to try to exhaustively find videos on a complex topic not easily captured by a single term, such as reading comprehension strategies. Future studies could determine how videos on such a topic are stored, and the most useful search terms to use to best access them. Possible research questions include: What search terms are most frequently used? Do certain terms generate more results? Do certain terms generate more accurate results? How many more videos exist than those retrieved by one search?

Refining methodologies. Given that YouTube is a very new Internet-based tool, it is unsurprising that there are no established methodological standards for harnessing it as a source of information. Although several studies have come out on this topic in recent years, it is clear that methods for conducting research on YouTube are still emerging.

Future studies may continue to consider how to best gain reliable, replicable, and meaningful data from search results and the videos themselves, including all the content that is associated with them (e.g., tags, statistics). Information-gathering procedures should be carefully considered in light of a deep understanding of the organization of YouTube. A measured consideration of search procedures is particularly warranted when researchers want to try to produce results generalizable to the entire body of YouTube videos on a topic, or even to the entire body of results for a search that retrieves thousands of videos. Search protocols could be better developed and articulated for different study purposes.

Along a similar line, a clear finding from this study was that the videos retrieved by a search term are not necessarily relevant to the intended focus of that term. As this was an initial exploration, a consideration of some of the “irrelevant” results was part of the overall findings. However future studies may wish to limit their analysis to an established number of results that have been screened and determined to be relevant.

Future work may benefit from considering new ways that quantitative and/or qualitative methods could be used to leverage rich and important data from YouTube videos. For example, qualitative methods could include analyzing narratives in the comments, whereas quantitative methodologies may work towards developing or refining rating systems with established reliability and answering empirical questions such as “Are non-profit videos more likely to
provide high quality and/or accurate results?” or “Does the number of views a video receives relate to its format?”.

**Learning more about YouTube viewers.** The current study only provided basic insight into the gender and age of users viewing videos about reading instruction. However, many questions remain unanswered, in particular, who is viewing these videos (e.g., their profession), and why? Developing a better understanding of the YouTube users and the social context for sharing and accessing YouTube videos was articulated as one of the highest priorities for future research in this area in a recent Delphi study (Snelson, Rice, & Wyzard, 2012). While it is tempting to come to the blanket conclusion that the video viewers considered in this study were teachers looking for information about reading instruction, this is not an established fact and obscures much information of possible interest. Are these new teachers who are looking for information to support their knowledge of teaching early reading? Are these teachers of English language learners rather than teachers who teach in an English-speaking context? Or, is it possible that the viewers are not teachers at all, but rather teacher educators looking for instructional videos, parents interested in learning more about literacy, or other stakeholders looking for general information.

As well, in addition to answering questions about who is using the videos and why, another important question to ask would be: how are users accessing video content and are their strategies effective? What skills or qualities (if any) make users more successful at harnessing the power of YouTube as a source of information about reading instruction? Are users able to find the results they are looking for?

**Exploring YouTube as a platform for dissemination.** If, as it appears, YouTube is reaching a wide audience of people interested in learning about reading instruction, this has important implications for reading stakeholders interested in providing information about teaching reading. Future research could consider how YouTube may best be used to convey such information, particularly from the perspective of researchers wanting to disseminate information to practitioners. In an experimental fashion, future studies could create and post YouTube videos that vary on relevant dimensions (e.g., their audiovisual quality, their length, their format, how they are categorized on YouTube, their topic) and examine how these factors influence viewer response.

**Evaluating the instructional potential of YouTube videos.** Not only can YouTube videos be used by laypeople as a source of information about reading instruction, but they can also be used as a tool to supplement instruction about how to teach reading. Research studies have shown that video-based “case studies” can be effective teaching and learning tools. For example, Morena & Ortecan-Layne (2008) conducted an experimental study that assessed pre-service teachers’ ability to apply theoretical concepts to practical teaching situations after experience text-, animation-, or video-based exemplars. They found that teachers exposed to video- and animation-based exemplars were better able to apply the targeted theoretical principles and enjoyed learning more. In another study (Dieker, Lane, Allsop, O’Brien, Butler, Kyger, Lovin, & Fenty, 2009), pre-service teachers’ ability to identify the key elements of a vocabulary instruction strategy were assessed after they had either viewed a video demonstrating the strategy, or read a transcript containing the same information verbatim. A higher percentage of teachers who had seen the video were able to recall each of the important elements of the vocabulary lesson (for example, 75% of the video group identified that 3-5 target words should be identified, versus 45% of the text group). While these studies indicate the promise of video-based case exemplars in teaching reading instruction concepts, the specific
parameters in which they are effective are still being established. Determining what videos promote what learning for whom under what circumstances are still questions very much up for debate.

Final Thoughts

While it has been established YouTube is used as a source of information about teaching reading, much work still must be done to determine how useful it is. Future study could help to further our understanding of how this unique and popular tool can be optimized both as a source of information and a platform for disseminating information about reading instruction.
References


Appendix A.

National Reading Panel Research Checklist

Methods recommended in the National Reading Panel report are marked with an asterix. (*)

**Phonemic awareness**

What does the video address?
- Phonological awareness
- Phonemic awareness
- Both
- Neither

Does the video focus on only phonemic awareness, or is the difference between phonemic awareness and/or phonological awareness/phonics explained?
- Yes
- No

Does the video promote focusing on only 1 or 2 types of phonemic awareness activities?
- Yes*
- No
- NA

What type(s) of phonological and/or phonemic awareness activity(ies) is involved or promoted? (check all that apply)
- Generating rhymes
- Identifying whether words rhyme
- Picking the word that does not rhyme
- Breaking words into syllables
- Blending*
- Segmenting*
- Elision/sound manipulation
- Phoneme matching
- Phoneme isolation or identification
- Other: __________________
- None

Does the video demonstrate or promote teaching phonemic awareness skills using letters?
- Yes*
- No

Does the video mention or show instruction geared to readers from pre-kindergarten to first grade or older, struggling readers?
- Yes*
- No
- Unsure
**Phonics**

Does the video explicitly promote or demonstrate teaching phonics in a clearly defined sequence (systematic)?
- [X] Yes*
- [ ] No

Does the video promote or demonstrate *explicitly* teaching predictable letter-sound relationships? (not teaching them only in the context of a story)
- [X] Yes*
- [ ] No

Does the video promote or demonstrate giving students substantial practice using these relationships when reading?
- [X] Yes*
- [ ] No

Does the video mention or show instruction geared to readers from pre-kindergarten to first grade or older, struggling readers?
- [X] Yes*
- [ ] No
- [ ] Unsure

Does the video promote or demonstrate teaching vowels as well as consonants?
- [X] Yes
- [ ] No

Does the video promote or demonstrate teaching digraphs or trigraphs in addition to single-letter correspondences?
- [X] Yes
- [ ] No

Does the video provide good examples of short-vowel *sounds*, instruction or practice?
- [X] Yes
- [ ] No

Does the video provide good examples of long-vowel *spellings*, instruction or practice?
- [X] Yes
- [ ] No

Does the video provide onset-rime instruction or practice?
- [X] Yes
- [ ] No

**Fluency**

Does the video promote or demonstrate repeated oral reading?
- [X] Yes*
- [ ] No
Does the video promote or demonstrate feedback?
- Yes*  
- No

Does the video promote or demonstrate modeling of fluent reading?
- Yes*  
- No

Does the video promote or demonstrate having students read text at their own reading level?
- Yes*  
- No

Does the video promote or demonstrate children reading in partners with instruction to provide feedback?
- Yes*  
- No

**Vocabulary**

What kind of vocabulary instruction does the video promote or demonstrate? (check all that apply)
- Direct*  
- Indirect*  
- Neither

If there is an explicit focus on vocabulary instruction, what does the video promote or demonstrate? (check all that apply)
- Explicit instruction of individual words*  
- Explicit instruction in word parts*  
- Instruction in word learning strategies*  
- None of the above

If there is an implicit focus on vocabulary instruction, what does the video promote or demonstrate? (check all that apply)
- Oral language development*  
- Listening to reading*  
- Reading independently*  
- None of the above

What word learning strategies, if any, does the video address? (check all that apply)
- Using dictionaries/reference materials*  
- Using information about word parts*  
- Using context clues*  

If the video directly teaches words, are they… (check all that apply)
- Key-concept words?  
- High-utility words?  
- Difficult words? (Homonyms or synonyms?)
None of the above

Does the vocabulary instruction in the video depicted or imply repetition and/or follow-up activities to ensure learning or the words?
- Yes*
- No

Does the vocabulary instruction in the video promote or demonstrate activities using the word in various contexts?
- Yes*
- No

Text Comprehension

Does the video explicitly promote or demonstrate purposeful reading?
- It is explicitly mentioned*
- It is demonstrated*
- No

Does the video promote or demonstrate explicit teaching of comprehension strategies?
- Yes*
- No

What techniques for comprehension strategy instruction does the video promote or demonstrate? (check all that apply)
- Direct explanation*
- Modeling*
- Guided practice*
- Application*
- None of the above

What strategies are promoted or demonstrated? (check all that apply)
- Monitoring understanding*
- Cooperative learning*
- Use of graphic organizers*
- Answering questions generated by the teacher*
- Generating questions*
- Using story structure*
- Summarizing*
- Using prior knowledge
- Mental imagery
- Other: _______________________
- None

Does the video demonstrate or promote an integrated approach to teaching comprehension strategies? (i.e., students should be using more than one strategy when they read)
- Yes*
- No
Appendix B.

Distribution of Video Lengths

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<thead>
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<th>Length in Minutes</th>
<th>Frequency Count</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C.

Distribution of Phonemic Awareness Video Views

Distribution of Phonics Video Views
Distribution of Fluency Video Views

Distribution of Vocabulary Video Views