An evaluation of Wordshark in the classroom

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to evaluate the utility of Wordshark, a multisensory drill-and-practice computer program designed to improve children's spelling and word recognition skills. The content of Wordshark, which utilises digitised speech feedback and an enjoyable game format, was based on the systematic phonic wordlists and teaching structure of the book Alpha to Omega (Hornsby and Shear, 1975), an approach that has been widely adopted for teaching children with dyslexia. A 20-item questionnaire on the use and effectiveness of the program was sent to 1312 schools in the UK that had purchased the program, and 403 replies were received (31% response rate). The results indicated that the program was predominantly being used in primary schools, but over one-third of users were in secondary schools. In the majority of schools the program was being used with pupils who have special educational needs, including children with dyslexia. Wordshark was principally used to practice words, to introduce new words, to find out whether children can read and spell particular words, to reinforce teaching points, and as a reward for effort and/or good work. The children were reported to enjoy using the program and almost all (96%) of respondents stated that children were better motivated when using the program than when doing other classroom work. In the vast majority of cases, significant improvements in children's reading and spelling were reported. The findings are discussed in relation to the theory and practice of computer-assisted learning for dyslexia.