

Hempenstall, K. (1994). The role of phonics in learning to read: What does the research say? Speld, 25(2), 10-11.

The role of phonics instruction in learning to read has always been controversial. It is particularly so in the last 10 years in Australia with the rise of the whole language movement which eschews phonics teaching. The whole language philosophy rejects phonics teaching on principle because it teaches reading using units less than the whole word, that is, via letters, syllables and morphemes. An emphasis on phonics teaches an analytical approach to words - it involves being taught to sound out unknown words rather than being expected to memorize them by shape. Thus one tries to teach a generative strategy, one which enables the reader to decode words previously unseen. This strategy does not make learning to read as easy as one would like, for two major reasons. The letter sounds especially consonants differ, depending on the sounds around them in a word. So the sound for /d/ in dim is a different sound from /d/ in bid, and from /d/ in dose. If a teacher tries to teach the sound for /d/ it will come out /duh/ which is not the sound of /d/ in any of the preceding examples. Because we long ago mastered the alphabetic principle (that a written symbol represents a sound), we no longer notice the discrepancies, but children can be confused by the variation. It takes time and practice for children to appreciate that the phonic strategies allow an approximate speech sound, one sufficiently close to the actual phoneme, from which correct pronunciation follows.

The second problem is that our vowel letters carry responsibility for one, two or three different sounds. For example, "bar", "bat", "bake" each use the letter "a" for a different sound. The system is not chaotic but rule-governed; however, there are exceptions to most rules.

Reading is an intellectually challenging task however it is presented to children. The question is whether teaching the alphabetic principle and some rules is more effective in the long run than using a whole word recognition strategy, and/or a process of guessing from the meaning of surrounding words (as whole language advocates would prefer). The issue should really be an educational, not a philosophical one, and so should be resolved on the basis of what works better. Over the last thirty years or so, the bulk of research has supported the superiority of an initial phonics emphasis. This does not mean that there must be an either/or dichotomy between meaning-emphasis approaches (such as whole language) and code-emphasis programs (phonics). From a pragmatic point of view there is no reason why a whole language program could not ensure adequate phonics teaching for all those students in need. Unfortunately, the intransigent position (no phonics) adopted by some whole language advocates could jeopardize the development of those students particularly in need of phonics teaching - those often described as at-risk, learning- or language-disabled, or dyslexic. Some whole language purists consider phonic cues have no place at all in a reading program, though most would view them as of secondary importance. They view reading as primarily a linguistic, not a visual, exercise; one of only sampling segments of the print and actively predicting what the words will be. If children need assistance they are taught to guess more wisely. This approach is disastrous for children in difficulty, and has been thoroughly discredited by research over the last fifteen years.

The role of phonic cues in whole language approaches has been reduced to those needed to identify a letter or two of a word so as to aid the confirmation of the guess. Whole language advocates argue that these phonic cues can and should be learned without explicit teaching. Further it is claimed that exposure to meaningful, authentic literature is all that students need in order to learn to read because learning to read is much the same as learning to speak - a natural process. Since we learn to speak without formal instruction, so we should learn to read the same way. Unfortunately it isn't so. Mastering a written language is an achievement which far outweighs the requirements of speech production. Written language is an artificial, visually-based device quite distinctly more challenging than biological sounds-based processes of speech. Many children need careful, systematic teaching of decoding skills, but will not receive it in a pure whole language program.

Does phonics mean enormous quantities of work sheet exercises, trying to remember large numbers of rules with dubious utility? Does it mean the use of such stilted stories as Nan can fan Dan? It certainly did so in past times when the purpose of reading became submerged under a fascination with the elements of the process. However research has continued to separate the necessary from the marginal, and has increasingly defined the proper place of phonics in a comprehensive literacy program. What phonics, when, how much

and for whom? These are the questions which continue to be examined - not the question whether, for it has been answered resoundingly in the affirmative.

Phonemic awareness: The missing link?

An extensive amount of reading research over the past ten years has emphasized the critical role of phonemic awareness in successfully beginning reading. It is an awareness that words are made up of smaller sound segments or phonemes. It is this conscious reflection on the structure of words which allows us to decide that "sat" has three phonemes, and "splat" has five. This is a difficult task for young children - many even consider a spoken sentence as one continuous stream of sound. They can be shown that despite the uninterrupted flow of a sentence one can learn to distinguish individual words. In stages, they learn to appreciate that it is possible to segment words into syllables (foot-ball); and, around year 1, into phonemes (m-a-t). This awareness is a pre-requisite for learning to read and spell an alphabetic writing system like ours. The relationship is a causal one - until phonemic awareness is achieved skilled reading will not occur. It can be tested, it can be taught, or it may be deduced by experience with print. Its absence is now considered a major cause of reading failure, though its presence does not guarantee success. Teaching phonemic awareness to children in their kindergarten or prep year (before any reading instruction), has been shown to improve their reading a year or two later. This finding is of particular relevance to at-risk and reading disabled students, who appear most in need of such assistance.

When students enter a reading program with phonemic awareness they are part the way towards appreciating the alphabetic principle. Reading becomes a task which "makes sense", not a confusing array of shapes jumbled together seemingly at random. When phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge are combined the effects are enhanced, that is, the children associate the shape of a letter with the sound in a word. Some children enter school with thousands of hours of literacy experience through rhyming games, Sesame Street, Playschool, I-Spy, plastic letter games, stories read to them, and teaching dolly to read. Other children have had either little interest or little opportunity for such exploration. Others still may have such experiences but they don't make the cognitive leap towards a conscious awareness. Dyslexics, for example, may have a weakness (perhaps partly genetic) in this area, and require intensive structured teaching to develop their phonemic awareness. Whole language theorists have tended to ignore the structure of language and avoid sounds-based instruction. They believe that children will induce the alphabetic principle by exposure to "real" literature and through communicating "authentically" in writing using invented spellings. The failure of whole language (at least in its current form) to be sensitive to the results of research is likely to cause its current government endorsement as a preferred model to be reconsidered.

Teaching phonics

What phonics elements should be included in a comprehensive reading program? There are aspects of reading which are not well comprehended unless they are explicitly taught in isolation from meaningful text. Among these are letter-sound correspondences. Children must be taught the most common sounds which letters represent, even though the sounds will not correspond exactly with how they will sound in words. Children can cope with these slight variations. Secondly, they must have the opportunity to practise these phonic generalizations in text which is controlled for regularity to a reasonable degree. Apart from letter-sound rules, another approach is to consider onset-rime divisions. Recent research has shown that breaking syllables into onsets (the part of the syllable before the vowel), and rimes (the rest of the syllable from the vowel onward) can provide another form of letters-sound regularity. Rimes like "ack", "ain", "ake", "ale", "all", "ame" are very regular across a large number of words, and provides powerfully in decoding novel words. If I know the word "back" I can use the rime "ack" to help decode "tack", "smack" etc. Phonics encourages children to seek patterns of letters they can recognize. It also focuses attention on all the letters, not only a few; we know from eye movement studies that skilled readers view every letter and do not sample only a few as some theorists have claimed.

Students also must be able to blend the letters or letter clusters. The beginning reader approximates the word by sounding it out, and then matching that approximation to a real word which fits the meaning of the

sentence. This requires teaching, and time for adequate practice, and children vary in the amount of practice needed to achieve mastery. Blends should be taught as continuous sounds where possible e.g. "man" should be sounded "mmaaaannn" not as "mmm-aaa-nnn". Continuous blends make it easier to telescope the sounds into a real word.

Oral reading practice provides the teacher with opportunities to provide corrective feedback to students. Every error (not only those altering meaning) is an opportunity for teaching:

systematic correction is far more valuable for students than is waiting for self-correction, or worse, ignoring errors because correction may dishearten the child, or because of faith that errors will eventually reduce of their own accord.

When sounds have been presented in isolation they must be presented in various contexts (word lists, then appropriate reading passages). Children need sufficient practice and review to develop automatic recognition. This requires overlearning, which in turn means that care is needed in selecting reading material which provides this practice. Those children who learn quickly can refine and extend their abilities in a broader based literature program, rather than progressing lock-step . How much phonics? As little as is possible to allow the child entry into the world of successful and enjoyable reading. It is known that as fluent reading develops, readers rely less and less on phonic strategies, using them only for difficult novel words. Automatic, rapid, context-free decoding occurs as the overlearned sequences of letters gradually begin to be perceived as syllables and words. Then skilled reading becomes so effortless that our limited attentional capacity can be devoted to comprehension of what we read. In contrast, children who continue to struggle at the level of print are using most of their attention to decode, and have little left to devote to comprehension. Once children master the basics, subsequent progress is largely determined by their volume of reading experience. Hence our program should be devoted to ensuring reading material matches their interest, and extends their higher order comprehension processes. To see children progressing in this way is exhilarating. To presume that the processes of skilled reading can be induced in children without their progressing through beginning stages is sadly misguided.

Phonics is the starting motor for an engine subsequently fuelled by confidence and enjoyment. Some starting motors turn sluggishly and demand a significant load from the battery (parents and teacher). If the battery fails, the journey may never begin.