

The Place of Phonics in Literacy Learning

Controversies about the most effective ways to help children's literacy learning have raged for more than four decades. The large and complex area of teaching literacy is often reduced to a long outdated debate about the teaching of reading and this is usually characterized as using phonics to teach reading versus using a 'whole language approach'. In reality few literacy educators would deny the importance of phonics and phonemic awareness as one component needed when becoming literate. Most, however, would argue that phonics is actually much more important when learning to spell and to write rather than when learning to read.

It is useful to start with a definition of reading for the purposes of this paper which will then provide a succinct summary of current research evidence on the best way for reading to be taught, and where the teaching of phonics resides within that.

Reading is a process of constructing meaning from a text. Clay (1991, p.14) calls it a problem solving process and points out that as readers we only sample 'enough visual information to be satisfied that we have grasped the message of the text so far'. The purpose of reading is to construct and reconstruct the meaning of text for a multitude of purposes. Prediction, questioning, testing and correcting are all important strategies. The reader brings their existing experience together with their knowledge of language to the information contained in the text and the context of the particular situation to make meaning. (See for example: Anstey, 2002; Braunger and Lewis, 1998; Goodman, 1975; Hornsby and Wilson, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983; Smith, 1985, 1988.) Merely decoding the words is an important but not an adequate definition of the reading process. As Emmit, Hornsby and Wilson (2013, p.3) state:

Three important sources of information in text are meaning, grammar and letter-sound relationships – often referred to as semantics, syntax and graphophonic relationships respectively.

These sources or cueing systems work together. Over-emphasis on any one cueing system when learning to read is ineffective.

Phonics

The complex relationship between patterns of letters (graphemes) and patterns of sounds (phonemes) is often referred to as *phonics*.

In its purest form a phonics approach starts with a limited set of letters which can be built into many different kinds of words. Gradually more letters are added and then the children are given consonant blends. As some words keep recurring, the child also begins to develop a sight vocabulary during these early stages. The individual letters are taught by the sounds they make and then children are induced to blend these sounds of the novel letter combinations. The important point about a phonics approach is that it teaches an analytic approach to words, one that is designed to exploit the alphabetic principle. The major criticism of the phonics approach include that it can be very boring and confusing for the child, that it obscures the function of reading (i.e. extracting meaning from print) and that many of the contrived texts lack coherence beyond the sentence level. Constant practice at producing phonemes and blending them together into a word in a decontextualised drill is not helpful for many children.

The danger with promulgating solely a phonics approach to the teaching of reading is that the primacy of oracy becomes lost. If students learn to decode words but do not know what the word means, they will be 'barking at print' and missing the most important part within this definition, that of comprehending meaning from the text.

The research demonstrates that promoting a heavy phonics-based approach to teaching reading can often result in children achieving good results on tests that merely ask them to pronounce lists of words but not on tasks requiring them to understand what they are reading (Krashen, 2009). The best way for children to excel in reading comprehension tasks is to undertake wide reading of books they select for pleasure (Sullivan & Brown, 2013; Krashen, 2004). Students who live in low socio economic areas are highly unlikely to read in this way because they lack the access to a wide range of quality texts at home and also often at school.

It is, however, clearly understood that students likely to be at risk of not learning to read proficiently – specifically students who have EAL/D, those who are developmentally delayed or have visual or auditory processing problems – may need more time with a repetition of explicit focus on particular skills and strategies. Sometimes this will include more emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness.

Learning to write and using phonics

It is also important to emphasise that phonics and phonemic awareness is more important for the writing process than learning to read. As Pearson (2004, p.226) explains:

...writing is the medium through which both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge develop – the former because students have to segment the speech stream of spoken words to focus on a phoneme and the latter because there is substantial transfer value from the focus on sound-symbol information in spelling to symbol-sound knowledge in reading .

It is particularly in writing that students need the clearest understanding of the alphabetic principle, although, in English there are 44 sounds and only 26 letters so it is almost untruthful to suggest to children that English is predominantly phonically regular. Think of the phonetic value of the “y” in the word *Pyne* (as an apposite example!), and in the words *yes*, and *happy*. And then of course there is the value of “ough” in *tough*, *though*, *through*, *bough*, *trough*, *nought*, *cough*, *hiccough*, *borough*, *plough*

Learning to read: using a repertoire of strategies

Many lay people make the mistake of juxtaposing a phonics approach with using a repertoire of approaches to literacy learning (Louden et al 2005). If one looks at the history of the theory of the teaching of reading, in reality the opposite end of the continuum to the phonics approach would be the “psycholinguistic approach” described by Kenneth Goodman, amongst others, in the late 1970s and 1980s. That approach can be too much of a guessing game for students to learn to read proficiently.

Research has shown that providing a repertoire of strategies is the most effective approach to literacy learning for more than 80 per cent of students. This approach incorporates rich and authentic texts that engage children, a balance between sight words which are not phonically regular and need to be learnt by sight e.g. the word *said*, and those that can be decoded e.g. *cat*. The skills and strategies that students learn to use are multiple and not singular as in an approach solely focussed on phonics and phonemic awareness.

Clearly the phonics approach, while useful, needs to be augmented with a variety of other skills and approaches.

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