

But We Do Teach Phonics!

Recent research is telling us that the way phonics is taught is critically important.

By Bonnie Macmillan

Since I wrote my book *Why Schoolchildren Can't Read*, the results of large-scale classroom studies in three different countries have become available. While these three studies confirm earlier findings as to the efficacy of phonics teaching for beginning reading instruction, each study also provides useful new evidence about exactly which elements of instruction are effective, and which of those are not, when attempting to teach children to read.

Canada

Sumbler and Willows compared the effects of synthetic phonics teaching with the effect of whole language/phonics-eclectic methods in 20 grade one classrooms. It was the first of its kind to adopt a time-sampling technique in which observers closely monitored, over a period of six months, the amount of time individual pupils spent on ten different activities.

Interestingly, it was found that out of these ten activities, only two were highly correlated with success in reading and spelling. These two were: **'phonics'** (which included all phonics activities involving print, letter-sound correspondences, blending, segmenting, detecting sounds in words) and **'letter formation'** (which involved talking about the shapes of letters, writing letters and words in the context of learning letter-sound relationships).

These were the only activities that mattered in terms of subsequent reading and spelling performance.

Equally important was the finding that six activities made no difference whatsoever to reading and spelling success, and two activities were actually related to worse reading and spelling achievement.

The six activities that made no difference were as follows: 'auditory phonological awareness' (in the absence of print); 'sight word learning' (learning to recognize whole words as units without sounding them out);

'reading/grammar' (grammar or punctuation explanations; reading by children that appeared to be real reading, usually with the teacher); 'concepts of print (learning about reading by chanting pattern books); 'real writing' (included any attempts to write text); and 'letter name learning' (included only letter names, not sounds).

The two activities that resulted in worse achievement were: 'non-literacy activities' (such as play, drawing, colouring, crafts), and 'oral vocabulary' (language development, story discussions, show and tell, teacher instructions).

Overall, the results from this study suggest that, rather than a particular method per se, it is the differences in time allocation that really count.

England

Stuart compared the effects of two methods of beginning reading instruction: a synthetic phonics method (combining phoneme awareness with letter-sound teaching) and a whole language method (based on the use of big books).

The results of this study agreed with the findings of the Canadian study. One year later, the greater allocation of time within the synthetic phonics classes to phonics-type activities resulted in these classes being significantly ahead of the other classes in standardized tests of reading (10 months ahead) and spelling (11 months ahead).

Even though the teachers using the big book method did include some letter-sound instruction along with shared reading activities, the amount of phonics emphasis required to accelerate initial reading progress was simply not sufficient. Their students took a year to make the same gains in phoneme segmentation and phoneme identify ability that the synthetic phonics children had made during the first 12 weeks of instruction.

This study demonstrated, in particular, the need for speed of learning at the beginning in order to avoid constant struggle later on to catch up.

Scotland

Johnston and Watson, working with 13 classes of year 1 children, compared three methods of instruction, all of which included teaching children letter shapes and how to form them: a) an 'analytic phonics' method (letter-sounds taught at the rate of one per week, in initial position in words only); b) a 'phoneme awareness plus analytic phonics' method (letter-sounds in initial position in words, taught at the rate of one per week, but half the time, both phoneme and rime awareness were taught in the absence of print), and c) a 'synthetic phonics' method (letter-sounds taught at the rate of six every eight days only in the context of print and seen in all positions of a word, along with segmenting and blending of all sounds in words).

After 16 weeks, methods a) and b) led to similar reading and spelling progress, both groups being on average one month below their chronological age, while the children taught with method c) were 7 months of reading age and 9 months of spelling age ahead of the other two groups.

Since an earlier study had indicated that faster-paced analytic teaching of letter-sounds led to less success than a similarly-paced synthetic approach, the authors concluded that it was not so much the faster pace of letter-sound learning in this later study that led to superior progress, but the fact that children exposed to this method were taught to segment and blend letters in all positions of a word.

(Adapted with permission from Newsletter No. 46 of the UK Reading Reform Foundation, www.rrf.org.uk. Dr. Macmillan is a Canadian reading expert who was educated in BC and now lives in London, England where she continues her research.)