

10-1-1987

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Natalie L. Delcamp
University of Central Florida

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Recommended Citation

Delcamp, N. L. (1987). Why The Phuss About Phonics?. *Reading Horizons*, 28 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol28/iss1/9

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WHY THE PHUSS ABOUT PHONICS?

NATALIE L. DELCAMP
University of Central Florida
Orlando

Of the many strategies employed to instruct beginning readers, phonics probably is the most controversial. Not only is it controversial but very misunderstood, particularly by the layman lacking perspective in the basic prerequisites of the beginning reading student (Rubin, 1982).

Phonics, quite literally, is the science or systematized knowledge of acoustics or sound. Phonics is a method used to help beginning readers enunciate unfamiliar words by learning the sounds which are associated with the letters in the words. Phonics has been the subject of rabid criticism and/or enthusiastic approval through hundreds of years of reading instruction.

The history of opposition to early intensive teaching of phonics is nearly as old as the origin of phonics itself. In (circa) 1527, a German named Valentin Ickelsamer wrote a phonics primer based on the notion that it was best to teach beginning readers to isolate speech sounds, or phonemes, and then say in serial order the phonemes represented by the letters of the word (Davies, 1974).

The opposition to this technique began within the next century when Lubinius proposed the "whole word" or "see and say" method of teaching reading. This was about 50 years before Comenius was credited with the whole-word-see-say idea of reading when he wrote his Orbit Pictus (Matthews, 1966).

Soon after the Revolution, Noah Webster prepared the first reading texts authored by American citizens because the teachers here no longer wanted to use the ABC Method materials which were prepared in England. Webster's texts introduced phonics not only as an aid to learning to read but also as a medium for unifying the American language.

About the middle of the next century many American

educators began European travel. They went to visit Pestalozzi, who designed experimental schools in Switzerland. They returned extolling the virtues of "The New Word Method" for beginning reading instruction. This method presented an object or a picture together with the word it represented in a manner reminiscent of see-say. Though widely used until the turn of the century, educators then decided this technique left students with little or no mastery in reading but rather an aptitude for word calling or thing identification.

Reading instruction thus went back to phonics, somewhat blindly, with much emphasis on memorization of sounds of letters and/or letter groups and little emphasis on comprehension. It was a sort of "Kate-ate-a-date" type of thing. Maybe it was the precursor of the Dr. Seuss nonsense syllables which don't help anyone learn to read, or comprehend.

By now, 1910-1920, newly devised tools of scientific investigation and measurement called Standardized Tests appeared on the educational horizon for the first time. These tests divulged dismal data indicating that the American child was reading poorly. This appalling "lack of literacy" was blamed entirely on the use of phonics instruction. The rationale of the educators was that the teachers had been spending too much time emphasizing phonetic elements at the expense of teaching reading for meaning. Once more phonics fell into educational disrepute. The new emphasis was placed on silent reading accompanied by questions to check the student's comprehension of what had been read (Auckerman, 1984).

As 1940 approached, testing once more disclosed that large numbers of children in America still could not read up to the educational expectancies of the educators. So once more phonics was dragged out and re-examined. It seemed to pass the scrutiny, for since that time phonics has been accepted by most educators as having validity (Matthews, 1966).

The foregoing historical summary of the use of phonics illustrates that the strategy has survived the yo-yo syndrome for hundreds of years. But then, who knows? Valentin Ickelsamer may have written his primer simply to facilitate the pronunciation of his own name. It surely

must have helped. And it has continued to help every beginning reader whose teacher is well trained in the application of functional phonetic principles.

There are many approaches to teaching phonics, but recent surveys indicate that teachers in preparation are not as familiar with these approaches as perhaps they should be to teach reading effectively to the beginning student (Smith, 1965). Many little learners are able to parrot the Alphabet Song when they begin formal schooling, but few are able to attach the correct name to the letter. Every teacher of early learners has seen children searching vainly for the letter elemno. How can a child learn to read if he cannot identify the symbols used on the printed page? All the spies in all the wars in history would have failed dismally without letter recognition ability when intercepting and breaking enemy codes. The child's ability to associate letters with appropriate sounds is second in importance to no other skill in helping establish reading independence.

Phonics taught sequentially with attachment of correct sounds to letters, small words, and short sentences is a basic consideration when teaching readiness for reading fluency and rate. Children who receive early intensive instruction in phonics develop superior word recognition skills in the early stages of reading and tend to maintain their superiority at least through the third grade (Dykstra, 1974).

Today there is impressive empirical evidence that children do use letter cues to recognize words from the time they first learn to read (Chall, 1983). It is known from research that if pupils are to recognize and transfer word recognition skills to unknown words, they must perceive and analyze the parts or features of the words both visually and auditorily. Some kindergartens have programs which lay the groundwork for the development of perception skills. But many kindergartners lack the developmental maturity for much perception training (McAlliater, 1982). The beginning reading student preparing for phonics instruction needs exercises in left-to-right directionality, eye sweep progression, and eye fix. The latter training perhaps is more important today than ever because of the deleterious effect of hours watching the

fragmented format of animated TV.

We know that a child needs a good oral communication base for any start in reading. But to say tht reading is an extension of oral language must give a first grade teacher pause. Few early learners enter school with much oral language development. While it is true the child has been verbalizing and vocalizing his feelings, wants, and needs for four or five years, it is the rare child who can respond in more than a monosyllabic word or two restricted to his experiential background. It is doubtful that children raised at Lake Woebegone would share the same background experiences with those brought up on the shores of Lake Okeechobee. How can a child be taught to read as an extension of oral language when the oral language development is too limited to fit into the curriculum plans which in no way relate to background? Few reading programs, if any, begin with the vernacular of The A-Team or Masters of the Universe. This type influence can be responsible for the esoteric language development demonstrated by many early learners.

A few years ago a reading consultant from a renown publisher of reading instruction was asked to demonstrate a pre-primer lesson in a local first grade classroom. This company, for years a leader in the basal reader approach, had published a reading system based on reading as an extension of oral language. The particular lesson involve a story with photos about house cats and had been an especially difficult lesson to relate to the students.

The Principal, the Reading Specialist, the CRT, plus all the primary grade teachers, hoping for some help in implementing a seemingly senseless reading lesson, all gathered for this memorable event. Never before had a consultant taught here!

All were rapt as the visiting guru led the students through the pages. All listened as the little learners read so many words so incorrectly. All waited eagerly for the expert to make suggestions or give the students clues for the correct reading of the printed matter. But, instead, all that was heard by the assemblage was the expositor pontificating platitudes such as "How nice!" "That's lovely." and "Yes, dear, read on."

After the demonstration, one teacher made bold to ask why the children were permitted to read incorrectly. To this the consultant replied, "Does it really matter if the child doesn't read the words exactly, as long as he makes a credible interpretation of the story and enjoys it?"

This is teaching reading?

The next story was about zoo animals. One child read the word hippopotamus as rhinopoterus. Had the child some groundword in phonics, this might not have happened.

Could this extension-of-oral-language reading instruction be a reason that so many upper grade kids have trouble reading in science and social studies? Without knowledge of word attack skills, how can they read words which are not included in their speaking vocabularies?

Apparently reading deficits are not new to education. They have been documented for hundreds of years. Perhaps failure is relative to societal demands. Boys and girls are not restricted to instinctive programming for periods of learning as are animals. Children's learning is dependent on so many factors and variables, not the least of which include background of reference and every kind of maturity. If given the necessary time and proper training, a child in primary grades could gain the sound foundation of a functional, practical, meaningful phonics program for the development of a successful and positive set of attitudes toward reading and the cultivation of habits and skills upon which reading competence depends.

In a report from the Commission on Reading (1985), phonics was identified as a strategy to help early learners relate spelling to sound and meaning. The report states that children who are taught phonics do better in sentence and story comprehension than those who are taught exclusively by the look-say plan.

Phonics has withstood the ravages of time--would it not be well to instruct the prospective teachers of reading in the fundamentals of phonetic principles, how to implement them, and thus effect more efficiency in reading instruction for beginning readers?
