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# LEARNING PHONICS NATURALLY: A MODEL FOR INSTRUCTION

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Incorporating phonics instruction into the teaching of reading continues to be a controversial subject. Those who oppose its incorporation note the inconsistency of sound-symbol correspondence in the English language. That is, some symbols or letters represent many sounds (e.g., bet, be, berth, brute) and some sounds have many spellings (e.g., the /u/ as in to, two, blue, through, blew). While phonics opponents favor reading instruction which emphasizes getting meaning from print, those who advocate phonics favor reading methods which emphasize "breaking the code". A further division exists even among phonics advocates. Should phonics generalizations be taught in context or in isolation?

In spite of the phonics controversy, reading methodology textbooks as well as basal reading programs suggest that teachers employ various types of phonics methods in the teaching of reading. The method may be analytical or inductive where children are given a set of words and are led to discover the common underlying phonic principle. Or, a synthetic phonics method may be suggested where children blend individual sounds, gradually constructing the word. Phonics instruction may also be based on a deductive method where a generalization is taught, and children are to apply it to unknown words.

While many teachers incorporate specific phonic methods, they often find the same recurring problem—children have difficulties applying phonics while reading text. Young children's inability to apply phonic principles may be due to their perceptions of how phonics fits into learning to read. Or, it may be due to teachers' perceptions of how children learn phonics and apply the sound-symbol correspondences of the English language. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers an understanding of primary children's abilities, inabilities, and requirements to use phonics as a beginning reading strategy and to suggest a model that facilitates children's application of phonics while reading.

## A Possible Source of Confusion

An underlying cause of problems with phonics instruction may be a discrepancy between adults' and children's perceptions of the world in general and language in particular. Children do not necessarily perceive the world as we adults do, nor do they necessarily hear or graphically represent linguistic sounds and words as adults do. What can result between students and teachers,

then, is a lack of common perceptions about sound-symbol correspondences and an inability to communicate those perceptions. Why should we assume that children readily perceive the adult model of sound-symbol correspondences any more than we assume that the teacher effortlessly perceives the children's model? Rather than imposing the complex adult model upon children, perhaps we as teachers should meet children at least halfway. Let's look at how children perceive the world.

Primary Grade Children: Their Abilities, Inabilities, and Requirements for Learning  
Stages of Development

Children look for meaning and attempt to perceive events as organized wholes in order to form their concepts about the world (Piaget, 1976). Like adults, children actively add to, delete from, and modify existing schemes in order to incorporate new information. Concept development is a gradual process, and in the course of gaining conceptual understandings, children perceive the world differently than adults do (Piaget, 1976). Young children are naturally active and curious about their surroundings and automatically investigate the world to derive meaning and build concepts.

Piaget (1955) reports that especially during the early stages of development children learn by doing. Piaget (1955) stresses that children need to do their own experimenting; they need to construct for themselves what is to be learned. When a teacher tells or teaches a generalization, s/he has prevented the students from discovering the generalization for themselves. It is through re-invention and continuous organization and reorganization of experiences that children learn. In relation to learning language, the teacher must provide children with opportunities to experiment with language and provide a non-threatening environment that promotes risk-taking.

Teachers can provide children with opportunities to experiment and make sense of language by permitting them to use invented spellings while writing (Chomsky, 1978; Henderson, 1980; Read, 1971). Children's invented spellings represent their understandings of sound-symbol correspondences. The problem sometimes encountered in classroom phonics instruction may, therefore, result not from lack of knowledge on the part of children but rather from a kind of conceptual clash between students and teachers.

Adult understandings of phonic rules are the result of vast experience with oral and written language. The rules as well as the exceptions to phonics generalizations are incorporated into the adult model. Children's understandings of sound-symbol correspondences, however, are derived mainly or solely from aural input. Children intuitively begin to form generalizations about sound-symbol correspondences and these generalizations are reflected in their invented spellings (Read, 1971). What we as teachers must do, then, is help children gradually substitute their well-founded intuitions about sound-symbol correspondences with a standard system that is not always based on a perfect, regular one-to-one correspondence between print and speech. Rather than

deny children's self-gained awareness, we should understand it and build upon it. For example, Rebecca, a second grade disabled reader, has written the following sentences in a classroom encouraging active involvement and risk-taking.

My teeth are good. I taylor kear of tham.  
I brash tham. Aftne meals I brash tham.

From Rebecca's invented spellings, the teacher can provide diagnostic-prescriptive phonics instruction enabling Rebecca to develop proficiency in reading.

#### Natural Language

For primary grade children, developing proficiency in sound-symbol correspondences is a natural process that progressively evolves through nurturing. The teacher can foster this process by providing children with natural language patterns in connected discourse. Goodman (1976) continually stresses the importance for children to read natural language. He states: "If the written language children encounter right from the beginning is whole, real, natural, and relevant, they will be able to use their existing language competence as they learn to read" (p. 13).

The Language Experience Approach, or LEA, encourages proficiency in reading because it uses the child's own language. By reading their own language patterns, children learn that language is systematic and patterned. Language is systematic in terms of its phonology and orthography (sound-symbol correspondence); a patterned relationship exists between the oral and written systems. Language is also systematic in terms of syntax (grammar) and semantics (meaning). In LEA, the child can develop insights into how language works as an integrative system, i.e., how sound-symbol, syntactic, and semantic components of language work together to provide redundancy so meaning can be constructed. Reading instruction that includes LEA encourages children to explore and experiment with the three components of language.

#### Oral Language Proficiency

Most primary grade children come to reading instruction with a well-developed understanding of language in the oral mode. At this stage, children have developed their own acoustic distinctive features and distinctive feature lists for processing language (Smith, 1971). That is, children have conceptualized the difference between the articulation of various phonemes by such sound characteristics as voiced /ð/ (as in the word those), voiceless /θ/ (as in the word thumb), nasal /m/ (as in the word mouse), duration, and position of tongue. They are able to discriminate single sounds and eliminate many alternatives in the total number of possible sounds. Children use distinctive features to develop feature lists in order to identify specific sounds or sound combinations that provide information for word recognition.

Most first grade children have mastery of distinctive features and feature lists in the acoustic system of language and have

developed these skills by listening to whole language (Smith, 1971). The process of acquiring acoustic features and feature lists is no less complex than acquiring visual features and visual feature lists (i.e., visual discrimination of letters or words). For the child to acquire the distinctive features and feature lists of the visual system, the child needs to experience whole language that is relevant and meaningful. The child has learned the acoustic system by first learning that oral language is communication. In other words, before the child has learned to say a word, the child has known the meaning associated with that spoken word. The same concept is true for reading. Meaning needs to precede the identification of the written word.

Creative writing, where invented spellings are encouraged, as well as LEA, are meaning-based approaches, permitting young children to acquire understanding of sound-symbol correspondences in a whole language context. From continual encounters with meaningful print, children gradually develop the necessary visual features to become a fluent reader.

We can best develop an effective approach to phonics instruction, then, by understanding primary grade children's abilities, inabilities, and requirements for learning. The model on the following page is based on primary grade children's cognitive and linguistic capabilities.

#### Phonics Instructional Model

The proposed phonics instructional model (see figure 1) is a four-step model designed to provide children with a natural way to learn phonics so they can become fluent readers. Steps one and two involve indirect teaching of phonics. In these two steps, the teacher places phonics in a holistic framework of creating and reading connected discourse. Steps three and four involve a more direct model of teaching where the teacher first analyzes the children's invented spellings to plan direct phonics instruction. The teacher then implements strategies that promote application of standard sound-symbol correspondences. Each part of the four-step model is explained to facilitate effective implementation.

#### LEA

The Language Experience Approach is the first step of the model. The fundamental component of LEA is dictation in which children tell a story based on personal experiences. As each child dictates the story to the teacher-scribe, s/he writes the story on the board or easel so the children can easily see the relationship of the spoken word to the written word. As the teacher writes each word, s/he can say the word emphasizing initial, medial, or final sounds developing sound-symbol correspondences. After the dictation is completed, the children can read their story with or without teacher assistance. Through continual encounters with LEA, children can begin to understand the concepts about reading, such as word boundaries, sentences, sound-symbol correspondences, and that reading is a communication process.

#### Creative Writing

The second step of the model is creative writing which provides

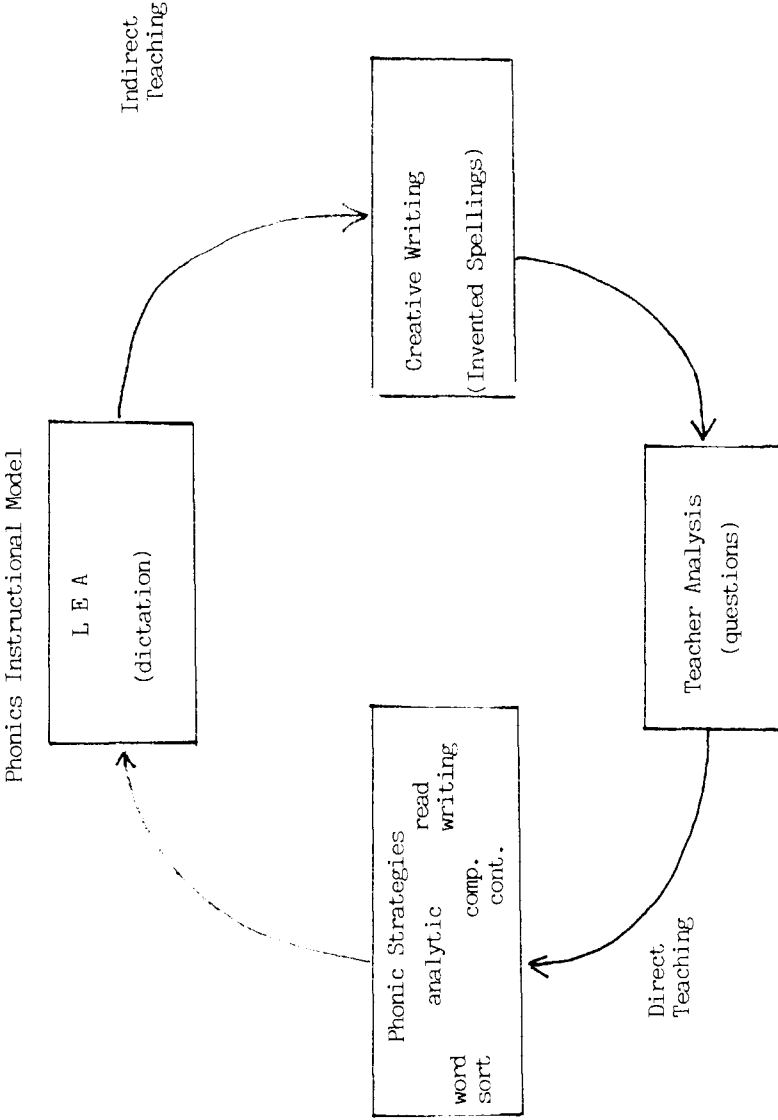


Figure 1

the key for understanding children as phoneticians. During creative writing, the teacher can give children an opportunity to explore sound-symbol correspondences by means of invented spellings. Instead of telling the children how to spell a word, the teacher asks them to listen to the sounds they hear in the word and associate the appropriate letters to these sounds. The teacher needs to assure children that mistakes are acceptable since learning requires taking risks and making errors.

From repeated creative writing sessions, children develop knowledge about how language works. They learn that sounds and symbols do not have perfect one-to-one correspondence. For example, they learn that some sounds, like /ʃ/ (shoe), may be represented by combinations of letters and that some sounds may not always represent the same letters (e.g., /k/ may be s or c). Invented spelling encourages children to discover their own generalizations, to discover the inconsistencies of language, and to recognize that generalizations may not always apply. Children will learn these ideas from continual experiences with language in a meaning based context. It is the combination of LEA and creative writing that can provide impetus for progressive growth in processing sound-symbol correspondences of words.

In the first two steps of the model, the teacher indirectly influences children to develop sound-symbol correspondences by providing children with opportunities to investigate and experiment with language in order to discover phonic generalizations for themselves. The next two steps of the model initiate direct teaching of phonics, but from children's vantage points and not from a programmed sequence found in scope and sequence charts of textbooks or curriculum guides. Phonics is taught via children's knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences of words, based on children's invented spellings within creative writing.

### Teacher Analysis

In step three the teacher analyzes the children's invented spellings. The following questions can help the teacher detect each child's strengths and weaknesses in sound-symbol correspondences:

1. Does the child have a concept of word (i.e., word boundaries)?
2. Is there a relationship between the child's spelling and the word to be spelled?
3. Does the word demonstrate a sound-symbol regularity? (e.g., the word the, does not show sound-symbol regularity, whereas the word bag does).
4. Does the child seem to exhibit understanding of the initial, medial, and final letters associated with the sounds heard in the word?
5. What letter(s) does a child consistently associate with sounds heard in a word?
6. Is the child's spelling characteristic of the child's dialect?
7. Does the child consistently omit the same letters within a word?

From these types of questions, the teacher can decide which sound-symbol correspondences each child may be able to learn. Kirk's creative writing sample is used to point out one child's strengths and weaknesses of sound-symbol correspondences. Kirk is a second grader who is experiencing reading difficulties.

One day I want to get a apow. I bet  
it. and a tosh came out and it whus  
bedden it whus hrten. and I shod mv  
Mom I wint to the dentes he said I  
have to caudes I got scerd. I strt  
to crie becus I Sote He will  
yocc it out

Notice that Kirk seems to understand word boundaries or concept of word. He is able to accurately represent initial sound-symbol correspondences, but is weak in identifying medial and final sound-symbol correspondences. Kirk has the most difficulty with medial positioned vowels as in the words: we t, bit, was, sowed, etc. Even though Kirk has difficulties with the medial vowel sounds, he shows an understanding of English phonology (Chomsky, 1979; Henderson, 1980; Read, 1971). Kirk's representation of some vowel sounds follows a developmental pattern that Read reports in his study of pre-schoolers' invented spellings. Read has found that pre-schoolers seem to use a systematic strategy in order to spell words with a short vowel pattern as in the word bit. These pre-school children have systematically substituted the graphic representation of the short vowel sound with the graphic representation of the long vowel sound articulated in approximately the same position. For example, Kirk has substituted the letter e, for the short i sound in the word, bit. The short i sound is articulated in approximately the same position as the long e sound; therefore, Kirk substitutes the letter e for the letter i. Kirk again uses this systematic strategy as described by Read in the word, went. Kirk has substituted the letter e for the letter a. The short e sound is articulated in approximately the same position as the long a sound. Kirk has shown that he has some understanding of the short vowel sounds.

Kirk also has difficulty with r-controlled vowels (e.g., "hrten" for hurting, "scerd" for scared, and "strt" for start) as well as inflectional endings (e.g., -en for -ing in "hrten" and "bedden" and "shod" for snowed). From the analysis of Kirk's invented spellings, the teacher can select appropriate strategies that enable Kirk to learn and apply the appropriate sound-symbol



correspondences of the English language.

### Phonic Strategies

In the fourth step of the model, the teacher implements appropriate phonic strategies which fit the child's strengths and weaknesses in sound-symbol correspondences. The following strategies are discussed—word sort, analytic phonics, comparison and contrast phonics, and reading of creative writing. These strategies are explained and discussed in relation to Kirk's strengths and weaknesses of sound-symbol correspondences.

### Word Sort

Word sort (Henderson, 1980; Morris, 1980) can develop children's awareness of sound-symbol correspondences by sorting known words into specific categories. For example, Kirk who has difficulties with inflectional endings is given a set of cards and a set of categories. Each card has one word containing an inflectional ending. Each category identifies a different inflectional ending. The child's task is to verbally identify the word on the card and identify the appropriate category to which the word belongs. The teacher may first identify each category and one key word card associated with each category, after which the child is to pronounce his/her word and place it with the correct category. After repeating the task several times, the teacher can add new words for the child to sort. In addition, the teacher can time the student while doing the task so the child learns to recognize immediately the sound-symbol patterns without hesitation or dependence on a sounding-out procedure. Word Sort can easily be used in a small group situation where children are groups according to their needs. In a small group, the teacher distributes several cards to each child, and the child is to say the word given to him/her and identify the appropriate category to which it belongs. Each child in the group takes turns until all the word cards are correctly categorized.

### Analytic Phonics

Analytic phonics is used often during instruction in which children inductively develop a generalization from a list of words exhibiting a common pattern. But, incorporating analytic phonics within this model has a unique focus—the generalizations to be developed are based on each child's needs as evidenced in his/her invented spellings. For example, Kirk has shown a lack of understanding in identifying the appropriate letters associated with each of the short vowel sounds. In analytic phonics, the teacher elicits from the child words from his/her speaking vocabulary that have, for instance, the /ε/, as in the word, went. After Kirk names several words with the /ε/, the teacher asks Kirk the following question, "What sound do all the words have in common?" and "What letter is associated with this sound?" After several analytic phonics lessons, Kirk should develop the appropriate sound-symbol correspondences. The key to this strategy is basing the lesson on the child's needs. Again, this lesson can be adapted to small group work as was Word Sort.

Comparison and Contrast Phonics

Comparison and contrast technique is the third strategy in which the child's invented spellings are compared to the traditional orthographics. In this strategy, the teacher writes the invented spellings and the standard spellings in two separate columns and asks the child to compare and contrast the two columns. Using Kirk's invented spellings, the teacher places the words in the appropriate columns and asks Kirk "How are these words alike? How are these words different? What is missing in the invented spelled words? What precedes the letter 'r' in each of these words?" Hopefully, from this discussion and others, the child develops the principle of r-controlled vowels. Again, this phonic strategy is based on the child's needs.

Reading Their Own Writing

The last phonics strategy is placed in the format of natural text. The teacher substitutes the child's invented spellings in the writing sample with standard spellings, and the child's task is to read the text with standard spellings. The child is given practice reading natural text so sound-symbol correspondences can be applied during the act of reading.

A Concluding Word

Young children can learn phonics in a natural manner when teachers permit children to explore language and apply their knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences. By analyzing children's phonics knowledge, the teacher can determine appropriate sound-symbol instruction that can help children become better readers. Following the logical steps of the instructional model, teachers can help children learn phonics naturally.

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