



## The Place of Phonics in the Total Reading Program

### from *Teaching and Assessing Phonics*

#### Language, Cognition, and Word Identification

Phonics and other word identification skills should comprise only a part of the total reading program—a much larger part for beginners than for more advanced readers. One way to keep this in mind is to view reading itself as composed of three interrelated major components: language, cognition, and word identification.<sup>1</sup>

Before students learn to read, their language and cognitive abilities are considerable. Six-year-olds have speaking and listening vocabularies of 6,000 or more words, and they can understand, when heard, books that are far more advanced than they can read. At the beginning reading stage, decoding written words to their spoken counterparts usually leads directly to comprehension; most of the words in the selections are in their speaking and listening vocabularies, the syntax is within their language development, and the message of the paragraph or story is usually not beyond their cognitive abilities. Phonics is one of the techniques taught to enable beginning students to read the language they already use and understand.

Word recognition based on visual or picture clues and context also helps. Instruction in phonics, however, gives students a more powerful tool for identifying words—one that is more reliable than other word recognition techniques. Thus, phonics plays a major role in the reading program for the beginning reader.

Phonic instruction, to be effective, must provide the skills that can be applied to reading and writing stories and other selections. Since phonics is a tool for unlocking word pronunciation and for spelling words, its true value is realized only when applied to reading and writing, even at the earliest state.

The focus on phonics and word recognition—with accuracy, speed, and confidence—should enable students to read independently and with understanding, as early as possible, books that are interesting and informative. When the basic phonic skills and rules are mastered, they

can be used in an almost unconscious way. Students can also write words that can be identified by others, although the spelling may not always be correct.

As their word identification abilities begin to match their language and cognitive abilities, students can read materials of increasing difficulty. At more advanced reading levels, a good vocabulary and expanding general knowledge help the student further in identifying words automatically. Throughout, one needs to balance teaching and learning phonics with reading a variety of increasingly difficult texts. Such reading is necessary to expose students to words that are not identified immediately.

A caution—phonics teaching may also be overdone. It is easy to teach more letter-sound correspondences and phonic generalizations than are productive. A balance is necessary. Similarly, a program of book reading that excludes any phonic instruction may be equally weak by denying students an opportunity to gain the phonic knowledge necessary for identifying unknown or unfamiliar words. Most students will profit from a program that includes phonic instruction, independent reading and discussion of literature, creative writing, and spelling.

#### Phonics and Whole Language Programs

A whole language approach to reading instruction views reading development as occurring in a natural environment where learning to speak, read, listen, and write is coordinated. It tends to view learning to read as a natural process—one that is similar to learning to talk. The focus is on meaning and, for beginners, whole language teachers tend to favor books where the words are predictable and have rich context. Although phonics is not rejected, it is not generally taught systematically because it is assumed that phonics is best learned by reading books and environmental print (such as street signs and billboards). The position taken by most whole language proponents is that phonics should be learned incidentally and “as needed.” Indeed, many whole

language proponents have tended to think that if phonics is taught out of the context of stories, it will deter the development of meaningful reading.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a growing recognition and appreciation by many whole language advocates that young children develop phonemic awareness early. This awareness, they find, enhances the learner's ability to write, spell, and read.<sup>3</sup> Hence, instructional techniques that enhance phonemic awareness are being incorporated into whole language programs.

The focus is somewhat different in writing. Indeed, it has been thought for some time that a child's use of invented spelling leads to the natural discovery of sound-letter relations. When teachers write the conventional spelling for a child's invented spelling, they are reinforcing the idea that letters correspond to sounds and that they are rule governed. Calling attention to specific sound-letter correspondences will make this learning more explicit. The knowledge and skill students gain from such instruction provides a bridge to more mature reading and writing and to reading more difficult texts.

We believe that a structured phonics program, using the components described in the preceding sections, can fit into a whole language program. If a teacher chooses, however, to restrict phonics teaching to a more "on demand" approach, its effectiveness will depend greatly on his or her knowledge of phonics, skilled use of that knowledge, and sensitivity to the children's successes and failures. Teachers are always a strong determinant in children's learning. Indeed, the more flexible and open the methods used, the more influential the teacher becomes. Thus, particularly in a whole language classroom using incidental phonics instruction, it is essential that teachers are highly knowledgeable and skillful with regard to phonics and how it fits into student reading.

A procedure for incorporating phonics in whole language programs is outlined by Phyllis Trachtenburg.<sup>4</sup> For instance, she suggests teaching /ə/ (short a) to children who need it after reading a particular book. The teacher explains that the students are to learn a sound that the letter [a] stands for. She then prints a sample of the text from that book which gives many examples of the [a] to /ə/ correspondence and proceeds to teach it: underlining the letter, giving the sound in isolation and in the words; having the students for /ə/ and then having them repeat

that sound in isolation and in words in the story; suggesting helpful cues such as "/ə/ as in apple"; guiding student practice in creating words with medial /ə/ in phonograms such as *at, an, am*; and building sentences using adjectives containing /ə/ and sentence clauses. Then the teacher presents a new book that contains many examples of /ə/ in the context and supports student participation in reading it.

### **The Relationship Between Writing/Spelling and Phonics**

Much of the recent research on early reading has found that interest in writing appears to precede interest in reading. Dolores Durkin, in her study of children who learned to read before they entered school, found that high proportion of these children showed interest not only in books and being read to, but in the letters, printed words, and writing.<sup>5</sup> She called them "paper-and-pencil kids." Earlier, Millie Almy also found that those first graders who made good progress in reading were interested in letters and print as well as in being read to.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Glenda Bissex, in her study of the writing and reading development of her son when he was fit to ten years of age, found that his early writing helped him gain insight into decoding and encoding (writing) words.<sup>7</sup> This was also the conclusion reached by Charles Read and Carol Chomsky.<sup>8</sup> With this knowledge, children have been observed to sound out the words they wish to write. As they try different letters to represent the sounds of these words, they become more aware that the letters represent sounds, and gain insight into the alphabetic principle. Their spelling is not conventional, as they often use the names of letters to replicate sounds in words rather than the sounds the letters represent. In spite of these differences, the practice of writing and sounding is excellent preparation for learning conventional spelling and phonics.

Invented spelling studies reinforce the recommendation to teach the names of the letters early. Knowledge of letter names will also help teachers and children communicate about reading and spelling. Once all the letters are learned, the children should be encouraged to write words as they hear them, and later as they are spelled conventionally. Indeed, in the Bissex study, her son sought conventional spellings in first grade, after using invented spellings in kindergarten, as have children in other studies. Early facility with writing contributes to

the ease with which children learn conventional phonics and spelling.

Early writing also illustrates an important principle of learning and teaching: that learning is cumulative. Without knowing the alphabet letters and their names, children could not spontaneously use them in writing and invented spelling. Nor could they take up writing without developing auditory and visual discrimination in skills.

During the earliest years, various language activities are important for the development of reading skills. Reading nursery rhymes to children, which serves to share our literary heritage, is also useful in developing their sensitivity to rhymes and the segmentation of words. Thus, we must look not only to the teaching and learning of the finished products—writing and reading comprehension—but to the prior learning on which they are based.

For spelling instruction, words can be dictated that use the letter-sound correspondences previously taught to make students more conscious of the separate letters and of the fact that just one different letter (or sound) at the beginning, middle, or end of a word makes a different word. It is also useful to dictate words that are not known, but whose spelling can be reasoned by analogy. Thus, if the students have practiced reading *cat*, *bat*, and *sat*, the teacher can dictate new words such as *fat*, *bat*,

*mat*, *pat*, and *rat*, or even less familiar or nonsense words such as *gat*, *tat*, *zat*, and *vat*.

Achievement in spelling and phonics is closely associated in the early grades. Those children who are good in phonics are usually good in spelling. And those who are good in phonics and spelling are usually good in word recognition, oral reading accuracy, and silent reading comprehension.

### Why Do Some Phonics Programs Fail?

A phonics program may fail to give students the skills necessary to become good readers if those skills are insufficiently practiced, and if phonics is not adequately balanced with reading of texts. Teachers should not forget that the purpose of learning phonics is to help in the accurate and efficient identification of words when reading for comprehension.

A phonics program may also fail if it tries to teach too many elements and rules, no matter how useful they may be. Similarly, if knowledge gained in the phonics program is applied too strictly, as if it were the true and best way to identify every word, the program may fall short of expectation.

---

Jeanne S. Chall and Helen M. Popp, *Teaching and Assessing Phonics: A Guide for Teachers*, available from Educators Publishing Service.

## References

John B. Carroll, "Developmental Parameters of Reading Comprehension." In J. T. Guthrie (ed.) *Cognition, Curriculum and Comprehension*, (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1977).

Marie Carbo, "Debunking the Great Phonics Myth," *Phi Delta Kappan*, (November 1988): 226-40; Kenneth Goodman, *What's Whole in Whole Language?* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986).

Keith E. Stanovich, "Romance and Reason," *The Reading Teacher* 47 (1994): 280-291.

Phyllis Trachtenburg, "Using Children's Literature to Enhance Phonics Instruction," *The Reading Teacher* (1990: 648-654).

Dolores Durkin, "Early Readers—Reflections after Six Years of Research," *The Reading Teacher* 18 (1964): 3-7.

Millie C. Almy, *Children's Experiences Prior to First Grade and Success in Beginning Reading* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1949).

Glenda Bissex, *GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Write and Read* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Charles Read, "Preschool Children's Knowledge of English Phonology," *Harvard Educational Review*, 41, (1971): 1-34

Carol Chomsky, "Invented Spelling in the Open Classroom," in Walburga von Raffler-Engel (guest ed.), *Child Language—1975* (New York: International Linguistics Association, 1976).