

Three Approaches to Phonics

by John Savage

Phonics—the study of sound-symbol relationships for the purpose of learning to read and write—is essential to children’s literacy development. There are many views on phonics and at least three ways to approach it in the classroom.

Direct, Systematic Instruction

Built directly upon the alphabetic principle, systematic phonics programs involve explicit teaching of sound-symbol relationships (“This is ‘m’ and it says /m/.”). Children learn to blend individual sound-symbol relationships into syllables and words. The aim of direct, systematic phonics instruction is to make decoding skills automatic.

Direct and systematic programs differ one from the other. Some (like the Orton-Gillingham method) are designed for one-to-one instruction. Others (like the Bradley Reading and Language Arts Program) are designed for large group instruction. All rely heavily on a multisensory methodology with the integration of auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactual processing. Lessons are carefully sequenced and scripted. Many use cards that may be color coded, and some have diacritical marking systems. Children practice decoding skills with word lists or with books whose language is tightly controlled for sound-symbol consistency.

Direct, systematic phonics instruction has proven to be an effective means of helping children learn to read, especially children with language and related learning problems. The approach, however, has been criticized as being presented as “phonics for its own sake,” removed from the actual process of reading. Despite criticisms, programs involving systematic phonics instruction are becoming increasingly popular as more and more schools adopt the Wilson Reading Program, WKRP, Project Read, and other systems that involve explicit instruction on letters and sounds.

Integrated Instruction

Integrated phonics instruction involves the direct presentation of sound-symbol relationships as well, but phonics is taught as one part of an overall classroom program that may include basal readers, children’s literature, and other components. Children practice elements of sound-symbol relationships in workbook programs (such as the Primary Phonics workbooks), with games, with word sorts and word building exercises, and with other activities designed to help them master the elements of their orthographic system.

Integrated instruction is typically analytic in its approach. Children are presented with lists of words containing specific phonics elements—blends, digraphs, short vowels, vowel digraphs with multiple sounds, silent letters, and the like. By analyzing these elements, children learn the sound-symbol correspondences of their language. The aim is to carry over the phonics component to other parts of the reading-writing program.

Integrated phonics is part of an overall classroom literacy program. While a separate time may be set aside for phonics instruction and practice, programs are balanced with other instructional components designed to teach reading and writing.

Embedded Phonics

Embedded phonics involves instruction in sound-symbol relationships that is built into authentic reading experiences, those that are carried on primarily for the purpose of information or pleasure and not for the specific purpose of skill development. Children learn phonics as they engage in ongoing reading and writing in the classroom.

As part of a shared reading lesson using the popular picture book *Rosie’s Walk* by Pat Hutchins, for example, the teacher might call attention to the R-/r/

correspondence in Rosie's name or start with the word hen and build a word family lesson involving the phonogram -en. Embedded phonics doesn't typically start with sound-symbol elements. It begins with story and builds phonics into the lesson. Some children's trade books lend themselves especially well to embedded phonics instruction. Nancy Shaw's "Sheep" books (Sheep on a Ship, Sheep in a Jeep, etc.) delight children while they emphasize repeated orthographic patterns that children need to learn.

Phonics is naturally embedded in writing instruction. As the class composes and dictates morning messages ("Today is Tuesday"), the teacher highlights the sound-symbol relationships inherent in the writing. And as children independently write stories about balloons and baboons, they need to master elements of their orthographic system in order to encode language. Phonics is at least as important in learning to spell as it is in learning to read.

Embedded phonics makes decoding an integral part of authentic reading and writing experiences. However, this approach lacks the structure that other approaches have, and some worry that too much room exists for children to "fall between the cracks." Phonics instruction is consciously built into shared reading, guided reading, and other authentic experiences that use children's trade books. Although mastery of sound-symbol relationships is not the starting point of the lesson, embedded phonics is an effective way to use decoding strategies as part of real reading experiences.

Different Options for Different Children

Different approaches to phonics offer teachers different options in light of different children's needs. All aim at helping children become competent and confident readers and writers.

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