

## Why Teach Phonics?

### from *Teaching and Assessing Phonics*

Learning phonics means acquiring a body of knowledge about the relationship between written and spoken words, skill in its use, and a positive attitude towards its application in reading and writing. *Why* should students gain this knowledge? Support comes from research and long historical use.

#### Support from Research

Phonic knowledge has been taught to those learning to read from the time of the Greeks to the present. Just as the Greeks found it useful to teach it to beginning readers, the research conducted in the United States over the past seventy years of more has found the same. The research indicates that students who learn phonics do better in all aspects of reading—word identification, accuracy of oral reading, and silent reading comprehension and fluency—than those who do not learn it. This also true in spelling.<sup>1</sup>

The correlation between phonic knowledge and word identification is very high, and skill in word identification is highly related to reading comprehension. In early reading, students who are better at word identification attain better comprehension because word identification and decoding are the major tasks they face. Their speaking and listening vocabularies are above their ability to recognize printed words. Hence, as they improve in word recognition and phonics, they improve in reading comprehension. Later, when students meet many new words that are beyond their speaking and listening vocabularies, it is necessary for them to be able to identify those words (and of course get their meaning) in order to comprehend what they read.

Weakness in phonics and in word recognition also tends to lead to dysfluent and slower reading because misreading words causes readers to backtrack. Fluency and automatic word identification are especially necessary as students enter the intermediate grades, when they read more difficult texts about times and places that are less familiar, more removed from their immediate experience. Their reading materials contain more difficult ideas and

more abstract and longer words. Thus, even if students' word identification skills were good for the primary grades, they face new hurdles. These hurdles are especially prevalent in content area textbooks, encyclopedias, newspapers, etc. In the English language, less familiar, abstract, and technical words are generally polysyllabic; students in the intermediate grades and beyond need to be able to rapidly decode (sound out) these polysyllabic words.

If readers have difficulty identifying words, they will lose the concentration necessary to attend to the meaning of the reading and also be less likely to infer meanings for the unknown words. Facility and ease in identifying polysyllabic words, and in inferring their meanings from a knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, and roots, help students with comprehension.

Therefore, although word identification and phonic knowledge enhance reading comprehension somewhat differently in the intermediate as compared to the primary levels, they have a strong influence in the intermediate grades, and beyond as well.

#### Is Phonics Rote or Meaningful?

In the various debates on phonics, it has often been said that phonics is not meaningful—that it is a form of rote learning without thought or meaning. In truth, if taught well, phonics is a highly meaningful pursuit, but the meaning is of a different sort than that of sentences, stories, and other connected texts. What is meaningful about phonics is the meaning letters have in terms of sound—they carry the information about the sounds to be made. The correspondence between speech sounds and letters, and the rules that govern these, are meaningful. It is sometimes helpful to view reading as encompassing two kinds of meaning—the meaning of the medium (the print) and the meaning of the message (the ideas). Viewed this way, we can say that phonics gives meaning to the medium, the print, while the meanings of the words and the syntax give meaning to the message.

The two meanings—the medium and the message—are, of course, related. Phonics helps students pronounce words they do not recognize immediately. They can get close to the sound of a word and, through the sound, to the meaning. Phonics is a kind of code-breaking. As in any code-breaking, it helps if the word being decoded is in the student's oral vocabulary—that is, if its meaning is known. Yet, when decoding a word whose meaning may not be known, phonic skills are also critical. Indeed, only with a knowledge of letters and letter combinations and the sounds they represent can the reader make a reasonable try at pronouncing less common words, proper names, place names, trade and product names, and scientific and technical terms. An attempt at “sounding out” the unknown word may suggest the appropriate meaning. If the meaning of the decoded word is not known, the student learns to check its meaning through context, the dictionary, or by asking someone.

To make phonics more meaningful, several kinds of practice are important, such as reading unrecognized words in isolation, in sentences, and in connected text, as well as in signs and labels. Reading unfamiliar names and labels provides challenging and often humorous practice in acquiring phonic skills and generalizations.

It is quite embarrassing to misread names of persons and places and to be unable to make further attempts at the correct pronunciation. Many people also have difficulty using a telephone directory since they seem to be unaware that the same name can be spelled more than one way, e.g., *Schwartz* or *Shwartz*, *Beverage* or *Beveridge*, *McDonald* or *MacDonald*. Children and adults who have difficulty reading and spelling names will also tend to have difficulty locating words they hear in a dictionary. Here, too, they may have to look for the word under more than one spelling.

Meaningful readings implies more than the ability to get meaning from reading stories. It also means a growing facility in turning printed words into their spoken equivalents. Further, growth in using the medium—linking letters and sounds—enhances the acquisition of the other meaning—the meaning of the message. Similarly, the meaning of the message enhances the meaning of the medium.

### Students' Interest in Learning Phonics

Children play with language when they learn to speak words for objects in their environment: *cat* for that furry creature, *bed* for that place where we sleep, *cup* for that which holds our milk, etc., and they learn how to string words together to communicate. In learning to read, they learn another symbol system that is imposed on the spoken words—on the sounds in those words.

Children are excited about learning this medium of literacy—the letters, the sounds represented by the letters, how words are spelled, and the reasons for these. Indeed, even children of three or four are keenly interested in learning the letters, writing their names, and reading signs.

Interest in and early facility with the sounds of language (now called phonemic awareness) are also highly predictive of early reading ability. On the whole, those children who show early interest in letters, printed words, and stories turn out to be better readers. This early interest in letters, writing, and rhyming predicts reading achievement even better than oral language ability and intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

When taught well, learning the letters and the sounds they stand for is intellectually stimulating and challenging. Such learning offers children and teachers opportunities for problem solving and for making exciting discoveries about the written and spoken language. It is exciting to share in predicting and making inferences about the relationship between writing and speech. It is intellectually stimulating to invent different ways of writing the same spoken words, and to generate feasible pronunciations for the same printed words.

Our writing is alphabetic and the alphabet is the way we represent sounds in English. The study of phonics can give teachers and students a sense of the great intellectual feat of the development of alphabetic writing. According to historians, the development of the alphabet is one of the great intellectual achievements of mankind. Over four thousand years ago, speech was represented by written symbols that stood for ideas. It was a long time before writing represented speech sounds with an alphabetic system of writing. It is believed by many historians that most of the alphabetic writing systems used today evolved from one of the early ones.<sup>3</sup>

In a real sense, children who learn phonics can gain insights into the language that are similar to those of linguists who study the relationships between word pronunciation and spelling in alphabetic languages.<sup>4</sup>

Phonics is a study unto itself, valued by linguists, philologists, dictionary writers, and cryptologists, as well as by reading teachers. When used by children, its main purpose is to gain knowledge and skill in identifying words not recognized immediately. Enhanced by knowledge and skill in phonics, reading becomes more accurate and fluent, and spelling improves. Both reading and spelling are done with greater confidence and accuracy. The ultimate goal is for children to apply with ease what they learn in the phonics program to their own reading and writing—that is *why* we teach phonics.

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## References

Notes: For this research evidence see the synthesis of the relevant research from 1910 to 1995 by Jeanne S. Chall in the three editions of *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967, 1983; Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1996).

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