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AUTHOR Lynch, John
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ABSTRACT

Because students too often leave the public school system with weak or non-existent reading skills, the subject of how to teach reading is debated. Most children bring a considerable level of oral language ability to their first day of school. Development of spoken language skills seems to come without conscious, formal effort for most children. Phonemic awareness helps to bridge the gap between oral language and text. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that every word can be broken up into individual sounds. Although whole language approach advocates claim that students taught reading using the whole language approach develop deeper, personal language experiences, phonics based instruction has legislative support. Researchers also note that spelling accuracy tends to be lower for whole language students. However, research indicates that once phonemic awareness is established, either a whole language or a phonics based approach is successful. The conclusion is that teachers cannot afford a dogmatic adherence to one or another approach to teaching reading. (CR)

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Research on Skills, Motivation and Practice:
Beginning and Proficient Readers

John Lynch

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Introduction

Reading is fundamental to education. Without the ability to extract meaning from written language, a student is cut off from one of the primary means of communication employed by teachers. Reading provides access to a volume and variety of information, ideas, philosophies and perspectives otherwise unavailable to a child or young adult. Without the ability to read, students cannot proceed through increasingly challenging levels of curriculum with their literate peers. Reading is essential for education.

The importance of reading for adults is immeasurable. We inhabit a text rich world in which the rules are written and often complex. There are few, if any, ways for adults to be economically self-sufficient without the ability to read. Bettering one's economic circumstance depends largely on developing new, more valuable skills. Such skill development is extremely difficult without the ability to read. Philosophy and the world's religions, in the majority, are communicated through written language. As a nation, we depend upon the reading skills of our population for economic competitiveness. Further, our system of self-governance functions best when the public is well informed and literacy is the key to information.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of reading for children or adults. For this reason, and because students too often leave the public school system with weak or non-existent reading skills, the subject of how to teach reading is debated.

Beginning Readers

It is said that human beings learn oral language naturally. Whether this statement is true and whatever "naturally" means, most children bring a considerable level of oral language ability to their first day of school. Development of spoken language skills seems to come without

conscious, formal effort for most children. When they arrive at school, they begin the process of learning to read. They may be presented with lists of words or portions of words or they may be read to and shown books that contain predictable text with numerous context heavy illustrations. In either case, the students must bridge the gap between their oral competency and the alphabetic markings on the pages before them. Due to the unconscious development of oral language skills, children are usually unaware that the language they use consists of 42 distinct and nearly discrete sounds. Termed a “genuine insight”, phonemic awareness, or the understanding that every word can be broken up into individual sounds, is the best indicator of success in learning to read (Adams, 1997). Phonemic awareness helps to bridge the gap between oral language and text.

When grounded in phonemic awareness, both phonics and whole language approaches to teaching reading can succeed (Griffith & Olson, 1992). Though whole language advocates argue that their approach instills a better attitude toward reading in their students, research is inconclusive (Diegmuller, 1996). However, other research, cited in the same article, indicates that children who were taught to read in a whole language program tended to read and write more for their own purposes while children taught in phonics based programs viewed reading and writing as school activities. This tendency to personalize reading and writing activities is beneficial.

Endorsement of the whole language teaching approach is far from universal. Researchers note that spelling accuracy tends to be lower for whole language students (Diegmuller, 1996). Further, Adams asserts that predictable text, illustrations, semantic and syntactic clues distract the beginning reader from pausing to decode a problem word. Research shows that children who attentively pause to decode difficult words find it easier to recognize those words on subsequent encounters (Adams, 1997). While Adams repudiates nearly the entire whole language approach, she does not attack the principle, asserted by Snyder, that beginning readers are more successful

in learning to read when the books they are reading cover familiar, interesting topics (Snyder, 1991). While Snyder makes this point in relation to teaching adult beginning readers, it seems to me that it is also applicable to children. By emphasizing that reading can be personal *and* educational, the selection of interesting, familiar books can help students read both in and out of school.

Proficient Readers

Proficient readers accurately recognize words at a high speed. Others argue that proficient readers must have high comprehension and retention. Word recognition is clearly essential for comprehension and retention.

Research shows that good readers pause their eyes on almost every word of the text they are reading. The ease with which good readers scan words sets them apart from poor readers. The device that operates efficiently is the brain, which “automatically, irrepressibly” translates print into speech (Adams, 1997, p. 426). The brain employs the following awarenesses and mechanisms, listed in order of increasing sophistication, to accomplish this translation: phonemic awareness, phonics, syllabication and morphemic awareness (Adams, 1997). The implication that they are sequential and dependent is contradicted by Stanovich’s interactive-compensatory hypothesis (Kim and Goetz, 1994).

As presented by Kim and Goetz, the interactive-compensatory hypothesis asserts that deficiencies at one level of processing may be compensated for at another level. For example, students with difficulty decoding might employ their abilities to interpret illustrations to compensate. Good readers are able to use orthographic cues almost exclusively, while poor readers rely on the slower, less efficient clues provided by syntax and semantics. Kim and Goetz

tested this hypothesis and present results that support it. They also found that good and poor readers attained the same levels of comprehension, albeit in different amounts of time.

Conclusion/Implications

Research indicates that phonemic awareness is the best indicator of success in learning to read. Developing phonemic awareness should then be the first task of teaching reading. Once a base of phonemic awareness is established, either a whole language or a phonics based approach can succeed. However, the fact that the fast readers who still achieve high comprehension tend to be those who rely heavily on orthographic cueing suggests that developing phonics skills, with emphasis on decoding, is the next logical task of teaching reading. Current research does not support whole language(Diegmuller, 1996). Phonics has legislative support which whole language currently lacks. Is a classroom that builds phonics skills on a foundation of phonemic awareness devoid of rich, whole language experiences? It need not be. The research indicating that students taught to read in a whole language program read and write more for their own purposes is ample justification for incorporating rich text experiences to create a balance between the skills necessary for reading and the motivation to read. Phonics instruction should include reading of good, interesting books by both the teacher and the students. As a teacher, I cannot afford dogmatic adherence to one or another approach to teaching reading. If I exclude approaches for teaching reading from my repertoire, I may exclude students from the world of reading.

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