



Better

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READING

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Beginning reading

What are the vital first steps in teaching children to read, and how can we ensure that no child falls behind? **Yola Center** reviews the evidence

IT IS UNDENIABLE that most children will learn to read, irrespective of the method of instruction. However, it is also clear that a significant number of students in regular classes in mainstream schools will have trouble with the literacy process. Indeed, a leading literacy researcher, Marianne Wolf, recently stated that about 40% of children are at risk of literacy failure unless teachers are aware of the essentials of effective beginning reading instruction. Furthermore, of that 40%, depending on economic status, half will get one-to-one remedial attention, but half will miss out. Most national and international surveys of struggling readers appear to substantiate this figure.

During classroom observations and through conversations with teachers, I have frequently heard deep frustration expressed about this group of “at-risk” or “reluctant” readers. Teachers, both experienced and novice, have often confided that their pre-service training has not equipped them to assist struggling readers satisfactorily. However, the most current research evidence can help student and graduate teachers develop their early literacy classroom procedures. Such information can also benefit policy makers, teachers, parents, and others who are interested in the process of children’s reading acquisition and the practices that are designed to foster it most effectively.

The aim of any early literacy program should be to engender in every child a love of literacy that transcends, but must include, the ability to decipher print and to gain meaning from print. The reason that some children who have no difficulty with spoken language experience difficulties with reading is that learning to speak and learning to read are not identical processes. The critical difference between the two is that speech is a product of biological evolution, while

reading is not. Provided that there has been no genetic or environmental impediment to learning to speak, all children will acquire spoken language. However, children are not programmed to acquire literacy in the absence of instruction and, in a sizeable minority of cases, reading will not be learned unless it is taught effectively.

Consequently, students need to be taught skills at both the meaning level, which occurs naturally as part of listening comprehension, and at the word level, which does not. Put simply, reading is the product of decoding (word recognition) and comprehension (both listening and reading). This view is supported by the U.S. National Reading Panel. In 2000 it identified five essential components of beginning reading instruction, including phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency – which can all be classified as word-level skills – and vocabulary and comprehension, which come under the rubric of meaning-level skills. By taking each component in turn and showing how it can be taught in an early literacy program, we can assist teachers in reducing the unacceptably high level of “at-risk” readers in mainstream schools.

Phonics and fluency

Phonological/phonemic awareness is an essential prerequisite of learning to read. It is the ability to understand the structure of speech, not only its meaning. Before children can learn to read, they must first know that a sentence is made up of discrete words demarcated by breaks. Children must also be aware that words themselves can be broken up into smaller parts. They need to know that cat is not just a furry animal, but consists of three discrete sounds or phonemes, c/a/t/. If a child is unaware that words can be subdivided

in this way, teaching them phonics or the alphabetic code to enable them to read will be unsuccessful. Thus a child who thinks the first sound in “cat” is “meow” is in for trouble, and so is his or her teacher.

There are many excellent programs for teaching phonological awareness available to mainstream teachers, for use either with a whole class or as a small-group intervention (see “Further reading”). If students are not assessed when they start school to identify whether they are phonemically aware, a whole-class phonemic awareness program should be used for at least the first 10 weeks of school, before embarking on an explicit whole-class phonics program.

Once children are sensitive to the internal structure of a word, they are ready to be taught to decode. In their first school year, all students should be explicitly taught to break the alphabetic code, as it is not possible to predict which children are going to have the phonological difficulties that will prevent them from mastering the code implicitly. Furthermore, as each sound or group of sounds is introduced, it should be practiced in connected text so that phonics tuition is not decontextualized. It is also important to realize that phonics or decoding is only one element of word recognition, and that practice in the use of analogies and prediction from context and picture cues should be encouraged, once children have reasonable mastery over sound/symbol correspondence. Crucially, it must be remembered that the eventual aim of phonics instruction is the ability to read words by sight, which means that the sight of a word immediately activates its spelling, pronunciation and meaning in memory, because it has been read sufficiently often before. Sight word acquisition is the automatic or fluent stage of word acquisition, because it is effortless and allows the reader to expend energy only on the meaning of print.

Following the first three elements of effective reading instruction at the word level (phonemic awareness, explicit phonics instruction, and the acquisition of fluency), we move on to the second term of our simple reading equation, comprehension.

Comprehension

Comprehension teaching should occur simultaneously with phonics instruction. Unfortunately, research indicates that teachers generally test comprehension rather than teach it. Because listening/reading comprehension is considered a natural process, very little school time is devoted to teaching it. While most reading

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failure is caused by difficulties at the word (decoding) level, children also need to be taught how to comprehend text as otherwise only the linguistically gifted will do well.

In addition to testing comprehension, teachers must teach children strategies to use at each stage of the reading process. **Before** they read a text, strategies such as providing motivation, activating relevant background knowledge, explaining and extending vocabulary skills, discussing text structure (narrative, factual, procedural, etc.) and story prediction should be taught. Strategies to use **during** text reading include visualizing, questioning the author's intent by looking beyond the literal meaning of the text (teaching inferential skills), confirming predictions and monitoring for meaning. **After** text reading, teachers should focus on children's summarization skills, and looking for the main point or theme.

The best time to teach these strategies is during listening comprehension, or during story reading time. Teachers commonly read books to students that are about one to two years above their reading level, and so can model these strategies to children while they read these more sophisticated texts. The

children can then use these taught strategies during shared and independent reading. A number of references for teaching listening/reading comprehension are included in "Further reading".

Conclusion

This simple view of reading reinforces the importance of the five components that the U.S. National Reading Panel deemed critical to early literacy instruction. Children must be able to first decipher the symbols of print to translate them into speech, and then construct meaning from the words they have deciphered. If either of these processes falls short, then reading comprehension will be jeopardized. While it is imperative that decoding skills are taught explicitly in the early years, comprehension strategies should be taught throughout the whole schooling period.

To counter any criticism that this is an ostensibly reductionist view of reading, let me quote Keith Stanovich, a leading reading researcher: "We must stop creating a progressive politics where to be of the left, you must oppose science." Science has shown, unequivocally, that knowledge

Further reading

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Tunmer W & Hoover WA, (1992) *Cognitive and Linguistic Factors in Learning to Read*, In Gough PB, Ehri LC & Treiman R (eds), *Reading Acquisition*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.

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National Reading Panel (2000).

of phonological processes is the key to deciphering print. It has also shown that children who are culturally, cognitively and phonologically at risk need explicit instruction in these processes in the first three years of school to avoid literacy failure. Furthermore, instruction in comprehension should be embedded throughout the entire school experience for those students who may not be naturally linguistically gifted enough to appreciate without assistance the wonder of reading.

As poor reading skills contribute in large measure to social and economic inequity, it is imperative that socially progressive educators at both school and policy level support literacy programs based on the most current research data.

About the author

Yola Center was an Associate Professor at Macquarie University in Australia until her retirement in 1999. Her principal interests were research and practice in the area of early literacy. She continues her association with the university as an honorary associate and has recently published a book on beginning reading.