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The Phonics Quagmire

Bruce A. Lloyd
Western Michigan University

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic

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The quicksand of confrontation in phonics methodology has been the either-or dichotomy exemplified by the nature-nurture controversy of yesteryear. The proponents of heredity as the prime dictator of human growth and development had well-polished arguments for their position and so did those who believed in the preeminence of environmental factors. In the phonics controversy the oversimplification of viewpoint was equally clear-cut. Either we teach phonics as *synthesis* or we teach phonics as *analysis,* but we cannot do both. However, modern phonics instructional theory and practice indicates that perceptive teachers are taking both handles and doing just that up to a point.

The Synthetic Approach

Through the process of synthesis, the reader looks at each letter of a word, says the sound of the letter, and puts the sound together with the next letter. This procedure is used with all letters in the word to the end that the reader will be able to pronounce the word when he has put all of the sounds together.

At first glance, this system might appear to work and work well for pupils attacking unknown words, words not in their sight recognition vocabulary. But all too frequently in actual practice, more confusion than enlightenment was generated. Not only is the meaning of the word not forthcoming, but word pronunciation is equated with reading.

The problem of synthesis can be illustrated as follows: take the word BAT. Readers were supposed to say the sound of the letter B first and it usually came out something like BUH. Probably the vowel A gave no trouble and the reader would say A. So far he had BUHA. Finally, he looked at the letter T and probably said TUH. Putting all of these sounds together, he came up with BUHATUH, which is a far cry from the sounds heard in the word BAT.

The Analytic Approach

Analysis, on the other hand, called upon the reader to look at the word as a whole, to find familiar parts, and to see which phonics rules could be applied. From the known parts, the reader could determine the rest of the word providing he knew and could apply techniques such as initial consonant substitution, initial consonant blend or digraph substitution, and/or the substitution of phonograms. For example, if the reader saw the word MAT and did not know

it, but did know the word BAT, then all he had to do was substitute the sound of M for the B sound and arrive at the correct pronunciation.

Unfortunately, this technique, like all other techniques used with our presently spelled English words, has its advantages and its disadvantages or limitations as well. Looking for known word parts or word families (phonograms) is an acceptable word attack skill, but its use is restricted to those word elements that are (1) known to the reader and (2) fit the confining pattern. Likewise, not all English words fit these nice, neat patterns because of the ridiculous and inconsistent, irregular spellings which are an ever-present roadblock to pupil reading. To illustrate the limitations of analysis techniques, take a look at the word TOGETHER. A reader may analyze the components TO and GET and HER, and not be able to continue reading because that is not the word.

Another fly in the phonic analysis ointment is the methodology based on rules. Readers were taught the many generalizations and the exceptions thereto with the assumption that they would look at a word, think of the generalization(s) appropriate to it, and come up with the pronunciation. For example, the basic (and comparatively unusable) generalization regarding two adjacent vowels goes something like this: "when two vowels come together in a word, the first vowel usually takes the long sound (says its name) and the second vowel is silent." That rule is illustrated by words such as *seat, boat,* and *hail.* Recent studies have found this rule to be less than fifty percent effective and there are more words that do not agree (break, lead, and said) than there are that do. Moreover, a number of rules of English phonic analysis have been shown to be of considerably less utility than was once thought. So it would seem that the analysis technique using known word parts and/or phonics generalizations has also left something to be desired.

The Modern Approach

This brings us to the basic question of the present dilemma, namely, what is the proper place of phonics in present-day, meaningful reading instructional programs. Synthesis has its limitations and so does analysis. What is the reading teacher to do?

Perhaps the best answer rests with the proper use-stress continuum.

Phonics can be defined as the correct association of speech sounds with their corresponding symbols. In other words, there is a phoneme-grapheme relationship (imperfect as it is) and readers need to be taught the correct phoneme response to the appropriate grapheme.

Herein lies the problem. Because of the imperfections and inconsistencies of English spellings with the corresponding lack of utility in either analysis or synthesis, how much stress should be given to modern phonics instruction in today's reading programs?

To answer this question, we must look to the actual use of phonics as the reader needs the appropriate skills to apply in attacking words. Initially the young or inexperienced reader has a limited sight vocabulary and is faced with the problem of attacking many of the words he meets. So there are many printed symbol groups whose pronunciation needs to be unlocked in order for the reader to read and to read better.

The real problem, then, rests with the reader's recognition vocabulary (his store of sight words) simply because the larger the number of words he recognizes instantly, the easier it is to read and to comprehend. The fewer words he knows and/or recognizes, the more he will have to rely on word attack knowledge. The larger the vocabulary of understanding (recognition vocabulary) acquired by the pupil, the more effective will be his use of phonic analysis. Once the word is pronounced, the appropriate mental associations must be made with the word, then the individual can continue reading with understanding. For the reader who has a limited vocabulary of understanding, using the dictionary is the best resource. Phonics skills do not give the reader word meaning. Even if the reader can "sound out" or pronounce the unknown word through the application of phonic analysis, he is still unsure of the meaning and must resort to context or the dictionary. Phonic analysis does not provide word definitions. These come from the reader's previous experiences.

Mature readers follow a similar pattern. They also find phonic analysis skills of service in the pronunciation of unknown words. Such individuals usually look at words, find familiar parts, attach sounds to symbols, synthesize correctly, and come up with a pronunciation. Then, if the set of sounds is in the reader's vocabulary of understanding and he recognizes this from some previous experience, the meaning becomes apparent and he continues reading. On the other hand, even if he can say the word, he may not know its meaning. Therefore, he must use clues that the context may give or he resorts to the dictionary. Once the meaning is known, the reader can proceed until he comes across another unknown word. The process is then repeated.

What, then, is the real value of phonics? Simply this: the skills of phonic analysis can help when the reader looks at a word, makes

the correct sound-symbol associations, *and recognizes the word* from his own individual store of words. If he cannot attach the sounds to meanings, no amount of phonic knowledge will help the reader understand what he reads. Phonic analysis, by whatever approach used, has these limitations. Although it is considered to be the best, single word attack skill procedure needed by readers, the value of phonic analysis is restricted and reading instructional programs should be adjusted accordingly. It is especially significant to note that reading skill instruction programs cannot be limited to phonic analysis alone. Other skill building learning procedures must be included.

The Quagmire Overcome

The proper, effective, stress-use continuum regarding the teaching of phonic analysis should follow a pattern and sequence that is most beneficial to the readers needing such instruction. The foremost concept teachers should consider is that reading for meaning is the ultimate goal of all reading instruction. Mere word pronunciation, of itself, serves few real purposes. Words must be read in context and have meaning for the reader. When reading is meaning-centered, phonics can assist the reader providing the analysis skills have a firm foundation. The skills should have a solid base in order to be useful to readers. This base is made up of experiences and instruction provided by the teacher.

Initially the skills of phonic analysis should be taught on an informal basis. Then teachers can gradually lead up to a more formal phonics program in which the skills are stressed for a time. Ultimately, however, phonics skill instruction should taper off so that the time can be devoted to other, more vital skill activities such as structural analysis, critical reading, drawing inferences and conclusions, predicting outcomes, and most vital of all, increasing sight vocabulary.

Conclusions

It has been noted that phonic analysis is a serviceable but limited tool or device for helping readers pronounce words whose visual forms are unfamiliar and/or unknown. Its utility declines as readers progress through the grades. Ultimately phonic skills have little value for readers and there is an increased need for higher level skills. Phonics most certainly does not help with the *meanings* of words if those meanings are unknown to the reader. In this instance he must resort to use of context, the dictionary, or some other source.

The best way to help pupils become better readers is to teach them to increase their own sight recognition vocabularies and give them

many experiences so they can learn more words. A large sight vocabulary is obtained by constant exposure to meaningful experiences and to words. This can be achieved orally (teacher-pupil dialogue; pupil listening) or visually (reading). A large sight vocabulary is retained by constant, meaningful reexposure to words (extensive and intensive reading, many experiences, and discussing experiences). A sight vocabulary is increased by continuous in-depth, in-breadth reading and more experiences at an ever higher level.

Although phonic analysis is a key of some utility in unlocking word pronunciation, getting meaning is the major purpose of reading. This phonics cannot do.

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