

In support of phonics

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New research has confirmed the effectiveness of phonics as a method of teaching reading.

The subject of phonics – the UK government-backed method of teaching reading – is one that still stirs great debate, despite strong and building evidence of its effectiveness. A result of this evidence is that, in England, using phonics instruction is a legal requirement in state-funded primary schools.

Phonics instruction involves intense focus on learning the relationship between letters and sounds. The impact of this method has been measured through a screening check administered to children in Year 1. Year-on-year gains in the percentage of children reaching an expected standard have been impressive – from 58 per cent in 2012 to 81 per cent in 2016.

However, despite this, some practitioners argue in favour of a less-prescriptive approach to teaching reading, consisting of a variety of phonic- and meaning-based skills, such as pictures and sentence context, to guess the meanings of words.

The Language, Learning and Cognition Lab at Royal Holloway, University of London has been investigating reading and learning methods including phonics since 2002. In its latest study, its researchers have shown that helping learners to focus on the relationship between letters and sounds in reading instruction has a dramatic impact on the accuracy of reading aloud alongside improved comprehension.

Researchers assessed the effectiveness of different methods of reading instruction by training adults to read in a new language, printed in unfamiliar symbols, and then measuring their learning with reading tests and brain scans.

Meaning and comprehension

Because phonics focuses on the relationship between print and sound, many people argue that it will do nothing to improve reading comprehension, and may even hinder it. This study is important because it shows that claim is false.

When training focused on the meanings of the new words, learners were far less accurate in reading aloud than when training focused on phonics. In fact, when people focused on meanings, it took them twice as long to reach a good level of performance in reading aloud, and MRI scans revealed that their brains had to work harder to decipher what they were reading.

Importantly, the study also showed that training focused on the meanings of words did not lead to better reading comprehension than phonics training. Those using phonics were just as good at comprehension and significantly better at reading aloud.

Phonics works for all

Some practitioners argue in favour of a ‘balanced’ approach, consisting of multiple methods in the first stages of learning to read. However, this research suggested that spending time learning the meanings of whole words may have



no benefit, and may actually hinder the learning of the relationship between letters and sounds.

Most practitioners can point to examples of children who have learned to read without explicit phonics instruction. Indeed, in follow-up work, the researchers have shown that some learners will be successful in discovering the regular patterns in written language irrespective of the method of reading instruction. However, most learners won't. The researchers argue that this is why phonics instruction is so crucial. Provided learners start with sound oral language, explicit phonics instruction has the potential to bring all learners to a high level of performance. That is very important for learners with special educational needs. This research agrees with previous findings showing that phonics instruction is appropriate for all learners.

This research contributes to the rapidly growing interest in promoting evidence-based practices in the classroom. The best outcomes for all children will be achieved when such practices are paired with the skill and professionalism of teachers.

Reference

Taylor, J. S. H., Davis, M. H., & Rastle, K. (2017). Comparing and validating methods of reading instruction using behavioural and neural findings in an artificial orthography. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 146, 826-858.

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Professor Kathy Rastle, Head of the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London, led the research project discussed above: www.royalholloway.ac.uk/psychology/.

She has been researching language and reading for over 20 years, and is interested in understanding how insights from psychology and neuroscience can inform practice in the classroom. She tweets at @Kathy_Rastle.

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