Phonics Faux Pas

Avoiding Instructional Missteps in Teaching Letter-Sound Relationships

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The need to explicitly teach letter-sound relationships in U.S. classrooms is settled science.[1] However, too often such instruction is not provided in the most efficient or effective way. These instructional missteps mean that fewer children will develop strong word-reading skills. In addition, ineffective phonics instruction is likely to require more class time and/ or later compensatory intervention, taking time away from the growth of other important contributors to literacy development. We have encountered many dozens, if not hundreds, of phonics faux pas. In this article, we focus on seven in early reading instruction that deserve our serious attention.

1. Spending Too Little or Too Much Time on Phonics Instruction

Our field has long had a problem with teachers devoting an inadequate amount of time to phonics instruction. Although

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some children will pick up word reading with little instructional effort, many require considerable instruction to master the complex task of looking at a series of lines and curves to ascertain the spoken word they represent. In languages in which there is a relatively simple relationship between letters and sounds, such as Finnish and Spanish, by the middle of first grade, children are able to read real words and pseudo-words in the language accurately almost 100 percent of the time.* In languages in which the relationships are somewhat more complex, such as Danish and French, children are about 70 percent accurate by that time point. In English, in which the relationship between letters and sounds is extremely complex, children are about 40 percent accurate at that point.[2] Put another way, English word reading requires a lot more effort to teach and learn than many other languages.

On the other hand, there is such a thing as too much phonics instruction. We have seen prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms in which the better part of the day is focused on letter-sound instruction (and often in a manner inconsistent with what research would recommend). This is problematic because it leaves insufficient time for many other important areas of development. For example, vocabulary and concept knowledge, which

*Pseudo-words are words with letter-sound relationships that are plausible in a language but do not actually form a real word.

are strong predictors of long-term reading and writing success, also need attention. In fact, vocabulary knowledge affects word-reading development. We sometimes cannot even know whether we have read a word accurately unless we already have the word in our vocabulary. Is the word *lemic* pronounced with a short *e*, like lemon, or a long *e*, like *lemur*? Unless you already know this word, you aren't sure. For children trying to learn to read words with low vocabulary knowledge, such uncertainty is common.

Likely the question on your mind is, "How much is enough and not too much?" Unfortunately, research does not offer a decisive answer to this fundamental question. Typically, recommendations range from 30 to 60 minutes per day in grades K–2, with that time including a number of different activities we discuss below.

However, we suggest that the answer also varies by child and should be informed by simple diagnostic assessments. Some children are able to develop letter-sound knowledge more quickly and efficiently than others. This is one reason why differentiated phonics instruction is so well advised. Some instruction is provided to the whole class, but then it is reinforced and gaps are filled in as needed in a small-group context. Research has shown that reading achievement is supported when instruction is differentiated.[3] A number of researchers have developed systems by which assessments determine which letter-sound relationships each child has learned and not yet learned, and a systematic series of lessons are provided accordingly.[4] An important direction for our field is to work toward determining the most time-efficient approaches to ensuring each child in a class meets grade-level expectations in word reading each year.

2. Neglecting the Alphabetic Principle, Concept of Word in Print, and Other Concepts of Print

Imagine going to work for a shipbuilding company. You go to work the first day and are schooled in all the different types of bolts, screws, and nails. You learn their names, the different sizes, and the different types, but you never learn that their purpose is to join pieces of metal and that those pieces of metal are used to build ships! Although this situation is clearly ridiculous, it is actually analogous to what we see in some prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms. Children are being taught to name letters or even identify the sounds that the letters represent, but they are unclear about *why* they are learning it. Letter-sound knowledge is being learned in a vacuum; the child has no context for how to *use* the information, no "big picture."

To understand the big picture, children must understand the alphabetic principle—how our English system of writing works. The alphabetic principle is simply that visual symbols (letters) represent speech sounds (phonemes). To write the spoken word "dog," you use alphabetic symbols to represent the speech sounds. We can combine and recombine letter symbols to form words. As odd as it may sound, children *can* learn letters and even letter sounds in very rote ways without understanding the

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alphabetic system. When children do not understand the alphabetic principle, they may do the following:

- Write something but not know how to read it back because they are not using letter sounds.
- Copy words but not be able to read them back.
- Write letters without any match to sounds (e.g., *I went to the store = bmlssmii*).
- Use letters they know to write all words, regardless of sounds.
- Look to the teacher when they can't read a word.
- Say the name of a letter when asked to read a word (e.g., *no = "en"*).

To understand the big picture, children must understand other concepts of print as well. Concepts of print are the many understandings about how print works, including that print serves specific purposes (e.g., to help us remember or to entertain us); that print is language written down; and that, in English, we read from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom. All of these and other "mechanics" about how print works are important to learn alongside letters and sounds.

In order to have a true understanding of the purpose and function of letters and letter sounds, children must understand how words are represented in print, or concept of word.[5] This means they know that words are collections of letters that represent a series of speech sounds that collectively represent a unit of meaning. They need to understand that each new word is signified by a space that does not contain any letters. They need to understand that you can see a word as well as say a word.

To understand concept of word in print, children need to watch others reading print and pointing to words.[6] In classrooms, this may be a teacher reading charts or big books to children and pointing to the words as they read. Teachers may also use pointers and sometimes ask children to point to words. In addition to watching others, children need to practice pointing to words themselves. A great way to do this is to allow children to point to words in a memorized line of print, in a dictated story of their own words, or in a simple book with short, repetitive sentences. Although it sounds like a really simple task, it is not. In fact, there are actually stages that occur as children learn

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to point to print. Specifically, they must gain control of multisyllabic words and show understanding that a word like *elephant*, with three syllables, is actually one unified word. When children cannot handle multisyllabic words, they will point to new words for each syllable in a word (e.g., if the text said "kittens cry," the child would point at the word "kittens" for the syllable *kit* and then point at the word "cry" for the syllable *tens*).

Essentially, whenever phonics is taught, there should be a very print-rich environment, with teachers and children interacting with print to acquire the alphabetic principle, concept of word, and other concepts of print. Without these instructional nonnegotiables, letter-sound knowledge will remain inert information.

3. Teaching Letter Names without Letter Sounds

From the alphabet song to children's toys, much of the messaging that young children receive about letters is focused on the names of letters. Although research does suggest the importance of teaching and learning letter names, also vitally important is teaching the sounds associated with the letters. A common faux pas is neglecting instruction in those sounds throughout prekindergarten and sometimes well into kindergarten.

Some people think that teaching letter names is essentially teaching their sounds, but unfortunately that is not the case in English. Some letter names don't have a sound commonly associated with the letter at all. Neither *Hh*, *Ww*, nor *Yy* has its commonly associated sound in its name (e.g., there is no /h/, as in *happy*, in the name of the letter *Hh* ("aych")). Knowing these letters' names definitely does not lead children to know their associated sounds. Some other letters' names contain one of the sounds commonly associated with the name but not the other. For example, *Cc* has one of its common sounds in its name (/s/) but not the other (/k/).

The primary vowels are like this as well. We would have been much better off if they were named by their short sounds (/a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, and /u/, as in *pat*, *pet*, *pit*, *pot*, and *putt*), because those are more common in the words read by beginning readers than their long vowel sounds (the letters' names)—but no such luck. Letter names are also challenging

for young readers because they aren't consistent in whether the commonly associated sound is at the beginning or end of the name. For example, in *Mm*/"em," the letter's target sound is at the end of the letter name, but in *Jj*/"jay," the target sound is at the beginning. That means for letter names to help children, they must memorize whether the target sound is at the beginning or end of the name.

The complexities of letter names in English might lead you to think we should not teach letter names at all, but research suggests that teaching letter names is still worthwhile[7]—it just needs to be accompanied by lots of attention to the sound or sounds commonly associated with each letter and by a thorough understanding of the challenges posed by English letter names. A teacher with such knowledge would understand, for example, why a young child might spell the word *daisy* as WAZ. Why? Sometimes children write "W" for the /d/ sound because the letter name for *Ww*—"double-u"—begins with the /d/ sound. The next sound we hear in *daisy* is the letter name for *Aa* (the long *a* sound), and the third and fourth sounds in *daisy* are the name of the letter *Zz* ("zee").

A final point about letter-name knowledge: it is often noted that letter-name knowledge in preschool and kindergarten is a strong predictor of children's later literacy achievement. This is true, but it is not because letter-name knowledge is an even-close-to-sufficient contributor to actual reading or writing. It is helpful, but some children learn to read knowing only letter sounds—no letter names. The predictive power of letter names lies largely in the fact that it is a proxy for other things. Children who know letter names early are more likely to have experienced a substantial emphasis on print literacy in the home and to have attended a strong preschool, for example, which in turn increase the likelihood of higher later reading and writing achievement. *Naming* letters is only one facet of letter knowledge, and probably not even the most important one. It is the *application of letter-sound* knowledge that advances children's reading and spelling.

4. Using Inappropriate Alphabet Key Words

A common tool for teaching the alphabet is alphabet key words, such as *Aa is for apple*, *Bb is for ball*, and so on. The idea is to make alphabet learning easier by creating meaningful associations between the letter and a word that begins with that letter. Unfortunately, too often, alphabet key words are problematic, creating more confusion than clarity for young children. Good alphabet key words need to begin with one of the sounds commonly associated with that letter. For example, *Oo is for octopus* works—the first sound in *octopus* is the short *o* sound. However, *Oo is for orange* does not work. The *o* in *orange* is what we call an *r-controlled vowel*. It does not make its typical short or long vowel sound. Similarly, *Tt is for thumb* does not work because there is no /t/ sound in *thumb*—there is a *th* digraph (two letters representing one sound). Another pitfall to watch out for is an

alphabet key word that begins with a letter name, which can be really confusing to children. For example, *Ee is for elephant* is confusing because it begins the letter name for *Ll* ("el"), and *Cc is for cake* is problematic because it begins with the letter name for *Kk* ("kay").

Alphabet key words also need to be depicted clearly in a photo or drawing, not easily confused with other items, and they should be words that are known to or can be readily learned by children. We recommend two alphabet key words for the letters *c, g, a, e, i, o,* and *u*—one for each of their two common sounds. Caution should be exercised in using children's names as key words, as some do not make a sound typically associated with the letter in English (e.g., *Juan*). In these cases, we suggest using the child's name to show the shape and name of the letter but to focus on a different alphabet key word for the sound.

For key words to do their job, children must be able to separate the first sound in the word from the rest of the word (e.g., to separate the /b/ from the /all/ in *ball*). Ideally, children develop this skill, called *initial phoneme segmentation*, during or before the prekindergarten year. However, not all children meet this expectation. Fortunately, you can work on this skill while teaching the alphabet, including alphabet key words. Research strongly suggests that phonemic awareness (conscious awareness of the individual sounds in spoken words—for example, recognizing that *sheep* has three sounds: /sh/, /ee/, and /p/), although an entirely oral skill, is actually best developed with accompanying letters. This initial phoneme segmentation issue is also why you should be judicious about using alphabet key words that begin with blends (two consonant letters pronounced in succession in a syllable, such as *dr* in *drum*); it is especially difficult for young children to separate the initial phoneme in a blend.

5. Lacking a Scope and Sequence

You can teach phonics in many different ways. You can use word or picture cards, magnetic letters, letter tiles, games, or even more traditional methods. However, if you want phonics instruction to be effective, you need to know the *content* (e.g., consonants, short vowels, digraphs) that you are teaching and the *order* in which children typically learn, and thus that you will teach, that content. We call this a *scope* and *sequence*.[8] Across decades, evidence has accumulated to suggest that *systematic* phonics instruction with a scope and sequence will produce better outcomes than instruction that does not follow a scope and sequence.[9]

Historically, a range of less systematic approaches have been popular. Typically, these approaches do not have a clear scope or follow a sequence but instead address letter sounds only as they arise incidentally in interactions with children or are needed to read words within a specific text. So, if a teacher is reading the book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, she will teach the *ee* sound because it is found in the word *see*. The problem with this kind of serendipitous approach *as the driver* of phonics instruction is that information is not presented

> # Systematic phonics instruction with a scope and sequence will produce better outcomes.

logically to the child and information gets missed. Of course, children should read connected text as they are learning phonics, and teachers should point out words they are reading that match taught patterns. But the scope and sequence of phonics instruction should not be based primarily on opportune moments in text reading.

Scope and sequence is also important because it helps children to organize information into cognitive categories, or "file folders," that support better cognitive storage and retrieval of information. For example, if one teaches information without a scope and sequence, one might move from teaching the short *a* sound in a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern (e.g., *bag*), to teaching the vowel digraph *oa* (e.g., *boat*), to teaching *ch* (e.g., *chip*), to teaching *i_e* (e.g., *bike*). It would be a lot easier to remember these patterns if they were taught in groups: for example, teaching all the short vowel sounds (*a, e, i, o,* and *u*), consonant digraphs that represent unique sounds (*th, sh, ch*), all the CVC-*e* (silent *e*) patterns (*mate, Pete, bike, note, cute*), and then both of the spelling patterns that represent the /oi/ sound (called a *diphthong*; *oy* and *oi*). If instruction follows a scope and sequence, the variations don't seem random but rather work to form a category (e.g., "Oh this *th* is kind of like the *ch*, two letters that make a new consonant sound").

6. Using a Problematic Approach to Teaching Sight Words

Often, even teachers who do devote considerable time to phonics instruction do not apply that instruction to teaching "sight words." Instead, they teach children to memorize sight words visually rather than to decode them. Research suggests that's the wrong approach.[10]

Let's back up and talk about terminology. A sight word actually refers to any word that can be read by sight. *Differentiation* is a sight word for us—we recognize it essentially instantly when we see it. What many teachers call sight words are actually high-frequency words. Because a small number of high-frequency words have less regular patterns (e.g., *was, the*), some people call all high-frequency words sight words and think that they must be learned visually and holistically by sight.

In point of fact, letter-sound information amalgamates the word's units into memory better than any other process. When we teach high-frequency words, we need to fully analyze the

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letter-sound relationships within them, whether the word is comprised of expected letter-sound relationships, as in *can* (/k/, /a/, and /n/, just as we would expect); some expected and some unexpected letter-sound relationships, as in *said* (/s/ and /d/ are as expected, /ai/ would normally represent the long *a*, not the short *e*, sound); or entirely unexpected letter-sound relationships, such as *of* (/uv/). Nearly two-thirds of high-frequency words are actually very regular (e.g., *at*, *in*, *it*), but even with those that are not, we need to fully analyze the letter-sound relationships as well as read them accurately many times. We suggest studying each letter's association with each sound, relating the word to other words with the same letter-sound patterns when possible (e.g., *no*, *go*, *so*), and teaching high-frequency words alongside meaningful words (e.g., *like* with *bike*).

7. Missing Essential Elements of Phonics Instruction

We often observe phonics instruction that has some strengths but also some gaps. Effective phonics instruction is multifaceted. You've likely already heard about the need for *explicit instruction.* Explicit instruction is direct, precise, and unambiguous (e.g., telling children what sound the letters *sh* represent together, rather than making the connection indirectly or asking them to figure it out themselves). You probably also realize the need to apply *general learning principles* (e.g., specific feedback). Some other facets that must be present are:

Specific, Applicable Generalizations

Simplistic, broad generalizations or "rules" do not work. For example, if we say that silent *e* signals a long vowel sound *all* the time, then we have a lot of issues. But if the generalization is made more specific, it is more applicable. For example, the silent *e* pattern is consistent more than 75 percent of the time in *a_e*, *i_e*, *o_e*, and *u_e*, but only consistent 16 percent of the time with *e_e*.

Active Construction and Deconstruction of Words

Just explicitly teaching letter-sound relationships is not enough. If it were, we could just tell infants what each letter-sound relationship is and then they could read. Children need opportunities to move letter tiles to build and change words, listen to words and spell them by sound, and so on.

Opportunities for Application

The evidence is clear that young children benefit from opportunities to read text that emphasizes letter-sound relationships they have learned to date.[11] This reinforces the value of their hard work and of using decoding to read words. Children's reading opportunities should not be restricted to decodable texts, or those with only letter sounds they have been taught, but such texts should be a regular part of the reading diet. TextProject.org is a great resource for texts, and information about texts, that support beginning readers to learn to decode, without being as boring or unnatural as some decodable texts are.

Responsiveness

Phonics instruction must be informed by our ongoing observation and assessment of children's phonics knowledge and word-reading skills. We should respond when we notice that a child is confused, is insecure with a particular skill, or has had a major breakthrough. If we are not responsive to our students, some students are likely to be left behind in their word-reading development.

For too long, much discourse around beginning reading instruction has focused on whether to teach phonics. It is time for greater attention to how—and how not—to do so. Universally high-quality phonics instruction—that avoids common missteps—should be our collective focus. ☐

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Barbara Foorman et al., *Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade*, What Works Clearinghouse, NCEE 2016-4008 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

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9. Sebastian P. Suggate, "A Meta-Analysis of the Long-Term Effects of Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, and Reading Comprehension Interventions," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 49, no. 1 (2016): 77–96.

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11. Jennifer P. Cheatham and Jill H. Allor, "The Influence of Decodability in Early Reading Text on Reading Achievement: A Review of the Evidence," *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 25, no. 9 (2012): 2223–2246.