

Reading

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The Phonics Controversy from a New Perspective

Critics of the reading ability of students argue that if schools would only teach phonics, children would learn to read easily and well. But others argue that phonics drills have discouraged children from reading for meaning.

Most reading specialists take a view somewhere between these two extremes. They agree that the relationship between letters and sounds is important; still, they believe that phonics generalizations have limited applicability for most of the words children encounter in their reading.

Despite the middle-road position taken by most educators, the controversy continues. One wonders whether research has provided clear indication of the value of phonics and some direction as to how it should be taught. Surely a few well-designed studies could answer basic questions about the teaching of phonics. Does the lack of such studies indicate the inadequacy of research, or does it demonstrate that not enough is known about the functioning of the human brain to design adequate studies?

The earliest education studies conducted in this country included attempts to determine when and how to teach phonics, and the results often influenced classroom practice. For example, the work of Morphet and Washburne¹ and Dolch and Bloomster² unfortunately persuaded educators to withhold reading instruction until children reached the age of 6½ or 7 years. Such early studies were based on limited understanding of how children learn and can be taught to read. Based on linear models of learning, these studies assumed that one stimulation leads to another and that consecutive stimulations develop into pattern recognition. In fact, this is the way computers are developed, and it is the reason that computers often do very dumb things, albeit very rapidly.

In her recent book, Marilyn Adams sheds new light on the phonics controversy, providing curriculum leaders with a fresh perspective from which to consider how children learn to read. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*³ summarizes recent theories and supporting research as to how the brain accomplishes the seemingly magical feat of understanding printed symbols. Adams examines the phonics issue from the viewpoint of those who are trying to determine why computers seem so stupid when compared to the human brain.

Adams suggests that the obstacle to our understanding has not been the inadequacy of research, but the inadequacy of our theories to explain complex learning and recognition activities. Reviewing the early studies, she summarizes their most cogent findings and then outlines a new theory of human learning to explain how reading can happen simultaneously on both orthographic (print) and phonological (sound) levels. Thus, Adams accounts for the complexity of processing both words and thoughts simultaneously.

In this way, Adams brings the world of parallel distributive processing to her readers. She describes how an array of scientists—from computer science, psychology, linguistics, and mathematics—have investigated how the brain does so many things at the same time (in parallel fashion) and how those activities are distributed back and forth so that one processing center does not need to wait for information from another before it can undertake its task.

Does this mean that Adams comes down squarely on one side or the other of the controversy? It does not, because she provides a model of reading that is able to account for and integrate the recognition of letters and words with a focus on meaning. Adams takes a clear position on the key

controversies in the debate about phonics. She states that "reading depends integrally on deep and thorough knowledge of spellings and spelling-sound relations. At the same time, both the use and acquisition of such knowledge depend on the child's fuller understanding of and interest in the reading process." That is the position accepted by many reading specialists who have recognized the importance of both the visual and the semantic aspects of reading.

Beginning to Read may sound like a complicated, perhaps unreadable, review of research divorced from the real world of teaching reading, but it is not. Adams describes the value and importance of providing children with early and extensive experience with books and stories. Her discussion of language is not merely about the place of phonics in reading instruction, but also about the place of phonics in developing literacy.

The controversy over phonics and reading instruction is surely not at an end, but Marilyn Adams has shown how some of our earlier attempts to understand reading were based on inadequate models of learning. Her book will allow reading teachers and curriculum leaders to gain a better understanding of how reading happens, within the minds of readers. □

¹M. V. Morphet and C. Washburne, (March 1931), "When Should Children Begin to Read?" *Elementary School Journal* 31: 496-503.

²E. W. Dolch and M. Bloomster, (November 1937), "Phonics Readiness," *Elementary School Journal* 38: 201-205.

³M. J. Adams, (1990), *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press).

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