

## Basic Phonics

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There are several possible positions about the role of phonics in reading, although they do not exhaust all the possibilities.

Intensive, Systematic Phonics. Ehri (2004) defines this position as follows: "Phonics instruction is systematic when all of the major letter-sound correspondences are taught and covered in a clearly defined sequence .." (p. 180).

This position claims that we learn to read by first learning the rules of phonics, that is, we learn to read by sounding out or reading aloud ("decoding to sound"). It also asserts that our entire knowledge of phonics must be deliberately taught and consciously learned: Intensive instruction is "essential" (Ehri, 2004). Proponents of Intensive Systematic Phonics tell us that learning to read is hard work (Ehri, 2004).

Ehri gives us some idea of what the "major" rules are: They include "long and short vowels and vowel and consonant digraphs consisting of two letters representing one phoneme, such as oi, ea, sh, and th. Also, phonics instruction may include blends of letter sounds that represent larger subunits in words such as consonant pairs (e.g. st, bl), onsets, and rimes" (p. 180). (It is unclear what happens to the "minor" rules, whether they are also taught or whether they are acquired incidentally. One must ask: if the minor rules can be acquired, without direct instruction, why can't all phonics rules be acquired?)

Basic Phonics: According to this position, it is helpful to teach some rules of phonics, but just the basics, just the straight-forward rules. (I introduce the term Basic Phonics here, attempting to provide a label for a position that already exists, but has not, in my view, been made explicit.)

According to Basic Phonics, we learn to read by actually reading, by understanding what is on the page. Most of our knowledge of phonics is the result of reading; the more complex rules of phonics are subconsciously acquired through reading (Smith, 1994).

A conscious knowledge of some basic rules can help children learn to read by making texts more comprehensible. Smith (1994) demonstrates how this can happen: The child is reading the sentence "The man was riding on the h\_\_\_\_." and cannot read the final word. Given the context and knowledge of 'h' the child can make a good guess as to what the final word is. This won't work every time (some

readers might think the missing word was "Harley"), but some knowledge of phonics can restrict the possibilities of what the unknown words are. (One could subdivide Basic Phonics into sub-positions, into those who claim that learning the basics is essential and those who claim it is helpful.)

Basic Phonics appears to be the position of authors of Becoming a Nation of Readers, a book widely considered to provide strong support for phonics instruction:

"...phonics instruction should aim to teach only the most important and regular of letter-to-sound relationships ... once the basic relationships have been taught, the best way to get children to refine and extend their knowledge of letter- sound correspondences is through repeated opportunities to read. If this position is correct, then much phonics instruction is overly subtle and probably unproductive"  
(Anderson, Heibert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985, p.38).

Zero Phonics: This view claims that all phonics rules can be acquired by reading, and that direct teaching is not necessary or even helpful.

## **The evidence**

An argument against intensive, systematic phonics is the claim that many rules are very complex and many don't work very well. As Smith (2003) notes, they are "unreliable ... there are too many alternatives and exceptions ... 300 ways in which letters and sounds can be related" (p. 41). In fact, Smith points out, most of the words of the English language are "spelled irregularly" and it is a real challenge to write "decodable text." (Some have claimed that the rules of phonics that appear not to work very well can be repaired and should be taught. In Krashen (2002), I argue that some recent attempts to state better sound- spelling generalizations have resulted only in more complex rules that are only slightly more efficient. )

The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) concluded that the experimental research supports intensive systematic phonics. Garan (2001), in an examination of this report, noted that the impact of intensive phonics is strong on tests in which children read lists of words in isolation. But it is less evident for tests of reading comprehension, and what is most important, it is miniscule for tests of reading comprehension given after grade 1, tests which include more complex texts with more irregular words. Thus, intensive phonics instruction may only help children develop the ability to read words in isolation, an ability that will emerge anyway with more reading.

If the Basic Phonics position is correct, which rules are teachable and useful? Most likely, experienced professionals will agree that most initial consonants can be taught and learned and applied to text by small children, but some rules will be impossible for six year olds (and most adults), rules such as this one, recommended by Johnson (2001): "the a-e combination is pronounced with the long vowel and the final e silent (except when the final syllable is unaccented - then the vowel is pronounced with a short-i sound, as in "palace," or the combination is "are," with words such as "have" and "dance" as exceptions).

### **The great misunderstanding**

There is certainly strong support among the public and the media for "phonics" instruction. What is not clear is whether the support is for Intensive Systematic Phonics, or Basic Phonics. Whole language advocates are regularly accused of supporting the Zero Phonics position, but most actually support Basic Phonics, maintaining that basic phonics is one way to help make texts more comprehensible. Public opinion might be much closer to the whole language view than to the extreme position taken by the National Reading Panel.

Anderson, R., Hiebert, E., Scott, J., & Wilkinson, I. 1985. *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education.

Garen, E. 2002. *Resisting Reading Mandates*. Heinemann.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2000. *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction: Reports of the Subgroups*. Washington, DC: NIH Publication 00-4654.

Johnson, F. 2001. The utility of phonics generalizations: Let's take another look at Clymer's conclusions. *The Reading Teacher*, 55, 132-143.

Krashen, S. 2002. Defending whole language: The limits of phonics instruction and the efficacy of whole language instruction. *Reading Improvement* 39 (1): 32- 42.

Smith, F. 1994. *Understanding Reading*. Erlbaum.

## INTENSIVE SYSTEMATIC PHONICS

phonics taught in sequence

all "major" rules

all rules consciously learned

reading = practice of learned rules

## BASIC PHONICS

no optimal sequence

consciously learn only basic rules

most rules subconsciously acquired

reading = source of most phonics knowledge

## ZERO PHONICS

rules subconsciously acquired

reading = source of phonics knowledge