

Submitted to Education Week, January 25, 2020
Foundational Reading Skills: Acquired or Learned?
Stephen Krashen

Mesmer (“There are four foundational reading skills: Why do we only talk about phonics?” Education Week, 1/23/2020) proclaims that explicit instruction in phonics is not enough: children must be taught print concepts, phonemic awareness, morphology, and fluency.

Of course children should develop competence in these areas, but should all this be taught explicitly? There is considerable published research that challenges this view, that concludes that for these “neglected” areas as well as phonics:

1. There are many rules and generalizations that are extremely complex and have not even been well-described.
2. Deliberate instruction does not result in improved reading comprehension.
3. Competence in these areas has been shown to emerge without instruction.

A reasonable hypothesis, one not mentioned by Mesmer, is that competence in these areas is largely, if not completely, the result of reading, not the cause. To borrow terminology from second language acquisition, these competences are subconsciously acquired, not consciously learned.

Some (just a few of the many) publications presenting and reviewing these conclusions:

Phonemic awareness: Krashen, S. 2003. The unbearable coolness of phonemic awareness.

Language Magazine vol. 2, no 8: 13-18 <https://tinyurl.com/y7eodokr>

Phonics: Krashen, S. 2019. Beginning reading: The (huge) role of stories and the (limited) role of phonics. Language Magazine, April, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yxyy5rnk>

Print concepts: Knight, C. and Fischer, K. 1994. Learning to read words: Individual differences in developmental sequences. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology 13: 377- 404.

Morphology: McQuillan, J. 2019. The Myth of Teaching Morphology. <http://backseatlinguist.com/blog/the-myth-of-teaching-morphology/>. October 21, 2019.

Fluency is not included in this list, but very few of the readers of this note have ever had instruction in fluency.