

Phonemic Awareness Training: Both Boring and Ineffective?

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There is strong evidence that affect counts, that positive emotions enhance performance and learning, and that negative emotions hinder them (for evidence supporting this "pleasure hypothesis," see Krashen, 1994; Coles, 1998). If this is correct, a recent report on children's attitudes toward phonemic awareness (PA) training gives us strong reason for concern.

Castiglioni-Spalten and Ehri (2003) compared the effects of regular PA (segmentation) training ("ear treatment") and PA segmentation training that included instruction in articulatory gestures (this group, the "mouth treatment," "learned to position pictures to depict the sequence of articulatory gestures in words," p. 25). The control group had no special treatment. (The mean age of all subjects was 5 years, 9 months.) Castiglioni-Spalten and Ehri reported no difference among the two PA groups on segmentation tests, and spelling, although both groups were better than the group that got no training, a familiar result: PA training results in improved performance on tests of PA (but not necessarily reading; Krashen, 2000, Coles, 2002) and is better than doing nothing (Coles, 2002). There was no difference among the groups in reading pseudowords and on a test in which children were taught new words. Castiglioni-Spalten and Ehri reported that the articulation group was better on the latter test when a post-hoc analysis was done and partial credit was allowed.

Of interest here is the children's reactions to the training: In the pilot study, the experimenter recorded "several off-task and resistance behaviors committed by students: refusing to use the mirror (during articulation training); leaving their seats without permission; playing with blocks by building a tower, house, or train; throwing the blocks on the floor; talking about extraneous topics; interacting with others in the room; and expressing reluctance to finish the instruction" (p. 36). In the actual study, the experimenter had a "procedure for curbing such behaviors. When one occurred, she reminded students that she would be reporting back to their teacher about how well they did and surely they wanted a good report. In addition, a screen was positioned to isolate children from distractions in the room" (p. 36).

During the actual study, "the experimenter recorded instances of off-task and resistance behaviors ... However, students rarely committed such behaviors more than twice because the experimenter discouraged them" (p. 43). Castiglioni-Spalten and Ehri reported there was more disruption for the "ear" condition than the

"mouth" condition but do not provide details, only the incredible statistic that 87% of the children in the ear condition "exhibited at least one of these behaviors such as playing with blocks by building a tower, horse, or train" (p. 43).

The training sessions lasted only between 20 and 30 minutes, and there were only "three to six" of them. Despite the short treatments, these children were clearly bored.¹

Compare this to children's reactions to hearing stories. Here is one typical description: Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein (1986), a study that took place in Israel, confirmed the positive impact of read alouds on language development (see also Blok, 1999; Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1995). In addition to providing test scores, Feitelson et. al. also presented this interesting report on how children reacted to hearing stories. First graders in Israel were read to from the Kofiko series, which dealt with the adventures of a monkey. The following is a quote from a teacher's observational record, two months after the reading program began: "11:20: The class is busy copying home assignment questions from the blackboard. At 11:25 the teacher reminds the children that 'we need to hurry because we want to read Kofiko.' There are immediate shouts of approval and children hurry to finish the task. A few faster children to to the desks of the slower ones and assist them. Cries of 'hurry up' and 'let's get it done so we don't lose time,' are heard from various directions ..." (p. 348).

In addition to the enthusiasm for hearing stories in the classroom, Feitelson et. al. reported that children asked their parents to buy them Kofiko books: "By the end of the study 13 of the 31 children in the experimental class personally owned one or more Kofiko books; all together the children owned 45 Kofiko books. Four additional children were borrowing Kofiko books from relatives, neighbors, or the public library. In comparison, there were single Kofiko volumes in each of three homes in one control class, and one Kofiko book each in four homes and two in a fifth home in the second control class. In every case these belonged to older siblings and the interviewed first grader had not read them" (p. 350).

It is hard to imagine a similar response to phonemic awareness activities.

The empirical research confirms what most parents know: The vast majority of children say that they enjoy being read to. Walker and Kuerbeitz (1979) reported that 35 out of the 36 children they studied said they liked being read to: Mason and Blanton (1971) and Wells (1985) reported similar results. And of course, the single best source for compelling case histories confirming the pleasure of read alouds is Trelease (2001).

Ironically, research suggests that read alouds also boost phonemic awareness: Neuman (1999) is a report of the Books Aloud project, a book flood aimed at three and four year old children in child care centers. "High quality" children's books were provided (five books per child), and ten hours of inservicing was provided for staff, which included techniques of doing read alouds, reading-related activities (e.g. manipulatives, hand puppets, flannel board activities), and the design of libraries. It is important to note that many staff members felt that direct teaching of skills was important. Neuman's goal was to "... alter heavily skill-based instruction" but still "acknowledge and work within teachers' beliefs" (p. 294).² The project lasted eight months.

Tests of phonemic awareness were given six months after the project ended. In the rhyme test, children were asked to indicate which word of three did not rhyme with the others. In the alliteration task, children were asked to indicate which word of three did not begin with the same sound. Children in the Books Aloud group were better than controls on both: I calculated effect sizes of .57 for rhyme and .54 for alliteration, which are quite substantial, and especially impressive considering that the tests were given long after the treatment ended.³ Citing Ehri, Neuman notes that this result suggests that "these skills may indeed be a by-product of exposure to books and learning" (p. 305).

Even if phonemic awareness were in fact a prerequisite to learning to read (which has never been demonstrated), it may very well be that children exposed to stories and meaningful print develop all the PA they need to insure their continued progress.

Shouldn't we study ways of developing literacy via pleasant and engaging activities? Shouldn't we continue to test the hypothesis that negative emotions hinder performance and learning, while positive emotions enhance them? Instead, I fear that research will investigate how to keep children quiet and docile so that they will endure boring (and ineffective) PA activities. How about Ritalin?⁴

Notes

1. One wonders how often this occurs. Reports of children's affective reactions to PA training have not been included in other studies. I applaud Castiglioni-Spalton and Ehri's honesty in including these descriptions, despite the fact that it opens them to charges of child abuse.

2. Neuman did not describe the direct instruction component of the project in detail. It was doubtful that it was the intensive phonemic awareness training that is done in training studies, or anywhere near what is recommended by some people these days.
3. Recall that in the Castiglioni-Spalton and Ehri study, PA posttests were given immediately after the training session and one week later. Their sessions were, however, few and short.
4. For very similar reactions to a phonics lesson, and a vivid contrast with a read-aloud session, see Meyer, (2002).

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