

The Phonics Debate: 2004

Stephen Krashen
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"Many are doubtless endeavoring to decide as to the most efficient method of teaching primary reading, whether through phonetic drills or otherwise" (Currier and Duguid, 1916).

As the above quote shows, the phonics debate has been going on for a long time.

The phonics debate today is a struggle between two hypotheses. The Comprehension Hypothesis is the one that I think is right: It claims that we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages, by listening or by reading. When we get "comprehensible input" language acquisition occurs effortlessly, subconsciously, and involuntarily. The "Reading Hypothesis" is a manifestation of the Comprehension Hypothesis. It claims that we "learn to read by reading," that we learn to read by understanding what is on the page (Smith, 1994; Goodman, in Flurkey and Xu, 2003). The Reading Hypothesis also claims that reading for meaning is the source of our competence in literate language; reading is the way we acquire (subconsciously absorb) vocabulary, spelling, writing and grammatical competence.

The second, or rival hypothesis is the Skill-Building Hypothesis: it claims that we learn language and develop literacy by first consciously learning the rules ("the -s goes on the third person singular," "when two vowels go walking the first does the talking."), we automatize the rules by speaking and writing, and adjust our knowledge of consciously learned rules by getting our errors corrected. For the general public, the Skill-Building Hypothesis is not a hypothesis: It is an axiom, simply assumed to be correct.

"Whole language" is considered to be closely related to the Comprehension Hypothesis, and "systematic intensive phonics" instruction (an attempt to teach all sound-spelling correspondences in a planned sequence) is considered to be connected to the Skill-Building Hypothesis.

I will focus here only on the latest (and most influential) report related to this struggle of hypotheses: The report of the National Reading Panel (2000), which came down heavily on the side of intensive, systematic phonics. The Panel came to two conclusions about phonics:

- (1) "Systematic" phonics instruction is more effective than less systematic phonics instruction.
- (2) "Skills" based approaches are superior to whole language approaches in helping children learn to read.

There is good reason to question both of these claims.

Elaine Garan (Garan 2002) took a close look at the panel's report, and found that claim (1) was only true for tests in which children read lists of words in isolation. It was not true for tests of reading comprehension. In fact, for tests of reading comprehension given after grade 1, the effect of heavy phonics instruction was barely perceptible.

When we give children tests of words in isolation, they have no choice but to appeal to their knowledge of phonics; it is no wonder that intensive phonics instruction shows such a strong effect. This does not show that intensive phonics is helpful in learning to read. Smith (2003) points out that "this is like tying children's feet together to prove they must jump before walking" (p. 13). In both cases, we have constrained the situation so that children are forced to use unnatural means of accomplishing a task.

The National Reading Panel did not distinguish between different kinds of tests used when making their second claim, the claim that skills-based instruction is superior to whole language. Some tests were measures of reading single words in isolation, some involved real texts. They also did not closely examine what went on in the treatments; The issue is not whether a treatment is labeled "whole language" or "skills" but how much reading the children actually did. In some studies, the group labeled "skills" or "traditional" actually read more than the group labeled whole language.

I re-analyzed this data (Krashen, 2002) with two alterations: (1) Considering only tests of reading comprehension. (2) Considering not whether a treatment is labeled "whole language," or "phonics" but whether the children in one treatment were actually doing more real reading than the children in the other treatment. In addition, I included some studies that the NRP had missed. My results were dramatically different from those reported by the National Reading Panel: I found an advantage favoring whole language.

My conclusion on the second National Reading Panel claim is what methodologists call "post hoc." I went back and looked at previously done studies using my own framework, asking different questions than those the original researchers had asked.

Scientifically, this is not a strong way of supporting a hypothesis. What is clear, however, is that the National Reading Panel's interpretation of the results is not the only possible one.

The role of phonics

I think there is a role for the direct teaching of phonics. This is not a "compromise" position but one that is fully consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis: Phonics, or conscious knowledge of sound-spelling correspondences, can help when it makes text 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 pretty good guess as to what the final word is. This won't work every time (some readers might think the missing word is "Harley"), but some knowledge of phonics can restrict the possibilities of what the unknown words are.

The limits of phonics

There are, however, severe limits on how much phonics can be learned and taught. Smith points out that phonics rules can be very complex. In fact, teachers often tell me that they have to review the phonics rules they are about to teach before coming to class. What does this tell us? If experienced teachers who have taught the rules many times cannot remember them, how are six-year olds supposed to remember them? Here is a simple rule of thumb for teachers: If you have to look it up, don't teach it.

Not only are the rules complex, many don't work very well. Clymer (1962) is one of several studies showing this. The famous "two vowels go walking, first does the talking" rule, for example, didn't work in 45% of the words with two vowels in a row in texts he examined.

Finally, Smith points out that different phonics programs teach different rules!

A generalization

Some knowledge of phonics can be helpful, but most of our knowledge of phonics, Smith maintains, is the result of reading, not the cause. There has been, in other words, a profound confusion of cause and effect. This view is, I believe, held by many people. It is nearly exactly what the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* concluded, 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).

Sources of confusion

Part of the problem, in my view, is that we are sometimes not very clear on what we mean when we talk about phonics instruction. Those of us opposed to intensive systematic phonics are regularly accused of being opposed to all phonics instruction, which is false. The issue for me is which rules are useful in making texts more comprehensible: which rules can be taught, learned, remembered, and applied to texts by children.

I have participated in many public debates and discussions on this topic. A particularly memorable one happened about five years ago in Kinkos. The clerk noticed that one of my manuscripts I was picking up had the word "phonics" in the title. She commented on it, saying, "Oh yes, phonics! Great stuff!" Then she went on to share this with me: "I taught my boyfriend phonics, he loved it!" Always the researcher, I asked her to give me an example of a phonics rule that he found particularly useful (I was tempted to say "enjoyable."). Her response: "'i' before 'e,' except after 'c.'" I tried to tell her that this was a spelling rule, not a phonics rule.

Postscript: Phonics and second language acquisition

Slavin and Cheung (2004) present several sets of studies that, they claim, show that systematic intensive phonics is effective for second language acquirers.

One set consists of studies of a program, designed by Slavin, called *Success for All*, which utilizes intensive systematic phonics instruction. Slavin and Cheung claim that *Success for All* has been shown to be more effective than comparison programs, and conclude that this is evidence for the superiority of intensive systematic phonics. But *Success for All* is much more than systematic phonics. The program insists on 90 minutes per day devoted to reading, considerably more than the usual amount of time, tutors are a key part of the program, and cooperative learning is used a great deal. In kindergarten and grade 1, “meaning, context and self monitoring strategies” are included, along with paired reading, and in grades 2 through 5, students are expected to do self-selected reading at home for 20 minutes per day. (See <http://www.successforall.net/curriculum/components.htm>.) Unless comparison groups follow identical curricula but do not use systematic phonics, we cannot conclude that it was the phonics component that made the difference.

Another set of studies consists of comparisons of an approach called Direct Instruction with "regular" instruction. In one of the two studies included, the comparison group treatment is unknown. In the other, the Direct Instruction children were superior to comparisons in word reading in grades 5 and 6, three years after the program ended, but performed dismally in reading comprehension (total reading MAT score), with fifth graders scoring at the 16th percentile and sixth graders at the 15th (Becker and Gersten, 1982, table V; comparisons did about the same). This pattern of high scores on decoding tests and lower scores on reading tests is precisely what Garan reported for the impact of intensive, systematic phonics on studies using native speakers of English.

Also, *Direct Instruction* has only been compared to other skill-based approaches, not to whole language classes in which there is plenty of exposure to interesting, comprehensible books.

One must conclude that there is no convincing evidence supporting the use of intensive, systematic phonics for first or second language readers.

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