DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 536 CS 011 018

AUTHOR Partridge, Susan
TITLE Phonemic Awareness versus Meaning Instruction in Beginning Reading: A Discussion.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 23p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; Phonetics; Primary Education; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Processes; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Phonemic Awareness; *Reading Theories

ABSTRACT

Two Schools of thought prominent in reading instruction are: (1) that reading is a language-based skill which requires the reader to have a sound knowledge of phonology and that this knowledge must be at an automatic level of information processing; and (2) that reading problems are the result of being overly attentive to phonetic and orthographic features of words, to the disadvantage of the use of context. Since most specialists feel that one need not preclude the other, the question of whether to teach letter-sound correspondences has been explored. Several studies show that letter-sound instruction helps students with correct spellings and readings, and that phonological awareness and letter knowledge in combination are necessary but not sufficient for acquisition of the alphabetic principle. In addition, more can be done to teach children how to use their language skills, since many children who possess decoding skills make little use of them. Teachers can use the humor, ridiculousness, and rhythm of rhyme to teach children to use their skills. Research has shown that recognizing the global, tactile, and kinesthetic reading styles of poor readers will facilitate their learning. Personality differences, psychological and metacognitive factors, the quality of teachers, and the stability of the home also play a large role in children's learning. Phonemic awareness and stress on meaning need not preclude each other, but each must be used according to the needs of individual children. Successful teaching is a huge cooperative effort, which includes teachers, parents, librarians, speech therapists, social agencies, and ministries. (Several rhymes are included and 15 implications for educators are attached.) (PRA)

Susan Partridge

Phonemic Awareness Versus Meaning Instruction in Beginning Reading: A Discussion

Susan Partridge

Phonemic Awareness Versus Meaning Instruction in Beginning Reading: A Discussion

This paper is addressed to a discussion of an educational problem of long and continuing concern, that is, instruction in phonemic awareness versus meaning-emphasis instruction in beginning reading.

Daniel P. Hallahan and Tanis H. Bryan (8) explained, "There is a school of thought that reading is a language-based skill which requires the reader to have a sound knowledge of phonology and that this knowledge has to be at an automatic level of information processing (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974)." In support of this belief, they added, "Vellutino (1977) suggested that good and poor readers may be discriminated by differences in their conscious awareness of the fact that individual sounds make up words; that poor readers are less aware of the structure of words."

The Wepman Auditory Discrimination Test (Wepman, 1958) has been used a great deal in assessing children's phonological skills. Hallahan and Bryan feel that there is little evidence to support Wepman's claims that the test discriminates good and poor readers. They explain: "It was found that scores on the group-administered tests of intelligence were more predictive than the auditory measures. Shankweiler and Liberman (1972) conducted several research studies to sort out whether poor reading is the result of auditory discrimination, visual processing, or auditory segmentation difficulties. They compared good and poor readers' ability to repeat the same words spoken to them. While the children had no difficulty repeating words they heard, they did

have difficulty reading these same words.

Hallahan and Bryan offer, in contrast to the results of studies in which Wepman's test was used, results of research on phonemic segmentation skills that indicate that skills in phonology are related to reading achievement. They explain, "The underlying assumption of this research is that poor readers have difficulties because they fail to recognize that words are comprised of single sounds, they fail to segment words into phonemic units, and they fail to recognize that written symbols represent these individual sounds. This is a difficult task because we do not hear words in segmented fashion, and written and spoken words in English do not have a one-to-one correspondence." They recalled that Shankweiler and Liberman (1972) conducted many research studies which demonstrate that poor readers have more difficulty with phonemic segmentation than good readers. Though they can repeat words accurately, they have difficulty reading them. They found that errors made in repeating words were distributed across positions of the words, whereas in reading, they tended to be in the medial and final positions of words with more errors made on vowels. They feel that their finding of few errors of sequence reversals or orientation suggests that errors are much more related to phonological than visual perception problems.

Hallahan and Bryan seem to feel that there is enough evidence to support the belief that children with difficulties in acquiring phonological skills appear to have greater difficulty learning to read than children who have the sense of word components.

In contrast to this belief, there are researchers who view reading problems as the result of being overly attentive to phonetic and orthographic features of words, to the disadvantagement of the use of context. Goodman (7) and Smith (9) are among those who, apparently, feel strongly about this. The reading deficit, in this view, is felt to be the result of having a poorly developed meaning system. The child comes to the reading task with limitations in the ability to use context to make sense of unknown words.

Hallahan and Bryan reviewed considerable research concerning the effect of a poorly developed meaning system. They concluded: "In sum, whether the linguistic difficulties observed in the learning disabled are the result of their inadequate phonological skills or their inadequate grasp of contextual meaning, it is clear that learning and/or reading-disabled children have greater difficulty than nondisabled children in the acquisition of language skills considered critical for academic achievement."

In regard to language skills, it has been convincing throughout the years that there are a number of little children who have sub-standard skills for their age level. The case of a happy little boy is remembered.

It is generally conceded that it is by word order and the juxtaposition of words that a writer conveys to the reader the logic of his/her thinking. An example of this little fellow's language follows:

He loved his neighbor and felt sure that she loved him. On

each visit to her, he'd greet her with, "Make onion sammich me; do thee good."

A child with good language skills would probably say, "Make me an onion sandwich" or "Make an onion sandwich for me," would pronounce "sandwich" correctly, and probably wouldn't expect to find "thee" at the end of the request. In addition, this child grossly mispronounced his neighbor's name, though he had heard it innumerable times.

Another example is remembered: His loving parents whose language skills left a lot to be desired, fed and clothed him well, and made sure that he had pleasant and profitable experiences. It is remembered that they bought him a rabbit and a little male goat. When his neighbor went to see the goat, he greeted her, with "You look out dat buck goat. Dat buck goat riz you right up." The goat's horns were in evidence, and his parents had probably warned him of what might happen if he teased the goat.

Needless to say, this little fellow had great difficulty learning to read. As a matter of fact, he is still not a reader. Fortunately, he had several things going for him, among them loving parents, a good self concept, a happy disposition and considerable artistic and mechanical skill. He has become a productive citizen.

Certainly, adequate language skills are a help in unlocking words. "Pint" and "hint" are offered as an example. In the sentence, "John drank a half pint of milk," the context makes it clear to the child who drinks milk and who is making normal progress in his/her reading that the word intended is "pint."

Unfortunately, there are a number of children who are not so fortunate.

Granted, "hint" is a more sophisticated word and not likely to be found in the very young children's reading material; however, there are some first grade children, even some "preschoolers" who can read beyond a first grade level.

Correctness of words unlocked through context can be verified by phonological knowledge. As a matter of fact, Dr. Donald Durrell, a noted reading specialist, was heard to say that he viewed phonics as a check on the reader's decision as to what the word is.

Barbara R. Foorman et al. (5) stated, "We see the relation between codes and meaning as nonorthogonal in that the teaching of codes need not preclude meaningful context, and the stress on meaning need not preclude the teaching of codes (see Stahl & Miller, 1989). We assume that the real debate is whether to teach letter-sound correspondences."

They designed their investigation to study the ways in which first graders read and spell as they are exposed to more or less letter-sound instruction. Their predictions follow:

> 1. All children will exhibit regularity effects in word reading. However, children receiving less letter-sound instruction will not exhibit regularity effects to the same extent or at the same rate as children receiving more letter-sound instruction.
>
> 2. The relation between phonemic segmentation and word reading will generally be one of reciprocal causation, but, in addition, knowledge of word spellings will predict accuracy of word readings for children receiving more letter-sound instruction.

A short abstract of their study gives the results of tests given three times during the year to determine how letter-sound instruction mediates progress in first grade reading and spelling; it follows:

> Children in six 1st grade classrooms (N80) differing in amount of daily letter-sound instruction were administered tests of phonemic segmentation and of reading and spelling 60 regular and exception words three times during the year. Repeated measures results indicated no classroom differences in phonemic segmentation. However, classrooms with more letter-sound instruction improved at a faster rate in correct spellings and readings. Individual growth models analysis indicated that phonemic segmentation scores obtained in October predicted overall performance in spelling but only predicted end-of-year differences in regular and exception word reading. Finally, better reading of regular words in October was associated with faster growth in spelling, and better spelling of words in October was predictive of May word reading.

Brian Byrne and Ruth Fielding-Barnsley (2) from the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, who favored phoneme identity over segmentation, designed a program to teach young children about phonological structure. Sixty-four preschoolers were trained for 12 weeks, and 63 controls were exposed to the same material but with no reference to phonology. Greater gains were made by the experimental group. It was found that most of the children who knew relevant letter sounds and possessed phonemic awareness could use their knowledge to decode unfamiliar words. The authors felt that results were consistent with the claim that "phonological awareness and letter knowledge in combination are necessary but not sufficient for acquisition of the

alphabetic principle."

They reported on the work of Cunningham (1990) which provided a possible clue to the necessary extra factors:

Cunningham compared "skill and drill" and "meta-level" instruction in phonemic awareness. The "skill and drill" instruction involved teaching specific skills -- segmentation and blending, for example. The "meta-level" instruction involved, in addition to teaching the skills, instruction as to how to use this knowledge.

Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley had some questions following the completion of their study:

"We have yet to determine whether the early benefits of the phonemic-awareness program used in this study lead to an advantage for the experimental group in the first few years of schooling. We would like to know whether the program is as effective in the less structured circumstances that may prevail in classroom uses by preschool and kindergarten teachers. Both of these issues are the subjects of continuing research."

There are those who believe in early positive learning experiences as being used more efficiently in new learning. There are also those who believe that there are many developmental skills that children must achieve before any "formal teaching" -- hand-eye coordination, attention span, etc. This may well be needed to be carefully considered in this hi-tech age when computers are being used with the young children. Dr. G.N. Getman (6), a distinguished pioneer in the field of developmental optometry, has made it very

clear that there are many developmental skills children must achieve before they are exposed to a microcomputer, and he says that many of these have not yet been achieved by millions of primary children. He is referring to such skills as eye-hand coordination, spatial orientation, figure/ground, visual peripheral awareness, and attention span. Getman emphasizes, "There is no doubt among behavioral optometrists, who have spent many years attending children with visual difficulties, that the computer will be the most potent contributor to early, extreme nearsightedness in the children who drive themselves to mastery of it in spite of the stress."

It is believed that Dr. Getman, in no way, wants to minimize the value of the computer or any of the many and continuing wonders of technology; he just wants to make sure of the children's readiness for their use.

It is truly believed that more could, and should, be done to teach children how to use language skills they have been taught. It has been observed that some young children who fully understand the concepts of horse and house, and who possess the necessary decoding skills, make little use of them. Some have been known to read the sentence, "The horse is eating grass" as "The house is eating grass," and continue merrily on with their reading.

Two other words, noise and nose, confused by some children, but whose concepts are understood by them, come to mind. It was recommended, in a professional magazine, that "oi" be reviewed for help in distinguishing "noise" from "nose." A review of a number

of young children's books shows that these two words are not interchangeable in light of the context. Following are examples which indicate that priority might well be given to meaning in these cases:

> Little Bella out
> Hanging up clothes,
> Along came a blackbird
> And nipped off her nose.

The children heard the queer noise. (Aiken Drum, the Brownie).

> Right through the window jumped the cat, the dog, and the donkey. They made a great noise going in, and the robbers made a great noise going out. (The Donkey and His Band).

Another example: When Pinocchio told a lie, his nose grew longer.

Children's joyous laughter has been heard as their teacher tried to instill in them a love for reading. Though some teachers have used rhymes with much success, it is felt that this resource could be more-widely used. Some children love the rhythm, others the humor, the ridiculousness and the imaginative.

In addition to all these assets, children stand to profit a great deal about the structure of words -- both regular and irregular, to increase their vocabularies and to have their thinking, their imagination and their creativity stimulated. Some little children have been known to create their own rhymes and to thoroughly enjoy some written by their teacher. The rhymes offered

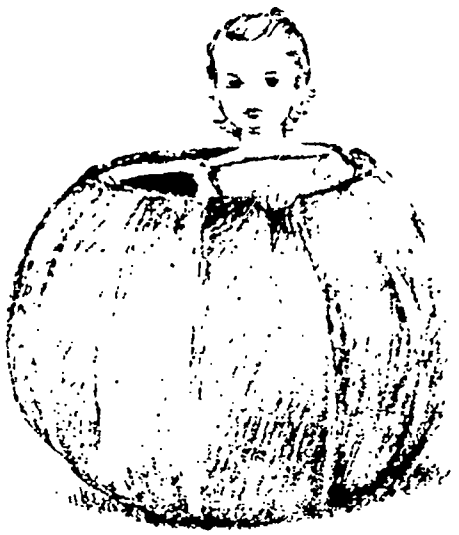
below support the claims made as to the value of including rhymes in reading instruction for the young children.

Dance, little baby, dance up high:
Never mind, baby, mother is by;
Crow and caper, caper and crow,
There, little baby, there you go;

Up to the ceiling, down to the ground,
Backwards and forwards, round and round:
Dance, little baby, and mother shall sing,
With the merry gay choral, ding, ding-a-ding, ding.

One, two,
Buckle my shoe;
Three, four,
Knock at the door;
Five, six,
Pick up sticks;
Seven, eight,
Lay them straight;
Nine, ten,
A big fat hen;
Eleven, twelve,
Dig and delve;
Thirteen, fourteen,
Maids a-courting;
Fifteen, sixteen,
Maids in the kitchen;
Seventeen, eighteen,
Maids in waiting;
Nineteen, twenty,
My plate's empty.

Marguerite de Angeli's
Book of Nursery and
Mother Goose Rhymes
1954



Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater,
Had a wife and couldn't keep her;
He put her in a pumpkin shell
And there he kept her very well.

Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater,
Had another, and didn't love her;
Peter learned to read and spell,
And then he loved her very well.

Three wise men of Gotham,
They went to sea in a bowl,
And if the bowl had been stronger
My song had been longer.

Little Jack Horner
Sat in the corner,
Eating a Christmas pie;
He put in his thumb,
And pulled out a plum,
And said, What a good boy am I!

Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town,
Upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown,
Rapping at the window, crying through the lock,
"Are the children in their beds, for now it's eight o'clock?"

Different children have different learning styles. It is believed that recognition of, and respect for, these differences would be in the best interests of the young children.

Marie Carbo (3), who has worked extensively on learning styles, reports that thousands of poor readers whom she and her colleagues have observed, interviewed, and tested have exhibited global, tactile, and kinesthetic reading styles. Ms. Carbo explains:

> It comes as no surprise that many poor readers are predominantly global, tactile, and kinesthetic learners -- for that is precisely the reading style that seems to be accommodated least in U.S. classrooms. Unfortunately, many of today's poor readers are dropouts of reading programs that demand strongly analytic/auditory reading styles. Analytic students are part-to-whole learners. They can often master isolated skills that are presented in sequential fashion, they enjoy forming words from bits and pieces of phonetic information, they can easily recall details, and they like to work with puzzles and nonsense words. Youngsters with auditory reading styles are capable of discriminating among subtle differences in letter sounds, associating those sounds with letter shapes, and blending letter sounds quickly to form words.
>
> Instruction in phonics is undoubtedly beneficial for some learners, but the amount that is needed varies, depending on an individual child's reading style and preferences. Youngsters with auditory and analytic reading styles often require phonics instruction to become proficient readers; those with strongly global and visual reading styles, by contrast, may need little or no phonics instruction.
>
> Instructional approaches that virtually force students to learn through their reading-style weaknesses tend to produce failure, boredom, and loss of self-esteem, while approaches that capitalize on students' reading-style strengths tend to sharply increase their reading achievement.

The Dunns (4), who also have done a great deal of work with learning styles, studied the related emotional, sociological and

psychological factors as well as the environmental and physical and have found twenty-one elements to be considered in designing instructional programs for individuals.

In the sociological category, they have offered four elements for consideration: colleagues, self, pair and team. This indicates that some children prefer working alone and that others do better working with one or more of their classmates. Many articles containing personality profiles of computer programmers, seem in agreement that they are logical and introverted people and enjoy working alone.

In the emotional category, the Dunns have found motivation, persistence, responsibility and structure to be relevant; in the psychological, they have named analytical, global, cerebral dominance, reflective and impulsive. The need for order which Gaylord and Franklin (4) found is in keeping with structure which the Dunns found an important element to be considered.

The Dunns have also found important consideration in the environmental and physical categories: sound, light, temperature and design in the environmental; and perceptual, intake, time and modality in the physical. Obviously, parents can exercise control over many of these elements; therefore, their cooperation should be sought.

Some educators favor developing metacognition in students through direct instruction and practice. Babbs and Moe (1) describe it thus:

"Metacognition refers to the ability to monitor one's own

cognition; it is thinking about thinking. When applied to the act of reading, this definition suggests that the reader is able to select skills and strategies appropriate for the demands of the reading task."

Some feel that the metacognitive concept is not new, as they remember that many years ago, Thorndike defined reading as reasoning. It is felt wise to give attention to this concept, and it is felt that good teachers do that and much more.

It is felt that if we want the very young to become lifetime readers, they should have the very best teachers. Some teachers have a very engaging personality and can readily capture the minds and hearts of the children.

It was most encouraging to learn that Ernest L. Boyer, Head of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is in agreement with this. Following is part of a personal letter from him which attests to this fact:

"I have, on several occasions, said that if this nation would give as much status to first grade teachers as we give to full professors, that one act alone would advance the quality of the nation's schools."

Throughout decades, it has been noted that little children, who wanted to share with their teacher, their enthusiasm over a story they were reading, were simply given an almost meaningless remark -- "How nice!" Such remarks indicate that the teacher probably didn't know the story. Teachers' colleges might well require that teachers planning to teach the beginning grades should

become familiar with little children's storybooks and, therefore, able to respond more enthusiastically and with remarks that are challenging and inspiring.

It is truly believed that school people alone cannot, and should not be expected to teach all children to read, to thoroughly enjoy it, and to become lifetime readers. It is easy to understand how an abused child might find it hard to concentrate on the highest quality of teaching.

In material received in June of '92 from the N.C. Chapter of the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, it was reported that 71,164 children were abused and neglected in North Carolina. That's 195 kids a day, or 1 every 7 minutes. The sad fact is that 9 times out of 10, parents are responsible for the abuse. Surely, help above and beyond the school personnel is needed in these cases.

Many parents, however, have much to offer, and their involvement in their children's schooling should be sought and welcomed.

A small survey of 30 people, selected at random, and connected with a university in capacities ranging from student to service personnel, and in age from 12 to the early 50's, was made. The subjects were approached and asked, "Do you enjoy reading beyond what is required of you? Whom do you credit with instilling in you the love of reading?"

Of the 22 boys and girls in the summer residential program for the talented (TIP), 17 credited their parents, two, their

grandparents, two, self, one a combination (home and school) of credit, and none, school. As a matter of fact, only one of the 30 subjects, a custodian in his early thirties, credited the school alone.

This survey, though very small, does show the importance of the home. In addition to the 17 young boys and girls, a clerk, a helper in the snack shop, and two undergraduates credited their parents, making the total 21 out of 30. In addition, two credited both home and school, four credited self, two, their grandparents; home probably played a part in each of these categories. Parental involvement is felt to be worth seeking as a help in instilling in boys and girls a love for reading.

Decades of work in the field of reading have been convincing in the belief that too much time has been given to decoding for children who didn't need that much, and not enough for those who needed much more than they were given. Witness has been borne again and again to the former doing page after page of workbook and ditto sheets in decoding, and the latter put at a great disadvantage.

Certainly a facility with language is a plus in learning to read. The child whose language is sub-standard for his age group can't get the meaning intended as quickly as the child who has great language facility; therefore, his/her deficit should be recognized, respected and given the necessary attention.

Capable readers, too, might need help in reading more challenging and thought-provoking material. For example, note the

very different meaning in the following sentences composed of exactly the same words with only one word in a different position in each sentence.

1. He lost nearly all his money.
2. He nearly lost all his money.

It is believed that what a reader gets from a page is in comparison to what he/she brings to it. Knowing what each one brings should be a guide to teachers as to the help he/she needs.

It is concluded that phonemic awareness has a place in teaching children to read and write. It need not preclude meaning, and stress on meaning need not preclude the teaching of phonemic awareness, but each must be according to the needs of individual children and thus avoid needless practice on what is not needed.

It is further concluded that the successful teaching of children to read and write is a huge cooperative which includes teachers, of course, but also parents, librarians, speech therapists, social agencies and ministries, as well as any individual or any organization needed in particular cases, including the abused children.

It is recalled that a gym teacher helped a little fellow with poor coordination. The attention seemed to give the child a better opinion of himself. This is important, as self-worth facilitates learning.

Implications for Educators

1. Teaching ALL children to read and write should be thought of as a huge cooperative, in which the needs of individual children are determined and the proper help sought.

2. Phonemic awareness should be taught to the extent needed by different children. It should not preclude meaning, nor should stressing meaning preclude it.

3. Metacognitive skills should be developed to help children think about their thinking.

4. The consideration of using rhymes for providing both pleasure and profit and stirring the creative imagination is felt worthy.

5. The learning styles of individual children should be determined and respected.

6. For the children whose language facility is sub-standard for their age group, experiences, such as audio-visual aids, should be provided, and teachers should be careful to set good examples in their own speech.

7. Cooperation of parents should be sought and welcomed.

8. Administrators of Teachers' Colleges should be informed as to courses that would be helpful to teachers.

9. More empowerment of teachers is felt needed.

10. Children's librarians know children's books. Good use should be made of both the school and public libraries.

11. Keep up with educational research.

12. Share your successes with others.

13. Exercise your voting rights and vote for those politicians who have a sincere interest in education.

14. Try individualizing instruction to the greatest extent possible, as some children are simply "lost" in mass instruction.

15. Finally, the successful teaching of reading seems to be giving the right skill, in the amount needed, to the right child at the right time if that child is to be able to read anything he/she wishes to read, to thoroughly enjoy it and become a lifetime reader.

Bibliography

1. Babbs, P.J. and Moe, A.J. "Metacognition: A Key for Independent Learning from Text." The Reading Teacher, January 1983.

2. Byrne, B. and Fielding-Barnsley. "Evaluation of a Program to Teach Phonemic Awareness to Young Children." Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 83, No. 4, 1991.

3. Carbo, M. "Deprogramming Reading Failure: Giving Unequal Learners an Equal Chance." Phi Delta Kappan, November 1987.

4. Dunn, R. and Dunn, K. Teaching Children Through Their Individual Learning Styles. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978.

5. Foorman, B.R. et al. "How Letter-Sound Instruction Mediates Progress in First-Grade Reading and Spelling." Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 83, Nov. 4, 1991.

6. Getman, G.N. "Computers in the Classroom: Bane or Boon?" Academic Therapy, May 1983.

7. Goodman, K. Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game. In H. Singer and R.B. Ruddell (Eds.) Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading (2nd ed.) Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1976.

8. Hallahan, D.P. and Bryan, T.H. "Learning Disabilities." Handbook of Special Education. Kauffman, J.M. and Hallahan, D.P. (Eds.) New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1981.

9. Smith, F. Psycholinguistics and Reading. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973.