

Changing Emphasis: Rethinking  
Turkey's Early Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

The Ministry of National Education in Turkey initiated a new early reading instruction method in 2004. Analytical approach (Whole Language), as defined in the curriculum, was abandoned and phoneme based approach (Phonics) was introduced. This research has a two year longitudinal perspective and aims to collect the opinions of teachers about the phoneme and analytical approaches and to compare the performance of students who were taught to read using the analytical and phoneme based approaches in terms of fluency, accuracy, reading errors and reading comprehension. This report summarizes the overall results of the study. In both years, the majority of teachers had very positive opinions about the phoneme based approach. Results of the reading test in the first year demonstrate that the use of phoneme based approach causes slower, but better understanding. Results of the reading test, in the second year, showed that students achieved similar performances in all parameters tested. The findings indicate that the method of reading instruction is more critical in the early stages.

Keywords: Phoneme-Based Literacy Teaching, Analytical Literacy Teaching, Early, Reading Instruction in Turkey, Efficiency of Reading Instruction Approaches.

## Introduction

The Ministry of National Education (MEB) initiated a new project called Basic Education Support Project (TDEP) on 8th February, 2000. The first component of the Project was to support reform directives in basic education nationwide. Together with the new Turkish curriculum, the early reading instruction method was also changed. The Analytical (whole language) approach that had been in use since 1981 was abandoned, and the phoneme based approach (phonics) was introduced.

This research study has a longitudinal perspective and aims, at first, to collect the opinions of teachers about both methods of reading instruction and second, to compare the performance of students who were taught to read using phoneme based approach and those who were taught to read using the analytical approach in terms of fluency, accuracy, reading errors and reading comprehension over a two year period (2005-2006). This article reports the findings of the second year in comparison with the first year.

## Early Reading Instruction in Turkey

Various methods have been used in Turkey for early reading instruction. The methods used before the phoneme based approach (irisingphonemic awareness) were the Direct Instruction, (letter, syllable, word, sentence teaching), mixed methods, Literature (story) Based Method, the Mixed Letters Method and the Analytical approach (from sentence to words and letters). (Çelenk, 2002: 40).

The analytical approach was initially introduced to be the best and the most effective reading instruction method and was first used in 1981. In this approach, reading instruction starts with teaching short, simple meaningful sentences that students can understand easily. Then the sentences are divided into words and students are asked to recognize the words, the words are then divided into syllables and syllables into phonemes. Later, the learners are asked to form new syllables with the phonemes they have learned, to form words with the syllables and sentences with the words. When teaching a new word or syllable, the teacher uses various sentences that contain the same word, various words that contain the same syllables. Students are asked to use the sentences or words studied in stories, poems or songs.

The new Turkish curriculum was accepted by the Ministry in 2004 and was used in the 2005-2006 school year. The method of reading instruction was also changed by this decision. It was decided to use the phoneme based approach. As introduced by the Ministry, reading instruction commences with phonemes. Phonemes are introduced in groups. Then, syllables are introduced by combining phonemes, words by combining syllables, and sentences by combining words. The time it takes to reach the sentence level is not very long. The characteristics of this method are listed by the Ministry as follows in the Turkish curriculum published by the Ministry (MEB, 2004; 71).

1. Reading instruction activities in the phoneme based approach are not only for improving reading and writing skills isolated from listening and speaking, but also for improving the five learning skills of Turkish instruction; that are reading, writing, listening, speaking and visual reading (graphical reading),
2. Starting reading instruction with phonemes, then constructing meaningful syllables, words and sentences with these phonemes makes it easier for students to construct

knowledge. From this aspect, phoneme based approach is a suitable method for the Constructivist Approach to learning,

3. Since each phoneme represents a letter in Turkish, Phonics is also appropriate for the phonemic structure of the Turkish language.
4. This method helps learners to be aware of the phonemes they hear and produce and thus, contributes to their lingual development in terms of correct pronunciation, fluency, distinguishing of phonemes etc,
5. Mastering all phonemes helps learners write words accurately,
6. Learners realize the similarity between writing and speaking and understand that writing occurs by combining letters, and speaking occurs by combining phonemes, and
7. Phonics makes the transition from oral language to written language easier.

#### Debate on Literacy Instruction in the World

“People have been searching for the single best way to teach children to read for more than a century. Reyhner (2003) claims that phoneme-letter based reading instruction is a practice of Skinner’s Behaviorist Learning Theory, whereas the Whole Language Method of reading instruction is a practice of the Constructivist Learning Theory. For Brooks and Brooks (2005), the analytical reading instruction operates from the premise "that youngsters acquire language rather than learn it through direct teaching; that language learning is child-centered, not teacher-dominated; that language is integrated rather than fragmented; that children learn by talking and doing rather than through passive listening".

For Ediger (2000), advocates of analytical reading instruction use the following to bolster their point of view;

1. Students read meaningful content rather than analyze words which may have no meaning for the reader.
2. Students attach interest to what is being read in a story rather than being drilled on phonics and syllabication skills.
3. Students learn to recognize words in context, not in isolation.
4. Students receive reinforcement in word recognition through rereading and echoic reading of previously read content.
5. Students observe the teacher reading aloud, followed by cooperative reading with the teacher, and then reread the same subject matter, such as in using the Big Book in reading instruction.

Brooks and Brooks (2005) claims that phonics instruction provides students with the "understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes and graphemes, the letters that represent those sounds in *written* language". This method operates from the premise that children best learn language in a sequential and ordered process of acquiring linguistic components and then (re)arranging them appropriately. Instruction begins with students gaining phonemic awareness, or the ability to understand that the "sounds of spoken language work, together to make words"

For Ediger (2000), phonics advocates would state the following reasons for using their approach in reading instruction:

1. It can be a key to recognizing unknown words.
2. It provides security to learners in becoming independent in word identification.
3. It can be used along with whole word methods in reading Instruction.

4. It can be made interesting to readers and not be dull and boring through drill and more drill in phonics.
5. It will not be a 100% consistent way to identify unknown words due to irregularities in spelling of English words, but there is adequate consistency to warrant their attention in reading instruction.

Brooks and Brooks (2005, p.273) states that educators remain divided as to the effectiveness of both analytical and phonic instruction for the teaching of reading comprehension. Neither technique has proven truly effective and fail-safe. "There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read" (IRA, 1999, Position Statement). "Several large-scale studies of reading methods have shown that no one method is better than any other method in all settings and situations (Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Hoffman, 1994; Stallings, 1975; Cromwell, 1997). For every method studied, some children learned to read very well while others had great difficulty." "The truth is that some children do learn to read easily with phonics - and some do not. The same can be said of analytical reading instruction programs" (Carbo, 1995, p. 3). Ediger (1997) believes that the issue between whole language versus phonics pertains to what is needed by individual pupils. Needs differ from pupil to pupil (pp. 162-190).

For Carbo (1995, p.3), "youngsters who do well with phonics tend to have strongly auditory and analytic reading styles. Children who are auditory can hear and remember letter sounds, if they are also analytic, the logic of phonics makes sense to them for they proceed naturally from bits of information to the whole. Phonics instruction is usually highly sequential, organized, direct and predictable - all conditions that appeal to analytics." "Children who do well in whole-language programs tend to have visual, tactile and global reading styles. They can recall words they see and hear repeatedly in high-interest stories" (Carbo, 1995, p.4).

Researchers have concluded that during the early stages of reading acquisition 'instruction that facilitates both phoneme awareness and alphabetic coding is vitally important to success' (Vellutino 1991, p.442). Although no one is suggesting that these elements of instruction are sufficient, there is now consensus among researchers that these elements are indeed necessary. Shang (2000) states that data from numerous intervention studies in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade classrooms indicate that early intervention to heighten phonological awareness has a facilitating effect on early reading and spelling acquisition. Support to this idea comes from Juel's (1988-1994) longitudinal study of the reading development of fifty-four children from first to fourth grade. Juel found that the fourth grade poor readers entered first grade with limited phonological awareness. This lack of understanding of the internal structure of words contributed to their slowness in learning letter sound correspondences and decoding. Gough and Juel (1991, p.55) conclude that "what seems essential is to insure that children learn to decode in first grade. If decoding skill does not arrive then, it may be very hard to change the direction that reading achievement takes." Researchers claim that "children who received code-emphasis instruction (emphasis *on* phonics and decoding) achieved better in the first three grades than children who received meaning-emphasis instruction (emphasis on word identification through context)" (Eldredge, 2004, p.10).

### The Method

This research study has a longitudinal perspective and aims, at first, to collect the opinions of teachers about the phoneme based approach and the analytical approach and secondly, to compare the performance of the students taught to read using one of the approaches mentioned



above in terms of fluency, accuracy, reading errors and reading comprehension over a period of two years. This report summarizes the results of the second year 2005-2006 school year and compares it with the results of the first year (see- Şahin et al, 2006).

### *Samples*

The first year, the new curriculum and the reading instruction approach were piloted by the Ministry in 120 schools in nine districts. In order to collect the opinions of teachers about the method of reading instruction, six cities and thirty schools were randomly selected and all First Grade teachers were asked to answer eleven items about reading instruction methods. A total of fifty-six First Grade teachers from thirty-nine schools in six districts responded to the questionnaires.

In the second year, cluster sampling was taken as the first step in sample selection. Turkey has eighty-one districts in seven geographical regions. It was decided to select randomly 25% of the districts in each geographical region to form the clusters. A total of thirty districts were selected randomly representing each geographical region. A total of 300 schools, almost 75% in city centers and 25% in towns and villages were, then, selected randomly. About 374 First Grade teachers responded to the questionnaires answering questions concerning fifteen different aspects of reading instruction methods.

In order to compare the students' performance in reading, four pilot schools three of which are in the city center and one in a village in the Kocaeli district were selected randomly. As a control group, the closest non-pilot schools in the nearest proximity to each pilot school were also selected. Fifty percent of the First Grade students were selected randomly. In some classes,

even-numbered students and in some others odd-numbered students were selected. A total of 386 students were given the reading test in the first year. Only the students who could not read at all were not given the test. The scores of some students were not included in the analysis because some simply hadn't wanted to finish the story, some were students who were repeating and some were students who had read the tale before. In the end, the scores of 352 students were considered in the analysis. Almost 55% of the subjects were from pilot schools and 45% were from non-pilot schools.

In the second year, the samples were the same students in the Second Grade in the same schools. 320 of the original students were tested because some had moved to different districts, some others changed their schools and some were ill. After the elimination of those who hadn't completed the tale the year before, 266 students were considered in the final second year analysis. Table 1, below, presents the schools and the number of students both in the first year and in the second year.

Table 1. Schools and Numbers of Students Taking the Tests.

Schools	2004-2005		2005-2006	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>Pilot</i> Türk Pireli İÖÖ.	42	11.9	29	10.9
<i>Non-pilot</i> Atatürk İÖÖ.	27	7.7	22	8.3
<i>Pilot</i> Suadiye İÖÖ.	20	5.7	15	5.6
<i>Non-pilot</i> Suadiye Barbaros İÖÖ.	31	8.8	18	6.8
<i>Pilot</i> 28 Haziran İÖÖ.	54	15.3	43	16.2
<i>Non-pilot</i> Fevzi Çakmak İÖÖ.	45	12.8	39	14.7
<i>Pilot</i> Yahya Kaptan İÖÖ.	78	22.2	59	22.2
<i>Non-pilot</i> 23 Nisan İÖÖ.	55	15.6	41	15.4
Total	352	100	266	100

### Data Collection Tools

The items to be asked about the reading instruction methods were developed with the help of thirty seven First Grade teachers. In an in-service teacher training course for the new Turkish

curriculum, all First Grade teachers in pilot schools in Kocaeli, thirty-seven teachers, were distributed pieces of paper and asked to list what makes a reading instruction method better, what are the qualifications of a good reading instruction program or what they expect from a reading instruction method. The responds organized, summarized and prepared as questions to be asked.

In order to compare the performance of students in reading in terms of fluency, accuracy and comprehension which are defined to be essential reading skills, a tale named *The Snail Carrying its House on its Back* from Vural (2000) that is not widely known in Turkey was selected to be developed as a test for the first year. Fifteen multiple choice questions with two options each about the tale regarding the characters, the timing and chronology, the vocabulary, the comprehension, the main idea etc. were prepared. The tale was first shortened and simplified with the help of colleagues in the Turkish Language Department. Then, the tale and the questions were shown to twenty-five First Grade teachers. Some sentences were shortened, some words were changed, some questions were deleted and some new questions were added according to their suggestions.

Another tale from the same source, *The Bear and The Salmon Fish*, was selected for the second year. The same procedure, as above, was followed. Twenty Second Grade teachers were consulted about the appropriateness of the tale for Second Grade students. After obtaining the approval of the Second Grade teachers, the tale was printed 18 point, Times New Roman, bold on A4 paper for the samples to be read. The answer sheet or the observation sheet was printed separately for the testers to follow the reading, to underline the errors and to record replies and time. Questions for the testers to ask orally to the sample students were also printed separately.

The observation sheet is presented in Figure 1.

<b>OBSERVATION SHEET</b>		
Names:.....School:.....Division:.....Reading Time:.....		
Preschool education:... <b>Yes/No</b> Repeat: ... <b>Yes/No</b> . Tale before:... <b>Yes/No</b>		
Read Wrong:	Do you know the salmon?	1.( )
.....	The cute fish leave their eggs to clean mountain waters	2.( )
Skip	swimming from the seas they live to river beds in the	3.( )
Syllables:	mountains when its time for them to lay eggs. And then,	4.( )
.....	they return to the seas and live the rest of their lives. The	5.( )
Add Syllables:	bear like the journey of the salmon fish the most. The <b>gluton</b>	6.( )
.....	bears who know the time for salmon to swim against the	7.( )
Repetition	flow of the river and to lay eggs, can catch them easily and	8.( )
.....	eat deliciously.	9.( )
Following with finger:	At a time for salmon to lay eggs again, a fat salmon fish	10.( )
(Yes)/(No)	starts its journey to mountain waters. It found very difficult	11.( )
	to swim up against the flow of the river, jump over the	12.( )
Level of Voice	waterfalls and big and sharp rocks. It wasn't yet aware of	13.( )
High ( )	the danger waiting. When a rock blocked its way and it	14.( )
Normal ( )	jumped to pass over it, it was caught by a bear.	15.( )
Low ( )	When the bear was almost to eat the salmon in its paws,	16.( )
Punctuation	it was surprised to see that the salmon was screaming in	
Reading.	delight. The salmon did it on purpose. This was a trick it	
Pause at dot ( )	found in order not to go the bear's stomach. The salmon	
Pause at comma ( )	with another burst of laughing said "fellow, did you see how	
Intonation ( )	high I jumped up? The record was 3 meter. I think I broke	
Breathing	it. It was a record that couldn't have been broken for 2	
Normal ( )	years. I'll get a hundred mackerel as a reward but I can't	
Muttering ( )	bring all of them from the bottom of the river alone. Can	
Irregular breathing ( )	you help me bring them up?"	
Pause between words:	The bear was transported by the joy when it heard about	
(Long)	a hundred mackerel and said "of course, I do help." The	
(Normal)	salmon with a great excitement said "Why are waiting, then.	
(Short)	Let's go! Let's jump in the water!"	
	The mouth of the bear fills with water when jumped in	
	without thinking. It not only let the the salmon fish escape	
	but was almost to drawn out and hardly got out of the	
	water.	
	The salmon went on its journey happy to get rid of	
	another danger.	

[Figure 1. Observation Sheet for Tale: *The Snail and Its House*]

The test was piloted with about thirty students in two pilot schools, and the responds of the students were analyzed to see the level difficulty of each question. Those questions which had more or less than 25% difficulty level were excluded. The reliability of the scale was calculated to be .68 with Cronbach Alpha and .81 with Guttman Split Half methods.

### *Administration of the Reading Test*

The reading tests were administered to the students in their schools between May 25th and June 5th. Each tester had one student at a time. Administration of the test took seven to ten minutes per students. The students who had taken the test were not allowed to contact those who would take it later.

For the administration of the test, fifteen volunteer student teachers and research assistants from the Department of Primary Education in the Faculty of Education were trained. During the test, the reading duration was to be recorded using chronometers, but the testers were asked to do this without attracting the attention of the students. While the students were reading, the tester was asked to follow the reading on the observation sheet, and when the reader made an error, the tester was to underline the word or syllable and code what type of mistake it was. Testers were also asked to notice the level of voice during reading, intonation and pause for punctuation and control of breathing. Each tester had a chance to practice with at least five to seven students before the actual testing began.

The testers were directed to stop the reading by saying “that’s enough, thank you very much” and to ask one or two simple questions to those who could not finish the first paragraph in four minutes, which was the average time needed to complete the task. These students were coded “very slow” and excluded from the analysis. After the students finish reading, a few seconds were given for them to relax. Then they were asked the questions in a calm, slow and easy way. No feedback was given to the students about their replies.

### Results and Discussion

The findings of the research are presented below under the headings “The Opinions of Teachers about the Reading Instruction Methods” and “Reading Instruction Methods and Students’ Performances”.

*The Opinions of Teachers about the Reading Instruction Methods*

In the first year, except the item regarding “reading fluently” the teachers are more positive about the phone based reading instruction. In the second year, the same items were again asked to teachers concerning their preferences of a reading instruction method. Although the teachers are again more positive about phoneme based instruction, their level of positiveness is a little lower compared with the first year results. The opinions of teachers in the second year compared with the first year are presented in Figure 2 below.

Teachers are more positive about the phoneme based approach especially for “less decrease after the semester holiday”, “creativity enhanced”, “transition to reading as a mass” and “transition to reading earlier.” Teachers are not positive about the fluency of reading in phoneme based reading instruction.

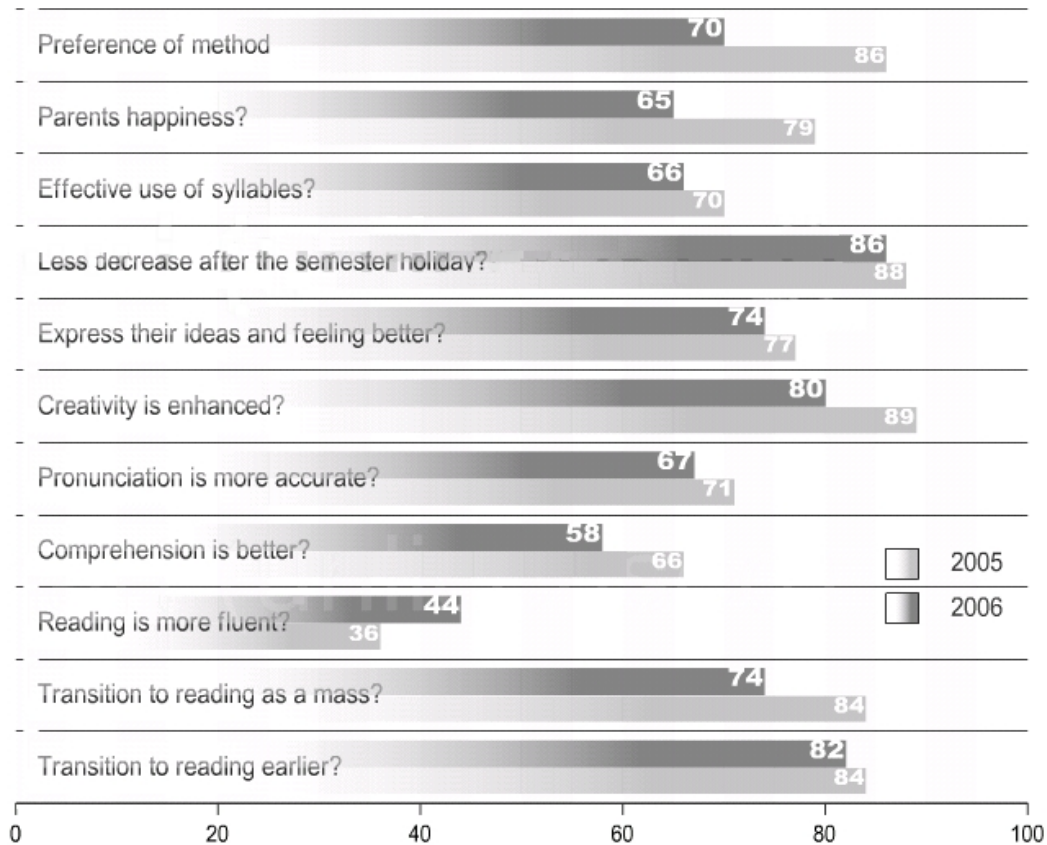


Figure 2. Preference Level of Phoneme Based Approach (%)

In the first year, number of students achieved reading by the time the research conducted in the pilot and non-pilot schools were compared. Since the “t” obtained for independent samples was 0.598 for 28 degrees of freedom at .05 probability level, the difference was statistically significant. The phoneme based approach enabled significantly more students to read. It may be just to say “it’s easier to learn to read with the phoneme based approach.”

#### *Comparison of the Students’ Performances Using Different Reading Instruction Methods*

The average time necessary to read the second tale was estimated to be four minutes. Those who could not finish the first paragraph in four minutes were coded “very slow” and excluded from the analysis. This may be taken as a reading difficulty in Second Grade. The first year, the number of students coded “very slow” was six in the pilot schools and fourteen in the non-pilot schools. The difference was found to be statistically significant in the first year with the value of chi square, 5.406, for 1 degree of freedom at alpha .05. In the second year; the students coded “very slow” were also higher in the non-pilot schools, students of which learned reading using the analytical approach the year before. The difference is statistically significant with the value of Chi Square, 5.602, for 1 degree of freedom at alpha .05. This clearly shows that the students experienced more difficulty in reading or more students experienced difficulty in reading when using the analytical approach.

Independent samples “t” test was used to analyze the differences in reading errors, reading comprehension and duration. The first year, the average reading duration for the samples of analytical approach from non-pilot schools was 3:55:21; it was 4:43:13 for the samples of the phoneme based approach from pilot schools. The “t” score obtained is 3.982 and it is statistically significant at 331 degrees of freedom at alpha .05. The students using the analytical approach are more fluent than students of phoneme based approach. This confirms the teachers’ opinions about the fluency of reading.

The first year, no statistically significant differences were observed between the level of syllable or word repeating, syllable or word skipping and the rate of reading wrong. For adding extra syllables when reading, the average of students who learned reading using the phoneme based approach was 1.23. And it was 0.93 for the students using the analytical approach. The value of “t” obtained was 1.981 and it is significant for 329 degrees of freedom at .05 probability level. This shows that students of phoneme based approach make more adding errors. The level



of comprehension, in the first year, showed another significant difference between the students using different reading instruction methods. The average of students in phoneme based approach was 9.41 and the analytical approach, 8.45 for thirteen questions. The value of “t” obtained was 2.852 and it is significant for 349 degrees of freedom at .05 probability level. The students who learned to read using the phoneme based approach achieved significantly better scores in reading comprehension.

The second year, the average duration for reading was 3:51:49 for students using the analytical approach in non-pilot schools and it was 3:56:19 for students using the phoneme based approach in pilot schools. The difference is not statistically significant. Table 2 below demonstrates the overall results.

Table 2. Statistics of Students’ Performances

	VARIANCE ASSUMED	Equality of variance Levene Testi		Independent Samples T test				
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>“t”</i>	<i>D. of Freedom</i>	<i>Sig. (2tail)</i>	<i>Means- Phonics / Analytical</i>	<i>Mean difference</i>
Reading	Equal	.225	.636	.517	264	.605	3:56:19/ 3:51:49	0:04:29
Duration	Unequal			.520	257.927	.604		
Skipping	Equal	.168	.683	.531	264	.596	2.66 / 2.48	.18
Syllables/words	Unequal			.531	253.329	.596		
Adding	Equal	.424	.516	.253	264	.800	2.54 / 2.34	.20
syllables/words	Unequal			.255	260.553	.799		
Repeating	Equal	.050	.824	.506	262	.613	4.03 / 3.79	.24
syllables/words	Unequal			.516	261.655	.607		
Reading Wrong	Equal	2.196	.140	-.562	259	.575	5.24 / 5.61	-.37
	Unequal			-.550	221.026	.583		
Comprehension	Equal	.130	.718	.413	264	.680	9.38 / 9.23	.15
	Unequal			.411	250.153	.681		

No significant differences were observed for the parameters tested. In short, the performance of students using different methods of reading instruction is quite similar in the second year. This implies that reading instruction method is more critical in the First Grade. The students achieve similar performance in the Second Grade whether they learned reading using phoneme based approach or using the analytical approach in terms of the aspects covered in this research.

For the other parameters like reading with fingers, punctuation reading (pause and stress or intonation at punctuation marks), control of breathing, level of voice and the length of pause between words, no statistical significant difference were observed between the students of using phoneme based approach and those using the analytical approach.

### Summary and Conclusion

The analytical approach was promoted and taken as the best method for reading instruction for a long time in Turkey similarly as it was all over the world. The sudden change in reading instruction to the phoneme based approach after having promoted the analytical approach for years surprised everyone, and many teachers had serious reservations. The findings of this study show that students experienced more difficulty in reading or more students experienced difficulty in reading with the analytical approach. However, one advantage of the analytical approach may be that students can read more fluently.

The advantages of the phoneme based approach according to First Grade teachers may be summarized as follows; students start reading earlier, the transition to reading occurs as a mass, students comprehend what they read better, have more accurate pronunciation, have greater creativity, lose in reading skills after the semester holiday, express their ideas and feelings better

and the use of syllables, words and sentences occurs earlier. The parents of students using the phoneme based approach are also happier about their children's reading performances.

The results of the reading test, in the first year, demonstrated that students of the analytical approach read more fluently, but comprehend less than the students of the phoneme based approach. However, in the second year, no statistically significant difference in any of the parameters tested was observed. The findings imply that reading instruction method is more critical in the early stages of learning to read.

Neither the literature review, the opinions of the teachers nor the performance of students in the reading tests indicated that the phoneme based approach is a worse method of teaching reading than is the analytical approach. The phoneme based approach also has many advantages, but as Şenel (2004) mentioned, none of the methods of teaching reading is perfect.

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