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Phonics Instruction and Assessments: Practical Guidelines for English Teachers

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Abstract

Phonics instruction is an approach of teaching reading that emphasizes the learning of letter-sound relationships and their use in reading and spelling. The main focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers learn how letters are linked to sounds to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns and to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading. This academic paper presents some core information about phonics instruction. It is important and useful for English teachers, especially novice teachers, to know how to teach phonics explicitly and systematically. This article also suggests salient instructional information for pre-service and in-service teachers in their practices. General information, useful instructional suggestions, and assessments are discussed. Moreover, an additional lesson plan and a descriptive classroom practice are illustrated for clarity.

Keywords: phonics instruction; phonemic awareness assessment; English teachers

Introduction

Phonics instructional approaches include synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset-rime phonics, and phonics through spelling (Adams, 1990). However, some phonics programs combine two or more of these types of instruction. In addition, these approaches differ with respect to the extent that controlled vocabulary (decodable text) is used for practicing reading connected text (Cunningham, & Cunningham, 1992). Although differences exist, the hallmark of systematic phonics programs is that they delineate a planned, sequential set of phonic elements and they teach these elements explicitly and systematically (Dahl, Sharer, Lawson, & Geogran, 1999). The goal in all phonics programs is to enable learners to acquire sufficient knowledge and use of the alphabetic code so that they can make normal progress in learning to read and comprehend written language (Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 1996).

Stahl (2001) comments that different methods of phonics instruction, as long as they are systematic, seem to have similar results. This article focuses the phonics instructions on phonemic and phonological awareness, although there are many of them. It is believed that building up awareness in children will reinforce a more independent learning and enduring understanding (Robin, R., Tijs, K., Eliane, S., & Ludo, V., 2021). Additionally, a practical example of how to develop beginners' embedded phonics for novice teachers is included.

Instructional suggestions

Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998) suggest that the primary job of first-grade teachers is to make sure that all of their students become readers. First-grade instruction should be designed to provide:

1. explicit instruction and practice with sound structures that lead to phonemic awareness;
2. familiarity with spelling-sound correspondences and common spelling conventions, and their use in identifying printed words;



3. sight recognition of frequent words; and
4. independent reading, including reading aloud.

Well-written and engaging texts that include words that children can decipher give them the chance to apply emerging skills with ease and accuracy, thereby teaching themselves new words through their relation to known words. In addition, the instructional program should ensure that children have exposure to the following activities:

1. Throughout the early grades, time, materials, and resources should be provided (a) to consolidate independent reading ability through daily reading of texts selected to be of particular interest and beneath the frustration level of individual students and (b) to promote advances in reading through daily assisted or supported reading and rereading of texts that are slightly more difficult in wording or in linguistic, rhetorical, or conceptual structure.

2. Beginning in the earliest grades, instruction should promote comprehension by actively building linguistic and conceptual knowledge in a rich variety of domains.

3. Throughout the early grades, reading curricula should include explicit instruction on strategies, such as summarizing the main idea, predicting events or information to which the text is leading, drawing inferences, and monitoring for misunderstandings, that are used to comprehend text (either read to the students or that students read themselves) (Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K., 2018)

4. Instruction should be designed with the understanding that the use of invented spelling is not in conflict with teaching correct spelling. Beginning writing with invented spelling can be helpful for developing understanding of phoneme identity, phoneme segmentation, and sound-spelling relationships. Conventionally correct spelling should be developed through focused instruction and practice. Primary-grade children should be expected to spell previously studied words and spelling patterns correctly in their final writing products (Bowers, J.S., 2020)

Phonemic awareness assessments

The following tasks are commonly used to assess children's phonemic awareness or to improve their phonemic awareness through instruction and practice (National Reading Panel, 2000):

1. Phonemic isolation, which requires recognizing individual sounds in words, for example, "Tell me the first sound in paste." (/p/)
2. Phoneme identity, which requires recognizing the common sound in different words. For example, "Tell me the sound that is the same in bike, boy, and bell." (/b/)
3. Phoneme categorization, which requires recognizing the word with the odd sound in a sequence of three or four words, for example, "Which word does not belong? bus, bun, rug." (rug)
4. Phoneme blending, which requires listening to a sequence of separately spoken sounds and combining them to form a recognizable word. For example, "What word is /s/ /k/ /u/ /l/?" (school)
5. Phoneme segmentation, which requires breaking a word into its sounds by tapping out or counting the sounds or by pronouncing and positioning a marker for each sound. For example, "How many phonemes are there in ship?" (three)



6. Phoneme deletion, which requires recognizing what word remains when a specified phoneme is removed. For example, “What is smile without the /s/?” (mile)

Classroom practices

There are two examples of the classroom practices to develop phonemic awareness. The first example is representative of the type of activities first-grade basal reading programs use to promote phonemic awareness as suggested by Simmons & Kameenui (1996) According to the teacher guide of a specific program, the objective of the activity is to develop phonemic awareness of /n/. The strategy requires learner to identify the sound of the letter at the beginning of *nest* and compare other words to determine whether the initial sound is a match with the initial sound of the target word. In essence, the task requires learners to make a word-to-word match based on the sameness of initial sounds (Routman, 2008) The following example provides multiple pictures from which students discriminate those that begin the same as *nest* and those that do not. The task as presented in the teacher’s guide is illustrated below.

Conspicuous Strategy: Word-to-Word Matching/Sound Isolation

Objective: To develop phonemic awareness of /n/.

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Teacher | Model /n/ sound. “Today you will be learning about sound you hear at the beginning of <i>nest</i> . The beginning sound in <i>nest</i> is /n/.” (Display picture cards that begin with /n/.) “Here are some pictures that begin with /n/. I will name the picture and the beginning sound. Then you name the picture: net, /n/; nut, /n/; needle, /n/; nine, /n/; newspaper, /n/.” |
| Student | Listen to /n/ and say words that begin with /n/. |
| Teacher | Assist student understanding of sound isolation. “Here are other pictures that begin with /n/. I want you to name the picture and the beginning sound.” (Display picture cards that begin with /n/.) |
| Student | Isolate beginning /n/ sound. |
| Teacher | Assess student understanding of sound isolation. “Here are some more pictures. Some begin with /n/, some begin with /h/, and some begin with /w/. When I show a picture, you name it and then say the beginning sound.” (Display picture cards that begin with /n/, /h/, /w/.) |
| Student | Isolate beginning /n/ sound and other sounds. |
| Teacher | Assess student understanding of sound isolation. “With these pictures, I want you to name each picture. Then put the pictures that begin with /n/ in one pile, those that begin with /h/ in a second pile, and those that begin with /w/ in a third pile” (Display picture cards that begin with /n/, /h/, and /w/.) |
| Student | Use beginning sounds to match and discriminate words. |

From the above example, it requires students to sort through the instructional language to discern the objective of the task: to determine that /n/ is the target sound. Success of this task is predicted on learners’ understandings the concept and their ability to extract the desired objective



from only one example of the target sound in a word. The complexity of the task is increased further by requiring students to discriminate words that begin the same as *nest* from those that do not before they have had sufficient practice with the target sound only (Cunningham, P.M., 2017) This instruction may be sufficient for some learners in first grade; however, teachers should know that an increasing number of children require more than what is specified in instructional manuals.

Below is another example of how to develop beginners' embedded phonics in which sound-spelling patterns are systematically embedded in connected text and decoding skills in a print-rich environment (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998)

An Example: Using Embedded Phonics Instruction in a classroom

Ms. B started the language arts block with a morning message, using yesterday's target spelling pattern, *-am*.

She wrote "*Sam will be 15 years young on Tuesday*" Then she asked the children to help her edit the message. They changed *young* to *old* and pointed out that Sam will be 7, not 15. With prompting, they agreed to capitalize the *t* in Tuesday and add a period at the end of the sentence.

Ms. B's target spelling pattern for the day was *-ap*. She introduced this pattern through shared reading of a big book. During this shared reading the teacher pointed to each word in the big book as she read the story, occasionally checking the understanding of the 22 children seated cross-legged in front of her by asking a question about the story. When she came to a word containing the target pattern, *tap*, she stopped reading the story, wrote *tap* on the blackboard and asked the children what word family *tap* belonged to. Then Ms. B asked what other words belonged to the *-ap* word family. Hands shot up in the front row with suggestions of *map*, *rap*, and *slap*. She asked the children to spell these words to her as she wrote them on the board. The children had trouble with the *l* in *slap*, so Ms. B had the children stretch out the sounds so that the letter /l/ was apparent.

After writing these words on the blackboard, Ms. B sent all but eight of the students to their seats. A strip of construction paper and a pile of alphabet letters from a bag of cereal were placed at each seat. Students were instructed to glue the letters-*ap* onto the construction paper and make new words by adding letters to the front. One student made *pay* and was not corrected because the teacher was busy working with the group of eight. When students were finished with this seat work, they were told to read independently a book of their choice.

Ms. B worked with the group of eight by writing yesterday's spelling pattern, *-am*, on a slate board. She elicited words with this pattern in *it-clam*, *slam*, *ram*-and wrote them down. She checked their understanding of *ram* by asking a student to use it in a sentence. Then she passed out copies of a book to each child that had the word family in it. The children were familiar with the story and read along with the teacher in choral reading. When they had finished, she gave them each a laminated tag board mat and laminated letters. She asked them to write some words with the-*am* pattern while she listened to one of the children read the story. As he read, Ms. B took a running record of his reading miscues, prompting him to use context cues to guess the meaning of unknown words. Finally, Ms. B introduced a new book to the children that contained



the spelling pattern of the day, *-ap*. She previewed each page, eliciting prior knowledge from the students by asking them to expand on their interpretations of illustrations. Then she put the book in a plastic bag for each child to take home and practice reading with parents.

With 30 minutes left in the language arts block, Ms. B began a process writing workshop on Thanksgiving activities. Students brainstormed about Thanksgiving activities while the teacher wrote down sentences that expressed their ideas. If previously taught spelling patterns appeared, she pointed that out. Once the brainstorming was complete, students wrote about their favorite Thanksgiving activity.

Conclusion: Application for teachers

A number of elements in a beginning reading program need to be examined. We need to understand the effects of phonics within a total reading program, to examine the unexpected effects of intensive phonics instruction, especially with students with special needs (Bosman, 2006). Stahl, Suttles, & Pagnucco (1996) studied traditional and whole-language classrooms and found that although the traditional classroom did provide considerably more phonics instruction than the whole language, the achievement differences were more a result of differences in the challenge of the materials used and the greater content coverage than to differences in method. It may be that phonics instruction is effective because it allows teachers to cover more material than other types of instruction.

Phonological-awareness training also seems to improve reading skill, at least on measures of word attack, and seems to be especially effective when combined with letter-name and letter-sound training (Vellutino, & Scanlon, 1998) However, we do not know how much phonological awareness is needed, whether it is an all-or-nothing phenomenon, whether it represents an aspect of phonological sensitivity (Sumbler, & Willows, 1998) or what the role of phoneme identities are (Chall, 2000) Resolving these controversies involves continued research, but also involves continued reflections on research, to examine how much our preconceptions and politics affect our research agenda. It was argued that future important directions for research on phonology and reading acquisition include research designed to help us to understand which aspects of phonological processing are due to basic brain function and which are culturally influenced and to help us to understand the relative weight that needs to be given to the different phonological units of syllable, rhyme, and phoneme and their connections with sequences of letters in different orthographies (Dahl, Sharer, Lawson, & Geogran, 1999) A better understanding of the factors that affect the transfer of phonological awareness across different languages is a third important goal for future work.



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