

READING COMPREHENSION

Constructing vs. Extracting Meaning

by Dolores Hiskes, 2003
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phonics-first reading program.

In her recent article "Making Matters Worse" Lynne Cheney pointed out that much of education today is student-directed, allowing students to create their own meaning from what they are trying to learn. This article will discuss the fallout and results of this educational philosophy as it applies to reading comprehension.

Most schools today claim to teach phonics, and initial results seem to indicate that they are doing an admirable job. Using current classroom reading programs, for example, first and second grade reading scores soar.

But subsequent comprehension issues are rampant, and by fourth grade students begin getting "D"'s in reading comprehension. The recent National Assessment of Educational Progress test (conducted every four years by the Department of Education) revealed that California's fourth and eighth graders have reading skills that are now eighth from the very bottom. Why such dismal results when phonics is taught?

Taking a closer look, we find that the beginning readers in most of these phonics reading programs are approximately 50% at best, thus setting in motion an unfortunate chain of events.

In first and second grades, the stories are simple, with pictures on every page offering clues to meaning. Students are frequently given beginning and ending letters of a word which helps them be even better guessers. They are also encouraged to use sentence context clues to find a word that seems to have the meaning needed. It's ok to choose another word that seems to fit, such as "house" for "home" or "horse" for "pony." Students are trained to guess, and construct their own meaning from what they are reading.

But by third or fourth grade the stories are more complex, and there are no more picture clues. And the more complex the reading, the more frequent and wild the guessing! To illustrate, try reading this phrase that's only 50% decodable:

chocolate %*&@?#

Clearly, it would be impossible to read this without guessing. Try reading it again, after knowing the beginning and ending letter sounds: chocolate [b%*&@t](#)

HmmmmSSCould it be "best"? Or perhaps "beast"?

Knowing beginning and ending letters will help you become a better guesser. And if there were picture clues you'd make an even better guess. But you would not now – or ever—be able to accurately read this phrase without knowing all of the letter sounds.

When students are trained to guess and substitute words they are putting meaning into rather than extracting meaning from the story. They are confined within the boundaries of their current vocabularies and thoughts, interpreting things only from within their own shallow perspectives.

When we are trained to guess, we cannot even think clearly and logically. Human attention is limited: It cannot focus on the meaning of something at the same time we're trying to determine what that something says.

Even misreading only one or two words on a page can change the entire meaning of the story. The New York Times had an article on June 3rd, 1999 about how epidemic numbers of pharmacists are misreading prescriptions, frequently confusing such words as chlorpromazine (an antipsychotic) with chlorpromamine (lowers blood sugar) with sometimes disastrous results.

Clearly, a myriad of different problems can arise resulting from a misunderstanding or misapplication of what "phonics" really is.

In fact, most of today's phonics reading programs are a form of implicit phonics. Implicit phonics is a combination of phonics and whole language, whereby words are first learned as a whole, and then broken down. For example, colors are usually the first things taught. Letter sounds may be taught simultaneously. Implicit phonics moves from the whole to the smallest parts.

These programs have appealing descriptions such as "Balanced Reading Program," "Embedded Phonics," "Integrated Language Arts," etc., but the content belies the titles. Like Cinderella's sisters trying on the glass slipper, the shoe simply will not fit! They are not explicit phonics, which is the only truly effective phonics method of teaching reading that consistently results in success for everyone.

What, then, is explicit phonics? With explicit phonics, letter sounds are learned first, and then gradually blended and built into words. Explicit phonics moves from the smallest parts to the whole.

Decodable reading practice, which I define as only based on skills learned so far and not including previously-taught sight words, is an integral part of this process. Just because a child knows the phonetic code does not mean he is ready to read complex and subtle literature any more than a beginning piano student is ready to play a lovely sonata just because she knows the notes!

Now try reading this phrase once more, this time with 100% decodable text: chocolate buffet

Explicit phonics is the indispensable key to fluent and accurate reading with excellent comprehension, and is the single most important feature missing from many reading programs today.

Learning how to read logically with a sequential, progressive method also develops clear and precise thinking skills that spill over into other disciplines. Math frequently improves without tutoring, and critical thinking in general sharpens.

If explicit phonics is so good, why isn't it included in reading curricula today? Explicit phonics with decodable reading practice for the most part has not been taught correctly in graduate teaching curricula for over fifty years. Teachers cannot teach what they may not know, any more than students can know what has never been taught.

Fortunately this situation can be easily and inexpensively remedied without changing current classroom reading programs or investing a great deal of time and money into learning a whole new program. With minimum adjustments any reading program can be enhanced to produce truly gratifying results.

For example, one first-grade public school teacher in California supplements her classroom program only fifteen or twenty minutes a day with a simple explicit phonics text and has all of her first-graders reading in only three months. She then has a literature evening for parents, whereby the children pour hot chocolate for their parents and all thirty-two students, including ESL and dyslexic, get up on the stage and read selections from Bennett's *Book of Virtues*. This teacher is experiencing the unique joy and fulfillment that results from seeing 100% happy faces and starry eyes--all busy reading!

As Mark Twain once said, "The difference between reading and almost reading is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Note from Don Potter

Many thanks to Dolores Hiskes for permission to publish her enlightening article "READING COMPREHENSION: Constructing vs. Extracting Meaning" on the donpotter.net web site. While she does not mention her own phonics program, *Phonics Pathways*, I can tell you from **first-hand experience** using her program with children with whole-word dyslexia that her program ranks as one of the most effective and easiest to use. You can purchase her excellent program from dorbooks.com. 12/25/03