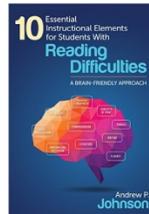


WHOLE LANGUAGE VS. PHONICS?

Meaning-First and Code-First Approaches to Reading Instruction

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CODE-FIRST OR MEANING-FIRST

There are two basic theoretical perspectives related to reading instruction. These two perspectives used to be identified as phonics and whole language. Some may remember the reading wars of the late 80s and early 90s which pitted phonics against whole language. However, these terms are outdated and inaccurate today. Most teachers who identify themselves as whole language teachers use very explicit phonics instruction in their classrooms. In the same way, most teachers who advocate a phonics-first approach also strive to get students reading whole, complete, meaningful texts to the greatest extent possible. It is more accurate to say that differing theoretical perspectives are: (a) a code-first approach based on a bottom-up model which has its basis in behavioral learning theory and (b) a meaning-first approach based on an interactive model which has its basis in constructivism or cognitive learning theory.

Code-First

The code-first approach to reading instruction places initial emphasis on decoding. Letter identification skills of increasing complexity are taught in a specific order (scope and sequence) until students have sufficient command of phonological processes. This approach has been successfully used with many generations of students (including me). Lower-level letter-sound and other reading sub-skills are taught so that students will be able to engage in higher level acts of comprehending whole, meaningful text. This reflects a bottom-up or phonological model of reading in which the processing of text is seen to move in a single direction, from letter-sounds to words to meaning in part-to-whole fashion. Reading here is equated with sounding out words. In 1983 when I began teaching 2nd grade in River Falls, Wisconsin I could not imagine that there could possibly be any other way to teach students how to read.

Meaning-First

The meaning-first approach to reading instruction places the emphasis on getting students engaged in whole, complete texts first then teaching skills within that meaningful context. Reading here is defined, not as sounding out words, but creating meaning with print. Reading is seen as both a top-down and bottom-up process. This reflects an interactive model of reading. Higher level cognitive processes interact with lower-level letter identification skills to create meaning during the act of reading. I call this a neurocognitive model because of the importance of both neurological functions and cognitive structures in creating meaning with print. Explicit instruction is used to teach phonics as well as other word identification skills. However, this instruction takes place in the context of whole, meaningful text to the greatest extent possible so that students are able to simultaneously develop the ability to use higher level processes as well as lower level skills.

Top-Down

What about a top-down model of reading? Here, higher level cognitive structures and processes would be used almost exclusively to identify words. Skills instruction of any kind would be minimal. Whole language teaching is often mischaracterized as a purely top-down approach; however, in my experience, very few people (if any) ascribe to a purely top-down approach to reading instruction. Most whole language teachers and scholars believe in very direct and explicit phonics instruction. It's not the "what" of phonics instruction that is in question, it's the "how" and "how much" of phonics instruction.

TOOLS IN YOUR TEACHING TOOLBOX

The thumbnail sketches presented above are by no means completely descriptive of the two general approaches to reading instruction. They are meant simply to provide context for the chapters that follow. As to which one is the "correct" approach, there will always be well-informed people of good character on both sides of this issue. I ascribe to a meaning-first approach based on the neurocognitive model of reading. From my perspective, a vast array of research from many different fields clearly points to the neurocognitive model of reading. However, I recognize that others disagree.

APPROACHES TO EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

The two approaches described above will be shown in the context of early literacy instruction (students ages 3, 4, and 5).

Code-First

The code-first approach, sometimes called the *reading readiness approach*, assumes that children require a great deal of explicit instruction in order to be made ready to read. Direct instruction is used to teach a prescribed set of reading sub-skills (such as alphabets, phonics, and phonemic awareness), in a predetermined order (scope and sequence), using predominately drill and practice.

There are some effective elements to take from this approach; however, research to support the efficacy of skills-only, phonics-first programs at the emergent level is inconclusive (Cole, 2003; Pearson & Hiebert, 2013; Smith, 2003). While instruction that focuses solely on reading sub-skills may result in increases in measures of these same reading sub-skills initially (as we would expect); at the emergent level it has not been shown to demonstrate positive effects on oral reading, comprehension, word

recognition, or spelling (Casbergue & McGee, 2011; Cain, 2009; Paciga, Hoffman, & Teale, 2011; Taylor, Anderson, Au, & Raphael, 2000); or on higher level literacy skills and later literacy achievement (Teale, Hoffman, & Paciga, 2010). As well, these types of interventions do not reflect what we know about human learning and how the brain creates meaning. Finally, this approach does not give any attention to young children's social, emotional, cognitive, or physical development.

Meaning-First

The meaning-first approach, sometimes called an *emergent literacy approach*, assumes that literacy emerges as a series of naturally developing skills and behaviors as children are developmentally ready and as they are exposed to certain conditions. This emergence occurs in much the same way that oral language emerges. This approach is based in large part on observations of real children actually learning within natural settings (Cambourne, 1993; Clay, 1982; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1981). Meaning-first approaches have been shown to out-perform code-first approaches in measures of reading comprehension, writing, and metacognitive knowledge (Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000).

Meaning-first approaches tend to align with our natural human tendencies for language learning. In this sense, humans are naturally hard-wired to learn language (Chomsky, 1965). The same language acquisition device the brain uses to learn to speak is involved in learning to read and write. Young children learn to speak because:

- they're immersed in actual, real-life speaking experiences.
- they're provided small bits on instruction in authentic contexts.
- they're encouraged to talk about things that make sense and are of interest to them.
- they use language for real life purposes.
- we respond to them instead of correct them.
- we encourage their early attempts and successful approximations.
- language is used in play and social interactions.

In effective meaning-first classrooms, these same conditions are applied to learning to read and write. Thus, we don't teach children to read and write as much as we create the conditions whereby all students can develop their full literacy capacities. This occurs when children are engaged in authentic literacy experiences with explicit instruction, modeling, and scaffolding and with lots of time to practice reading and writing. (These same conditions should be applied to literacy learning at all levels.) Figure 7.1 contains elements that Morrow and Dougherty (2011) have identified as being essential for effective literacy instruction in pre-school and kindergarten classrooms.

Figure 7.1. Elements necessary for effective emergent literacy instruction.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicit modeling and scaffolding of lesson to be learned. • guided practice • independent practice • time on task • structure and routines • differentiation of instruction to meet individual needs. • feedback for children • time to explore • time to experiment • time to collaborate in social settings • time for problem solving. |
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Skills Instruction in a Meaning-First Approach

Meaning-first approaches to early literacy instruction use direct and explicit instruction to teach reading sub-skills such as alphabets, phonics, and phonemic awareness. However, these sub-skills are taught in ways that are developmentally appropriate and in the context of authentic reading and writing. Whereas, a skills-based approach starts with explicit instruction of reading sub-skills and moves to real reading and writing later on; a meaning-first approach immerses students in authentic reading and writing experiences first, then teaches essential skills within that context. This actually results in more-direct instruction than a skills-based approach. Here the necessary skills are taught directly in the context in which they are used. Also, students are not asked to make a link between abstract skills taught in one context and real life literacy in another context.

Learning letter-sound relationships is necessary for learning to reading but far from sufficient. Learning to read and write cannot be reduced to simply mastering a predefined set of sub-skills. Instead, early literacy learning is more like systems theory in that there is an interrelationship among multiple elements: linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and social systems (Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006), as well as knowledge and experience (Neuman, 2006). Each element reinforces as well as draws upon the other. Thus, an effective meaning-first approach focuses on nurturing and developing each of these elements in developmentally appropriate ways.

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction

There is a reason why effective kindergarten instruction does not look like instruction in a first grade classroom: kindergarten is not first grade. There are certain types of instruction and experiences that are very effective for older students, that are simply not developmentally appropriate for young children (IRA & NAEYC, 1998). Thus, with young children you want to avoid what is called the *push-down curriculum*. This is where a first grade curriculum gets pushed down into kindergarten or pre-school.

Children think in qualitatively different ways at different stages of development. Thus, instruction for young children must be developmentally appropriate. Starting reading instruction sooner doesn't mean students will be further ahead at a later point. From a developmental stand point, educational experiences must fit students' social, emotional, cognitive, and physical developmental levels. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't address phonics and other reading sub-skills in pre-school and kindergarten classrooms. It means that the form that this instruction takes should be developmentally appropriate. It's not the 'what' of phonics as much as the 'how' or the 'how much' that is in question. Worksheets and a lot of time spent drilling and practicing are not developmentally appropriate practices at the emergent levels. Most instruction at these levels should be incidental or involve play. This is how young children learn.

Whole-to-Part-to-Whole Instruction

Learning complex skills (such as reading and writing) is most efficient when addressed whole-to-part-to-whole (Donnelly & Davidoff, 1999; Helmut, 2005; Julia, 2006; Lim, Reiser, & Olina, 2009; Tanaka & Gauthier 1997). When learners can get a sense of the whole, they're better able to see where the smaller parts fit within this context. The description of Mr. Jay in Figure 7.2 is an example of whole-to-part-to-whole instruction. Children here were immersed in authentic reading and writing experiences (whole). They were given small bits of letter-sound instruction (part) within this meaningful context. They were then invited to engage in other authentic literacy experiences (whole). For example, they would spend time each day reading real books. Their reading at this level may rely more on picture cues than letter cues, but they were creating meaning with print. Activities here would include picture reading,

pretend reading, echo reading, and choral reading. He also tried to get children writing real things. Again, their writing may rely more on pictures than letters, but they were using pictures and letter symbols to communicate in developmentally appropriate ways.

Mini-Lectures Related to Whole Language and Phonics

Whole Language (meaning-based) vs. Phonics (skills-based)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i46xKEkzsz8>

Research Review: Whole Language and Dyslexia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyYHt-7SCv4>

Literacy “instruction” for Pre-School and Kindergarten

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-J8hYhH2Bg>

Whole Language: Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dW6NfBi5wxQ>

Whole Language: Part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxeqk3ATgYQ>

A Balanced Approach to Literacy Instruction: Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kQZJnuJ4Lg>

A Balanced Approach to Literacy Instruction: Part 2

https://www.youtube.com/edit?o=U&video_id=rgcqZxYMyQM

A Balanced Approach to Literacy Instruction: Part 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEV5GTwr0z4>

A Balanced Approach to Literacy Instruction: Part 4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y169g13kZM>

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