

Phonics works: Sounding out words is the best way to teach reading, study suggests

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Summary:

New research has shown that learning to read by sounding out words (a teaching method known as phonics) has a dramatic impact on the accuracy of reading aloud and comprehension. There has been intense debate concerning how children should be taught to read. Researchers tested whether learning to read by sounding out words is more effective than focusing on whole-word meanings.

Research published today in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* has shown that learning to read by sounding out words (a teaching method known as phonics) has a dramatic impact on the accuracy of reading aloud and comprehension.

There has been intense debate concerning how children should be taught to read. Researchers from Royal Holloway, University of London and the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit tested whether learning to read by sounding out words is more effective than focusing on whole-word meanings. In order to assess the effectiveness of using phonics the researchers trained adults to read in a new language, printed in unfamiliar symbols, and then measured their learning with reading tests and brain scans.

Professor Kathy Rastle, from the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway said, "The results were striking; people who had focused on the meanings of the new words were much less accurate in reading aloud and comprehension than those who had used phonics, and our MRI scans revealed that their brains had to work harder to decipher what they were reading."

English-speaking countries should replicate UK use of phonics

In England, the provision of systematic phonics instruction is a legal requirement in state-funded primary schools. The impact of phonics is measured through a screening check administered to children in Year 1. The results of this screening check have shown year-on-year gains in the percentage of children reaching an expected standard -- from 58% in 2012 to 81% in 2016.

However there are objections to the use of systematic phonics. Many practitioners argue in favour of a less-prescriptive approach, consisting of a variety of phonic- and meaning-based skills. One frequent objection is that while phonics may assist reading aloud, it may not promote reading comprehension.

"There is a long history of debate over which method, or mix of methods, should be used to teach reading," continued Professor Rastle "Some people continue to advocate using a variety of meaning-based cues, such as pictures and sentence context, to guess the meanings of words. However, our research is clear that reading instruction that focuses on teaching the relationship between spelling and sound is most effective. Phonics works."



Schools Standards Minister Nick Gibb said, "Our plan for Britain is built on ensuring every child has equal opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the future. Teaching all children to read fluently by the time they leave primary school is fundamental to this ambition."

"This research highlights the potential benefits of learning to decode using phonics. Thanks

to the hard work of teachers, our continued focus on raising standards and our increased emphasis on phonics, there are now 147,000 more six-year-olds on track to becoming fluent readers than in 2012."

Reading aloud with understanding; phonics works

The paper describes how people who are taught the meanings of whole words don't have any better reading comprehension skills than those who are primarily taught using phonics. In fact, those using phonics are just as good at comprehension, and are significantly better at reading aloud.

Dr Jo Taylor, also of the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway argues "People frequently argue that phonics disadvantages reading comprehension. Our work puts that claim to rest. Phonics actually enables reading comprehension by relating visual symbols to spoken language. The laboratory method that we've developed in this study offers strong evidence for the effectiveness of phonics, and has also helped us to understand why phonics works, in terms of the brain systems responsible for reading."

The researchers are continuing this work by investigating how reading expertise develops in the brain.

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Taylor, Joanne; Davis, Matthew; Rastle, Kathleen.

Comparing and validating methods of reading instruction using behavioural and neural findings in an artificial orthography.

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