

EFFECTIVELY TEACHING PHONICS TO PROMOTE PROFICIENT, STRATEGIC  
READERS AND WRITERS

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EFFECTIVELY TEACHING PHONICS TO PROMOTE PROFICIENT, STRATEGIC  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE  
TITLE PAGE  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS  
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION

- a. Statement of the Problem
- b. Purpose of the Study
- c. Significance of the Study
- d. Definitions of Terms
- e. Methodology

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- a. Systematic Phonics
- b. Whole Language Phonics
- c. Phonics in Spelling
- d. Phonics in Writing
- e. Basal Phonics Instruction Components

III. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IV. REFERENCES

## Abstract

I have taught second grade for seven years. The reading block of the day encompasses all aspects of reading. The students in the class have a broad range of reading abilities when they enter second grade. Some students are *learning to read* while others are at the stage of *reading to learn*. One part of our reading block is phonics instruction. This part can seem beneficial in many ways to help readers at every stage; however, methods to teach phonics instruction are often developed only through the basal reading series. I want to be most effective in my time with my students and want to find the best way to reach readers and writers at any stage.

The purpose of this study is to find information about effectively teaching phonics to my students to ensure that they are proficient, strategic readers and writers by the end of the year. There is a debate regarding effectiveness of phonics instruction between it being taught systematically or taught with a whole language approach. I want my students to acquire the necessary skills they need to be readers that are intrigued about the world around them and who want to intentionally read to learn.

The analysis of the research seemed to indicate that teaching phonics systematically is the most beneficial method to promote a successful lifelong reader. There are many aspects to teaching phonic effectively to every learner because every child has different needs. Phonics instruction can benefit everyone and harm no one. It is a stepping stone to understanding the English language and is embedded with years of history.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of the Problem**

Phonics is described as, “the ability to bolt the sounds of the language onto its symbols” (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016, p. 45). This component of reading and writing aims to improve students' abilities to synthesize, analyze, contextualize, pattern, spell, and recognize words used daily. Students use these skills to demonstrate their mastery of phonics by becoming accurate and fluent readers and writers (Ellvery, 2009, p. 59). “Phonics instruction, which is composed of the sounds, letters, and letter combinations that represent those sounds, is critical for beginning readers” (Fisher et al., p. 45). The debate about phonics instruction surfaces around using a systematic approach versus a whole language approach as a method of teaching: however, both sides agree that phonics knowledge is best suited for students at a younger age. This leads to the question, how does teaching phonics effectively contribute to becoming a proficient, strategic reader and writer?

### **Purpose of the Study**

Second grade is a transitional year for students in reading. They begin moving from the stage of *learning to read* into the stage of *reading to learn* in order to conceptualize new information. In my seven years of teaching second grade, I have found that every year I can categorize my students as readers into three groups. One group of readers is *learning to read*. A second group has progressed from learning the fundamentals of reading into a stage where they are synthesizing their knowledge of one syllable words and applying it to two or more syllable words. A third group of students are *reading to learn*. These students are reading higher level

books with the intent to learn about the world around them. Each group of readers would benefit from different levels of phonics instruction.

My daily schedule allows for small group and whole group instruction. The whole group instruction time is used to teach students about many aspects of reading. In this time, I am teaching phonics patterns, reading strategies, reading skills, grammar, spelling, and writing. I use the small group instruction time to improve or extend these reading concepts for each level of students.

Like many other school districts, our district has a basal program that tells an approach to use with every concept. Time in front of students is very precious in school, and this is an area that weighs on my mind daily as I look out during instruction and see my three groups of readers. I often find that the students who need to be actively participating in the phonics lesson are disengaged. I notice that the material is moving too fast for these students. All of these students are in the *learning to read* stage. I work on words that follow CVC or CCVC pattern (consonant-vowel-consonant, consonant-consonant-vowel-consonant) with these students. The basal program progresses very quickly and by the first month of school, this group of students no longer feels successful in the whole group setting because the phonics patterns have advanced to words with a CVVC pattern (vowel teams); therefore, the students become disengaged. On the other end of the spectrum is the group of students that are *reading to learn*. These students can follow along quickly as the basal moves from one phonics pattern to the next. The one syllable words practiced daily do not seem to give these students the tools necessary to read books at higher levels where in-depth curiosity, questioning, thinking, and learning take place.

This has led me to wonder if there is an appropriate and effective way to teach phonics in the classroom, whether it be in a whole group, or small group setting? I am researching

successful ways to implement phonics instruction to enhance my teaching pedagogy and find the most effective way to teach phonics to ALL students at different stages of reading.

### **Significance of the Study**

My assumptions and subsequent hypothesis is that teaching phonics effectively in my classroom will develop the foundational reading skills students need to become proficient, strategic readers and writers. Phonics instruction can benefit all students at different levels of reading. Students *learning to read* look for patterns in words. Students *reading to learn* use phonics to find meaning behind written and spoken words used in the English language (Blevins, 2019). “For children learning to read English, phonics instruction unlocks a large proportion of the system of English orthography. When bound morphological units like inflections, prefixes, suffixes, and Greek or Latin roots are layered on top of phonics instruction, an even greater proportion of the English orthography system is exposed” (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Teachers also can be flexible during instruction to adapt to individual needs of all students at any linguistic stage of reading. Phonics is not intended to be the only component in becoming a fluent, strategic reader. Integrated with phonics is phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (“Phonics Instruction,” 2019). Research shows that introducing phonics at an early age highly impacts students' reading outcomes; otherwise, it can be presumed that it may be more difficult to impact students that have attained a reading method on their own. Early reading predictors, letter knowledge and phonemic awareness, can be assessed prior to the beginning stages of *learning to read* to anticipate the individualized level of phonics needed. (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001).

Therefore, I conclude that implementing phonics instruction at the early stages of *learning to read* will increase the number of fluent, strategic readers and writers at the



elementary level. In essence, when a student has a strong background in reading, there is hope that teachers have instilled in the student the chance to have a lifetime love of reading and writing. Consequently, schools need to take a close look at early reading strategies and acquire the necessary tools that teachers need to teach phonics.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Phoneme:* The smallest unit of sound in our spoken language (“Phonics in Practice,” 2019)

*Grapheme:* A written letter or a group of letters representing one speech sound (“Phonics in Practice,” 2019)

### **Methodology**

This literature review was collected July 2019 through May 2020. The information gathered originated from books, professional journals, peer-reviewed articles, and websites. The sources are primary and secondary. The literature was found through UW-Platteville databases such as EBEBSCOhost, JSTOR Arts and Sciences VI, and the International Literacy Association using the key terms: phonics, phonics instruction, and systematic phonics. The author conducted the literature research, summarized the findings, and made conclusions regarding effectively teaching phonics.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

“Phonics is the study of the relationship between sounds and letters” (Bear 2018). It supports students' abilities to see connections between letters, patterns, and sounds (Bear 2018). It is an essential component of reading and writing in the early grades. The goal of phonics is to rapidly move students at the early ages toward becoming independent readers of a wide range of texts. Phonics instruction is one piece of the puzzle in being a well-rounded reader. Phonics provides students with the ability to decode unfamiliar words encountered as students learn to read more difficult text (Norman & Calfee, 2004). Phonics instructions techniques have taken many paths, but they date back to as early as the 1850s (Soler, 2017). Teaching methods have included a systematic and whole language approach to phonics instruction. Both types of instruction lead readers into the world of spelling and writing. The spoken language is transcribed into written form using letters to represent the sounds heard within words. “Eventually the attention to letter and sound correspondences through application of phonics to decode unknown words helps the beginner master a multitude of spelling patterns and become a fluent reader and writer” (Mesmer & Griffiths, 2005).

Two early and important predictors for phonics success are alphabet recognition and phonological awareness (McGeown, 2014). Alphabetic knowledge is learning the names, shapes, and sounds of the letters in the alphabet. Phonological awareness is the ability to orally break apart phonemes, or sounds, and produce syllables of a spoken word. Phonological awareness is learned through singing, tapping, syllables, rhyming, and dividing words into individual phonemes. Systematic phonics instruction relies on the student's foundational grapheme and phoneme knowledge to provide support in building a bank of phonics patterns

used in words (Bear, 2018). Phonics instruction can start as soon as the student has complete knowledge of the alphabet letters and sounds associated with each individual letter (Bowey, 2006).

### **Systematic Phonics**

One method to teaching phonics is using an explicit, systematic approach. This method allows the teacher to follow a sequential set of phonics skills or patterns. Explicit instruction is an important piece to systematic phonics because the concepts are taught clearly and directly by the teacher. Students do not stumble upon unknown word patterns while reading on their own. The teacher provides direct instruction in order for students to learn each phonics skill and then provides students with many opportunities to apply these skills in other words and decodable text controlled by a certain phonics pattern. Teachers pair patterns taught with non-example words for students to distinguish from each other. The non-example words are chosen carefully to ensure students are able to use the pattern appropriately among words that are similar (Spear-Swerling 2018). The teacher explicitly teaches students to convert letters into phonemes and then blend the sounds to form words that can be understood and create meaning within the text (“Phonics in Practice,” 2019). Direct instruction requires regular responses from students and immediate feedback from the teacher with corrections as needed. The teacher provides demonstrations and leads students into guided practice. This explicit instruction helps students start to build foundational reading skills (Spear-Swerling, 2018).

The systematic approach to phonics instruction sequentially teaches each phonics element in isolation. The incremental phonics instruction is presented first with small sets of grapheme and phoneme sounds. It is ordered in a logical and clearly defined sequence (Schaars & Segers, 2017). Sequencing starts with consonant letter sounds, and moving to short and long vowels,

followed by vowel and consonant digraphs, and blends of letters (Ehri et al., 2001). More complex phonics patterns such as homophones, homographs, and inflected endings are also present; however, students will begin to apply previous knowledge to more challenging patterns. “Phonics instruction provides children with the key. They will unlock the door” (Bowey, 2006). Consequently, when students have foundational skills, reading inspires curiosity and growth, moving a student to the stage of *reading to learn*.

“During these initial phases, children gradually learn how graphemes systematically correspond to phonemes and how they can blend the phonemes to form words,” (Schaars, Segers, & Verhoeve, 2017). Students learn to blend each phoneme and the technique provides students with the ability to decode additional words that have unfamiliar patterns; thus achieving faster word decoding. The teacher starts phonics instruction using one syllable word patterns and progresses those patterns to two-syllable words.

After intensive training of each small set of grapheme and phoneme sounds, a new set is introduced. With every new set, comes continuous, repeated practice of previously learned phonics patterns for 4-6 weeks through words in isolation and in sentences (Blevins, 2019). This allows students to apply and solidify all grapheme-phoneme relationships and rules that have been learned. The goal is to have students retain phonics patterns they have been taught and develop automaticity with each pattern (Spear-Swerling 2018). This mastery of the pattern allows students to transfer the skill to all reading situations (Blevins, 2019). In this systematic approach, students do not have to worry about unknown grapheme-phoneme sets to which they have not been introduced.

## **Whole Language Phonics**

Another method to teaching phonics is using a whole language approach. The whole language approach is centered on students learning in a contextual way. The students interact with different texts at their own speed and in their own way. Teachers do not directly teach phonics, spelling, and vocabulary as isolated skills. The teachers act as facilitators in each student's growth and achievement in all aspects of reading (M. Brooks & J Brooks, 2005). As stated by Heald-Taylor, "Whole language instruction is taught by having 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" (Heald-Taylor, 1989, p. 16). Whole language phonics, referred to as analytic phonics, teaches in a whole to part process rather than a part to whole process like synthetic phonics instruction. This method avoids having students segment each isolated phoneme in a word to decode (Ehri et al., 2001). Students look at the whole word and learn how each word makes sense in an entire sentence before breaking down the individual word into phonemes (Glazzard, 2017). This allows students to analyze grapheme-phoneme relationships once the word is read. If a student knows the letter P; several words that start with the letter P can be read. The student can categorize all words that start with the letter P. Students also analyze the common phoneme in a set of words (Ehri et al., 2001).

Whole language instruction operates on the premise that students will acquire reading strategies and skills through their experience of reading for meaning. The importance of learning is set by the teacher to provide a print-rich environment exposing students to many types of literature (Bowey, 2006). This method instills a love of reading in students. The enjoyment of reading allows students to thrive at problem-solving, collaboration, critical thinking, and have

perseverance of their own learning. The teacher is present to help make the reading more comprehensible (Krashen, 2002).

### **Debate on Systematic Phonics versus Whole Language Phonics Instruction**

The debate for many years over effective phonics instruction is an ongoing dispute between using a systematic or whole language approach. Educators have disagreed about how learning to read should be taught in the early grades. The disagreement revolves around whether or not the instruction should be taught in an explicit systematic way or taught in context as the skills arise (Ehri et al., 2001). Opposing sides of the debate argue the value of each instructional method to yield the best outcome for a fluent, strategic reader and writer.

Educators in support of the systematic approach to teaching phonics suggest that phonics patterns can be learned systematically and will grow upon the previous pattern. The idea is that there is a system for learning to read. First you learn the alphabet sounds and letters and use this knowledge to read and write words. The goal of reading is to be able to read fluently and comprehend what the author is trying to portray. Advocates of a systematic approach believe that comprehension of a text successfully requires a student to be able to read most of the words. When students have the ability to decode a word based on the decoding strategies they have been taught, all words are possible to read (Ehri et al., 2001). This approach ensures that students can identify words independently and effortlessly when they have internalized the ability to decode quickly and apply learned skills to new words. Now, it is believed, that the students can focus their attention on comprehending the text, “As a result, phonics instruction should improve text reading as well as word reading,” (Bowey, 2006). Students are able to read isolated words, nonsense words, and words within a text (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, Willows, 2001).

Educators recommending systematic phonics instruction also argue that explicit teaching of phonics skills is beneficial to children with reading difficulties. The instruction teaches students how to decode and enables these students to make better progress in learning to read. Phonics instruction benefits spelling and text processing as well (Ehri et al., 2001). Spelling is based on the alphabetic principle where sounds represent letters and aid students in correct spelling. The effects of teaching phonics to read and write extend even after instruction has ended (J. Bowers & P. Bowers, 2017).

Educators in support of a whole language approach to teach phonics suggest that the core values of this approach continuously allow students to read for meaning. Students are able to read more and enjoy reading more comprehensible and interesting texts. Students taught in a whole language approach perform better on comprehension assessments because there is little focus on specific reading of individual skill patterns on assessments (Krashen, 2002). The explicit, systematic approach is viewed as boring daily drills to those in favor of whole language phonics. It is the thought that phonics skills should not be taught in isolation and separate from learning how to read (Bowe, 2006).

These supporters also argue that the English language is too irregular for isolated phonics instruction. The language has many graphemes that are represented by many phonemes. In reverse to the previous statement it can be challenging for students to understand that there are many phonemes that are represented by many graphemes. These educators oppose teaching a language that is inconsistent in the sounds represented by letters and letters represented by sounds. The phonics approach should not be taught to beginning readers by focusing only on the level of the graphemes and phonemes, but rather on an approach that teaches readers to look at the whole word or find rhymes (Glazzard, 2017). Another challenge for students being

explicitly taught phonics instruction is to remember all the sounds in the proper order to blend words correctly (Ehri et al., 2001). When blending sounds by the visible letters, students need to delete sounds they hear when saying individual sounds like t-tuh. The ‘uh’ sound is removed (Ehri et al., 2001). Critics on either side of the debate work to make every student a successful reader and writer.

### **Phonics in Spelling**

“Spelling is integral to reading and writing. The skills required for good spelling reflect those required for successful reading and writing” (Adoniou, 2019). Spelling is not a separate entity from reading and writing. It coincides with both to create a proficient, fluent reader and writer. When spelling is taught successfully, the more likely the student is going to make gains in reading and writing as well. Spelling involves turning spoken language into written language. English spelling has evolved over the last 1,400 years and the letters and sounds have emerged into a reflection of history instead of a phonics rule. The spelling of the English language is reasonably systematic. Teachers can help students reveal the system by looking from many angles to find layers of history and meaning that explain why words are spelled the way they are (Adoniou, 2019).

Many assume that the role of letters in the English language is to represent sounds, and if one letter represents a different sound, then it is considered a “rule breaker” or “exception.” This gives the idea that spelling is difficult and disconnected from reading and writing (J. Bowers & P. Bowers, 2017). The English language relies on good spellers to use knowledge of word layers. These layers include phonological knowledge, orthographic knowledge, and morphological knowledge. Phonological knowledge teaches students to consider the relationship between single and paired graphemes and single and paired phonemes. Students use this



alphabetic layer to pair single letters to single sounds to create words (Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009). Orthographic knowledge is a step further from single letters and sounds to larger patterns and groupings of letters. Students can decide what letter patterns are logical for the word they are spelling or reading. Morphological knowledge allows students to understand that words can have different parts that each carry a different meaning. Words that have inflections, prefixes, and suffixes require a student to have knowledge in the meaning of the base word and the meaning of the inflection, prefix, or suffix (Adoniou, 2019).

English may not be a phonetic language; however, teaching sound to letter relationships and decoding is important for spelling, reading, and writing. Although, in the English language, we cannot rely on phonemes to represent the same graphemes, hearing phonemes within words and knowing the scope of possible graphemes for those phonemes is a critical skill in spelling. Good spelling is learned. It is not a gift that some have and others do not (Adoniou, 2019). As students learn to explain how words are built and can have meaning, they show competence in phonics because they have the ability to decode and spell by understanding the English language rather than by memorizing patterns. The system integrates decoding and spelling in a single process to support conceptual understanding of many skills that provide students with transferable knowledge into reading and writing (Norman & Calfee, 2004). Phonology, morphology, and orthography are not only for advanced learners looking to be challenged. All spellers can use each of these layers as a guide to becoming, developing, or extending their knowledge of the English language in reading and writing.

## Phonics in Writing

“Ultimately, whether a student can spell in a test is a moot point: the point of spelling is to communicate clearly with others (Lapp, 2019). Spelling is a way to communicate with others and traditional spelling tests might show mastery of a weekly phonics pattern; however, it fails to show if students are transferring phonics patterns into writing. Authentic writing tasks given to students will show successes and challenges in phonics patterns and will guide teachers to be able to give the proper phonics instruction to all students. A closer look at a student's spelling within their writing can show that a student is using phonological knowledge to spell. As school years progress and words become longer, contain more difficult patterns, and have meaning behind the spelling pattern, using phonological knowledge will no longer be useful. Teachers will be able to identify students that are ready to spell and read words that are more difficult. Close analysis of student writing might also show a weakness in phonological knowledge as well. A teacher might observe a student matching phonemes to graphemes to spell, but still misspelling words. This might show up in their writing, perhaps revealing that the student may have memorized a pattern. Upon a closer look, the teacher can identify that the student is struggling hearing the correct sound in words and may need more practice in phonemic awareness. In turn this could be affecting the student's reading as well (Lapp, 2019).

Students' independent writing can be an ongoing assessment. Teachers that provide high quality instruction give students many opportunities to practice reading and writing. Through these teaching strategies, students gain word knowledge at an increasing rate. The student progresses through stages and becomes a learner that is *reading to learn*. Students can use knowledge they have learned in phonics, spelling, reading, and writing to make generalizations about patterns that they can apply to new words they encounter (Williams et al., 2009).

## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, and RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, phonics instruction is given to students at a young age and is beneficial in helping students in the “learning to read” stage. Educators should focus instruction on the early years of learning in kindergarten and first grade (Armbruster, 2001). There are different methods of delivery for phonics instruction. The debate between using a systematic or whole language approach continues to circulate in education. Early assessment of decoding knowledge is valuable in determining the level at which each student is. Assessments similar to the names test and reading nonsense words can pinpoint areas of strength and weakness for young students as readers (Mather, Sammons, & Schwartz, 2006). Phonics plays a necessary role in the reading acquisition process because the use of phonics encompasses all layers of English spelling. Teachers give clear examples of patterns to help students develop their awareness of how words are spelled (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Phonics instruction teaches children to use relationships to read and write words (Armbruster, 2001).

In order to become a proficient, strategic reader and writer, studies show using a systematic approach to phonics is valuable in creating a lifelong learner. Teaching systematically shows students that there are predictable relationships between graphemes and phonemes. A strong dependence on letter knowledge and blending of those letters in combinations to form a written word is important. Students can use this system to read words in isolation and within a text (McGeown & Medford, 2013). In a study done by Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, and Willows (2001), the findings indicate that, “Meta-analysis support the conclusion that systematic phonics instruction helps children learn to read more effectively than non-systematic or no phonics instruction. The impact of phonics instruction on reading was significantly greater

in the early grades (kindergarten and first grade) when phonics was the method used to start children out than in later grades (2nd through 6th graders) after children had made some progress in reading presumably with another method.” These findings indicate that phonics instruction is beneficial in the beginning stages of *learning to read*. The discussion goes on to say, “Systematic phonics instruction was found to boost spelling skills in younger but not old students. These findings indicate that phonics instruction helps kindergartners and first graders acquire the alphabetic knowledge they need to begin learning to spell” (Ehri et al., 2001). While the younger grades are focusing on the phonological stage of spelling and making connections to the morphological stage, this beginning stage is not suitable for all ages. Older grades that are no longer working on phonics encompass all domains of spelling knowledge (Adoniou, 2019). The integration of phonics, reading, spelling, and writing creates a proficient, strategic reader and writer.

There are many programs and activities that can be used to teach phonics in a systematic way. Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, and Willows (2001) analyzed seven systematic phonics programs and found that they did not differ in their effectiveness on early readers. As a result, no one program is better than the next. Another activity for phonics practice is Word Work. This strategy is a hands-on approach to manipulating letters and sounds to form words. Students will start to apply understanding of decoding and spelling with new words (Norman & Calfee, 2004). Reading connected text is a way to support students’ ability to read independently. These decodable stories use phonics patterns and can help give students a sense of reassurance that they are learning to read. “The tight connection between what students learn in phonics and what they read is essential for building a faster foundation in early reading” (Blevins, 2019).

Phonics is more than just isolated words taught in a dull and boring way. It seems self-evident that the specific techniques and activities used to teach phonics need to be relevant, motivating, and interesting in order to hold children's attention and to promote optimal learning (Ehri et al., 2001). Phonics skills need to be transferable to all subject matter. There also needs to be more research done to see what programs and activities are most engaging for teachers and students. When teachers are committed to deliver the best phonics instruction, students are naturally going to participate. Phonics instruction is only one piece to a very big puzzle in reading. Teaching phonics contributes to only one piece of the puzzle; however, phonics knowledge connects to the bigger picture of becoming a proficient, strategic reader and writer.

## CHAPTER IV

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