



What do you think of ‘phonics first’ or ‘phonics only’ in the primary grades?

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Teacher question:

At my school, the district inservice has made a big deal out of Scarborough’s Rope. Nevertheless, when it comes to daily instruction, we (the primary grade teachers) have been told that decoding is the most important thing and that we are to emphasise that. They’ve sent us to LETRS training, purchased instructional programs on phonics, and require testing students’ ‘nonsense word fluency’ frequently. At what grade levels is it appropriate to teach the ‘language comprehension’ portions of the Rope?

Shanahan responds:

In 1915, near where I’m writing this, a passenger ship, the *SS Eastland* sank, drowning 844 passengers – many of them children. It was the greatest disaster in Chicago history and the greatest loss of life of any single shipwreck on the Great Lakes ... But I’ll get back to that in a moment.

I agree with your district that young readers – if they are going to be young readers – need to learn to decode, and phonics and phonemic awareness instruction are essential during the primary grades to ensure that students develop proficient decoding ability.

But it seems to me that in your school district’s prodigious and well-meaning efforts to ensure that happens, they are ignoring Scarborough’s Rope, Gough & Tunmer’s Simple View, Duke & Cartwright’s Active View model, the Report of the National Reading Panel, \$100 million worth of research from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and a slew of other more recent research studies.

They’ve left the ‘bop out of the bop-sh-bop-sh-bop’. Or, more accurately, they’ve left the science out of the ‘Science of Reading’.

Most people would chalk this overreach up to ‘reading wars’. That could be what’s happening; maybe there’s a ‘true believer’ in your district who thinks that only decoding matters – and is willing to make that happen no matter the costs.

However, I’ve been hearing about this ‘decoding first’ or ‘decoding only’ action often lately – from parents, state department of education officials and teachers. Reading instruction over my career has tended to follow a pendulum. As interest swings one way or the other, instructional practice gets twisted out of shape.

I remember back in the 1970s and 80s. The federal government invested heavily in research on reading comprehension. That produced a lot of terrific studies, and for a while it dominated the reading journals – both the research journals and those aimed at practitioners.



In 1980, it was nearly impossible to find a contemporary high-quality article on phonics teaching. The comprehension researchers weren't anti-phonics, they just sucked all the oxygen out of the room. A beginning teacher at that time would have thought the only thing she was supposed to teach was comprehension strategies.

Not surprisingly, publishing companies followed that lead. It wasn't that they wouldn't publish information on how to read words or how to teach students to do so. They were just following the market, publishing the shiny new stuff that everyone was interested in right then – rather than trying to make sure that all the important aspects of teaching reading were addressed sufficiently.

That's what's going on now. The press and media are emphasizing decoding because of serious gaps in the practices of many schools, so parents are asking questions about it and curriculum directors are making darn sure that they have a good story to tell. Since no one appears particularly concerned about prosody or vocabulary or whether kids are reading enough science text, all hands on deck is about addressing the decoding gap.

We certainly have work to do to make sure that phonics is taught, that teachers have supportive, high-quality instructional materials aimed at that, and investing in professional development on decoding is wise, too.

But that's the easy part.

The trick to doing that successfully, however, is to do it without tipping the boat over.

Ah, the *SS Eastland*, let's get back to that. The ship that day was loaded with families going out for an excursion on the lake, a Sunday entertainment. Unfortunately, once boarded, the ship listed heavily to starboard (it was leaning uncomfortably to the right). The passengers responded as might be expected ... They moved quickly to the other side of the boat – which tipped it over.

It sounds like your district is trying to address a real problem. But under pressure and anxiety, they are shifting all the ballast to one side of the boat. Ignoring or delaying language comprehension instruction is not the smart way to correct the decoding problem. In fact, it might eventually sink the boat.

Is there really any reason to believe that teaching phonics first or that only

teaching phonics for a year or two is a good idea? If you have phonics stuff to sell, it probably seems like it is. But if you have any interest in the *science* of reading (that is, you want to base your actions on data rather than sales talks and unintentional media hyperbole), then it's clear those scorched earth approaches are bad pedagogy.

If you don't think that I'm right about this, look at this evidence:

- 1 Jeanne Chall, the Harvard professor most known for her analysis of the research on phonics instruction ([*Learning to Read: The Great Debate, 1967*](#)), promoted the role of phonics more vocally and more articulately than any scientist of her generation. Nevertheless, the phonics instruction that she promoted through her own work never delivered phonics in a vacuum. Her research revealed that students, to become readers, needed to progress in multiple skills areas simultaneously.
- 2 In 1990, Marilyn Jager Adams published the landmark *Beginning to Read*, her magnificent summary of

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the research on the early acquisition of reading ability. Not surprisingly, this work – like Chall’s – has been a major pillar of movements to teach phonics explicitly and thoroughly from the beginning. However, this incisive review of research explicitly rejects the idea of either ‘phonics first’ or ‘meaning first’ approaches. It describes such approaches as ‘misguided’ and ‘simplistic’ and documents the lack of empirical evidence supporting either of those approaches.

- 3 Hollis Scarborough’s Rope, which you mention, treats word recognition and language comprehension equivalently. However, you could read that visual metaphor for reading development two different ways. You could read it left-to-right, which would suggest that both sets of skills develop simultaneously and interactively from the beginning. Or you also might read it from top to bottom, suggesting that language comprehension comes later in the process, built upon a foundation of phonemic awareness, phonics and sight vocabulary. Recently, Hollis clarified the intended meaning in a Q&A available on YouTube. She said that the publisher of the original graphic left out one important item. There was to be an arrow at the bottom labelled time, and it was to point left-to-right. Her understanding of the research is in accord with those of Chall and Adams – decoding needs to be taught early in the developmental process, along with those comprehension abilities.
- 4 The [National Reading Panel report \(2000\)](#) is oft cited as the major support for phonics instruction. We (I was a member of the panel) found that explicit, systematic phonics instruction helped students to become better readers – based on a meta-analysis of 38 studies. But most of those studies provided the phonics instruction embedded in or accompanied by a more comprehensive reading program (the same was true of all the other components of reading that the National Reading Panel examined). If you have any doubts, Linnea Ehri, the scientist who led the alphabetics part of the effort, has focused her research not only on how kids learn to recognise words (ever hear of ‘orthographic mapping?’), but also on more comprehensive approaches to decoding like Reading Rescue.
- 5 The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that once instruction had successfully raised kids to average levels of decoding ability – levels that should have resulted in successful reading – more than half the students still struggled. Decoding was essential, but insufficient for success. That’s why Reid Lyon, Jack Fletcher, Barbara Foorman, Joe Torgesen, and so many others endorsed more comprehensive approaches to meeting children’s reading needs ([Fletcher & Lyon, 1998](#)). They were quite explicit that the teaching of these components takes places simultaneously, not consecutively or sequentially. It would be cruel to put all the emphasis on one part of the process, while allowing kids to languish with the other parts (sort of like providing calcium by taking away the protein).
- 6 Perhaps you think that what I’m saying may be true for some kids, but not for kids with dyslexia. You’d be wrong there too if you examined the rigorous and well-grounded research of folks like Sharon Vaughn or Maureen Lovett. They must not have gotten the memo that kids only need decoding supports early on; look at the interventions they’ve developed for students with dyslexia.
- 7 Not long ago, on a listserv where I lurk, someone argued that it was okay to teach phonics to kids who already could decode satisfactorily (“it couldn’t hurt”). Research shows that engaging those kids in comprehension and language activities instead of teaching them again what they already know, generates greater learning progress ([Connor et al., 2004](#)).

TIM Talks: Advice for the discerning educator



This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [Shanahan on Literacy](#).

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Nothing wrong with supporting phonics instruction but being so cavalier about the education of other people's children is insensitive and offensive. (Yes, unfortunately, I've witnessed that same kind of insensitivity and gracelessness from those excusing their own disregard for the decoding needs of kids.)

- 8 The value or possibility of teaching foundational skills and language skills simultaneously is not just for reading either. Karen Harris and Steve Graham shared some of their recent work with me that shows that first-graders do quite well with a more comprehensive approach from the beginning ([Harris et al., 2023](#)).

I could go on and on, but I think you get the idea. The scientists who know the most about this are big proponents of teaching phonics, but they don't buy in to the idea that its phonics first or phonics only. Those ideas come from folks who are trying to push a pendulum, make a sale, or – perhaps, like your district – want to respond to community pressure without taking the trouble to examine the Science of Reading.

How to proceed? The way I handle it is by apportioning time to parts of the literacy curriculum. I follow the research and advocate teaching phonics for about

30 minutes a day (just like in most of the studies summarised by the National Reading Panel). Comparable amounts of time should be devoted to the other important components – that of reading comprehension, writing and the ability to read text fluently. Doing it that way, kids get what research says is an effective dose of phonics instruction, and they don't miss out on all the other things that they need if they are to become good readers.

In Chicago, when I was the director of reading, we began every workshop with an overview of all the skills needed to read. It was explained repeatedly that today's PD was on _____ but not because that was the most important or the only component of reading. It was important, it mattered, and it was the topic of the day, but it had to fit together with the other pieces (that also were essential and that mattered every bit as much). Worked for our kids.

Please share this article with your administrators. Perhaps we can persuade them to do less tail covering and more to meet the literacy learning needs of our diverse children.

Let's not sink the boat in our zeal to make it look like we are doing a great job with phonics.

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