Phonics: Proceed with caution

This is not to say that phonics should be the only component of literacy instruction. Heartwarming though it is to see outdated and discredited approaches such as 'balanced literacy' and whole-word learning lose popularity, the shift towards phonics instruction should always be tempered with the understanding that knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) is necessary but not sufficient for literacy acquisition in a deep orthography like English.

Many phonics approaches have taken the correspondence idea too far, resulting in a disastrous misrepresentation of English orthography. This again will interfere with the process of orthographic mapping and that segment of the population who need high quality, explicit instruction in how this system works continue to miss out.

Here are some examples of how a phonics approach might take GPCs too far:

· If your approach says that all letter sequences are 'spellings' for sounds, this is too far. Not all letter sequences are 'spellings' for sounds. English is not and never has been a transcription system for sound. Baked into English orthography is a meaning layer that should not be ignored. Much of this book will reveal that layer.

· If your approach has charts that posit 100+ 'graphemes', this is too far. According to Venezky (1999), there is a limited set of around 70 major graphemes, with some minor patterns. Asking children to store and independently retrieve many more than this set poses a cognitive load too high on developing readers and spellers.

· If your approach says that 'encoding' is the flipside of 'decoding', that is too far. Sounding words out on a page (decoding) is different from mentally segmenting a word into phonemes and morphemes and using graphemes and markers to produce the correct sequence of letters.

· If your approach says it's fine to model incorrect sequences of letters so that sound-symbol correspondences according to a particular phonics progression remain intact, that is too far. Children should never be exposed to incorrect spelling unless you are giving them an orthographic choice test (see Spelling Assessment for more information on that).

· If your approach supports the myth that English spelling doesn't make sense, that is too far. It actually makes perfect sense, but teachers are not given this knowledge in teacher training institutions (see Reading for Life for the whole story). Showing how and why it makes sense is the purpose of this book.

· If your approach forces novices to somehow 'memorise' whole words (usually high frequency function words like said or was), that is too far. Drawing attention to the internal structure and orthographic kinships within words helps children build mental models of how the whole system works.

· If your approach prioritises the teaching and learning of 'syllable types' over morphemes, that is too far. Beyond open and closed, all other so-called 'syllable types' are unreliable, meaningless zombies that are neither phonemes nor graphemes nor morphemes. They are not justified in terms of cognitive load versus payoff (Kearns 2020).

In sum, we should not be in the business of devising shortcuts to reading acquisition that interfere with orthographic mapping. If you are wondering why your young readers are still poor spellers, see above.

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