

## The National Reading Panel and ELLs: Phonics

**"To what degree can the findings of the Report the National Reading Panel ... be generalized to English-language learners?"****The Case of Phonics**

I review here another critique of the NRP report concerning their conclusions on the role of phonics.

The National Reading Panel claimed that (1) "systematic" phonics instruction is more effective than less systematic phonics instruction and (2) "skills" based approaches are superior to whole language approaches in helping children learn to read.

**Claim (1): Systematic phonics instruction is more effective than less systematic phonics instruction**

The NRP's conclusions on the impact of phonics actually show that phonics instruction has a very limited impact on learning to read. The NRP reported an overall effect size of  $d = .46$  in favor of programs that provided systematic, intensive phonics, as compared to programs providing less or no phonics. The effect was dependent on the kind of measure used, with systematic phonics showing a greater effect on reading single words aloud, and a smaller effect on tests involving reading texts (for details, see Garan, 2002):

Impact on different kinds of tests:

test	effect size
regular words:	.67
pseudowords	.60
oral reading of text:	.25
comprehending text:	.27

(from: table 3, appendix E)

The NRP also found that the effect of systematic phonics instruction faded with time. For studies that included both immediate posttests and delayed posttests, the effect size dropped from .51 to .27 (six comparisons; all measures combined). The time interval between the immediate and delayed tests ranged from four months to one year.

Before considering what these results imply for theory, it should be pointed out that they are not new (nor does the NRP claim they are). The systematic phonics advantage was also reported by Chall (1967), and others have reported that the superiority of intensive phonics fades with time, with the advantage disappearing by third grade (Chall, 1967; Dykstra, 1974).

There is, thus, a temporary advantage for systematic phonics, one that appears to be quite modest when tests involve reading real texts. The usual interpretation of this result is that this superiority provides support for the "Skill-Building Hypothesis," the view that language is learned by first mastering the parts, and then, through drill and exercise, working up to larger units. But the results of these studies are also consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis, the view that language is acquired by understanding messages (Krashen, 1985); in the case of reading, this means the comprehension of texts (Smith, 1994; Goodman, 1982).

Smith (1994) provides this explanation: Some conscious knowledge of phonics rules can help make texts more comprehensible. He provides the following example. A child is reading the sentence "The man is riding on the h ---." and cannot, at first, read the final word. But if the child knows what sound /h/ makes, this information, along with context, will help reduce the possibilities and thus help the child identify the word. The combination of some conscious knowledge of phonics, along with context, will not help every time, but it helps enough to make learning some phonics worthwhile. Thus, children who know more phonics will be somewhat better off than those who know less.

But the effect is limited, because there are severe limits as to how much phonics can be consciously learned. Many phonics rules are extremely complex and have numerous exceptions (Adams, 1990; Smith,

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1994). Most of our knowledge of phonics, Smith argues, is the result of reading and not the cause. In terms of language acquisition theory, most of our knowledge of phonics is subconsciously acquired as the result of comprehensible input (reading).

The effect of phonics, however, is exaggerated in tests of reading comprehension. To see why this is so, consider what takes place when fluent readers encounter words that they do not recognize. Smith (1994) points out that fluent readers generally skip words that they do not know and try to confirm predictions about meaning without them. If skipping fails, that is, the text is incomprehensible without the skipped word, the fluent reader will attempt to guess the word from context. If the guess is correct, the passage will make sense. If the guess is not correct, and the passage does not make sense, the reader will try again. When guessing fails, the reader can look the word up or ask someone what it means. The last resort, Smith points out, is to “sound out” the word and to try to identify it from its pronunciation.

Now let us consider what happens when a young child does not recognize a word on a typical grade 1 or grade 2 reading comprehension test. Beginning readers are often taught to carefully examine every word, that is, not to skip. The context is usually so impoverished (a few sentences or even less) that guessing will not be very productive. The child can't ask anyone, because it's a test. “Sounding out,” the last alternative in the real world, becomes the first alternative. Thus, a child who knows more phonics will have a bit of an edge on these tests, which is exactly what the research shows when reading comprehension is tested ( $d = a$  modest .27).

Of course, this does not demonstrate that the Comprehension Hypothesis is correct. It does, however, show that the Comprehension Hypothesis can explain the results of the research, that is, that the research does not disprove the Comprehension Hypothesis.

Thus, claim (1) is consistent with the Comprehension Hypothesis, the hypothesis that we learn to read by understanding what is on the page. This hypothesis is the foundation of “whole language.”

**Claim (2): “Skills” based approaches are superior to whole language approaches.**

Claim (2) is not correct; when one considers tests of reading comprehension, and the amount of real reading done by children, whole language emerges as the winner in these studies.

The National Reading Panel concluded that systematic phonics approaches were superior to whole language approaches, claiming that the average effect size in favor of phonics was .32 (based on twelve comparisons). In their analysis, however, effect sizes were not analyzed separately for each kind of measure used. Some were measure of reading single words in isolation, some involved real texts. Also, the issue is not whether a treatment is labeled “whole language” or “skills” but how much reading the children actually do. In Evans and Carr (1985), for example, the so-called “traditional” group actually did significantly more silent reading than the whole language group. The whole language group did more oral reading of stories the children had written themselves or dictated to the teacher, an activity that entails less new meaning and, most likely, more focus on form.

In Krashen (2002), I re-analyzed this data with two alterations:

- 1) Considering only tests of reading comprehension.
- 2) Considering not whether a treatment is labeled “whole language,” or “phonics” but whether the children in the treatment were actually doing more real reading than the children in the other treatment.

In addition, I included some studies that the NRP had missed.

My results were dramatically different. I found a small advantage favoring whole language on tests of reading comprehension ( $d = .17$ ).

It should be noted that the studies reviewed by the NRP were not done with what I consider to be the crucial variable in mind: The amount of genuinely interesting, real reading that children did. Thus, my

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conclusions are post-hoc and are only suggestive. What is clear, however, is that the National Reading Panel's interpretation of the results is not the only possible one.

It is also interesting that studies done with older readers show the same thing: Students who participate in sustained silent reading and self-selected reading programs outperform comparison students (Krashen, 1993). (The NRP has disagreed with this conclusion as well, arguing that evidence is insufficient to arrive at a conclusion. Their analysis, however, omitted several important studies. For discussion, see Krashen, 2001.

### Conclusion

The NRP shows only that direct instruction in phonics plays a very small role in predicting scores on tests of reading comprehension. The NRP's conclusion that systematic phonics instruction is superior to whole language instruction does not hold up when we consider how much reading children do, and consider tests of reading comprehension.

As was the case with phonemic awareness (See "The case for phonemic awareness," another paper submitted as commentary on the National Reading Panel), one must ask, before applying the results of the NRP to second language acquirers, whether the results are valid for first language acquirers.

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