

Methods of reading instruction and the cycle of knowledge.

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Children go through many repetitions of the cycle of knowledge as they learn how to read. The process consists of several stages in which the child learns large quantities of very specific information. After a certain quantity of information and practice, a leap occurs. The child can then use that information again and again. A skill is consolidated. As the child develops in fluency, what is difficult and conscious at one level becomes so common that it is not even conscious anymore. A child struggles at one stage to decode individual words, yet a fluent reader does not even consciously look at individual words as he reads.

Stages of the Process:

At the earliest stage, the preschool stage, the child struggles to learn the alphabet: recognizing the letters and learning the principle sounds that they make. Characteristically, alphabet books and songs are used a lot at this stage. Children walk around picking letters off of signs and billboards. But there reaches a point when all the struggles over individual letters are over and the child is fluent at the letters and their basic sounds.

For many children today in the USA, this process is completed before the child is receiving an formal reading instruction, often before the child is in public school. For example, Sesame Street presents this information on TV. Many day care centers, following from the Head Start program, incorporate this into their curriculum.

There have been debates among reading instructors about how to teach this skill. On the one side were those who thought that words should be used more or less as examples of the alphabet. Others thought that words be taught first and then broken down to show their letters. In practice, words are used as examples for the alphabet in most of the materials in use today. The letters are taught in alphabetic order with words used to illustrate some of the principle sounds that they make. An opposite approach was to take a common object--for example, a ball. The object would be shown and then the word and then the individual letters taught in context of the word.

Learning the alphabet is not a skill which children appear

to fail at learning. Those children who have difficulties in learning how to read, don't appear to get stuck at this stage.

A second general stage in the process of learning how to read can be characterized as learning sight words. Children are taught a basic vocabulary of familiar words which they learn by sight. The purpose is to give the child enough of a vocabulary to get them started with reading practice and to provide a set of building blocks which can be used in word analysis. The cycle of knowledge at this stage is difficult to complete. Learning particular words by sight, does not, in and of itself, result in a leap that allows the child to grasp the general method of reading.

A third general stage is the stage of learning how to decode familiar words from the written symbol. This appears to be the most difficult stage and the one in which many children fail to consolidate the skills that they need. Where in earlier stages, the child learned 26 letters and maybe 40 sounds, now the child must learn thousands of combinations of letters and the sounds that they make as they fit together into words. The inconsistency of the English language in this area is well-known.

A fourth stage involves amassing a large enough sight word vocabulary and consolidating enough word decoding skills that reading becomes almost automatic. The principle problem becomes comprehension. New words are deduced from the context in which they appear or by an on the spot analysis of its structure and general morphology. For example, being able to determine the meaning of a more complex word by seeing how it is a form of a simple word.

Reading educators have directed much working in understanding the internal processes of the 3rd stage, word decoding and developed different approaches to this stage. This is where the differences in the outlooks of educators and the young reader affect the process.

The phonetic method reflects the movement of knowledge from the particular to the general. An unfamiliar word is dissected and the sound of each letter and diphthong is vocalized. Through enough repetition and vocalization, the reader eventually hears the word emerging from the vocalized letters. Knowledge of words is built up from very particular knowledge of letters and diphthongs. The advantage of the phonetic method is that it breaks down the task to very manageable proportions and builds general

rules and patterns that can be applied again and again. As such, the phonetic method is a teachable and learnable skill that does not depend on any intuitiveness or insight from the reader. If it were only that easy, phonetics would be universally used and more children would learn to read. Like all procedural approaches to complex phenomena and processes, it begins to break down as the reader approaches more and more phenomena that are exceptions and variations. Reading educators respond to these exceptions, of which English has very many, by summarizing new and more particular rules. One basic phonetic reading texts lists 45 basic sounds of the English language and 54 phonetic rules which govern which sound is used where, i.e. when a "g" is likely to be a "hard g" or a "soft g". On the one hand, it is remarkable that phonetic English can be reduced to so few rules. On the other hand, this summarization is not really useful as a reading tool, because the number of rules is more than a reader can bring to bear on a word, while reading.

During the early grades, the subject of spelling is used to complete the cycle of knowledge around phonetics. Spelling is the reverse process of reading--the written symbol is produced by the student in response to the spoken word. It is used to consolidate the knowledge of individual sight words and to give practice in the analytical skills of phonetics.

The outlook of the child affects how well the child is able to respond to a particular method of reading instruction. Reading educators and childhood psychologists have correlated certain psychological traits with success in the phonetics oriented classroom; notably the trait of 'compulsivity'. From this, it can be hypothesized that metaphysical children will respond better to the condition of phonetic reading instruction.

In contrast, other word attack strategies are less procedural and depend on much "freer" associative connections.

One successful word attack strategy is to focus on the contextual clues to determine word identification and content. On the broadest level, these are contextual clues that are based in the actual content and meaning of the sentence, paragraph or story. This method works and its working is a basic method by which readers expand their knowledge of words. A fluent reader has a reading vocabulary far in excess of their speaking vocabulary. All

of us know words by sight that we have never heard said or can even pronounce correctly ourselves. Except for the tiny handful of words that we may have looked up in a dictionary, these words are learned through contextual clues.

Other reading instruction methods that depend on contextual clues focus on more particular aspects of the context. One method is to use sentence structure and word order as a clue to determine a word. A word that follows an article is a noun or an adjective. This narrows down the list of possibilities considerably.

The Linguistic (or Bloomfield) method develops a consciousness of patterns of word structures by teaching words in groups that are based on the same root syllables. The first root syllable taught is '-an'. The child learns 'can, pan, ran, Nan, man', etc. A child then tries to deduce the structure of an unknown word in relation to these linguistic structures, and from there determine what it is. At a practical level, this method teaches another way to analyze an unknown word. Where the phonetic method has the child start with the initial letter, vocalize it and add additional letters onto the sound stream until the word can be heard, this linguistic approach has the child look for recognizable syllables inside the word. It may be that the initial sound is the last thing deduced.

The non-phonetic methods of word attack are rich and varied and point to the large number of ways that words meaning can be determined in addition to sounding it out. The problem is that they are non-procedural and informal. They work, but it is hard to say how they work and harder yet to instruct someone in how to use them. They are idealistic methods, depending as they do on the ability to make a lot of connections. Idealistic children will probably use them a lot, without prompting. Metaphysical children will need to be encouraged to use them, simply because they bring the content of the reading material and the function of reading itself into process of working through individual words.

Conclusions:

The early process of learning how to read is to learn how to deduce known spoken words from their written symbol. The body of knowledge of phonetics is the summarization of the relationships between written letters and spoken sounds. It is an objective fact that because of the English language's particular development these relationships are not always regular and predictable. However, being able to apply these

phonetic relationships is the first and necessary step of reading instruction. No one can learn to read reliably without them.

On the other hand, there is a content and function to reading that goes beyond pronouncing written words.

A reading method that speaks to the development of a metaphysical child will be based on the phonetic method, but constantly stresses the content of reading materials, the meanings of words and sentences, the function of reading. Otherwise, the child will become bogged down in the letters and sounds and be unable to complete the cycle of knowledge by developing enough fluency at reading.

A reading method that speaks to the development of the idealistic child will be based on the phonetic method as well. But here, the child must be struggled with to actually apply it and learn it thoroughly. Otherwise, the child will learn to read through a variety of intuitive methods and not have the basic skills to analyze particular words when encountered. The child's progress will slow when close and particular reading is required.