THE ROLE OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS AND PHONICS IN BEGINNING READING

BY CAROL SPAULDING SERNA

Koi, a charming 6-year-old, has been in the United States for three years. An ESL (English as a second language) student, she is now enrolled in a multigrade classroom in the Pacific Northwest. Even though Koi speaks English fluently, she had a difficult time with phonemic awareness in kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher felt she was ready socially and intellectually for 1st grade, despite her phonemic awareness deficit.

By participating in various oral phonemic awareness activities in kindergarten and 1st grade and using invented spelling in her daily journal writing, Koi was able to develop phonemic awareness. It was a sudden breakthrough. One week, Koi still needed a parent volunteer to segment words for her to blend so that she could write phonemically in her journal. The next week she wrote phonetically "When the opera lady sings, she breaks the glass" for her "-ing" word family sentences in spelling class—all by herself! She was able to transfer her decoding skills to other language-arts activities. Koi was on her way; she was able to read orally and do written work independently because she had broken the code!

Phonemic awareness and phonics enabled Koi to make sense of the English alphabetic system. The California Reading Program Advisory states: "The lack of phonemic awareness is the most powerful determinant of the likelihood of failure to learn to read because of its importance in learning the English alphabetic system or in learning how print represents spoken words. If children cannot hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words, they have an extremely difficult time learning how to map those sounds to letters and letter patterns—the essence of decoding."[1]

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The Difference Between Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

Phonemic awareness has been defined as recognition that sounds make up the English language, and that the words we speak are each composed of individual sounds. Children need to be encouraged to pay attention to the sounds of words, separate from meaning.[2] Phonics is based on the premise that words can be decoded into sounds. When they study phonics, students learn spelling-to-sound correspondence.[3]

Rog states, "Phonemic awareness is not phonics. Phonemic awareness is an understanding about the structures and patterns of spoken language. Phonics, on the other hand, refers to the connection between letters and spoken sounds."[4] Spiegel adds: "Phonemic awareness is a *con-*

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sciousness of sounds as entities that can be blended and taken apart and manipulated. Phonemic awareness includes the ability to use sounds. It is different from *knowing about* sounds, which may be what is taught in a traditional phonics program."[5] The focus of this article, then, will be the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in teaching beginning reading.

Five Levels of Phonemic Awareness

Marilyn J. Adams, in her landmark 1990 review of reading research, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, established that there are five basic levels of phonemic awareness:

- Oral rhyming
- Oddity tasks
- Oral blending
- Oral phoneme segmentation
- Phoneme manipulation

These levels move from the simplest to the most complex. Likewise, the research-based activities that support and develop them also become progressively more complex.[6]

Phonemic Awareness Instruction and Activities

Hallie and Ruth Yopp, in their *Reading Teacher* article "Supporting Phonemic Awareness Development in the Classroom," discussed some aspects of phonemic awareness instruction and activities. They recommend that phonemic awareness instruction and activities should be developmentally appropriate, "playful and engaging, interactive and social, and should stimulate curiosity and experimentation with language."[7] They recommend using songs, chants, and word play games to enhance students' awareness of the sound structure of language. Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp warn that "Few young children spontaneously acquire phonemic awareness. But when teachers plan activities and interact so as to draw attention to the phonemes in spoken words, children's awareness develops."[8]

Level 1

In level one, *oral rhyming,* students decide whether words rhyme.[9] To help develop students develop oral rhyming skills, the teacher can use an activity like "Extend the Rhyme," where he or she says three rhyming words (*frog, log, jog*) and asks the students to provide other words that rhyme with those

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words (*dog*, *hog*, *etc*.).[10] Much of children's literature brims with rhyme, alliteration, and word play. Literature with predictable rhythms and rhyme patterns can be used as a springboard. Students are often able to supply words to complete the sentence. Some children can make up their own silly rhymes based on the pattern of the picture book.[11]

Level 2

In level two, *oddity tasks*, students find similarities or differences between initial, ending, and medial sounds.[12] Activities that help develop these skills include games such as "Stand, Sit, and Turn Around," where the teacher says a sound, such as /f/, and all the students whose names start with the /f/ sound stand up, turn around, jump, clap, or do some other designated action.[13] Teachers can also ask students to make hand signals each time they hear a word that begins with a designated sound in a read-aloud book.[14]

Level 3

Level three, o*ral blending*, requires students to identify words in which the phonemes have been separated.[15] One activity that helps students practice oral blending is the game "Put It Together." Using a puppet as a prop, the teacher tells the students that the puppet likes to say only complete words. The teacher says a word in parts, then the students "guess" the word. The puppet restates the complete word and models blending as needed.[16] Another oral blending activity is sung to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It." The class sings:

If you think you know this word, shout it out!
If you think you know this word, shout it out!
If you think you know this word
Then tell me what you've heard,
If you think you know this word, shout it out!

The teacher says a segmented word such as /w/-/i/-/g/, and the students shout out the blended word, *wig*.[17]

Level 4

In level four, *phonemic segmentation,* students are asked to say in order each sound in a word.[18] One activity that helps develop phoneme segmentation is "Segmentation Cheer."

Teacher: *Listen to my cheer, then shout the words you hear.*
Cat! Cat! Cat! Let's take apart the word cat!
Give me the beginning sound.
Students: */c/!*
Teacher: *Give me the middle sound.*
Students: */a/!*
Teacher: *Give me the ending sound.*
Students: */t/!*
Teacher: *That's right!*
Students: */c/-/a/-/t/ Cat! Cat! Cat!*[19]

Each time the teacher says the cheer, he or she changes the words in the second line.

Level 5

In level five, *phoneme manipulation*, students change words by adding, deleting, or moving a phoneme.[20] One activity to help develop phoneme manipulation is "Picture Search." The teacher turns to different pages in a picture book and says the name of an object, animal, or person in the picture, but leaves out the first phoneme. For a picture of a fish, he or she would say "-ish." The students would supply the missing phoneme /f/. Phoneme manipulation also works with songs such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," where the words *merrily*, *merrily*, *merrily* are changed to nonsense words such as *werrily*, *carrily*, *tarrily*, etc.[21]

An Important Link

Phonemic awareness is an important link to reading instruction. It is not meaningful in and of itself. In *The Phonological Awareness Handbook for Kindergarten and Primary Teachers,* Ericson and Juliebo state, "Numerous studies have shown that phonological awareness teaching programs that include letter-name and letter-sound correspondence have a greater positive impact on reading development than interventions involving phonological awareness or sound-letter instruction alone."[22] The California Reading Program Advisory determined, "After children have demonstrated initial levels of phonemic awareness, both phonemic awareness and phonics can be taught simultaneously. At this point, it is also essential that both phonemic awareness and phonics be mutually reinforced in the context of integrated, shared reading and writing activities."[23]

Is Phonics Here to Stay?

According to Hall, Prevatte, and Cunningham: "Phonics instruction is clearly important because one of the big tasks of beginning readers is to figure out how our alphabetic language works. Adams reviewed decades of research and concluded that while some children can figure out the letter-sound system without instruction, directly teaching this system speeds up the literacy acquisition."[24]

At one time, the field of reading was embroiled in the "Great Debate" over which was best, the phonetic approach or the whole-word approach to early reading instruction. This debate spawned some major research initiatives. The current debate no longer centers around the value of phonics instruction—that has been accepted—but which approaches to teaching

phonic relationships are the most effective.[25]

Traditionally, there have been four basic approaches to teaching phonics:

- *Implicit* (analytic, incidental, contextual)
- *Embedded* (incidental, discovery)
- *Explicit* (synthetic)
- *Analogic* (phonograms, word families)

Current educational research supports the use of explicit and analogic approaches to phonics instruction. The California Reading Program Advisory found that "The most effective phonics instruction is explicit—that is, taking care to clarify key points and principles for students. In addition, it is systematic—that is, it gradually builds from basic elements to more subtle and complex patterns. The goal is to convey the logic of the system and to invite its extension to new words that the children will encounter on their own."[26]

In 1997, the U.S. Congress asked the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in consultation with the Secretary of Education, to convene a national panel to assess the effectiveness of various methods of beginning reading instruction. After two years of reviewing research-based reports, the National Reading Panel concluded that "the detailed analysis of studies involving phonics instruction revealed that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for students in kindergarten through 6th grade and for children having difficulty learning to read."[27]

Why Not Use the Implicit or Embedded Approaches?

In implicit or analytic phonics instruction, the teacher does not present sounds in isolation from words.[28] Hempentall argues that "teachers who limit their instruction to pointing out word-parts to students in the context of authentic literature as the situation arises (incidental or analytic phonics) create particular problems for at-risk students."[29]

The embedded phonics approach, a subtype of the implicit approach, attempts to teach reading skills by embedding phonics instruction in text reading. Instruction tends to rely on incidental or discovery learning. The embedded approach "assumes that students will develop a self-sustaining, natural, unique reading style that integrates the use of contextual and grapho-phonic cues, without the possibly disabling influence (it is argued) of systematic instruction."[30] Current research does not support either the implicit or embedded approaches to teaching phonics.

Explicit Phonics Instruction and Activities

Explicit phonics refers to the synthesis or building up of phonics skills from their smallest unit.[31] The teacher presents the skills sequentially, using isolated, direct instructional strategies. In addition, he or she employs controlled vocabulary stories in the begin-

Picture Removed

ning stages of reading instruction to help build students' confidence in using the various decoding strategies.[32] "Research shows that it is important for children to practice the phonics they have learned. It is therefore essential that the intial books that children attempt to read on their own be composed of decodable text."[33] Furthermore, "flooding children with an uncontrolled array of words does no favours for struggling students . . ."[34] Beginning readers' emergent decoding skills require simpler text to allow them to develop the competence and confidence they need.[35]

Analogic Phonics Instruction and Activities

According to Wagstaff, Patricia Cunningham was the first researcher to describe decoding by analogy. Cunningham found that when readers come across unknown words, they tend to pay attention to patterns in the words, because the human brain functions as a "pattern detector." When students see an unknown word, they search their "memory stores" for words with a matching pattern.[36] "Familiarity with patterns promotes automaticity in decoding."[37] When students learn rime patterns (word families—i.e., -ate family: *date*, *gate*, *late*, *mate*, *rate*) and can use decoding by analogy, the decoding process requires less mental processing and attention. The reader can, instead, focus on comprehending text.[38]

An example of an analogic phonics activity is "Making Words," "an active, hands-on, manipulative activity in which children discover letter-sound relationships and learn how to look for patterns in words. They also learn that changing just one letter or even just the sequence of the letters changes the whole word."[39] In a beginning lesson, students are given a card with one red

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vowel letter, which must be used in every word they create. The teacher urges them to observe how words change as different letters are added. They begin to see the importance of letters' location in words. After they have created their words, students sort them according to patterns (words that start alike, have the same vowel sound or the same spelling patterns, etc.). Every activity starts with small words and ends with using all of the letters to make one big word.[40]

Implications for Teachers of Beginning Readers

Ellen White stated in the book *True Education*, "Teachers should see to it that their work tends to definite results. Before attempting to teach a subject, they should have a distinct plan in mind, and should know just what they want to accomplish. They should not rest satisfied with the presentation of any subject until their students understand . . . and are able to state clearly what they have learned."[41]

This challenge to Adventist educators of her era still rings true today! The California Reading Program Advisory concluded their study, *Teaching Reading*, with these words: "We must provide a balanced and comprehensive reading . . . program in our schools so that every child will be ensured success as an effective reader . . . and thinker . . . We are in this process together, for the children."[42]

As Christian educators, we have an even greater need to develop balanced and comprehensive reading programs in our schools. We must use the most effective instructional methods and materials available. Phonemic awareness and phonics instruction is one part of a total language-arts program. ✎

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Current research does not support either the implicit or embedded approaches to teaching phonics.

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