



Comment

Opponents have got it wrong on phonics

Rather than turning students into robots, the teaching method is powerfully liberating, writes **Kevin Wheldall**.

REACTIONS to the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (*Teaching Reading*, published in December last year) have been mixed. Many teachers and parents have welcomed the report's emphasis on the central role of phonics in the initial teaching of reading, but many educators have either questioned the importance of phonics or are of the view that teachers already employ sufficient phonics instruction within a "balanced" approach to literacy teaching. In Britain, the Rose report, released last month, also strongly favoured phonics, first and fast, for early readers.

Those least convinced by the findings of the two reports are those traditional educators favouring the well-entrenched "whole language" approach to the teaching of reading. "Whole language" advocates believe that reading is acquired naturally, in much the same way as we learn to talk, and that little or no phonics instruction is necessary, and may even be harmful.

Those who support phonics are perceived as uncool at best and reactionary at worst. Whole language exponents, on the other hand, are portrayed as children's champions in the fight for liberty and equality. Yet phonics instruction, rather than subjecting (if not subjugating) students to mindless, robotic drill, is actually powerfully liberating for children.

Those who advocate phonics share the views of whole language supporters on the importance of phonemic awareness, vocabulary and comprehension, and the fact that students need to be able to read fluently and easily, not laboriously.

Together with phonics, to which even some whole language advocates pay lip-service in a minor role, these elements have been identified as the five critical components of any effective reading program by the National Reading Panel in the US and reiterated subsequently by the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia. No one, to my knowledge, believes that phonics is the only answer.

So, advocates of phonics and whole language actually agree on far more than they disagree on. The point of departure lies solely in the importance the two camps attach to explicit and systematic instruction in how to decode words. The whole language side says children will discover this for themselves by being exposed to a rich literacy environment (and some children do), while those associated with phonics instruction argue that, to ensure the majority of children learn to read easily and quickly, systematic, explicit instruction in phonic decoding is essential. This is especially important for those experiencing difficulties.

A second misconception is that phonics advocates seriously suggest that once we have learned to read phonically, we continue to read that way. Not so. Phonics instruction provides a self-teaching mechanism by which children can teach themselves an increasing number of new words, initially by sounding them out. With sufficient repetition, and this varies for each child, these words are learned as sight words; they do not subsequently have to be sounded out each time they are encountered in text. Self-teaching is truly liberating because it allows children to learn new words without a

teacher or parent even being present.

A focus on reading for meaning alongside systematic, explicit phonics instruction means the self-teaching mechanism also gives children an in-built check on the accuracy of their decoding. This is not to deny for a moment the vital significance of reading for meaning for its own sake.

It is not just educators advocating a whole language approach who want children to read critically. We all do. We all want children to be able to differentiate fact from opinion, and the ironic from the literal, for example. But to do this, students need to be able to read fluently first. If a child cannot read the actual words on the page, there is no possibility of being critical.

So the main point of departure is essentially one of priorities. To become a critically literate member of society, you need first to be able to read fluently and with understanding. To attempt to teach critical literacy before children have learned to read fluently is to put the cart before the horse. In the early years of schooling, the main emphasis should be on teaching accurate, fluent decoding with the aim of the vast majority of students being able to read well by year 3. Explicit, systematic instruction in phonics is the best way to achieve this so that students can then read by themselves a variety of texts and hence have access to a variety of opinions, views and perspectives: phonics for freedom, in fact.

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