

LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and Spelling: The Road to Word Recognition

BY JIM BEERS COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

One of the greatest challenges for a beginning reader is learning how to recognize words as he or she reads. Just ask a five- or six-year-old about recognizing words and you are apt to hear a number of responses.

“Why can letters say more than one sound?”

“Sometimes the same sound can be spelled by lots of different letters.”

“There are even words that have letters with no sounds.”

“And what about the words that change if they have an ending?”

“Why aren’t words spelled the way they sound?”

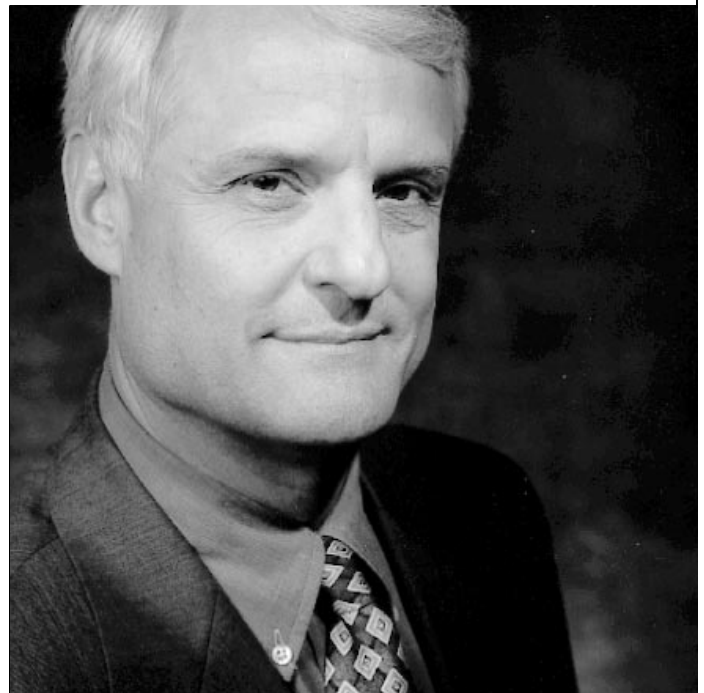
“How am I going to learn all these words?”

“How will I keep from forgetting them?”

Comments like these point out the need for beginning readers to learn the links along the road to word recognition. These word recognition links are: phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling. All three are connected and reinforce each other as children develop into readers. In fact, phonics and spelling reflect and support each other in reading or writing, since both use “mirror-like processes” (Cunningham and Cunningham, 1992).

How does the phonemic awareness–phonics–spelling link develop?

When four- and five-year-olds come to school, they have already developed a general sense of the sound system that is used in their oral language (Owens, 1996).



As they learn to talk in their early years, children learn words that are spoken in their language and the sounds that distinguish one word from another. This helps to explain why five-year-olds don’t confuse *hat* with *cat* when someone says, “Hand me my hat” or “Don’t step on the cat.” This sound awareness helps preschoolers learn that the plural form of *box* is *boxes* but the plural form of *sock* is *socks* and not *sockes*. As children become aware of sound patterns in their spoken language, they are able to repeat favorite rhymes and make up new ones. A child’s ability to recognize and

repeat rhymes becomes a skill that he or she later uses to read and write. It demonstrates the beginnings of phonemic awareness, which is an important predictor of reading success in the early school years.

When children enter school and begin to learn to read and write, they encounter the demands of the written form of their language. They learn that spoken words can be represented by written words. These written words are comprised of letters that represent sounds that they first heard in spoken language. While learning oral language, children deal with speech as a continuous, uninterrupted flow of sound. With written language, they must learn to sort sounds, letters, and words. Learning letter-sound connections in written words requires much more specific attention to sounds in words and letters that represent them. Why is this important in learning to read? English is an alphabetic language, and learning key letter-sound patterns or phonic elements in words provides an important source of information when attempting to learn a new word or recognize a previously learned word.

Children need to learn to recognize sounds in words, separate the sounds in words, and blend them together into words.

Linking phonemic awareness to phonics

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify, separate, and combine sounds in spoken words and is necessary for beginning readers to be successful in decoding and learning words. To help children become aware of sounds in words, instruction in phonemic awareness needs to be directed toward key parts of spoken words: the beginning sounds in words, rhyming sounds, ending sounds. Children need to learn to recognize sounds in words, separate the sounds in words, and blend them together into words. Rhyming poems and stories are excellent for stimulating children's phonemic awareness.

Writing activities that encourage children to spell words as they sound strengthen phonemic awareness and draw attention to the location of sounds in written words. They also reinforce phonics instruction, because young writers begin to choose letters that are associated with certain sounds. The use of letter-sound boxes can also help students decide what sounds they hear in a word and where to position letters to represent the sounds (Clay, 1993).

As five- and six-year-olds begin to link sounds to letters, they start at the beginning of words, which are mostly consonants and quite consistent in letter-sound spelling. This suggests that phonics instruction would be most beneficial if it begins with beginning consonants. Attention to initial consonants establishes a link between phonemic awareness and phonics that is very much reflected in the early phonetic spelling of children (*k* for *cat*, *s* for *school*). Children's phonemic awareness begins to expand as children turn their attention to the ends of words as revealed in their early phonetic spelling (*dg* for *dog*, *hm* for *home*). They recognize that words have a starting and ending point (phonetic boundaries) and are not just part of a seamless run of sounds. As pointed out earlier, young children come to school understanding when spoken words begin and end in speech. Their spelling attempts that highlight the beginning and ending of words (*wst* for *waist*, *sp* for *stop*, *sd* for *slide*) point out that they now understand how written words begin and end as they use appropriate letters for the beginning and ending sounds in written words (Beers and Beers, 1991). Onset and rime activities also reinforce the beginnings of words and their subsequent stems and serve to draw attention to regular spelling patterns in many words (*-ack*, *-ant*, *-ake*).

The phoneme-phonics link becomes stronger as children turn their attention to the hardest part of words—the middle, where vowels and syllables are found. As children learn about vowels and the letters that represent them, they begin to spell entire words phonetically (*evre*

for every, *trubol* for *trouble*). When young readers are spelling unknown words phonetically, they are able to segment or divide words into pronounceable units. Segmenting words will be reinforced by their knowledge of spelling patterns in words (Uhry and Shepherd, 1993). With the ability to segment and sound out unfamiliar words, phonemic awareness is now complete. This natural progression from phonemic awareness to phonics points out how important phonemic awareness is for success in phonics instruction. It should be added that careful phonics instruction helps direct and strengthen phonemic awareness in beginning readers.

Phonemic awareness helps them hear words that begin, rhyme, or end with the same sounds (*cat, car; top, hop; last, first*).

Phonics helps them see and hear similar letter-sound patterns in words they learn (*stop, story; pen, hen*).

Linking phonics to spelling

There is still one more link that needs to be added to the phonemic awareness–phonics connection, and this is the spelling link. I have deliberately chosen examples of children’s invented spelling to illustrate their growing knowledge about words. This knowledge is incomplete, however, unless they are able to move to larger units in words as a means of identifying them as they read. We know that when children spell a word as it sounds, their phonemic awareness is sharpened (Adams, 1990). Researchers have also shown that as children progress through stages of spelling development, they develop better phonic skills and are better able to learn words for reading (Morris and Perney, 1984; Gough, Ehri, and Treinman, 1992). But how is the connection between phonics and spelling made by children who are learning to read? As they begin to deal with all aspects of written

words, what do they begin to see in these words that they read and write? They see patterns. Phonemic awareness helps them hear words that begin, rhyme, or end with the same sounds (*cat, car; top, hop; last, first*). Phonics helps them see and hear similar letter-sound patterns in words they learn (*stop, story; pen, hen*). They find onset and rime patterns by creating word families (*f-ast, l-ast, p-ast*). They begin to see that many of these patterns are found in the spelling of words they read and write (*stopping, hopping; school, spool*). These spelling patterns create larger, familiar chunks of words that children can use to recognize words as they read. This is especially true for older students who encounter alternate forms of the same word in their reading (*define, definition, definitive*).

How does the connection between phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling help children become readers?

The connection between phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling helps young readers learn to rapidly recognize words in a text without having to sound out the words they read. The ability to recognize words quickly in turn helps promote reading fluency in young readers. The key to this rapid or automatic word recognition is a reader’s ability to quickly analyze recognizable phonic elements coupled with familiar spelling patterns in words. These patterns help the reader match the word in print with words containing the exact phonic and spelling pattern already known. By linking phonics to spelling patterns in words, readers avoid having to sound out or pronounce every letter or letter group in each word. As students mature as readers, they are able to gradually acquire a sizable reading vocabulary by reading that would not be possible by simply relying on phonics and/or context. It will be spelling patterns coupled with phonics and context that will become the most commonly used information in learning new words as they read.

What can we do to support and balance the connection between phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling in helping children become successful readers?

Teachers, parents, and others who work with young readers can help forge the link between phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling.

- Look for instructional activities that promote the integration of phonemic awareness, phonics, and spelling.
- Encourage the use of connected text, songs, poems, and patterned stories to introduce and reinforce sounds, phonic elements, and spelling patterns in words. As you read aloud, ask children to listen, locate, and identify sound, phonic, or spelling patterns. Try to find additional poems, songs, or text with more examples of the same patterns.
- Choose materials for phonics and spelling instruction that follow a developmental progression. For example, instruction should begin with initial consonants and then move to consonants, final consonants, onset and rime, short vowels, long vowels, etc.

- Provide opportunities for learning about patterns in words, for example:

Onset and rime activities (activities with word families), sound and letter-sound boxes, word building (the letters *a, b, c, h, t* can be arranged and rearranged to spell *bat, cat, hat, chat, cab, batch*), words by analogy (*cat + ball = call*), word ladders (*an ant pant pint hint thin think thing ring rink drink*), word sorts, word walls.

- Promote oral language activities and read aloud to students frequently. These strengthen an awareness of sounds, structure, and meaning in language.
- Help children learn about the regular features in English words:

Letter-sound patterns (*back, sack*), word structure patterns (*stick, sticks, box, boxes, moved, moveable*), meaning patterns (*final, finish, finite*).

- Provide ample opportunities for reading and writing and provide support for students to accomplish both.

If the goal of reading instruction is to help children successfully master all aspects of written language, it behooves us to provide them with the strategies and support for accomplishing this.

Phonemic awareness training, phonics instruction, and attention to spelling patterns in words can help pave the road to word recognition. There is no point in paving the road, however, if it is never used. Reading and wanting to read meaningful text should always be the vehicle that justifies word recognition instruction. Reading and writing must always have as their primary purpose the creation of meaning. As one first-grader explained to me many years ago when asked about phonics and spelling, he replied: "Phonics and spelling are easy, once you know how to read." They are not an end in themselves but, rather, useful for smoothing out the road to reading.

References

Adams, M. J. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

Ball, E. W., and B. A. Blachman. "Does phonemic awareness training in kindergarten make a difference in early word recognition and developmental spelling?" *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 26 (1991), pp. 49–68.

Beers, C. S., and J. W. Beers. "Understanding children's spelling." In D. Booth (ed.) *Spelling Links*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1991.

Clay, M. M. *Reading Recovery: A Guidebook for Teachers in Training*. Auckland, NZ: Heinemann Education, 1993.

Cunningham, P. M., and J. W. Cunningham. "Making words: Enhancing the invented spelling-decoding connection." *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 46 (1992), pp. 106–115.

Gough, P. B., L. C. Ehri, and R. Treiman (eds.). *Reading Acquisition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992.

Morris, D., and J. Perney (1984). "Developmental spelling as a predictor of first-grade reading achievement." *The Elementary School Journal*, vol. 84 (1984), pp. 440–457.

Owens, R. E., Jr., *Language Development: An Introduction*. New York: Macmillan, 1996.

Uhry, J. K., and M. J. Shepherd. "Segmentation/spelling instruction as part of a first grade program: Effects on several measures of reading." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 28 (1993), pp. 28–233.