

## **BEGINNING READING: THE (HUGE) ROLE OF STORIES AND THE (LIMITED) ROLE OF PHONICS**

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**The goal of beginning reading instruction is to help students develop a pleasure reading habit. This is a practical goal; it leads to competence in literacy in general, including reading ability, writing, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar, and also leads to knowledge in several areas, including science, history, and practical matters.**

**The program is based on one central concept: We acquire language and develop literacy in only one way: When we understand what we hear and what we read, that is, when we receive comprehensible input. The best input is compelling input: extremely interesting content that involves you completely in the message. This is what good stories do. When you hear or read a compelling story, your sense of self and your sense of time is diminished: Only the story exists. Getting “lost in the story” is, surprisingly, the best way to become literate.**

### **STORIES**

**Beginning literacy development begins with aural language, in the form of stories; A good teacher of beginning reading is a good story-teller. This means selecting good stories and knowing how to make them comprehensible.**

#### **Story Listening**

**Simply telling a story, or reading a story aloud as it is written in a book, may not be comprehensible for those just starting on the road to literacy. Story tellers have several ways of making input comprehensible: These methods have been called “Elaborative assistance” (McQuillan, 1993) and “comprehension aiding supplementation” (Krashen, Mason and Smith, 2018). They include providing background information (telling listeners something about the story in advance, telling stories that have familiar settings or characters), and providing visual information (pictures and drawings) and linguistic information (synonyms, descriptions, translation for second language acquirers). Story Listening, introduced by Beniko Mason (Mason, 2014) provides this help. The reader is invited to see some examples of Story Listening at [storiesfirst.org](http://storiesfirst.org) (“demonstrations” section).**

#### **Vocabulary**

**Studies show that listening to stories results in substantial growth in vocabulary (e.g. Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch and Krashen, 2009, as well as grammar (e.g. Chomsky, 1972). For this to happen, listeners need not understand 100% of the story, nor do they need to understand the complete meaning of each unfamiliar word; each time listeners hear a new word in a comprehensible context, they acquire a small part**

of the meaning. If they hear enough stories, and the stories are reasonably comprehensible, substantial vocabulary growth will take place.

There is not only no need to “teach” words that are unfamiliar to listeners: this is, in fact, inefficient. Several studies (Mason and Krashen, 2004; Mason, Vanata, Jander, Borsch and Krashen, 2009; McQuillan, 2019) have compared the impact of hearing unfamiliar words in the context of a story, helped by “comprehension-aiding supplementation,” with additional direct teaching. The consistent conclusion is that the former is more efficient: hearing unfamiliar words in the context of stories results in more acquisition per minute. The time is better spent listening to more stories.

### Stories lead to reading

Stories provide the linguistic competence that makes reading possible, and they also stimulate interest in reading. The title of Brassell (2003) tells it all: “Sixteen books went home tonight: Fifteen were introduced by the teacher.” Listening to stories is, as Wang and Lee (2007), put it, “the bridge” to independent reading.

## PHONICS

Nearly all of our ability to pronounce words out loud, that is, use the rules of phonics, is a result of what we have subconsciously acquired through reading. Very little of our ability to pronounce what we read comes from our conscious knowledge of the phonics rules we have studied in school. Most readers consciously know very few rules, and the ones they do know are hard to remember. This is no wonder: Many phonics rules are very complicated with numerous exceptions. Teachers have told me that they have to review the rules before coming to class.

### Complexity

Many phonics rules are very complicated and many don’t work very well. Smith (2003) notes that “phonics rules are unreliable: “There are too many alternatives and exceptions. Every letter of English can represent more than one sound (or silence) and every sound of English (or silence) can be represented by more than one letter. There are over 300 different ways in which letters and sounds can be related” (p. 41).

Even highly competent readers are usually aware of only the most basic phonics rules. Here is an example: All readers of this paper can read the word [bomb] out-loud, pronouncing the first “b” but not the second one. There is a rule: [b] is silent in words ending with -mb, such as “bomb” and “climb.” This explains why [b] is pronounced in “December” and “remember”: the -mb in “remember” does not come at the end of the word.

But [b] is silent in “bombs” and “bomber,” even though -mb is not at the end of the word. Why? Another rule says that [b] is silent if -mb is followed by a “grammatical suffix.”

**Grammatical suffixes include tense markers on verbs, changing ‘climb’ to “climbing,” “climbs,” and “climbed” as well as agentive markers, changing “climb” to. “climber.” They can attach to nouns, changing “bomb” to ”bombs,” [b] is silent in these words, because of the grammatical suffix.**

**I have a PhD in Linguistics. I am interested in the rules of phonics and know a lot of them. I didn’t know the rules for silent [b] until I started writing this paper and was looking for examples. I asked my 11-year old and 16-year old grandchildren to pronounce [bomb], [remember] and [bombs]. They got all three right. Neither had any idea what the rule was.**

**Some people, like me, think these rules are “interesting.” This does not mean such rules should be taught. I have lived more than 77 years not knowing the silent “b” rule consciously and have not suffered from this lack. Teaching these rules belongs to a subject called “linguistics,” and is not a necessary part of learning to read or spell.**

**Many backers of phonics are in favor of “intensive, systematic” phonics, which insists that we teach all the rules of phonics in a strict order to all children. But it is clear that many rules are too complex to learn, and that we can learn to read quite well without knowing much about phonics. In fact, phonics researchers are constantly coming out with “better” versions of rules: How did anyone learn to read without these improved versions?**

#### **The research on phonics: The Garan effect**

**Those supporting extensive systematic phonics claim that extensive phonics programs produce superior results. Among other documents, the report of the National Reading Panel (2000) made this claim. Garan’s reanalysis (Garan, 2001) of the Panel’s data, however, revealed that the impact of intensive phonics is clear only for tests in which children pronounce lists of words in isolation. It is miniscule or absent on tests of reading comprehension given after grade 1, tests in which children have to understand what they read. A similar pattern was found in a number of additional studies (Krashen, 2009; Coles, 2003; McQuillan, 2018).**

#### **The research on phonics: Tests of Reading Comprehension**

**The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that students in skills-based classes did better on tests of reading than those in whole language classes, an apparent victory for phonics over whole language. The panel’s report, however, averaged the results of all reading tests, including those in which children pronounced words in isolation.**

**When the analysis was restricted to tests of reading comprehension, children in classes in which more reading was done did better than those in skills-emphasis classes (effect size,  $d = .7$ ) (Krashen, 2002). This agrees with the results of McQuillan’s review (McQuillan, 1998, pp. 58-63). McQuillan also reported that “students in classrooms with a print-exposure focus have been found to be superior in terms of their attitudes toward reading and the amount of reading they do” (p. 63). It also agrees with the massive amount of research showing that access to books and the amount of self-selected reading done is an**

excellent predictor of scores on tests of reading comprehension, both in first and second language acquisition (McQuillan, 1998; Krashen, 2004).

### **Zero phonics**

Contrary to claims made by proponents of intensive phonics, there is very little support for a zero phonics movement, that is, a complete avoidance of teaching the rules of phonics. There is a good reason to include some deliberate and direct teaching of some rules of phonics. The purpose is to help make input, the text, more comprehensible.

### **How “basic phonics” can help**

Smith (1994; see also Smith, 2004) provides this example of how conscious knowledge of some basic rules can help children learn to read by making texts more comprehensible. The child is reading the sentence "The man was riding on the h\_\_\_\_." and cannot read the final word. Given the context and knowledge of 'h' the child can make a good guess as to what the final word is. This won't work every time (some readers might think the missing word was "Harley"), but some knowledge of phonics can restrict the possibilities of what the unknown words are.

### **A "balanced" approach?**

The inclusion of some phonics instruction does not constitute a “balanced” approach or an “eclectic” approach: All components of the complete program, stories, self-selected reading and a small amount of direct phonics instruction are in the service of providing comprehensible input. Stories and self-selected reading provide CI directly: They are assisted by a variety of means for making input comprehensible: some conscious knowledge of the rules of phonics is one of them. It is, however, very limited.

## **THE TRANSITION TO SELF-SELECTED READING**

The focus of this paper has been the beginning stage of literacy development, with a focus on stories and phonics. I discuss the next stage only very briefly, as it is covered in numerous other publications, and I comment here only on one aspect of the transition to independent reading.

Mason (2019) has pointed out that very beginning readers and those reading in a second language may find self-selected reading overwhelming at first. “Guided Self Selected Reading (GSSR)” can help students eventually make the transition to fully self-selected reading.

In GSSR, students have access to a collection of reading material selected by the teacher that is right for their interest level and level of comprehension, and that can be read fairly easily. Books used for beginning GSSR are selected from the lowest level of graded readers, and efforts are made to make sure students have access to large quantities of these books.

**The growth of very easy and interesting graded readers in foreign language education has been an encouraging step forward. I am curious to know how many second and foreign language students have access to such friendly collections.**

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