

Lecture Transcript

Session 3: Word Study and Fluency

Dr. Jeanne R. Paratore: Let's now take a minute to consider some of the evidence from your readings and from the general research, and then we may return and add some ideas to this. But let's spend a few minutes now, talking a little bit more formally about some of the issues. I'm going to start with emergent literacy. There are at least four important elements for the young child who's just beginning to learn to read and write -- four critical parts. One is the development of oral language. The second is the development of concepts of print. The third is the development of alphabet knowledge. And the fourth is the development of phonemic awareness. Most recently, phonemic awareness has received most of the attention, and it is, indeed, important. But I'm going to take us back and start with the first one, oral language.

If you don't know the words, if you don't know the meanings, you can decode all you want, but you can't make any sense of print. Reading is a process of constructing meaning. And if you don't have the language to construct meaning, then you're not reading at all. You're decoding. So, attention to children's language knowledge is of critical importance. How do you do it? Well, you know, I feel like all of you know a good deal about this already. But thinking a bit about it, the read alouds that we do with children. The opportunities to talk about what they read. To write about it, in whatever form writing takes. Opportunities to use the language they hear, will contribute to the development of oral language.

Foundations for success in reading: Concepts of print. Having opportunities to interact with books, so that they learn the front of the book, the back of the book, when a book is upside down, or not upside down, at the very beginning. But later on, then, the concept of word. What's a letter? What's a word? What's a sentence? And later yet, the concept of story. Those concepts are also foundational to learning to read and write. And children don't just acquire them. They acquire them from opportunities to interact with books.

Now, alphabet knowledge is a little bit different, in that we find that alphabet knowledge is a very, very strong predictor of children's achievement in reading. But we don't actually find it to be causal. That is, if children don't know the names of the letters of the alphabet, they can still learn to read. They can still develop phonemic awareness. They can still learn to read words. They can still write. So, it's important, it's not critical. Go ahead, Adrian.

Adrian: Don't you think the alphabet knowledge goes back to the oral language that you were talking about earlier? Because you said it's predictive, not causal? Meaning that, if they don't have the oral language, they won't be able to understand what they're reading.

Dr. Paratore: Not exactly. Let me go back a little bit. Oral language has to do with meanings of words, concepts, ideas, experiences, and contexts. Alphabet knowledge is a very discreet skill. I know that this is an A, and this is a B, and this is an F, and this is an H. And I know that this is an upper case letter and I know that this is a lower case letter. It's not necessarily important to construct a meaning. It is important, though, if a teacher says, write the word cat, c-a-t. And if I don't know what a C is, and I don't know what an A is, and I don't know what a T is, that direction doesn't help me at all. So, knowing letter names will facilitate instruction. But in fact, I could learn to read cat, if I knew the sounds. If I knew C-A-T, I could learn to read cat, without knowing the letter names. OK, now if you go back to the evidence and try to figure it all out, I mean, this evidence is old. This is evidence from the fifties, and Donald Durrell -- you remember Ruth, Donald Durrell. His research was really seminal in helping us understand this relationship. And what researchers now believe is that children who come to school knowing their letter names are children who have had lots and lots and lots of experiences with books. So, they know their letter names; they also know the concepts of print; they also have a lot of oral language, because they've been read to; they've been invited to write; they've been invited to talk about print and to interact with print. And those experiences have come together, to provide a very strong foundation for learning to read and write.

And finally, the fourth important element of emergent literacy is phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness, like alphabet knowledge, is highly predictive of success in learning to read -- highly predictive of children's achievement at the end of first grade. It's different from alphabet knowledge, in that it has indeed been found to be causal. Children who don't have phonemic awareness, likely will not succeed in reading and writing. If you diagnose children at the beginning of kindergarten, or the beginning of first grade, as not having phonemic awareness, and you do not explicitly teach it, they're likely to fail. It is causal, and it's teachable. If we determine children don't have it, and we teach it, most of them learn it. Now, the critical point here -- and a point that Patricia Cunningham made in the article I asked you to read is that many children enter school already knowing it. So, we need to be really careful about whole class instruction of phonemic awareness. It's getting a lot of attention, because it's very important to success in reading. But some children, if not many children, enter school having it. We need to think about that, and think about how we're going to assess it.

The phonics instruction principles -- what Patricia Cunningham identifies as what we know about effective instruction of phonics -- are these: She says, we know the children need to learn sequential decoding. By that she means that children need to learn to look at a word,

and decode that. They need to learn to approach a word sequentially to decode it. The children need to apply phonics when reading multiple types of text. And that principle -- Cunningham is essentially addressing the issue that is a bit controversial right now. That beginning readers need mostly decodable text. And she's arguing that, in fact, we don't have a research base for that point of view; that our research base tells us that children need many different types of text. They need decodable texts; they also need texts in which they are drawing meaning-based clues; they also need texts that give them a good deal of opportunity to practice sight vocabulary. There is no strong research base that beginning readers need one type of text and that text should be decodable.

She tells us also, that as children learn more words, they use patterns and analogy to decode. She tells us that as children develop as readers, they decode multi-syllabic words, using patterns that are often morphemes. Morphemes are word parts that essentially carry meaning, roots and endings, or prefixes and roots. And she tells us that children need multi-level activities to emphasize transfer. We talked about that a bit earlier in response to Lisa's suggestion. And then finally, in addition to developing particular decoding strategies, children need opportunities that help them to go from decoding accuracy, to fluency.

Jay Samuels tells us, in one of the recommended readings, that there are essentially three stages to word reading. The first stage is non-accurate. They guess at the words and they guess incorrectly sometimes. The second stage is accurate but not automatic. Given enough time, they can figure out the word. Now, that might seem OK, except the information processing research tells us that the more time I spend on decoding, the less time I dedicate to comprehension. So, that ultimately diminishes children's comprehension. Accurate and automatic decoding allows children to save their cognitive energy for comprehension. And that is, of course, the stage we want for fluent reading. So, developing accuracy and fluency is important.

There's been, I think, an assumption, that once they know how to decode, once they know how to comprehend, fluency will sort of fall into place. There hasn't been this understanding and expectation that fluency is acquired through very deliberate and purposeful activities.