THE CASE FOR ACQUIRED PHONICS

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Language Magazine, October, vol 22,2: 19-22.

Researchers in second language acquisition have hypothesized that there are two very different ways of gaining knowledge of language: acquisition and learning. *Learning* results in conscious knowledge of rules, and is the result of deliberate study. *Acquisition* results in a feel for correctness. It is the result of understanding what we hear and read.

We propose that this distinction applies to how we acquire/learn and use phonics.

Examples of learned and acquired competence.

The simpler phonics rules can be consciously learned. For example, "b" at the beginning of English words is pronounced as is the first sound in "bee". But if "b" comes at the end of words and is after "m" it is silent, as in "comb". In an informal study one of us (SK) estimated that about 20% of literate English speakers have consciously learned the rule, even though all have acquired it.

But then it gets more complicated. Why is "b" silent in "combing"? And why is "b"pronounced in "combination"? Nearly all of us have acquired these rules: We don't make mistakes in reading these words out loud. Not many of us, however, have learned the rules. (Very few of the people SK asked knew these rules and SK had to look them up(.

It has been asserted that all rules of phonics must be taught and cannot be acquired. Gentry (2022), in fact, has claimed that this has been demonstrated by research but presents no citations.

Acquisition of phonics: Learning to read without instruction

McQuillan (1998a) presents an extensive review of cases in which children learned to read at home but did not get extensive instruction from their parents. They did not receive metalinguistic support ('learning" about language). They learned to read without "systematic formal instruction usually associated with school – phonics training, phonemic awareness exercises, and other skill-building activities" (p. 34).

Krashen and McQuillan (2007) also present several cases of children who learned to read well after the time formal teaching of reading is done in school. The cases include Mason (1993), who reported that her daughter, who was home-schooled, "could not/did not want to read" at age eight and a half. Having tried earlier to push her to learn math, and finding that the pressure made her hate arithmetic, Mason decided not to intervene on reading. Around her ninth birthday, she began to read and two months later she could read at the level of her literate friends. Then she extended her reading, and now (age 15) she reads the way very literate adults do' (p. 28)."

H.K., described in Kerman (1993) was another home-schooled child. Kerman notes that H.K ."refused instruction." Her mother reported that at age ten, H.K. "learned the basics about reading although I shall never know how. "

In cases such as these, "…the children made rapid progress once they began reading material they were genuinely interested in of their own volition" (Krashen and McQuillan, 2007).

In many cases, children received "elaborative" support, that is, help in making input comprehensible. Goodman and Goodman (1982) reported that their daughter Kay learned to read on her own at age five years, six months. "Her parents provided elaborative support, including being read to and talked to … and a great deal of "singing, poetry and oral language games" (McQuillan, 1998a, 21).

McQuillan (1998b) reviewed a survey done by the US Department of Education of over 6000 parents of children aged 6 to 9, and concluded that about one in ten children learn to read in the home environment where "in many cases … systematic intervention is unlikely" (p.16).

In our discussion of the studies reviewed just above we have assumed that successful reading means that phonics has been acquired or learned, that readers need to be able to accurately pronounce every word in

order to understand what they read. In other words, we assumed that total mastery of phonics is necessary for reading. This may not be true. The two studies reviewed in the next section, the tasks, carefully sounding out isolated written words, do in fact require mastery and use of the rules of phonics, and are therefore a better test of knowledge of phonics rules.

The following two studies thus confirm that phonics can be acquired, and also provides a comparison between the efficiency of acquiring and learning phonics.

More willing to "sound it out."

In Gambrell and Palmer (1992), first and second graders in "literature-based" classes that "emphasized whole language … and the integration of reading and writing" were compared to students in conventional classes. The conventional classes relied on basal series, workbooks, "and the use of children's literature during voluntary reading time" (p. 216).

Children were asked what they would do if they were reading and came to a word they didn't know. The literature-based children were far more likely to say they would try to "sound it out" (69% in grade 1, 52% in grade 2, compared to 21% of the conventional students in grade 1 and 19% in grade 2).

More accurate in "sounding it out."

In Freppon (1991), first graders in "literature based" classrooms were compared to first graders in traditional skill-based classrooms.

The literature-based teachers identified themselves as "literature-based and whole language" (p. 142). Literature-based classes emphasized reading for meaning and strategies such as guessing/predicting and rereading (p. 144); "no mandated phonics or vocabulary curriculum was present."

Instruction in the skill-based classes had "a strong emphasis on traditional, sequenced phonics" (p. 142), with "drill and practice on discrete skills using worksheets" (p. 144).

Literature-based students devoted substantially more time to reading, 18-20 minutes per day, compared to 5 to 9 minutes in the skills-based classes.

The literature-based students were more successful in correctly sounding out the words in a story (53 percent compared to 35 percent), even though the skill-based students had received much more instruction in phonics.

The two studies: summary and discussion

The literature-based children were more likely to use their knowledge of phonics and used it more accurately, even though children in the conventional classes had more exposure to traditional phonics instruction, and more practice learning and using the rules relating sounds to spelling.

The two studies described here confirm that children can acquire rules of phonics from reading, and the results are consistent with conclusions about the conditions needed: A great deal of comprehensible and highly interesting reading material. They are also consistent with the conditions for "optimal input" for language acquisition in general (Krashen and Mason, 2020).

The superior performance of acquired phonics in these studies may be due to these factors: (1) Even the best students do not learn all the rules presented in class. In fact, the most knowledgeable teachers don't know all the rules, and even the most expert scholars have not discovered the rules (Smith, 2004). This is a powerful argument for the reality and usefulness of acquired phonics. (2) The complexity of some consciously learned rules requires time and effort for retrieval and application. In other words, acquired knowledge is easier to apply.

Do we need ANY instruction in phonics?

We do not conclude from the evidence presented here that conscious knowledge of phonics is useless. It has been argued (Smith, 2004) that some conscious knowledge of phonics might help reduce alternatives and make input more comprehensible (McQuillan, 1998a, p. 40). But there is no support for making it the central part of instruction.

The disdain for acquired knowledge.

Learning to read without instruction is mentioned in the professional literature, but is it in passing and often without comment. The following is from an interview with Joel Gomez, in Ehri, de Jong, Kurto, and Gomez (2022), commenting on interviews with various experts on reading:

"One of the primary outcomes of the discussions was the case made for the importance of teaching the fundamentals of reading as an important step toward learning how to read. It was emphasized that instruction on the grapheme-to-phoneme relationship was an important element of these fundamentals. However, a counterpoint to this approach was provided by some of the roundtable participants, who shared memories on how they learned to read as children. Some of the participants stated that they learned to read before attending school by listening to books being read and then looking at the books. One participant said that he learned how to read by listening to oral tapes synced to pages on the book" (Ehri et al, 2022).

No further comment was made of this observation. All that was stated was that acquisition without instruction existed. This negligence gives acquired phonics the status of an odd and rare phenomenon. We feel that enough evidence was presented here to warrant serious study of acquired phonics and its applications.

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