

Long term effects of phonics instruction

A summary for teachers

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Background: There is considerable interest in understanding the long term effects of different types of reading instruction on a range of literacy skills (i.e., word reading, spelling, comprehension). A concern of phonics focused methods is that they are unsuited to the irregular nature of the English writing system (i.e., words such as 'yacht', 'aisle', 'eight' are irregular).

Aims: 1) To examine the long term effects of different types of reading instruction on children's word reading, spelling and reading comprehension skills; 2) To examine the effects of reading instruction on children's reading of regular and irregular words.

Participants: 190 (Study 1) and 31 (Study 2) children (aged 10) had been taught to read by a synthetic phonics approach and were matched with 203 (Study 1) and 33 (Study 2) children who had been taught to read by a mixed method approach (including analytic phonics). Groups were matched on time at school and socioeconomic background.

In Study 1, children completed assessments of vocabulary knowledge, word reading, reading comprehension and spelling. In Study 2, children also completed these assessments and additional assessments of high and low frequency regular (e.g., back) and irregular (e.g., yacht) word reading.

Instruction	Mixed method	Synthetic phonics
Description of Differences	Children had learnt by the UK National Literacy Strategy programme Progression in Phonics (DfEE, 1999). For word reading, children learnt a range of reading strategies, including using analytic phonics, learning to recognise words as wholes, using picture or text context to decipher unfamiliar words etc.	For word reading, children learnt primarily to sound and blend sequences of letter-sound correspondences (e.g., a-t-, c-a-t, ch-a-t) to read unfamiliar words. Unlike analytic phonics, children did not learn letter sounds in known words. For irregular words, attention was brought to the regular elements, where these provided a clue to pronunciation.
Similarities	The groups differed mostly in word reading strategies. For the rest of the curriculum (e.g., text reading), both methods taught and fostered reading for information, reading for meaning and reading for pleasure.	

Results: In Study 1, the groups did not differ in language skills (vocabulary knowledge); however synthetic phonics taught children had better word reading, reading comprehension and spelling. Boys in particular benefitted from the synthetic phonics method for their word reading and spelling. In Study 2, differences in reading regular and irregular words were small; however synthetic phonics taught children performed better on average.



Discussion and implications for education: Overall, children who had been taught to read by a synthetic phonics approach performed better on a number of reading related assessments. In addition, there was no evidence that a stronger reliance on a phonics approach impaired irregular word reading. Benefits of a synthetic phonics approach were particularly marked for boys.

Academic paper: Johnston, R., McGeown, S. & Watson, J. E. (2011). Long term effects of synthetic versus analytic phonics teaching on the reading and spelling ability of 10 year old boys and girls. *Reading and Writing*, DOI 10.1007/s11145-011-9323-x