

Influence of early reading instruction

A summary for teachers

Contact: s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk

Background: The way in which children are taught to read has been found to influence their word reading strategies and skills supporting strategy use (McGeown and colleagues, 2012; 2014). The present study summarises research from both studies and considers implications for education.

Aim: To synthesise the research studies of McGeown, Johnston & Medford (2012) and McGeown and Medford (2014).

Participants and details of reading instruction: 79 children (McGeown 2012) and 85 children (McGeown 2014) participated in longitudinal research studies. Children were assessed prior to reading instruction (2012 & 2014 studies), 6 months later (2012 & 2014 studies) and 1 year later (2014 study). Children completed reading related assessments of letter sound knowledge, rhyme awareness, phoneme awareness and word reading, and cognitive assessments of vocabulary knowledge, short term memory and visual discrimination skills. Children either learnt to read by an eclectic or synthetic phonics approach. Details are below.

Eclectic approach to reading instruction

This approach used a variety of strategies to develop children's word reading skills, including:

- Teaching children to recognise words as visual wholes (i.e., flash card teaching)
- Encouraging children to recognise words within big book/story time activities
- Analytic phonics instruction
- Encouraging children to use multiple cues to facilitate word reading (e.g., word length, initial letter sound, context, grammar).



Synthetic phonics approach to reading instruction

This approach used a synthetic phonics method to develop children's word reading skills:

- Children were taught to sound and blend sequences of letter-sound correspondences to read words (e.g., c-a-p, c-a-m-p, c-r-a-m-p). This approach was used predominately to develop word reading skills.



Results, discussion and implications for education: For children learning to read by a synthetic phonics approach, letter-sound knowledge, phoneme skills and short term memory were the strongest predictors of early reading success (McGeown 2012; 2014). For children learning to read by a more eclectic approach, letter-sound knowledge, rhyme skills and vocabulary were the strongest predictors of reading success (McGeown 2012). A synthetic phonics approach may be particularly suitable for children starting school with weaker than average language skills (e.g., those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds) as language abilities were not drawn upon to the same extent for reading attainment.

Academic paper: McGeown, S. (2014). Synthetic phonics vs. an eclectic approach to reading instruction: Implications for the skills predicting early reading acquisition and development. *Psychology of Education Review*, 39, 2.