

Learning to Read: Recollections and Reflections

Kassidy Lywandowsky and Ann Ellsworth

How students learn to read and how reading is best taught have been the focus of discussion among educators and a recurring topic in the media. For many, reading has been a ubiquitous part of our lives; we can scarcely recall a time when we could not decipher print. However, early reading memories do not always generate fond recollections. To launch this essay, the first author, a classroom teacher, shares her father's painful literacy experiences in an unvarnished account that highlights student vulnerability, emphasizes the critical role teachers play in a child's literacy development, and suggests the importance of a coherent instructional approach, rooted in research findings and robust pedagogy. The first author sought the perspective of a colleague, who teaches early literacy courses at a nearby university, and their collaboration resulted in this essay. They present an –albeit limited—overview of the trends in reading instruction during the last century and then discuss the Science of Reading, a concept supported by decades of research and understandings that informs present-day classroom instruction. Finally, they share thoughts about the critical role of literacy educators, especially during those early formative years.

Introduction

Growing up, my father struggled with reading and spelling. In fact, his struggles, at times misinterpreted as laziness or stubbornness, eventually landed him in special education classes, where he left his class to receive intervention from a specialist. Being reminded by the classroom teacher that it was time to meet Mrs. W. reinforced in my father's young mind that he was different and inferior to his friends. When asked about his memories of learning to read, he

offers vague responses that center on word memorization and reading stories that were artificial and boring. By middle school, his reading apathy was acutely apparent. In school, he did the bare minimum to pass. Reading remained a chore, something unpleasant to endure to get that high school diploma. To this day, my father still does not like to read. Unfortunately, his early literacy associations yielded long-term consequences.

This wasn't the life he wanted for his children, though. When my siblings and I were going to school in the 1990s and early 2000s, phonics reigned supreme. My parents drilled us on phonics sounds, using flashcards with colorful pictures of objects that we were to associate with alphabetic symbols. Although this activity helped in the short term—namely, during the primary grades—phonics proved to have limited utility with more complex texts. Learning about word parts, for example, was not emphasized in my grade-school experience. To this day, while I love reading, figuring out unfamiliar words remains challenging. If I don't know a word, I say it in my head based on my understanding of phonics and then hope for the best. Understandably, this can be a haphazard approach, rendering uneven comprehension. Research suggests explicit instruction in morphological awareness advances students' concept understanding and vocabulary knowledge (Apel et al., 2012). Morphological awareness refers to “children's conscious awareness of the morphemic structure of words and their ability to reflect on and manipulate that structure” (Carlisle & Feldman, 1995, p. 194). Like other aspects of reading instruction, examining structural clues—the study of prefixes, suffixes, and word families—requires a systematic, rather than a hit-or-miss, approach. Knowledge about affixes equips readers with tools they can draw on to resolve unfamiliar words (Fry et al., 2023; Goodwin et al., 2012).

Another powerful recollection from those impressionable grade-school days involves conversations when family and friends gathered. As we sat around a campfire or the fireplace, the topic would sometimes drift to recalling school memories. A conversation might unfold as follows. “Do you remember the announcement the week before school—when classroom teachers would be announced?” one person might ask. Another in the group would interject, “Yes, and we all dreaded getting Ms. T. I always felt bad for the kids who were stuck with her. She would hand out detentions for any little thing.” Back and forth, so it would go. Too often, unfortunately, these trips down memory lane included accounts of learning to read. While many were positive, some were not. As a literacy teacher, I shudder to think that young children viewed school as a punishment rather than a joyful experience. Perhaps it was, in part, due to these family exchanges that I chose to become a teacher and, above all, to make reading a fun, enjoyable adventure for my students. Authorities in the field (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Oakhill & Cain, 2012; Opitz & Rasinski, 2008) posited that reading instructional practices for young children ought to build favorable associations with words and books. Accordingly, skill and drill exercises, punitive responses to students trying to learn, and decontextualized instruction ought to be relegated to unfortunate incidents in the past.

Change and Controversy

A long history of controversy that dates from at least the early 20th century has focused on how teachers teach reading. Theories of learning to read and reading instruction, and the role of phonics and other reading skills have been influenced by many forces, including standardized test scores, low reading achievement, and polarizing movements (Thomas, 2022). For decades, literacy educators and classroom instructors have sought the “right way” to instruct reading. Whether it was marching students through worksheets, having them read texts above their

reading level—as was the case for my dad—or just drilling bits and pieces of phonics—my experience—there has been a tendency by educators to herald one method. However, waves of research have illuminated the complexity of learning to process print (Pearson & Tierney, 2021). Accomplished readers approach reading as a conscious act and recognize they are in command of their own understanding; thus, they monitor their thoughts and periodically pause to summarize and ask questions (Fry et al., 2023). These metacognitive readers know when meaning is lost and manage strategies to recover comprehension (Willingham, 2009). Such mindful behaviors matter as students transition through the grades, especially when the texts they read have more words, longer words, and fewer illustrations (Hanford, 2019). Kambach and Mesmer (2024) observed, “As readers comprehend sentences, they form a web of information, paying attention to the most important information” (p. 891). Without comprehension, students are unable to draw meaning from what they are reading; not understanding fuels frustration and feels pointless, often resulting in on-going comprehension challenges, resentment, or apathy. Furthermore, Pinker (1999) opined that no special reading gene is passed from one generation to the next; instead, every brain needs to be taught to read. A complex cognitive skill that serves as a portal to all other learning, reading involves skill instruction that advances in sophistication with the goal of automating reading processes. Thus, how to effectively teach reading has remained a central question for generations.

Conversations, debates, and classroom practice have been informed by hundreds of thousands of studies that suggest definite trends. In the early 1900s, looking at the entirety of a word and learning through repetition and memorization received wide-spread approval from educators and enjoyed endorsement from researchers until the mid-1960s (Savage, 2011). This look-say, or whole-word approach, popularized by Scott Foresman’s readers—the *Dick and Jane*

books—fueled the impetus for spinoffs from other publishers (Blevins, 2017). The *Jack and Janet* books, published by competitors at Houghton Mifflin, paralleled the formula that brought success and financial reward to the Scott Foresman company (Savage, 2011).

During this time, Edward Dolch, a professor of education at the University of Illinois, provided his list of 220 high-frequency words that students should be able to read on sight (Parker, 2021). These early readers and the Dolch 220 focused on seeing words as whole units; there was little emphasis on understanding the sound-letter correspondences within words. Moreover, many of those words were low-image function words: prepositions (in, at, with, above, near, across); pronouns (these, them, they, her, our); conjunctions (and, but, or, since, because, while); and adverbs (very, so, still, quite, just.) Being able to read “on sight” glue words that appear across texts was a recognized early-reading target.

However, Rudolph Flesch’s 1955 popular book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, which experienced coast-to-coast popularity and was read by educators and parents alike, impacted classroom practice (Blevins, 2017). Flesch’s treatise was direct. He argued that phonics-first instruction was the sensible way to teach a child to read. If children were taught the 44 sounds of English and how they were spelled, they could, he believed, sound out each word from left to right, an approach preferred to the guesswork method of “look and say” (Flesch, 1955).

While phonics gained temporary traction into what classroom teachers and researchers deemed as the new best way to teach reading, it lost status with the introduction of the “three-cueing” system of the 1970s. Part of what was known as the “whole-language philosophy,” this triadic model was believed to be superior to any other method because readers would know how to predict words based on context clues given in the text—determining if a word would sound right, make sense, and look right in a sentence. Therefore, researchers and educators believed if

they taught all students to guess the words that would come next in a sentence, they could teach struggling readers to emulate their skilled peers (Goldberg & Goldenberg, 2022, p. 622). However, according to Hanford (2019) this method of teaching was also deeply flawed. Wolf (2009) observed that using the three-cueing approach promoted inferior reading habits and impeded how the brain uses phonetic features to decode words. While phonics was never fully shunned, it certainly received less focus in many classrooms across the nation, notwithstanding studies (Anderson et al., 1985; Chall, 1996; Hanford, 2019; & Juel, 1988) advocating the importance of explicit alphabetic instruction and adhering to three golden rules: do it early, keep it simple, and complete instruction by the end of second grade. When educators focus on the various features embedded in word recognition practice, students engage the world of print with greater understanding of phonetic and orthographic principles that contribute to their literacy success (Stahl, 2011).

Created in the 1980s by cognitive developmental psychologist Hollis Scarborough who sought to represent her research about how readers process print (Fisher et al., 2023), the Reading Rope visually attempted to represent cognitive complexities (Fry et al., 2023). The Reading Rope consists of two strands—Word Recognition and Language Comprehension—each of which is made up of smaller strings. Word recognition involves phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition whereas the language comprehension strand includes background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge (Scarborough, 2001). More an “infographic than instructional framework or curriculum,” this visual metaphor represents the complex language features and cognitive knowledge involved in reading (Fisher et al., 2023, p. 5) and acknowledges the complexity of

overlapping knowledge, not congruent with former “one-size-fits-all” prescriptions (Silverman et al., 2020; Stahl, 2011).

Today, an extensive body of scientifically based research about reading and issues related to literacy informs policy and practice. This “Science of Reading” research, drawing from disciplines, such as developmental psychology, cognitive science, education, and linguistics, has positioned scholars to advance a more critical, comprehensive understanding of reading (Pearson & Cervetti, 2017). The latest chapter in a long history of competing ideas about how to instruct reading, the science of reading derives from thousands of studies conducted over the last five decades across the world, informing educators how proficient reading and writing develops, why some learners have difficulty, and how instructors can most effectively assess and teach (Thomas, 2022). With the goal of prevention of and intervention for reading difficulties, the science of reading is concerned with improving student outcomes and spotlights the perennial gap between research and classroom instruction (Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). Moreover, it provides recommendations for state and local policy makers to provide teachers the flexibility and support necessary to adapt their instruction to students’ needs (Thomas, 2022).

When defined, the science of reading can illuminate evidence-based practices requisite for literacy learning. Duke, Ward, and Pearson (2021) offer signposts that guide expert instruction: reading comprehension should begin early, accompanied by explicit teaching of word-reading (phonological awareness, print awareness, phonics, and word recognition) and other skills (morphological awareness and reading fluency.) Additionally, they advocate actively teaching text structures and features (e.g., how narrative contrasts with informational text and how authors present ideas), which fosters reading comprehension development. Recognizing that vocabulary and knowledge building aid reading comprehension development, the researchers

(Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021) support engagement with text (volume reading, discussion and analysis of text, and writing.) Finally, they recommend instructional practices that kindle reading motivation and improve comprehension (Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). These numerous, overlapping recommendations transition fledgling readers to those who wield strong comprehension. However, Shanahan (2020) urged caution, observing that premature translation of basic research findings into wide-scale pedagogical application might result in instructional overgeneralizations without an adequate consideration of instructional experiments. While there is merit in being wary and attentive about wholesale adoption of attitudes that spawn “at last—the golden ticket” thinking (Thomas, 2022), nonetheless, the authors of this article believe lively discussions centering on the science of reading catapult literacy teaching and classroom practice into valuable conversational spheres.

Final Thoughts

When I think of my dad as a little boy, going to school and struggling with reading, my heart breaks. He was taught to look at a word, listen to an adult say it, repeat it, memorize it, and parrot it. However, when the word did not look the same every time, he had no option but to guess and oftentimes stumble. Believing himself not smart enough, shadowed him throughout his schooling and shaped his identity as a reader. Neuroscientist Bruce Perry (2007) stated, “If people are anxious, uncomfortable, or fearful, they do not learn,” (p. 26). Willingham (2009) observed that school activities, “including drilling would do far more harm by making students miserable and by encouraging the belief that school is a place of boredom and drudgery, not excitement and discovery” (p. 51). Learners grow frustrated and experience humiliation when they cannot do what their peers can do. This was my dad’s experience.

In this paper, the authors have chronicled some of the major trends in reading instruction that invite rethinking past efforts and new reforms. Together, these create a tapestry of how reading has been taught for the last several decades. We advocate for student-centered pedagogy that champions learners' identity as readers. The evidence is unequivocal: an unrelenting commitment to using evidence-based practices that eschew overstatements and oversimplifications has potential to honor teacher expertise and autonomy, maximize teaching-learning conditions, and respect the diverse milieu of classroom practice that is nuanced and messy (Thomas, 2022). We believe that literacy, the keystone to change, starts one student at a time.

References

- Anderson, R. C., Hiebert, E. H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I. A. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on Reading*. Champaign, IL: Center for the Study of Reading and National Academy of Education.
- Apel, K., Wilson-Fowler, E., Brimo, D., & Perrin, N. (2012). Metalinguistic contributions to reading and spelling in second and third grade students. *Reading and Writing*, 25, 1283-1305. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ969989>
- Blevins, W. (2017). *Phonics from A to Z: A practical guide*. Scholastic.
- Carlisle, J. F., & Feldman, L. B. (1995). Morphological awareness and early reading achievement in L. B. Fieldman (Ed.), *Morphological aspects of language processing* (pp, 189-209). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Chall, J. S. (1996). *Stages of reading development*. Harcourt.
- Cunningham, A., & Stanovich, K. (1998). What reading does for the mind. *American Educator*, 22, 8-15.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237109087_What_reading_does_for_the_mind
- Duke, N., Ward, A., & Pearson, P. D. (2021). The science of reading comprehension instruction. *Reading Teacher*, 74(6), 663-672. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1993>
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2023). *Teaching reading: A playbook for developing skilled readers through word recognition and language comprehension*. Corwin.
- Goldberg, M., & Goldenberg, C. (2022). Lessons learned? Reading wars, reading first, and a way forward. *Reading Teacher*, 75(5), 621–630. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2079>
- Goodwin, A., Lipsky, M., & Ahn, S. (2012). Word detectives: Using units of meaning to support literacy. *Reading Teacher*, 65(7), 461-470. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.011069>
- Hanford, E. (2019, August 22). *At a loss for words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers*. APM Reports.
<https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>
- Juel, C. (1988). Beginning reading. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson (Eds.) *Handbook of reading research*, 2. Longman.
- Kambach, A. E., & Mesmer, H. A. (2024). Comprehension for emergent readers: Revisiting the

reading rope. *Reading Teacher*, 77(6), 888–898. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2315>

Parker, S. (2021, Dec. 23). *A brief history of reading instruction*. Parker Phonics.

<https://www.parkerphonics.com/post/a-brief-history-of-reading-instruction>

Pearson, P. D., & Cervetti (2017). The roots of reading comprehension instruction. In S. E. Israel

(Ed.), *Handbook of research on reading comprehension* (2nd ed., pp. 12–56). Guilford

Press.

Perry, B. D. (2006). Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process.

New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education, 2006(110), 21–27.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.215>

Savage, J. F. (2011). *Sound it out! Phonics in a comprehensive reading program*. McGraw Hill.

Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities:

Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Newman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for*

research in early literacy (pp. 97-110). Guilford Press.

Shanahan, T. (2020). What constitutes a science of reading instruction: *Reading Research*

Quarterly 75(1), pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.349>

Silverman, R. D., Johnson, E., Kean, K., & Khanna, S. (2020). Beyond decoding: A meta-

analysis of the effects of language comprehension interventions on K-5 students'

language and literacy outcomes. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 55, S207-S233.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.346>

Stahl, K. A. (2011). Applying new visions of reading development in today's classrooms.

Reading Teacher: A Journal of Research-Based Classroom Practice, 5(1), 52-56.

<https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.65.1.7>

Thomas, P. L. (2022). The Science of Reading movement: The never-ending debate and the need

for a different approach to reading instruction. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy

Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/science-of-reading>

Willingham, D. T. (2009). *Why don't students like school? A cognitive scientist answers*

questions about how the mind works and what it means for your classroom. Jossey-Bass.

Wolf, M. (2009). *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain*.

HarperCollins.