

# KNOW PHONICS OR NO PHONICS

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## Abstract

English is a widely used language in India, and is required for higher education, beyond primary school. Researchers state that there are about 200 million children of school age who cannot read. How can this status be changed? Are we not taught to read at school from the day one of our schooling? Then why is that a wide range of children suffer from poor reading ability? The reason concludes to be the one and only that English is a foreign language. The term foreign language cannot be used in the present time as we all are aware that English has become one among the Indian languages. The skill of English language in reading, writing and communicating provides abundance of employment opportunity in India as well as other neighbouring countries.

Hence one needs to excel in reading, writing and communicating in English to excel in his or her life. When it comes to learning a language, the first part is the introduction of the letters of that particular language. When the letters are introduced the 'name of the letter' is given priority than the sound that they produce. Since English has been a part of our Indian School Curriculum, only recently the entry of introduction of Phonics has come into existence. The value and the need to study phonics are showing a rapid progress in Indian schools. This article will analyse the importance of learning phonics, its effective practice in the classroom, the impediments, and the recommendations.

## Key Words

Phonemes, Mind debate, Alphabetic principle, sub lexical approach, sound symbol, embedded phonics, paradoxes of phonics.

## Introduction

**The Term Phonics Refers to:** A method used for teaching- reading, writing and communicating, to the English language learners. It is the development of the ability to hear, identify and manipulate phonemes to know the relation between the sounds and the spelling patters.

Research has proved that when phonics is taught in a structured way from the easiest sounds and progressing through the most complex, it is the most effective way of teaching children to read. It is

particularly helpful for children aged 3 to 7. Almost all children who receive good teaching of phonics will learn the skills they need to tackle new words. They can then go on to read any kind of text fluently and confidently, and to read for enjoyment. Children who have been taught phonics also tend to read more accurately than those taught using other methods and also children who find it difficult to read.

The goal of phonics is to enable beginning readers to decode new written words by sounding them out, or blending the sound-spelling patterns. Since it focuses on the spoken and written units within words, phonics is a sub lexical approach and, as a result, is often contrasted with whole language.

### **Why should we Emphasis on Phonics?**

While the English language system is difficult and complex, many words follow systematic rules, and most words have some regular letter-sound relationships that assist with reading. The alternative to learning the alphabetic code is to learn every word by sight – this quickly rates the memory of early readers. Some children begin to read by memorizing all words by sight, but at a later stage the reading process is confused. Because the child did not learn the sound of the letters, or the way to blend them together, hence it becomes impossible for the child to approach or try reading the unknown words.

The “mind debate” The research evidence over the past five decades (e.g., Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1968; Chall, 1967; NICHD, 2000; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Snow & Juel, 2005) has strongly concluded that “the teaching of letter-sound relationships should be part of beginning reading programs”. The continuing “mini-debate” centers on “exactly how letter-sound knowledge should be taught”. Concluding with the best three different approaches to teaching phonics exist, with variations within them – and many teachers use a combination of methods.

### **Phonics & Reading**

Introduction Phonics is the understanding that there is a relationship between the individual sounds of spoken language and the letters that represent those sounds in written language. This understanding is termed as the “alphabetic principle”. An understanding of the alphabetic principle depends upon phonemic awareness – it is impossible to relate a letter to a sound, if the sound cannot be perceived.

In view of Stahl (2002) “At the beginning level, children identify letters and sounds. Next, they try to relate the letters and sounds. If letters and sounds are not easily matched at the initial level, children will have a difficult time identifying unknown words during reading”. Subsequently, they will not know the meaning of the words they see and will have great difficulty comprehending what they are reading. Like

the importance of a good foundation to a well-built house, strong phonics ability provides a key foundation for successful reading.

### **Approaches to Phonics**

There may be many different views on phonics but concluded three ways to approach it in the classroom.

#### **Direct, Systematic Instruction**

As John Savage says “**This instruction is constructed directly upon the alphabetic principle**”, in his “**Three Approaches to Phonics**”, and also adds that systematic phonics programs involve explicit teaching of sound- symbol relationships. Children learn to blend individual sound-symbol relationships into syllables and words. The aim of direct, systematic phonics instruction is to develop decoding skills automatically. Direct and systematic programs differ one from the other. Some (like the Orton-Gillingham method) are designed for one-to-one instruction. Others (like the Bradley Reading and Language Arts Program) are designed for large group instruction.

Most of the teachers depend heavily on a multisensory methodology with the integration of auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and tactual processing. Children practice decoding skills with word lists or with books whose language is tightly controlled for sound-symbol consistency. Direct, systematic phonics instruction has proven to be an effective means of helping children learn to read, especially children with language and related learning problems. The approach, however, has been criticized as being presented as “phonics for its own sake,” removed from the actual process of reading. Despite criticisms, programs involving systematic phonics instruction are becoming increasingly popular as more and more schools adopt this method.

#### **Integrated Instruction**

Integrated phonics instruction involves the direct presentation of sound-symbol relationships, but phonics is taught as one part of an overall classroom program. Children practice elements of sound-symbol relationships in workbook programs with games, with word sorts and word building exercises, and with other activities designed to help them master the elements of their orthographic system. Integrated phonics is part of an overall classroom literacy program, phonics instruction and practice, programs are balanced with other instructional components designed to teach reading and writing.

### **Embedded Phonics**

Embedded phonics involves instruction in sound-symbol relationships that is built into authentic reading experiences, those that are carried on primarily for the purpose of information or pleasure and not for the specific purpose of skill development. Children learn

Phonics as they engage themselves in reading and writing in the classroom.

### **A different approach for English Language Learners**

Many researchers report that English Language Learners are significantly behind in literary achievement to the English speaking learners particularly in countries like India. Hence it is important that educators or teachers make use of effective techniques for improving the literary skills of such children. During phonics lessons, teachers can modify and pace instruction so ELLs can be explicitly taught the names of key phonics pictures and vocabulary in a familiar context. Teachers can use actual objects, photographs, manipulative, and picture cards to teach these concepts. Teachers should appropriately model sound-symbol correspondences and then provide many opportunities for repetition with each skill.

Other effective techniques for helping striving readers are increasing the amount of engaged reading time with proper reading texts, using the Language Experience Approach, and reading aloud to students to promote reading enjoyment and motivation. Allington & Baker (2007, p.100 ) stated that “striving readers need extensive opportunities to independently practice and apply strategies in high-success reading materials. To accomplish this goal, teachers need lesson plans and materials designed to support systematic, explicit, small-group instruction followed by practice activities. Manipulative such as picture cards, letter cards, word cards, and word cubes related to reproducible worksheets are ideal for practice activities.

### **Views Supporting Phonics instruction**

There is significant support that phonics should be given the prime focus for teaching beginning readers. Several people agree with the assertion of the DfE evidence paper (DfE 2011a) that the ability to decode grapheme/phoneme correspondences is the first requirement for success in reading. Other researchers who work with children with special learning difficulties believe that early phonics instruction is particularly important for the progress of such children. While phonic decoding is considered to be an important part of learning to read, other strategies are also vital.

As per their research, many teachers emphasise the importance of reading for meaning, Children for whom English is a second language require an emphasis on textual understanding; phonics approaches fail to

provide visual scaffolding to support their learning and these children find it hard to progress under a regime that, it occupies the greater amount of classroom time. Many others express concerns that systematic phonics instruction creates more problems for struggling readers, as their cognitive energies are spent trying to sound out words: they therefore miss the meaning of the text. Several commentators believe that such children need a variety of different strategies in order to progress. Many teachers observe that children of all abilities are less motivated by reading schemes than by real books, as these encourage reading for interest and enjoyment.

### **Why No Phonics?**

The standard way of thinking about phonics is that phonics knowledge is developmental and integrated into beginning reading and writing instruction. Cristie and Enz (2007) in their book, cover the development and teaching of both oral and written language from preschool through the elementary grades. When treating phonics, they recommend a combination of meaningful engagements with print and appropriate instruction on literacy skills that reflects on the kindergarten level. At the core of children's school success is their literacy achievement. However, teaching phonics seems to be out of favour in Indian schools. The role of phonics in reading, in learning to read, and in reading instruction is probably the most widely misunderstood and misrepresented aspect of language education today.

Indeed, phonics seems to play an important role in early reading instruction. It's an effective method of reading instruction, yet the skills taught by phonics have little to do with the processes of reading acquisition. Rod Maclean (1988) researched on this topic, and he discovered that in order to recognize a word it isn't necessary to be phonetically skilled. Word recognition is essentially something that is possible to visualize without the need of early, explicit phonics teaching. In this regard, he illustrated two paradoxes of phonics that eventually make the teaching of phonics beneficial. The first one consists in teaching phonics for facilitating the process of learning unfamiliar words, though it isn't needed for high-frequency words because students are supposed to be able to control their own learning and recognize them. Thus, the role of phonics is to help children make use of it when they need. The second paradox presented by Maclean (1988) has to do with learning to read. In other words, the skill of phonics is not strictly related to the way that skill is used in practice. Therefore, a resolution to this paradox could be the suggestion of a form of instructional display that helps children understand what they are learning. However, this is something valid only when young learners are starting to read. If something is clearly visualized, children may understand and process the concepts better. He concludes by saying, "Phonics should be seen only as a way of getting children started on the path of learning to read, not as an ongoing teaching strategy", because if students are to learn phonics association effectively, they need to see a reason for doing so, that is being able to read and understand written material that may please them.

Overall, what one side of the controversy of teaching phonics in Kindergarten has shown is that the phonics-centered approach is often associated with direct instruction where teachers teach the alphabetical principles to students in a structured manner, and students might spend time reading texts decoding the words. In Kindergarten, where children are at their initial stage of learning to read, it's important to learn the concept that alphabetic letters represent sounds in the language. The evidence surrounding this debate shows that students with systematic phonics perform better in early word-level reading. Children learn to rely on what they know about speech-print connections. They develop fluency and independence in word recognition with sufficient practice.

### **Develop phonics knowledge among children**

Instead of using programs for teaching phonics intensively and systematically, parents and teachers can do various things to help children gain phonics knowledge and develop phonemic awareness in the context of meaningful reading and writing and language play. They can make the children read and reread their nursery rhymes, and enjoy tongue twisters and other forms of language play together, they can be introduced to reading their favourite poems, songs, and stories; discuss alliteration and rhyme within them; and play with sound elements, parents and teachers can also read alphabet books to and with children, discuss words and make lists, encourage children to play with magnetic letters and to explore letter/sound relations, help children write the sounds they hear in words, help children use prior knowledge and context plus initial consonants to predict what a word will be.

Teaching phonics and phonemic awareness in such ways helps keep letter/sound cues in proper perspective, but only when children spend substantially more time daily in listening to books read aloud, in reading independently. Research suggests that our best plan may be to teach phonics and phonemic awareness in the context of reading and writing, to all children; provide tutoring for children who need more individualized and/or more direct help with phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and/or using these skills as part of effective reading strategies; and possibly to discontinue such help for children who have benefited little from a year's daily individualized tutoring, while increasing the emphasis on developing strategies for deriving meaning.

### **Conclusion**

Phonics ability plays a central and foundational role in the reading process since it is the mechanism through which children match the letters and sounds of words. Without strong phonics skills, children often struggle to identify words and consequently are unable to comprehend the text they are reading. Research strongly and consistently supports the importance of phonics to reading success and underscores

that phonics instruction is most effective when it is started early and taught systematically (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Very crucial was the quote, “Don’t waste time debating whether or not to teach phonics, spelling, grammar, and other ‘skills’ of literacy. Do spend time discussing how to teach them in a way that contributes to the learners’ ‘self-improvement’ because, in fact, those who do read are more likely to be educated. And therein lays the responsibility of teachers to teach with knowledge, skill, and care the alphabetic invention that makes all this possible.

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