

Phonics, Reading, Common Sense and The Dangers of "Read-i-cide"

After more than 50 years of teaching reading, I'm meeting more teachers who observe that many of their children "*can read fluently at high level but don't have a clue about what they just read*". True or not, statements like this ring alarm bells for me. They indicate that teachers define reading primarily as decoding-to-sound. Such definitions imply that comprehension is secondary to decoding. Not only do I find this definition theoretically problematic, my experience in schools shows it creates teaching practices which can alienate students from deep engagement in life-long reading.

Let me explain why.

An alphabetic writing system gives the illusion that reading is simply a process of translating visual symbols into their phonetic equivalents. This involves first decoding the graphic symbols into the sounds they represent, blending these together, hearing the words inside your head, and finally attaching meanings to them. This is called "comprehension". Given this illusion it's common sense that you must first learn to decode. This means mastering phonics.

Unfortunately, illusions can acquire the status of irrefutable truths. An example is the way our perceptual system creates the illusion that the earth is flat. For thousands of years a "flat earth" assumption was basic to any theory of navigation. If you sailed too far from land you'd fall off the edge of the earth.

Just as the flat-earth illusion affected how the sailing fraternity conducted navigation, the illusion that readers cannot comprehend an alphabetic text until they have first decoded it to sound has had a strong impact on reading education. It too has acquired the status of an absolute truth around which a set of self-affirming theoretical principles has also developed.

This intrigues me because a definitive experiment, which proves the illusion, has never been done. Nowhere in the literature can I find an experiment which definitively proves that comprehending alphabetic print demands readers must first convert visual symbols to sound. Nowhere.

On the other hand evidence which challenges the illusion is continually emerging.

Pre-lingually deaf humans provide one such example. By definition they have no access to sound. In theory they can't decode to sound. But they learn to read. How?

Then there's homonyms like *rite* and *right*, *meat* and *meet*. Decoding these produces identical sounds, yet we can still work out what they mean. How? Perhaps there are lexical and grammatical cues embedded in the visual shape which take precedence over sound?

Homographs (words that are spelt the same but pronounced differently) provide yet another example. In a sentence like "He **wound** the bandage around the **wound**" it is impossible to pronounce either homograph correctly until AFTER the meaning has been accessed. A robust theory should cover all classes of word without exception.

People also learn to read non-alphabetic writing systems with the same degrees of efficiency and effectiveness as readers of alphabetic scripts without first decoding to sound. This means that humans have evolved with nervous systems, which can go from visual symbol to meaning without first going through sound. This means that the alphabetic symbols C-A-T could also be read as a visual sign which means "cat", just as readers of Chinese do? Why go through sound at all?

Some commentators argue that it's because an alphabetic system makes reading both easier to do and learn. This claim has no support. The alphabet evolved to support writing *not* reading.

An alphabetic system like English enables people to make marks on paper (and other surfaces) in a simple and consistent matter. In essence, alphabets are writers' (not readers') "tool kits" for putting words together. From a stock of just 26 basic shapes all the words of the English language can be represented. Moreover these 26 letters have names which define their shape. This means that novice writers can be told to write "d" "o" "double l" (doll) instead of "First do a ball and put a stick on its right hand side, then another ball and then two sticks next to each other." This is a much more cost-effective way of constructing and transcribing meaning than logographic systems such as Chinese, ancient cuneiform or Egyptian hieroglyphics. In essence the invention of the alphabet made writing and transcribing much easier for scribes and with the invention of paper and the printing press made the scribing process more accessible to more people. While this in turn made reading more accessible, there is no evidence it had a profound effect on the reading process.

The ecological research I've completed in schools has convinced me that a "reading-is-decoding" definition of reading creates teaching practices which alienate many less advantaged children from deep engagement in life-long reading. An American teacher has identified this phenomenon as "Read-i-cide" defined thus: *"The systematic killing of love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools"*.

Decoding demands intensive drill and practice on the small bits of language before meaningful enjoyable texts can be read. Meaning-making is put on hold until decoding skills are developed. This makes it very difficult for learners to focus on what evolution has designed them to do -- namely go straight to meaning from visual symbol using linguistic clues that are far more useful than sound.

Whereas a decoding-first theory argues that comprehension can be fixed up after decoding has been mastered, evolution theory argues that meaning is paramount all the time. It's not something which can be added later. Furthermore, the evidence I shared above indicates that it is possible to access meaning without first accessing sound. And here in a nutshell lies the educational "rub". It makes much more sense to teach the phonic knowledge which the "decode-to-sound" theorists think kids need to know in the context of learning to write, rather than in the context of learning to read.

Why do they feel so threatened by such a suggestion?

--Brian Cambourne