



Understanding Phonics and the Teaching of Reading: Critical Perspectives

Kathy Gooch and Andrew Lambirth

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“Education”, Fay announced. “There’s an area where we could certainly learn something from the Russians.”¹ It is Long Island in the early sixties and Fay is trying to impress her companions by referring to the current American perception that the Soviets’ success in launching Sputnik in 1957 was due to their superior education system. The publication, also in 1957, of Rudolph Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read* gave the humiliated American public a convenient reason for this perception: the American educational system was faulty because its method of teaching reading was not phonically based.

In fact, both phonics and whole word based approaches were used in the States at the time and doubtless nobody knew how the Russians did things. That is not the point. Reading was, and is, perceived as the touchstone of educational success and failure as it contributes to a sense of national humiliation (see newspaper coverage of the current PISA report²). And, perhaps because people think that phonics is all there is to reading, politicians and the media reach for phonics instruction, or lack of it, as a catch-all remedy for reading failure³. As Brooks tellingly puts it in his comments on the present Government’s proposal for a single decoding test of reading for six year olds, “The proposed test commits what has been appropriately called ‘the fallacy of the unique methodological solution’, that is, succumbing to the belief that ‘if only we can fix this aspect and make all teachers do this particular thing, all (educational, literacy, ...) problems will be solved.’”⁴

Yet, however fallacious, this particular “unique methodological solution” has been the subject of heated discussion among politicians and practitioners for most of the past century and all of this one and its intensity has recently been increased by the attachment of phonics instruction to particular methods of teaching it, with a ratcheting up of the accompanying rhetoric. So, “progression” (as in the National Literacy Strategy’s *Progression in Phonics*) has acquired the adjective “systematic” and has now become “systematic and synthetic” in the present Secretary of State’s recent and somewhat cavalier statement that “the evidence is clear that the teaching of *systematic synthetic phonics* (my italics) is the most effective way of teaching young children to read, particularly for those at risk of having problems with reading.”^{5 6}

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¹ Philip Roth, *Letting Go*, 1961

² e.g. Guardian: ‘World education rankings: which country does best at reading, maths and science?’ 7 December 2010

³ The recent UKLA publication *Teaching Reading* sets out a broad based description of reading which includes phonics but goes far beyond it.

⁴ Brooks, G. (2010) ‘The Government’s Proposed Decoding Test for 6-year-olds’ www.ukla.org accessed December 2010

⁵ White Paper ‘The Importance of Teaching’ November 2010

⁶ In fact, the report on which Mr Gove largely relies, the 2000 National Reading Panel Report, was more careful in its statements about different forms of phonic instruction. They found that *systematic* phonics instruction benefitted children’s reading in general and *systematic synthetic* phonic instruction benefitted the *decoding* abilities of children with reading disabilities and those from low socio economic backgrounds. They make a number of qualifications about the timing and circumstances which would maximise the benefits of various types of phonic instruction, including the effects of these on other reading skills such as comprehension. Ehri et al 2000 p12 ff

The speed with which we have gone from an acknowledgement that the teaching of phonics is a necessary part of learning to read, to this conflation of two methods of teaching phonics *and* its equation with the whole of the teaching of reading and its assessment at the start of primary education, has made me wonder whether I would make the same judgements now on a book with phonics in the title that I would have done even a year ago. When I reviewed Gooch and Lambirth's *Understanding Phonics and the Teaching of Reading: Critical Perspectives* in 2009⁷ I welcomed its attempt to describe the different perspectives on teaching and learning which allow teachers to be truly professional and make choices of strategies and approaches in the best interests of their children, and suggested that governments would be wise to support the development of these, as in Scotland⁸ rather than determining methods, as in England. Would I now consider that a range of contributions on reading pedagogies and support for teachers' choice of them in the classroom would be sufficient in a climate where the debate seems to be about the merits of different phonic strategies? Surely we should focus on these rather than on the pedagogies in which they will be realised?

In fact, Gove's White Paper statement is rather more relevant to questions of teacher professionalism and their understanding of the teaching of reading than it is to methods of teaching phonics: irrespective of how free teachers would be to use their own judgement after children reach six, before that time, a particular approach (synthetic phonics) has to be used and children's progress in reading will be assessed according to their ability to use a single phonic strategy. There is no leeway here for teachers to choose methods according to their assessment of children's needs, and, in consequence, there is an inevitable downgrading of the importance of teacher assessment. Inevitably this would prevent the classroom realisation of many of the contributions to *Understanding Phonics*: the establishment of distinctive Early Childhood practices for which Tricia David makes a strong case; the operation of the multiple educational discourses which Kathy Gooch describes in her plea for teachers to be professionals, rather than transmitters of government messages; the construction of differing reading identities through the many encounters with texts advocated by Barrs, Meek Spencer, Cremin, Gooch, and Lambirth. The White Paper requirements, including that for a single test of decoding at six, would also support the idea of a perfectible system of reading instruction and assessment with absolute standards, which Patrick Shannon warns against as not reflective of the breadth of the reading process. Perhaps most importantly for the classroom teacher, a single approach to phonological decoding would be privileged when, as Usha Goswami points out, any strategy used must be appropriate to the way that particular language has encoded the written word. Where that encoding is complex as in English, more than one strategy will be needed.

It is, indeed, tempting to think that the scenario for the teaching of reading laid out in *Understanding Phonics* is so different from that implied by Gove's White Paper statement that it has little to say to those querying the latter's focus on synthetic phonics. But what this book shows us is that issues to do with the teaching of reading, including reading failure, are not, in the end, those centring on particular phonic strategies, where the evidential base for a single strategy is, in any case, weak,⁹ but about the professionalism of teachers which enables them to know and use multiple strategies appropriately. In what is possibly the book's most significant contribution to this post White Paper world, Kathy Hall uses Wenger's concepts of *reification* (the

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⁷ *Literacy* Volume 43, Issue 3, pages 160-161, November 2009

⁹ See the NRP report referred to above.

⁸ Ellis, S. (2005) 'Platform: Phonics' *Times Educational Supplement* (Scotland) 23 September

objectification of knowledge, as in the explicit teaching of phonic knowledge) and *participation* (making learning relevant to one's own needs and community, as in children's use of phonic knowledge for their own reading purposes) to show that both are necessary in the classroom but that participation should be 'foregrounded.' High quality teacher assessment and recording (curiously, not addressed in *Understanding Phonics*) is crucial here since only teachers can make the judgements which integrate both kinds of teaching and learning. The requirement to use a particular form of phonics instruction at a particular point in a child's encounter with reading negates this aspect of the teacher's role.

These are the issues which, as Hall points out, are really important in the present debate and we should not allow ourselves to be deflected from discussing them by engagement in an energy-consuming debate about methods (as distinct from sufficiency) of teaching phonics. If teachers are formed and treated as professionals, they will use whatever means are appropriate to the task, including direct teaching and synthetic phonics, or indeed any strategy which is compatible with what children need and is consonant with their growth as readers. As Brooks points out, teachers would then also be in a position to respond to the need to identify and address reading failure early, identifying which of their pupils have not yet made a satisfactory start on learning to read, write and spell "on the basis of their professional skills, specific training... and personal knowledge of their pupils". This would, as he says, be a much more productive and economical approach than national testing at six.¹⁰

Addressing these issues of professionalism and ownership is what is important in the teaching of reading and discussion of them is much assisted by the range of pedagogical insights provided in *Understanding Phonics*. What would be helpful now is examples of how teachers operating as professionals and using a number of assessment procedures, successfully integrate a range of strategies for teaching reading, including those phonic strategies often thought to be in opposition to each other. Such an exercise might well show that controversies about phonic approaches are more rhetorical than real and that the real issue is about how teachers view themselves and the pedagogical choices they feel entitled to make.

Margaret Cook,
West Kirby

¹⁰ Brooks, G. (2010) op.cit

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