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Teaching reading: combine and make it effective

According to Russian Educational Standard children in primary schools should be taught to read aloud short texts based on well-known language with reasonably correct pronunciation and intonation [Cit. in 4].

However, and not only in Russia but even in English-speaking countries, children come across multiple difficulties while learning to read. There are two main approaches to teaching reading: *Phonics* and *Whole-Word Reading*. They have been taking turns being in favour among scholars for more than a century [3, 6]. Let's have a critical look at them.

When the *Phonics* method is used, first initial letters and their sounds are taught (as [k] for *cat* or [b] for *bee*). Then sound blends are practiced (such as pl, pe, pa, etc). Then they are combined into words, then phrases and sentences come. Only then does the reading for meaning begin. That is to say, the approach is purely deductive, from bottom up.

The method that we called the “*Russian*” approach is similar to *Phonics*, but has its peculiarities. Here the stress is on vowels in so called ‘open’ and ‘closed’ positions. The accent is also on letter blends that are not specific to the Russian language (such as *ch, sh, ee* or *ea*).

In the *Whole-Word* method words are presented as an entity in a meaningful setting and are taught as “sight” vocabulary. Through various activities students remember how a word looks like. Rather soon students read short meaningful texts. The approach is inductive.

Thus, the distinctive features of the *Phonics* and the “*Russian*” approaches are the following:

- they aim to develop and consolidate children’s phonological, phonemic and morphological awareness;
 - teach initial sounds, sound blends, consonant and vowel combinations;
 - teach explicitly;
 - teach the technical side of reading, not paying much attention to meaning;
 - develop the ability to sound letters of any word, even unfamiliar ones;
 - are systematically organized and sequenced.
- Whole-Word* (or *Linguistic*) approach has the following features:
- focuses on whole-word recognition of most common words;
 - emphasizes building up a sight vocabulary based on most common words;
 - students are repeatedly exposed to the new words;
 - develops lexical knowledge (collocations);
 - attention is focused on the meaning from the very beginning;
 - students are not explicitly taught that there is a relationship between words and sounds.

There are also several approaches that are not so well-known. One of them is the *Multi-Sensory approach* that claims that while learning to read one has to make use of all the senses available: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile. The *Language Experience approach* implies that children learn by listening to, reading and rereading books with the teacher’s guidance.

Now let’s consider limitations that the approaches mentioned above seem to have. For *Phonics* and the “*Russian*” approach they may be the following:

- 1) Russian students do not usually have much experience with spoken foreign language, so for them it may be difficult to draw parallels between sound and its letter expression;
- 2) the approaches are purely deductive: little cognitive development is involved;
- 3) not all the words correspond to rules, the most common ones among them;
- 4) child's logic may be not developed enough;
- 5) involves repetition of meaningless elements that can create dislike in reading;
- 6) sometimes only recognition is practiced, without any comprehension.

If we speak about possible disadvantages of *Whole-Word Reading* and the *Language Experience* approaches, the following can be named:

- 1) they mostly care for visual learners;
- 2) child can work out patterns wrongly;
- 3) it takes different time for an individual child to remember a word (combination);
- 4) they don't satisfy the needs of analytical students;
- 5) accuracy in reading comes later;
- 6) there may be confusion between words looking the same;
- 7) limited exposure to the language may impede a child's brain working out reading patterns.

As we have seen, each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Then, why not use them together?

Now we are going to consider various activities and resources that can be of help when teaching reading. The activities that can help teaching reading the *Phonics* way are the following:

- reading drills, for example available free at http://donpotter.net/pdf/remedial_reading_drills.pdf
- worksheets and simple readers, which can be found at <http://www.starfall.com/>
- songs and chants: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vm4rESpmWE4> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYCKBK9RTkU&feature=related> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZOII0VCrco&feature=related>
- video lessons, also available at You-tube, for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mMQVByIubY&feature=relmfu>
- word cards with sound blends highlighted in colour
- Power Point presentations.

Games that can be used when teaching *Phonics* are the following:

- *I Spy* – a set of cards is chosen, the teacher / one of the students thinks of the word corresponding to one of them, and says: “I spy with my little eye / I hear with my little ear something that begins with ...” (the initial letter of the word). The student to guess is the next to think of the word. The game is also good for practicing classroom and clothes vocabulary.
- *Match the word to the sound* – several letter blends are written on the blackboard, students take turns drawing out cards from a pile, reading them out and matching to a particular letter combination. The activity can be carried out as a team game.
- *All in a row* – students stand in a row with letters / letter combinations in hands. When the teacher says a word starting with a particular letter / having a particular letter combination in it, one of the students raise their cards.

Activities and procedures that are helpful in *Whole-Word Reading* are the following:

- notice boards and words (phrases) of the week (day);
- matching words to pictures;
- sorting and categorizing word cards;
- *fishing* – the teacher provides a box with a whole. Students are divided in teams. Each team takes turns drawing out a word and reading it. The team with more word cards collected, wins;
- *treasure hunt* – word cards are hidden around the room. Students search for them, bring them to the teacher, and read them out;
- Bingo and dominoes: <http://www.mes-english.com/> is a great resource which allows to make custom game on a wide range of topics;
- word searches and crossword puzzles: <http://www.discoveryeducation.com/free-puzzlemaker/?CFID=1079255&CFTOKEN=28022795> allows teachers to create their own worksheets;

- guess the word – the teacher has a set of word cards. She revises them with the whole class. Then she mixes them, chooses one, and the teams of students try to guess which word it is;
 - memory games – one of them is when several words are written on the blackboard, they are revised and then hidden, and the students restore the set in pairs;
 - intensive and extensive reading.
- As for Multi-Sensory activities that can be used for teaching reading, we will name the following:
- sand letters which students trace with their eyes closed to guess which letter it is;
 - making letters / letter combinations from dough;
 - miming – the teacher shows a word card, and the students mime it;
 - echo – the teacher writes number of words which have the same sound on the blackboard, then sprinkles the set with some unrelated words. The teacher reads the words one by one, the students repeat the word only if it has the sound agreed;
 - air / back / palm writing – students write letters or words on each other's palms, backs or in the air for their partners to guess what letter / word it is;
 - tracing: http://www.mes-english.com/worksheets/flashcards/animals2_spelling.php provides interesting tracing worksheets;
 - letter mazes <http://www.printactivities.com/Mazes.html>
 - choral reading;
 - practicing short poems, tongue twisters, sayings individually and in groups.

The author of this article finds it appropriate at the beginning to teach some vocabulary as whole words. Thus, the students get used to the shape and sound of English words. By the time *Phonics* is introduced, children start to draw conclusions about the rules of English pronunciation. Then *Phonics*, *Whole-Word Reading* and *Multi-Sensory* activities supplement each other. It has to be mentioned, however, that extensive listening is indispensable for the development of reading skills.

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