

On sequences of instruction

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I received an interesting question from a third-grade teacher in Frankfort, Kentucky (US). She writes, “In my district we do not have a specific scope and sequence for teaching vocabulary, nor phonics. I have tried to find something that I feel is research-based and comprehensive. I want to help my strugglers and my above-level students. Can you help?”

Those are two pretty important questions: What should the sequence of instruction be in phonics and vocabulary? And do you need a prescribed sequence to be successful?

Let me answer the easier of the two questions, first.

Yes, I think it is important to have a clearly established sequence of instruction in both phonics and vocabulary. In phonics, the question has been tested directly in several research studies, and always with the same result: teachers who were teaching a pre-established regimen of phonics were more successful than those who were winging it. I know of no direct tests of the question in the vocabulary literature, but all of the studies where success was accomplished in improving reading comprehension had a clear plan for the teacher.

So, what is the research-based comprehensive curriculum that teachers need to follow? Well, to tell you the truth, I don’t know. When I look at phonics and vocabulary studies, it is clear that pretty much all sequences work. For example, the National Reading Panel looked at 38 studies on something like 19 different sequences of phonics instruction, and though those differed greatly in the inclusion and ordering of skills, all the approaches seemed to confer a learning advantage. The same kind of thing was true for vocabulary.

That doesn’t mean sequence doesn’t matter. Perhaps direct tests of different sequences could sort out some small learning differences. What I think it really means is that most of the schemes tested in research are pretty reasonable. Most try to teach the most important or largest skills first or have some kind of logic to their plan. Most don’t emphasise minor or later developing skills. But all provide sufficient coverage and structure to make sure the kids have a chance of succeeding.

Yes, indeed, your school or district should have an agreed upon systematic plan for what is to be taught in each grade level so that teachers will have a clear idea of what to do. This plan, whether purchased or developed internally, may be somewhat arbitrary but I bet it won’t be ridiculous.

(In other words, you'll probably spend more time on the m or s sounds than the z sound. Or, you'll be more likely to teach vocabulary words like 'contain' or 'reluctant' rather than 'quidnunc'.) Without such a plan, important words or spelling patterns may not be taught at all, and some concepts or skills may be covered again and again. In such a case, the most successful kids may progress anyway, but this kind of laissez-faire curriculum plan is a disaster for the strugglers.

That there isn't a single research-proven sequence gives your district latitude. They could buy one of the many commercial programs aimed at supporting systematic instruction or could convene a group of teachers to come up with a district plan. Apparently, within reason, it doesn't matter that much what the exact plan is, just that there be one and that teachers follow it (we don't teach alone – we build on what the previous teacher accomplished and prepare students for what is to follow). When a specific instructional sequence exists, you usually see more teaching than when it is left up to each teacher to work this out herself; and that is a big benefit for kids. Of course, if there is a plan, the teacher (and mum and dad) can tell how a child is doing – the instructional sequence becomes a point of comparison for determining who is not doing well.

This article originally appeared on the author's blog, [Shanahan on Literacy](#).

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