

How much phonics should I teach?

Tim Shanahan



Teacher question:

Teacher: I keep hearing about the science of reading and that I need to teach phonics (I'm a second-grade teacher). I'm okay with that but there is a lot to teach in reading. How much of the time should I spend teaching phonics?

Man, was I surprised! I'd already spoken to the principal about the school curriculum. He'd given me an overview and assured me that what his teachers needed was training in academic language and how to ask high level comprehension questions. The speaker at a professional conference had stressed the importance of those in high poverty schools and the principal was convinced that was the road to higher test scores.

I'd asked about how much reading instruction his students were receiving in phonics and fluency, and he assured me those were already addressed. "No, the problem is those higher-level thinking skills that our students lack."

I told him that I thought I could help but that I wanted to be sure. "Could I visit some classrooms before I decide?"

What I saw wouldn't surprise me now, but at that time I was gobsmacked.

The teachers' lesson plans showed a lot of reading instruction. My classroom observations showed something else. Much of the instructional time wasn't used for instruction at all. The teachers spent a big chunk of time on 'sustained silent reading' and they read to the children quite a bit, too. All the classrooms had multiple reading groups. That meant that the boys and girls did a lot of worksheets to keep them quiet while the others were reading with the teacher.

The small group teaching entailed little more than reading a story together out of a textbook, with quite a bit of round robin reading. I guess that was the fluency work.

Oh, and the phonics instruction?

There was some, but that was pretty thin gruel, too.

The teacher would hand out a couple of phonics worksheets from the textbook program. She'd read the directions to the class and have the kids fill out the pages and then she'd score them and hand them back. Phonics assignments more than phonics instruction. I don't know what

the publisher had in mind, but probably not what the students were getting.

I didn't keep track at the time. In retrospect I'd guess those kids got about 5 minutes a day of phonics (and as for quality of instruction, please don't get me started). The same point could be made about the 'fluency work'. Round robin reading rarely gives kids more than a minute or so of practice. Across a school year, that would amount to less than three hours of oral reading practice if done daily!

In other words, these children weren't getting much phonics or fluency teaching.

These boys and girls needed to learn how to read. Nevertheless, no one was teaching them very much.

Students could practise but practising what you don't know how to do is not especially effective.

The principal was right. They weren't getting much help with academic language or higher order thinking. But that wasn't their problem.

You asked, "how much phonics should you teach?" Certainly, more than these kids were getting.

The National Reading Panel concluded that students benefited from explicit phonics instruction. It didn't determine how much phonics might be beneficial (it did say that phonics from kindergarten through second grade was a good idea).

In response to your letter, I took another look at those 38 studies. Eighteen of them gave information about dosage. They all were successful. That is, the kids who got those amounts of phonics outperformed the ones who weren't getting that instruction.

These daily amounts ranged from 15 to 60 minutes per day.

Since the phonics instruction in all these studies was beneficial, you could say 15 minutes per day is enough, and maybe it is. But I'd lean towards the averages. There are

different ways to calculate averages. In this case, they all came out to around 30 minutes per day (the mean was 34.4 minutes, and the mode and median were both 30).

Does that mean every child needs 30 minutes of explicit phonics teaching every day?

Not necessarily. Carol Connor found she could divide first-graders based on their decoding proficiency. Those who could already decode well did better working on more advanced reading and writing activities. Those not so proficient did best with explicit phonics teaching. Her study gives lie to the notion that there is no cost to teaching phonics to kids who can already decode well. What that means is that some kids would get more phonics and some would get less.

Also, even with 30 minutes of decoding instruction each day there are sure to be kids who need even more (decoding is a bigger challenge for some). Those kids might receive in-class or pull-out interventions added to the daily classroom phonics instruction.

I required 30–45 minutes of such instruction when I was Director of Reading in the Chicago Public Schools. We aimed for two to three hours per day of reading and writing teaching, so we devoted a quarter of the whole to making sure kids could read the words. Obviously, there is more to teaching reading than that, but 25% is a considerable commitment. Over three years (from Kindergarten to Year 2), that would mean roughly 270 hours of

decoding instruction would be available to all students (with some kids getting less due to their burgeoning proficiency and some others getting more – beyond the classroom – due to their particular needs). In the long run, that’s more time than any of the studies have provided and certainly more than I often see in the classrooms that I visit.

What counts as decoding instruction?

That will vary a bit from grade level to grade level. At Foundation level, children need to be taught the letters (lower case and capitals, names, most common sounds, how to write them).

Kids must perceive the sounds within words if they’re going to link them with letters, and phonemic awareness instruction aims to accomplish that. I would definitely make that part of my decoding instruction, too.

As the kids progress up the grades, spelling patterns and their pronunciations become an issue.

Phonics instruction should teach kids to hear the sounds, to recognise the letters or spelling patterns, and then to connect the sounds and the letters/spellings. They need a lot of practice with those elements within words and some reading practice with them, too (that’s where decodable texts come in handy – as part of the phonics instruction).

Instruction should emphasise using this knowledge of letters and sounds to decode words and to write or spell them, too (reading and spelling are closely connected). Decoding words and

spelling words should take up a big part of the phonics instruction real estate.

Finally, good phonics instruction must nurture a sense of flexibility. Kids who come to see these letter and sound relations as ‘rules’ don’t do as well as those who see them as possibilities or alternatives.

Thirty minutes per day on that kind of learning in Foundation through Year 2 is a wise investment.

Perhaps you’ve heard of those 10-minute phonics programs? Given the evidence, they don’t seem like such a good idea to me – more like a patch on a deficient reading program than a serious effort to meet kids’ learning needs. Thirty minutes a day makes sense to me, I hope it does to you.

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

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