

# PHONICS: AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING READING TO LEARNERS WITH READING DIFFICULTIES (DYSLEXIA)

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## ABSTRACT

Reading entails a complex task that requires learners to master some skills to ameliorate its complexity. It is a receptive ability and one of the four basic language skills; the other skills include: listening, speaking, and writing. Reading serves as a medium of decoding information from written text. As per the complexity of reading, many learners, not only those exhibiting reading difficulties, face challenges before becoming conversant with it. This paper examined Phonics Approach to teaching reading to learners who encounter reading problems. The approach is effective in helping such learners to understand letters and how to pronounce them correctly and accurately. The approach can also promote active learning engagement as it stresses more on relationship between letters and sounds, reading fluency and proficiency as well as vocabulary development. Finally, recommendations were offered on how to further address dyslexia.

**Keywords:** Phonics Approach, Reading, Reading Difficulties (Dyslexia), Language and Basic Skills

## Introduction

Reading difficulty is a term that is used to refer to reading disorder which entails challenges learners face while reading. This term is technically known as dyslexia which is attributed to a learning disorder, affecting learners' reading ability. This disorder is not characterized by poor vision or intelligence; it only relates to reading difficulty of words and/or poor understanding of what is being read. It is the subset of learning difficulties in the field of special needs education. In fact, learners with learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group. These learners are a diverse group of individuals, exhibiting potential difficulties in many different areas. Some may experience reading problems while others experience spelling or writing problems. However, this paper concerns only those who are bedevilled with reading problems.

Generally, language is seen as a means of communication per excellence. When one reads, they engage in decoding what is communicated in written form. They, thus, require understanding and recognition of the connections between meanings and what is written. Learners, especially those who experience dyslexia, face problems to do with recognition of words and their understanding when put together in a string. As such, there is need to have effective approaches to learning reading skills which can in turn help even the learners with dyslexia improve their reading abilities. The reason being is that reading is a complex act that involves multiple cognitive, emotional, and social abilities, each of which influences the learners' academic success. Phonics is one of the effective approaches to teaching learners reading skills and that which at the same time ameliorate dyslexia. Ac-

cording to Brand, (2004) phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling. The primary focus of phonics instruction is to help beginning readers understand how letters are linked to sounds (phonemes) to form letter-sound correspondences and spelling patterns and to help them learn how to apply this knowledge in their reading.

### **Concept of Language**

Language is an influential tool of expression. It is obviously, seemingly impossible to imagine a society without a language. Societies and languages are inseparable phenomena. It is language that polishes up people's reasoning and help them extend their feelings. Sharma and Puri, (2022) posit that language "...is the conveyor of civilization as well as culture. In its manifestation of mother tongue, an individual learns it comfortably. Nevertheless, learning a second language calls for keen endeavours to learn it and the scope of learning a second language in most instances is restricted. Language is made up of many different combinations of words and sentences that we use to communicate with one another." Husain, (2015), furthermore, clearly states that "a language is a system. It is a complex whole like the human body. The system of language functions through sounds, words and structure. These are integrated with one another and constitute the complex whole which is language. A language is a system of phonetics, grammar and vocabulary which themselves are systems".

Husain, (ibid) also cited the following as definitions of language provided by different writers: According to Block & Trager "a language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group operates". While, Allen, defines it as "a means of communicating thoughts". However, Jespersen maintains that it is "a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings". It is "an audible, articulate human speech as produced by the action of the tongue and adjacent vocal organs" (Webster). Thus, all these definitions stress the methods of human communication production, entailing words put in structure that is conveyed verbally, in writing or gesture, which all help in extending thoughts and feelings.

### **Four Basic Language Skills**

The four basic language skills include: listening, speaking, reading and writing. They are related to each other by two parameters: a) the mode of communication- oral or written and b) the direction of communication that involves receiving or producing the message (Aydogan & Akbarov, 2014). Language skills are the foundation of learning any language. Sharma and Puri, (2022) broadly classify them into two main skills, as thus:

- i. Productive Skills (Active Skills): these comprise speaking and writing.
- ii. Receptive Skills (Passive Skills): these consist of listening and reading.

**Listening:** it is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in a communication process. It is also a key to all effective communication.

**Speaking:** it allows to communicate effectively as it gives speakers ability to convey information verbally in a way that listeners can understand.

**Reading:** it is the ability pertaining to a person's capability to read, decode, comprehend and interpret written language and texts.

**Writing:** it is a written medium of communication which helps a person to express ideas, opinions and thoughts in an easy and clear way.

Of all these language skills, reading, the focal concern of this paper, is the most challenging one. It involves multifaceted skills and cognitive abilities.

### **Concept of Reading**

Reading is generally defined as an active and cognitive process of comprehending the meaning of written texts. Obviously, the act of reading demonstrates an interaction between a reader and a producer of a written text. In such interaction the reader is forced to be proactive in decoding the written message. This important language skill, reading, is described as a complicated process as it covers interrelated physical and cognitive attributes (Ari, 2017). According to Danielle, (2007) reading is an extraordinary achievement when one considers the number of levels and components that must be mastered. It happens in the context of social practices that involve writing, speaking and listening (Frankel, K. et al, 2016:7).

Reading is an active process of comprehending the meaning of texts by understanding meaning and understanding important points to find information of the texts, including some elements: phonemics awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency as well as comprehension (Paris, 2009). Bhan (2010) cited in Agyei (2010) views reading as the act of simultaneously “reading the lines”, “reading between the lines”, and “reading beyond the lines”. Here, the reader engages in a cognitive process, involving critical and creative manipulation to not only recognize the written words but understand what they mean denotatively and connotatively. According to Dadzie, (2008) cited in Agyei, (ibid) reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader, the text and the context of the reading situation.

### **Reading Difficulties**

Reading difficulties (dyslexia) is a term used in special education to denote an incapability to read clearly and accurately. It indicates lack of reading skills where learners experience difficulties to recognize words or fail to comprehend what is written. Learners with dyslexia, therefore, commit reading errors which subsequently affect their fluency and phonological awareness. Even though the ability to read is necessary in every culture, it is extremely difficult for dyslexic individuals to learn to read at an appropriate level (Klein, 2017). However, dyslexic individuals are not ‘thick’, ‘stupid’, ‘lazy’ or ‘careless’, labels that are incorrectly utilized (Klein, ibid). Many learners with learning disabilities have difficulties with reading fluency and words recognition skills. This means that curtailing reading difficulties will eventually be remedy for learning disabilities. Reading Disability (RD) is a generic term that refers to an abnormal difficulty in learning to read and write, presumably as a result of neuropsychological abnormalities in otherwise healthy children. Some authors consider that reading and writing have not exerted evolutionary pressure on humans and therefore no brain specific biological adaptations have occurred for these skills (Poblano, Borja, Elias, Garcia-Pedroza & Arias, 2002).

According to Williams and Lynch, (2010) reading difficulties is “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia...”. They further explained that children with dyslexia often are late in developing language and may have difficulty formulating speech sounds after the age when these are typically acquired. They may use terms such as things or stuff because they cannot think of the specific word they want to use at the moment (Williams & Lynch, 2010).

## Characteristics of Learners with Reading Difficulties

According to Hallahan and Kauffman, (2003) it is easy to see why problems with phonology would be at the heart of many reading difficulties. A person who has problems breaking words into their component sounds will have trouble learning to read. And there is suggestive evidence that readers of English are more susceptible than readers of some other languages to problems with phonological awareness. Some have speculated that this is why reading disabilities are more prevalent in English-speaking countries than in some other countries. The following are some of the characteristics of students with reading difficulties:

- a. faulty auditory perception without hearing impairment
- b. slow auditory or visual processing
- c. inability to distinguish or separate the sounds of spoken words
- d. lack of knowledge of the purpose of reading
- e. failure to attend to critical aspects of the word, sentence, or paragraph
- f. failure to understand that letters represent units of speech sounds

Other scholars made emphasis on the following regarding the characteristics of learners with dyslexia:

- a. **Omissions:** Learners with dyslexia skip individual words or groups of words while reading.
- b. **Insertion:** Learners with dyslexia insert one or more words into the sentence while reading orally.
- c. **Substitution:** Learners with dyslexia replace one or more words in the passage by one or more meaningful words.
- d. **Gross mispronunciation of a word:** Learners with dyslexia fail to pronounce words properly.
- e. **Hesitation:** Learners with dyslexia often hesitate for two or more seconds before pronouncing a word.
- f. **Inversion:** Learners with dyslexia change the order of words appearing in a sentence; they fail to observe punctuation

## Phonics Approach to Teach Reading

For children to learn the phonics approach they need phonically written books using regular words that are interesting to young children. Each word must be sounded out by the child in order to achieve the highest level outcome (Phajane, 2014). Phonics is a way of decoding written letters and spoken sounds. This approach to learning to read encourages children to decode words by sounds, rather than by recognizing whole words (Bald, 2007). Children are systematically taught around 40 phonic sounds and the combination of letters used to represent each sound Bald.

In fact, learning sounds and their blends may be boring to young children so one should keep it short and entertaining. Often children are so busy concentrating on sounding the words and blending the sounds that they do not learn the meaning of the word, making it boring for them (Cunningham and Allington, 2007). It is important to recognize that the goals of phonics instruction are to provide children with key knowledge and skills and to ensure that they know how to apply that knowledge in their reading and writing. In other words, phonics teaching is a means to an end (Goouch and Lambirth, (2007). To be able to make use of letter-sound information, children need phonemic awareness (Phajane, 2014).

The National Reading Panel (NRP), (2004) found that phonics instruction is an effective approach of teaching reading for children from kindergarten through 6th grade, and for all children who are having difficulty in learning to read. They also found that phonics instruction benefits all ages in learning to spell. They also reported that teachers need more education about effective reading instruction, both pre-service and in-service. Allington, (2005) asserts that existing scientific research supported that phonics is an effective approach for teaching learners to read at the word level. She argues strongly that the phonics and the whole language advocates are both right, and that phonics is an effective way to teach children the alphabetic code, building their skills in decoding unknown words. By learning the alphabetic code early, she reaffirms, children can quickly free up mental energy they had used for word analysis and devote this mental effort to meaning, leading to stronger comprehension earlier in elementary school.

This result matched the overall goal of whole language instruction and supported the use of phonics for a particular subset of reading skills, especially in the earliest stages of reading instruction (National Reading Panel (NRP), (ibid). Among other results, the report includes the finding that phonics instruction improves children's ability to identify words (Gray and McCutchen, 2006). They reported that useful phonics strategies include teaching children the sounds of letters in isolation and in words, and teaching them to blend the sounds of letters together to produce approximate pronunciations of words. It also states that phonics instruction should occur in conjunction with opportunities to identify words in meaningful sentences and stories (Gray and McCutchen, 2006).

Phonics instruction teaches children that there is a relationship between the letters of written language (graphemes) and the individual sounds of spoken language (phonemes) (Ma and Crocker, 2007). Phonics is a tool needed by all readers and writers of alphabetically written language such as English. Teaching and learning by using phonics actually need learners to identify words quickly and accurately (Paris, 2009). Brand (2004) says that phonics is one of the instructions that can help learners understand the sound of a letter in reading and spelling. This approach focuses on how readers recognize and understand the way letters are pronounced correctly in reading activities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored dyslexia and its remedy. It focused on phonics as an approach to teaching learners with dyslexia (reading difficulties). These learners tend to commit a lot of errors while reading. As such this problem must affect their academic performance. Hence, reading needs to be taught carefully, paying attention to learners' phonological awareness which eventually help them decode written words. Thus, phonics is an approach that help poor readers to acquire skills of reading, understand relationship between sounds and letters for correct and accurate reading.

## **Recommendations**

1. There is need for writers to adopt one way of writing style by restricting on only British or American English.
2. Government should provide books that meet the needs and level of the learners as this will help them acquire reading skills at early years.
3. Teachers should be meticulous in selecting books that will help their learners acquire reading ability.
4. Early readers need support and guidance from their parents.

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