

How Phase theory can be used to improve reading comprehension in children

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How to cite this paper: Dewle, M. (2018). How Phase theory can be used to improve reading comprehension in children. *International Journal of Language Teaching and Education*, 2(2), 97-102. <https://doi.org/10.22437/ijolte.v2i2.5051>

Received: **** *, **

Accepted: **** *, **

Published: **** *, **

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Abstract

The present paper gives summary about some development theories which focuses on how development of reading takes place in a child. It then focuses on one theory, i.e. the Phase theory by Ehri (1999) where this theory mentions with the help of four stages how a child goes from the stage of no knowledge of letters to full knowledge of letters in children. Though this theory has been criticized by some, but it is still considered as the theory which explains the basic stages of development in a child while reading while refuting the earlier theories on development of reading. Further, this paper discusses how this theory can be used as a form of instruction for children to develop reading comprehension.

Subject Areas

Reading Comprehension

Keywords

Phase theory, rote learning, decoding, development in reading, skilled readers

1. Introduction

Reading is a process which includes meanings to be accessed with the help of print (Cain, 2010). However, interim processes are required to decode print and attach meaning to it. These develop when the child learns to decode words and to read. However, we do not know how the child goes from decoding words to reading. It was a kind of mystery which several researchers as well as teachers have always wanted to solve. There are many researchers who have investigated this issue but Ehri's (1999) work regarding the development of reading is considered the most important. The present paper discusses the stages in the development of reading where children go one from stage of no knowledge of letters to skilled reading through theoretical viewpoint and how this knowledge can be used by the teachers to give instructions to develop reading comprehension in children.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Developmental Theories

The earlier developmental theories which focused on how a child learns to read, the notable ones were Gough & Hillinger (1980) where they have mentioned that a child goes through two phases of reading, the first one is reading a word through visual cues which are surrounding the word and relate to the word s/he has already stored in the memory. The second stage is where the child can decode easily with the knowledge of grapheme and phoneme connection in a language, where the child replaces the visual cues with the letter-sound knowledge to read words.

The second theory was proposed by Mason (1980) where she mentioned that the first stage of Gough and Hillinger's is same where she stated that a child reads a word with the help of pictures and each word has its own unique pattern which helps him/her to remember the word. Further, she added another stage to Gough and Hillinger's theory, where the child reads letters of the word but is not able to decode the word. In the last stage the child can understand the connections between grapheme and phoneme in the language and is able to read words which are not known to him/her.

The third theory is Marsh, Welch, and Desberg (1981) has mentioned four stages, in the first stage the child tries to guess the word through glance either with the help of pictures or visual cues and see whether he/she can remember the word. The second stage is where the child discriminates one word from the other word with the help of the grapheme cues available. The third stage is where the child learns to understand the connections between the letters and sound and read the word. The fourth stage is where the child becomes skilled in reading by able to understand the complex relations between words and being to read and understand the words.

The final theory that has been discussed over the years is Firth's model (1985) where she has proposed three stages of learning to read, the first stage is where the child is able to read words based on the visual or contextual features. The second stage is where the child uses the phoneme-grapheme connection to read words. The last stage is where the child read long words with the help of the spelling patterns in the language, especially with the help of the morphemes.

2.2. Ehri's Phase Theory:

When all these developmental theories were proposed, the only problem being that all the stages in these theories do not cover systematic stages a child goes through when s/he learns a language. Ehri through her Phase theory tries to provide an overall view of how a child can learn to read word and, she challenges the conventional way of teaching word reading through rote learning where the child must memorize entire words with visual cues. However, in case of irregular words it does not work, and it leads to confusion among the child.

Therefore, Ehri has proposed the four stages of alphabetic development. The stages are: pre-alphabetic, partial-alphabetic, full alphabetic and consolidated alphabetic. These four phases of alphabetic developmental model discuss the development in learning to read words where each phase is characterized by the involvement of learner's working knowledge of the alphabetic system (Ehri, 1999:99). These are as follows:

Stages of Phase theory:

Pre-alphabetic phase: In this phase, readers do not use the alphabetic system as they do not have the knowledge of alphabets to read words. So, they use the visual cues that accompany the words to memorize and remember the pronunciation for reading those words. They form connections with the help of these cues and store in the memory and whenever they see these letters they pretend to read them, for example, children see a packet of 'Maggie' and the way it is written to discern the word 'Maggie'. Sometimes when they see an unfamiliar word they try to predict with the help of these cues. Therefore, readers in this phase are not able to decode, analogize and do independent reading since their alphabetic knowledge is not developed. Moreover, readers are not able to pronounce exact words on the printed page as there is lack of connection between letter and the sound. Here there is a distinction between Firth (1985) and Ehri's model because Ehri thinks that the reader uses the context rather than the words. Therefore, Ehri named it as pre-alphabetic stage whereas in Firth's model it is logographic (where readers read whole words like in Chinese which is not possible according to Ehri, since children use visual cues to read words (Ehri, 1999).

Partial Alphabetic phase: In this phase, the reader can read sight words by forming connections between the first and the end letter of the words as they are salient and contribute to the sound of the word. These connections help the reader to pronounce words, for example, when the reader read the word 'listen, he/she reads the initial sound /l/ and the end sound /n/ which helps him/her to pronounce the word correctly. Since, the reader identifies only the initial and end sounds of the word then confusion arises with the words having similar initial and end sounds. Moreover, children in this phase write partial spellings since medial vowels, consonant blends are absent. This again indicates that decoding and analogizing is not possible since full knowledge of alphabetic system is unavailable. However, readers in this phase can use the partial letters to identify unfamiliar words with the help of the context. They are also able to read words backwards with the help of the partial cues that are available to them.

Full Alphabetic phase

In this phase, the reader can understand the alphabetic system and the connections between the grapheme and the phonemes and the corresponding pronunciation of the words. Therefore, the reader can read the sight words and remember them. Also,

with the help of sight words the reading becomes more accurate and able to distinguish between similar spelled words. Moreover, the knowledge of alphabetic system helps the reader in decoding unfamiliar words for pronunciation. The identification of similar spelled words helps the reader to read pseudo words. In addition, the reader can use analogy to identify unfamiliar words though not in large extent. They try to use strategies to identify words such as island where 's' is silent (Beech, 2005).

According to Beech (2005) this phase is important for Ehri because this phase discusses sight word reading and it is central to phase theory. Whereas in case of Firth's stage theory of reading (1985) no such reading theory has been proposed and the development has been termed as general. Moreover, in this stage theory Firth has considered sight word reading (which is described later) as non-phonological process (where there is no connection between grapheme and phoneme).

Consolidated Alphabetic phase: In this phase, the reader can detect letter patterns that recur in words. The reader is also able to read sight words more easily as they are stored in memory and they can decode multisyllabic words as they understand the spelling system. Moreover, they can access sight words very easily since letter identification is not a problem. They can read familiar words and letter patterns accurately and the use of knowledge of shared words to identify the sight words.

Ehri's phase theory model, the developmental process of reading centers around the alphabetic reading where she has described that when a reader goes from a non-alphabetic phase to an alphabetic phase he/she also use other ways to read words. These are sight word reading, decoding, analogy and prediction. Sight words are those words which are frequently read and retained in the memory of the reader. These words are easily accessed by the reader from the memory whenever he/she encounters a familiar word. Also, the reader does not have to spend time on concentrating the pronunciation and decoding of the words but only on the meaning of the text.

Therefore, the process where sight word is used to read is known as sight word reading. It is a process where the reader does not memorize the word but understand the letter-sound connection in each word which leads to the linking of written words to pronunciation. This helps him/her to form these connections whenever a familiar word is repeated in the text. Moreover, sight word reading involves the process of reading words which are accessed by the memory. If the visual forms of the words are memorized, then the reader would not be able to tell the difference if the words are misspelled or if there are no visual cues then the reader would not be able to read the word.

Thus, it can be inferred that phase theory helped us to understand that development in reading progresses through using visual cues, forming connections between letters and sounds detected, sight vocabulary and letter patterns that recur to

detect different words and recognize them. Also, it mentioned that these phases are not precursor to the subsequent phases.

Different ways of learning to read words:

Ehri (1999) has also focused on three different ways of reading words other than sight word reading which are linked to the development of reading are mentioned below:

1. **decoding:** where single letter or combinations of letters is/are divided according to the sounds they produced and these sounds are then blended into pronunciation, for e.g. when we read the word king, we know that this word contains four letters K, I, NG but which represents three sounds /k/ /ɪ/ /ŋ/ which leads to the pronunciation of the word 'King'. Here the reader tries to understand the grapheme-phoneme connection between the words and use this knowledge to read words.
2. **analogizing:** where familiar words are used to read unknown words that have/share similar letters. Whenever we come across any unfamiliar word we try to read them based on the spellings of the known word, like here, in this example, when a child tries to read the word 'brain' s/he will search in the memory to look for a similar word like 'train'. Then, s/he will use this analogy of similar word to read the unknown word 'brain'.
3. **prediction:** to guess the unfamiliar word based upon the pictures that accompany the words in the text or with the help of the context in which it appears or the partial letters appearing in the word, for e.g. if a word like temper is given then the reader does not know what it means but can understand with the help of a picture that is given of a woman showing red jets of vapor coming out of her ears and nose. This helps the reader to know the meaning of temper.

3. Implications

This theory can be used as is important because it helps the teachers to help students in reading instruction:

1. It is important for beginners to learn all the letters and to use this information to relate to their own speech processes. This will include learning graphemes such as 'ch', 'sh' and 'th'.
2. Children need to develop awareness of phonemes and relate this to their graphemic knowledge.
3. By the First Grade, teachers should help all children to achieve the full alphabetic phase. The major grapheme-phoneme connections, particularly those involving vowels, need to be learned.
4. Children need practice at learning unfamiliar words both by breaking down their graphemes to form sounds and using analogy. This will be easier for students in the full alphabetic phase.

5. Learning to spell is an important part of reading development. The important initial phase is to be able to create appropriate graphemes from the constituent sounds. Memorizing word lists should not be started until this is mastered because this will make learning such lists easier.
6. Later work should expand to learning morphemes, affixes and families of related words. (Ehri, 1998 cited in Beech, 2005).

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