

FACT AND FICTION ABOUT THE SYNTHETIC PHONICS STUDY IN CLACKMANNANSHIRE

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Since our study of synthetic phonics in Clackmannanshire (Johnston and Watson, 2004) has been widely discussed, though perhaps not widely read, a remarkable number of myths have been circulating.

Hall (2006, page 12) argues that in our research in Clackmannanshire ‘analytic phonics was set up for failure’. Actually, as we are scrupulously careful researchers, our very first study set out to find out exactly how analytic phonics was taught. Definitions of analytic phonics are rarely very explicit; below is one of the more detailed ones that we have found.

“Gradual Analytic Method: The gradual analytic method initially presents the student with a list of words that become part of his sight vocabulary through visual memory techniques. Subsequently he is taught to analyse these words by identifying certain common sounds that appear in them. For example, the sight words milk, man and mother are shown to the child, who is asked if he sees anything about these three words, he then ‘reads’ them. The teacher cautions him to listen to the sound he hears at the beginning of each word. ‘Whenever we see this letter, “m”, in a word, we will hear the sound that we hear at the beginning of milk and man. Can you think of some other words that begin the same as milk and mother?’ The proponents of the analytic method contend that it keeps decoding as part of the reading act, since the sounds are never isolated but are always taught within the context of the word and perhaps the sentence.” Harris, L.A. and Smith, C.B. (1976)

On pages 10 and 11 of the report on our longitudinal study (Johnston and Watson, 2005) we described our observations of classroom practice in 12 classes in Scotland teaching by the analytic phonics approach, starting in 1992. The programme started by teaching letters in the initial position of words, at the pace of one letter sound a week. In all but one class, this took 26 weeks to complete, generally around March of the first year at school. Children were then taught about the importance of letters in the final position of words, and then in the middle, at which time sounding and blending of CVC words could commence. At this point, we found that independent reading skills really took off. The pace and progression in analytic phonics teaching that we observed was common practice throughout Scotland at the time (and is similar to how schools implemented Progression in Phonics in England). It was the observation that independent reading skills were very much better in the class where one teacher took a faster approach, introducing sounding and blending much earlier, that led us to study synthetic phonics.

In our second study, carried out in 1995, children learning by the normal classroom analytic phonics approach received extra phonics tuition for 10 weeks in small groups outside the classroom, having two 15 minute sessions a week (Johnston and Watson, 2004). One group of children learnt by the synthetic phonics approach, learning letter sounds at the pace of two a week. A second group also learnt two letter sounds a week, following an analytic phonics programme. As this was the first term of school, these letters were learnt at the beginning of words. In the third group, the children received the same new print word exposure as the other two groups, but had no phonics teaching additional to the classroom analytic phonics programme. By Christmas of the first year at school, the synthetic-phonics-taught children read significantly better than the other two groups, and also knew

more letter sounds (even though the analytic phonics group had learnt letter sounds at the same rate). The intervention ended at this point, but the children were followed up until the start of their second year at school. By this point, the children had all been taught in their classroom phonics programme to look at letters in all positions of words (Johnston and Watson, 2004, page 352). Despite the fact that the classroom programme had reached the sounding and blending stage, the synthetic-phonics-taught group was reading around 11 months ahead of the accelerated analytic phonics group. Thus despite the fact that our intervention in Clackmannanshire (see below) was terminated before the stage where sounding and blending is used in analytic phonics programmes, our evidence from the earlier study suggests that the children taught this way were very unlikely to have been able to catch up with the children taught synthetic phonics.

In our third study of phonics, carried out in Clackmannanshire starting in 1997, we again compared the effectiveness of analytic and synthetic phonics teaching (Johnston and Watson, 2004), this time delivered on a whole-class basis. The children in the analytic phonics condition followed a systematic scripted daily classroom programme based on the observations in the first study of how analytic phonics was typically taught. As the 16-week intervention ended in February of the first year at school, the children had by that time learnt 16 letter-sounds at the beginning position of words. As we had established in Study 2 that speed of letter learning in itself was not a factor in accelerating learning to read, the children in the synthetic phonics group received a programme delivered at the typical fast pace of such programmes. They covered letters and letter sequences for the 40+ sounds in the English language in 16 weeks. At the end of the programme, these children were reading 7 months ahead of the analytic phonics group, and had much better phonemic awareness skills. However, both groups had been exposed to the same new print vocabulary.

The children in all conditions read text from early on, starting on reading scheme books just 6 weeks after the programme started, contradicting the idea that all synthetic phonics programmes advocate covering the 40+ sounds before the introduction of reading for meaning. Much is made of the fact that the synthetic phonics programme in Clackmannanshire led to much greater increases in word reading and spelling skill than in reading comprehension, implying that reading comprehension did not benefit from the intervention. However, it should be noted that at the end of the seventh year at school, reading comprehension in the study was significantly above age level, in a sample that had a below average SES (socio-economic status) profile.

It has been claimed that other interventions were being carried out in Clackmannanshire at the time of our study, which could have led to better results for the synthetic phonics condition (Ellis, 2005). At the time of our study, home-school liaison officers were appointed in four of the study schools. However, two of these were in schools in the synthetic phonics condition, and two were in an analytic phonics condition, so these appointments cannot account for the gains found with the synthetic phonics programme.

The DfES-funded Torgerson et al (2006) review of the effectiveness of reading programmes chose to carry out a meta-analysis only of studies that had random allocation to conditions. It is not clear why a study that received so much public funding (around £70,000) only undertook a partial review of the literature. Like two-thirds of similar studies in the literature, the Clackmannanshire study did not have random assignment of schools to conditions. As random allocation was not possible, the schools from the most disadvantaged areas were allocated to the synthetic phonics condition. This is

a tough test of the effectiveness of synthetic phonics, as children from areas of deprivation do less well in reading than those from better-off areas from the very first year at school (Stuart et al, 1998, Duncan and Seymour, 2000). The National Reading Panel (2000) and Camilli et al. (2003) reviews looked specifically at whether studies having random assignment to conditions led to different outcomes from those studies that did not (the majority of the literature). Neither review found that this made any difference. Similarly, our second study, carried out in 1995, did have random allocation of children to conditions, and the Clackmannanshire study replicates the findings of that earlier study.

The two previous reviews looking at the effectiveness of reading programmes scrupulously excluded all unpublished studies. Therefore another singular feature of the Torgerson (2006) review is that one of the three studies they include that compares analytic and synthetic phonics conditions is an unpublished study, delivered at a conference in 1971. This study found no advantage for synthetic phonics teaching. As a peer-reviewed article has not appeared on this study in 35 years, it suggests there is something wrong with it. There is indeed a major flaw – the synthetic phonics programme was not correctly implemented. The kindergarten children were taught to sound and blend words like 'tape', an approach which would lead to an incorrect pronunciation of the words. In synthetic phonics schemes such items are taught much later on, when phonic rules are taught.

Interestingly, the detractors of the Clackmannanshire study have not attempted themselves to demonstrate that their preferred method yields as good or better results than a synthetic phonics programme. Their method seems to be to merely attack the Clackmannanshire study and thereby imply that the approach that they advocate is as good or better, without collecting any supportive data.

In sum, any piece of research, particularly one that has had such a wide influence, should indeed be subjected to close scrutiny. However, looking at all the points that have been raised about the study, it is clear that there is a desire in some quarters to denigrate the work by slur and innuendo, without actually producing any evidence that contradicts the findings of the studies carried out.

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