

Tom Sticht  
International Consultant in Adult Education

The U. S. Education Department's present focus on No Child Left Behind aims to encourage the use of "scientific, evidence-based" methods of teaching the "essential components" of reading. For instance, the USED web page for Reading First states "Reading First will provide funds to train teachers in the essential components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension)... ,"  
<http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/applicant.html>

However, this seems to me to contain certain misunderstandings about reading which I have summarized below, along with some other misunderstandings that I have seen in the literature on reading.

Misunderstanding #1: Fluency is one of "the essential components of reading" that include alphabetic (phonemics,phonics), fluency, vocabulary, comprehension.

Correction: "fluency" is not a "component" of anything. Rather it is the quality of a performance. In reading it refers to reading that is executed without a lot of mistakes, not in a slow, halting, recursive manner but rather in a regular left to right, progressive moving, fairly rapid (around 200-250 words per minute) manner when reading materials of some familiarity.

Misunderstanding #2: Vocabulary is one of "the essential components of reading" that include alphabetic (phonemics,phonics), fluency, vocabulary, comprehension.

Correction: Vocabulary is a component of language, not listening or reading, though it can be acquired using either of these information pick-up processes.

Misunderstanding #3: Comprehension is one of "the essential components of reading" that include alphabetic (phonemics,phonics), fluency, vocabulary, comprehension.

Correction: Comprehension precedes reading and directs the reading process, not the other way around. Listening to speech is one way to comprehend language, reading graphic symbols is another. Children typically learn to comprehend by listening to speech before they learn to comprehend by reading. Comprehension is what the reader tries to achieve, but comprehension is not a component of reading, it is both a precursor to and a result of reading.

Misunderstanding #4: Listening and reading are the same language processes.

Correction: Listening and reading are both information pick-up processes which may be used to construct language, but they are not language and they are not the same. You can do one in the dark, the other in a noisy room, but neither in a dark, noisy room. Language can be accomplished using tactual information pick-up processes, too.

Misunderstanding #5: "First you learn to read, then you read to learn."

Correction: Despite the wide-spread use of this old bromide, you always read to learn. Even when learning to read, one looks at the graphic displays and tries

to learn (i.e., "read") them as symbols. First you read to learn to read graphic information as symbols then you read to learn some other new information forming new ideas expressed in graphic symbols.

Misunderstanding #6: We can teach reading skills to children and adults.

Correction: We cannot teach "skills." We can teach knowledge but skill must be developed through practice. We can coach for skill, and we can model skillful performance, but we cannot teach skill. When we teach phonics we are teaching knowledge of sight-sound correspondences, not decoding skill. The latter can only be developed through practice.

In order to offer valid "scientific, evidence-based" recommendations for teaching reading we need to first have a good understanding of what is meant by "reading." As far as I can see, developing this understanding is still a work in progress for the field of reading.