

Wednesday 30 January, 1-2pm, Chandler House G10

Debate: The teaching of phonics vs the teaching of the orthographic system at early stages of learning to read

Chaired by Dr Lee de-Wit

Prof Jeffrey Bowers - School of Psychological Science, University of Bristol

There is now a widespread consensus that reading instruction in English should emphasize systematic phonics. That is, children should learn letter (grapheme) to sound (phoneme) correspondences before learning about the meanings of written words. In support of this conclusion, researchers cite a large body of empirical work in support of systematic phonics, including multiple meta-analyses. Researchers also make the theoretical case for systematic phonics by arguing that English uses the “alphabetic principle” with letters representing sounds. From this, it is concluded that initial instruction should target these letter-sound mappings. In contrast with this view, I show that the empirical evidence does not support systematic phonics, and indeed, there is little or no evidence that systematic phonics is better than whole language (despite 100s of studies and 30 or more years of the “reading wars”). In addition, the theoretical motivation for phonics is flawed given that English is not an alphabetic system in which letters represent sounds. Instead, it is a morphophonological system in which spellings evolved to represent both sounds (phonemes) and meaning (morphemes). I argue that new methods of reading instruction are needed, and a promising approach is to teach children the logic of their writing system.

Prof Charles Hulme - Department of Education, University of Oxford

English orthography can be considered irregular in its mapping from letters to sounds, but nevertheless like other alphabetic orthographies it does operate by using graphemes to represent phonemes. Evidence for this comes from the simple observation that we can read nonwords quite accurately using GPC rules. Measures of the two foundations of the alphabetic principle (letter-sound knowledge and phoneme awareness) are statistically the most powerful predictors of variations in the rate of learning to read. For typically developing children the form of reading instruction may not make much difference, but many children struggle to master the alphabetic principle and for them systematic instruction to produce secure letter-sound knowledge and phoneme awareness is important for helping these children learn to read. Morphological skills are also related to reading development, and teaching children about morphology may also be helpful in helping them learn to read and spell. The aim of reading instruction should be to establish decoding skills as smoothly and easily as possible so that children can progress to reading and comprehending written texts. Decoding and comprehension skills are interdependent; and developmentally both depend upon children’s broader oral language skills, which should be given a high priority in early education.