

The Three Cueing Systems in Beginning Reading Instruction: Good Idea or Hoax?

by Robert Schwartz

A main skirmish in the Reading Wars centers on phonics first or building on the strengths a child brings. In his blog, Dr. Tim Shanahan, a knowledgeable and highly respected literacy researcher and educator, offers a well-reasoned and completely incorrect analysis of cueing systems. He maintains that they have no value in initial reading instruction and that their advocates are spinning a magnificent fictional hoax.

What makes this a hoax? Tim claims that the research evidence shows that skilled readers don't use meaning or syntactic cues to recognize words. I agree. The research evidence is clear. It is also clear that skilled readers don't sound out words letter-by-letter and then blend the sounds.

So, we need to consider how different approaches to beginning reading instruction can support the transition from slow, effortful word recognition to the fast, automatic recognition of skilled readers. Tim uses a golf analogy to make his case for phonics instruction. I'd rather use a bike riding analogy.

We could look at skilled cyclists for clues about how to teach bike riding, but I think most parents would still think training wheels are a good idea for many beginners. Starting with training wheels doesn't require the balance that all skilled cyclists display, but it does let the novice apply what they know about pedaling, breaking, turning, and maybe even balance as they enjoy the freedom of movement and independence that motivates further learning. With training wheels, the novice can learn to coordinate what s/he knows with some new elements of the task while avoiding injury and embarrassment that might put an end to interest.

Little books with simple repeated language structures and picture support for important content words are the equivalent of training wheels for novice readers. Consider this example: On the first page there is a picture of a man holding a bunch of colored balloons and handing a red balloon to a child. Told that the text says, *I like red balloons*, the novice will likely be able to read the rest of the book as the child is handed different color balloon on each page and begins to float away with his collection.

Is this *real* reading? Educators call it *emergent reading* to stress the fact that it builds on what the child already knows about oral language and might know about how reading works. The novice can apply what they know about where the text starts, which direction it goes, what a word in written language is and how it differs from a letter, how to match words in oral and written language, maybe even how the letters relate to the sounds in these words as they enjoy the independence of reading a book with an amusing, if somewhat simple plot.

With this type of emergent literacy approach, educators don't need to teach children to use meaning and language structure (two of the three cueing systems) to read unfamiliar content words, they just need to make it possible to use what the child already knows about oral language in books that are partially familiar. As a novice reader learns more about letters, written words, and their connection to sounds they begin to combine this visual cueing system

with meaning and structure to generate and check their word recognition attempts (McGee, Kim, Nelson, & Fried, 2015; Schwartz, 1997, 2005, 2015).

In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, this is what Daniel Kahneman calls least effort strategies. Adults use these least effort approaches in all sorts of novel and complex tasks. Why wouldn't we expect a 5 or 6 year old to use this type of least effort approach when reading their first books? Sounding out words letter-by-letter is not a least effort strategy, especially for novice readers.

As Tim argues, why teach children to do what skilled readers don't do? Skilled beginning readers can sound out words letter-by-letter but they only do this if forced to work at this level with texts that don't make sense, like early decodable readers, nonsense words or unfamiliar word lists. Even with these materials, skilled readers will try to work with larger units of print and sound like initial consonant clusters (onsets) and vowel patterns (rimes).

As children engage in reading, writing, and word study activities they build the orthographic and phonological knowledge that makes fast, automatic word recognition possible. Using visual cues becomes their least effort strategy for word recognition with meaning and language structure serving as a way to check these word recognition attempts and construct their understanding of the text.

Children who struggle with early literacy learning take more time to learn and coordinate all the elements that support proficient reading. The goal is the same, but the path they take to this goal will differ depending on the knowledge and strengths they bring (Clay, 2014). As novices, they all need to learn phonics, but doing this while building on their strengths will avoid injury and embarrassment that often puts an end to their interest and effort to learn.

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