How do we learn to read?

April 18 2017, by Misty Adoniou

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

The sign on the public car park in the tiny Tasmanian town of Wynyard reads, "Egress from this carpark is to be via the access lane in the rear."

"Egress?" I wondered.

As my 21-year-old son quipped, perhaps the council had called in the local duke to write its signs. Or at least the local lawyer.

I could say all the words on the sign with very little effort, and with impressive fluency.

That is called decoding.

I had to work a little harder to understand what the sign was saying.

That is called comprehending.

The aim of reading is, of course, comprehension.

In essence, debates around how to best teach reading have been about which comes first, the decoding or the comprehending.

Research concludes these debates are redundant because comprehension and decoding are codependent.

The federal government's recent proposal, however, for a Year 1 Phonics Screening test – which tests a child's ability to decode made-up words – appears to support the view that decoding comes before comprehension.

Comprehension, therefore, is deemed irrelevant – at least initially.

So who is right? The researchers or the politicians?

Let's take a look at what the research tells us about how we learn to read.

Tackling unknown words

It was the first word in the car park sign that threw me. "Egress."

I used my knowledge of how sounds map on to letters in English to decode it. However, because I couldn't remember ever hearing the word

said out loud, I wasn't sure if I was decoding it correctly.

It might be EE-gress or ee-GRESS, EGG-ress, or egg-RESS. It is the first, apparently. I Googled it later.

In any case my decoding efforts didn't help me understand what the word means. In order for decoding skills to be of any use in reading, children need an excellent vocabulary to which they can cross reference as they attempt to decode.

Tip 1: teach phonics through words already in the children's vocabulary.

Building children's vocabularies

Before we rush out and start teaching children lists of vocabulary, words in lists are not enough.

If someone had shown me "egress" by itself on a flashcard, I might have guessed it was a bird.

Luckily, "egress" was in a full sentence on a sign in front of a car park, and all of that context helped me comprehend the word.

Without context, words are just letters on a page. This is because all words in English are polysemic - they have multiple meanings depending upon the context.

*The **wind** in my hair. My baby has **wind**.*

And some words keep their spelling but change their pronunciation as well as their meaning.

*I'd like to **wind** you up. I need to **wind** my clock. Why do I always **wind***

***up doing the dishes.*

Tip 2: build your children's vocabulary by talking and reading to them so that they encounter words in all their many and varied guises. Seeing a word in many different contexts is more important than just seeing the word flashed at you many times.

Grammar matters

The grammar of the parking sign in Wynyard also helped my comprehension.

I had figured out from the context that "egress" meant either entry or exit. I hear a lot of language so I understand how words "collocate" in English - that is, how some words always hang out together grammatically. My experience with the language meant I knew that we exit "from" and enter "into".

The more we hear and read real language, the more we learn about how word order works in English.

Tip 3: teach reading through real books with real language so that children learn the rhythm and patterns of English grammar.

Experience counts

I relied on my experience as a driver to look around and see that a median strip in the road would make "egress" from the front of the car park tricky. Life experience helps us read too.

If I write I live in a studio apartment in San Jose, your interpretation of where I live will depend upon whether you understand a studio

apartment to be a basement bedsit, or penthouse bachelor pad. It will depend on whether you understand San Jose to be an affluent tech hub or an working class industrial city.

The words alone cannot carry all the meaning of my message. You bring your life experience to the task of reading my words.

Tip 4: give children lots of real life experiences and talk to them about what they see. Trips out and about, and chats about things beyond their everyday environment are important.

Are we giving poor readers the help they need?

Good readers have a full repertoire of skills, each dependent upon the other.

- They have excellent oral language and a wide vocabulary. They know what words mean and this helps them decode.
- They can decode and this helps them locate the word in their existing vocabulary.
- They know the structure of English through exposure to authentic complex written and spoken language.
- They use rich life experiences to support their comprehension of written texts.

Poor readers need all of these skills too. Yet our interventions for poor readers typically only address one skill - decoding.

Our declining results in international tests of literacy show us that our 15 year olds can decode but they can't comprehend.

Until we pay full attention to all the other reading skills, the decline will continue.

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