Literacy Instruction Approaches.

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An increasing number of studies have revealed that when children learn to spell, complex metacognitive processes take place. Other research has shown that learning to read, spell, and write is interrelated and connected (O'Sullivan, 2000; Santoro, Coyne, Simmons, 2006; Senechal, Ouellette, Pagan & Lever, 2012). Following the literature review, this paper aims to compare and contrast different instructional theories of spelling as well as to suggest recommendations of strategies for spelling instruction. In particular, two instructional approaches – direct and indirect instruction, will be considered as well as third – a suggested solution to the political debate between both– the contemporary eclectic approach that combine explicit and holistic instruction.

The analytical approach relates to bottom-up processes of learning (Stanovich, 1980, Stanovich, West, and Feeman, 1984, as cited in Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011) that aim for generalisation from details. It means that the instruction of the alphabetic principle, in this case spelling, has to be explicit, direct and intensive. The learning process begins by focusing on details. Strategies are broken down systematically into sequenced steps using a task analysis procedure. The language of explicit instruction has to be clear and consistent. The skills must be demonstrated and explained repeatedly. Popular modelling procedures are used in this approach, e.g. the 'thinking aloud' strategy, where the teacher presents step by step guidelines for doing a particular task; and scaffolding, where substantial intensive instruction is provided and gradually withdrawn as students progress (Santoro, Coyne, & Simmons, 2006). Because the direct instruction approach relates to the learning of sounds of letters, it is also named the phonics instruction approach. It focuses on identification of fundamental components of the word and their memorization (Faust et al., 2011). Therefore, repetition and practice are required to achieve mastery and automaticity of particular skills, e.g. segmentation and blending, as well as skilled syllabification. The direct and explicit spelling instruction relates to different domains of human cognition and involves multiple senses. For example, in developing phonemic awareness it is recommended to combine gestures with voice (Castliglioni-Spalten and Ehri, 2003). Manyak (2008) presented a 'Say – It-And-Move-It' strategy that involves auditory, visual and kinaesthetic perception and memory.

The phonic approach supporters highlight the importance of phonemic awareness and letter-sound relationship followed by alphabetic understanding (O'Sullivan, 2000; Bissaker & Westwood, 2006; Santoro et al.).

The explicit spelling instruction approach is based on the theory of developmental spelling. It explains the stages of human development of literacy that begins with oral language development, through sounds identification and then through grapheme-phoneme relationship, and ends in more complex morphological word studies (Bear and Templeton, 1998; O'Sullivan, 2000). There are three fundamental abilities advocated for literacy/spelling development: phonemic awareness; orthographic awareness; and morphological awareness (Kenn, Wilson-Fowler, Brimo and Perrin, 2012; Senechal, Oullette, Pagan and Lever, 2012). The level of their development and their integration affects the phonetic, visual, structural and semantic knowledge of a child. Also, because of these three abilities are interrelated, some authors indicate a relationship between spelling, writing and reading. For example, according to O'Sullivan, writing promotes spelling development. Interestingly, Santoro et al. (2006) stated that spelling practice increases reading achievement. However, Ganske (1999) noted that there is higher percentage of students with spelling difficulties to students with reading problems.

The explicit instruction supporters encourage teachers to conduct frequent review and revision. The examination of errors is crucial to understand sub-skills that indicate the stage of spelling/literacy development (Ruth, Bahr, Silliman and Berninger, 2009; Westwood, 2005,2008). Moats (1993) highlighted the importance of a phonological approach to spelling assessments and its phonological and phonetics means of errors. By determining the level of student achievement, assessment assists teachers in planning suitable instruction, enable research into special learning difficulties and helps in the determination of appropriate intervention. (Ganske, 1999). However, importantly, Critten and Pine (2009) stated that instead of looking only at spelling accuracy or the lack of it, phonics instruction takes into account children's' verbal explanations in order to determine their understanding.

The second approach is holistic and relates to top-down processes of learning that, unlike phonics instruction, begins from the wide perspective of wholeness and ends in detail (Stanovich, 1980, Stanovich, West, and Feeman, 1984, as cited in Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011). For example instruction begins from the sentence level, proceeds through the word level and finally arrives at the sub-word level.

Again, in contrast to phonics instruction, in holistic approach the learner is expected to acquire the alphabetic principle (in this case spelling rules and word patterns), independently. This achieved through immersion in language learning and literature through listening, reading, speaking and writing and the provision of authentic reading and writing opportunities (Butyniec-Thomas and Woloshyn, 1997; Collins and O'Brien, 2011; Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011). Whole-language approach supporters highlight the importance of children's self-determined construction of meaning. Therefore, the teaching instruction is indirect. Teachers are viewed as facilitators of learning rather than directors. (Butyniec-Thomas and Woloshyn, 1997; Collins and O'Brien, 2011). They respect the ability of learners to set and determine their own purposes and they limit their influence just to an adequate guidance and immediate feedback to children's independent attempts to spelling (Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011). The holistic approach takes into consideration the whole child's needs: cognitive, emotional, physical and spiritual (Collins and O'Brien). As early literacy development is influenced by multiple metalinguistic variables simultaneously, the whole language approach supporters believe that by immersion in natural literacy environment a student is able to choose independently preferred domains suitable to the task and his/her abilities. Assessment is usually informal and the teacher assesses the student's achievements through direct observation of their activity, as well as other performance-based assessments and portfolios (Butyniec-Thomas and Woloshyn).

The whole language approach supporters place their attention on an invented spelling strategy that is defined as child's independent attempts to spelling (writing and reading) (O'Sullivan, 2000). Research revealed that there is a correlation between invented spelling and phonemic awareness (Senechal, Ouelette, Pagan and Lever, 2012). Invented spelling involves complex skills and enables inter-connection of internal visual and auditory representations (Ouellette and Senechal, 2008). Therefore, it integrates phoneme and orthographic representation.

Additionally, the holistic approach indirectly relates to the self-teaching hypothesis which states that phonological recoding of written text might be a self-teaching device or 'built in teacher' to develop the word-specific orthographic representation – strings and patterns in words (Share, p. 273). The self-teaching theory supporters recommended problem-solving instruction in teaching spelling, writing and reading (Share, 2004; Ouellette and Senechal, 2008)

Finally, the contemporary approach to teaching instruction, including spelling instruction, is eclectic and incorporates the principles of both approaches to meet the student abilities and needs and to the environmental settings (Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011; Westwood, 2008).

Assuming that the learning process occurs in both direction simultaneously, it is crucial to design a learning process that utilises bottom-up along with top-down processes and focuses on whole language level of the text as well as on the alphabetic/phonic principle (Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011; Kenn et al. 2012). This approach relates to the research on the metacognitive aspects of the process of learning. It revealed another crucial phenomena that is self-regulatory and accommodation processes. Stanovich (1980) presented interactive-compensatory model (cited in Faust, 2011) where information from both top-down and bottom-up processes is simultaneously presented during literacy skills performance, and word recognition is based on a synthesis of information provided by these several sources. Top-down processes can compensate for deficiencies in bottom-up processes. This concept of compensation leads to the prediction that when analytical abilities are slowed because of student, or stimulus, deficiencies then contextual factors become more important (Faust and Kendelshine-Waldman, 2011).

The results of the Butyniec-Thomas and Woloshyn (1997) study indicated that explicit direct instruction in a whole-language environment resulted in better spelling performance that did either whole-language or explicit instruction alone. The authors stated that an explicit teaching strategy can be effectively integrated with whole-language instruction for young students. However, it has to be strongly highlighted that also according to Butyniec-Thomas and Woloshyn research, the explicit instruction alone is still more effective than the whole-language instruction alone. Critten et al. (2009) mentioned that the current increase of explicit instruction usage in UK schools resulted in rapid progress of children's literacy assessment results.

Lastly, it is worth referring to both direct and indirect spelling instruction for children with learning difficulties. The whole language approach requires non-stop guide and interaction that, in the school class setting, is almost impossible to implement. However, immediate feedback is a great basis in an one-to-one technique that is effective in teaching students with learning difficulties. The strength of phonics instruction is its simple and useful application in the school class environment. Also, phonics instruction is structured and explicit, which is crucial to success for children at risk.

In conclusion, the learning-teaching process, especially spelling instruction, has to be direct, explicit and structured. However, this process needs to correspond with the environment, and also it needs to respond to student's attempts at independent explorations and his/her natural cognitive curiosity and creativity. The teacher should be highly trained in direct instruction professional who would be able to deliver appropriate instruction at a student's stage of development, and simultaneously relate this to whole language and student's knowledge that is gained independently.

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