

# CHAPTER 2 PHONEME AWARENESS IN EARLY READING

*Zuraidah Md Don*

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread belief that the pace of research is now so rapid that anything published more than five years previously is likely to be out of date. In practice, in the case of specialised areas, topics can remain matters of debate and further research for long periods of time. This point is illustrated by a recent article entitled *Common misconceptions about the phonological deficit theory of dyslexia* (Share, 2021). Starting with the title, this article raises questions about the relationship between technical terms and the concepts they are used to label. For example, what is phonology in this context, and what is the range of phenomena within its remit? At any rate, it does not seem to have much in common with the topics studied by mainstream phonologists in the last 90 years or so, beginning with Bloomfield, 1933. What exactly is a phonological deficit? Does this deficit belong to an elaborated theory or is it just a hypothesis? Is the claim that someone with the deficit can be predicted to have dyslexia (ignoring other possible outcomes), or is it that dyslexia can be traced to the deficit as its cause (ignoring other possible causes)? The most obvious prediction is that the speech of someone with a phonological deficit will be abnormal in some identifiable way; but this does not seem to be generally the case. The article deals at some length

with phonemic awareness; but it remains unclear in what sense or senses the term is being used. Surely, it might be argued, this whole area of enquiry can be enlightened using common knowledge about the spoken language that has been available for a very long time. It is as though technical terms originally taken from the study of the spoken language have evolved in other fields of research in such a way that they are understood by researchers in the immediate field of the article, but have become unclear to linguists and phoneticians for whom the study of the spoken language is at the centre of their area of expertise.

This is a position paper, and it makes a critical evaluation from the perspective of linguistics and phonetics of current research into early reading and dyslexia. It also makes the case that research into these areas needs stronger theoretical foundations, building on established knowledge about the spoken language. Section 2 traces a historical explanation for the current situation, including the schism between phonics and phonetics which took place last century. Section 3 covers the essential background knowledge required to understand early reading and associated problems. This is followed by a view into the current state of the art in reading studies and a brief survey of some selected articles to ascertain to what extent they are based on sound knowledge of the spoken language. The paper ends with a discussion and a separate conclusion.

## **2.2 PHONICS AND PHONETICS: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW**

The study of the spoken language began in Europe in the early sixteenth century, when the Dutch scholar Erasmus visited Cambridge, and having observed the idiosyncratic way English scholars spoke Ancient Greek, he eventually published his work on the pronunciation of Latin and Greek (Erasmus, 1528). By starting with the letters of the alphabet and inferring the corresponding sounds, Erasmus almost certainly created the popular approach which gives logical priority to the letters of the spelling, and looks for speech sounds behind the letters. Later in

the century, the spelling reformer John Hart (1569) pioneered the study of the sounds of English. Hart's work led on to the study of writing systems, and to the understanding that gives logical priority to speech sounds, and created the insight that letters represent sounds.

These complementary approaches can be traced through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and into the nineteenth. When linguists began the task of reconstructing dead languages, they at first tried to use spellings. Jakob Grimm, famous for Grimm's Law, included a chapter in his grammar entitled *Von den Buchstaben* (of the letters) (Grimm, 1822). By the 1870s, however, it was clear that scholarly work had to start with representations of speech sounds, and this advance made it possible to trace languages back in time long before the introduction of writing systems (Verner, 1877).

In the twentieth century, a clear distinction was made between phonics and phonetics. Phonetics starts with the speech sounds themselves, and is exclusively the approach for serious scholarly research. Phonics starts with the spelling, and traces the connections between letters and sounds, and is essentially a popular approach without firm theoretical foundations. Nevertheless, phonics amounts to a very useful fiction, and it remains the most effective approach to teach beginning readers. A comparison can perhaps be made with the geocentric and heliocentric theories of the solar system: The heliocentric theory is used for serious research, but the geocentric theory is a useful fiction for talking in everyday language about such things as sunrise and sunset, and for research in agriculture and horticulture. Leaving aside everyday language, any research involving spellings and pronunciation has to start with phonemes, and not with spellings or letters of the alphabet.

The complementary relationship between phonics and phonetics was destroyed in the middle of the last century by the so-called phonics wars, which involved hostile attacks on the phonics approach to reading, and which resulted in a permanent schism between the two disciplines. The attacks began in the nineteenth century (Flesch, 1955), but were reinforced by attempts ostensibly to provide a better learning experience