How did Clay regard the use of phonics in Reading Recovery®?

We understand that Marie Clay’s literacy processing theory is multifaceted, and we understand the place of phonics within her design of instructional procedures. This article reviews Clay’s messages about alternative approaches to early literacy instruction, including phonics. This is important in light of recent assertions that Clay’s procedures do not address phonics and that Clay considered phonics nonsense. In fact, Clay did use the word “nonsense” followed by the word “phonics” in The Early Detection of Reading Difficulties (See Clay, 1979, p. 7). However, to present this as the proof that she considered phonics unnecessary is inaccurate. Following is the complete story of Clay’s use of the term nonsense, and the importance she assigned to phonics.

At the place in her 1979 text where this word, ‘nonsense,’ is found, Clay is reflecting on two alternative approaches to beginning reading instruction. One approach, the look-say method, was based solely on building the child’s stock of known words recognized instantly. The second approach, the phonics method, focused on helping the child to identify sounds of single letters and letter clusters and blending sounds into words. These two, very different approaches to beginning reading were implemented widely in our schools at one time. Critics, unassociated with Clay, found both approaches lacking.

What were the alternative approaches?

Look-say approach to beginning reading

First, in considering the look-say method, the assumption that the acquisition of a large sight vocabulary was the entree to proficient reading was found faulty. Reading with understanding requires more than instant word recognition. As a brief example, we expect that a first-grade reader will recognize the words “is,” “or,” “not,” “to,” and “be” instantly and correctly. However, interpretation of the statement, “To be or not to be,” will elude the young learner. Reading with comprehension is more demanding than identifying sight words.

Phonics approach to beginning reading

The phonics approach to beginning reading was focused on building the learner’s knowledge of both letter-sound associations and sounding-out abilities needed to decode new words. The phonics curriculum offered an extensive number of rules, presented in what was labeled an appropriate sequence, with ample practice of each new rule. The curriculum was organized to proceed from the easiest to the more-complex rules for identifying sounds and blending sounds to pronounce words. Again, the goal of the phonics approach was mastery of word recognition skills, and learners did acquire the rules. However, as with the look-say method, the effectiveness of the phonics method in supporting a learner’s comprehension was questioned. For example, following a year of instruction, a reader would be expected to decode the words “bark,” “rig,” “main” and “mast” successfully; however, this would not ensure understanding of the statement: “The fore- and main-masts on this bark are rigged square.” Reading for meaning requires more than using phonics rules to decode words.

An alternative view

Clay’s assessment of these instructional approaches resulted from her study of the reading behaviors of beginning readers. She focused on documenting the emerging literacy behaviors of children making proficient progress in reading and writing. She discovered that even as beginners, those readers were attentive to multiple aspects of printed language, i.e., they used many sources of information to read for meaning. The sources of information they attended to include

1. the message, or meaning
2. sentence structures of written language

Understanding Marie Clay’s Perspective on Phonics

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What did Clay’s evidence reveal?

Proficient readers
Clay’s proficient readers attended closely to the print, scanning each letter in a word in serial order (left to right) and each word in text (#4 and #5 above) and combined that information with “information they carry in their heads from their past experiences with language” and their world (Clay, 2019, p. 14) (#2, #3, #6, #7). The proficient reader integrates information from all available sources, monitors the reading, and self-corrects when errors distort meaning. Clay was clear that command of sight words and knowledge of letter-sound relationships and proficient sounding and blending abilities are essential; however, neither is a sufficient explanation of the processing the capable young mind achieves while reading for meaning. Therefore, to base an instructional program, or a remedial program, on either of these single components (sight words or phonics) is an oversimplification.

Thus Clay’s (1979) statement: “Such an analysis makes the terms ‘look and say’ or ‘sight words’ or ‘phonics’ nonsense as explanations of what we need to know or do in order to be able to read” (p. 7).

Oversimplified approaches to beginning reading instruction are what Clay calls nonsense (1979, 2019).

Clay’s (2001) theory of literacy processing and instructional procedures to support the learner’s acquisition of an effective processing system does not ignore the need for both an ever-expanding sight vocabulary and efficient phonics skills.

Low progress readers
In contrast, Clay observed that low progress readers used a narrow set of ineffective processes. These included relying on memory of the book, limited attention to print details (letters and words), guessing based on limited information (e.g., the first letter of a word). To address these inadequacies, Clay designed instructional procedures that incorporate specific attention to building fast, efficient word analysis skills in isolation, in writing stories, and during text reading. These procedures involve multisensory and systematic techniques to teach words, the alphabet, clusters of letters, letter-sound associations, and features of letters. The end goal for the learner is acquisition of a processing system that involves all language and print knowledge sources, including story structure, language structure, words and word structure, letter-sound relationships, letters, and features of letters. Thus, sight words and phonics, while essential, involve a singular focus on item learning (e.g., sight words) and skills related to attacking, or decoding, new words (phonics). Each of these approaches, which reflect a limited theory of reading and learning to read, is only one component of a complex literacy processing system.

A complex approach for struggling readers
Clay (2001) rejected simplistic approaches to instruction for those first-grade children struggling to acquire beginning reading. To ensure that struggling learners become proficient readers ready to benefit from their classroom literacy programs, they deserve instruction supporting their acquisition of a complex literacy processing system.

References

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