

# The Relationship Between Reading and Speaking Skills

## An Interview with Ann Hilferty

*Ann Hilferty, Assistant Professor of English at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, has been exploring the research literature on the relationship between the development of reading and speaking skills, especially with adult ESOL learners. While she assumes that oral mastery, when it exists, influences reading, she finds that much recent research reveals the influence of reading on speaking. There also seems to be reciprocity between them, which may have implications for ESOL instruction. Focus on Basics editor Barbara Garner interviewed her to learn more.*

**BG:** *What do you mean by reciprocity between reading and oral language?*

**AH:** By reciprocity I mean that as skills in some aspect of oral language increase, they help development in reading, and as a person improves his reading skills, that improvement seems to enhance further improvement in the spoken language. This seems to be a continuing spiral.

I became interested in this because some adult ESOL teachers don't seem to think that it is true. They seem to think there's somewhat of a one-way influence: that development in spoken language influences development of reading. That's true, but it's also true that as people develop stronger reading skills, they further enable their development of more sophisticated speaking skills.

**BG:** *Where does your sense of ESOL teachers' beliefs come from?*

**AH:** In a small survey I did a few years ago, many of the teachers seemed to feel strongly that there was a theory supporting the primacy of the spoken language. The word "transfer" came up a lot. Some seemed to believe that a person only had to reach a certain level of oral proficiency in English and reading proficiency would automatically develop if they were already literate in their first language. My guess is that they were influenced by 1970s Goodman and Smith articles [on what came to be known as whole language]. Goodman and Smith became very influential in the ESOL community, even when the reading community began to contest their ideas regarding the acquisition of beginning reading skills.

I later tested 44 Latinos who had, in general, fairly high literacy in Spanish, but not a lot of exposure to written English in their ESOL instruction. Their performance on English tests was quite low. They didn't do well in reading in English. There is clearly some transfer [from reading in the first language to reading in the second] but I'm not sure how much. It's not something that automatically happens. If you withhold exposure to practice in English reading and writing until the learners have advanced oral proficiency, you're withholding the very practice they need to improve.

**BG:** *What are some of the main research findings that reflect reciprocity?*

**AH:** Some of the most convincing findings are reported in a number of studies. Phonemic awareness - noticing the individual sounds in word - seems to help with comprehension of the spoken language. Knowledge of spelling patterns seems to help improve pronunciation and listening. Print experience is related to knowledge of grammar and print experience also seems to help learners acquire spoken language forms, for example, function words, such as conjunctions, prepositions and articles, and derivational word endings, which are endings that form new words.

**BG:** *An example of derivational word endings?*

**AH:** Photographer, photography, photographic.

At the same time, research has shown that we don't speak the way we thought we did. Our model of speech mimicked our model of reading: that we spoke by producing sequences of phonemes. But now we know that it doesn't work like that. That's one of the reasons it's difficult to learn to read.

**BG:** *So you're saying that there's a firm basis to teach the two - oral and reading skills in a second language - simultaneously and not to neglect one for the other?*

**AH:** Yes. And many of the same people who are seeing the connections between speaking and reading also report that beginning reading needs instruction. Under normal circumstances, we all learn to speak. But we don't all, under normal circumstances, without any instruction, learn to read.

The research suggests that in the early stages of beginning reading in a second language accurate and fast word recognition is a good predictor of reading comprehension. You might say that instead of [reading] being dependent on speech, both speech and reading are dependent on the same group of abilities needed to process phonologically difficult materials. Evidence for this is that most reading difficulties reside in phonological language difficulties. Poor readers tend also to have poor speech perception, and phonological deficits in both spoken and written language.

Beginning readers need to learn phonological awareness: awareness of the sound system; and graphophonemic awareness: a knowledge of the letters and an understanding that letters and letter combinations stand for sounds and words. If people are only doing oral skills, it might not include much attention to the elements of the sounds of the language - the bits and pieces - even if they do some work on pronunciation.

After the early stages of reading, the relationships [between speech and reading] may change, depending on learner, task, and circumstances. There is evidence, for example, that while for first-language readers' oral experience is primary, reading and writing become increasingly independent and reciprocal as they develop. For some second-language or foreign-language readers, the reading skills provide the bulk of the new language input.

Most studies of adult literacy indicate that phonemic awareness is dependent on letter-sound knowledge. For example, phonemic awareness usually begins to develop in illiterate adults after they have actually had experience with printed letters. Even the concept of "word" is usually not learned until the learner experiences words in print, separated from each other by spaces. As phonological awareness develops, it helps both first- and second-language learners to understand spoken language better.

**BG:** *What could teachers do to support this reciprocity?*

**AH:** We do know that phonological and graphophonemic awareness develop in a sequence. Steve Stahl confirmed this for both children and adults. These steps can be supported.

**BG:** *What are the steps?*

**AH:** Knowledge of the alphabet; phoneme identity (sounds of a language); partial word segmentation (divide a word into syllables, or into onsets and rimes - the first consonant group and the ending, if it's a one syllable word); recognition of some letter sounds in words; simple word recognition; phoneme blending and deletion and full word segmentation (not just syllables but phonemes); advanced word recognition (multisyllabic words, demonstrating less frequent spelling patterns).

**BG:** *Who are some of the researchers working in this area?*

**AH:** Just a few of the names that come to mind: Linnea Ehri, Beatrice DeGelder and Jose Morais, Maria Carlo, Charles Read, Lenore Ganschow, James Flege, John Strucker and Rosalind Davidson.

**BG:** *What kind of classroom research could an interested teacher do to explore these ideas?*

**AH:** One suggestion might be for teachers to design classroom research projects following some of the recommendations researchers are making for beginning reading instruction. For example, teachers might include sequenced instruction and practice, for those students who need it, in phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, and knowledge of the simple English spelling patterns. Teachers can adapt the materials for this from their regular lessons. Then, measuring and recording the students' progress in these skills, teachers might look for relationships with progress in other language skills, both oral and written.

**BG:** I hope we hear from teachers who try this out.

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