

‘Explicit Instruction’ Provides Dramatic Benefits in Learning to Read

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Summary: When it comes to learning to read, new research suggests that explicit instruction—a phonics teaching method in which the relationship between sound and spelling is taught directly and systematically—is more effective than self-discovery through reading.

The ability to read is foundational to education, but prolonged school closures and distance [learning](#) due to the pandemic have imposed unique challenges on the [teaching](#) of many fundamental skills. When in-person classes resume, many students will likely need a period of catch-up learning, especially those who lag behind in basic reading skills.

New research published in the journal [Psychological Science](#) shows that people who were taught to read by receiving explicit instructions on the relationship between sounds and spelling experienced a dramatic improvement compared to learners who discovered this relationship naturally through the reading process. These results contribute to an ongoing debate about how best to teach children to read.

A team of researchers from Royal Holloway, University of London, tested both techniques on a group of 48 adults who, over an intensive two-week period, were taught to read a new language that was printed in unfamiliar symbols.

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— K. Rastle, Royal Holloway

One half of the participants learned spelling-to-sound and spelling-to-meaning regularities solely through experience with reading the novel words during training. The other half received a brief session of explicit instruction on these regularities before training commenced. At the end of the two-week period, both groups were given reading tests to gauge how well they had learned the new language.

“Our results were really striking. By the end of the two weeks, virtually all learners who had received explicit instruction were able to read words printed in the unfamiliar symbols,” said Kathleen Rastle, a researcher at Royal Holloway and lead author on the paper.

In contrast, despite up to 18 hours of experience with the new language, less than 25% of the “discovery learners” reached the same standard, and some showed very poor learning.

“Reading is the foundation for children’s learning throughout their schooling; for this reason, the learning loss that we are seeing is very concerning and has the potential for lifelong consequences,” said Rastle. “The provision of evidence-based instructional methods has never been more important. Our research highlights the significance of explicit instruction in ensuring that all pupils have the opportunity to develop strong reading skills.”

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Psychological Science, the flagship journal of APS, is the leading peer-reviewed journal publishing empirical research spanning the entire spectrum of the science of psychology. For a copy of this article, contact cblue@psychologicalscience.org.

Reference: Rastle, K., Lally, C., Davis, M., & Taylor, J. S. H. (2021). The Dramatic Impact of Explicit Instruction on Learning to Read in a New Writing System. *Psychological Science*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620968790>