Can the Children Really Recognize Name of the Letters?

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Abstract

Formal reading instruction usually begins at 6-7 years old. In The Turkish Literacy Curriculum, whole language instruction (WLI) was rescinded in 2005 and phonetic based reading instruction (PBRI) was put into practice. Debates have occurred between academics over whether the WLI is better than the PBRI or vice versa. Scholars seem to think PBRI is somewhat better than the WLI but the difference between their effects is not significant. Children's early attempts at reading begin with an attempted understanding of one or two letters. Within 18 months of schooling, children’s spelling attempts depend on their knowledge of letter sounds and their ability to divide spoken words at the level of phoneme, the smallest unit of syllable. Every student’s successful decoding begins with an encounter of unfamiliar word. This encounter provides an opportunity of word specific orthographic representation. As the child develops more orthographic representation, word recognition improves, but the importance of language development depends on word recognition and language comprehension, not just reading comprehension. On the one hand, knowledge of the letter names can enable children to build basic word recognition. However, children understand large phonological units such as words and sentences earlier than they gain awareness of letters. The examined literature points to a lack of studies that reflects the success of phonetic-based reading instruction in Turkish Language study for children in the transitional stage between pre-operational and concrete operation periods. This research seeks to answer if phonetic recognition appears earlier than word recognition. Our research sample consisted of 22 seven year old children. This case study used structured interview form and asked the students to complete both exercises on word recognition and phonetic recognition. As a result of the data analysis it was discovered that the children had slight difficulty with recognizing larger structural units (sentences and words) but had considerable difficulty with phonetic recognition (phonemes, syllables and letters). This study proves that word recognition appears earlier than phonetic recognition.

INTRODUCTION

Reading can be described as the process of translation of visual codes into meaningful language and aspect of language acquisition (Whitehurst &Lonigan, 1998). Acquisition of language is a developmental process. In order to teach learning to read entails children to have
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developmental necessity. In western countries formal reading instruction begins at the age of 5-6 years or at least by age 7 because children reach necessary developmental stage when they are 7 years old (Snowling & Gobel, 2011).

There are several theories about children’s language development. Constructivist theory is the theory which claims that children can acquire language competence mainly through cultural learning and other general categorization or analogy. According to constructivist theory children reconstruct the linguistic abstraction of speech to become productive and creative. They do this by using general cognitive process of categorization, analogy, schema formation (Tomasello, 2011).

In the acquisition of language children develop and use generalizations. These generalizations are schema which is regarded as children’s re-construction. There are three types of schemas that occur as the children grow. Pivotal schema is the first schema which breaks out when the children is about two years old. Pivotal schemas are organized concretely and locally around particular words. The children, who use pivotal schemas, are about two years old and don’t use syntax or word order correctly (Tomasello, 2011).

Item-based schemas are the second type of children’s reconstruction. In the item-based schemas children are aware of the word order and agency in sentences. Therefore they can combine sentences (Diessel & Tomasello, 2005). However the items-based schemas imply imitative learning with concrete pieces of language. Young children with the item based schema hear and use the same utterances by repeating over and over but with little variation. For instance “Where is London” and “Let’s go to London” a child can detect easily “London” in both of the sentences. When children tend to see similarities among different utterances, item-based schemas are not adequate for them to detect and they need more developed schemas to make appropriate abstraction (Tomasello, 2011).

Analogy is the third type of schema. It is a learning process that achieves schematization. The key skill in analogy formation is the ability to focus on detecting similarities in relational structure. Analogy helps them to make constructions (schemas). More abstract constructions in turn cause them to cluster words and morphemes into categories such as noun, pronoun, verb and adjective. Furthermore analogy entails children to realize information about the
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function. Cues of words and construct the words and function with respect to their contexts. (Tomasello, 2011). They employ analogy efficiently in concrete operational period.

Learning to read and write is such the most abstract aspect of the language acquisition that formal reading instruction begins in concrete operational period in which children have already reached necessary development stage to learn to read and write. Although there is a strong consensus among the academics when the formal reading instruction must commence, there is no consensus about how children are taught learning to read. In other words reading instruction is too controversial. There are two main approaches about reading instruction. These are Phonetic Based Reading Instruction (PBRI) and Whole Language Approach (WLA). PBRI claims that printed characters (graphemes) correspond to phonemes (sounds) so reading instruction must depend on direct instruction for the letters and sound (Adams & Osborn, 2006). According to the PBRI there are two crucial elements in learning to read: understanding of spoken words’ properties (phonology) and their written form (orthography) (Talcott et.al, 2000). PBRI gives remarkable importance to phonological awareness which is sensitivity to sounds in spoken words. Phonological awareness requires the alphabetic principle. Alphabetic principle is the notion that letters stand for specific sounds. (Stahl, Hester & Stahl, 1998; Ehri, 1995). Besides phonological awareness encompasses analysis (segmenting a word into its units) and synthesis (combining the constituents segments into whole word) (Schneider & Naslund, 1992).

There are two ways in helping children to acquire phonetic awareness. First one is synthetic phonic approach. It teaches students to sound out and blend letters to form words. Latter one is analytic approach which teaches children to divide words into their constituent letters and sounds (Ehri, 2006). Phonological awareness can be measured and defined several different ways. Tasks designed to measure the construct range from recognition of rhyme (Does fish rhyme with dish?) and sound-to-word matching (Does fish begin with /f/) to isolating single sounds from words (What is the first sound in fish?), blending (What does /f-i-sh/say?), deleting phonemes (Say fish without /f/), and other even more complex manipulations, such as children’s secret languages (Stahl & Murray,1998).

Alphabetic principle has crucial roles for phonetic awareness. Because it is impossible to distinguish sound-letter relationship without alphabetic principle. Development of alphabetic principle consists of four stages. Pre-alphabetic stage is the first stage. Children use cues to
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recognize words but can’t use letters and sounds. The partial alphabetic stage is the second phase. It indicates that children acquire some phonologic awareness and knowledge of letter names and can match initial and final sounds to read or spell words. Even though they lack adequate knowledge of letter names to decode new words, they can remember how to read words by connecting some of the letters and sounds. Full alphabetic stage is the phase at which children develop automatic word recognition. When children achieve automatic word recognition, they don’t think about words in text just concentrate on the meaning of the text the full alphabetic stage indicates that children have learnt the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences. They have already acquired the ability to divide words into constituent units and blend. In this stage they can decode familiar words efficiently. The consolidated phase emerges after children after they have retained full alphabetic stage completely. As they are familiar with letter patterns that recur in the different words, grapheme-letter connections are consolidated into larger units (Ehri, 1995; Ehri, 2005; Stahl & Murray, 1998, Stahl, Hester & Stahl, 1998).

A large body of research proved impact of the phonological awareness and alphabetic principle on reading success (Adams, 1990; Hatcher, Hulme & Ellis, 1994; Caravolas, Hulme & Snowling, 2001; Cardoso & Matins; 1995; Muter, Hulme, Snowling & Steverson, 2004).

Whole Language Approach (WLA) is another instructional way to teach children to read. The WLA can be based on Gestalt theory and Piagetian part and whole perception. Gestalt theory claims that whole is different from its components and sum of components is not equal to the whole. In other words perception of the whole is radically different form perception of its components (Rock & Palmer, 1990). In addition it suggests that perceptual system ignores the details and parts, focuses on the larger units because the whole is more predictable than the detail. Word and letter relationship is an excellent proof of the Gestalt theory (Navon, 1977). Gestaltist researchers founded that readers are not affected by omission of the letter in texts or words which they read (Warren, 1978; Johnson, 1975). Piaget’s idea that whole precedes the parts, is the another contributor to the WLA. The children, who have already begun the formal reading instruction, are in the concrete operational period. In this period children use such general schemas because of the syncretistic understanding that they first perceive and understand the whole without analysis of the parts. This non-analytical habits stem from egocentrism. When a child confronts an unfamiliar word, he assimilates the unknown word as a function of the general schemas which precludes him to analyze the word syllable by syllable.
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or letter by letter (Piaget, 2005:91). Piaget’s theory of the cognitive development indicates that children will only perceive the word as a whole which is compatible to the general schemas, not focus on the letters when they try reading an unfamiliar word whose one letter is missing.

The WLA stresses the importance of focusing on meaningfulness of language. In other words the WLA doesn’t suggest that individual sound-letter relationship is taught initially. Its advocates refuse to give individual sound-letter relationship in isolation initially (Stahl & Miller, 1989). They also believe that acquisition of reading and acquisition of oral language break out and develop concurrently. Therefore they note that acquisition of reading occur as easily and naturally as acquisition of language (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). According to WLA speaking, writing, listening and reading are interdependent and interrelated.

Main aim of the WLA is to bring children into literacy through natural ways by removing the gap children’s own language competencies and written language (Stahl & Miller, 1989). In WLA skilled reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game in which reader deduces unfamiliar words from their contexts. Instruction in reading begins when children have adequate ability to think with words (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Because of the fact that children can identify more accurately words in context than isolated sound-letter relationship context aid in word identification has influential impact on reading performance (Goodman, 2005). For instance in reading a text “the cowboy rode a ...” the reader can predict that the next word is “horse” and notice initial “h” to confirm his prediction. Therefore teachers must encourage their students to make word-level predictions and use context aids (McKenna & Piccard, 2006).

If WLA is implemented thoroughly, it instills love of literature, problem-solving and critical thinking skills. It has some advantages compared to PBRI. These advantages include creating strong-concept of print, more positive attitude toward reading and word recognition. In addition the fact that the WLA exposes readers to rich texts read aloud by teachers increases vocabulary growth (Stahl & Kuhn, 1995).

The WLA and the PBRI stress that children’s socioeconomic status has impact on children’s phonological sensitivity (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Social class difference has significant impact on children’s exposure to experiences that support the development of literacy skills.
Adams (1990) estimated that typical middle-class child enters the school with 1000-1700 hours exposure to one on one book reading while average of children from low income family is just about 25 hours. Children’s informal interaction with their parents provides valuable opportunity for them to immerse into literacy in preschool period.

Teaching to read is very controversial issue but there is general rule that children first recognize larger and more obvious units such as messages, words, and syllables as they develop, they will notice smaller, more abstract units such as onsets, rimes and phonemes (Murray, 2006). This rule roughly displays what method must be employed in teaching to read initially. Reading instruction begins to influence children’s awareness of larger units within two years of reading instruction. After two years children develop sensitivity to the consistencies within grapheme-phoneme system (Treiman & Kessler, 2005).

Learning to read depends on language characteristics. There are two types of language: transparent language and opaque language. There is always one to one correspondence between letters and sounds in transparent languages. In other words every letter represents only one sound. Therefore it is easier to learn to read in transparent languages than in opaque languages. Contrary to the transparent languages there is not one to one correspondence between letters and sounds in opaque languages. (Stahl, Hester & Stahl, 1998; Snowling & Gobel, 2011). Turkish is a transparent language in which every sound is represented by one specific letters.

In the Former Turkish Literacy Curriculum reading instruction depends on the sentence analysis. First Children read aloud the sentences with the teacher. Second the sentences used to be segmented into constituent words and the words were divided into their syllables and letters. After the students have come to notice the letters in the sentence, they construct different words with the same letters. This application depended on the WLA. This instructional application, based on the WLA, was rescinded in 2005 and the PBRI has been employed to teach reading. In the New Turkish Literacy Curriculum, phonemes of the letter are taught and orthographic representations of the letters are introduced with various activities. The children’s initial attempts of reading consist of two or three letters. As classroom teachers teach more phonemes with their letters, children can combine more letters to form words. While teachers are teaching the phonemes, they care to connect the phonemes
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and their letters with children’s daily life and pre-existing knowledge. In PBRI children are expected to build up new words by combining the letters (Bilir, 2005; Akyol & Temur, 2008).

METHOD
Case study, one of the qualitative research traditions was employed in the study. Case study enables the researcher to investigate a bounded system (a case) over time through detailed in-depth data collection. Furthermore case study is very convenient for the researchers to use multiple sources of data collection such as observation, audiovisual materials, interview (Creswell, 2007:73). The structured interview and observation were used to collect data in the study.

Selection of the Participants: In the study the purposeful sampling strategy was used to determine the participant children. Selection criteria depends on Adams (1990)’s estimate which claims that an average middle-class child starts the school with 1000-1700 hours informal exposure to literacy. 22 children from middle-class children who had received kindergarten instruction, were included in the sample. All of them were seven years old. They were assumed to have been instructed by the informal interaction with their parents. After consent from the participant children’s family was provided, the study was commenced. In addition the participant children were given pseudonyms such as “Participant Student 1, Participant Student 2” to keep their names secret and obey the ethical rules.

Development the Structured Interview Form: The interview form was developed by the researchers and the classroom teacher. The form consists of three components. These components are concerning with message awareness, lexical awareness and phoneme awareness. In other words these components were arranged from larger units to smaller units. The teacher taught e, l, t, i, n, r, m, u, k, ı, y, s, d, ö, b. Therefore In each of the parts the researchers cared to use the letters, words, phonemes which the children had been familiar with.

In the first component the students were asked to read the text and match the text to the relevant picture. The researchers demanded the students to read the words and correspond to the relevant pictures in the second component. Finally the students were asked to read and complete the missing letters (sounds) within the five selected words.
Observation of the Participants: The researchers observed the students while they were fulfilling the tasks. Observations were analyzed according to results of the tasks in the each part.

Implementation of Data Collection Tools: The researchers divided the children into five groups. Each group consisted of 4-5 children. The structured interview form were implemented individually not whole. The tasks were asked in order from larger units to smaller units. Just as the participants were doing the tasks in the components, the researchers kept the notes through their observations.

Data Analysis: Observers’ comment and children’s responses to the tasks in each component were analyzed to determine codes and themes.

FINDINGS
Message Awareness:
The researchers demanded the Participant Students to read the text find and mark the relevant picture.

Table 1: Codes on Message Awareness ant Their Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word Awareness Within the Text</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Awareness of the Task</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Awareness of the Task with Slight Spelling Difficulty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observer’s Comment Codes of Word Awareness within the Text: “The Participant Student 22 read the text very fluently. In addition she managed to find the animals name within the text then matched the relevant picture.”

Observer’s Comment on Code of Adequate Message Awareness: “The Participant Student 7 read the text fluently and matched the relevant picture without focusing smaller units such as words, syllable.”
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Picture 3: the Participant Student 11’s Performance on the Task

Observers’ Comment on Code of the Adequate Awareness of the Task with Slight Spelling Difficulty: “The Participant Student 11 did not read very fluently and had a difficulty with spelling three words. Although he did not manage to perform the task very well, he seemed to understand the text then marked the relevant picture.

Lexical Awareness:
The Participant Students were demanded to read the words and match the relevant pictures in this task. Codes were extracted from the observation and the Participant Students’ performance on the task.

Table 2: Codes on Lexical Awareness and Their Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Word Awareness</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Word Awareness with Slight Spelling Difficulty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficient Awareness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Picture 4: the Participant Student 20’s Performance on the Task

Observer’s Comment on the Code of Adequate Word Awareness: “The Participant Student 20 read the words without any difficulty and matched the words to their relevant pictures very easily”

Picture 5: the Participant Student 17’s Performance on the Task
Observer’s Comment on the Code of Adequate Word Awareness with Slight Spelling Difficulty: “the Participant Student 17 performed the task with slight difficulty with spelling ayakkabı (shoes) and sandalye (chair). However he could match the words to their relevant pictures with little hesitation.”

Observer’s Comment on the Code of Deficient Word Awareness: “the Participant Student 3 read the words with poor performance because of the spelling error. The student may have been distracted due to the spelling error and difficulty. As a result he did not manage to match the words to their relevant pictures.”

Phonemic Awareness:
There are five words which have missing vowel, in the last part of the structured interview form. After a short story was explained to the participant students by the researchers, they were asked to read the words and find the right letters. Codes were found through the observation and the Participant Students’ performance on the task.

Table 3: Codes on Phonological Awareness and Their Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adequate Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ability to Read the Words but not to Find Correct Letter</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deficient Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Picture 7: the Participant Student 22’s Performance on the Task

Observer’s Comment on the Code of Adequate Phonemic Awareness: “the Participant Student 22 predicted the words correctly, read fluently and put the correct letters into the blanks. Because of the appropriate orthographic representation and word recognition ability she appeared to have adequate phonemic awareness.”

Picture 8: The Participant Student 17’s Performance on the Task

Observer’s Comment on the Code of Ability to Read the Words but not to Find Correct Letter: “the Participant Student 17 were able to read the first, second and fourth words and find the correct letters. Although he could read third and fifth words, he didn’t write the correct letters into the blanks. This fault may have stemmed from the insufficient word recognition and phonemic awareness.”

Picture 9: the Participant Student 9’s Performance on the Task
Observer’s Comment on the Code of Deficient Phonemic Awareness: “the Participant Student 23 neither could predict the words nor he was able to read the words and find the correct letters. He has lack of word recognition skills and orthographic representation. Her phonemic awareness and word recognition skills need developing.”

DISCUSSION

The present study’s main purpose is determine in depth whether seven years old children from middle class, recognize the name of the letter or not. Our findings are only valuable for educational settings in which the students come from middle-class family. Adam (1990) estimated that an average child from middle-class family receive 1000-1700 hours informal interaction on literacy with his/her parents until he/she begins school. The children, who attended the study come from middle-class family and finished kindergarten. Therefore it was assumed that the children had at least 1000 hours interaction with their parents on literacy.

There is an idea which explains how a child gains the phonemic awareness. According to this idea children first realize and recognize larger and obvious units such as messages and words. As children goes on the formal reading instruction, they come to notice smaller units from onsets and rimes to phonemes (Stahl, Osborn & Lehr, 1990). Furthermore they can’t recognize smaller and abstract units unless they receive two years formal reading instruction (Treiman & Kessler, 2005). The present study’s findings confirm both of the results. In the study the participant children who had five months formal reading instruction, were good at recognizing messages and words which were rather obvious and concrete. In contrast to the findings in message awareness and lexical awareness, very few the participant children were successful to recognize the missing letters which were more abstract and smaller units. It can be predicted that they will be able to notice smaller units when they are instructed on learning to read for over two years. In addition to that, idea of gaining phonemic awareness and longitudinal effects of formal reading instruction are valid for Turkish which is a transparent language. Moreover four of them were able to recognize the relevant animals name and find within the text. This finding can be indicator of efficient word recognition skills and reading comprehension.

The last part on the structured interview form is for alphabetic principle and grapheme and phoneme correspondences. Alphabetic principle is very important for learning to read. Development of alphabetic principle has three stages. These are pre-alphabetic stage, partial
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alphabetic stage and full alphabetic stage. At the stage of the pre-alphabetic stage children use cues to recognize words but can’t use letters and sounds. At the partial stage children can develop phonologic awareness but they lack adequate knowledge of letter names. They remember how to read words by connecting some of the letters and sounds and match initial and final sounds to read. Children have adequate phonological awareness and ability to recognize words automatically at the full alphabetic stage (Ehri, 1995; Stahl & Murray, 1998, Stahl, Hester & Stahl, 1998). The participant students could read and recognize words not the letters and few of them could recognize letters and their sounds in the study. In other words they did not learn grapheme-phoneme correspondences, although formal reading instruction is based on phoneme and letter correspondences. This finding indicates that the participant children could reach partial-alphabetic stage within five months of formal reading instruction under Turkish language contexts.

The findings in the last part of the form yielded very important results. 15 of the participant students managed to read the words whose one letter is missing but did not manage to find and recognize the missing letters. 5 of them neither read the word correctly nor recognize the missing letters. Besides majority of them could know single letters and their sounds but did not manage to know how to use them in the words. This result confirms several studies’ results in the literature (Warren, 1978; Johnson, 1975; Palmer, 1975). The result can be explained through the Cognitive Development Theory and the Gestalt Theory. Gestalt Theory puts forward that whole is so predictable that omission of the letters can’t prevent the readers to read the word whose letters are deleted. In fact a great number of the participant student could read the words which had one missing letter, without faltering. This result also can be related to the Cognitive Development Theory developed by Piaget. In the tasks the participant students confronted five familiar words which had missing one letter. Although there were missing letters, they could read very easily. Because the participants who are in the concrete operational period, read the words by using the general schemas. Usage of general schemas prevented them to focus on missing letter but helped them to predict and read the words. However their natural inclination to syncretistic thought precluded them to concentrate on the missing letters and find them. In addition their syncretistic thought may prevent the development of alphabetic principle and phonetic awareness on them. Therefore the WLA seems to be suitable way of teaching to read for the children who are the concrete operational period and have received 1000-1700 hours informal interaction with their parents on literacy.
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Phonological awareness and alphabetic principle are so crucial for children’s achievement in reading because of the fact that both of the concepts enables children to read recognize and manipulate words and read independently (Adam, 1990; Byrne, 1996). Therefore reading instruction must be based on the correspondences between sounds and letters. On the other hand general sensitivity to grapheme-phoneme and smaller units don’t break out within two years of the formal reading instruction (Caravolas et al., 2001). It is very clear from the study that the participant students were at the stage of partial alphabetic stage and did not develop any sensitivity to the grapheme-phoneme consistencies although their teacher were teaching to read through PBRI. It is advisable for the case that the teacher first starts teaching to read by employing the WLA without excluding the PBRI principles until they acquire the necessary abilities for the full alphabetic stage such as letter knowledge, grapheme-phoneme sensitivity.

In sum this case study reveals that awareness of larger units such as sentence, word occur earlier than phonetic awareness and the participant’s developmental characteristics (syncretistic thought and lack of analysis skills) prevent them to recognize letters even if they are taught to read through the PBRI.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted under Turkish Language context on the children coming from middle-class families. The findings of the study are not convenient to generalize because of the nature of qualitative case study inquiry. However they indicate what the participant students, who were assumed informal, reading instruction for 1000-1700 hours, can do after five months has passed in a specific boundary system. In the study main aim is not to reveal the children’s longitudinal development of reading acquisition or determine that transparent languages cause the phonemic awareness to break our earlier. The study depicted what the middle-class children whose classroom teacher taught reading through direct instruction of letters could do after they had been instructed for over five months.
REFERENCES


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