

The Difference Between Good and Poor Readers

Lately, the media has been brimming with information about how we learn to read. A decade ago the focus was on the war between whole language versus phonics. With new research using functional MRI's, the emphasis has shifted to the difference in brain activity between good and poor readers. Scientists from Yale University have discovered what actually happens to the brain when people have trouble reading. They say that poor readers lack the ability to sound out words. What the researchers discovered is that we learn to read the same way that we learn to talk, one sound at a time. Unfortunately, unlike talking, reading is not innate. It must be taught. This finding supports the view that reading is biologically based and that the difference between good and poor readers is one of phoneme awareness.

What are phonemes? Phonemes are sounds, and the task of the reader is to break up or decode words into their corresponding phonemes or sounds. Words are made up of sounds and the reader must develop the awareness that the printed words on a page represent the sounds of the spoken language. For example, the word "CAT" consists of three phonemes or sounds, (kuh, aah, tuh). Apparently, good readers are aware of this automatically, but poor readers are not. Good readers understand that the word "CAT" has three sounds but poor readers hear only one. Those who struggle with reading have a difficult time bringing the phonemes or sounds of a word into awareness, and they often get frustrated by the fact that they can comprehend what they hear but not what they see!

The first step in reading is sounding out words, and good readers do this automatically and with great speed. Those with reading problems, however, get stuck at step one since they cannot make the connection between the symbol on the page and the sound that the word makes. Because they are trapped at this initial step where they cannot identify the printed word, they are unable to move to higher order language processing skills, such as comprehension and meaning, even though these poor readers might have these advanced skills intact. So, the good reader who looks at the word "CAT," automatically breaks it down into its component parts, identifies it as the word "cat" and then recognizes that word as "a small furry mammal that meows." Since poor readers lack the ability to decipher or decode a word when they see it in print, they are also unable to progress further in reading and comprehend the meaning of words or understand them in the context of a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or a story.

What this new evidence means for the teaching of reading is that, for the large majority of individuals, it takes a balanced program to be most effective. The key word is balanced, and the best reading programs include such topics as phoneme awareness, phonics, whole language, and constant practice using rich literature to develop fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. In its Reading Program, Kumon utilizes all of these components. This comprehensive approach makes the Kumon Reading Program appropriate for the diverse population of students that it serves.

Note from the editor:

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