Explainer: What does the term 'synthetic phonics' really mean?

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We three have all been involved in various social media discussions following the publication of Dr Jennifer Buckingham's call for a trial of the UK Phonics Check in Australia and the subsequent article in support of the proposal by Snow, Castles, Wheldall, and Coltheart in *The Conversation*. The aim of the proposed trial is to determine empirically whether such a check is actually necessary within an Australian context. Why bother if phonics is already being taught well in Australian schools?

As always, however, the devil is in the detail. It all depends on what is meant by 'phonics instruction'.

Clearly, many teachers are incorporating phonics in their teaching already, as one of the Five Big Ideas underpinning effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. But what is being delivered in classrooms may not be the most effective form of phonics instruction.

For example, in a joint statement by ALEA (the Australian English Teachers Association) and PETAA (the Primary English Teachers Association of Australia), in response to Buckingham's position paper, the argument is made that:

> We … agree that effective phonics instruction should be explicit, systematic, and sequential … However, ALEA and PETAA argue that this instruction should always occur within genuine literacy events and in contexts meaningful to the student. Our assertion that phonics instruction should be taught in meaningful contexts should not be conflated with the concept that phonics instruction, as Dr Buckingham suggests, is random and '*ad hoc*' …

But it is difficult to imagine how 'explicit, systematic and sequential' phonics instruction could conceivably be delivered effectively in the way suggested. This may be due to confusion regarding terminology.

Synthetic doesn't mean 'fake'

The tensions regarding the way in which phonics should be taught are perhaps exacerbated by widely held misunderstandings about the meaning of certain technical terms. The form of phonics instruction that Buckingham and Snow et al. are advocating is known as **synthetic phonics**, as distinct from **incidental** and **analytic** phonics.

Incidental phonics, as its name suggests, is taught as opportunity arises, and thus cannot seriously be regarded as systematic and sequential, even if it is explicitly taught. Analytic phonics starts at the word level, analysing or breaking down words into their component letter sounds, and as such is not a starting point in reading instruction. Incidental and analytic phonics often meet in practice; e.g. when a child is encouraged to "sound out" the first letter of an unfamiliar word they encounter when reading a book.

But it is the term *synthetic phonics* that is most widely misunderstood. Frankly, it is not a helpful term but we appear to be stuck with it as it is widely employed in the UK and Australian literature. (It is not used in the United States, however, where the term *linguistic phonics* refers to a similar approach.)

So, what is meant by 'synthetic' in this context? Apart from being truly 'explicit, systematic, and sequential', synthetic phonics, quite simply, refers to the process of synthesis, of synthesising known letter sounds to read 'through the word'.

Another way of describing this process is **blending.** Once a basic set of letter sounds have been taught, say "a", "s", "t", "i", "l", "n", and "m", children are taught how to blend these letter sounds into words: s-a-t; m-a-t; t-i-n; l-i-t; and also

to **segment** words so they can see how meaning changes as sound-letter patterns change. In this way, teachers systematically (not incidentally) teach the various letter combinations that represent the 44 sounds that we use in English, and they do this as the starting point in reading instruction.

Unfortunately, the word 'synthetic' has connotations other than this technical usage. It can mean artificial or man-made as against natural; nylon or plastic, for example. It should not be surprising, then, that it is to this meaning that those not closely connected to scientific reading research might be drawn. In our experience, it is a distinction that many teachers have not encountered. This creates fertile ground for discussion to be occurring at cross-purposes.

This particularly applies in the context of the proposed Phonics Screening Check, which includes non-words or pseudowords to test for generalisation of letter sound learning (poth, shan, veen, etc). It almost begs the (false) assumption that the underlying idea is to teach and test artificial, synthetic, non-real, pseudowords. Hence, the myth is born that synthetic phonics involves teaching phonics by teaching pseudowords.

This is simply not true and those teachers in the UK who have attempted to teach possible pseudowords that might crop up in the check are inadvertently distorting the purpose of the whole exercise: to test whether their regular phonics instruction is sufficiently effective so that it generalises to previously unseen pseudowords, and provides all children with the critical decoding skills they need to be effective readers.

So, whose fault is this misunderstanding? The reading scientists for using impenetrable jargon and not communicating effectively? The educators for not doing their (reading) science homework and not keeping up to date? Neither or both of the above?

We subscribe to the view that it is simply an unfortunate fallacy that has sprung up. It is nobody's fault but it is a fallacy that has perhaps hindered trans-disciplinary communication about effective reading instruction. There is nothing artificial or unnatural about synthetic phonics instruction.

Why do we need to overcome such misunderstandings?

All children need to learn to decode, but some require much more explicit teaching in this skill than others. In particular, children who may be vulnerable with respect to early oral language skills are likely to need (and benefit from) early teaching that has a focus on phonemic awareness (the ability to hear, blend and segment sounds within words) as the starting point in their reading instruction, along with strategies that promote comprehension.

Without such explicit instruction, these children run the risk of being part of the so-called long tail of under-achievement with respect to reading skills and it is these children who are being missed in the academic debate over approaches to phonics instruction in Australia.

For many children, 'revealing the code' that more fortunate others may well learn through incidental means is a critically important step in the process of learning to read, without which they may experience ongoing school failure. Moreover, we cannot know in advance just who these children will turn out to be and so we need to offer effective synthetic phonics instruction to all children initially. If there is a means to avoid children experiencing failure in learning to read, we cannot, as a community that cares deeply about children's life chances, continue to argue at cross-purposes.

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