



## Phonics: its place in the literacy story

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Controversies about the most effective ways to help children's literacy learning have raged throughout our careers as literacy educators. This is partly because of misconceptions of what 'literacy' means. The Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014) defines literacy as encompassing:

*the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school.*

The large and complex area of literacy is often reduced to a long-outdated debate or 'war' (Ewing, 2006) about the teaching of reading and this is usually polarized: either use phonics (the relationships between patterns of letters or graphemes and patterns of sounds or phonemes) to teach reading or use a 'whole language approach' (recognizing words as whole pieces of language). In reality few literacy educators would deny the importance of phonics and phonemic awareness (identifying, thinking about, and working with the individual sounds in words) as components needed when becoming literate. Most, however, would argue that phonics is actually much more important when learning to spell and to write rather than when learning to read.

### Teaching reading

Reading is not just about decoding the text or sounding out words. It is a complex process of constructing meaning(s) from a text. While decoding is one of a set of skills children can use when they meet an unknown word, the research demonstrates that solely relying on heavy phonics-based approaches to teaching reading can often result in children achieving good results on tests that merely ask them to pronounce lists of words. Tasks requiring them to understand what they are reading (Krashen, 2009) require more than decoding. The best way for children to excel in reading comprehension tasks is to undertake wide reading of books they select for pleasure (Sullivan & Brown, 2013; Krashen, 2004). Children who live in low socio economic areas are unlikely to have as many opportunities to read in this way when compared with their more affluent peers because of difficulties in accessing a wide range of quality texts at home and sometimes at school.

Competent, experienced readers sample just enough visual information to feel satisfied that they have grasped the meaning so far of whatever text they are reading. They also bring their past experiences and knowledge of language to the information in a specific text and use prediction and questioning strategies to test and re-test that they have understood the author's purpose in this particular context. Thus, over-emphasis on the letter-sound relationship can be very confusing for children learning to read.

### ***A phonics approach***

There are two kinds of approaches to phonics teaching: synthetic and analytic. A *synthetic* phonics approach starts with a limited set of letters that are taught by the sounds they represent and built into different kinds of words. Gradually more letters are added and then consonant blends and other combinations are introduced. The *analytic* approach is designed to exploit the alphabetic principle. It encourages learners to look at whole words and break them down into their phonemes. While both are useful, solely using phonics, can seem nonsensical to the learner because it obscures the function of reading (i.e. extracting meaning from print). Many of the texts or basal readers contrived to focus on a few words that can be sounded out lack coherence beyond the sentence level (see for example *The Fitzroy Readers*). Constant practice at producing phonemes and blending them together into a word in a decontextualised drill is not helpful for many children and can be demotivating.

### ***Phonics and learning to write and spell***

Phonics and phonemic awareness is therefore most important for writing and spelling processes rather than when learning to read. As Pearson (2004, p.225) demonstrates:

*...writing is the medium through which both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge develop – the former because students have to segment the speech stream of spoken words to focus on a phoneme and the latter because there is substantial transfer value from the focus on sound-symbol information in spelling to symbol-sound knowledge in reading.*

It is particularly in writing and spelling that children need the clearest understanding of the alphabetic principle. In English there are 44 sounds and only 26 letters that together offer up 120+ grapheme choices so it is almost untruthful to suggest to children that English is predominantly phonically regular. Think of the phonetic value of the “y” in the word Pyne (as an apposite example), and in the words yes, and happy. And then of course there is the phonetic value of “ough” in *tough, though, through, bough, trough, nought, cough, hiccough, borough, plough*.

### ***Using a repertoire of literacy strategies***

If children learn to decode words but do not know what these words mean, they will be merely ‘barking at print’ and missing the most important part within this definition, that of comprehending the meaning of text. As Emmitt, Hornsby and Wilson (2013, p.3) state:

*Three important sources of information in text are meaning, grammar and letter-sound relationships – often referred to as semantics, syntax and graphophonic relationships respectively.*

These sources or cueing systems work together. Over-emphasis on any one cueing system when learning to read is ineffective.

Research has shown that employing a repertoire of strategies and approaches that use and develop all three cueing systems and are shaped to meet the learning needs and strategies of individual children is the most effective approach to the teaching of reading. In 2005 the project *In Teachers’ Hands* (Louden, et al., 2005) investigated the link between children’s growth in English literacy in the early years of schooling and their teachers’ classroom teaching strategies. 2000 children from each state and territory were assessed at the beginning and end of their first or second year at school and the teaching practices used by the teachers whose children made most progress were explored.

The most effective teachers used a **wide repertoire of teaching strategies tailored to meet the needs of the children. They implemented these key teaching practices with greater consistency, skill and subtlety because of their knowledge and understanding of the strategies and how they align with each cueing system.**

Sharing rich and authentic texts that engage children, introducing a balance between sight words which are not phonically regular and need to be learnt by sight (e.g. the word *said*), and those that can be easily decoded (e.g. *cat*), and talking about the possible meanings and different perspectives raised in a text are all important in helping children learn to read. Of course some children may need more time with a repetition of particular skills and strategies. Sometimes this will include more emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness.

If we truly care about all Australian children becoming literate we must stop perpetuating a narrow debate about what literacy is and we must stop using outdated misunderstandings and definitions. There is no single recipe for literacy learning. To propose a solely phonics approach will short change many children and lead to their disengagement from the literacy learning process. Teachers need to have a deep understanding of a repertoire of strategies and approaches carefully chosen to suit the intellectual needs of individual children to ensure all children learn to read for meaning and enjoy it.

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