

Read all about it

READING INVOLVES MUCH MORE THAN SIMPLY SOUNDING OUT LETTERS OR WORDS, AND IS HARD TO MASTER, BUT SYNTHETIC PHONICS PROGRAMS ENABLE EVERY CHILD TO LEARN TO READ AND SPELL. JO-ANNE DOONER EXPLAINS HOW.



Teachers, principals and academics are eagerly reading the new draft national English curriculum, a document that makes it clear that reading involves much more than simply sounding out letters or words, and is much harder to master. Over the past decade alone, governments in the United States, Britain and Australia have all commissioned major reviews in order to establish the best approach to implement literacy programs in early childhood education.

All have independently come to the same central conclusion that the early stages of teaching reading and spelling must include a synthetic phonics approach – often called systematic or explicit phonics in Australia. As the draft national English curriculum recognises, though, learning to read must take a balanced approach that encompasses phonemic awareness, synthetic phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

Exactly how best to teach reading and spelling is still not agreed upon, partly because English spelling is pretty complicated. Another problem is that, while our brains are programmed to learn spoken language, they're not hardwired to learn to read. We're not born with a 'reading' gene, but our neural pathways have been able to 're-wire' in such a way that allows reading to be learned.

This is why we need strategies for teaching that respect the technical difficulties of reading and spelling in English. The fastest, most effective and most inclusive strategies that avoid the unnecessary underperformance and failure of many of our children are based on systematic synthetic phonics.

A further problem is that some teaching has emphasised the importance of children getting 'the right answer' rather than the development of underlying reading skills, which can lead to guessing and an over-reliance on illustrations.

Traditionally, the teaching of reading has focussed on the letter, often alongside its name; but with only 26 letters and 44 sounds to be represented there just aren't enough letters to go around. This leads to

complexities that puzzle many children such as the letter 'c' starting words such as 'cat,' 'chop,' 'Christmas' and 'ceiling' to say nothing of its use in words such as 'social.' George Bernard Shaw once challenged his audience how to pronounce 'ghoti.' In response to their immediate bafflement, he pronounced it 'fish,' with 'gh' as in 'cough,' 'o' as in 'women' and 'ti' as in 'initial.' Shaw's demonstration shows that English is a difficult written language indeed, one that's not easily caught without being taught and, yes, this is the reason behind the renewal of interest in explicit teaching. The fact is, though, that English is nowhere near as random or difficult as you might think when you're taught how it works and given lots of time and feedback to get it.

Other countries with a more straightforward orthography such as Italy where, by and large, their 21 letters can easily accommodate the 26 sounds of Italian, have a drastically lower level of national reading failure. Such is the straightforwardness of the Italian system that their word for writing is the same as their word for spelling. If only we could make it so simple. Back in the English-speaking world, many children do 'crack the code' for themselves, but the unfortunate fact is that we also leave far too many behind.

As the draft national English curriculum states, English learning for early reading and writing must include 'phonological knowledge and phonemic awareness, sound-letter correspondences, and using syntactic and semantic cues to make meaning.' Let me tease that out in terms of phonemic awareness; phonic knowledge; vocabulary knowledge; reading fluency; and reading comprehension.

Phonemic awareness and phonics

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, focus on and manipulate phonemes – or sounds – in spoken words. It has been found that having good phonemic awareness is the best indicator of future success in learning to read.

Synthetic phonics starts from the basis that there are 44 sounds used in the English language and that these are all taught in an explicit fashion. Synthetic phonics teaches children how each of the 44 phonemes can be represented by letters or combinations of letters – or graphemes. It allows children to master the phonic code from the very simple to the more complex in a systematic way. This step-by-step method of teaching, with each stage building on and reinforcing the previous stage, really gets results.

In the Get Reading Right program, for example, the sequence of the first eight sounds – 's,' 'm,' 'c,' 't,' 'g,' 'p,' 'a' and 'o' – are taught together over four to six weeks. This is much faster than other approaches that can take 'a sound a week,' even though what is actually meant is 'a letter a week.' Putting these sounds together is called 'blending' or 'synthesising' and produces over 40 words; not bad for a child's first few weeks at school. You can also imagine the confidence levels that come from this level of progress. The first 30 sounds can be taught in about 20 weeks, in some cases even faster.

Synthetic phonics aims for zero reading failure so that from day one, lesson one, struggling children are identified for small amounts of attention in order that no one in the class should be left struggling before the class moves on to the next unit. The idea is that the first wave of teaching is as effective as possible rather than relying on literacy support to pick up the pieces over the years to come. Studies in Scotland show that the benefits of synthetic phonics are more widespread than with other approaches and have even shown boys to be ahead of girls in a number of areas. The benefits of the approach have been shown to persist through to secondary school, almost seven years later.

A particular emphasis in some phonics programs has been to target fluency, or automaticity, at each level with a 'fast read' of the target words – looking for 'cat,' not 'c-a-t.' This frees up working memory capacity, making the next stage easier to learn and also assists in improving comprehension. The easier the decoding process is

for the child, the more working memory is left for comprehension.

Synthetic phonics theory recognises the limitations of an over-reliance on visual memory approaches and so reduces demands on memory to a minimum. Children need to learn 'by sight' only a small number of irregular, high-frequency words that are essential for their writing and that, at their stage of reading development, can't yet be decoded. The first half dozen are 'I,' 'was,' 'are,' 'the,' 'to' and 'she.' Such an approach clearly delineates the decodable from the non-decodable in the early stages, thus helping the child to adopt a blending and segmentation approach as their default strategy, which can quickly become automatic.

Phonic knowledge

Once a child can hear phonemes in a word, he or she needs to learn that we can assign a letter to represent each phoneme. For example to read the word 'cat,' the child has to recognise that the 'c' represents the phoneme /c/ the 'a,' /a/ and the 't,' /t/; then blend or glue each of these together to read the word 'cat.' Similarly to spell the word, 'cat,' the child needs to be able to break the word 'cat' into each of the three phonemes and then choose a letter to represent each one, thereby spelling the 'cat.'

Vocabulary knowledge

Our children are living today in a society where they are more likely to have mastered the internet before they even start Kindergarten. Communication takes so many non-vocal forms that we sometimes forget to use words and simply talk. The result? Word poverty, or an underdeveloped vocabulary. We teachers can do a lot to enrich the vocabulary of children simply by reading to our students more, and encouraging parents to read to their children. The more we read, the better our vocabulary. Add the convoluted spellings of the English language, and we find that more and more children, and adults, underperform in writing because they can't spell the words they'd like to use, and so write the bare minimum.

Reading fluency

Reading fluency is only one of the several critical factors necessary for good reading comprehension. When children read out loud with speed, accuracy and expression, they're more likely to comprehend and remember the content than if they read with difficulty. Being a fluent reader leaves a child with enough working memory to attend to comprehension.

Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the ability to get the meaning from a text. We use our background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge to create sensory images and then to understand what is read. It's the creation of sensory or visual images that makes reading so much fun. Very good comprehension allows a child to take meaning from the text and transform it into something different, something their own. Without good comprehension, all learning, in all subjects, is affected.

What are schools doing?

There is a small but growing number of schools whose goal is zero failure; they have had to challenge accepted ways of teaching and have adopted synthetic phonics enthusiastically as their approach to the early teaching of reading and spelling.

In late 2007, Blaxcell Street Public School in Sydney implemented synthetic phonics across the whole school. In an area where 98 per cent of children are from a language background other than English, teaching reading and spelling is a huge challenge with 52 per cent of pupils facing reading difficulties. With just two days of literacy training on the theory of synthetic phonics and the practicalities of its implementation, the staff of Blaxcell Street initiated synthetic phonics lessons across the school for just half an hour per day. In just four months, the previous figures of 52 per cent were reduced to 12 per cent. The staff aim to push this even lower.

As Blaxcell Street Deputy Principal Hani Zahra explains, staff also used some simple

approaches to address vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency and reading comprehension. Classroom teachers read to their classes every day, increased vocabulary through rich talking and listening activities, and initiated an explicit, systematic comprehension program. 'The aim,' says Zahra, 'is to support all children in achieving success.'

Killara Public School in the North Shore of Sydney also implemented the same program in the middle of 2008. 'In one term we were able to see real differences,' says Killara Principal Kathy Rembisz. 'Our Kindergarten students can now make words independently, can identify sounds anywhere within a word, and are reading and writing much more challenging words. Our Year 1 children have taken off, and we're seeing a great improvement in all aspects of literacy.'

The good news for teachers is that you can give your students the types of early learning experiences that ensure reading development in ways that they find enjoyable and entertaining.

I'm looking forward to seeing the roll out of the new national curriculum for English because, if its current draft form remains largely intact, it will help our schools to implement a synthetic phonics approach, which is a simple, scientifically-proven way to teach every child to read and spell. **T**

Jo-Anne Dooner is a literacy trainer, primary school vice principal and author of the Get Reading Right literacy program.

LINKS:

Email jdooner@getreadingright.com.au or visit www.getreadingright.com.au

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