

The Australian Curriculum: English and the proposed Year 1 phonics test

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Introduction

I'm writing about the proposed Year 1 phonics test, so it's important to say, up front, that

- (1) I am "**pro-phonics**". I am co-author of *Teaching Phonics in Context* (Hornsby & Wilson, 2011). I am also co-author of a paper written for the Australian Literacy Educators Association, which is available free for all. www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/773
- (2) I believe it is essential for teachers to assess children's phonic knowledge continuously, and that the assessment data should inform their teaching.
- (3) For many reasons, the UK test is neither valid nor reliable. It must never be adopted in Australia.

The proposed Year 1 Phonics Test

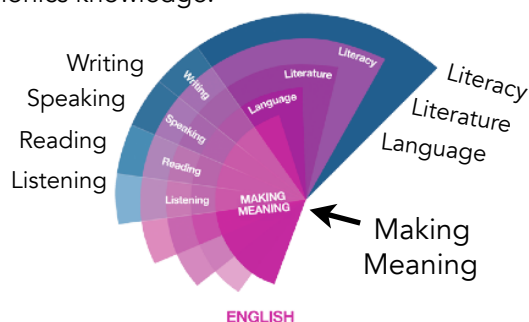
In light of the proposal to introduce a phonics test for all Year 1 students, it is essential to consider key requirements of the *Australian Curriculum: English*.

• The English curriculum is meaning-centred

There is bipartisan support for the *Australian Curriculum: English*. It has some major strengths and a high level of support from teachers.

The logo chosen for English shows making meaning at the very centre. The content descriptors and related elaborations constantly refer to meaning-making strategies:

- monitoring meaning using emerging contextual, semantic and phonic knowledge, and
- attempting to work out unknown words by combining contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonics knowledge.



Indeed, our new curriculum explains that phonic knowledge can only be used when combined with the other cues in the text. In other words, phonics can not work without meaning and structure.

Consider the word *wind*. Did you just read it as a word rhyming with *sinned* or as a word rhyming with *find*? It's only when you know how the word is

being used, and what it means, that you can 'sound it out' correctly: Please wind up the blind before the wind gets too strong.

Meaning is essential for readers and writers to determine how graphophonic relationships work. (ALEA Declaration, 2015; Cooke, 2016; Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Emmitt, Hornsby & Wilson, 2013; Goodman, 1993; Hornsby & Wilson, 2011; Kirby & Bowers, 2012; Weaver, 2009.)

• The English Curriculum emphasises the need for rich, authentic text

The curriculum specifies that teachers use a wide variety of different text types, "including literary texts from across a range of historical and cultural contexts that are valued for their form and style and are recognised as having enduring or artistic value." www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/key-ideas (accessed 24 March 2017).

A clear intention of the curriculum is that teachers provide meaningful literacy learning experiences and activities. Presenting young learners with isolated words out of context, and with nonsense words, means that the proposed Year 1 phonics test will not be testing children in the way the curriculum demands that teachers teach them. There would be a lack of consistency between the current curriculum policy and the intended assessment of phonics.

Nowhere in the new curriculum do we see statements like, "Phonics should be taught in isolation," or "We can use nonsense words because meaning doesn't matter." If the children are learning graphophonic relationships through rich, authentic text, then they should have their knowledge tested with rich, authentic text. Both the learning and the testing are sensitive to context. If children are tested in ways that are foreign to the ways in which they learn, what is the test testing? What is the value of the data from just one day in the year? Is it a wise use of tax-payer's money?

• The English curriculum requires that students have 'fluency in letter-sound correspondences of English'

www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/key-ideas (accessed 24 March 2017).

Fine, but it's not possible to demonstrate fluent processing of letter-sound correspondences in a test that uses words in isolation and nonsense

(strings of letters that aren't words at all). It's inconceivable that such a notion is being considered. Again, it is violating the intention of the *Australian Curriculum: English*.

- **The intention to buy the UK Phonics Check**

The video-clip provided to help teachers deliver and mark the UK phonics check is full of serious misunderstandings and errors. For example, the UK test assumes that letters can be read left to right and that the sounds can be blended so that the child being tested can pronounce or say the word. However, this is not always possible. Consider the nonsense word *roopt* in the test. The only answer considered to be correct rhymes with *stooped*. However, the 'oo' letter combination could also be pronounced like the 'oo' in *booked*. A further complication is that it could also represent the shorter /ü/ sound as in *blood*. Because *roopt* is a bit of nonsense, the child can not be expected to link it with words like *hoop*, especially since it ends with the -pt blend.

Even a real word, in isolation, can be pronounced in different ways. An example in the UK test is *path*, where the letter 'a' represent the /ar/ sound. However, if it's an unknown word, and the child knows the name *Kath*, it would be reasonable, or even expected, that the child might pronounce the word with the shorter /ă/ sound as in *Kath*.

In the UK video-clip, one child sounds out the word *blow* and pronounces the 'ow' as /aʊ/ in '*cow*'. She is marked incorrect. However, /aʊ/ is an appropriate sound for 'ow' and is demonstrating good phonic knowledge. She may not have known the word 'blow', but the test is full of nonsense words so how could she know that this is not just another nonsense word? This test is no longer testing phonics – it's testing sight vocabulary. (Just remember how stupid it is to ask her to sound out an isolated word, when you could ask her to read the sentence, *The wind will blow*. If she could read the word *blow* correctly in context, what possible reason could there be to ask her to sound it out in isolation? No phonics extremist has been able to answer that question satisfactorily.)

When the test gets to longer words, such as *plastic*, one child can give a sound for each letter, but then doesn't blend them to say the word correctly. It could be quite possible, however, for the child to be able to read the word in context (eg. *I have a blue plastic water bottle*.) If the child can read the word in context, why would she be penalised for not being able to read it in isolation? Why not put the word in meaningful context in the first place?

- **The test assumes that letters always have a phonological function**

Quite often, a letter has no phonological function at all, but a morphological function. For example, in the word 'two', the letter 'w' has no phonological function. Its function is to indicate that the word is related by meaning to *twin*, *twice*, *twenty*, etc. The letter 'g' in *sign* has no phonological function, but it indicates that the word is related by meaning to *signal*, *signature*, *significant*, etc.

The phonics test assumes that every letter, or letter cluster, represents a sound. That is a false assumption. It's clear that the "experts" advising our Federal Minister of Education don't understand the nature of the English spelling system. (If they do understand it, then one would wonder about their motives.)

- **Australian teachers are required to teach children, not a set program**

"The Australian Curriculum ... recognises that children are different: they develop at different rates, have different learning preferences and areas of interest, and have different aspirations. Teachers develop teaching programs designed to build on current learning. In each class, there may be students with a range of prior achievement (below, at, or above the year level expectations)." www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/overview/implications-for-teaching-assessing-and-reporting (accessed 24 March 2017).

Some children will start school already knowing many sound-to-letter relationships and how to write some personal words (their name, mum, dad, dog). Others will start school speaking a language other than English and will be from a culture that doesn't even use an alphabetic script. Children are at very different starting points. This is also true for many new arrivals coming into Australian classrooms in later year levels.

We can have no 'one size fits all' or 'one test fits all'

During the war, in 1942, Lou LaBrant (an eminent educator) became frustrated with national concerns about literacy. She wrote: "As is to be expected, immediate explanations have been forthcoming, and immediate pointing-of-fingers has begun. Most of the explanations and pointing have come from those who have had least to do with teaching reading, and who are least conversant with the real problem." Today, P. L. Thomas asks, "Sound familiar?"

(Paper with references: www.davidhornsby.com.au)