



On what makes for systematic teaching of phonics

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Some recent public commentary around learning to read and write is misleading and false. One such claim is that that all students should receive the same synthetic phonics program in the same sequence and in the same way and for the same amount of time. This is not supported by research. Literacy researcher Mesmer (2019) says:

'Although there are many different considerations in presenting letters (e.g., letter frequency, visual contrast, transparent letter name, sonority: the relative loudness of a speech sound) there is not at this time a clear evidence-based sequence for teaching letter names and sounds together.'

Synthetic phonics programs are systematic in the lock step way they deliver content. They are not systematic in meeting learners' diverse needs. Nor do they enable teachers to use their understanding of and expertise in using a range of strategies to meet students' individual needs. Students' listening, speaking, and vocabulary abilities influence the development of their phonic skills: using phonics alone to decode words will fail if the words are not in the students' listening vocabularies.

Reading is a highly complex meaning-making process. Over many decades much of the debate about how teachers can best help children learn to read has centred around how much emphasis should be placed on teaching the most common of letter-sound relationships and the development of phonemic awareness (dividing words into phonemes, the smallest units of sound). In English, a sole emphasis on this component or cue is problematic because English has drawn from so many other languages as it has evolved and so is defined as a morpho-phonemic language rather than a phonetic language.

In English words are written according to both their meaningful parts (morphemes) and their speech sounds (phonemes). There is no straightforward one-to-one correspondence between the 26 letters of the alphabet and the 44 or more speech sounds present in English dialects. It is therefore important to look at the morphology (meaning and structure) of words or parts of words in conjunction with the sound system (phonology). (Jeff and Peter Bowers, 2017).

The privileging of phonics instruction in isolation without meaning is misleading. In English we cannot know the sound (phoneme) a single letter or combination of letters (grapheme) represents in writing unless it is in a meaningful context.

For example, 'We were sitting in a **row** outside when I heard a loud **row** in the playground.' We would not know which phoneme the 'ow' grapheme is representing without the word 'row' appearing in context. In addition, notice the variation in the pronunciation of the letter 'a' in the words 'local' and 'location'; or 'o' in 'history' and 'historical'; or 't' in 'soft' and 'soften'. These word pairs belong to the same morphological family - it is the knowledge of morphemes that will support the grapheme choice when writing these words.

The data supports systematic instruction in phonics at a variety of grain sizes (e.g. onset and rime and phoneme) with evidence that contextualised phonics instruction is effective. (Goswami & Wyse 2008). The patterns of sounds and symbols in English can be taught via real texts in their environment and in high quality children's literature. (Exley 2020)

Explicit and systematic phonics instruction in context requires:

- ❖ **Responsiveness** – ongoing observation and assessment and responding when a child is confused or has made a breakthrough.
- ❖ **Differentiation** - whole class, small group and individual groupings.
- ❖ **The use of a range of approaches**
 - ❖ A whole-to-part approach (analytic) taking a word from a text and analysing its parts; identifying the graphemes that are representing the phonemes in the word or breaking the word into onset and rime
 - ❖ Part-to-whole (synthetic) starting with sounds and blending them before recording or reading the required word in isolation and then replacing it in the whole text. The synthetic component of blending sounds is more often linked to writing as children listen for the sounds in a word and blend them together as they write the word.
- ❖ **Active** – assembling and disassembling words
- ❖ **Independent reading and writing** - affords children opportunities to apply, generalise and transfer their graphophonic knowledge across different texts and task.

(Adapted from Mantei, J. & Kervin, L. 2019)

References (most available on the Foundation for Learning and Literacy website)

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Foundation for Learning and Literacy Touchstone 6: All children are different. Their experiences are different, their environments are different, their ways of thinking are different. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy learning does not work.