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Continued and often heated debates about how teachers and parents can best help young children learn to read are closely related to different definitions of, and understandings about, what effective reading is. This Fact Check discusses two approaches to defining effective reading and argues that it is imperative to adopt a definition of reading that privileges meaning-making. It acknowledges that reading is a highly complex and multi-dimensional meaning-making process that must be underpinned by a repertoire of diverse practices and strategies that respond to the needs of individual learners.

Defining effective reading

The simple view of reading

Some educational psychologists advocate a 'Simple View of Reading' (SVR) model (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018) to define the reading process. *Reading comprehension is seen as the product of word recognition ability and the level of spoken language comprehension.* This assumes erroneously that comprehension can be added after 'sounding out' words is mastered.

There are occasions when we don't know what sound to say until we know what the utterance in which it occurs means. Homonyms and homographs are an example of this. Neurological researchers at UC Berkeley in the United States have recently used interactive maps of the brain to demonstrate that when we listen to, or read stories we integrate the words to make meaning rather than process them separately (Deniz, Nunez-Elizalde, Huth & Gallant, 2019).

The SVR proponents concentrate on the explicit teaching of five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension). These components are important and are priorities for every teacher of reading. They are, however, not sufficient. For example, building children's oral language through play, wondering and talking together and sharing stories are also essential precursors to learning to read and help children learn how texts work. Such experiences should begin from the moment a child is born.

Often, however, proponents of the SVR concentrate on acquiring letter-sound recognition first through intensive decontextualised synthetic phonics programs. For example, Castles, Rastle and colleagues have recently published a series of articles arguing that initial reading instruction should first concentrate on grapheme-phoneme correspondences through synthetic phonics because *they regard English as an alphabetic system in which all letters represent sounds* (see for example, Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). While an important function of the alphabetic letters is to represent many elements of pronunciation, it is not the alphabet's whole function. English is a morpho-phonemic language preserving its history (etymology), encoding meaning through word structure (morphology), and in addition it translates this meaning into sound (phonology).

Contrived texts are often introduced alongside the synthetic phonics lessons because the SVR design framework suggests that when a high percentage of words in these texts match the synthetic phonics lessons, students will be able to make sense of these texts accurately and that repeated successful readings will lead to automaticity in sounding out words, automatic word recognition and fluency. It is well established that many of these kinds of contrived texts do not engage children in the active process of meaning-making because they do not make sense beyond sentence level.

A meaning-centred approach to effective reading

This definition of reading conceptualises reading as much more than the deciphering of the written code. In contrast, it sees that meaning-making is the most important part of the reading process so *it must therefore be the starting point in learning to read*. Human beings are hard wired to use symbols to make sense of the world. The reading process is a thinking process using symbols and integrates cognitive and sociocultural factors at the same time (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004).

Learners' active engagement in making sense of text is highly valued. They vary their strategies depending on both the purpose and text being read. The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009) underlines that reading development is part of children's social, emotional and physical growth. It acknowledges that every child's individual experiences have an impact on the way they learn to read and that teachers must build on

the children's understandings and knowledge. *The Australian Curriculum: English* (2018, v.8.3) supports the centrality of meaning-making in defining reading as:

processing words, symbols or actions **to derive and/or construct meaning**. Reading includes **interpreting, critically analysing and reflecting upon the meaning** of a wide range of written and visual, print and non-print texts.

Learning to read is about meaning-making, coming to understand, interpret, analyse and reflect on the world as well as considering new possibilities for how to be in the world.

(Ewing, 2018, p.9).

A meaning-centred approach understands that English orthography (spelling) is morpho-phonemic, not just phonemic, so it embeds systematic teaching of grapheme-phoneme relationships within authentic talking and listening and reading and writing contexts.

Teaching about phonics must be integrated with teaching about the meanings and structure of words (morphology) and their origins (etymology). Responsive teachers move between strategies that analyse letter-sound relationships and blending sounds where appropriate with morphology and etymology depending on learners' needs and understandings.

Learners understand that letters do more than represent sounds and that the sounds represented by the letters depend on the word they appear in. Indeed, meaning is *required* for knowing how grapheme-phoneme relationships work. Meaning-making is always central to the process.

To sum up:

...the picture that emerges from research in these first years of children's reading and writing is one that emphasizes wide exposure to print and to developing concepts about it and its forms and functions. Classrooms filled with print, language and literacy play, storybook reading, and writing allow children to experience the joy and power associated with reading and writing while mastering basic concepts about print... (International Literacy Association, 2018, p. 5).

References

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This Fact Check expands on all the Foundation’s Touchstones especially:

5. ‘Making sense’ is the beginning, middle and end of learning to read and write.
2. Oral language is the foundation for all meaningful reading and writing.
3. Reading and writing are both pleasure and power. They allow us to participate in the real world, escape from reality and to imagine alternative worlds. These purposes should be at the heart of teaching children and young people to tell stories, read and write.
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.
10. Teachers teach children. Programs don’t.