

Phoney Phonics: How Decoding Came to Rule and Reading Lost Meaning

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The current debate around the teaching of reading in primary schools is a global phenomenon, even framed as being the “reading wars.” In the western world, education departments in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have implemented phonics packages from the start of compulsory schooling (usually beginning at five years of age) and “screening” test regimes in the second year of school (in Australia, Year One). The stated aims of these tests imply that there is one element that is common across successful readers: being able to decode text using what is technically called the synthetic phonics approach. According to the information for parents provided with South Australia’s phonics screening test, “Phonics is vital in learning to read... The phonics screening check is a short, simple assessment that tells teachers how students are progressing in phonics.”

There are two approaches to phonics. The *synthetic approach*, favored by those who promote packaged phonics learning with the associated tests, starts with the letters of the alphabet (26) and then considers the single and blends of sounds that result in 44 unique sounds or *phonemes*. It privileges decoding over meaning. *Analytic phonics* starts with words and then analyzes them to consider how the sounds in the word match the letters. More important, it is encountered in the *context* of engaging picture story books created by authors who want to instill a love of reading in young children. As a pedagogy, it compliments emergent literacy learning by encouraging children to view texts and images in their immediate environment and to discuss and use them in creating—and reading—their own texts generated in multimodal formats (e.g., printed books, electronic texts, movies, paintings, and plays). It aligns with what is often called the *whole language* approach. Teachers can also incorporate synthetic phonics for individual children if, in their professional judgement, they would benefit from the strategies.

Since the “ultimate goal of reading is comprehension” (Nation, 2019), it is relevant to consider *analytic phonics* as part of a *suite of strategies* to develop and sustain competent readers. Paradoxically, the fact that some children come to school as fluent readers is recognized by synthetic phonics advocates; and these children arrived at school with *no* formal teaching in phonics. Yet, they are then subjected to simplistic phonics activities in packaged kits that focus on decoding with very basic readers that are designed for “struggling” readers. This is an example from the *Pocket Rocket* phonics readers that fold out like an accordion with titles such as “Sad Dad”: “Dad is a sad man. / The din! The din! / A pin in the tin. / Sid and the pan. Tim and Pam, ‘I did! I did!’ / Did Dad nap?”

“Sad Dad” is designed to introduce and practice onset rimes, including id/ad, in/an, im/am, and ap. Even though the story is called “Sad Dad,” we don’t know why he is sad, and it is difficult to ascribe or understand any meaning in the story at all. This calls into question why we have books and how we might derive meaning and enjoyment from them. In this way, a synthetic phonics approach prioritizes decoding over meaning-making, which is the source of the pleasure we get from reading books.

Advocates of the phonics screening tests claim that they are fun. In fact, for fluent readers, it can destroy their recognition as competent readers. In one school example, a boy who came to school reading, and who continued to flourish as a fluent reader, scored 2/40! Since the test includes nonsense words in the quest to focus on decoding (he read “elt” as “let,” “sarps” as “rasp,” and “chab” as “cab,” to foreground a few! What he seemed to be doing was re-arranging the letters or sounds and reconstructing them into recognizable words that he knew made sense. Meanwhile, another child whom the teacher regarded as not being a fluent reader was able to sound out the nonsense words as well as regular words and achieve a score of 16/40, all without knowing their meaning. Thus, the raw scores from the test of each child give us no information about them as readers and how they can make meaning from text; they simply show how they decode words out of context.

Adoniou (2018) has pointed out that while the phonics screening test scores are increasing in the United Kingdom where it was introduced in 2011, with children improving in their ability to read words like “kigh” and “queep,” reading comprehension scores have not improved. So, the claims of success of teaching with the phonics approach would seem to be premature. She also notes that the assertion that the test has given teachers more data with which to support children struggling with reading is false. There is no evidence that test results data was any better than the teachers’ professional judgements. Some of the synthetic phonics “kits” include 80 hours of lessons for 20 weeks in small groups of no more than four children. This requires high-level resourcing for systems, and while research revealed improved skills in phonemic awareness and letter sound knowledge, as that is what the 80 hours was designed for, there were “no better outcomes on reading whole passages of text” (Quach et al., 2019, p. 8).

Though the connection made between phonemes (sounds) and text is foregrounded in synthetic phonics, in reality, text more closely aligned with image than sound. Never has this been more important than in this century with the advent of new technologies. Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope have pioneered work on multiliteracies since 1996. In asking, “What is the place of phonics?” they contend that text and speech are quite different and, in fact, text and image are much more closely aligned. Their new work on Transpositional Grammar is groundbreaking.

Transpositional grammar relates directly to patterns in meaning making and builds on Halliday’s view of grammar as a theory for human experience. It locates itself in contemporary times where we are constantly crossing boundaries in multimodal learning and meaning-making and describes the movement between meanings. In this new era, Unicode is a scripting system that is used for everything we do. It contains 136,000 characters from everyday language and numerals to emojis. It includes phonemes and graphemes as limited speech markers. In contemporary digital and analog worlds, fluent readers see and read whole words (text) and images, and their eyes jump over clusters of letters and images, to make meaning. This multimodal world, of which the digital is but a part, albeit a major one, is so different from for previous times. To choose synthetic phonics as the only strategy for struggling readers makes no sense in terms of the application of foundational skills appropriate for their lifeworlds. It is much more sensible to focus, combine, and go between the five components as necessary to support meaning-making; text, image, speech, writing, and embodied movement.

A focus on synthetic phonics comes at a high cost. Not only in terms of the money it costs to purchase these huge, labor-intensive packages that take many hours of time for struggling readers and their teachers to complete and then test, but also in terms of being relevant to contemporary lifeworlds in which meaning-making and comprehension are

critical to successfully navigating everyday life in diverse contexts. They are reductionist, simplistic, and do not provide emerging readers with the functional strategies to make meaning from multimodal texts. It elevates one aspect of our language acquisition above all others when in contemporary times we need to be able to interconnect the meaning forms (text, image, space, object, sound, and speech) and not consider them as separate entities. If we want to grow a generation of new learners who are multiliterate from birth, there are many ways that we can support early childhood educators and parents with a variety of strategies to achieve this. Then, just like the fluent readers who arrive at school with a love of literature and an eagerness to create their own multimodal texts, they would not have to endure “Sad Dad” books and all the other mind-numbing materials that constitute many of these packages.

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