

What's your system? Thinking about what we mean by being 'systematic' in our teaching about letter-sound relationships in context

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Commercial phonics packages often claim to be 'systematic' in their teaching of phonics perhaps with the inference that other methods are not. But what does it mean to be systematic? Is there more than one way to be systematic? We think so.

We know literacy teachers draw on their extensive knowledge about language and about pedagogy to match their teaching approaches to two things: (1) the needs of their learners, and (2) the ways the content they are teaching is actually used in the context of making meaning. Embedding the learning of skills within their context is teachers' daily work across modes, across disciplines, and across the years of school. Also, it is well known that there is no single pedagogical approach superior to all others. The goal is to develop students' knowledge about language and the ability to use language to achieve their purposes within and well beyond the classroom walls.

Teaching about the relationships between the sounds we make and the ways they are recorded as letters and letter clusters (phonics) is no different. At least, it should be no different. Good pedagogy will always be key to quality learning environments and it cannot be replaced by a resource, a package, or a single approach. In their 2017 report, the Australian Expert Advisory Panel for the National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check agreed with national and international findings that there is no single 'best' approach to teaching phonics as long as that approach is 'systematic and explicit' (p. 13). The National Reading Panel (2000) identifies systematic and explicit approaches as: analogy phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, onset-rime phonics, synthetic phonics, and phonics through spelling.

Our search of literacy and pedagogy literature suggests little thought has been given to the concept of being systematic. Is it because we all know what it means? Does it assume we all think the same thing? And what is that thing? We suspect there are many different understandings of 'systematic'

and interpretations about what 'being systematic' means for literacy pedagogies. When we lack clear understandings about our own pedagogical approaches, external pressures can undermine our confidence in our own expertise.

In our search for definitions, we found one from Fellowes and Oakely (2014, p. 228) who describe systematic teaching of phonics as a 'planned scope and sequence for the teaching of letter-sound relationships'. As experienced literacy educators, this definition makes sense and fits within our understandings of teachers' work. In taking this definition, we share examples from primary teachers in our project about literacy transitions across school settings. These teachers come from one of the project schools and the examples shared provide insights into the ways they are systematic in their teaching of phonics in context.

The teachers begin with formative assessment

What do my students know, what can they do, and what do they need to know next?

Using reading and writing assessments, the teachers track and respond to what the children know and what they are yet to learn. These teachers took running records, they administered Marie Clay's letter identification assessment, they collected independent writing samples from the children's writing books, and they spent extended time talking with the children. Of course, these assessments reveal far more than simply the children's knowledge about letter-sound relationships, but for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on what they could learn about the child's control of the constrained skill of phonics.

The **Letter Identification** assessment provides insights into the child's knowledge about name of the letters and/or sounds that lower and upper case symbols represent. Because the assessment requires annotations on the score card, the teachers can pinpoint letters the child knows (and the ways they

know them), the letters they are yet to learn, and any confusion evident.

In terms of phonics, **Running Records** provide insights into children's responses to letters/words in continuous text where there are more demands for accuracy than in the letter identification test. For example, in the letter identification test, a response of either the soft or hard 'g' sound is correct, but in the running record, the child must match the symbol with meaning – soft g for *giant* but hard for *good*.

Writing sample analysis offers different insights into the ways a child hears and records sounds in words. For example, this writing (Figure 1) demonstrates an emerging understanding about letter-sound relationships. The child has successfully recorded the sounds in 'can', however, they are not sequenced as they are heard – 'cna'. A teaching focus for this child could be hearing and recording sounds in words left to right rather than doing more work on the individual sounds and their representative symbols.



Figure 1. Writing sample from independent writing

Talking with children during the assessments and other class time allows a teacher to analyse oral language development and to discuss children's interests and community connections. Anecdotal notes from these conversations will inform teachers about each child's oral language development not only for teaching topics, but also in the ways a child articulates sounds.

They plan to teach and select resources to support their pedagogic intent

What approaches could support that learning?

This school uses a literacy session organised into modelled, guided, and shared episodes. In modelled

reading and writing, teachers focus on the needs of the whole class. The teacher using a piece of children's literature as a springboard for writing (Figure 2). She adopts an analytic phonics focus while writing about the carrots in the story. The teacher and children work to match sounds with symbols. Their analysis includes an exploration of spelling options, e.g. which /k/ they need for *carrot*.



Figure 2. Modelling letter sound relationships in whole class writing

Guided reading episodes allow the teacher to focus on the specific needs of a small group of children. The teacher uses a basal reader that is contrived to teach, among other things, knowledge about letter sound relationships (Figure 3). The teaching here is systematic because it matches what emerged from the formative assessments, and the teacher can track and respond to evidence of the child's learning.



Figure 3. Teaching letter sound relationships with a basal reader during guided reading

In the independent task, we see a synthetic phonics approach as children work with symbols and attempt to match them with appropriate sounds and then an image (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Matching symbols with sounds and images

Each example offers opportunities for teachers to record and track children's progress and, specifically in terms of phonics, they can track the letter-sound relationships that have been taught. Tracking what's been taught allows the teacher to be systematic in ensuring all letter sounds are addressed, but, because the learning is contextualised by meaning, the teacher is further assured that the child can *apply* the knowledge to meaningful reading and writing tasks.

What resources will give the clearest examples and richest opportunities?

The teachers in the project school used a range of texts matched with each task's purpose. We observed the use of continuous text (i.e. full sentences and stories), lists of words and individual letters to teach letter sound relationships. Similarly, basal readers, authentic picture books, information texts, digital multimodal text, narratives, and persuasive texts formed a rich array from which the teachers taught about letter-sound relationships. For example, they learned about 'w' in *Diary of a Wombat* by Jackie French, they found it in a letter sort, used it in their writing, and so on until there was established a deep and flexible understanding about the principle of the symbol 'w'.

They reassess and replan

What do my students know now? What do they need to do next?

Regular administration and analysis of running records allow these teachers to track reading development which includes understanding what they know about the relationships between the letters on a page and the sounds they are representing. Similarly, writing samples offer insights into a learner's developing phonic and



Figure 5. Independent writing using a target sound and its symbol

orthographic understanding about words. Ongoing and sustained conversations allow the teachers to take into account the ways their knowledge is growing in response to the lessons. It is through this systematic assess-plan-teach-reflect cycle that these teachers can ensure the establishment of powerful foundational understandings about letter-sound relationships.

Concluding remarks

Our teachers showed us their systematic approach to the teaching of phonics in context:

- Ongoing formative assessment means the teacher is teaching exactly what the learner needs and time is not wasted teaching something that is already mastered – Adam Andaman doesn't need to sit through an intensive lesson focused on the shorter sound represented by the letter a (think Ants in the Apple)! Teachers without information from formative assessments are guessing what their students need.
- Carefully planned learning experiences mean the teacher can work with whole words, individual letters and letter clusters as necessary to build understanding.
- Modelled, guided, and independent episodes support teacher- and student-led learning that includes explicit teaching as well as independent exploration and creativity.

- Judicious use of resources diversifies the experience so the learner can work with texts contrived to teach letters and sounds, but more importantly with text designed to tell rich, wonderful stories that show the reader what it means to be in the world.

If we accept that language is a living and evolving entity, we need contemporary literacy pedagogies that have real world application. That means we need to teach reading and writing using real and complex texts embedded in real and complex contexts that can support learners to make meaning. Teaching phonics in context reflects the pedagogies of contemporary classrooms. It is systematic and personalised to the needs, interests and abilities of each child. Also, it sets them up to engage with the increasingly complex and sophisticated texts that they must deal with throughout and beyond primary school.

And so, we invite you to reflect on your teaching – *How are you systematic? How do you know what your students know and what they are yet to learn? And how might you respond when next called on to 'be systematic in your approach to teaching letter sound relationships?*

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