

The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading

1. Literacy levels in England: what's happening now?

After seven years of primary education, one in six 11 year olds still struggles to read. The 2011 tests for children leaving primary school also reveal that one in 10 boys aged 11 read no better than a seven year old. The PISA 2009 Study 'How Big is the Gap?' highlights how far England has slipped behind other nations in reading. GCSE pupils' reading is more than a year behind the standard of their peers in Shanghai, Korea and Finland. Overall, in the last nine years, England has fallen in PISA's international tables from 7th to 25th in reading.

This decline is reflected in the skills of England's workforce. Employers report that young entrants to the labour market often lack the basic literacy skills to work effectively. The absence of these valued skills appears to have a direct impact on the high levels of youth unemployment. The Centre for Cities policy institute reports "youth unemployment in cities correlates to GCSE attainment. Those cities with high youth unemployment characteristically have significantly lower attainment in GCSE Maths and English." (2011).

Those who achieve a good start in the first few years of reading are very likely to have accelerated progress in their attainment throughout school and achieve the skills valued by employers. Of the children who achieved the high level 2a in Key Stage 1 reading, 98% went on to achieve the expected level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 in 2010 and 66% achieved level 5. By contrast, only 73% of children who achieved the lower level 2c at Key Stage 1 went on to achieve the expected level 4 or above at Key Stage 2, and just 20% achieved level 5.

If children do not learn to read, they cannot read to learn. Just 46% of children who achieved the low level 1 in KS1 reading went on to achieve the expected level 4 at Key Stage 2 in 2010. A lack of confidence in reading skills prevents children from following lessons at school, leaving them disengaged. In the worst cases, the prevalence of poor literacy in children excluded from school is very high. The Centre for Social Justice found there are significant literacy and numeracy problems in 50-75% of children who are permanently excluded from school. Many children were found to "display challenging behaviour to hide the fact they cannot read."

For all these reasons, tackling reading failure is an urgent priority for the Department for Education. Reading can change lives and we are committed to improving the teaching of reading in reception and Year 1 of primary school. As well as mastering the basic skills of learning to read, we want to encourage children to experience the rewards of reading and develop a lifelong love of books.

2. What does international evidence suggest is the best approach to teach all children to read with confidence?

UK and international research shows overwhelmingly that systematic phonics is the most effective way of teaching reading to children of all abilities and educational backgrounds. Phonics teaching must be embedded in a language-rich curriculum.

What is systematic synthetic phonics?

Synthetic phonics is a method of teaching reading that ensures virtually all children can learn to read quickly and skilfully. Children are taught the correspondences between sounds (phonemes) and letters. They identify and blend different letter sounds and letter combinations together ('synthesise' them) to make a word - for example, pronouncing each phoneme in shop /sh/-/o/-/p/ and then blending those phonemes to produce the word. Through this, children take the first important steps in learning to read. They can also use this knowledge to begin to spell new words they hear.

A systematic approach to teaching synthetic phonics means teachers take a planned, thorough approach, teaching children the simplest sounds first and progressing all the way through to the most complex combinations of letters.

Using a systematic synthetic phonics approach, almost all children quickly become confident and independent readers. They soon move away from the mechanics of identifying and blending letter sounds (or 'decoding' words) and start reading fluently, even when they come across words they have never heard or seen before. Once the process of reading becomes automatic and easy, they can devote all their attention to understanding the meaning of what they have read.

What does the evidence show is the most effective way of teaching reading?

The US National Reading Panel was set up to assess the effectiveness of the different approaches used to teach children to read. For two years, until the panel reported in 2000, it held public meetings and conducted analysis of all relevant robust research into teaching reading. It was the most comprehensive and detailed survey of this topic ever produced. One key area of interest was the role of phonics instruction on reading achievement, fluency and reading comprehension. The panel concluded that systematic phonics instruction produces significant benefits for pupils in pre-school all the way until the end of primary school, and for pupils having difficulty learning to read.

The panel reported that the evidence which shows phonics is effective and beneficial is largely based on investigations which used a systematic *synthetic* phonics approach. The study found that systematic synthetic phonics instruction had "a positive and significant effect on the reading skills of younger children and those at risk" of developing reading difficulties (2000a, 2000b). It was noted that "a majority of programmes in the data base used a synthetic approach to teach phonics" and the conclusions therefore offered clear evidence to support that methodology.

Johnston and Watson (2004) carried out two experiments, one controlled trial and one randomised controlled trial (the gold standard of scientific research) to understand the effects of synthetic phonics teaching on reading and spelling attainment. The research is known as the 'Clackmannanshire study'. Clackmannanshire is a very deprived area of Scotland. Many of the pupils came from extremely deprived homes and/or had significant educational difficulties – and yet pupils tracked from pre-school to age 11 achieved results in reading and spelling far beyond that expected for their age. The analysis concluded that using systematic synthetic phonics instruction enabled the children to read and spell better than those taught by alternative approaches (including analytic phonics). At the end of primary school, following the completion of the intervention programme, children in the synthetic phonics group had word reading 3 years and 6 months ahead of chronological age, and their spelling was 1 year and 9 months ahead.

The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative was led by Professor Tommy MacKay, an educational and child psychologist. West Dunbartonshire is the second most deprived area in Scotland and the 10-year research project saw the authority become the first to state it had eradicated illiteracy among school-leavers. In the Final Research Report (2007), MacKay explains: "Among the individual components of the intervention, the synthetic phonics study has highlighted the benefits of a strong and structured phonics emphasis. The study indicated the superiority of the synthetic over the analytic or traditional approach, and the clearest policy recommendation would be for schools to adopt this approach." Overall, the analysis pointed to the benefits of: "the use of synthetic versus traditional phonics, in changing attitudes to reading, in making declarations of future reading achievement and in the use of intensive individual support."

The importance of a systematic approach to phonics instruction

Recent inspection evidence from a sample of 12 primary schools supports this view. Their practice is presented in Ofsted's 2010 report 'Reading by Six: How the Best Schools Do It'. The report explains that "concentrated and systematic use of phonics is key to their success; this is based on high-quality and expert teaching that gives pupils the opportunity to apply what they have learnt through reading, writing and comprehension of what they are reading".

In 2006, the Department for Education and Skills commissioned the Universities of York and Sheffield to conduct a review of the experimental research on using phonics to teach reading and spelling. Torgerson, Hall and Brooks found that systematic phonics teaching "enables children to make better progress in reading accuracy than unsystematic or no phonics, and that this is true for both normally-developing children and those at risk of failure" (2006).

In Australia, the committee for the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy produced the report 'Teaching Reading' (2005). The committee concluded: "The evidence is clear, whether from research, good practice observed in schools, advice from submissions to the Inquiry, consultations [...] that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an

essential foundation for teaching children to read. ...systematic phonics instruction is critical if children are to be taught to read well, whether or not they experience reading difficulties. [...] Moreover, where there is unsystematic or no phonics instruction, children's literacy progress is significantly impeded, inhibiting their initial and subsequent growth in reading accuracy, fluency, writing, spelling and comprehension."

In England, Jim Rose (2006) in his 'Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading, Final Report' emphasised that beginner readers should be taught using a systematic approach to phonics and cautioned that evidence submitted to the review suggested that, for almost all children, diluting the approach by using a mix of approaches can hinder children's progress: "A model of reading which encourages switching between various strategies, particularly when phonic work is regarded as only one such strategy, all of equal worth, risks paying insufficient attention to the critical skills of word recognition which must first be secured by beginner readers, [for example] if beginner readers are encouraged to infer from pictures the word they have to decode ...It may also lead to diluting the focused phonics teaching that is necessary for securing accurate word reading."

What is happening in schools now?

It is apparent not all schools are aware of this evidence. The Process Evaluation of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Pilot, carried out by the Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, Sheffield Hallam University (2011) reported that just 27% of schools participating in the pilot said they were delivering a dedicated phonics programme systematically, as the prime approach to reading new words. Almost three quarters of respondents stated that they encouraged children to use a range of guessing and context clues, mixed with a phonics approach.

The importance of being able to decode any word, leading to fluency, comprehension and reading for pleasure

Opponents of synthetic phonics voice concern that it encourages a focus on the mechanics of reading words rather than understanding them. However, skilled readers are able to identify a word just from the combination of letters written on the page, regardless of context. Once they have accurately identified the word, they can use context to understand its meaning. Confident reading of a wide range of texts therefore only comes after a child is confident decoding every word - children simply have more time to attend to comprehension because they are fluent decoders.

The National Reading Panel analysis says that 'fluency helps enable reading comprehension by freeing cognitive resources for interpretation' (National Reading Panel, 2000). American researcher Perfetti summed it up as: 'the hallmark of skilled reading is fast, context-free word identification and rich, context-dependent text understanding'.

It is the importance of context-free word identification which led the Department's Phonics Screening Check to include 'pseudo words'. Pseudo

words are used in many phonics programmes as a measure of children's decoding skills and as evidence from Farrell, Osenga & Hunter's (2010) research review reveals, reading nonsense words may uncover deficits in decoding that are not revealed when students read lists of words they should know or other real words. They explain: "Beginning and struggling readers need to understand that they do not have to know the meaning of every word they read. They need to be confident that when they encounter an unfamiliar word, they can decode it, even if it has no meaning to them."

The importance of children reading for pleasure

Once decoding has been mastered, research evidence highlights the importance of fluency and comprehension for children to be proficient readers. A growing number of studies show that promoting reading for pleasure can have a major impact on children and adults and their future.

Evidence from OECD (2002) 'Reading For Change Performance And Engagement Across Countries - Results From PISA 2000' shows that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status. Clark and Rumbold (2006) argue that reading for pleasure could be one important way to help combat social exclusion and raise educational standards.

3. What action is being taken in response to this research and to improve children's confidence in early reading?

Virtually all children should have mastered basic reading skills by the end of Year 1. They should be confidently decoding words and starting to read more fluently, which will benefit their comprehension and reading for pleasure.

From June 2012, the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check will help teachers to confirm whether individual pupils have grasped fundamental phonic decoding skills, and identify which children need extra help. The check will give parents confidence that their child has learnt this crucial skill. It will also provide a national benchmark for phonic decoding, so that schools can judge their performance against the national average, and set high, but appropriate, expectations for their pupils to achieve by the end of Year 1.

To support the teaching profession further, the Department has made available to all schools with Key Stage 1 pupils up to £3,000 of match funding for systematic synthetic phonics materials or training. We have sent all these schools a catalogue of approved materials and training from which they may choose resources suitable for their pupils.

Ofsted has published a new inspection framework which draws a closer link between teaching quality and the overall grade schools receive. This new way of inspecting schools will allow Ofsted to spend more time in the classroom and, for the first time, Ofsted inspectors will listen to pupils reading aloud to check their rate of progress – with a particular focus on weaker readers.

The Department is strongly encouraging schools to follow phonics programmes to completion so that children are confident in decoding and encoding more challenging letter combinations. We also advise that schools faithfully follow their chosen synthetic phonics programme, as case study evidence shows that a single approach is more effective than mixing and matching different schemes.

To ensure that teachers have the necessary skills and training to be effective teachers, we have reviewed standards for teachers which apply at all career stages. From September 2012 it will be a requirement that those teaching early reading should have a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics. The Training and Development Agency for schools, together with the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, is working to ensure that all university teacher training faculties are improving teacher training in this area.

We want to work together with schools to ensure the one in six children who were once destined to struggle reading essential text can fully participate in their studies and the world of literature. By encouraging the use of systematic synthetic phonics to teach early reading, and using the phonics screening check to ensure that all children are making good progress, we want to help all children to master the essential mechanics of decoding words early. Once they've done that, they can quickly move on to develop fluency, comprehension and a lifelong love of books.

Further detail on the academic evidence around phonics is available in a research note on the DfE's website at the following link:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/pedagogy/phonics/a0075951/year1phonicsresponse>

