The Magic and Mystery of Learning to Read: 
A practical approach to implementing phonics in the classroom

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The media generation – our children, and their children, are growing up with the rapid increase in the use of digital media – broadcast, social, online media and mobile communication. It has changed the way young people gather and process information; and, we are only now beginning to change the way we teach reading in the classroom.

This article argues that electronic aids can support the development of phonics knowledge as part of a balanced reading program. It starts by taking a look at the synthetic phonics approach being used in some schools and then talks about how to compliment phonics teaching with interactive and fun technology.

Catching up
One thing is obvious when it comes to teaching reading – traditional approaches severely underestimate just how, at first glance, complicated the English language is, both to read and to spell. Most of us, with the exception of those who struggled, have largely forgotten the bafflement when our teacher told us one rule one day, but contradicted the rule the next.

As the Australian Curriculum states, English learning for early reading and writing must include, ‘phonological knowledge and phonemic awareness, sound – letter correspondences, and using syntactic and semantic cues to make meaning,’ (ACARA, 2010). However, in its present form, the curriculum document so far doesn’t explain how to implement this practically in the classroom or for the media generation.

The good news is we do not need to go back to school ourselves in order to learn how to teach reading in this electronic age. Implementing modern learning methods, such as with an online platform need not mean throwing the baby out with the bath water by buying an iPad2! Use the same content, the same fun games, but let the children learn using a different medium.

Wolf (2008) explains that our brains are programmed to learn spoken language, but are not hardwired to learn to read. Unlike vision or speech, we have no genetic program for reading. We are not born with a ‘reading’ gene; but our neural pathways have been able to ‘re-wire’ in such a way that allows our brain to learn to read. While it is true that many children do learn to read and spell; the evidence is now clear, that there is a faster, more effective and inclusive way of doing this that may help avoid the unnecessary underperformance and failure of many of our children. This approach is systematic synthetic phonics.

Hence, traditional pencil and paper strategies for teaching reading may need to be tweaked in order to get the best results from all students, but at the same time, still respect the difficulties inherent in learning to read in a language such as English.

A balanced reading approach – The Fab Five of Reading
Many teachers have been using phonics in the classroom for decades. However, phonics is only one piece in the reading puzzle. Before powering up the motherboard, any good curriculum to teach reading needs to include five elements that work in harmony to create a well rounded and ‘balanced’ approach to teaching reading. These are:
1. Phonemic Awareness
2. Phonic Knowledge
3. Vocabulary Knowledge
4. Reading Fluency
5. Reading Comprehension (NRP, 2011).

1 & 2. Phonics and Phonemic Awareness
Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, focus on, and manipulate phonemes (sounds) in spoken words. It has been found that having good phonemic awareness is the best indicator of future success in learning to read. Online games and websites that recite nursery rhymes are a great way to reinforce these necessary skills.

Synthetic phonics starts from the basis that there are 44 sounds used in the English language and that these are all taught in an explicit fashion. Synthetic phonics teaching shows children how each of the 44 phonemes can be represented by letters or combinations of letters (graphemes). It allows children to master the phonic code from the very simple to the more complex in a systematic way. This step by step method of teaching, with each stage building on and reinforcing the previous, is
Synthetic phonics theory recognises the limitations of an over reliance on visual memory approaches and therefore, demands just to remember, are reduced to the minimum. Children learn ‘by sight’ only a small number of words essential for their writing but, at their stage of reading development, cannot yet be decoded (irregular, high frequency words). The first half dozen are I, was, are, the, to, she. Such an approach clearly delineates the decodable from the non-decodable (in the early stages), thus helping the child to adopt a blending and segmenting approach as their default strategy.

3. Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary researchers, Hart and Risley (1995) say that our children are living today in a state of word poverty. They argue that in today’s society children are more likely to have mastered the internet before they are required to start kindergarten. And further, that they can obtain the answer to their questions in seconds through Google, sending a text or IMing. Communication takes so many non-vocal forms that we can forget to simply talk! Parents and teachers can enrich a child’s vocabulary simply by reading to them.

Compounding the situation is the convoluted spellings of the English language. This, in tandem with limited vocabulary means more and more children and adults underperform in writing as they rely on an impoverished vocabulary (because they cannot spell the words they would like to use) and write the bare minimum. Having a large and useful vocabulary is essential for reading and writing. Without a sound vocabulary, meaning is easily lost.

4. Reading Fluency

Reading fluency is only one of the several critical factors necessary for good reading comprehension. When children read with speed, accuracy and expression, they are more likely to comprehend and remember the content, than if they read with difficulty. Being a fluent reader can leave a child with enough working memory to attend to comprehension.

5. Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the ability to get the meaning and the messages from text. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) explain that comprehension can be thought of as an internal dialogue between reader and author. Children use their background and vocabulary knowledge to create sensory images and then to understand what is read. It is these sensory or visual images that make reading so much fun! Very good comprehension allows a child to take meaning from the text and transform it into
something different or more personal. Without good comprehension, all learning, in all subjects, is affected.

**Fab Five in the Australian classroom**

There is a growing number of schools whose goal is zero reading failure. They have had to challenge accepted ways of teaching and have adopted synthetic phonics, using traditional and/or online methods enthusiastically as their approach to the early teaching of reading and spelling.

In late 2009, Blaxcell Street Public School, Sydney implemented synthetic phonics across the whole school. In an area where 98 percent of children have a language background other than English, teaching reading and spelling was a huge challenge with 52 per cent of pupils facing reading difficulties. With just two days of literacy training on the theory of synthetic phonics and the practicalities of its implementation, the staff initiated synthetic phonics lessons across the school for just half an hour per day. In just a few terms, the previous figure of 52 per cent was reduced to 12 per cent of children considered to have ‘reading difficulties’. Blaxcell Street Public School also committed to teach an explicit, systematic comprehension program, address vocabulary knowledge and reading fluency. Classroom teachers read daily to their classes and endeavoured to increase vocabulary through rich talking and listening activities. The Principal commented,

The parents are delighted at the improvement in our reading results. The children are proud of their achievements too! The teachers are motivated and highly engaged in the delivery of a quality teaching and learning program that supports all children in achieving success.

In another example, Prairievale Public School in Bossley Park, NSW took synthetic phonics teaching into the electronic age by introducing additional teaching tools in the form of an online synthetic phonics platform. The platform, *Phonics Hero* is being used by Kindergarten and Year 1 students and consists of 228 research-based lessons for early readers. These lessons aim to teach sounds, reading, spelling, camera word (or sight word) reading and spelling, as well as sentence reading. They are all based on the synthetic phonics approach. Classroom teacher, Christine Alderson noted,

Children today are surrounded by electronic devices, it is how this generation learns and lives. In October we implemented *Phonics Hero* as part of our reading group curriculum for Year 1 students and instantly saw results.

Using the electronic whiteboard, Christine began working with small groups of students for half an hour a week. By the first week, some students were playing the interactive games and trying to ‘beat’ Christine in saving the superhero characters on the platform.

**Looking ahead**

The good news is that we can all give students a positive learning experience when it comes to literacy in a media savvy way. One that is enjoyable whilst being educational at the same time, for teacher and student. There are a myriad of tools and resources available to access – games, interactive tools and full lesson plans. We should no longer feel shackled to hours of watching children complete worksheet after worksheet, getting nowhere fast! Synthetic phonics online programs can be quick to pick up and implement; multi-sensory, entertaining and learning oriented in an environment that meshes with their daily lives.

As a literacy trainer, I look forward to seeing more electronic teaching aids available to teachers and schools which will help our young Australians learn to read and spell.

**References**


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