

Synthetic Phonics – the politics and the teaching principles

Debbie Hepplewhite – August 2005

'Synthetic phonics' is a hot potato. The teaching principles themselves are very straightforward but the difficulty lies with so many people in education steeped in an entirely opposite rationale. Unbelievably, the debate about how best to teach reading is centuries old, but even within this last century various fads, philosophies and myths have abounded and people have been taught to read through a variety of approaches or a mix of approaches (whole word, look-say, whole language, real books, balanced approach, mix of methods). For many years, phonics was neglected and its importance, as the basis for the written alphabetic code for English, misunderstood.

A significant percentage of people in English-speaking countries, however, have appeared almost unteachable in terms of reading and spelling – but is this really a problem of their learning difficulties or the methods with which teachers have attempted to teach them? This is such a horrendous scenario that some would not want, or dare, to consider it.

But, tragically, science and experience have shown us that many of the reading instruction ideas which have been accepted as plausible – even desirable - *are* misguided. Teachers have been mistrained and children have been mistaught. This continues throughout English-speaking countries. Government inquiries and analyses of research on reading are ongoing in countries such as America and Australia as well as our own.

In acknowledgement of England's long tail-end of underachievers, the government launched the National Literacy Strategy in 1998 – a commendable gesture. Inexplicably, authors of the National Literacy Strategy programmes, despite the internationally well-known battle over which reading instruction methods are most effective (and which are potentially damaging), failed to test their programmes and 'searchlight reading strategies' model with control and comparison groups using pre- and post-standardised reading tests. This has resulted in fierce criticism and the media is currently helping to highlight the debate both in the national press and on the television - such as the recent series about Ruth Miskin's rml literacy programme on BBC2 Newsnight.

The Reading Reform Foundation was founded in 1989 to bring evidence-based reading instruction to public attention and to hold governmental departments accountable for what they promote. Lobbying, plus a spread of notable results from synthetic phonics commercial programmes and the 7 year longitudinal study in Clackmannanshire (Johnston and Watson) hitting the headlines has finally brought 'synthetic phonics' to the fore. In response to the recent House of Commons' inquiry, *Teaching Children to Read*, Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education, has announced a national review of reading instruction in the early years under Jim Rose – particularly looking at the role of synthetic phonics.

The twist in the tale is that the National Literacy Strategy supplement *Playing with Sounds* (which has *already* been rolled out to the country!) is to be piloted in 200 schools as part of the national review. *Playing with Sounds* is being promoted by the government as a 'synthetic phonics' programme but, according to the leading synthetic phonics proponents, this is not a true synthetic phonics programme and the worry is that this will further skew accurate information reaching the teaching profession and lead to misunderstanding about synthetic phonics as a teaching approach. Fortunately, Ofsted will also be looking at some exemplar synthetic phonics schools as recommended by the Reading Reform Foundation.

The way forward

This is a really exciting time for teachers. I have long since described the need for teachers to make their own professional choices but these need to be informed by an investigation into the research on reading, classroom findings and the details of the reading debate. The Reading Reform Foundation website has been established to allow such independent investigation. The RRF newsletters are available to download and there is a message board to facilitate debate and the sharing of information. Schools can be ahead of the game and start the academic year 2005-2006 with the Synthetic Phonics Teaching Approach for the benefit of beginner readers and to catch up struggling readers and spellers. Teachers don't necessarily need special or commercial programmes – but every teacher needs to understand and know the outcomes of evidence-based teaching principles – then they can make their own informed, professional choices!

The synthetic phonics teaching principles and the starting points for classroom teaching

Likely previous practice and how this might need to be altered:	Debbie Hepplewhite's advice taking research and classroom findings into consideration:
<p>Don't teach words by their whole shape as an initial sight vocabulary.</p> <p>Even with some phonics approaches, many have promoted that children need to start with an 'initial sight vocabulary' to introduce the first words likely to be needed for text reading. This is a flawed approach as it starts children learning words by distinct 'shapes' (which turn out to be NOT so distinctive when compared with many other words). Many children struggle as memory-capacity is overloaded with this 'whole word' learning. This leads to early failure and it contradicts the way that the English writing and reading system is devised. Quite simply, it leads to the wrong reading reflex.</p>	<p>It is important to create a baseline to measure effective teaching and progress.</p> <p>Assess the children's literacy knowledge and abilities as they enter term one of the reception class (FS 2). What letter <i>sounds</i> do they know? Can they read already, but how do they read? [Whole word, whole sentence memorisation, cues from pictures, sounding out and blending?] Do they recognise any letter shapes – upper case and lower case – can they form letters from memory/correctly? Can they identify sounds throughout spoken words? NB: Some of this is helpful if it is detailed (exact no. of letter sounds known), but some information is simply to give the teacher an idea of existing skills (letter formation, phonemic awareness – hearing sounds in a word).</p>
<p>Don't teach letter names as this halves the learning and avoids early confusion.</p> <p>Don't focus on first letters and sounds, then last, then medial when teaching phonics.</p> <p>Some good results are still obtained from learning letter names alongside sounds but to avoid <i>any</i> children being confused, consider singing letter names with an alphabet song in the beginning stages.</p> <p>The child needs to utter the correct <i>sound</i> automatically on seeing a particular letter shape.</p> <p>NB: Many older pupils identified with literacy special needs utter a letter <i>name</i> on seeing letters and therefore can be seriously hindered in the sounding out and blending process. Early years teachers may be oblivious to this situation.</p> <p>Don't hesitate to teach at a fast pace as <i>putting letters and sounds to use</i> is what reinforces the learning. Don't presume that your particular pupils cannot cope with fast-paced learning – have you tried it? Don't decide on behalf of immature children or EAL children that they cannot cope. You could be in danger of leaving the very children that might need additional teaching to receive the least teaching.</p> <p>Don't rely on incidental teaching, you need to be focused and direct. I have never known reception children not to thrive on this approach.</p>	<p>Teach sounds along with letter shapes.</p> <p>Sound out and blend all-through-the-word from the outset.</p> <p>Teach the letter/s-sound correspondences at a fast pace (4 to 6 per week) from the first term in a reception class. Some nursery settings may have started this process but then revise at this pace in reception. Include some vowels and consonants from week one.</p> <p>NB: You can use the mnemonic system (aid to memory) of a commercial programme or make up your own way of helping the children to recall which letters represent which sounds. Involve parents if possible by sending home letters learnt so far written or pasted in a small exercise book.</p> <p>Put the correspondence knowledge to use immediately with sounding out and blending all-through-the-word for reading (decoding). This is the 'synthesising' process. It is the basis of all future decoding. This is the fundamentally important reading strategy!</p> <p>When the individual children can sound out and blend, send them home with words to practise blending with the letter/s-sound correspondences learnt so far.</p> <p>NB: Decoding a word which is within the child's oral vocabulary automatically activates comprehension of that word. Phonic decoding is not anti-comprehension – it aids comprehension!</p>
<p>Don't waste time developing phonemic awareness without letter shapes.</p> <p>There are many great activities to develop awareness of sounds, but these are not pre-requisites for learning to read. By all means enjoy listening to sounds in the environment, identifying musical instruments by their sounds and enjoy saying alliterative phrases and rhymes – but don't confuse this with teaching children to read and spell.</p> <p>NB: Children are able to develop their phonemic awareness for literacy <i>whilst</i> they are learning their letter shapes and related sounds in speech.</p>	<p>Teach the spelling process alongside teaching the reading process from week one of introducing letters and the sounds they represent.</p> <p>Teach sound-letter/s correspondences. Say simple, regular words slowly and the sounds will 'pop out'. Listen and identify the sounds all-through-the-spoken-word. Relate the sounds to letter shapes for spellings. Early work for spelling can include selecting magnetic letters or letters printed on cards.</p> <p>As the children learn to write the letter shapes and can match them to their sounds, start the simplest spelling activities by saying the word slowly whilst the children write down the corresponding letter shapes.</p>

<p>Don't start teaching all the tricky and unusual words until the children have a firm grasp of the 'transparent alphabet'.</p> <p>Synthetic phonics turns on its head the basis of other methods of teaching reading because it starts with aspects of the English language and alphabetic code which work very simply and straightforwardly. Other methods involve the exceptions and trickier words and rules before the children have grasped the basics.</p> <p>Once the children have a good grasp of blending for reading and segmenting for spelling, then trickier but helpful words for text reading can be introduced. Sounding out and blending can still be applied but the tricky part pointed out and, where appropriate, the pronunciation can be 'tweaked'.</p> <p>Spelling more tricky words may need an element of 'look, cover, write, check', but keep emphasising the spelling skills of identifying the single sound units all-through-the-spoken-word as a continuum. Send word lists home for practice which specify whether they are 'look, cover, write, check' words or to be spoken only.</p>	<p>Teach a common spelling version of long vowel sounds and other digraphs as a continuation of learning letter/s-sound and sound-letter/s correspondences.</p> <p>These could include ai, ee, ie, oa, ue, ck, ng, oo, ch, sh, th, qu, ou, oi, er, ar.</p> <p>Different commercial programmes have their own order of introduction and teachers may wish to follow these to take advantage of the resources they include to support classroom teaching.</p> <p>Following on from the first spelling version of a sound, continue to introduce different spelling versions in a systematic way. Include plenty of revision and rehearsal and keep informing parents by sending completed recorded activities and games-to-do home.</p> <p>Plan lots of dictation activities from letter level (can you write 'b'?) to digraph level (can you write me three versions of the /oa/ sound?) to word, sentence and text level. Hold the pencil with a traditional tripod grip ('froggy legs at the bottom of the painted part and log under').</p>
<p>Don't expect children to read books which rely on repetition and whole word/sentence memorisation or which are beyond their phonic knowledge and skills.</p> <p>This will require a very big change in practice for most schools. Whilst some children manage perfectly fine on such books, bear in mind that it encourages whole word memorisation which leads to a flawed 'reading reflex'.</p> <p>Most schools apply the multi-cueing reading strategies of guessing/predicting words from picture, context and initial letter cues. It is <i>mistakenly</i> thought that beginner readers need to learn through these different strategies, but these are all part of 'whole language' reading strategies and lead children away from becoming proficient decoders. These guessing traits are identified as <i>failings</i> of readers with literacy special needs and yet they correspond with the way that teachers have taught the children and the way that teachers are trained to teach children. This is a major cause of hardship for many children who sometimes get by throughout their infant years, but desperately struggle as text becomes more complex. BAN WORD-GUESSING!</p> <p>The damage to readers who tend to read words as whole shapes and who do not have a comprehensive code-knowledge can be hidden even amongst adults with degrees and successful careers.</p>	<p>Provide decodable words, then sentences, then text to read and books which match the children's level of phonic knowledge and skills.</p> <p>NB: Phonics decodable books are becoming increasingly available and teachers can write their own early material.</p> <p>Children taught by the Synthetic Phonics Teaching Approach become very knowledgeable about phonics – the building blocks and code of the English language – and they become very proficient at the skills of both decoding all-through-the-word and segmenting all-through-the-spoken-word. So much so, that they are often 'free readers and writers' by Year 1 or Year 2.</p> <p>Teachers need to appreciate that teaching children to read and spell is only one aspect of reading and writing.</p> <p>Other elements of communication, language and literacy need to be provided in a literacy-rich environment like any other good classroom or foundation stage setting. Comprehension is enabled by good decoding – it is not a case of one instead of the other. A child who can decode well is more likely to be able to access books at their oral level of comprehension than a child who is struggling and having to guess the words on the page. Develop articulation and vocabulary rigorously as a whole school.</p>
<p>Don't allow children to race ahead with independent writing if their spelling is very poor.</p> <p>This is about the teacher's professional judgement. Children taught by the Synthetic Phonics Teaching Approach are enabled to read and write very quickly. Many can write a page by the end of reception. Creative writing is very exciting for both teacher and children, but it is also important to remember that early years' teachers are setting up the foundations for all later literacy. The infant teacher needs to ensure enough structured reading and writing opportunities for the children to value accurate reading and correct spelling and letter formation.</p>	<p>From Year 1, depending on progress to date, children can be taught a cursive script with leaders (starting on the line) very rigorously. It is transformational.</p> <p>I cannot recommend this handwriting style highly enough. It has transformed the handwriting of children from the infant years to secondary and this can be achieved very quickly with ample opportunity for rehearsal from the outset.</p> <p>Teachers need to identify the exact problems of children who are poor or reluctant writers. Often they have no phonic spelling skills and struggle to form their handwriting well. These need to be taught thoroughly whatever the age.</p>

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