

Is there one best method of teaching reading? What is the evidence?

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Claims have been made over many years for one best method of teaching reading, not necessarily the same method. In 1960s it was the initial teaching alphabet. In England the current government has claimed that the one best method of teaching reading is by synthetic phonics, first, fast and only, with implications for schools, the curriculum and for the training of teachers.

In this article, which is reproduced from the March 2013 issue of *Literacy Today*, the author will consider the evidence for such a claim. In a further article she will discuss the phonics check administered for the first time to all Year 1 children in state schools in England in June 2012 and its effects on the curriculum in the early stages of primary schools.

As early as 2005, during the last Labour Government, claims were being made for the importance of synthetic phonics as an important element in the teaching of reading. This featured in evidence to the Education and Skills Select Committee and in 2006 in the subsequent Rose Report. Reference was made to research in Clackmannanshire in Scotland in support of this view, still cited by the current government in spite of its methodological weaknesses (see below). In an article entitled 'The Rose report in context: what will be its impact on the teaching of reading' (*Education Journal* issue 97, 2006-7 p.27-9) I considered the evidence presented at that time and cited an article by Colin Richards in the same issue entitled 'This could be the end of teacher autonomy'.

It is important to distinguish the following; whether there is evidence for one best method for all children; whether for all children systematic teaching of phonics should form all or only part of their early instruction; whether this should be synthetic rather than analytic phonics.

The current government, and Ofsted, stress that the method of teaching reading should be phonics and synthetic phonics, rather than analytic phonics, and claim this is backed by research evidence.

Definitions of phonics

Phonics instruction: Literacy teaching approaches which focus on the relationship between letters and sounds. Synthetic phonics: The defining characteristics of synthetic phonics for reading are sounding-out and blending. Analytic phonics: The defining characteristics of analytic phonics are avoiding sounding-out, and inferring sound-symbol relationships from sets of words ... Systematic phonics: Teaching of letter-sound relationships in an explicit, organised and sequential fashion as opposed to incidentally or on a 'when-needed' basis ... (From Torgerson et al 2006 p.8 see below).

In this article I will explore the evidence for one best method for all children, citing quotations from distinguished researchers. This will be followed by a reanalysis of the evidence cited by the government claimed to support synthetic phonics as the method to be used in all schools and emphasised in all colleges training teachers. Finally I will introduce some research evidence not cited by the government where concerns are raised.

Is there one best method?

See *Learning to Read : the great debate* J. Chall (1967) for evidence of a longstanding concern with the best method of teaching reading and the controversies surrounding this. In 1972 Vera Southgate stated in *Beginning Reading*, "I think it is unlikely that one method or scheme will ever prove equally effective for all pupils, being taught by all teachers, in all situations" (p.28).

In the Bullock Report (*A Language for Life*, DES, 1975) it is stated that: "There is no one method,

medium, approach, device, or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning to read. Too much attention has been given to polarised opinions about approaches to the teaching of reading" (p.521). In the report from the House of Commons Select Committee (2005) referred to above it is stated that it is "unlikely that any one method or set of changes would lead to a complete elimination of underachievement of reading." (p.3).

More recently, in July 2011, a House of Commons All Party Parliamentary Group for Education published a *Report of the Inquiry into Overcoming the Barriers to Literacy*, where it is stated that "respondents were clear that there is no one panacea which guarantees all children will become readers ... There are different ways to learn and different learning preferences, this is why a focus on only synthetic phonics is not appropriate" (p.14) (www.educationengland.org.uk).

What is the research evidence on synthetic phonics?

Following the government's announcement in 2010, many experts wrote to the Department for Education stating their concern about the insistence that in all schools in England the initial approach to teaching reading should be synthetic phonics only, also about the proposed phonics check for six-year-olds.

The Importance of Phonics: Securing Confident Reading (www.education.gov.uk) cites researches such as several of those noted below as proving the superiority of synthetic phonics as the only method for teaching reading. Two frequently cited by the government in support of its current emphasis on synthetic phonics first, fast and only in the initial stages are from Scottish local authorities, Clackmannanshire and West Dunbartonshire. It should be noted that in both these authorities this was part of a major intervention study with additional resources and a staff development programme (see Ellis, 2007 below). None of the researches cited below provide convincing evidence for synthetic phonics as the only approach in the early stages of learning to read.

1. Marilyn Adams (1990) *Beginning to Read: thinking and learning about print*, cited in Clark, Young *Literacy Learners: how we can help them*, 1994) emphasises that "the degree to which children internalize and use their phonics instruction depends on the degree to which they have found it useful for recognizing the words in their earliest texts". Thus, of importance is "immersion – right from the start – in meaningful connected text" (p. 22).
2. Clark, M.M. (2006) "The Rose Report in context: What will be its impact on the teaching of reading?" *Education Journal*, issue 97, 27-9. This short article critiques the Rose report, and the evidence cited from the Clackmannanshire study which had methodological failings, and where there was little long term gain in reading comprehension. The Rose Report did contain a wide range of recommendations designed to improve the teaching of reading. However, most attention was focused on the synthetic phonics issue ... with the impression that an injection of synthetic phonics first, fast and only as soon as children enter school, would solve all reading problems.
3. Ellis, S. (2007) *Policy and research: lessons from the Clackmannanshire synthetic phonics initiative*, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, vol. 7(3) 281-297. She claims "that any study driven mainly by one paradigm can only offer limited insights and that other Scottish local authorities deliberately created multi-paradigm projects in response to the national early intervention initiatives". West Dunbartonshire, Ellis claims, "designed possibly the most successful intervention, and based it on a 'literacy for all' agenda" (p.294).
4. MacKay, T. (2007) *Achieving the Vision. The Final Research Report of the West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative*. (Education.centralregistry@west-dunbarton.gov.uk). The final report provides an overview of the entire 10-year study. The following are cited by MacKay as crucial to the success of the project: phonological awareness and the alphabet; a strong and structured phonics emphasis; extra classroom help in the early years; raising teacher awareness; and home support for encouraging literacy through focused assessment; increased time spent on key aspects of reading; identification and support for children who are failing, and close monitoring of progress. The project needed to be long term, had substantial funding and high levels of training of staff. The current government in citing this study as evidence for synthetic phonics, omitted the final sentence in the paragraph, as to whether synthetic phonics "has not yet been sufficiently systematically compared with better analytic phonics teaching using a faster pace and more motivating approaches" (p.46).
5. Reedy, D. (2012) *Misconceptions about teaching reading: is it only about phonics?* *Education Review*

NUT (EPC) Vol. 24 No.2. David Reedy explores the evidence for the quotations from Nick Gibb, Schools Minister from 2010 to 2012, questions his claims from research and cites contradictory evidence from Ofsted.

6. Solity, J. and Vousden, J. (2009) *Real books vs reading schemes; a new perspective from instructional psychology*. (*Educational Psychology*. Vol. 29 No. 4, 469-511). This article analyses the structure of adult literature, children's real books, and reading schemes and examines the demands that they make on children's sight vocabulary and phonic skills. While learning phonic skills greatly reduces what children have to memorise, a combination of this and learning the 100 commonest sight words, and studying in the context of real books, makes for 'optimal instruction'. Note that these authors used the McNally and Murray 100 commonest word list from the 1960s in their analysis, and still found it valuable in 2009. The authors claim that "the debate may be resolved by teaching an optimal level of core phonological, phonic, and sight vocabulary skills, rigorously and systematically in conjunction with the use of real books" (p.503).
7. Torgerson, C. J, Brooks, G. and Hall, J. (2006) *A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling*. The University of Sheffield. RR 711. They claim that since there is evidence that systematic teaching of phonics benefits children's reading accuracy, it should be part of every literacy teacher's repertoire, in a judicious balance with other elements. They claim there is currently no strong randomised control trial evidence that any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other. NB "No statistically significant difference in effectiveness was found between synthetic phonics instruction and analytic phonics instruction" (p.8).
8. Wyse, D. and Goswami, U. (2008) *Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading, British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 34(6) 691-710. They claim that the government's review provided no reliable empirical evidence that synthetic phonics offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers ... "There is also evidence that contextualised systematic phonics instruction is effective" (p. 691).
9. Wyse, D. and Styles, M. (2007) *Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's Rose Report, Literacy*, vol. 41, 35-42. A review of the international research into the teaching of early reading shows that the Rose Report's main recommendation on synthetic phonics contradicts the powerful body of evidence accumulated over the last 30 years (p 35). "The conclusion of the Rose Report, that teachers and trainee teachers should be required to teach reading through synthetic phonics 'first and fast' is, in our view, wrong" (p 41).

Conclusion

From the researches cited above there is evidence that the inclusion of a systematic programme of phonics within the early instruction in learning to read in English is of benefit within a broad programme. However, there is no evidence to support phonics in isolation as the one best method, nor for synthetic phonics as the required approach.

In the following article, to be published in *Literacy Today*, I will consider the new phonics check administered to all Year One children in England in June 2012 and the implications of the results.

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