

The Government plans to bring in a 'light touch' decoding test towards the end of Year 1.

Ministers say this will be a "progress check" to help identify children needing extra support. They claim that "a light-touch phonics-based check will provide reassurance that children in Year 1 have learned this important skill" and "Parents want to know how their children are reading and this will tell them."

What would the test involve?

The test is likely to present children with three sets of items to pronounce:

- phonically regular ordinary words, such as *cat, dog, gate, sand*
- digraphs, such as *sh, th, ea*
- phonically regular nonsense words, or 'non-words', such as *mip, fack, glimp*.

Children are to be tested on their use of phonic knowledge to identify words and non-words in isolation.

The United Kingdom Literacy Association questions the value of this test because:

1. The proposed test would be hugely expensive.

The current plan is to test all the 600,000 or so children in the year group. All taxpayers should be concerned that this would be extremely costly to set up and administer¹. It would involve the company awarded the contract in:

- constructing initial versions of the test
- piloting these initial versions
- calculating 'pass marks' on the basis of the pilots
- receiving the results from schools
- preparing reports on these.

2. It would also be expensive in terms of school time.

Teachers would have to spend teaching time in:

- keeping the test secure until the day of its administration
- administering the test, one by one, to the whole year group,
- marking the test and submitting the marks to the test agency
- sending data to government about test scores and reading government reports on the test.

3. The proposed test doesn't reflect what readers do in real life

Effective young readers of English don't process every new word one letter at a time. They move between different sizes of unit².

- Sometimes they work words out letter by letter,
- sometimes they look at familiar groups of letters, such as 'all',
- sometimes they look at whole word patterns, such as 'little' or 'bottle'.

4. Phonics is never enough.

Phonics is not enough to teach a child to read English. As well as matching letters to phonemes (speech sounds), children learning to read English need to:

- recognise patterns of letters such as the 'all' in 'tall', 'call' and 'ball'
- 'recognise one-off' whole words such as 'was', 'the' and 'one'.
- search for meaning in the texts they read.

5. Decoding tests don't tell you about children's progress as readers.

- Children who perform poorly on such tests may perform much better on real text³.
- Success on digraphs, isolated words and non-words is not a predictor of reading for meaning.

¹ Brooks G (2010) *The Government's Proposed Decoding Test for 6 Year Olds* www.ukla.org

² Brown and Deavers, (1999) Goswami, U. (2010) A psycholinguistic grain size view of reading acquisition across languages In N. Brunswick, S. McDougall & P. Mornay-Davies (Eds). *The Role of Orthographies in Reading and Spelling*. Hove: Psychology Press.

³ Walmsley, S. A. (1979). The criterion referenced measurement of an early reading behavior. *Reading Research Quarterly* p. 597

6. Children need to make sense of what they read and need to be engaged in the process

- Identifying words on a list is not like reading a connected text.
- Both the reward and the central purpose of learning to read are to make sense of text.
- There is a real danger that using isolated skills as the sole index of progress leads to children failing to attend to the meaning of what they are reading⁴.
- Children need to be engaged in the texts they read if they are to make real progress⁵.

7. Tests shape the way teachers teach.

A compulsory test taken by all children will surely become a 'high stakes' test. There will be pressure on schools to achieve high pass rates. Understandably, this is likely to steer very many teachers to teach to the test, leaving less time to teach:

- other word attack skills,
- the essential business of making meaning from connected text
- children's engagement in reading, widely seen as the most significant contributor to reading standards.

8. Teaching reading effectively requires balanced attention to words and meaning.

Science shows that reading is a multi stranded processing activity⁶. Over-emphasis on a single strategy leads to imbalance with disastrous effect on:

- those with reading problems
- children who are disadvantaged in terms of access to books and stories
- the growing proportion of economically disadvantaged children in the UK.

The proposed test could lead to a drop in reading achievement.

9. Non-word tests are particularly difficult to construct.

It's not easy to compile lists of non-words that are equally strange to all children. Doing so requires close analysis of the non-words' similarity to real words – not just in English, but also in the very many languages our 6 year olds speak at home. The non-words then have to be exhaustively tested with real children.

10. There would be no real benefits.

The test would provide no information about:

- how children identify words in running text
- how they make sense of what they read
- their level of engagement in reading.

UKLA recognizes that such decoding tests involving non-words are useful to psychologists investigating limited aspects of reading. They are not appropriate as tests of progress in learning to read.

UKLA calls on government and all MPs to reject plans for such a narrow, uninformative and unnecessary test. We press instead for an evidence-informed approach to teaching and testing children's reading. We urge that all teachers of Year 1 children should:

- **be required and supported to use appropriate professional knowledge to identify those children not making satisfactory progress by the middle of Year 1;**
- **be given the necessary resources to provide balanced help for these struggling readers, with attention to engagement and the building of meaning as well as to word identification.**

United Kingdom Literacy Association www.ukla.org e-mail: admin@ukla.org

⁴ Scanlon, D. M., & Sweeney, J. M. (2010). Response to intervention: an overview: New hope for struggling learners. In P. H. Johnston (Ed.), *RTI in Literacy - Responsive and comprehensive*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association p.18

⁵ Cunningham, A.E. and Stanovich, K.E. (1998) What reading does for the mind. *American Educator* 22, 1&2, pp. 8-15

⁶ Wolf, M. (2008) *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain* Cambridge UK: Icon Books