

Unlocking the Reader in Every Child

by SUSAN ELKIN



book of practical ideas for teaching reading

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by Susan Elkin

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2 Phonics Plus



2 Phonics Plus



The Issues



Turning decoders into readers

Knowing your phonemes, your graphemes and your GPCs does not make you a reader. Similarly, being a good decoder of words and sentences does not make you a reader either.

A girl may be able to read whole strings of words in her decodable book quite accurately. But is she taking in what she is ‘reading’? Is she understanding, or learning to understand, the meaning of the sentences? Are the words on the page being converted into stories, images or information in her head? Or is she, like a well-trained, rather bright dog, simply ‘barking at print’ – recognising the words and obediently saying them aloud, without really reading (in the full sense) at all?



Never lose sight of the simple fact that children learn phonics in order to be able to read.

They don’t read in order to prove their phonics ability.

There is a big difference between reading and barking at print.

You only become a reader by reading. There's no stage when you can say 'I can read, so I can stop now.' A reader is somebody who reads, not somebody who used to read.

Not only must children be taught how to decode words and sentences, they must also constantly be encouraged to use the skills they're acquiring.

That means that children need to read as often as possible. They need to read books, captions, football league tables, jokes, emails, the school lunch menu, text messages on a mobile phone and anything else which is written and which the child is interested in.



Research by Wray and Medwell in 1999* found that the most effective teachers of literacy put decoding skills into context by using meaningful texts (meaningful to the reader, that is) for real purposes.

**What makes an effective teacher of literacy?* David Wray and Jane Medwell, University of Warwick, published in *Literacy Today* June 1999.



Remember, every child is interested in something.

Otherwise there is a danger that children will see reading as something very difficult that they are forced to pit themselves against in school, but which is not relevant to their 'real' life.

So reading has to be presented not only as a piece of mechanical learning, but also as an activity which has a context – such as a story a child really wants to read, an account of last night's football match, a paragraph about someone the child has seen on television, or whatever.

What this all boils down to is that you need regular practice. You only learn to read – *really* read – by reading.

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That way you gradually become a more confident reader and you can keep going for longer without flagging. You build what the experts call reading stamina.



Synthetic phonics plus

The pendulum has swung firmly in favour of synthetic phonics in recent years but, as we've seen, that doesn't mean that other approaches are no longer relevant.



Remember the story of the blind man and the elephant? He tried to identify the animal by touch. Feeling the shape of its trunk, he thought it was a snake; feeling its leg he thought it was a tree. Only when he had put the big picture together was he able to identify the elephant for what it was.

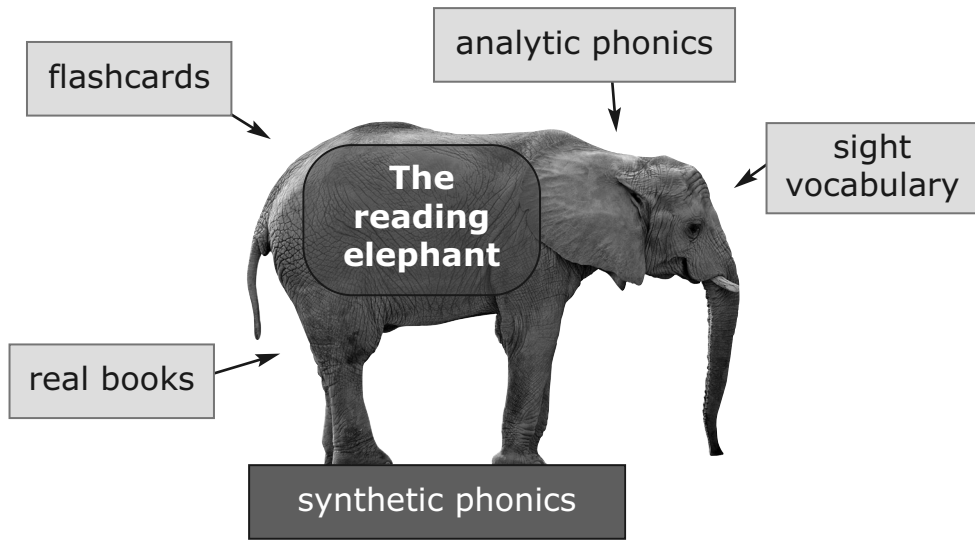
Learning to read is just the same.

It's true that the various approaches we've already discussed – whole-word/sight vocabulary, flashcards, real books and analytic phonics – all have too many shortcomings to be used as the primary (i.e. main) method for teaching children to read; but that is far from saying that these approaches have no value.

Synthetic phonics brings a rigour and a method to tackling texts: it gives children strategies to recognise unfamiliar words, thus reducing guesswork.

It is right that synthetic phonics should, for the majority of children, form the basis of literacy teaching.

Analytic phonics can bring quick fixes to decoding more complex words such as *thinking* (*th - ink - ing*). And a sight vocabulary facilitates more fluent reading.



Yet each of the approaches we've discussed – including synthetic phonics – will, on its own, only get the child so far down the road to reading.

As in all things, it's a question of balance. Children need context for their reading and lots of opportunities to practise it in an enjoyable, informative and useful way. But they also need to acquire decoding skills in a systematic way, because it offers a sound basis for approaching everything else.

Read reading success comes when you, the teacher, are able to help the child put together the best of each approach to read fluently and with pleasure.



Building 'the house of literacy'

Compare synthetic phonics with the foundations of a large building. Without good foundations the building will collapse and fall down. On the other hand, there is a great deal more to any building than its foundations (which, after all, are usually invisible so that we're not conscious of them). What we see in a building are its rooms, its space and style.

When we help children build their houses of literacy, we must put solid foundations in place for them. Synthetic phonics offers the most effective way of building these foundations.

But equally, there is a great deal more to our house of literacy than its foundations. Being able to read books, notices, timetables, the Internet and sources of information of all sorts and in all formats – fluently – requires more than just an understanding of synthetic phonics.



In favour of mixed methods

- 1 When children read, as we have seen, they use a variety of methods (whether we introduce them all or not). We cannot (and



Reading is a pleasure. But it requires practice, fluency and stamina.

should not) forbid emergent readers from taking help in the way they find it.

For example, opponents of ‘mixed methods’ (who usually want nothing but synthetic phonics to be used) loathe this approach because they say that it relies partly on guesswork.

Well yes, it does – and it has to. Cast your mind back. How did you cope with strange words such as *annihilate*, *vehement* and *brougham* when you first met them in print? The fact is, you would not have known how to pronounce them until someone told you or you heard them spoken.

And if you are reading an illustrated book – say on a science topic – and you meet a word you don’t know, do you refer to the accompanying illustrations to help you work out what the word might mean? Of course you do. You’d be foolish not to. Should we therefore prevent children from looking at the illustrations in their reading books? Some teachers and specialists argue (wrongly in my view) that we should.

- 2 Synthetic phonics does not suit all children.

Some children, for whatever reason, fail to learn to read fluently with phonics in their early years.

So teachers and other adults have to find other ways of helping to build up these children’s literacy, as they progress through primary school and into secondary education.

- 3 Phonics does not help with irregular words – words that are not phonetically decodable. Take, for example, that well-known group of stumbling blocks: *plough*, *dough*, *tough*, *through*, *cough* and *borough*.

I had a friend at school called Marian Hough. How do you pronounce her surname? We spent years listening to new teachers guessing – amusing for us but tiresome for poor Marian. In fact it rhymed with *cough*, but there were at least five other possibilities. You learn to read such words only by guessing, being helped and then committing them to memory.

2 Phonics Plus



Practical Teaching Ideas

The strategies that follow are all aimed at making children and young people more ‘reading aware’, or at starting them on the first rungs of the reading ladder. These strategies can easily be adapted to the age group you are working with, and so can be used with early years children, as well as in getting much older pupils on track with their reading.



Parents can do a lot of this at home too. The advantage of doing it at home, of course, is that ‘home’ isn’t ‘school’ and therefore it can’t be ‘work’.



Stories



Reading with the child

- ✎ When you read a book to, or with, a child make sure you can both see the pages of the book. (Someone once said that the very best children’s book was big enough to spread across two

laps.) This applies to parents and teachers, whether reading with their children at home or at school.

- ✍ Run your finger lightly along the print as you read the words, to draw the child's attention to it. As the child's sight vocabulary (i.e. words they know and can recognise without sounding them out) develops, stop at the occasional word and let them read it – but keep the flow of the sentence going, so that you don't lose the narrative pulse.

If it's a book they are familiar with, such as one of David McKee's *Elmer the Elephant* books, you might get them to read the word *Elmer*, or *Elephant*, every time you come to it.

- ✍ Gradually you can increase the number of words they read and decrease the number that you read.

This is where (for parents) it's very useful to know the stage that your child has reached in their reading at school. If you know which phonemes your child has covered, for example, you can quickly work out which words in the book you can ask them to read. You will also be more confident in your requests: 'You should be able to read this word,' or 'This one's hard, but see if you can do it ...'



Teachers, please note: many parents are very keen to help their children read at home, but they are often not sure what exactly they can do to help.

Parents and carers at home are effectively free sources of teaching support – but you need to give them some direction about how best to help. So keep parents in the loop.


And never underestimate the damage that a misdirected 'pushy' parent can do to a child's attitude to reading – not to mention their self-esteem.



Reading stories aloud


Experiencing stories is the single most important factor in eventually learning to read. Every child should hear several stories every day.


It is vital that children see books in use and learn that good things come out of them. But they also need the communication skills that come from listening to – and watching the face of – a story *teller*, as opposed to a story *reader*.

-  Pointing to the words on the page as you read them gets the children used to the idea – or reminds them – that print has *meaning*. They will gradually start to recognise some of the word shapes. If they hear the same story often enough, some will learn it by heart and then ‘read’ it to themselves or to toys, often turning the pages at the right time. This is a good sign that the child is on the way to literacy.



But the converse isn’t necessarily true. If a child doesn’t do this, it doesn’t mean that they aren’t on the way to literacy. So don’t panic. Remember, all children are different.

-  If you are reading a story to young children from a book, sit with the child or children, so that the text and the illustrations are visible to both (or all) of you.

-  Point to the words as you read them. Don’t be afraid to make up extra bits to enrich the story.



If you do depart from the written text, and if the child is ‘reading’ along with you, then let the child know that you are not always following the text – otherwise they will get lost and lose any reading confidence they have built up.



Point to the words as you read to the child.



With very young children, you might base your story on a toy – ‘Here’s Bertie the Bunny and he’s going to find some carrots to eat. Look, here he goes ...’



If you are telling a story, make it as dramatic as you can, with lots of gestures and eye contact. Digress (at appropriate moments) to tell the children about things that have happened to you in real life.



Large format books, often known as ‘big books’ and produced by several publishers, are good for using with large groups or whole classes of children from age 5 to 8 or 9.