



Robyn Ewing makes the case for teaching reading that considers the individual needs, background and abilities of each child and cautions against trying to follow a prescriptive recipe for all students...

The way of words, of knowing and loving words, is a way to the essence of things, and to the essence of knowing.

John Dunne

How should reading be defined?

Controversial discussions about the best way to teach reading have ebbed and flowed for well over a century (Ewing, 2006) and sometimes fail to consider how individual differences shape the process. In an early consideration of the reading research, Huey (1908) concluded that “human variation” must always be considered and that learning to read defied a prescriptive recipe for all children.

Nevertheless, many continue to search for a reading recipe for all children. The arguments that continue to rage over the teaching of reading — and how children can be best assisted in learning to read — have much to do with the way different theorists understand the reading process (Davis, 2012, 2013). In addition, they relate to differing ideologies and understandings of pedagogies. As Moss and Huxford (2007) assert, it is essential that literacy issues are not addressed using a single paradigm’s field of reference. Rather, before making critical decisions, policymakers in educational systems need to carefully consider evidence from different paradigms and disciplines.

The process of learning to read has often been conceptualised as developing a set of cognitive skills to crack the print code. Learning to read has thus been seen as involving the development proficiency in a hierarchical set of simple and discrete skills, then moving to more complex skills through a range of activities, including recognition of sound-symbol relationships about letters or groups of letters, at the same time encouraging students to memorise most commonly used sight words. Once competency in these skills has been achieved, students would then also answer questions about what they read to check their comprehension. In fact, Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) “simple view of reading” advocated a clear differentiation between word recognition processes and language comprehension processes because they asserted this allowed teachers to assess word recognition and comprehension performance separately, and then plan different kinds of teaching for each. Reading tests over the years have often consisted of merely asking children to read lists of words (see examples, Daniels and Diack, 1983; Schonell, 1971).



However, the Language and Reading Research Consortium (2015) has suggested that too often these simple models of reading are problematic and conflated when defining what it means to read, and when assessing reading ability.

For the purposes of this review, a far more expansive understanding of reading has been adopted. Reading is defined as a process of bringing meaning to and constructing meaning from texts (text is defined in its broadest sense to include visual and digital). It is not merely about deciphering a written code: it is about understanding the world and opening up new possibilities for being in the world. In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (2009) asserts that reading development is part of children’s social, emotional and physical growth and that it is essential to acknowledge that children develop at different rates and stages and that different learning experiences will also impact when children will be ready to read. The Australian Curriculum: English (2018) defines reading as:

Processing words, symbols or actions to derive and/or construct meaning. Reading includes interpreting, critically analysing and reflecting upon the meaning of a wide range of written and visual, print and non-print texts.

Some useful definitions

Etymology: The study of the origin and history of words and how their form and meaning changes over time.

Decoding: Working out the meaning of words in text.

In decoding, readers draw on contextual, vocabulary, grammatical and phonic knowledge. Readers who decode effectively combine these forms of knowledge fluently and automatically, and self-correct using meaning to recognise when they make an error (The Australian Curriculum: English).

Grapheme: A single letter or combination of letters that represent a phoneme. Graphemes occur within morphemes and can represent more than one phoneme. In English, 44 sounds and 26 letters offer more than 120 grapheme choices.

Graphophonic knowledge: The knowledge of how letters relate to the sounds of spoken language.

Morphemes: The smallest units of meaning-bearing structures of words (bases or affixes — prefixes, suffixes and connecting vowel letters).

Morphology: The system-enabling morphemes that combine to represent the meaning of words. Every word is either a base, or a base with another morpheme fixed to it.



The morphophonemic principle: Refers to the fact that morphemes can vary widely in their phonological representation across related words. English orthography has evolved to favour consistent representation of morphology over phonology to mark connections in meaning across words.

Onset and rime: Children learn to identify the sound of the letter or letters before the first vowel (the onset) in a one-syllable word, and the sound of the remaining part of the word (the rime).

Orthography: The writing system that represents the meaning of a language.

Phonemes: The smallest units of a spoken language which can be combined to form syllables and words. In English, there are 44 phonemes but only 26 letters (although accent can play a role here).

Phonemic awareness: An auditory skill, the ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words.

Phonics: Matching letters — the symbols of the written language (graphemes) to the sounds (phonemes). In the classroom, there may be an overlap; teachers may use various aspects of these approaches based on the children’s needs rather than a one-size-fits-all recipe.

Synthetic phonics: A part-to-whole approach that begins with focus on individual letters and emphasises teaching students to convert letters (graphemes) into sounds (phonemes).

Analogy-based phonics: Teaches children to use similar parts of known words (word families) to identify and decode words with similar parts. Onset and rime also used (for example, once “meat” is recognised, this can be used to identify beat, feat, heat, neat, seat, treat, etc).

Analytic phonics: Refers to larger-unit phonics programs that tend to start with children’s known language and introduce shared reading. An explicit focus on words from these sources follows, including teaching children letter-sound correspondences and analysis of words into their component parts. The emphasis is on the larger sub-parts of words (i.e. onsets and rimes, spelling patterns) and phonemes.

Embedded phonics: Children are taught letter-sound relationships during the reading of connected text. Since children encounter different letter-sound relationships as they read, this approach will not be a preconceived sequence, but can still be thorough and explicit.

Phonology: The system by which speech sounds of a language represent meaning.

Phonological awareness: A broad understanding of the sounds around us that provide the basis for understanding phonics. Includes awareness of spoken words and syllables; rhymes; sounds; and phonemes.

Recoding: Translating sound to print, with no associated meaning. Compare with decoding, defined above, which includes meaning.



Semantic information: Refers to meanings used when reading. Includes a reader’s prior knowledge, as well as the meanings embedded in text. Semantic meaning assists in decoding a text.

Syntactic knowledge: The way sentences are created using words, phrases and clauses.

What factors are most important in helping children learn to read successfully?

There are many factors that contribute to learning to read successfully, beginning with the opportunities young children have to talk and listen to their parents, older siblings and other caregivers, and also to engage in storying (Lowe, 2004).

Oral language development and shared reading

As Wolf (2007, page 85) cogently reminds us:

Each aspect of oral language makes an essential contribution to the child’s evolving understanding of words and their multiple uses in speech and written texts.

From birth, children develop strong associations between talking, hearing stories and being loved. During these opportunities, and as their early language develops, they learn names for things. Children delight in making discoveries about language. Time for children and their loved ones to engage in serious play with sounds and words is critical (Ewing, Callow and Rushton, 2016).

However, this is not always the young child’s experience. Many researchers suggest huge differences in the vocabularies and language processing of children who are linguistically advantaged by more opportunities to talk with their parents and caregivers rather than just overhearing talking (for example, Fernald and Weisleder, 2015). Research led by Hirsch-Pasek (for example, 2015) concludes the quality and diversity of one-on-one interactions between parent and child is critical. How much children are read to and read themselves is also an important predictor for success in reading. Wolf (2007, page 82) asserts:

Decade after decade of research shows the amount of time a child spends listening to parents and other loved ones is a good predictor of the level of reading attained later.

This is discussed in more detail below.



Social and economic factors

Closely related to opportunities for the development of linguistically rich oral, and shared opportunities for young children, other well established predictors of children’s reading success include parents’ education and socioeconomic status (Mullis et al, 2007; OECD, 2010a) and cultural orientations to reading (Williams, 2000; Bernstein, 1990; Heath, 1983). Bernstein’s (1990) work on restricted and elaborated codes is critical to our understanding of the socially constructed language barriers that can impede disadvantaged children’s success in learning. These factors are strongly connected to how language is used at home and how — or perhaps if — reading for different purposes is valued in the home and immediate community. Bernstein’s research concluded that children from more advantaged social backgrounds were more likely to use elaborated language codes. Williams’s (2000) study of mothers reading to four-year-old children identified huge differences in the use of language across different socioeconomic areas in Sydney, NSW.

Ensuring young children have easy access to a range of books in the home can be extremely difficult for those at risk or living in poverty. Given that one in six Australian children are living in poverty (Australian Council of Social Services, 2016), this is a very real issue. PISA (2009) indicates that almost 70 per cent of the gender gap and 30 per cent of the socioeconomic gap in reading attainment is associated with disparities in the breadth and depth of reading (OECD, 2010a). Therefore, ready access to libraries is important (Krashen et al, 2012).

Purcell-Gates’s (2007) research reported profound differences between five-year old children who were frequently read to at least five times a week compared to children who were not. Those who were read to often were more capable storytellers and used more sophisticated language and syntax, enabling the transition to reading.

Children from disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds require a much higher level of support in early childhood contexts and at school. At times, diversity of language use in the home is not realised or addressed sufficiently when a child begins preschool or school. Therefore, schools that have higher enrolments of disadvantaged children need the best resources and teachers, and require access to the most up-to-date research and professional learning to understand the challenges some children face.

How do children learn to read?

Three important sources of information in text are meaning, grammar and letter sound relationships — often referred to as semantics, syntax and graphophonic relationships respectively (Emmitt, Hornsby and Wilson, 2013, page 3).



Meaningful use of spoken and written language in a range of play-based and child-centred activities in different contexts lays a firm foundation for learning to read and write (Campbell, 2015, page 13). Sharing stories with young children helps lay the foundation for them to become good readers. Listening and responding to stories builds vocabulary and grammar knowledge and encourages children to read regularly, which is by far the best way of developing reading ability, writing competence, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling (Meek, 1988). What children attend to in reading lessons depends on what they and those around them think reading is for and how it can be used. Children will have a very different view of reading if it is mainly used as a quiet or settling time before bedtime rather than if a child is actively engaged in making meaning, asking questions and sharing related experiences (Williams, 2000; Meek, 1988; Chambers, 1985; Brice Heath, 1983).

The interaction between a child’s oral language and learning-to-read process has been emphasised by many researchers, including Holdaway (1979), Ashton-Warner (1986), Clay (1979) and Cambourne (1988). Reading with young children should involve much discussion about images and context as well as sounds and symbols. Children delight in making their own discoveries about words and images on a page. Building a strong oral base around storybook language (Fox, 1993) and vocabulary, exploring the ideas in stories, relating them to personal experiences and asking questions are part of what Scott Paris (2006) has described as the development of unconstrained reading skills. Singing, exploring rhymes, chants and all sorts of oral language play also help establish reading as an enjoyable and creative learning experience, as well as establishing the foundations for phonological awareness.

When children focus on letters and sounds as they engage in shared reading experiences, associated writing activities enable them to demonstrate their developing knowledge and skills — they begin to write their name, see the relationships between letters and sounds, make short lists, create labels and re-tell events. Paris’s (2005) constrained skills theory is an important reconceptualisation of how children learn to read. He proposes a continuum of skills, some highly constrained and more easily measured (such as writing your name, letter knowledge, phonic knowledge), some moderately constrained (phonological awareness, reading fluency), and others unconstrained (vocabulary development, comprehension) that are learned over many years, and perhaps even a lifetime. While constrained skills are necessary, they are insufficient for the development of complex reading (Stahl, 2011).

Stahl also points out that if highly constrained skills are overemphasised, unconstrained skills can be compromised.

Emerging findings from *Transforming Literacy Outcomes* (TRANSLIT), a major research project at the University of Wollongong (Jones, Kervin, Mantei, 2018), explore Stahl’s continuum of constrained to unconstrained literacy practices students encounter as they transition from early childhood settings to primary school and then to secondary school. At a recent symposium at the University of Sydney,



Jones, Kervin and Mantei shared their emerging findings. The project is investigating the nature of students’ literacy experiences at key points in schooling, from foundation to senior secondary (preschool to school, primary to secondary school).

In particular, the research examines how teachers teach “constrained skills” (Paris, 2005), including alphabet knowledge, word lists and phonics, and how they allow for “unconstrained skills” to develop. One aspect of their research highlights increasing parental pressure on early childhood educators to introduce more constrained skills and code-based practices, including phonics, in preschool curriculum in readiness for school. These demands can threaten to overshadow broader literacy repertoires that are so important for emergent readers. Further findings will be valuable for all teachers of literacy and for schools in developing their literacy programs and policies, and will also help those outside the teaching profession understand how isolated instructional experiences can be integrated into rich, engaging and meaningful literacy programs.

Becoming a fluent and accurate reader means learning to use all the cue systems: semantic, graphophonic and syntactic cues, as well as having an understanding of Freebody and Luke’s (1990, 1999) reader roles (code breaker, participant, user and analyst). Developing graphophonic knowledge is part of an approach to reading that focuses on meaning, purpose and enjoyment (Ewing, Callow and Rushton, 2016). Graphological and phonological aspects of decoding print are a part of the reading process, not the first or the most or least important. Therefore, there is an important interrelationship between a reader’s thinking, language and reading. The role of any of the cues in learning to read must be understood with other predictors of reading success. These include the centrality of:

- a language and story-rich home environment where reading and writing for different purposes is modelled and shared (Heath, 1983);
- frequent and diverse linguistically-rich parent/child oral interactions;
- the provision of a range of books; and
- quality, literacy-rich preschool experiences.

It must also be emphasised that readers of different languages use different pathways for reading different scripts (for example, Chinese and English), and these different pathways are used in the same brain. Children learning straightforward alphabets, such as German or Greek, gain fluency more quickly than those learning more challenging codes, such as English (Wolf, 2007). It is within this complex context, with its inter-related set of factors, that the current debate about synthetic-versus-analytic phonics and a phonics check for all six-year old Australian children must be considered.

The complexities of what it means to “read” and the challenges for some children in learning to read must be understood. Policies that address these complexities need to be accompanied by much needed



resourcing and professional learning. Views of reading research that suggest one approach will provide answers for every child are unhelpful for teachers, parents and children.

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This article is extracted from Robyn Ewing’s report, *Exploding SOME of the myths about learning to read: A review of research on the role of phonics*, (2018). Read the full report and references [here](#).