

# Background to teaching reading

## Reading in schools

Up until the 1960's, most teachers used a phonics based approach; children were taught individual alphabet letters/sounds which they blended together to make words (the c-a-t approach). During the 1960's and '70's phonics fell out of fashion: it didn't seem to work for some children; the focus was sometimes more on decoding than on real reading; it required both teacher and pupil to understand the complexities of the English alphabet code. So, a simpler approach was sought. 'Whole word' or 'sight reading', a method by which children learn to recognise whole words *via* context and shape rather than decoding, became popular. The 1980's and 90's also heralded an approach known as 'whole-language reading' in which children learned to identify words by associating them with prior knowledge (e.g. frequently seeing the word cat with a picture of a cat). With these new approaches in vogue, newly trained teachers were often unable to teach phonics as they had not been taught the system themselves. However, statistics on reading ability continued to show an alarming downward trend and so in recent years various Governments have heralded a return to the phonics approach which, whilst more challenging, generally yields better overall results.

## Reading at home

One of the problems facing teachers in schools is that they are confronted with a large group of children, some of whom will have had little exposure to books; they must rely on a scheme which suits the majority of the class and 'works for most'. One of the huge advantages of teaching your children at home is that they will have much more one-on-one reading time; they will have been read to from an early age and the parents will (hopefully) continue to read aloud to them daily. In this context, parents often find that with just a little help, children teach themselves how to read without the use of complex reading programmes and expensive schemes. On the other hand, there are children who will not just 'pick up' reading and for these children it makes sense that parents should be ready to teach more explicitly. Teaching reading *via* a phonics based method has advantages when it comes to spelling: children who have learned to 'decode' the sounds and letters in words for reading can more easily be taught how to build up those same sounds and letters for spelling. For these reasons, it is worth the trouble getting to grips with the basics of phonics yourself even if your child 'gets' reading without it.

## Synthetic phonics

Synthetic phonics, the most recent manifestation of the phonics approach, takes into account the importance of contextualising reading; decoding is seen not as an end in itself,

but as a means to an end: reading fluency. It encourages plenty of reading aloud and reading words in context alongside a solid grounding in decoding. The name synthetic phonics has nothing to do with being artificial, it simply refers to the method of synthesising or blending sounds in words. The method works on the basis that written letters represent spoken sounds: each unit of sound (called a **phoneme**, from the Greek word for sound) can be represented by a single letter or group of letters (called a **grapheme**, from the Greek word for writing). Reading is the act of working out which sounds (phonemes) each letter or letter group (grapheme) represents, then blending these together to read a given word. (Writing can be seen as the other side of the coin: in working out how to write a word, we know the phonemes but need to work out which graphemes accurately represent those sounds. You'll find more about this on the Teaching Spelling page.)

The matching up of a phoneme to its grapheme is known as a **Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondence** (a GPC).

Here are some helpful facts to remember when getting used to this vocabulary:

- one sound (phoneme) can be represented by a one, two, three or four letter grapheme  
/a/ a, /f/ ph, /i/ igh, /o/ ough
- one sound can be represented by multiple graphemes (spelling alternatives):  
/oa/ can be written as o, oa, ow, oe, o-e, eau, ough
- one grapheme (letter or letter group) can represent multiple sounds:  
/ch/ can represent ch, sh or k (**chair**, **chef**, **school**)

## Why is English such a difficult language to read and write?

The English alphabet code is particularly difficult to learn, derived as it is from a potent mix of Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon/Germanic, Danish and Norman-French. A good example of this is the grapheme /ch/ referred to above. /ch/ is used to represent /ch/ in Anglo-Saxon words such as chair; /sh/ in French-derived words such as chef and /k/ in Greek derived words such as school. Due to the diverse roots of our language, our 26 letters must be manipulated to represent approximately 44 different sounds. Compare this with Italian in which each sound is (almost) always graphically represented by the same combination of letters. (Bernard Shaw once famously quipped that the word "fish" could be written "ghoti": f as in enough; i as in women; sh as in the ending -tion.)

How do we teach this complex code? There are two approaches: we can start by showing the child a letter or group of letters (grapheme) and then teach all the sounds associated

with that grapheme e.g “the grapheme ‘ou’ can say ‘ow’ (**flour**) or ‘u’ (**young**)”; or, we can start from the sound and then teach the child all the different ways in which this sound can be represented, from most common to least common: instead of suggesting that the letter *says* or *makes* the sound, we say that the letter *represents* the sound (e.g “the sound ‘k’ can be shown as c, k, ck or ch”). The logic behind this latter approach is that spoken language precedes written, not only in individual learning but in terms of historical anthropology: we were speaking for a long time before we started to make marks to represent those sounds.

However, in reality, there is a lot of crossover in the way we teach since what we are teaching here is grapheme- phoneme correspondence so it works both ways: from grapheme (written) to phoneme (sound) for reading, and, *vice versa*, from phoneme to grapheme for writing. Most programmes start by teaching phoneme to grapheme to get the children reading (with just one grapheme for each sound), but subsequently they present the child with new graphemes first and give the various sounds they represent: at this point, the phonics lessons shift to being more focussed on spelling than reading.

### **How *not* to approach reading if using phonics**

Perhaps the most important point to remember is that it is not necessarily helpful to teach the *names* of the letters first. Research has shown that teaching names, even if they are taught alongside sounds, can cause confusion in many children (experienced remedial tutors find that struggling readers tend to use a confusing mix of sounds and letter names when they try to decode). Remember, you are trying to teach your child how the sounds of the letters can be written: the names are of little use at this point. In most schools using synthetic phonics, letter names are not introduced until sounds have been thoroughly mastered (on average 1-2 years). Teaching the letter names and the alphabetical order in which they occur is more useful later for dictionary use.

The second point, linked to this, is that it is not helpful to teach the letters in alphabetical order. Teachers instead focus on teaching those groups of letters which will allow children to read the greatest number of words in the shortest amount of time. The first set of letters usually taught is s-a-t-p-i-n as these can be combined to read a variety of simple words. Having said this, there is no harm at all in teaching your child the old alphabet rhyme we learned at school (to the tune of ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star’). Then, when they learn the letter names, they already know their dictionary order.

On the Beginning Reading pages you should find all you need to teach your child if you want to use a synthetic phonics approach.