

Whole language approach: Reading is more than sounding out words and decoding

November 12 2019, by Katina Zammit



Words can say different things depending on their context. Credit: [Annie Spratt/Unsplash](#)

When I was younger I decided to learn Greek. I learned the letter-sound correspondences and could say the words—the sounds, that is. But although I could and still can decode these words, I can't actually read Greek because I don't know what the words mean.

Being able to make the connection between the letters, their

combinations and the sounds that make up the [words](#) wasn't all I needed to be able to read. It was an easy way to learn but it didn't provide me with the whole picture.

As we read, and understand what we are reading, we don't just use our knowledge of the letter-sound correspondences, which you may know as phonics or phonemic awareness, we also use other cues. These include our knowledge of the topic, the [meaning of words](#) in the context of the topic, and the flow and sequence of the words in a sentence.

Good readers use a full repertoire of skills, each dependent on the other. And a whole language approach to teaching reading is about arming new readers with this repertoire.

What is the whole language approach?

A whole language approach to teaching reading was introduced into primary schools in [the late 1970s](#). There have been many developments in this area since, so the approach has been adapted and today looks quite different from 40 years ago.

To begin with, let's dispel some myths about a whole language approach to teaching reading. It is not learning to read individual words by sight. Nor is it learning a list of vocabulary only.

A whole language approach to teaching reading is not opposed to teaching the correspondence of a letter or letters to sounds to help sound out unfamiliar words. Nor is it opposed to learning how to blend sounds together to decode a word by using the first letter/s of a word, the end of the word and the letter/s in the middle.

But just knowing sounds is not the same as knowing how to read. In 2000, the US National Reading Panel's analysis of [scientific literature](#) on

teaching children to read found systematic phonics instruction (teaching sounds and blending them together) should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a balanced reading program.

The panel determined that phonics instruction should not be a total reading program, nor should it be a dominant component.

In 2011, the UK introduced a [mandatory phonics screening check](#), for year 1 students, to address the decline in literacy achievement in the middle years of school. Children were prepared for the test using a government-approved synthetic phonics program. But in 2019 around 25% of [year 6 students](#) failed to reach the minimum requirements in reading.

Australia's [own national inquiry into teaching literacy](#) noted the same conclusions as the US national reading panel.

This view aligns with the whole language approach in the 21st century, which advocates a balanced way of teaching reading in the early years. This includes:

- explicit teaching of decoding skills (how to break up a word to work out how it is pronounced)
- connecting the decoding of word/s to their meaning
- learning to read frequently used words that can't be sounded out or broken up into [different sounds](#) (the, were)
- learning the meaning of new words from the context they are in (looking at the words before and after and at what the sentence is about)
- understanding what the text being read is about (literally and interpretively)
- building a wide vocabulary
- understanding how images and words work together

- promoting a love of the English language and an interest in reading.

Let's not put kids off reading

The whole language approach provides children learning to read with more than one way to work out unfamiliar words. They can begin with decoding—breaking the word into its parts and trying to sound them out and then blend them together. This [may or may not](#) work.

They can also look at where the word is in the sentence and consider what word most likely would come next based on what they have read so far. They can look beyond the word to see if the rest of the sentence can assist to decode the word and pronounce it.

We do not read texts one word at a time. We make best guesses as we read and learn to read. We learn from our errors. Sometimes these errors are not that significant—does it matter if I read Sydenham as "SID-EN-HAM" or "SID-N-AM"? Perhaps not.

[Does it matter](#) that I can decode the word "wind" but don't pronounce the two differently in "the wind was too strong to wind the sail"? Yes, it probably does.

Teaching children to read or to see reading with a focus on phonics and phonemic awareness gives them [the illusion "proper" reading is mere decoding and blending](#). In fact, it has been argued this can [put children off reading](#) when entering school. While some gain may occur in the first years, over time [achievement deteriorates](#) for children in high-performing and low-performing schools.

A whole language approach doesn't argue against the importance of phonemic awareness. But it acknowledges it is not all that should be

included in reading instruction.

It is important to [assess children's reading](#) from the beginning of schooling and continually determine how they are progressing. Teachers can then select specific strategies to improve individual children's reading competence and increase their skills to build fluent and confident readers.

A whole language approach to teaching reading advocates for [teaching](#) phonics and phonemic awareness in the context of real texts—that use the richness of the English [language](#)—not artificial, highly constructed texts. However, it also acknowledges this is not sufficient. Being able to decode the written word is essential, but it isn't enough to set up a child to be a competent reader and to be successful during and after school.

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