

# Phonics teaching in England needs to change: New research points to a better approach

January 19 2022, by Dominic Wyse, Alice Bradbury

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Arguments about the best way to teach children to read can be intense—they've even been described as "[the reading wars](#)." In England, as in many other countries, much of the debate has been over the use of phonics, which helps children understand how sounds—"phonemes"—are represented by letters.

The government requires teachers to use a particular type of phonics [teaching](#) called "[synthetic phonics](#)," and the emphasis on this technique has become overwhelming in English primary schools.

Supporters of synthetic phonics teaching have argued that teaching of phonemes and letters should be first and foremost. On the other side have been supporters of whole language instruction, who think that reading whole texts—books for example—should come first and foremost.

Our [new research](#) shows that synthetic phonics alone is not the best way to teach [children](#) to read. We found that a more effective method is to combine phonics teaching with whole texts, meaning that children learn to read by using books as well as learning phonics.

Current synthetic phonics lessons typically have an exclusive focus on phonemes, and how these are represented by letters. For example in the word "dog" each letter stands for a different phoneme: /d/ /o/ /g/. In the word "teach" there are three phonemes: /t/ /ee/ /ch/. Phonemes can be represented by one letter or sometimes by more than one letter, like the /ee/ phoneme represented by the two letters "ea" in "teach."

The teaching of synthetic phonics is done separately from other English teaching. Children read "decodable books": books with a limited vocabulary of words designed to emphasize use of the letters and sounds taught in phonics lessons.

[Our research](#) included a survey of more than 2,000 primary school teachers. When asked a question about their approach to reading, 66% responded: "Synthetic phonics is emphasized first and foremost in my phonics teaching."

The Department of Education [enforces the policy of teaching](#) synthetic

phonics in various ways. It vets published teaching schemes, creating a list of approved synthetic phonics schemes. Ofsted, the government office responsible for educational standards, has a strong focus on synthetic phonics teaching in their inspections of schools.

Furthermore, children in year one (aged five to six) in England take a national statutory test, the [phonics screening check](#). This is used to emphasize phonics teaching and hold teachers to account. This test includes the requirement for children to learn to read nonsense words, called "pseudo words." These could include, for example, "meck," "shig," "blem" and "sut."

It is clear from our research that the phonics screening check is narrowing teaching. For example, 237 teachers in our survey said that they were giving extra phonics lessons to help children pass the test. The word "pressure" appeared 97 times in teachers' comments about the phonics screening check. One teacher felt that they had to "live and breathe phonics."

## **Existing evidence**

Our research also reviewed the best existing evidence on phonics teaching and reading. [Previous research](#)—a systematic review, which analyzes the findings of a number of research papers—not only questioned an emphasis on synthetic phonics but also on other systematic phonics teaching. It found that there is no evidence that synthetic phonics teaching is better than other methods of teaching phonics and reading.

Other main methods of teaching reading include the "whole language" approach. In this approach, teaching reading with whole texts is the priority. Encouraging children's motivation for reading is another main aim of whole language teaching. In the [whole-language approach](#) phonics

is not taught systematically.

Another main method of teaching reading is "balanced instruction." With this approach the importance of comprehending the meaning of written language is carefully balanced with the acquisition of a range of skills and knowledge. Balanced instruction combines systematic teaching of whole texts and other linguistic aspects such as sentences and words.

Another [systematic review](#) found that integrating phonics teaching with comprehension teaching resulted in the best impact on children's reading.

As part of our research we carried out a new analysis of all 55 research papers that were part of this [systematic review](#). In summary, it was clear that in effective teaching approaches phonics teaching was connected with whole texts in every lesson.

One study, carried out in Canada, was particularly compelling because the tests of children's reading comprehension showed that the approach had been effective four years after the intervention had ended. The effective approach was driven by helping children to make sense of reading using whole texts.

## **A different approach**

We found that England's emphasis on synthetic phonics is different compared to high performing English language countries in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. None of these other countries mandate synthetic phonics.

Canada has consistently performed the best of English language dominant nations in the PISA tests. Canada's approach at national and

state level is very different from England's because it emphasizes whole texts, and phonics is not emphasized as much.

The approach to teaching reading in England means that children in England are unlikely to be learning to read as effectively as they should be. Teachers, children, and their parents need a more balanced approach to the teaching of reading.

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