

COMPREHENDING DECODING

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Anyone that knows anything about reading must have read reports on the Clackmannanshire research with an appalling sense of *déjà vu*. This research showed that after only 16 weeks of synthetic phonics teaching children were reading seven months above chronological age. Seven years later, with no further systematic synthetic phonics, their word-reading ability was three and a half years above chronological age.

Do we really need more research to tell us that boys, EAL children, children from poorer families – indeed all children – learn to read more quickly when they are taught systematically and intensively using synthetic phonics? (Synthetic phonics is simply the ability to convert a letter or letter group into sounds that are then blended together into a word.)

Once a child can work out the words (decode) he can then begin to sort out the message (comprehend). If he can't decode the words, he can't begin to understand.

If on the other hand he can decode efficiently, he is likely to understand a text which he would previously have understood if it had been read aloud to him. In other words, with *simple* children's texts, good decoding is usually sufficient to ensure good comprehension.

The easier a child finds decoding, the more he will read and the more he will enjoy reading. The more he reads, the more challenging material he is likely to read. He will start to read more complex texts which include vocabulary he would not otherwise have come across. He will constantly ask 'What does this mean?' His knowledge of words and therefore his understanding of the world will increase. The more he learns the more he wants to find out.

The child who finds reading difficult does not ask, 'What does this word mean?' He asks, 'What is this word?'

Imagine you are five years old. Your teacher has chosen a book for you to read.

On the first page you come to a word you can't read.

You know the first letter but not the rest of the word.

Should you guess the word from the picture? No, of course not, because only nouns have pictures.

Should you read on to the next word and try to guess the word using the word before the word you can't read to help you? No. There are too many possible choices to guess, even if you understood what you were reading in the first place.

Should you guess by using a grammatical cue? No. You need to have a very strong grammatical sense and understanding even to think about using this one.

If you have floundered around pursuing these false solutions it is very unlikely that you will ask what the word means. You can't ask what the word means because you don't know what the word is. You are so lost that you don't know where to begin. You switch off and look at the teacher's face, hoping for clues in her eyes. The teacher may now be showing frustration in her eyes. You start worrying that she thinks you are not very bright.

You hope if you pause long enough and look worried enough the teacher will tell you the word.

Unfortunately in the next sentence the same thing happens. And again.

You think about how hard life is now you've started school and ask 'Can I go now, please?'

You take home a colour-coded simple book that you know so well you don't even have to look at the words. At least you don't have to use any picture, context or graphic cues.

During my three years of training teachers in my programme, I have, more or less, the same discussions wherever I go: the arguments given by teachers show that they are locked into a National Literacy Strategy mindset.

Teacher: But your system doesn't encourage children to use a range of cues.

Me: Absolutely, I want the child to decode every word quickly, without hesitation.

Teacher: But they won't know how to use picture cues, or context cues or syntactic cues.

Me: Why would I want them to?

Teacher: Because you can't work every word out using phonics.

Me: That's because the books you give them don't have a strong cumulative phonic structure, so the child has got to use his guessing cues.

Teacher: It's informed guessing.

Me: It's still guessing. It's not decoding. They know they've guessed, so they don't really know if they know.

Our books give children success because they can decode every word except the 'red words'. (We print the few common undecodable words in red so that the child knows he can't use 'Fred Talk' – sounding out grapheme-by-grapheme.) They know they know the words.

While your child is playing a guessing game, my child has read the whole page.

Teacher: But doesn't that mean he will be good just at decoding?

Me: When a child can decode any word efficiently, he can devote all his conscious attention to comprehension. He then asks questions about the words he doesn't

understand. All his energies are concentrated on getting to the heart of the passage. He's not in the word any more, he's in the world of comprehension.

Teacher: But he will only be able to read phonically decodable texts.

Me: He will be able to read anything when he has cracked the complex alphabetic code (when he has learned more than one spelling for a given sound). As the Clackmannanshire research shows, the effects of synthetic phonics are cumulative; after seven years, children are reading words three and a half years ahead of their chronological age.

Teacher: But when does a child's comprehension catch up with this ability to decode?

Me: Never. Adults read words they don't understand. We ask, 'What does this word mean? But we can only do this when we use our knowledge of sound-graphemes to pronounce a word such as 'pleurothotonos'.

We decode a complex medical word, maybe with an incorrect pronunciation, and then work out what it might mean in the light of the sentence. We use the context to work out the possible *meaning* of the word.

The crippled old man leaned heavily to the left. At first I thought he was drunk, but then I realised he was suffering from pleurothotonos.

The clarity of the above became obvious to me when I was teaching children with English as an additional language in Whitechapel. I also read so much research that said exactly the same thing.

Given that most parents could not read English, I could not assume there was someone to help at home. The more quickly these children learnt to decode, the more time we spent on helping children comprehend new words and stories. The results were remarkable. Many children were reading advanced children's fiction by the age of 7. Of course there were a few children to whom every year we gave extra support – but they all learnt to read.

I stopped being a headteacher three years ago and wrote a reading programme. Over these years I have worked with many schools to develop and improve the programme so that it can be implemented quickly and easily.

I have learnt, however, that it's not just *what you do*, it's *how you do it* that also matters hugely. The same programme can go into one school and get quite good results and into others and get fantastic results.

In the end it is down to the head teacher. If the head teacher wants the programme to work, it will work. A good synthetic programme with a good team of staff leads to successful readers.

What we do:

- *Read Write Inc.* is an inclusive literacy programme for all children reading at National Curriculum level 2b or below. It is also suitable for children in older year groups who have significant learning difficulties, including specific literacy problems.
(We have a programme for children in Years 5, 6 and 7 who are reading below the National Curriculum level 2a, which uses age-appropriate text.)
The Read Write Inc. programmes teach reading and writing. However talking is a critical and integral element of the programme. There is no bolt on ‘speaking and listening’.

READING

The children:

- learn 44 ‘speed’ sounds and the corresponding letters/letter groups using simple picture prompts.
These are taught over a short period of time in short, intensive and, importantly, fun lessons. No games are used – just good purposeful teaching. Phonics is for reading and spelling – not playing games.
- learn to read words using sound-blending known as ‘Fred Talk’.
Fred can only speak single-syllabic words in pure sounds. He shows the children how to sound-blend. He does this all through the d-ay.
- read lively stories featuring words they have learned to sound out.
The Storybooks have been written by Gill Munton, a talented and experienced author. When you read Gill’s stories, you forget that you are reading a text with a strong phonic structure. The language is natural and fluent and each story has a clear shape. Humour is a strong feature – children want to read the books again and again.
- show that they comprehend the stories by answering ‘Find It’ and ‘Prove It’ discussion questions.
As soon as children can decode the story with accuracy, we teach them to comprehend the story through partner discussion. Children are taught to ask questions and then answer them with a partner. They are taught both to answer simple literal ‘on the page’ questions and inferential questions that are ‘between the lines’. Children are asked to justify their answers and opinions by looking for evidence in the text. They do this from the earliest texts so they learn to comprehend what they read from the very beginning.

WRITING

The children:

- learn to write the letters/letter groups which represent the 44 sounds.
They learn to hand-write using simple cues and ‘sound-write’ in rhythms. learn to write words by saying the sounds and graphemes.
Children sound out each syllable in Fred Talk as they touch their ‘Fred fingers’.
(They also learn to write ‘red words’ from memory.) As their phonic knowledge increases, they make grapheme choices from the Speed sound poster.
- write simple sentences.
Children learn to ‘hold a sentence’ in their head before writing it down. These sentences include words we know the children can sound out. They learn to compose ‘build-it’ sentences, orally, using new vocabulary.
- compose stories based on picture strips.
We help children compose sentences before they write using illustrations from the stories.
- compose a range of texts using discussion prompts.
We provide the teacher with discussion prompts to develop a wide range of writing.

TALKING

Children are assessed, so they work with children at the same level. This allows them to take a full part in all lessons.

They work in pairs so that they:

- answer every question
- practise every activity with their partner
- take turns in talking to each other.

We want children to take a full part in all the lessons, so all children answer every question. Responsibility for talking is not an optional extra; we should expect children to talk in the same way as we expect them to read and write.

After all, we learn so much of what we discuss with another person and to teach gives mastery. In this programme we teach the children to teach reading.



How it works:

- The systematic and lively programme is organised by an in-school manager.
If this programme is to succeed it has, like anything else, to be managed properly. We ask the headteacher to select an excellent teacher who has the key qualities of enthusiasm and relentlessness. This teacher supports assistants and inexperienced teachers to implement the programme to the highest standards. The manager gets to know the day-to-day progress of every child who is learning to read.
- All staff (teachers and assistants) are trained together by one of our trainers who has taught and managed the programme (no cascade training is used)
When every member of staff (including the headteacher) knows how to teach the programme they all start to speak with one voice. Everyone has a shared knowledge and understanding of how children learn to read using the same programme. This means that staff support each other.
- The children read and write for an hour each day, grouped according to their reading level (two 20-minute sessions for Reception children).
This, perhaps, is the most critical part of the programme. The greater the homogeneity of the group, the more focused the teaching and the faster the progress of the children. When children work at their own reading level every day for an hour, they are bound to make more progress than if they were reading at their level for a mere 20 minutes a week.
Every reading teacher knows that it is impossible to support very poor readers and extend fluent readers at the same time. You cannot meet the needs of all children if some can't read the book.
- Children work with a partner to practise what they have been taught. This means that all children participate during the whole lesson; there is no 'down time'.

The cumulative effect of learning to read and write, talking about the books and teaching each other has improved children's confidence immeasurably. Children who were shy and too afraid to speak out in front of the class talk confidently with a partner.

Some schools start in a small way, using Read Write Inc. as a 'Wave 3' programme whereby groups of teachers from different schools are trained together.

However, when a whole school really works well together the results can be impressive. One school in Walsall gained 41% more seven year old children achieving Level 2b at Key Stage 1 in 9 months. Most schools have increased the same scores by well over 20%.

Schools to visit are listed on our website

www.ruthmiskinliteracy.com