# Early Reading Instruction and Systematic Synthetic Phonics: A Sample Policy

In Primary 1-3 (YR-Y2) a large part of the daily timetable is devoted to teaching children how to read, write and spell. English is a complex language, and as such, it takes around three years to sufficiently master the basics. In line with current international research, we use systematic synthetic phonics in our school, as this has been shown to be the most effective way to teach all children to read and spell—regardless of background or individual difficulties. There is a mounting body of evidence which also shows that this approach is most effective for disadvantaged children and, when taught properly, it can close the attainment gap.

The English language is built out of sounds—or phonemes. Through systematic synthetic phonics children are taught how to blend (synthesise) sounds together to decode words. In addition, this same knowledge is used for spelling—or encoding.

Children are taught about the alphabetic code—and the relationships between the sounds and the letters/spellings (or the grapheme/phoneme correspondences or GPCs). They then use this knowledge when learning the core skills of reading, writing and spelling.

In Primary 1-3 (YR-Y2) we use the programme ***<<insert as appropriate>>***, on at least four days out of five. Two sounds/letters are introduced per week:

**Monday:** re-cap/review previous learning then teach/introduce new sound/letter and give individual word level practice (reading, writing and spelling)

**Tuesday:** continue to reinforce/apply/practise new sound at sentence level and text level (reading, writing and spelling)

**Wednesday:** re-cap/review previous learning then teach/introduce new sound/letter and give individual word level practice (reading, writing and spelling)

**Thursday:** continue to reinforce/apply/practise new sound at sentence level and text level (reading, writing and spelling)

In all lessons reading, writing and spelling are practised at the same time—with word level, sentence level and text level work taking place—to ensure that children have plenty of practice in applying their knowledge and skills. Sentences and texts are cumulatively decodable, reinforcing previous learning and allowing focussed practice of the new sound/letter correspondence that has been taught. It is this individual, independent application of skills and knowledge that will secure progress for everyone.

The lesson outlines described above are focussed on enabling children to read, write and spell—but they are also rich, core learning experiences and provide extensive opportunities for comprehension, discussion, the teaching of grammar, and crucially, vocabulary enrichment.

Reading books are also used to support this learning in the classroom and at home. Phonically decodable reading books provide positive reading experiences for children— they use the sounds/letters that children already know and will mean they can read these books independently and with confidence.

By the end of P3 (Y2), if following the pace and practice recommended above, our children will have covered a comprehensive alphabetic code for reading and for spelling; many of the children will almost be totally free readers.

It is important however, that instruction in the alphabetic code continues into P4 (Y3)—and right up until children leave primary school to ensure that the more complex letter/sound correspondences are covered, for spelling in particular.

Sight Words

Parents and teachers may at first be surprised to find that we no longer use sight words to teach words to children. This practice has been embedded in ***<<insert country as appropriate>>*** for many decades—and indeed still exists in many schools. However, there is robust research and evidence to show that teaching children to memorise words as a whole, by their shape, is ineffective, and in many cases, detrimental for the teaching of early reading. Reading by sight words is simply memorisation, it is not real reading —and crucially, does not enable children to read any word they may come across. In addition, reading words by sight is a limited strategy—it only works while the reading books and materials used use the words taught to date. If children encounter new or more challenging words—having never learnt it as a sight word—they are left with one ineffective strategy—to guess.

The only strategy that children need, that will work for them every time, is phonics ‘all-the-way-through-the-word’ for reading and for spelling.

Letter Names

Often one of the very first things that parents try to teach their children at home is their ‘ABCs’—where children sing or chant the letters of the alphabet. However, the names of the letters (Ay, Bee, See etc.) actually have nothing to do with learning to read—as it is the sounds associated with the letters that is important (/a/, /b/, /c/). For this reason, we teach the letter names separately from the alphabetic code—and only once children have a secure basic knowledge of phonics. This avoids confusion at the earliest stages.

Struggling Readers

There are many reasons why children may struggle with reading. But it must be remembered that, when research-informed, effective reading instruction is used, it is entirely possible to teach every child to read. It will only be in 2%-3% cases, where children have profound difficulties or disabilities, that they may be unable to reach the desired level of literacy. Even children, who may previously have been described as dyslexic, can be taught to read.

From Primary 1 (YR) it is crucial that slower to learn children are given sufficient time to earn—and this will usually mean more ‘little and often’ practice—to ensure that these children can keep up with the work of the class, rather than allowing them to fall behind and be in the impossible situation of ‘catching up’ with their peers.

It is not necessary to buy or use specific intervention programmes for struggling readers. If you buy a high-quality phonics programme this should also be used for intervention purposes.

Resources

The methodology we use at ***<<insert school name>>*** is systematic synthetic phonics and we follow its principles for the teaching of reading. We use the following resources to support the teaching and learning of reading in the classroom:

***<<insert as appropriate>>***: a phonics and intervention programme—and a spelling programme throughout the school

***<<insert as appropriate>>***: phonically decodable reading books

***<<insert as appropriate>>***: we use these books with children who have ASN or who are experiencing difficulties with reading

***Alphabetic Code Charts***: these are used throughout the school, in every classroom and in book bags. They support teaching and learning in reading—and also help children become independent, accurate spellers.