

Phonics for Pupils with Special Educational Needs

Ann Sullivan

Recent History of Phonics in UK Schools

In 2006 a landmark report, the Rose Report, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education, concluded that early reading instruction in UK schools must include synthetic phonics. Academic research has unravelled how we learn to read and indicates that systematic synthetic phonics delivered by direct, explicit instruction is the best way to teach reading and spelling.

In 2018, The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) stated that, "It is absolutely essential that every child master the phonic code as quickly as possible ... So, successful schools firstly teach phonics first, fast and furious."

From September 2019, Ofsted inspections included a focus on reading with an expectation that schools will demonstrate implementation of a good quality synthetic phonics programme.

The Simple View of Reading

In 1986 academic researchers Philip Gough and William Tunmer proposed a simple way of considering the complexities of reading. Their Simple View of Reading (SVR), later enhanced by Hollis Scarborough's 'Reading Rope' remains the accepted wisdom of what happens when we learn to read.

There are two main components in the SVR: word recognition and language comprehension. Both are necessary for skilled reading that results in the reader fully understanding what they have read.

Word recognition itself is made up of two parts: phonological awareness (awareness of syllables and the sounds in words) and decoding (the alphabetic principle and correspondence between sounds and letters). Fluency also comes into this part of the SVR. As the child becomes increasingly skilled in decoding and begins to build up a bank of words that can be read with automaticity (read on sight or sight words) then reading fluency develops and improves.

Similarly, language comprehension can also be divided into two parts: vocabulary (words the child knows the meaning of) and language structure (understanding of the protocols for assembling words in sentences for meaning). Fluency also comes into this part of the SVR. If the child knows in advance vocabulary associated with the subject they are reading about and have a good understanding of language structure, then as they read and monitor their own understanding and are able to read with expression and pace.

Phonics is the gateway to becoming a skilled and competent reader and as such is an important aspect of a child's learning.

Synthetic Phonics

Written language can be viewed as a code or cipher that we need to know, understand and work with when reading and spelling.

Synthetic phonics teaches pupils the correspondence between letters and sounds, to read words by blending the sounds together and to spell words by segmenting or identifying the individual sounds in a word and then writing the matching letter or letter combination.

Linguistic Phonics

Linguistic phonics is synthetic phonics but with a subtle difference. Rather than teaching letters and have the pupil learn the matching sound, linguistic phonics starts with the spoken word and all its component sounds and then teaches the child all the letters and combinations of letters that can represent the sound.

For example, let's consider the sound /ow/ as in the word 'down'. The sound /ow/ can be represented by the following combinations of letters: **ow ou ough**, in the words 'town', 'found' and 'drought'.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Phonics

For pupils with SEN, specific difficulties make the process of learning to read and spell more challenging, with difficulties in processing sounds (phonemic skills) having the greatest impact.

Like all pupils a highly structured, systematic synthetic phonics programme is the best method of learning to read and spell and the linguistic approach is easiest for pupils with SEN to understand and access, including those with complex needs.

The speed at which pupils with SEN become confident readers and writers may be slower than their peers. They require much exposure to activities that give them lots and lots of experience of working with sounds, letters / letter combinations and words in sentences and texts. This is sometimes described as overlearning.

Pupils with additional barriers to access and learning such as pupils with physical disabilities or who are non- or pre-verbal require adaptations to the core programme to enable access.

Ann Sullivan 2020