



## Attachment 6

# Thirteen important aspects of a systematic synthetic phonics program

## 1. Phonological awareness

### Having a broad awareness of the sounds of language

Phonological awareness involves being able to hear all sounds in language. It involves, for example, the ability to recognise and use rhyme; break words into syllables; blend phonemes (sounds) into syllables and words; identify beginning and ending sounds in a syllable; and see small words in larger words (e.g. 'cat' in catalogue). Phonological awareness is both oral and aural and does not need a knowledge of written letters.

Tasks that involve phonological awareness include:

- identifying and making same sounds
- identifying and making alliteration and assonance (sing, song, sung)
- identifying and making rhymes
- dividing sentences into words
- dividing words into syllables
- segmenting and blending onsets and rimes.

## 2. Phonemic awareness

### Knowing how to manipulate the separate sounds in words

In the strictest sense, phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness. Phonemic awareness only deals with one aspect of sound: the phoneme. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound which can make a difference to the meaning of a word.

For example, if we change the first phoneme in 'man' from /m/ to /b/, we change the word from 'man' to 'ban'. This also changes the meaning of the word. Learning to hear separate sounds in words allows students to relate the sounds to the letters of the alphabet and supports their ability to read and write words they have not seen before.

As with all phonics strategies, phonemic awareness involves a sequence of instruction progressing from easier to more difficult tasks and from larger to smaller units of spoken language, for example:

- identifying beginning, final and medial phonemes in spoken words
- segmenting and blending individual phonemes in spoken words
- inserting, substituting and deleting individual phonemes in spoken words.

Ideally, the phonemic awareness component of a high-quality synthetic program uses tactile, auditory and visual cues to help children understand how to identify, segment and blend the sounds in spoken words. It will usually start with continuous sounds that are easier to blend and it will advise teachers to 'stretch out' and blend (or 'sing') sounds rather than separating them. As students' understanding develops, it will include activities to teach the relationship of letters to sounds.

## 3. Concepts about print

### Understanding the forms and functions of printed language

Students will not always come to school with an awareness of print. Some students may come from a particular culture or home environment where reading print is not a regular daily practice, so they may not understand that print has meaning or purpose. Good instructional programs will involve the introduction and discussion of a range of print texts and a discussion of their purpose.

Environmental print in the classroom, as well as magazines, newspapers, recipes, instructions, menus and street signs, are all sources relevant to the classroom discussions that build students' print awareness. Elements of an instructional program that develops print awareness include learning to differentiate letters from numbers; recognising English letters from different community languages; and reading signs that incorporate non-print messages (such as road signs or warning signs).

## 4. Alphabetic knowledge

### Knowing the shapes and names of letters of the alphabet

English has a 26-letter alphabet with upper- and lower-case letters. Any systematic approach to teaching English provides activities for students to learn this. Handwriting lessons that teach upper- and lower-case letter forms provide an ideal opportunity to teach students how to form letters and support letter-shape recognition.

A high-quality program provides students with the opportunity to experiment with and manipulate letters to make words and messages, using a sequence of letter introduction that can be adjusted to student need. The teaching sequence should consider the visual appearance of each letter and avoid teaching letters that are too similar in appearance in close succession. In many programs, lower-case letters might be taught before upper-case equivalents.

## 5. The alphabetic principle

### Understanding the relationship between sounds and written letters

Programs that effectively teach the alphabetic principle teach letter-sound relationships explicitly and in isolation and are also known as phonics programs. They provide daily opportunities for students to practise letter-sound relationships, and include new letter-sound relationships, as well as cumulatively reviewing previously taught relationships.

Such programs give students opportunities early and often to apply their expanding knowledge of letter-sound relationships to the reading of phonetically spelled words that are familiar and to words that are new to them.

## 6. Sequence, rate and mode of phonics instruction

### Adopting a systematic sequence, rate and mode to support learning

Good synthetic phonics programs recognise that students learn letter–sound relationships at different rates. They introduce letter–sound relationships at a measured pace and allow teachers time to review unconsolidated learning. High-quality programs place common letter–sound relationships early in the teaching sequence by introducing common consonants and vowels so students can learn to read words quickly.

Importantly, high-quality phonics programs avoid the simultaneous introduction of letter–sounds that sound or look too similar, for example, b/d/p/q are not taught in close succession. Single consonant sounds and consonant blends or clusters are taught in separate lessons. Blending instruction occurs with words that contain the letter–sound relationships that students have learned. Phonic concepts are taught using multisensory means that cue students to methods of sound production for voiced and unvoiced sounds.

## 7. Decoding

### Knowing how to read each letter or letter pattern in a word

Quality synthetic phonics programs provide children with opportunities to use their knowledge of letter–sound relationships to practise decoding. They help students use context to confirm the meanings of words they have identified by applying their knowledge of letter–sound relationships.

They also support students by teaching them word morphology (meaningful parts of words, that is, prefixes, suffixes, linguistic word roots and etymology), especially in multisyllabic words.

## 8. Decodable texts

### Applying knowledge of letter–sound relationships to decodable texts

Quality phonics programs provide opportunities for students to practise reading texts that contain a high proportion of words that conform to letter–sound relationships they have been taught, particularly through the first stages of the program. High-quality decodable texts contain enough high-frequency, irregular and story words to make them sound as natural as possible so they can sustain the students’ interest while allowing them to feel successful as a reader.

The sequence of texts in such programs should closely match the teaching sequence of letter–sound relationships and contain phonic concepts that are cumulatively reviewed in subsequent texts.

The program must be engaging, encourage the students to read, and promote and reinforce comprehension – the ultimate purpose of reading. To develop fluency and confidence, students must have opportunities to repeatedly read decodable texts.

## 9. Reading fluency

### Using a variety of texts to support easy, accurate and expressive reading

Fluency aids comprehension, so students need opportunities to read and reread a range of stories and informational texts by reading independently, with a partner or in choral reading situations. Effective programs provide these opportunities. They also pre-teach new or difficult words and provide students with practice in reading these words before expecting them to be read independently in a text.

Students also benefit from hearing a range of texts read fluently and with expression. The regular assessment of students' oral reading fluency allows teachers to track individual students' reading rate and accuracy. Most critically, it allows teachers to check their reading comprehension. Take-home readers and in-class parent reading can support teachers to provide students with repeated opportunities to read texts and build their accuracy, fluency and comprehension.

## 10. Irregular/high-frequency words

### Recognising frequent words that are not readily decodable

Irregular/high-frequency words are best learned quickly to allow access to the broadest range of early reading texts. Effective programs acknowledge this and have specific instruction in how to read such words that makes the process enjoyable and rewarding for students. Teachers often support students to recognise these words by referring to them by a particular term such as a 'tricky word' or a 'red word'.

Teachers also encourage students to identify the 'tricky' part of the word but decode the other parts, for example, /said/ – the tricky part is /ai/, which makes a short /e/ sound, whereas the beginning /s/ and the closing /d/ are easily decodable.

The goal of identifying these specific words is to develop automaticity. Automaticity indicates that students' short-term memory, often called working memory, immediately processes such words so that they can move on to reading other parts of the text to make immediate sense of what they read.

## 11. Spelling

### Translating letter–sound relationships and spelling patterns into written communication

Ideally, a good phonics program involves teaching spelling strategies that thoroughly cover the most common spelling for each sound, and then systematically introducing the advanced spelling alternatives for each sound. When assessing for spelling, students will not be expected to write words, sentences and stories independently before being taught how the writing system works.

When encouraging students to express themselves in writing, teachers should make the distinction between lessons where correct spelling is the focus (such as in dictation) and lessons where self-expression and communication of ideas is the focus.

## 12. Writing

### Encoding sounds into letters to create words in texts to convey meaning

Integrated into good reading programs are multiple opportunities for students to apply their phonics skills to encode (or write) relevant and purposeful texts. Students should be supported to write increasingly sophisticated phonically structured words and apply their knowledge of writing conventions.

Educators need to be intentional when setting writing tasks and include opportunities for students to explore and experiment with text structures, words and language features. Targeted and accurate feedback to students is vital to ensure students always apply their developing knowledge of letter-sounds and patterns.

Students who have spelling ability that limits their expressive range need added encouragement for writing even though they may lack consolidated spelling skills. Even for students whose spelling may impede clear expression, writing opportunities still assist them to develop their other writing skills, such as personal voice, the capacity to plan and organise texts, and the production of particular text types (for example, characterisation and description in narratives; organising phrases in recounts). These students should be given enough time to edit their writing for meaning and not just spelling.

## 13. Regular assessment and review of progress

A quality teaching and learning phonics resource will provide information about how to gather and interpret information about student progress and growth. Teachers then can make decisions about the next instructional steps.

This information also forms the basis of feedback that teachers regularly provide to learners that will deepen their engagement in their phonics learning and assist them to move forward. Regular reviews of progress also support students to act as learning resources for one another in the classroom, for example, as peer tutors.