

Phonics in Northern Ireland: Setting the Record Straight

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• Teaching phonics in the 1970s and 80s

Chall (1967) recommended that decoding should be taught explicitly and early, and systematic phonics teaching became prevalent within the beginning reading programme in the 1970s and 1980s in NI. Lessons followed a structured sequence to teach phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence, alongside other strategies to develop orthographic awareness, sight word recognition and reading fluency. Phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences (PGCs) were taught before larger orthographic units such as initial consonant blends, e.g., tr, str, or spelling patterns such as cap, tap, rap, trap, strap (onset and rime).

ADDED ILLUSTRATION — ONSET AND RIME

cap	tap	rap	trap	strap
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Phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences were taught before larger units like these.

• Blending and working memory

Children were taught to blend (synthesise) phonemes together, and when they knew the individual phonemes, they were taught to recognise common initial consonant blends such as cl, bl, fl, gl, sl, and consonant clusters such as spl. These orthographic patterns are blended units of sound that occur at the beginning of many words. If learners have already been taught the phonemes that form these blends, no additional memory load is created, rather it is an effective way to teach blending. Furthermore, the ability to recognise these orthographic units reduces the demands on working memory when blending and decoding. Difficulties with working memory make blending individual phonemes in words with more than two phonemes beyond the working memory capacity of most 5-7 year old children.

TEACHERS NEED TO BE AWARE

The DfE Essential Core Criteria for the validation of phonics programmes published in 2021 and updated in 2023 prohibits the teaching of initial consonant blends and clusters, to ensure that children take each phoneme in turn, one by one, all through a word — and teachers need to be aware of this if they are using a phonics programme from the DfE validated list.

It was well recognised in the 1980s that the strategy of analysing the sounds in written words supports the development of phoneme-to-grapheme links for children who have difficulties blending. The ability to blend individual phonemes continues to be a significant problem in SSP phonics programmes.

• Breakthrough to Literacy

The methods used when teaching beginning reading in the 1970s and 1980s were also influenced by Mackay, Thompson and Schaub's (1970) *Breakthrough to Literacy*, which, at that time, was an innovative new approach to teaching reading that involved children constructing their own sentences before reading conventional books.

Children physically manipulated and re-ordered words to make sentences using a sentence maker.

As a young teacher from 1980 onwards and as an experienced teacher working with

children with literacy difficulties, sentence making was a feature of this author's teaching within the beginning reading programme. Physically constructing sentences using a target vocabulary develops the semantic and syntactic associations that are particularly important for learning high frequency words that carry meaning through their function, and irregular words, e.g. "said", "the", "was", "are".

• **Sight words and the shift to decoding**

It was also recognised in the 1970s and 1980s, and reaffirmed by Gough and Hillinger (1980), that children can learn some sight words visually, before whole word learning becomes inefficient and a decoding strategy becomes essential for larger vocabulary growth. This is why phoneme-to-grapheme correspondence was taught systematically alongside the teaching of a small sight vocabulary, using a range of activities to ensure orthographic learning.

• **Adams (1990): it must all work together**

The importance of systematic phonics teaching was strengthened by Adams' (1990) review of beginning reading. However, Adams advised against phonics first and only, and against the whole language meaning-first approach, instead advising that:

"All of the component knowledge and skills must work together within a single interdependent system. And it is in that way that they must be acquired as well: it is not just eclecticism that makes a program of reading instruction effective; it is the way its pieces are fitted together to complement and support one another, always with full appreciation of the needs and progress of young learners with whom it will be used."

ADAMS (1990), P. 423

• **The whole-language shift of the 1990s**

Many schools in NI continued to teach phonics systematically throughout the 1990s using both synthetic and analytic strategies. However, the whole language approach to teaching reading treated phonics as one of three cueing systems. It was taught incidentally in context, rather than systematically. This approach gained momentum in the 1990s amongst teachers who lacked experience of systematic phonics teaching and were, therefore, unaware of its important role in reading development. Many teachers, however, did not implement the whole language strategies that encouraged guessing, and continued to use a range of orthographic, semantic and syntactic activities including a broader approach to systematic phonics teaching, to develop all of the cognitive processes needed for reading fluency and comprehension.

As a result of the whole language approach to teaching reading, the strategies of analysis and synthesis, which were originally employed as strategies within broader phonics instruction in the 1970s and 80s, were wrongly treated as divergent. Consequently, analytic phonics and synthetic phonics emerged as opposing, mutually exclusive approaches, with analytic phonics becoming associated with the whole language approach and branded as teaching larger units of sound first, before phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences (PGCs).

• **The National Reading Panel (2000)**

The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) was commissioned, in part, to evaluate whether systematic phonics instruction produces better reading outcomes than unsystematic or no phonics instruction, and more broadly to review and evaluate the scientific research on how children learn to read and which instructional methods are most effective.

The NRP (2000) found that systematic phonics teaching within the beginning reading programme is better than incidental phonics teaching or no phonics teaching. It must be noted that the research supporting systematic phonics teaching does not relate

specifically to systematic synthetic phonics (SSP). The important factor is that teaching is systematic, whether it be a synthetic, analytic or a miscellaneous phonics approach.

"The analysis showed that effect sizes for the three categories of programs were all significantly greater than zero and did not differ statistically from each other."

NATIONAL READING PANEL (2000), PP. 2-132

• Systematic is not synthetic

Unfortunately, many teachers think that synthetic phonics and systematic phonics are one and the same, because systematic phonics research is quoted when synthetic phonics is being promoted.

"Although systematic and synthetic are very different concepts, some observers have interchanged them, which has resulted in some confusing and misleading interpretations of the National Reading Panel findings."

SHANAHAN (2005), P. 11

This conflation led to the development of systematic synthetic phonics programmes in the UK, which have become predominant within the beginning reading programme and, in some cases, are the sole approach to teaching beginning reading.

• Phonics should not be the sole approach

The NRP (2000) report is unambiguous and makes it clear that phonics should not be the sole approach to teaching reading.

"Phonics should not become the dominant component in a reading program, neither in the amount of time devoted to it nor in the significance attached."

NATIONAL READING PANEL (2000), EXECUTIVE SUMMARY P. 2-97, AND MAIN BODY P. 2-136

• Is synthetic phonics better than analytic phonics?

Although it is claimed by those who seek to promote SSP that there is research proving synthetic phonics is better than analytic phonics, existing studies are limited by methodological flaws that undermine the validity of their claims. Therefore, there is currently no robust research evidence that has found that systematic synthetic phonics is better than systematic analytic phonics. After 20 years of SSP in England there is still no research evidence to show that it outperforms any other form of systematic phonics teaching, and no research evidence to support systematic synthetic phonics as the sole or primary approach to teaching reading. There is, however, statistical evidence of the difficulties experienced by a significant minority of children.

RELATED READING

Please see the information leaflets on DfE statistics for phonics and reading standards, and the significant flaws in Johnson and Watson (2005) the research evidence.

• A broader approach is needed

Systematic synthetic phonics is an important element of a phonics programme, but it is not enough. A broader approach to phonics teaching is needed. Teachers also need to be aware that some of the strategies within the SSP programmes validated by the DfE in England are not supported by research evidence. Please read McMurray,

Morrow and Bower (2026) for a detailed analysis.

McMurray, Morrow & Bower (2026) — a detailed analysis of the strategies within DfE-validated SSP programmes.

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• **Shanahan (2005): teachers should be able to deliver both**

A broader approach to phonics teaching is supported by Shanahan (2005), who was a member of the National Reading Panel subcommittee (2000). Shanahan advises that the practical recommendation is that teachers should be able to deliver both: explicit single-sound (synthetic) teaching, as it helps children who struggle to hear sounds inside whole words, while word-analogy (analytic) teaching helps children who struggle to blend isolated phonemes without distorting them (Shanahan, 2005). Please see the information leaflet on Shanahan's advice for teachers.

• **Synthetic, analytic and analogy: a continuum, not a choice**

The DE (2025) *Strong foundations: A literacy Framework for Primary schools* identifies three approaches to phonics teaching — synthetic, analytic and analogy (p. 40–41). It is important that teachers understand that synthetic, analytic, and analogy phonics are not empirically discrete instructional approaches and in practice they overlap substantially. Skilled teaching requires understanding of all these approaches and how they work together to ensure every child develops an effective phonics strategy. They exist on a continuum of strategies that are compatible.

Children in mainstream classes vary in how they learn because they have different strengths and weaknesses in the cognitive processes required for learning to read. Synthetic phonics fails to teach children the range of strategies needed to develop all of these cognitive processes, leaving a significant amount to implicit learning from reading experience. It is not that synthetic phonics is not an important element of an effective phonics strategy, it is that phonics teaching should be broader.

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