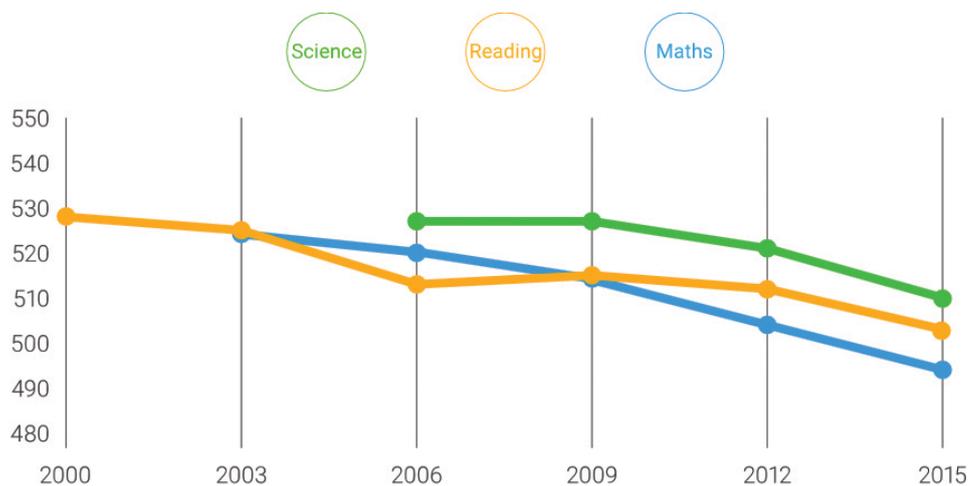


# Teach them all how to read right!

Research based letter-sound correspondence methods and early intervention in the K–2 years are essential for students with learning difficulties – **Rhonda Filmer**



Australian achievement trends, PISA (2015) <https://www.acer.org/ozpisa/key-findings>

**M**uch of educational debate in the media has centred on funding models and this has been particularly so, this year, with the vote for Gonski 2.0 in the Federal Parliament. Funding is always the key to resourcing of educational programs but of far greater concern to many educational researchers is the way that reading is taught in Australian schools. Research has shown us that the learning difficulties of students can be prevented from becoming life-restricting limitations if they are taught by letter-sound correspondence methods and there is early intervention in the K–2 years.

Why is the evidence for this approach being ignored in favour of reading methods that have not been independently researched and peer-reviewed?

There is actually evidence of systemic failure. Australia's results in the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), where Grade 4 students were examined on reading comprehension skills, were at the lowest ranking for all English-speaking countries. Australia ranked 27 out of 45 countries while the United States came sixth and England came eleventh. It was found that 17 per cent of students met the lowest benchmark in Australia and that another 7 per cent failed to meet even the minimum standard.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international assessment measuring student performance in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their science, reading and maths knowledge and skills

to meet real-life challenges.

It is not possible to categorically suggest what factors are causing this trend. It may be that our patterns of migration have changed bringing more non-English speaking students into our schools. (If so, the direct instruction in the phonology and structures of English is important in all programs including English as a Second Language courses.)

The teaching of reading has been dominated by 'whole language' pedagogy, and increasingly so, since the late 1970s. In this system students are taught to 'multi-cue' or to predict meaning from the available visual, syntactic or semantic clues and there may be some attention to the teaching of initial sounds depending on the philosophies of those who are teaching it.

What is wrong with that approach?

Prof Stanislas Dehaene (2013) presented a lecture on *How the Brain Learns to Read* found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25GI3-kiLdo>. Reading starts in the visual areas of the brain but very quickly moves into the area that stores 'letter recognition' then on to the areas that interpret meaning. There is no doubt that letter-sound correspondence, from the spoken language parts of the brain through to applying the appropriate written symbols that represent those sounds in written text, is the essential formative basis of reading. It can now be shown through neuro-imaging of brains while reading is undertaken.

Could this lecture by Dehaene, lasting 33:29 minutes, be run on a Staff Professional Development Day? Dehaene asserts that teachers know more about the mechanical

workings of their cars than they do of their students' brains. Pre-service teacher education did not cover this material for the vast majority of teachers because it was not available.

Why does it matter how children are taught to read in the 21st century?

If students are taught from a rich curriculum of spoken experiences and excellent literature, that is firmly founded on strong phonemic awareness <http://www.fivefromfive.org.au/phonemic-awareness/>, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, in the K–2 years and beyond, then we know that, for the 80 per cent of students from whom we expect no specific learning difficulties, a strong basis has been established for not only good reading but for spelling and written expression skills. For the 15 per cent who will demonstrate a learning difficulty and the 5 per cent who will develop a learning disability then the tools of written communication have been faithfully imparted and, on a *Response to Intervention* model, those students can be given Tier 2 interventions in small groups to consolidate and master literacy skills in the time they require.

When the changes in methodology from phonic-based to 'whole language' began to occur in schools in the 1970s there was a sense that we were moving into a new world that would require students to be freed from constraints, prescriptive curricula and 'boring' directed tasks. Increasingly, direct explicit instruction was being replaced by 'discovery' or constructivist methods. I am anecdotally recalling the mood and attitudinal shift of teachers because I was teaching in a primary school at the time. I recall that the NSW English curriculum had the 'traditional' grammar elements replaced by 'functional' grammar terms and concepts which caused confusion among staff who were not offered adequate in-service to equip them to teach it competently.

Somehow, in that process, and over time, the complexity and depth of the structures of English and recognition of the difficulty, faced by so many children, to become proficient readers, became devalued. We now have a generation of teachers who were taught, to some degree, by programs that emphasised comprehension of meaning and spoken skills learned through language experiences and not sequential programs of instruction involving the mechanical elements of phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence. In the absence of adequate professional skills, teachers will default to what they know. What other

profession in our society is asked to manipulate and teach skills that they have not been taught in their university courses?

Dr Louisa Moats (2010) wrote a culturally significant synthesis detailing how the English language works, in her book *Speech to Print – Language Essentials for Teachers*. It should be a reference for all pre-service primary and secondary English teacher education courses because of its relevance, depth and applicability.

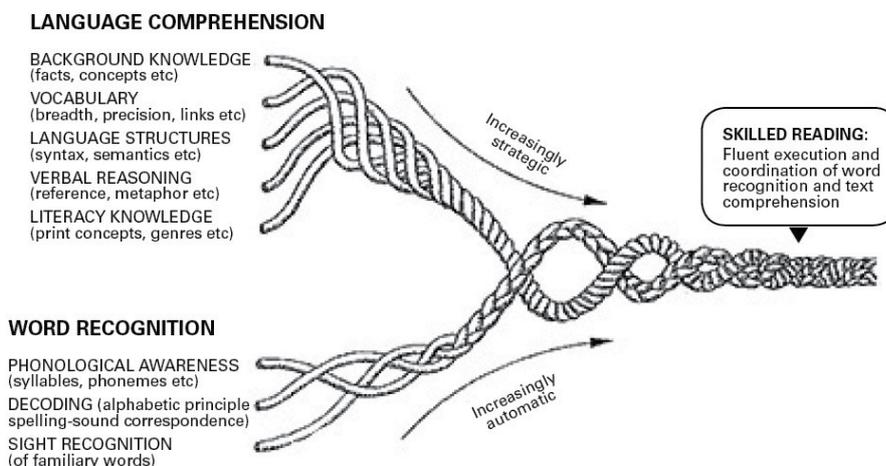
There is actually no intractable dichotomy here. It is important that all teachers know and appreciate the etymology of English as a historically derived, complex and dynamic language. Teachers need to know how to teach using systematic synthetic phonics so that children are taught the building blocks that go on to result in high quality ‘recoding’ (spelling) strategies and orthographic skills, and can equip students with a propensity for improving their use of vocabulary through an understanding of the structures and variable forms of words using prefixes and suffixes. They can impart a willingness to sustain effort and to seek ‘a better word’ in the process of written expression. Phonic lessons are not actually ‘boring’ when multi-sensory ‘hands-on’ activities such as whiteboards, cards, tiles, slates and drama are used. And where the pressures of a highly-crowded curriculum allow, the shared enjoyment of rich, beautiful literature is at the heart of all primary classroom experience.

Students who are experiencing energising success are rarely ‘bored’. But any class program becomes inappropriate for students who have conquered and mastered it. Just as it is important to move children on to challenges beyond their current knowledge and skill-base in all content driven curricula so it is with the teaching of literacy. Competent adult readers do not consciously use phonic techniques until they encounter new words of multiple parts. Otherwise, it feels like sight reading because of the familiarity of English text in print. This is true for high achieving students who are talented in English literacy. Their program should be differentiated to keep momentum in their motivation and learning of new language structures through wonderful experiences with literature.

Currently, the NSW Department of Education schools are training early education teachers in a multi-cueing program called *Language, Learning and Literacy* (L3), a system that has no research evidence to back its claims. Though it is claimed that L3 is ‘research-based’ there is no published research to support it. L3 is currently the only early literacy training on offer by the Department of Education. Since 2012 hundreds of primary schools have received L3 training and many more are receiving it right now.

In a 2013 review of current Australian early literacy interventions carried out by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) the following comment was made: “Based on the criteria used for the review,

### The Many Strands that are Woven into Skilled Reading (Scarborough 2001)



Scarborough's Reading Rope symbolically demonstrating the growth of Skilled Reading. Ref: Scarborough, H. (2001) *Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory and practice*. In S. Newman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*. pp. 97–110. New York, Guilford Press

among the literacy interventions reviewed there is no research evidence or very limited evidence available for the efficacy of: ... Best Start... [or] Language, Learning and Literacy.” (Meiers, *et al.*, 2013 p.xi)

How can a school leader know what early literacy programs are recommended by research and how to teach them? Unfortunately, many new teachers were not given the appropriate skills during their pre-service training and it has become increasingly necessary for school systems and individual schools to take responsibility for decisions regarding early literacy programs. Reading programs based on the principles of Orton-Gillingham and Spalding are a starting point. AUSPELD, the national body of the Specific Learning Difficulties Associations, has produced a handbook in two editions called *Understanding Learning Difficulties* – one for parents and one for teachers wherein the research base for many programs is examined and recommendations are made. The teachers' handbook is available free at [www.scottle.edu.au](http://www.scottle.edu.au) while the parent handbook is free to download on the SPELD NSW website at <http://speldnsw.org.au/news/understanding-learning-difficulties-a-guide-for-parents/>. These guides should be in the hands of all teachers in Australia and all parents that have concerns about the low progress of their children in Reading.

The duties of teachers in schools are so wide-reaching and so time-consuming that there is little opportunity to examine teaching practice at its sources. Besides, teachers are often instructed to use particular pedagogies without being able to explore relevant evidence. The responsibility for a whole school approach to the teaching of literacy rests with executive staff and leaders of learning.

It is often asserted that *creativity, communication, collaboration* and *critical*

*thinking* are the necessary skills for the 21st century in increasingly complex work and internet environments. I would assert that strong communication skills will always be the most important skill since students need to be aware of the varying premises of contractual, factual, persuasive, opinion-based and narrative genre with perhaps an increased requirement for more precise and unambiguous written text in virtual communication.

Research science has brought us conclusions on how young brains learn to read and it is the domain of school leaders, more than ever before, to oversee that this knowledge is brought to inform whole school practices thereby ensuring that all students are given the best chance possible to develop strong literacy skills as the underpinnings of future opportunities in life.

#### Further reading

Meiers, M, Reid, K, McKenzie, P, & Mellor, S (2013). *Literacy and numeracy interventions in the early years of schooling: A literature review*. Report to the Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy. [http://research.acer.edu.au/policy\\_analysis\\_misc/20](http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/20)

Moats, L (2010). *Speech to Print – Language Essentials for Teachers*. Baltimore: Paul H Brookes Publishing Co.

Neilson, R. & Howell, S. (2015). A Critique of the L3 Early Years Literacy Program. *LDA Bulletin*, 47, 2, 7–12. **ET**



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