

Phonics

Phonics instruction teaches the correspondence between the sounds of a language (phonemes) and the letter patterns that represent these sounds (graphemes).

Research

Decades of research has established explicit, systematic phonics as the most effective and inclusive approach to teaching children to read and spell words (National Reading Panel 2000; Rose 2006). Phonics instruction should provide opportunities to decode (read) and encode (spell) words, to sort words, to recognise misspellings, and to gain proficiency in using all this information in authentic activities.

Systematic phonics

Knowing the letters and letter combinations (phonics) that represent the sounds of their language is a critical skill required for students to decode words as they read (Rowe Report 2005). Phonics programs are systematic when they teach phoneme-grapheme correspondence in an ordered sequence.

Synthetic phonics

Synthetic phonics is the process of synthesising or blending the sounds and letters to decode words, and the segmenting of sounds and letters to encode words. It requires a part-to-whole word approach. Students are taught to decode at the phoneme level and attend to all the sounds and letters in a word. This process provides students with a reliable strategy for decoding unknown words and discourages guessing (Johnston and Watson 2005). It is through this process that students develop mental graphemic representations of words (sight words) that facilitate reading fluency and reading comprehension (Masterton and Apel 2019).

The extended code

In the learning to read phase, synthetic phonics includes instruction in both the initial and extended phonic code. This includes the common and alternative letter and letter combinations that represent all 44 sounds in English. Students are taught to segment, blend and manipulate sounds and letters to encode and decode words. As students advance beyond the early phases of reading, phonics instruction for typical readers emphasises syllabification and structural analysis of multisyllabic words.

Analytic phonics

Analytic phonics uses a whole-to-part approach (National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy 2005). Students are taught to analyse letter-sound relationships once the word is identified taking clues from recognition of the whole word, the initial sound and the context. Inaccurate reading of important content words prevents students from developing mental graphemic representations and from comprehending text.

Next steps

For more information, contact your school speech language pathologist or the Reading and Writing Disorders Advisory Service. The Advisory service may be accessed by telephone or email on weekdays between 8:30am and 4:30pm.

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