

Is a particular phonics approach better for teaching reading?

What this research was about and why it is important

There has been much debate around the effectiveness of various approaches to teaching reading, particularly of “synthetic” versus “analytic” phonics. **Synthetic phonics** teaches beginner readers to analyse written words at the level of individual letters, sounding them out on the basis of the correspondence between letters and their particular sounds. **Analytic phonics** starts with whole words and then breaks these down into (often larger) combinations of letters. Compared to other nationalities, English children are relatively slow to develop reading skills, which has been attributed to the lack of consistency in phonics approaches, causing some to argue for an exclusive focus on synthetic phonics. However, the findings of studies from around the world suggest that it is the complexity of the sound-spelling system of the language, rather than the teaching approach used to teach reading, which primarily determines the rate of reading development in children.

What the researchers did

The author reviewed studies of reading acquisition across different languages in different countries, in order to set the English phonics debate within a multilingual context and examine whether factors other than the teaching method might be operating.

What the researchers found

- There are two major constraints upon the acquisition of the reading of a language: one is the **complexity of the sound system** of that language (its phonological complexity); the other is **the consistency of symbol-to-sound mapping** in the language (its orthographic consistency).
- One study compared the rate of learning to read of children learning fourteen different European languages. It found that those acquiring reading in languages with a consistent spelling system progressed much faster than those learning languages with an inconsistent system. Other studies have obtained similar results.
- In order to remove the possibility that differing educational circumstances in different locations could be affecting the results, another study compared children in the same part of Canada learning to read French with children learning to read English (this being the more inconsistently-spelt language). The English-speaking children progressed at a slower rate than their French-speaking counterparts.
- A similar comparative study was done in North Wales, where within the same education system parents can choose whether to have their children educated either in Welsh (the more consistently-spelt of the two languages) or in English. The study showed that the Welsh-speaking children were able to read over twice as many words as the English-speaking children after the same period of instruction.
- Another Canadian study compared the effect on the success of teaching reading of focusing upon “small unit” phonics (as synthetic phonics does) with focusing upon “large unit” phonics (as in analytic phonics). Both approaches led to similar results for native learners of English.

Things to consider

- Children acquire reading skills much faster when there is a simple consonant-vowel structure to the language (e.g. as in Italian and Spanish) – i.e. when the language is less complex phonologically.
- Reading skills are also acquired faster in languages where a given letter or letter cluster is always pronounced in the same way (e.g. Greek, Italian and Spanish) than in languages where it can have different pronunciations (e.g. English and Danish).
- Similarly, in some languages a given speech sound is almost always spelt the same way (e.g. Italian), whereas in others it can have multiple spellings (e.g. English, French and Hebrew), rendering the task of learning to read harder.
- English is an exceptionally inconsistent language for both reading and spelling (i.e. in both directions).
- The author notes that there can be a “switching cost” for children learning to read English, who have to alternate between processing at the single letter sound (“small unit”) level and the combination of letters (“large unit”) level, in order to cope with the spelling complexity of English, unlike learners of more consistently-spelt languages. She concludes that the reading of English is acquired more slowly than for other languages because the English spelling system is the most inconsistent world orthography and English phonology is complex.