Synthetic phonics and early reading development
A summary for teachers

Background: In the UK, there is increasing use of a synthetic phonics approach to teach word reading to young children. However, very little research has examined the influence of this method of instruction on children’s reading strategies, and the cognitive skills they rely upon as they learn to read.

Aim: To examine the skills supporting initial reading acquisition and development when children learn to read by a systematic synthetic phonics method of instruction.

Participants and details of reading instruction: 85 children were assessed prior to reading instruction (av. age 4yrs 7 mths) (T1), 6 months later (av. age 5yrs 1mth) (T2) and 1 year later (av. age 6yrs 1 mth) (T3). Children completed reading related assessments of: letter sound knowledge, rhyme awareness, phoneme awareness and word reading, and cognitive assessments of: vocabulary knowledge, short term memory and visual discrimination skills. All children learnt to read by a systematic synthetic phonics method of instruction, learning almost exclusively to sound and blend sequences of letter-sounds to read new words. Teachers did not promote other word reading strategies (e.g., whole word learning, guessing from picture or text context, using word length or initial letter-sound to guess word).

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<th>Phoneme analysis</th>
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<th>Vocabulary</th>
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Note: All correlations are statistically significant. Those in bold show strongest relationship with word reading. Correlation of 0 = no relationship, 1 = perfect relationship.

Results: Children’s knowledge of letter-sounds, their phoneme synthesis skills and their short term memory (which would be needed to retain sequences of letter-sound correspondences of increasing length) were the strongest predictors of later reading skills. Unlike past research, rhyme and vocabulary were weak predictors of reading success, as this method does not draw upon these skills.

Synthetic phonics definition: Sounding and blending sequences of learnt letter-sound correspondences. For example, with letter sounds: a t p i n = a-t; a-n-t; n-i-p; a-n; t-a-p; t-i-n; i-t, p-a-n; p-i-n; p-a-n-t; t-a-n; i-n; p-i-t; n-a-p; p-i-p.

Discussion and implications for education:

For those teaching with a systematic synthetic phonics approach and not teaching other word reading strategies, it is important to consider that children are potentially relying upon their letter-sound knowledge, phoneme synthesis skills and short term memory for reading. A synthetic phonics approach may be particularly suitable for children starting school with weaker than average language skills (e.g., those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds) as language abilities were not a particularly strong predictor of reading success.

By better understanding the skills supporting children’s reading development and providing focused training and support in the skills associated with instructional method, potential reading difficulties could be minimised.