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Cover image: Reading for pleasure begins early. Photo / Belinda Whyte

Aligned with the sciences:

How does Reading Recovery teach phonics?

By **Dr Rebecca Jesson** and **Judy Aitken**

Introduction

You may have heard or even contributed to a call for Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education to discard Reading Recovery because of a perception that the intervention is aligned with a 'whole language'

approach and therefore teachers do not deliberately teach phonics. As Reading Recovery Trainers, we reject this characterisation. Instead, we emphasise a multidimensional and networked nature of literacy learning, informed by research findings (Compton-Lilly, et al., 2020) within which the learning of phonics plays a key role. We argue here that Reading Recovery teachers



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Key Words: Reading, reading recovery, instructional teaching, phonic skills.

are skilful teachers of phonics, engage in ongoing professional inquiry around the contribution of phonics to literacy learning, and ensure phonics is integral to every Reading Recovery lesson. For transparency, we outline the assessment and teaching procedures that guide Reading Recovery teachers to support young learners to develop word and sub-word level skills for reading and writing. We illustrate how teachers actively incorporate commonly advocated phonic skills, including the alphabetic principle, grapheme-phoneme correspondences, phonemic awareness, segmenting, and blending, within reading and writing activities in every 30-minute lesson. We also consider the notion of 'systematic' in relation to phonics teaching, demonstrating how the individual nature of Reading Recovery allows for careful daily observation of children's learning and, therefore, ample scope for responsive systematic and explicit phonics instruction. Finally, drawing from recent studies of phonics interventions, we highlight five repeated findings that can help guide lesson design for students getting underway with literacy. In doing so, we intend to dispel misconceptions and counteract oppositional views by showing how Reading Recovery teachers use systematic teaching procedures to build phonics knowledge for individual children.

Part 1: What phonics skills do students need?

There is little doubt that learning to read and write entails learning the codes and conventions of written language. In an alphabetic writing system like English, early readers

and writers need to understand that letters are representations, or symbols, that visually represent the sounds of language, usually heard aurally. Although defined differently by different researchers, word reading skills generally include the development of phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness and knowledge of letter sounds.

Consistently, studies suggest that the development of these word reading skills is strongly related to a students' relative standing in reading compared with their peers in Year 1. This statistical notion is termed *predictive*, in that the students' decoding knowledge will be a good indicator of their reading ability. From Year 2, reading fluency and oral language skills play a more critical role in discriminating good from poorer readers (Cervetti, et al. 2020).

The teaching of knowledge and skills in this area loosely combine under the commonly used term *phonics*. The almost synaesthetic ability to mentally 'hear' sounds when looking at letters and combinations of letters has been called *orthographic mapping* (Ehri, 2014). This ability has been described through recent neurological research in word reading, alongside other emotional, semantic and linguistic neurological processes also activated for text reading (Compton-Lilly, et al., 2020).

Phonics and much more

Phonics skills, therefore, are a subset of those that contribute to reading and writing.

In a more detailed interpretation

of the *other* processes activated for reading, background knowledge, genre knowledge, language skills, and verbal reasoning are also required as are the self-regulative processes of executive function (attentional control, inhibition, working memory), motivation, engagement and strategy use. In addition, print concepts, reading fluency, morphological awareness, cognitive flexibility and vocabulary knowledge are all thought to contribute to both word reading and comprehension. These aspects are described as ‘bridging’ word reading and language comprehension (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

Developing early proficiency with phonics is one essential facet of learning and teaching in Reading Recovery. However, learning is embedded within a daily, thirty-minute range of activities that also recognise these other relevant aspects. Talking and thinking about reading and writing is a priority, and interactions that nurture a child’s cultural and social identity and, therefore, motivation and engagement, are fundamental. Delight in the accomplishment of gathering or sending a meaningful message is a goal of every reading and writing activity. In reading, the teacher prompts attention to the print and the many other information sources to help the child access the author’s message. And when writing, observation informs teacher support for using phonics and many other sources of information to produce a meaningful message. The teaching is designed to facilitate a child’s growing agentic control over broad aspects of literacy learning in every activity across the lesson. While we acknowledge and celebrate this multi-faceted approach

to Reading Recovery teaching, here, we will remain faithful to the purpose of this article by specifically focusing on learning and teaching phonics.

Part 2: Phonics instruction in Reading Recovery

Through working closely with one child at a time, Reading Recovery teachers know general patterns of early literacy learning progressions, including a scope of knowledge that supports learning the code. Ongoing formative assessment allows teachers to monitor closely the shifts in children’s ability to decode and encode and make responsive teaching decisions based on the evidence of children’s learning. In this section, we provide some specific examples of what teachers do, and using the language of phonics will make the alignment with other instructional approaches explicit.

To establish the alphabetic principle, a child must first know how to look at letters and see each distinct from one another. It is difficult to attach a sound to a letter if it is confused with others of a similar shape. Although it does not appear to be a significant feature in other early literacy approaches, this early discrimination is critical for children with limited knowledge of letters.

In daily lessons, children practice letter learning using magnetic letters on a whiteboard. The teacher explicitly teaches new letters systematically, beginning with the easiest-to-see letters. The teacher might initially hold the child’s hand as a guide and provide a verbal description “down and around” as the letter is formed on a whiteboard (Clay, 2016, p. 64). As the child gains

greater control the teacher has the child form the letter many times, and encourages fluency. The new letter learned is entered into a personalised alphabet book with a key picture the child identifies. The teacher uses this as a record of how well the child works with many complex things, the form of the letter, the letter name, an object associated with it and the first sound of the object's name.

In addition, at an early stage, the teacher helps the child learn how to attend to the order of letters and patterns of letters in words (Clay, 2016, p. 72). Again, using magnetic letters, the child breaks words, firstly, into single letters, "If we were going to write this word, we would make it letter by letter," then into word parts (morphology), "We can take the first part away" and "Can you hear the last part of looking?" (Clay, 2016, p. 73), and finally, onset and rime breaks, "Break this word into two parts" (Clay, 2016, p. 74). The consistent stress on correct directional habits for attending to print and the deliberate demonstration of word and letter concepts are foundational knowledge for learning phonics. The teacher adjusts the systematic and sequenced nature of the teaching in tune with the learner's progress. Without these early foundational understandings, any further teaching can confuse the child.

Because of its high utility, word recognition is fostered and monitored closely throughout the lesson series. For example, a new word may be selected for learning in a text the child reads. At first, the teacher asks them to write the word or make it with magnetic letters to support memory for the orthographic pattern. Then additional prompts foster

both closer attention and executive function (inner control): "Use your eyes and think about it" and "You need to know that word" (Clay, 2016, p. 133). Next, the new word is reread quickly in the text to embed comprehension and self-monitoring. The aim is to ensure the child recognises it quickly and consistently every time it occurs in reading.

To speed automatic word recognition during writing, the teacher selects a new word and prompts: "This is a word you need to know," "Think carefully before you start and write it here" and "Do it faster and once more." The child then writes the newly learned word into their message, checking that the grapheme sequencing looks right, "Look closely at it and check it" and "Check it carefully" (Clay, 2016, p. 89). This teaching for both attending and monitoring across reading and writing is systematic and explicit, following a sequential pathway from small to lengthier high-utility words with more complex orthographic patterns. Finally, this vocabulary offers the child access to a rich bank of sub-word parts to use when decoding and encoding new words.

Reading Recovery teachers use daily writing to teach phonics, with particular attention to phonemic awareness. Children attend to the words they are writing, hear the sounds in those words, and write down the letters that represent those sounds (Clay, 2016). Systematic, explicit instruction guides the child to develop phonemic awareness and establish links between sounds and letters.

At first, the teacher uses picture cards in a brief explicit activity to help the child

learn to stretch and connect phonemes in words in a natural way. For example, “Say the word slowly” (Clay, 2016, p. 96). New research suggests that this connected phonation is a more effective way to teach beginners as they are more likely to pronounce the word correctly after hearing the phonemes (Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2021). Alternatively, with segmented phonation (pausing between phonemes), children can have difficulty remembering the first sounds they have spoken when blending them to form the word.

Then, Elkonin boxes lift the learning into the next phase. The child practices with two, three and four sound boxes, pushing counters up into the boxes, working left to right in sequenced coordination with each sound they hear. This new learning is then progressed each day during writing. At first, simple words with easy-to-hear consonants and vowels are selected for analysis. The child pushes the counters and now records the letter that represents each phoneme. The teacher now prompts for: “What can you hear?” “How could you write it?” “Where will you put it?” (Clay, 2016, p. 98). In this daily routine, awareness of phoneme-grapheme correspondences is developed as each sound’s correct letter form (grapheme) is identified and recorded, in any order at first. Over time the child learns to attend to single consonants, short vowels and simple consonant digraphs, quickly establishing a beginning-to-end approach.

An increase in challenge using Elkonin boxes comes through exposure to words with more complex orthographic features such as consonant digraphs, initial/final blends, vowel digraphs,

complex morphemes and contractions. The teaching prompts the child to now attend to spelling. That is, learning that how words sound and how they are spelled are sometimes different. This shift involves becoming aware of orthography as well as phonology. For example, “What letters would you expect to see?” (Clay, 2016, p. 99)

Along with the support of Elkonin boxes, the child’s daily writing includes learning about using known spelling patterns to write new words. For example, explicit in-the-moment teaching helps the child construct a new word because it is like another one he knows very well. The teacher uses prompts such as, “Say the word slowly. Is it like another word you know?” or “You can write another word that sounds like that?” (Clay, 2016, p. 105). In addition, demonstration on the child’s practice page can help them attend, listen to and identify where the sound pattern changes. At each phase, the specific teaching decisions and words selected are based on the child’s developing control of a range of strategies for encoding words during the activity of writing.

Part 3: Systematic - how are teachers systematic about their teaching of phonics?

A key feature of Reading Recovery is that lessons are designed for a single child. The particularities of this setting mean that regularities, patterns and averages described by quantitative studies may or may not hold true. For example, statistical measures of central tendency (averages) are useful for describing populations and are often used to identify which skills are

perceived to be harder 'in general' than others. However, when working with one child, it is the particularity of that child's 'known' which can determine or guide the sequence and scope for that child's 'unknown.' *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (Clay, 2016) offers teachers guidance and a menu of teaching procedures. Throughout a lesson, the teacher facilitates letter, word and sub-word learning in both isolated and embedded activities (Harmey & Bodman, 2020). The teacher's minute-by-minute repertoire blends systematic episodes of explicit teaching, showing children what to do and how to do it, with implicit or 'statistical' learning (Seidenberg, 2022), facilitating opportunities that help children notice and use sounds, letters, words and sub-words independently when reading and writing. There is no script. The child's developing literacy profile guides the selection of teaching procedures, and the sequence of learning is determined by what best suits the child at that time.

Formative assessment

Systematic observation of the learner begins with the assessment tasks from *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2019), where the teacher gathers evidence of a child's developing ability to decode and encode written language. Different tasks assess a child's understanding of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, the alphabetic principle and word recognition skills. For example, one task reveals children's knowledge of letters (by name, sound or word association), any confusion they may have, and letters yet to be learned. In a Concepts about Print task, the teacher assesses

what is being attended to in print and in what order, some knowledge about the shapes and positions of letters, and what the child has learned about visually scanning the print for grapheme-phoneme correspondences. Further evidence of these connections is gathered from a written Dictated Story task. Tasks involving reading and writing words in isolation identify the scope of a child's developing vocabularies. Finally, Running Records show how well a child directs their word recognition and knowledge of letter-to-sound and sound-to-letter connections to comprehend a text's message.

From this extensive evidence, teachers unpack a student's profile of strengths and next steps and use this information to begin a series of individually designed and delivered lessons, combining all aspects known to contribute to literacy. Fluency, comprehension, composition, executive function, self-monitoring (including comprehension monitoring) and cognitive flexibility (Duke et al, 2021) and, in writing, composing and encoding (Harmey & Bodman, 2020) are all supported. As children move between word (visual analysis), sentence (syntactic analysis) and text level, they experience the joy and satisfaction of reading and writing stories.

Close observation

A significant advantage for teachers is the daily one-to-one context, which allows for close and systematic observation of children's reading and writing behaviour. Over time, in this setting, the teacher builds a personal theory of the child as a learner. They

hypothesise about a child's thinking from behavioural observations and then use their developing theory to make teaching decisions. They continue to use close observation to determine whether their teaching decisions lead to positive change for the child. If not, the teacher re-evaluates and adapts initial theories and renews their observations.

During intensive training and ongoing professional learning, teachers observe one another teach, with attention to the close observation of children's literacy learning in real time. In this setting, the observation of young learners drives guided collaborative inquiry, further strengthening teacher reflection and hypothesising. An outcome is that Reading Recovery teachers have the opportunity and professional discretion for moment-by-moment responsive teaching. They craft individualised lessons and recraft these daily to engage children in the most effective and speedy pathways to literacy.

Reciprocal gains

Given the intensity of phonics instruction through writing, there is an expectation of a massive reciprocal impact on the application of phonics in reading. For instance, in reassembling the child's cut-up story, teachers want to observe checking for accuracy through linking phonemic sequences to grapheme sequences and vice versa. Gradually segmenting the story into more challenging word parts is expected to challenge and extend this learning. Likewise, while reading stories, teachers use a hierarchy of systematic prompts to help the child use their growing knowledge of phoneme-grapheme links to monitor for visual accuracy with the

print by saying for example, "Check to see if what you read looks right" (Clay, 2016, p. 135).

Conversely, to use their growing grapheme-phoneme links when solving unknown words, the teacher may call on the child to carry out an analysis of a new word by prompting: "Say it slowly and move your finger under it, like this" (Clay, 2016, p. 54) or "What sounds can you see in that word?" (Clay, 2016, p. 138) or "What can you see that might help?" (Clay, 2016, p. 152). Again, depending on the child's competencies, the teacher may be more supportive by highlighting a known part of the word with a card or articulating the part clearly for the child and asking them to locate it. In an even more helpful way, the teacher may construct part of the word in writing on the whiteboard or with magnetic letters. More support is offered to children who have mastered phoneme-grapheme correspondences but cannot independently segment and blend new words in text. The teacher can demonstrate by writing or making the new word letter by letter with magnetic letters, s- sp – spl – ash (Clay, 2016, p. 54). In all instances the child's response guides the teaching. The prompts above demonstrate the variability of ways the teacher might offer different levels of support in concert with the child's responses.

Part 4: Aligning with the sciences: So how do these teaching procedures align with most recent evidence about effective phonics interventions?

Aligning with science is a daunting endeavour since every day, new

studies emerge that contribute new knowledge to the pool of what is known. In general, scientists look for studies that converge, knowing that science seeks regularities and patterns over time with different populations. In this section, we highlight some relevant research findings. Bearing in mind the uniqueness of each child, the studies presented here provide emerging directions for designing instruction.

1. Awareness of larger units is typically learned earlier than smaller units

In Reading Recovery, an activity involving clapping the parts of words of one, two and three syllables precedes segmenting words into phonemes (taught using Elkonin boxes). The premise is that hearing big chunks of sound is easier than discovering single sounds. This activity orients the child to the idea that words are analysable as sounds. Eventually, the child adds to their repertoire the understanding that words are encoded by letters that represent sounds (the alphabetic principle). The theoretical notion that the child moves from the 'larger' known, to the 'smaller' unknown, is also apparent in recent studies of phonics learning. Phonics advocates acknowledge that children are observed to hear syllables and onset/rimes before individual phonemes and learn to segment sounds before they can blend them (Hodgins & Harrison, 2021).

2. Connected phonation leads to more effective outcomes

One of the drawbacks of approaches that teach segmenting or blending phonemes has been the size of the

breaks between the sounds. When words are segmented, there is a tendency to add a 'schwa' sound between each letter. These additional sounds create difficulties for the word's audibility and memory since children must remember all the phonemes separately. Stretching a word by saying it slowly and connecting the sounds has always been employed in Reading Recovery. The findings of Gonzalez-Frey and Ehri (2021) concur with Reading Recovery findings that students learn to decode more quickly when taught through connected phonation. Indeed, in that study, students with previous segmented phonation training were slower to learn decoding skills than those with no segmented instruction

3. Interventions that include comprehension have stronger effects at follow up

Reading Recovery can be conceived as a 'mixed' intervention since it includes aspects of fluency, comprehension, writing, and phonological awareness. Suggate (2014) compared phonics, phonological awareness, fluency and comprehension interventions in a meta-analysis comparing intervention types. His findings suggest that there are long-term benefits of focusing on less constrained skills, particularly comprehension.

This is understandable as comprehension becomes increasingly important to students reading success as texts become more complex. It also aligns with Reading Recovery's relentless focus on ensuring students are accessing meaning while they read and creating meaning when they write.

4. Language experience is essential for learning to read and write

Scientists acknowledge that decoding is just one aspect of learning to read and write. Many scientific studies are based on monolingual speakers of English. In reality, communities consist of children learning new language types, sometimes the English language, as well as the languages and codes of schools and books.

The way we learn a language is through talking. The way to learn the language of books is through shared reading. So, while phonics is essential to learning to read, language is also crucial. Indeed, researchers interested in reading comprehension take an even stronger stance. Cervetti et al. (2020) argue that a focus on decoding alone is a flawed application of what is known about reading and overlooks early language development as fuel for decoding and comprehension. Maintaining a focus on language development aligns with the notion of building 'natural' language skills and gradually increasing competency with the syntactic complexity of texts read and stories written.

5. It is faster to learn to read by reading, than to be taught rules

The relative balance of explicit instruction, through demonstration, explanation and modelling, and implicit learning, through guided or independent practice and 'on the run' problem solving, is contested. In general, most curriculums or programmes advocate a mixture of both. Many programmes recommend

explicit teaching of things that children are not 'picking up' independently. But, increasingly, it is acknowledged that learning rules is slow and that neural networks generalise without learning rules (Seidenberg, 2022). As Seidenberg (2022) suggests: "There is no special award for knowing 44 phonemes or memorising 100 spelling rules. There are many awards for people who can read well. Instruction needs to be conditionalised on child's progress" (Slide 33, Montag Symposium Powerpoint presentation).

Conclusion

Reading Recovery teachers teach phonics, and the impact of this teaching has been a well-researched domain of Reading Recovery over many years (Harmey & Anders, 2018; What works Clearinghouse, 2016) receiving positive ratings alongside other equally critical domains such as phonemic awareness and comprehension.

We have used examples from Reading Recovery support materials to show how teachers use explicit instruction and also design opportunities for implicit learning of phonics in every daily lesson, with a child's individual responding determining the scope and sequence of attention. We have also illustrated how Reading Recovery training supports the systematic and responsive teaching of phonics that will look different for different children at different times during a lesson.

We argue here that phonics is a necessary condition for literacy. However, while phonics is necessary, it is not sufficient. We reiterate that word reading skills are not sufficient for

learning to read and write text.

Reading and writing are much more than attending to and working with letters and letter clusters.

Reading Recovery teachers view literacy learning as multidimensional. Language development is essential and occurs as the teacher directs the child's attention to a connected text's phrase, sentence and passage level. Language learning

is further facilitated as the teacher and child talk together to understand (comprehend) and enjoy a message during reading and writing.

Reading Recovery children make accelerated progress through regular and highly effective opportunities with reading and writing connected text, supported by a sensitive, observing adult invested in expanding their competencies.

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