

'Teaching reading is rocket science'

Approaches to early reading instruction

Key questions

- How do children learn to read?
- What do teachers need to know to teach early reading?
- What is the role of phonics and phonemic awareness?

Reading is a complex process of making meaning from texts. As readers engage with texts, they decode the orthography of the language to access meaning.

Meaning making in reading draws on students' knowledge about the world and the topic. This knowledge is not restricted to 'vocabulary'. Text structure, grammatical choices and illustrations in the text also contribute to intended and inferred meanings. In early reading contexts, children's motivation for reading often begins with reading for social purposes, to participate with others in meaning-making, enjoying access to other people's worlds, and to the rhythm and prosody of language. Over time they become familiar with reading to learn in different curriculum areas.

The ability to use phonemic awareness, meaning the awareness of sounds that make up spoken words, and phonics, for example the relationship between letters and phonemes; together with the ability to syllabify, segment and blend individual sounds to form words, are fundamental decoding skills for accessing meaning in the early years. However, phonics and phonemic awareness are only one decoding strategy. Visual, orthographic and morphemic knowledge allows for multiple pathways to decode the 'deep' orthography of English. Decoding needs to become automatic as quickly as possible, in order for attention to be focused on meaning making.

Expert teachers employ a wide range of teaching strategies based on a deep knowledge of how children learn to read and the needs of learners. They pay due attention to decoding, using explicit teaching and facilitating sufficient practice such that students become automatic decoders. Teachers support meaning-making by helping to build field and contextual knowledge about texts, bringing to consciousness and explaining the inferences they are intuitively making which may be culturally unfamiliar to students, building vocabulary with depth and repetition, and explaining how text structures and grammatical structures contribute to meanings and communicative intent.

While students' decoding skills continue to strengthen, teachers involve early readers in many joint readings of high-quality, authentic literature, and exposure to texts written for different purposes, engaging students in deep discussions about the meanings in the text and illustrations, at the same time supporting fluency and vocabulary development. Regular reading of simple texts, and commercial reading schemes have the essential purpose of practising decoding skills. Such texts are not a substitute for rich texts, but work in parallel. All this work also supports students' abilities to write effectively.

Key points

- Teaching reading is a complex process requiring teachers to use range of teaching strategies based on a deep knowledge of language.
- Teachers need to know about the structure of the language and how children learn.
- Effective teachers use specific and explicit instruction in meaning-making and decoding in varied and meaningful contexts.

Further information

For more information, including media queries contact PETAA on 61(0)2 8020 3900 or publishing@petaa.edu.au

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