

# **What is meant by ‘synthetic phonics?’ and what impact will the Rose Report have on our teaching of reading before formal school age?**

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## **Introduction**

The teaching of reading raises important questions and challenges, with particular implications for Early Years practitioners. Despite the introduction in 1998 of the National Literacy Strategy (now part of the National Primary Strategy), and the improvements in children’s reading attainment, the government is concerned that, using their tightly age-related measures, there are still many children ‘lagging behind’ or ‘failing’ to learn to read by the age of eleven, and ‘not meeting expectations’ at seven.

Much research has taken place to establish how best to teach reading and in 2005 the government asked Jim Rose, both a former headteacher and head of OFSTED, to produce a report with recommendations. He listened to many representatives (see Appendix to report 2006) including powerful lobbyists for an approach called ‘Synthetic Phonics’. Their publicity, and the media coverage has implied that he was swayed by their arguments and that his recommendations were accepted by Ruth Kelly, the then Education Minister, and will shortly be made compulsory for schools.

In this paper, I intend to give the debate a historical context, by looking at the history of teaching reading over the last hundred years or so. Next I will look at the claims of the proponents of synthetic phonics, and finally the conclusions and recommendations of the Rose Report, and its implications for practitioners working in the early years, particularly with the under-fives.

## **Teaching reading since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The teaching of reading is a complicated and vastly researched subject. As Pearson suggests, in his article, ‘Reading in the twentieth century’, (2000: 1) in order to compare different approaches, it is useful to have a set of criteria by which to assess them. He suggests ‘dominant materials’, and ‘dominant pedagogical practices’ as two which are easiest to ‘see’: he goes on to suggest that ‘role of teacher and learner’ and beliefs about ‘the nature of reading’ and ‘learning to read’ will be more difficult to identify but also useful forms of comparison.

Pearson (2000: 1) suggests that, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the main teaching method was 'synthetic phonics'. This entailed children undertaking exercises to learn letter names, letter sounds and then 'blending'. To apply his other criteria, the child's role was to receive curriculum from the teacher and to practise skills, the teacher's role to provide appropriate exercises. This approach to teaching reading takes what is known as a 'simple' view of reading: i.e. that it consists of two processes, 'decoding' and 'comprehending': the reader 'listens' to what s/he is decoding and thus understands it.

Pearson goes on to describe innovations in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1900-1935). These can broadly be divided into three categories (different only in 'dominant materials'). The first, 'analytic phonics' is an approach (sometimes called 'words to letters') in which the child encounters a whole word, and is asked to 'analyse' the sounds within it. The second innovation came to be known as 'look and say': a number of words were learnt as sight vocabulary before any analysis of their letter sounds took place: Pearson strongly argues that, 'contrary to popular opinion.....some form of analytic phonics usually kicked in after ..a hundred or so sight words had been memorized.' (2000: 2). The third approach used an invented alphabet as temporary measure, as in the 'Initial Teaching Alphabet', popular in the 1960s (see <http://www.itafoundation.org>).

Other important developments in this period are described by Pearson. The first was the testing of reading (and the ensuing effect on teaching materials). The second was 'readability' - the idea that the difficulty of a text could be measured by sentence-length and word-frequency, and that therefore texts composed for children as practice should take these factors into account. The third was the notion of 'Reading readiness', consisting of various components.

Pearson also points out (2000: 4) that it was at this time that the idea of 'remediation' took hold: in a construct derived from medicine, the child has his/her difficulties 'diagnosed' and then a course of study is 'prescribed'. This model affects all teaching of reading, and fits well, as he points out, with a skills-based approach.

In the 1960s the 'students were still the recipients, and teachers still the mediators, of the received curriculum' (Pearson 2000: 6). The 'simple view' of reading still prevailed. New research was now undertaken to establish what the best method for teaching reading was. Among other results, reading 'primers' or 'basals' based on 'look and say' were found to be much less effective than text based on any other approach (from Chall 1967). Chall (Pearson

2000: 7) concluded that 'early attention to the code ... must be reinfused into early reading instruction'.

The last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought more radical changes of approach. Other disciplines, linguistics and psycholinguistics, (e.g. Smith 1971) began to influence beliefs about the development of the ability to read. Put simply, following Chomsky's argument that 'children are equipped with some special cognitive apparatus for inferring complex rules', (Pearson 2000: 10) the belief emerged that the ability to understand and create written language could develop in the same way as the ability to speak and understand spoken language. Goodman (1967) suggested that readers make use of three different kinds of cues, i.e. 'Syntactic clues, semantic clues, and grapho-phonemic cues.' Smith (1971) argued that 'reading was not something one was taught, but something that one learned to do'. 'For Smith, all knowing and learning were constructive processes; individuals made sense of what they encountered based on what they already knew.' (Pearson 2000: 11). This psycholinguistic approach challenged the previously held views of learner, teacher, and the nature of reading and of learning to read. Psycholinguistics 'helped us to view reading as language rather than as simple perception or behaviour' (Pearson 2000:11).

Other disciplines (e.g. cognitive psychology) had an impact on teaching reading, and by the 1980s, 'Whole Language Theory' had taken a strong hold. As Pearson points out, using the criteria for comparing approaches, there was a strong conceptual difference between this and all previous approaches. In whole language theory, the child is the proactive learner, the teacher has turned into a facilitator. 'In contrast to previous periods, reading was now regarded as a meaning-making, not a perceptual process' (Pearson, 2000: 20).

### **Synthetic Phonics**

As we have seen, the idea of teaching reading via synthetic phonics is by no means new. Its return to prominence and popularity seems to be an unintended consequence of the adoption of 'whole language' approaches in British and USA schools. As more and more schools adopted the 'apprenticeship approach', it became clear that being immersed in print was not always effective *quickly* for young readers, especially if their previous experience of literature was small.

In England in 1998, a National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was introduced by a new government anxious about the level of reading failure in the country. The NLS recommended teachers to teach children to use four searchlights for reading, i.e. 'Knowledge of context', 'Phonics (sounds and spelling)', 'grammatical knowledge', and 'word recognition and graphic

knowledge'. The 'Phonics' searchlight in the NLS followed the 'analytic' approach (as in 'words to letters' above). It was acknowledged that many words cannot be analysed reliably in this way, and these are taught in other ways, including sight recognition. The contextual searchlight remained important-not only for decoding an individual word but for making sense of the text, and text-based teaching (often with a 'big' book) formed a key part of the instructional repertoire.

Despite wide acceptance by teachers of the requirements of the NLS, the government was disappointed to find that they were not meeting their own targets for achievement at KS1 and KS2 (by January 2006 Rose quotes 84% of eleven year-olds reaching Level 4, i.e. 16% failing to meet national standards – transcript of oral evidence to Education and Skills Committee, January 2005). Jim Rose, in 2005, in response to a report by the Education and Skills Committee, was appointed to carry out a review and his report was published in March 2006.

An exceptionally vocal lobby group, led by the 'Reading Reform Foundation' (RRF) and the 'Promethean Trust', reported to Rose what they claimed to be a highly significant research project from Clackmannanshire ('The End of Illiteracy, the 'Holy Grail of Clackmannanshire': Paper presented to Centre for policy studies by the Promethean Trust, March 1999). This research, using 300 children in five schools in Scotland, compared a cohort of children taught using 'synthetic phonics' with a cohort taught analytic phonics. Their progress was tracked until Primary Seven (aged eleven years).

By these organisations, and for this study, 'synthetic phonics' adapts wholeheartedly the 'simple view' of reading, i.e. that readers decode and then comprehend the word. It recommends 'phonics fast and first' (amended by Rose in his evidence to 'at a fairly brisk pace' - Rose January 2006: 11). By 'synthetic phonics' the proponents of this approach seem to mean just what they say: i.e. all of the letter sounds are taught very rapidly, the emphasis is on blending the sounds, and it can be taught in a few months.(See Hepplewhite 2005). They advocate 'blending' as the sole means of decoding-there is no mention of 'segmenting' (an analytic phonics tool).

Burkard, the founder of the Promethean Trust, goes claims in his paper (*op.cit.*) that the 'skilled reader need not rely on contextual information. In fact it is poor readers who guess from context....' and deduces from this: 'Since it is implausible to suggest that children can become good readers by encouraging them to use the skills of poor readers [i.e. using context to support], synthetics phonics programmes begin by teaching children to recognise,

articulate and blend the 42-44 basic sounds of English before they are introduced to books '. The 'books' to which they are introduced after about nine weeks are 'decodable', i.e. containing only single letter phonemes. McGuinness AND McGuinness (2006) interviewed teachers and a parent volunteer from three different areas adopting this approach, who confirmed that they were directed 'not to show the pages when reading to the class for fear the children might remember whole words from the text'.

Burkhard (*op cit.*: 18) claims that the key findings of the Clackmannanshire study were that children taught synthetic phonics were ahead (by seven-nine months) in reading and spelling compared to those taught analytic phonics. The McGuinness's argue that a later finding was more significant (Johnson and Watson, 2005). Their finding was that 'by Primary Seven, 14% of the students taught with synthetic phonics were two or more years behind in reading comprehension'. Burkhard refused to be swayed by this result, reasserting on the Reading Reform Foundation forum (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> November 2005) his belief 'that reading is decoding' and 'that comprehension exists as a separate measure to reading itself'.

Other insights into the proponents of synthetic phonics can be gleaned from the work of Sue Lloyd, the developer of 'Jolly Phonics' a commercial phonics scheme. In a paper ('A comparison of the pace of Synthetic Phonics teaching and the DfEE directives, 2001'), having outlined the basic principles for teaching four-five year old children (e.g. 'Know the blending technique: if the short vowel does not work, try the long one'), she claims that synthetic phonics 'provides the necessary skills that enable the majority of children to read and write above their chronological age. The 20% who have literacy problems still have a good foundation of the basics and just need more time and input' (but c.f. the 14% in Clackmannanshire who were *at least* two years behind in comprehension at age 11).

Jenny Chew, a member of the board of the RRF, confirmed in a paper to the Phono-Graphix International Conference (June 2005), that 'in synthetic phonics children's literature is withheld until such time as the individual child is reading with some fluency'. She also confirmed that in synthetic phonics children are 'never presented with blended words, the word is always built up from the letter to the sound'. Mistakes can be corrected by 'tweaking' as she demonstrated at a 1999 conference (quoted in McGuinness and McGuinness 2006: 13).A teacher would say to a child misreading 'sade' for 'said', 'does that sound like a word you have heard before?'

As can be seen, many of the claims made for synthetic phonics by its more radical proponents, are not supported by long-term evidence. Moreover, the implication that there is

any simplicity in the method is completely misleading. Even one of its staunchest advocates, Tom Burkhard, does not seem clear as to whether there are 42 or 44 sounds. To prevent children from having access to books with real text for up to a year, and to avoid them having the opportunity to develop any sight vocabulary seems to be not only fanatical but also based on assertion only that this is helpful to reading development. Burkhard's dismissal of comprehension as an important reason for reading, and the RRF's constant claims that 'blending through the word' is the way to decode, neglect entirely the notion of 'reading for meaning'.

### **The Rose Report**

In his article, Pearson concludes that 'irrespective of the means of instruction, the overwhelming evidence suggests that phonemic awareness is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the development of decoding and reading' (2000: 23). He points out that 'a substantial proportion of unsuccessful end of grade one readers possess better than average phonemic awareness' (*ibid.*).

Rose himself, in his introduction to his final report, asserts that 'Best practice is that which results in the greatest benefit to the learner', and also acknowledges responses to his interim report concerned that 'one size does not fit all'. He does however conclude that research findings 'argue strongly for the inclusion of a vigorous programme of phonic work ... to be embedded in a broad and language-rich curriculum'. (35). In Para 37 he adds 'It is widely agreed that phonic work is essential but not the whole picture of what it takes to become a fluent reader or writer'. He agrees that children should have access to a full Foundation Stage (and KS1) curriculum and that practitioners should pay great attention to the skills of speaking and listening.

In Para 51, despite saying he is describing the 'key features of the synthetic phonics approach,' he states these to be:

1. learning grapheme/phoneme correspondence (quite different from 'letter sounds' in the radical Synthetic Phonics programmes);
2. learning to apply the skill of blending through the word in order to read it (pure synthetic phonics);
3. applying the skill of segmenting a word into constituent phonemes to spell (rejected as a strategy by synthetic phoneticists – this is analytic phonics);
4. understanding that blending /segmenting are reversible processes (again of no relevance to Clackmannanshire practice).

He concludes in Para 53, 'High quality phonic work is not a strategy so much as a body of knowledge, understanding and skills which has to be learned'.

In Appendix 1, Rose's case for adapting the NLS searchlights model, he examines a range of research, returning to his original conclusion (Para 12) that the two components of reading are 'decoding' and 'comprehension' – the 'simple view of reading'. In doing so he once again parts company with pure synthetic phoneticists who reject the idea of comprehension as separate from decoding. He also, more significantly, rejects the psycholinguistic approach entirely, the position that 'all knowing and learning are constructive processes, individuals make sense of what they encounter based on what they already know'. (Smith 1967, quoted in Pearson 2000). However, his adoption of the simple view of reading does lead Rose to conclude (18c) that using it as a 'conceptual framework', 'makes explicit to teachers that different kinds of teaching are needed to develop word recognition skills from those which are needed to foster the comprehension of written and spoken language' .

### **Conclusion: implications of the Rose Report for Early Years Practice**

Rose's report thankfully falls a long way short of advocating synthetic phonics in its Clackmannanshire form. He makes constant reference to a language-rich environment, to the use of real books, (see Para. 104) to analytic as well as synthetic approaches to the teaching of phonics, and to the vital importance of a rich early years curriculum. He recommends the discrete teaching of phonics for short periods each day by the child's fifth birthday (exactly when is not defined) but emphasises that none of the teaching should compromise good early years practice.

The more serious implications of the report are in Rose's adoption of the simple view of reading. He adopts this despite acknowledging (paragraph 11) that 'there has been a convergence of opinion among psychologists investigating reading that little progress towards understanding how reading happens in the human mind is likely to be made'. In adopting this view, as Pearson points out, (2000: 26), he is tacitly returning 'the role of teacher and learner to what they were at the beginning of the twentieth century'. In doing so he misses the opportunity to advocate instead 'an ecological balance': this is described by Pearson as (in preschool and Year 1), 'a highly contextualized set of language and literacy experiences [which] would provide the context from which teachers would carve out scaffolded instructional activities to spotlight necessary skills and strategies-phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, concepts of print, and conceptual development. In this process the child is an 'active meaning-maker' (p.27).

To reject the active meaning-maker is to alienate many early years practitioners. As Rose says at the beginning of his report, 'best practice is that which results in the greatest benefit to the learner.' As Pearson says (p.25), 'it is no accident that studies of exemplary teachers ... consistently find that they exhibit a balanced repertoire of instructional strategies'. There is no reason why this should not apply to reading as to every other area of teaching. Nothing in the Rose Report prevents early years practitioners from continuing to use their whole repertoire: unfortunately interpreted by less than exemplary practitioners, the effect of his report might well be a pendulum swing back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

**The synthetic phonics debate still rages! What's YOUR view? Do you agree with Sue Vermes that the Rose Report does not prevent early years practitioners from continuing their exemplary practices in teaching literacy? OR does the Rose Review spell the end of good early years practice as we know it?**

**Please send your views, as usual, to the website editor:**  
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