

PD 10 THE BIG PICTURE

Important as phonics instruction is, it doesn't happen in a vacuum.

The "Reading Rope" (see Paper 2) makes it clear that language scientists see phonics as part of a larger whole. Let's broaden the discussion to take in more of the big picture.

When children read, they are manipulating a complex set of elements:

Graphophonic cues

These are knowledge of sound-letter relationships¹. Phonics instruction is essential to help children use these cues. The letters are decoded by the child to form a set of sounds with an accepted meaning (a word)

eg cake

To state the obvious, every single lesson in **Easy Readers** is about exactly this skill: the way letters encode sounds.



Syntactic cues

These involve readers' underlying understanding of the grammar or structure of language². It is a grasp of the basic patterns of spoken English. This knowledge predates reading of course. Children already understand the way different words combine to make meaning. Consider the sentence

We saw a _____ in the zoo.

All possible options to fill in this blank must be a "naming" word. When a child reads a text such as this, their grasp of language predisposes them to expect what we call a noun. This is syntax in action.

¹ The translation of a letter (the grapheme) into its sound (the phoneme).

² From "syntax" – the accepted arrangement of sentence parts, such as noun plus verb plus predicate (I ate cake).

However, there is still a mystery. What sort of object is it? It lives in a zoo. It is unlikely to be a cow or pig, but it could be a lion or a crocodile. Let's suppose he sees that the first letter is a "p", and the last letter "a". He might now be able to guess what it is.

We saw a **panda** in the zoo.

Here the graphophonic clues ("p" and "a") intertwine with the **syntactic** (sentence structure) clues: to produce a word (from the children's memory) - the word panda.

Easy Readers stories are a rich resource for building syntactical awareness. All the pieces are in rhymed verse, to make the stories fun, but they follow standard English syntax - from the simplest:



Dad was mad.
Dad was mad at Max the cat.
Max the cat was being bad.
(*Bad Cat*)

to the much more sophisticated style of:

One day when I was outside wandering around,
Guess what I found lying on the ground?
(*Guess What I Found?*)

A useful exercise in raising syntactical awareness would be to take a story from **Easy Readers**, and remove words (ideally the rhyme word) and ask children to guess what is missing.

Eg Storybooks take you on adventures to faraway lands,
With dragons or pirates with hooks for _____. (*Looking at Books*)

This is a painless and contextually rich way of showing how syntactic knowledge works.

The way language is structured does not have to be discussed in a boring way. It can be made into a game: what is the missing word? What are the clues? Why should it be this word and not that word?



Semantic cues

These involve a reader's knowledge of the world³. World knowledge and a grasp of language and meaning are essential to skilled readers. Let's take a common expression:

"I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

A skilled reader will have no trouble decoding these words. But what do they **mean**? Is the speaker about to devour a real horse?

To decode the real meaning of the sentence he needs to know that the words are not literal, but metaphorical. It is a figurative way of saying "I'm famished" - in the same class as "She has a heart of stone" or "He thinks the world revolves around him". This is semantic knowledge in operation.



What do we take from this? That comprehension and meaning are not just about letters and sounds – but the whole rich background of language as explained in the "Reading Rope"⁴ (see Paper 2) .

A simple way into this is to use other parts of the Ziptales library for younger children.

For instance, in **Storytime**, there are a number of traditional tales told with puppets and a set of cartoons about a girl called Wendy.

In two of the stories, "Wendy and the Pirate" and "Wendy and the Genie", there is lots of word play. The genie offers Wendy three wishes, but tricks her with the words he uses.



The way both stories play out is semantics in action.

³ From 'semantics' or meanings (from the Greek *semantikos*, meaning signifying, or significant).

⁴ Scarborough, H. (2001) "Connecting early language and literacy to later reading disabilities: Evidence, theory and practice" In S Neuman & D Dickinson (Eds), *Handbook for research in early literacy*, Guildford Press

Why not play the story and ask children, “How did the pirate misunderstand Wendy and her map?” and “How did the genie trick Wendy with his words?” They will be looking at a live case of how semantics affect meaning.

Orthography – the importance of standard spelling

Phonics is essential in starting children on the road to reading effectively.

Reading can be thought of as an input.

For almost all children, writing is the output.

From the very beginning, learning to decode text gives children words as their tools. They then need to be able to reassemble these words in their own writing.

As we have noted many times, English has a small but frustrating number of irregularities. It is important to make the case that “standard” or correct English spelling is vital.



If not, you could get this:

*Wunce uhpawn uh thyme, thare wuz uh liddle gurl hoo lift wif hurr
muhther inna liddle coddij, awn thuh ehj uhva larj fahrrust. Dis liddle
gurl offun war a liddle kloke wif a priddy liddle rehd hood, anfer dis
reesun peepł calder Liddle Rehd Rye Din Hood.⁵*

While spelling may appear to be of lesser importance to young learners, it is important. If children could make up spelling at will (on the basis of just what they hear), *without* mastering the conventions of orthography, there would be chaos.

Here is the text again in standard English:

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who lived with her mother in a little cottage on the edge of a large forest. This little girl often wore a little cloak with a pretty little red hood, and for this reason people called her Little Red Riding Hood.



⁵ Willingham, D. (2005) *The Reading Mind*, Wiley This is his example of unregulated phonetic spelling.

There is absolutely no point in debating if cloak should be spelt kloke. It's not. In Chaucer's time (the fourteenth century), it was *cloke*⁶, but by the time of Shakespeare, in the late 1500s, it had its modern spelling⁷.

For the sake of smooth communication, spelling has to be taught, exceptions and all. This process begins just after the teaching of phonics and will forever after be part of the linked and interdependent loop of reading and writing.

In this series of papers and videos, we have repeatedly looked at the complex history of English. Its mixture of Anglo-Saxon, French, Latin, Greek and words from a dozen other languages makes it simultaneously rich *and* frustrating in terms of its spelling.

As a comfort for teachers who might still worry that English is too irregular, here's a reminder from a world expert (a professor of linguistics)⁸ that while irregularities may seem troubling, it's possible to find plenty of simpler, regular words for beginner readers. Can you spot the text?

Then we saw him pick up
All the things that were down.
He picked up the cake,
And the rake, and the gown,
And the milk, and the strings,
And the books, and the dish,
And the fan, and the cup,
And the ship, and the fish,
And he put them away.
Then he said, "That is that."
And then he was gone
With the tip of his hat.⁹

The genius of Dr. Seuss was to use just 236 words to tell a riveting story. His groundbreaking use of phonics, in *The Cat in the Hat* and over 40 other books, showed that children could have a great time reading, if the vocabulary is controlled and a little imagination is used.

When Ziptales produced **Easy Readers**, Dr. Seuss was a major inspiration.

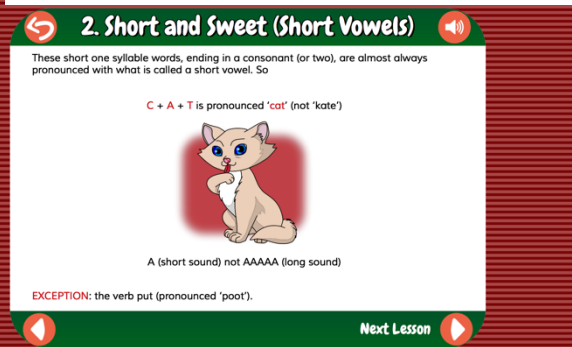
As a side note, Ziptales has a whole module devoted to grammar, punctuation, comprehension, and **spelling**. It's called **Skill Builders**. It can be found in the section for older children. It could be of benefit, used selectively, for key teaching points for younger children.

⁶ Chaucer, G. (c1400) "The smylere with the knyf under the cloke" The Knight's Tale, in *The Canterbury Tales*

⁷ Shakespeare, W. "I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes" *Romeo and Juliet*

⁸ Crystal, D. (1995) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, CUP

⁹ Seuss, Dr (1957) *The Cat in the Hat*, Random House



Morphology – why understanding units of meaning is vital

Morphology¹⁰ is a fancy word for the study of morphemes – the smallest meaningful units of a word.

There are two types.

So called “free” morphemes are whole words: bed, **book**, cloak, frog, fly, sky.

The others are called “bound” morphemes – if you like, detachable bits that you can add or subtract from a word. Here is an example:



un read able

The “root” of the word is the verb, **read**. On its own, “read” is a free morpheme – it makes sense alone.

The other bits – the prefix **un** - the suffix **able** – are bound morphemes.

So the word “unreadable” has three morphemes.

This may seem quite academic, but teaching the most common morphemes is important work because learning them helps children build comprehension.

¹⁰ From morphology, the study of form (Greek *morphe*, meaning form)

Here are the most common prefixes, with their relative frequency¹¹.

The Most Common Prefixes

Rank	Prefix	Meaning	%
1	un	not, opposite of	26%
2	re	again	14%
3	in, im, ill	not	11%
4	dis	not, opposite of	7%
5	en, em	cause to	4%
6	non	not	4%
7	in, im	in or into	4%
8	over	too much	3%
9	mis	wrongly	3%
10	sub	under	3%

Rank	Prefix	Meaning	%
11	pre	before	3%
12	inter	between, among	3%
13	fore	before	3%
14	de	opposite of	2%
15	trans	across	2%
16	super	above	1%
17	semi	half	1%
18	anti	against	1%
19	mid	middle	1%
20	under	too little	1%

The suffixes¹² are just as important.

The Most Common Suffixes

Rank	Prefix	Meaning	%
1	s, es	plurals	31%
2	ed	past tense verbs	20%
3	ing	present participle	14%
4	ly	characteristic of	7%
5	er, or	person connected with	4%
6	ion, tion	act, process	4%
7	ible, able	can be done	2%
8	al, ial	characteristics of	1%
9	y	characterized by	1%
10	ness	state of	1%

Rank	Prefix	Meaning	%
11	ity, ty	state of	1%
12	ment	action or process	1%
13	ic	characteristics of	1%
14	ous, ious	the quality of	1%
15	en	made of	1%
16	er	comparative	1%
17	ive, ative	adjective form	1%
18	ful	full of	1%
19	less	without	1%
20	est	superlative	1%

¹¹ Stone, L. (2018) *Reading for Life*

¹² Stone, L (2005)

It is also important to teach children how words can be combined.

They will be familiar with compound words like afternoon, anybody, armchair, backyard, bedroom, clubhouse, and so on.

Then there is the exciting world of combining morphemes (typically prefixes and suffixes) to make up dozens of common words: **bicycle**, **export**, **microscope**, **nonsense**, **submarine** ... **childish**, **freedom**, **golden**, **rubbery**, **useless**, **happiness**. These are examined at length in **Skill Builders** (see above).

As an example, in “The Grumpy Goat” (**Easy Readers**), a story of just 160 words, there are 20 suffixes (12% of the total). The teaching point of the story is the “ou” sound, but it would be possible to use the story for additional practise with suffixes.

To sum up

Phonics is not the whole story. It is a vital starting point, but needs to lead to a range of other lessons which investigate broader issues.

These include the idea of **syntax** (sentence structure), **semantics** (meanings of words), **orthography** (standard spelling) and **morphology** (building blocks of meaning).

As the “Reading Rope” shows, the whole process of learning to read is a much richer and more open-ended experience.