

School of Education

Position Paper for the Teaching of Reading

For the Early Years and Primary



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Learning to read is a human right

Learning to read is recognised as a fundamental human right by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Haneman, 2008). Reading is critical to educational success and future participation in society. Reading also contributes to knowledge acquisition and promotes a sense of wonder, awe, and empathy as well as building an understanding of different ways of living and being.

Reading is complex and needs to be taught

Learning to read words is a complex neurological process that does not develop without being explicitly taught (Castles & Nation, 2022; Dehaene, 2009). The development of skilled reading, which includes recognising printed words and applying meaning to them in texts, develops across early childhood, primary and secondary years of schooling because of what teachers know and do in the classroom. Building partnerships with children's families is also recognised as contributing knowledge, skills, and dispositions toward a child's reading success at school (Boone et al., 2021). At Edith Cowan University (ECU), we believe that instilling a love of reading and the capacity to understand complex texts is dependent on successfully teaching reading according to current research.

ECU's approach to teaching reading is based on key international reports and research literature

The units we teach are based on the findings of international reports and research reviews (for example Castles et al., 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Rose, 2006; Rowe, 2005) which have identified skilled reading as the product of automatic word recognition and language comprehension (the ability to understand spoken language).

We, therefore, acknowledge the utility of the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) in providing an educational framework for understanding both the teaching and assessment of early reading. The Simple View describes reading in the broader sense of reading comprehension and highlights the necessity of developing proficiency in two separate and distinct core processes: A) the "ability to decode (or recognise) a printed word to produce a spoken word" and B) "to understand the meaning of the spoken word" (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). As such, comprehension in this context refers to linguistic comprehension and recognises logical reasoning and listening comprehension are key to future reading achievement (Moats, 2020). For children to develop proficiency in the two components of reading comprehension identified in the Simple View, a range of cognitive skills need to be acquired (Tunmer & Hoover, 2019).

The extensive body of research on reading instruction on which we base our courses concludes there are six essential components for reading: oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Konza, 2014). These components are interrelated, such that the development of each is dependent on the others. Research demonstrates that the most effective method of teaching skills and knowledge for word level reading is systematic, explicit, and cumulative (Buckingham et al., 2019; Castles et al., 2018). When teaching reading, the emphasis on oral language, phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge,

systematic decoding instruction and fluency enables children to read words (Castles et al., 2019) and supports comprehension of authentic texts.

To become proficient readers, children require abundant practice in reading text, and they need to be exposed to a rich and broad language curriculum

We also recognise the importance of teaching these skills within a rich and broad language curriculum as first proposed by the NRP (NICHD, 2000). In the early years of formal schooling, there is strong scientific evidence for designing rich, diverse, and playful contexts for oral language development (Kuhl, 2011) alongside explicit teaching of vocabulary, morphology, phonological and phonemic awareness, and phonics with simultaneous development of listening comprehension (Duke et al., 2021). Reading to children from quality children's literature and non-fiction texts helps to develop background knowledge, vocabulary, and the skills required to understand literate language. Whereas, decodable text, which features phonically regular words that include taught letter-sound correspondences, facilitates the development of word recognition skills (Mesmer, 2005, 2009). As children become more proficient at decoding words, as a result of reading simple decodable texts, they begin to apply both skill sets to reading authentic texts independently. Once children are applying knowledge of the alphabetic code to simple, natural language, or authentic fiction and non-fiction texts, there is evidence for explicit instruction in fluency, morphology, vocabulary and comprehension instruction alongside opportunities for independent reading of authentic texts.

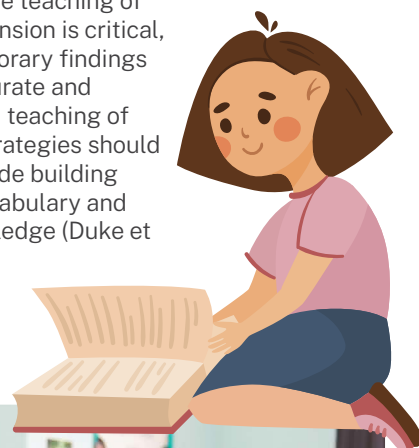
As well as knowing how and what to teach, our graduates understand that children will develop reading at different rates and there will always be a need to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of a range of students within a Multitiered System of Support (MTSS) (de Bruin & Stocker, 2021). Our Graduates also understand the importance of adaptive and responsive teaching that recognises and incorporates children's existing and developing funds of knowledge as well as diverse backgrounds and literacy practices (Wright et al., 2022).



Ongoing Engagement with Research

The way we prepare teachers at ECU is an iterative process that reflects well established research and contemporary research. As new research is published, we refine our practice. For example, the following recent findings inform our current practice:

- The importance of reading to children for pleasure to stimulate brain development is critical in child development, which in turn, builds vocabulary, visualisation and social-emotional skills that last a lifetime (Cates et al, 2017; Sun et al., 2023).
- The importance of Shared Reading to support children's development of print and text concepts, vocabulary and listening comprehension skills (Deshmukh et al., 2022; Lepola et al., 2023).
- Systematic, explicit decoding instruction is best taught through connected phonation, or 'smooth blending' (ssssuuunnnn), as opposed to stopping between sounds (s-u-n) (Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2020).
- Research strongly supports the use of decodable or phonically controlled texts in the early stages of reading (Cheatham & Allor, 2012) because these give children practice applying letter-sound associations, reinforces their understanding of the alphabetic principle and the mapping of letters to sounds. This results in more accurate decoding, especially of novel or unfamiliar words (Cheatham & Allor, 2012; Mesmer, 2005), and strengthens the connections between speech and print (Dehaene, 2009). Access to these texts, however, should not be protracted as there is evidence that once children are decoding and applying the self-teaching mechanism (Share, 1995, 1999, 2008) they will benefit from reading a range of texts with greater lexical diversity (Shanahan, 2021).
- Common misconceptions about the term 'sight word' suggest that children should learn whole words by visual memory, often via lists or predictive text. Instead, ECU beginning teachers learn that whether words are regular (sun), irregular (any), commonly occurring (and) or less common (whisper), multiple opportunities for the human brain to map letters to sounds results in all decoded words becoming automatically recognised from memory by sight. This process is known as orthographic mapping (Ehri, 2020). The evidence shows that words are read from memory when graphemes are connected to phonemes, bonding the spellings of individual words to their pronunciations along with their meanings in memory (Ehri, 2023). Note, however, that it can be helpful to teach children to recognise a handful of common high-frequency irregular words in the beginning stages of learning to read so they can access text quickly and focus their attention on decoding (Colenbrander et al., 2020).
- Reading comprehension is a complex process that requires the coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes including, but not limited to, word reading ability, working memory, inference generation, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge (Perfetti et al., 2022). Because of this, the teaching of reading comprehension is critical, however, contemporary findings show that for accurate and fluent readers, the teaching of comprehension strategies should take place alongside building and extending vocabulary and background knowledge (Duke et al, 2021).



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