

**The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check:  
What will it be like? How can we be sure our children succeed?**

**Jennifer Chew**

I'm dividing my talk into three parts: first, I'll talk about the small pre-trial of the screening-check which took place last November/December and which I observed in a few schools, then I'll talk about what happened when I administered that version of the screening-check in a school where I help voluntarily, and finally I'll talk about the pilot which took place in June.

**1. The pre-trial**

Because of the time of year (November/December) the pre-trial was done with Year 2 children rather than with Year 1 children: as the real thing will be done in the summer term by Year 1 children, the autumn term would have been two terms too early for them, whereas it was only one term late for Year 2 children. I think that schools were invited to be involved in that pre-trial only if they were thought to be teaching good phonics.

The practical arrangements worked best when the school had arranged a quiet room for the screening and had arranged for one or two children to be waiting outside, with the door closed so that they could not eavesdrop. This meant that there could be a quick change-over as each child finished.

The check itself was conducted by teachers – I was simply an observer. Few children seemed to find it stressful and some said that they had enjoyed it. That point was also mentioned in the independent evaluation of the June pilot by Sheffield Hallam University: 'for most pupils overall, the experience of the Check was generally positive, with those pupils with stronger phonic decoding ability finding it most enjoyable'. ([www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR159.pdf](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR159.pdf))

There were no practice items for the pre-trial, and I think they would have helped – there *were* practice items for the pilot and will be for the real thing starting next summer. In the non-word sections of the pre-trial version, the early items (but not all items) were accompanied by quirky little pictures of imaginary creatures – the idea was to provide a visual reminder that responses should not be real words. Some children clearly found the pictures amusing, and this probably helped to put them at their ease. I won't go into all the details of grapheme-phoneme correspondences and word-structures for the check as these can be found on the DfE website:

<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/y/year%201%20phonics%20screening%20check%20framework.pdf>

Some children read all or most of the items, including non-words, as if 'at sight', and got through all 40 in a minute or less making no mistakes or very few. Others did a lot of overt sounding out and blending. Either was acceptable as long as a blended form of each item was produced. A few children took a very long time (10 minutes or more) to get through all the items and got very few right – in these circumstances teachers should perhaps stop the check early. In a few cases (but not many) I found it difficult to tell whether a child had produced an acceptable pronunciation of an item, and this was reported as happening in the June pilot, too. I didn't feel, however, that it made a big difference to scores.

The average score in the pre-trial was 29.3 out of 40. That may seem lower than we might expect in schools selected because their phonics teaching was thought to be good, but we need to bear several things in mind:

- some of the children may not have been at the schools from the start of Reception;
- many Year 1 children are too young to be aware of the importance of putting their best foot forward on an occasion like this, and teachers may know that they perform better under normal classroom conditions;
- even in classes where phonics is taught very well, there will often be children who are much slower than the rest to catch on and this will drag the average down.
- Conditions may not have been ideal in some schools: in one school where I observed and where teaching seems to be very good, the check was conducted in an area where there were a lot of distractions.

## **2. Giving the pre-trial version in a school where I help voluntarily**

In January (so shortly after the November/December pre-trial) I gave that version of the screening check to a Year 1 class with whom I'd worked voluntarily for a year. As far as I can tell, the school's phonics teaching is good, though it's probably undermined a bit by the fact that the books used for home reading don't allow the children to practise decoding much. In my own brief weekly or fortnightly one-to-one sessions, I use decodable books with all the children except those who no longer need them. The average score of this class in January was 21.2 out of 40; this was well below the pre-trial average of 29, but these children were of course a year younger than the pre-trial children. I then gave them the same version again in June and their average score went up to the pre-trial average of 29, though they were doing the check a term earlier than the pre-trial children had done it. There was no way the children could have improved their scores by memorising items – they saw them only briefly while they were doing the check in January; I gave no corrective feedback, and it was five months before they saw the items again.

I felt that the results of the check tallied well with my subjective impressions of the children's reading and with their results on a single-word reading test: for example the boy who has always been the best reader in the class got 40 out of 40 in both January and June; another boy also got 40 in June, up (remarkably) from 29 in January. These two had the top reading ages in the class in June (10:6 and 9:10) and could read virtually anything put in front of them; other children with high scores (37-39) had reading ages two or more years above chronological age, and like the two boys with 40 out of 40 they no longer needed phonically graded books by the end of Year 1. All children in the class except for three improved their scores between January and June – those three were the one with full marks both times, one with 38 out of 40 both times (not much room for improvement), and one with 20 both times.

There were three children I had been particularly worried about in Reception – however hard I worked on sounding and blending with them, they just didn't catch on. If I said /r – u – n/ and thought they couldn't fail to realise that it was 'run', they would respond with something like 'elephant'. Once I realised that they weren't catching on, I tried to work with them every week instead of fortnightly which is all I have time for with most of the children. They had improved by the January of Year 1 to the point where they all managed some of the screening-check items, and they improved still more by June: their respective scores out of 40 went up from 8 to 20, 11 to 26 and 14 to 25. This meant that their average improvement was almost one-and-a-half times the average improvement of the whole class.

I haven't used non-words for practice with any of the children I've worked with – I have simply encouraged them to work out all unfamiliar words in their reading books by sounding out and blending. I'm hoping that teachers will realise that this is good preparation for the decoding check as

well as being good for children's reading generally. If I were a class teacher I *would* give children a little bit of practice with non-words, just to familiarise them with the concept and to get them used to not trying to tweak non-words into real words, but very little practice with non-words should be necessary if children are getting plenty of decoding practice in their normal text-reading. In practice, Year 1 children *do* come across words in their text-reading which are in effect non-words to them: a child reading aloud to me recently decoded the word 'wok' perfectly well but clearly did not understand it, so for all he knew it might not have been a real word. In that situation I was able to explain it, but even if children are reading to themselves without an adult on hand to explain, I think it's always better for them to think about meaning *after* decoding a word rather than *instead of* decoding it. Decoding it as a first step at least allows them the opportunity to try to match it with a word in their spoken vocabulary, which at this stage is likely to be much larger than the vocabulary which they immediately recognise in print.

### **The June 2011 pilot**

As far as I can tell, great care has been taken over the screening check – I'm impressed with what I've seen and heard of the DfE's efforts. For example, checks have been made to ensure that non-word items are not real words in some other language, and care has also been taken to avoid high-frequency real words which some children might have been taught as 'sight' words. Teachers involved in the pilot were given training, and comments about that training were 'highly positive', according to the independent report from Sheffield Hallam University. In the pilot, 18 different versions of the screening-check were trialled, with 360 different items. All 360 items were then ranked from easiest to hardest on the basis of children's actual performance. About 10,000 children were involved in the pilot, with a representative sample of 300 schools being used.

I've heard from a DfE source that an early look at the results suggests that 40 out of 40 might be the most common score. This doesn't necessarily mean that a high percentage of children got full marks, however: if children were equally spread out over all possible scores, then two and a half per cent would be on each score, and the number on 40 might not have been a lot more than that. We'll have to see what emerges in the DfE's technical report which will probably be out soon.

Some teachers who started off being against the inclusion of non-words ended up changing their minds, to the extent of thinking that *all* items should be non-words. The sort of reasoning that lay behind this was that there were cases where, in reading real words, children produced a sound for a grapheme which was legitimate but wrong – a hypothetical example would be children reading 'knead' as /ned/. Such attempts had to be marked wrong, but if the item had been a non-word (for example 'kleab', /kleeb/, /kleb/ or even perhaps /klabe/ would have been counted as correct, and it was examples like this which made teachers move from disliking the idea of non-words to regarding them as a good thing.

I know that some people are worried that children may try to tweak non-words into real words. Equally, however, they may tweak one real word into another real word – either way, their decoding is faulty. I wasn't able to note down all errors when I was observing the pre-trial or administering the check myself, but of about 200 examples I *did* manage to note down of non-words being read as real words, every single one involved faulty decoding – for example some children decoded digraphs wrongly, or omitted a sound, or added an extra sound.

I understand that the DfE is intending to produce user-friendly guidance for schools, for example something showing which grapheme-phoneme correspondences might be in sections 1 and 2,

something showing acceptable alternative pronunciations of graphemes, and a video to exemplify the scoring.

If you've read the Sheffield Hallam evaluation, you may have noticed that nearly three-quarters of schools involved in the pilot said that they taught children to use a range of cueing strategies as well as phonics. Those of us who have nailed our colours firmly to the phonics mast would probably expect that when we see the detailed analysis it will turn out that schools using just phonics for word identification have done better than schools using mixed methods. I gather that this is something the DfE is researching and if the findings turn out as I would expect it would create a strong rationale for schools to pursue a more systematic approach to phonics teaching.

I'll finish with a comment from a teacher which is quoted in the Sheffield Hallam evaluation:

'Very difficult test for Year One pupils because it's not something they are familiar with doing. So we are used to asking them to decode words in context. In books to apply their knowledge of the picture cues, the context and so on.' (p. 50)

My reaction is that if the children at this school were used to decoding at least the *decodable* words in their book-reading, they would surely be familiar enough with the decoding process to apply it to the items in the screening check, all of which should of course be perfectly decodable for Year 1 children. Unfortunately, however, that teacher is not unique: there are still too many schools where children are taught to rely on cues from pictures and context even for fully decodable words. Isn't that exactly why we need this decoding check?