

Newsletter no. 56

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Contents

Editorial – Jennifer Chew	1
An American Story – Nora Chahbazi	3
The Teaching of Reading in Finland – Jennifer Chew	4
Teaching Adults Using Phonics – Evelyn Freeman	5
Learning Principles and Strategies that Empower Letterland Teaching – Lyn Wendon	7
United Kingdom Literacy Association <i>Literacy News</i> Autumn 2005	13
Research Digest – Jennifer Chew	14
Edited Extracts from the Submission of Celeste Musgrave and Santina DiMauro to the Australian Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading	16

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Mike Goodwin	Sue Lloyd	Fiona Nevola
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RRF Governing Statement

The Reading Reform Foundation is a non-profit-making organisation. It was founded by educators and researchers who were concerned about the high functional illiteracy rates among children and adults in the United Kingdom and in the English-speaking world.

On the basis of a wealth of scientific evidence, members of the Reading Reform Foundation are convinced that most reading failure is caused by faulty instructional methods. A particular fault of these methods is that they under-emphasise the need for children to be taught the alphabetic code: the way in which individual speech-sounds (phonemes) are represented by letters and combinations of letters. The United Kingdom chapter of the Reading Reform Foundation was set up in 1989 to promote the teaching of the alphabetic code in a research-based way, and this remains its main aim.

The governing principles are to

- promote research-based principles of reading instruction
- promote the use of scientifically proven reading instruction programmes
- promote the use of standardised reading tests at frequent intervals
- provide information about effective teaching methods
- work to ensure that government departments become accountable for the effectiveness of the educational programmes they promote
- disseminate information through a newsletter and website on an ongoing basis.

NEXT ISSUE OF RRF NEWSLETTER

The next Newsletter is due out in February 2006. Please send contributions no later than the middle of January, by e-mail to jennifer@chew8.freeseerve.co.uk or by post to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB. Subscriptions should be sent to the same address.

EDITORIAL

A delay of a month in the publication of this Newsletter would have allowed us to comment on Jim Rose's interim report on the teaching of phonics, but it was decided to keep to our normal schedule and to comment, instead, in the spring 2006 Newsletter, by which time both the interim and final reports should be available.

One thing that we hope will be clarified in the Rose review is the difference between the phonics in the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) and the kind of phonics which the RRF has hitherto called 'synthetic phonics'. This may be the right time to let go of this term as confusion is increasingly surrounding its use. Whereas it once meant only programmes which taught beginners to read all words by synthesising (blending) sounds, it is now often used even when there is much less emphasis on synthesising. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES), for example, regards the 'direct' and 'systematic' teaching of the alphabetic code, rather than the amount of synthesising, as the criterion for calling a programme 'synthetic phonics' – see its submission to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee dated 30 November 2004, the 'Phonics PHAQs' document sent out in spring 2005, and the September 2005 edition of 'Teachers Magazine' on the DfES website. It is thus able to claim that the phonics in the NLS is 'synthetic phonics' despite the clear differences between it and the approach used in the Clackmannanshire study – the study which, after all, brought the term 'synthetic phonics' to prominence.

One of these differences is that the NLS focuses far more on the segmenting-for-spelling side of phonics than on the blending-for-reading side. 'Phonics PhAQs', for example, states that the NLS 'starts by teaching children to hear and segment the sounds in a spoken word and showing them the letters for those sounds so that they can spell the word'. This document appeared in 2005, but even back in 1999, *Progression in Phonics* had made the NLS's segmenting orientation very clear, both in explicit statements and in the activities it recommended. Segmenting is certainly important for spelling but 'PhAQs' itself states that teaching this way is 'slightly different' from the blending approach – and yet it still calls the NLS approach 'synthetic'. The best results of all are surely achieved when beginners are taught exactly what to do in reading and spelling respectively: in reading, they work out the spoken form of the word by looking at the letters and digraphs etc. from left to right, saying the sounds they have been taught for them, and then blending the sounds together; in spelling they work out what letters to write down by listening to the whole word, segmenting it into separate sounds and writing down letters for the sounds. Spelling soon starts requiring word-specific knowledge, but the 'working out' routine continues to be important in reading and the NLS does too little of it, which means that it differs more than 'slightly' from a true blending approach.

A second difference is that it has always been clear, for example in the 'searchlights' model, that the NLS does not favour a 'phonics-only' approach to word-identification for beginners, whereas this is central to 'synthetic phonics' as the RRF has always used the term. The Education and Skills Committee, to its credit, recognised that there was a difference between teaching 'phonics fast, first and only' and 'mixing phonics instruction with other methods of teaching' (see p. 36 of this Committee's report *Teaching Children to Read*). This difference has also been recognised by the Office for Standards in Education, for example in its report *The National Literacy Strategy: the first four years, 1998-2002*. In paragraph 58 of that report, OFSTED commented that 'The "searchlights" model proposed in the framework has not been effective

enough in terms of illustrating where the intensity of the “searchlights” should fall at the different stages of learning to read. While the full range of strategies is used by fluent readers, beginning readers need to learn how to decode effortlessly, using their knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and the skills of blending sounds together. The result has been an approach to word-level work which diffuses teaching at the earliest stages rather than concentrating it on phonics’. This is exactly the RRF view.

Three years after that report appeared, however, the DfES is still defending the ‘searchlights’ model. In a section of its website devoted to the Rose review, a frequently asked question is said to be ‘Is it true that the Literacy Strategy does not focus exclusively on phonics?’ The answer given is ‘The Literacy Strategy is based on the best available independent research which makes clear that phonics is most effective when it is combined with other teaching strategies that support word recognition, understanding context and knowledge of grammar’. The wording there is clearly that of the ‘searchlights’ model. In spite of the OFSTED criticism of the ‘approach to word-level work which diffuses teaching at the earliest stages rather than concentrating it on phonics’, the DfES still backs this approach.

The DfES’s confidence about the research evidence behind the ‘searchlights’ model is at odds not only with OFSTED’s view but also with what Prof. Morag Stuart said in her paper for the March 2003 DfES phonics seminar, where she wrote about the ‘searchlights’ model ‘confounding word recognition and text comprehension’. She comments that although the grammatical knowledge and context searchlights could apply to comprehension, they are actually presented in the NLS ‘as providers of information useful to word recognition’, perhaps because of the influence of Reading Recovery. She points out, though, that it is *poor* readers who use grammar and context in order to identify words, and that it is ‘highly questionable’ to suggest these strategies as a suitable basis for the development of normal reading.

Prof. Stuart is now a member of the Rose review team, and we hope that due weight will be given to this crucial point of hers. If the Rose review is truly independent it will not take the DfES’s word for it that the ‘best available independent research’ shows that ‘phonics is most effective when it is combined with other teaching strategies’ as in the NLS – it will investigate whether this is really true, as the Education and Skills Committee recommended.

It is often argued that a strong initial emphasis on decoding has a detrimental effect on comprehension. This has led to criticism of the Clackmannanshire approach because at the age of eleven, the children were on average only three and a half months above chronological age in comprehension as against three and a half *years* above chronological age in word-reading. But these children were from the most deprived 10% of the population. Is there evidence that children from similar backgrounds score better on this test (the Macmillan Group Reading Test) if taught from the start by an approach which emphasises decoding less and reading for meaning more? If the evidence exists it should be produced – if not, the criticism should stop.

The RRF flagged up the possibility that problems might arise with the term ‘synthetic phonics’ at the foot of p. 1 of Newsletter 55, written before the Rose review was announced. We still believe that the important thing is to establish which features of literacy programmes produce the best standards of reading and spelling in practice, regardless of the terminology used. This is what we hope the Rose review will do.

Jennifer Chew

AN AMERICAN STORY

Nora Chahbazi

The following piece was posted on the Reading Reform Foundation message-board by Nora Chahbazi, the owner and director of the Ounce of Prevention Reading Center in Flushing, Michigan. This edited version is printed here with her permission.

I am new to this board [the RRF message-board], feel thankful that it was brought to my attention, and wanted to share my experience of how I became very passionate about effective, efficient reading instruction. I feel that it is quite likely that there are many others out there with important stories and if we all connect and work together, we truly can have a tremendous impact improving literacy in society.

As for my 'formal' education, I have two degrees in nursing and worked as a neonatal intensive care nurse for about ten years. While I was born and raised in Michigan, I've lived in a variety of places including Charleston (South Carolina), Cuba and Guam. Because of frequent moves, my children have been in a variety of schools and as a result experienced the good, bad and ugly of reading instruction throughout their early years. When my middle daughter was in second grade eight years ago (in a school back in Mid-Michigan, where we now live), she was put in the gifted and talented program based on her IOWA test scores in maths. However, she was a year below grade level (by second grade!) in reading. I wasn't working at the time and threw myself into finding out all I could about reading. For six months I read research, observed programs in schools, went to reading conferences and read everything I could about reading. Very little of what I read and experienced made any logical sense until I got hold of Diane McGuinness's book *Why our children can't read*. This book was recommended to me by a former Professor of Education from Michigan State University. This professor had taught teachers who were getting their masters in reading for years but left in frustration because, as she explained to me, 'they wouldn't let me teach teachers how to teach reading'. After leaving MSU she started a reading centre in 1989 in Lansing, Michigan, that just closed this last year. Diane's book changed my life – to put it mildly! After reading her book, I taught my daughter to read in three hours. She is now in high school, a student in advanced classes, and reads every night. If it had not been for my intervention, I'm sure her life would have taken a very different path. I then taught lots of other kids using research-based word-level instruction (linguistic phonics), getting similar results.

In 1999, I opened a reading centre (all this stuff was not planned – serendipity, I guess!), informed hundreds of teachers about the strategies I had learned, became educated about 'supplemental' interventions for the tougher kids, and really could write a book or two about my unusual experiences. In January of 2002, Celeste Hammell (a 25-year veteran as a Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant in New Jersey) and I developed EBLI (Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction). It is a system of strategies – not a programme, as it is continuously being refined based on new information and research we learn about and use with students. EBLI is heavily focused on linguistic phonics instruction; it also includes fluency and vocabulary instruction and moves students of all ages very far, very fast. We have had especially amazing results with older students: fourth-to-twelfth graders typically show two to nine years of improvement in about six hours on instruction.

Throughout this journey, we have had many amazing things happen – legislators seeking us out, people wanting to fund on-line training, a \$750,000 grant opportunity, a community foundation funding training and follow-up consulting for all teachers in their county, meetings with Michigan department of Education people, an invitation to do three presentations at the Michigan Association of Secondary Schools Principals (500 middle and high school principals), and, best of all, many wonderful kids benefiting from what we offer. We provide three-day trainings and follow-up consulting in the schools of the teachers we train. Our results have been analyzed (from first to twelfth grade) and that information has greatly increased awareness of EBLI strategies around the state and country.

If a former nurse can become a reading guru after stumbling upon what it really takes to teach reading, then acts on her new-found knowledge to help children and teachers, and realises that if you forge ahead with vision and integrity the possibilities are endless, imagine what a whole gaggle of people with similar thought-processes and experiences can do! I look forward to finding out.

See <http://www.mackinac.org/pubs/mer/article.asp?ID=3430> for 'Reading Recovery is no such thing', a critique by Nora Chahbazi.

THE TEACHING OF READING IN FINLAND

Jennifer Chew

The following is based on an article by Dr Eliane Gautschi, a special educator, which appeared in the May 2005 issue of *Current Concerns*, the English version of *Zeit-Fragen* (published in Zurich). Finland is often said to have the highest literacy standards in the world – many people believe this to be the result of its exceptionally transparent writing system, but as Dr Gautschi shows, other factors are also at work.

Finnish children start school in the year in which they turn seven. The country's population is very homogeneous, with smaller differences between the highest and lowest incomes than in other European countries. The winters are long, dark and cold, and this has 'spawned a culture of reading that hardly exists anywhere else'. Reading has a high social value. 'Television and computers do not offer serious competition to books. There are only a few TV programmes in Finnish, so that watching television becomes another form of reading practice, because films are not dubbed, but rather given Finnish subtitles. Because of this, if they want to understand what happens on the screen, children have to automatically train themselves to read quickly and retain what they have read'.

Finnish grammar is complicated, but letter-sound correspondences are very straightforward: 'Every sound in Finnish corresponds to a letter. There are no letters that stand for more than one sound...'. This makes word-reading and spelling very easy, and 'most of the Finnish children who start school in August can read by Christmas time'.

Editor's comment: It is arguable that a similar level of performance is achieved within the first term in British schools where phonics is taught first, fast and only, and where care is taken to ensure that reading vocabulary is decodable on the basis of the phonics taught at any given point. Because of the complexity of the English alphabetic code, English-speaking children have clearly not *finished* learning to read in the sense that Finnish children have at this point, but they can at least *start* just as easily. (See also the article by Finnish authors in this issue's Research Digest.)

TEACHING ADULTS USING PHONICS

Evelyn Freeman

There is something powerful and overwhelmingly sad about adults weeping but when they weep because they are telling me how awful they feel about their reading, writing and spelling skills and ultimately how awful they feel about themselves, I want to weep too. Yet I've lost count of the number of adults who have broken down when trying to explain why they want to work on their reading now in the college of further education where I work.

Mostly they tell me how they never quite 'got' it at school, how they spent time out in the corridor because of their behaviour, or how they stopped going to school at all when things got too tough. Almost all of them feel their schooldays were dreadful but none seem to have had teachers who spotted what was going wrong or were able to fix things. My students all seem to have a sense though that they themselves are to blame as they are pretty stupid and slow learners.

It would seem to be an insurmountable task to overcome such deep feelings about reading, about learning and indeed about themselves. The amazing thing is that when they are finally taught how to read and spell properly, *using phonics*, they learn quickly, grow in confidence and start to feel better about themselves.

What is even more amazing is that I have taught them to read better but am myself no more than an enthusiastic amateur. It is true that I am a trained teacher but I am neither an English teacher nor a primary school teacher, nor have training in additional support needs. I use *Step by Step* by Mona McNee. (My mother had read about this scheme in the late 80's and used it with my son who was a late speaker and seemed slow to pick up this business of reading. It worked then very well and he is an avid reader now, studying German at university.)

We still had the book at home and I wanted to offer one of my young students some help to tackle his lack of reading skills. Using *Step by Step* for about 30 minutes every lunchtime my student made steady progress and he started to enjoy the fact that finally he had a system to use when reading. This was a young man who had been in 'special school' where smaller class sizes should have meant more time to work on his basic skills.

With the confidence gained from helping one student I continued, offering individuals time over lunch and again we made steady progress. One young man, Alom, is not a native English speaker, had disrupted schooling and could not recognise letters. He is now reading long sentences, has won a college award and cannot stop smiling because, finally, he can make sense of the written word.

Over the past few years the Scottish Executive has targeted the poor basic skills of many Scots and my college has funding to offer free classes to adults working on their literacy/ numeracy skills. I now run a variety of day, twilight and evening classes and specialise in reading and spelling.

Using Mona McNee's *Step by Step* I teach a rule, have my students read many, many sentences using the rule and, when they have confidently mastered that rule, move on to the next one. I make the sentences up, building on the words they know and never introducing words they cannot decode. The main thing I am trying to eliminate is the guessing which for many is their only strategy of reading. Indeed my classrooms resound to me saying, 'Don't guess. Look at the letters. Read the letters'

I use the rules to teach spelling too. Many, many students have no idea about doubling letters or about dropping the 'e' before adding 'ing'. So I teach the rules of *Step by Step* and then my students try to spell words I give them that follow that rule. Students tell me this has made a huge difference to them in their lives – some are students on courses elsewhere in the college and improving spelling helps enormously; some find this useful in work, especially if they have been nervous in the past about being asked to write something down; others tell me they feel better about working with their children on homework.

The feedback from my students, generally, is wonderful. This is also the most rewarding piece of work I have ever done. To see students being able to read or spell properly for the first time makes my heart sing and I am so very proud of what they are achieving.

However I feel that other students could benefit from this system of phonics and have suggested to the trainer of literacy tutors like me that I offer training to others in these methods – methods that work. We had a fairly heated discussion in which she told me that phonics is not the only way that people learn to read. I countered by saying that it does really work. She suggested my readers perhaps had specific learning difficulties – I said they may do but this system works and they are reading. She doubted that we had millions of people in Britain unable to read properly and she certainly was not going to go against the guidelines of the Scottish Executive to offer training in reading using phonics.

So there we have it. Despite the success in Clackmannanshire using phonics, the use of phonics is not universally appreciated and certainly not yet in the world of adult literacy so I will soldier on. My students will also continue to make progress and they will keep coming to me. They tell me they have tried other centres but got copying out to do or given a computer to work on. That is not what they want, they tell me. What is fundamental to them all is that they want to read and they want to be able to spell. Using *Step by Step*, that's exactly what I help them to do.

**EXTRACT FROM HANSARD (HOUSE OF LORDS)
28 JUNE 2005**

Lord Quirk: My Lords, does the Minister think that phonics teaching should be more consistently observed in schools? Would he also venture a word about adult literacy, not least in Her Majesty's prisons?

Lord Adonis: My Lords, phonics teaching is at the centre of the national literacy strategy and has been since its beginning in 1998. However, we are always anxious to learn from best practice, because our only concern in this matter is that the maximum number of children should learn to read as soon as possible.

We have asked Mr Jim Rose, a distinguished former deputy chief inspector of schools, to examine the evidence on different methods of teaching phonics in primary schools, including the experience of the Clackmannanshire experiment in Scotland, to see if there are lessons that can be learned. He will report to us at the beginning of next year and we will make any appropriate changes in the literacy framework following that report.

So far as prisons and adult literacy are concerned, we place great importance on tackling the problems of literacy in prisons and it is a high priority of my department.

LEARNING PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES THAT EMPOWER LETTERLAND TEACHING

Lyn Wendon

Introduction

Best Practice

When Secretary of State Ruth Kelly commissioned Jim Rose to set up a Reading Review to evaluate best practice in the teaching of reading, I found it important to stand back and take a look at my Letterland System in order to decide what Jim Rose needed to know about it. Clearly he needed to know what learning principles and strategies empowered Letterland teaching, so I asked myself that question. I thank the Reading Reform Foundation for providing space for me to share my findings.

Synthetic Phonics

First I should say, the Letterland system's core strategy has always been direct instruction that prioritises teaching children how to convert letters and letter combinations into sounds, how to segment them and how to blend them into meaningful words. This is currently better known as a 'synthetic phonic approach'. The Letterland system also includes a Phonemic Awareness Fast Track strand, a Reading by Analogy strand and a Sight Word strand. The system is flexible, enabling the teacher to phase in each strand, timed to suit the needs of the particular classes concerned.

Scientific Research Base

I would also add that Letterland is a research-based programme, commended most recently in the impressive book by Peggy McCardle & Vinita Chhabra, *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research*, and also commended by Distinguished Professor Linnea Ehri, City University of New York and author of the summary of over 30 years of research on reading which culminated in the US National Reading Panel 2000, whose words I treasure, "You have uncovered some important principles of learning supported by research findings in your efforts to develop Letterland as an effective instructional tool. I am very impressed." It has also been commended by Dr Sally Shaywitz, MD, Professor of Pediatrics and Child Study, Yale University in her recent book *Overcoming Dyslexia*, and by Dr. Rebecca H. Felton, Neuropsychologist and Dyslexia Researcher, as a source of "rich and effective system of cues for letter-sound associations." Observing an on-going Letterland research project of 5 years standing in North Carolina, Dr Bob Schlagal, Professor of Reading in the Department of Language, Reading and Exceptionalities, Appalachian State University, USA, last month summarised his findings as follows: "Letterland is the most effective of all the synthetic phonics programs for children that I have observed or worked with. This program is not only extremely well-thought out, it is highly imaginative and distinctly and usefully memorable."

I could quote many more sources. One I particularly value comes for the Eitz Chaim Schools, Pre-School Director in Toronto, Nechama Cohen, also with 5 years experience of Letterland amongst her 4- and 5-year-olds. She states, "Nobody with whom I have associated in the field of early childhood education has ever been as excited about a program before. What I find astonishing, and I've been in the classroom for 27 years, is that this program is the only program which gets absorbed by the weaker student as well. We see such incredibly positive results and a

real, genuine excitement for learning. We teach Hebrew reading in our school to these kids simultaneously, and let me tell you, we have to scratch our heads pretty hard to generate equal excitement.”

The most exciting research findings to date on Letterland have been produced by the eminent American neuroscientist Dr Dennis Molfese, Chair and Professor of the Department of Psychology and Brain Sciences, University of Louisville, Kentucky, and Editor in Chief of the journal *Developmental Neuropsychology*. He has conducted a 6-month research project measuring brain activity in 4 and 5 year old children learning the alphabet with Letterland. Space permitting, I would be glad to share these intriguing findings in the next RRF issue.



Back to my original question to myself, what are the learning principles and strategies that empower Letterland teaching?

The Learning Principles and Strategies

Ideational content

Often the phonic component in any reading programme is a compilation of miscellaneous facts without reasons. So learning them becomes drudgery. My concern has always been to find ways to give ownership of this dry subject to the children themselves, building into the teaching of phonics specific reasons and strategies that:

- activate all possible learning channels
- enable prior knowledge to be used as stepping stones to new knowledge
- develop early speech and language skills as part of early literacy
- actively involve children’s imaginations, hearts and minds.

Teach the unknown via the known



The system is based on the fundamental principle that we all learn the *unknown* best by relating it to the *known*. Metaphors, and metaphorical thinking rely on this fundamental fact as a strategy for bringing new knowledge into circulation. The authors of a fascinating book called *Metaphors We Live By* (by George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, University of Chicago Press) reveal how much of our daily thinking is built on implicit metaphors, and how naturally even young children receive and understand metaphors. What I needed was some very simple visual metaphors.

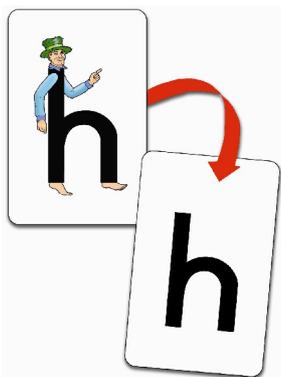


To achieve this strategy I bonded familiar human, animal and object shapes into the letters. Because children *already know* these shapes, they can quickly ‘map on to’ an unknown alphabet shape as soon as this metaphoric parallel has been drawn for them. The resulting fusion of the cueing device into the plain letter shape *forever alters the child’s perception of the plain letter shape*. Before being given the pictograms, the children simply saw the letters **h** and **H** as meaningless shapes. Now they recognise them, with and without the pictogram, because they *perceive* them in a new light.

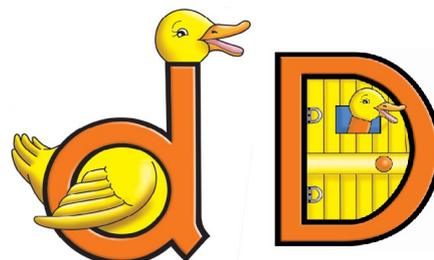
The pictogram has become the *bonding element* linking the letter to its abstract shape; taking the mystery out of it. The ‘hieroglyphics’ are permanently transformed into familiar shapes.

Pictogram Designs

I was determined that my pictogram designs should be as effective as possible. At first I simply hoped they would serve as *attention grabbers* and *motivators* for failing youngsters who didn’t want to learn any more. But I quickly realised that these integrated mnemonics could do much more. So now, each design:



- **confirms** both letter shape and character shape simultaneously
 - **cues** the correct letter sound (at the start of the character name)
 - **clarifies** letter orientation in space, by relating all the pictograms to the ‘Reading Direction’, as a conceptual guideline for correcting reversals
 - **is simple** enough for a child to draw the character straight on to a large, plain letter. Remember the old adage: “What I hear I forget. What I see I remember. What I *do* I understand.”
 - **is removable** for immediate transfer from pictogram to the plain letter shape at the twist of a wrist (from front to back of one Picture Code Card)
- **is connected** thematically to its capital letter shape (e.g. the small **d** becomes a Letterland **duck**, while capital **D** becomes her **Duck Door**)
 - is **mime-able**. Miming only takes a moment. It doesn’t need a costume (although simple props add to the fun), but in those few moments while the children embody the character and his or her sound, they build a set of kinaesthetic memory traces that can be permanent
 - **remains valid even when letters changed their sounds!**



Story Logic

Changes in letter sounds were the biggest challenge. Normally there is no reason available to explain, for example, **h** and **s**, but then **sh**, or why **a** changes its sound one way beside **w** (**aw**) and another way beside **r** (**ar**). These are simply arbitrary facts that contradict first learning about **a**, **w** and **r**. Was there a way to resolve this problem? The Economy of Learning paragraph below explains my solution.

Shared Instruction Language

Ideally, the early stages of learning to read should include a minimum amount of rule talk, because rule talk distances young children. Letterland’s strategy here is to enable teachers to replace rule talk with instructions provided in the language of childhood, so that the children can even *comfortably speak it themselves*. The many children I have taught showed me how to do this. Move into the child’s language of make-believe through *story telling*! Each phonic fact is transposed into a brief story. They are little fictions which carry all the facts by analogy. Children helped me to devise these stories, and children love retelling them.

Enrichment: vocabulary, alliteration and language development

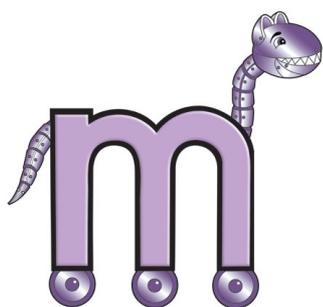
The pre-school and early primary school years are the time in children's lives when they sponge up new vocabulary, when they are full of curiosity, and when they are keen to participate in imaginative play. Letterland fits right into this formative stage by providing a 'secret' imaginary land for them to explore, and a set of characters they can surround with their thoughts and alliterative words. The thoughts and words get pulled into the 'magnetic field' of each pictogram like iron filings to a magnet. The Letterland ABC Book starts the process of exploring phonemic awareness of initial sounds by featuring many alliterative words and objects on each page.

Phonemic Awareness: The children's first acquaintance with **b**, for example, brings with it many visual/verbal associations. Along with meeting a brown bunny with bright blue eyes called Bouncy Ben, they learn about his bouncy blue ball and his brothers, they discover their boat, the bridge and a host of other alliterative objects to name and to talk about because they all begin with Bouncy Ben's sound.



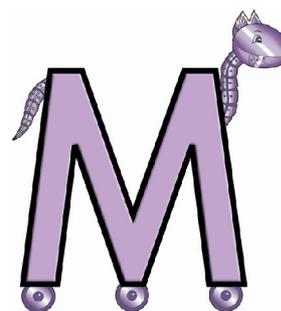
Ownership & Imagination: Next Letterland teaching brings in a whole further dimension to the process of learning letter sounds by helping the children to gather their own words and individual thoughts around each character. The Early Years Handbook and the Letterland Teacher's Guide both set the process going by asking lots of questions, and providing possible answers.

Soon the children are ready for a more open-ended approach, creating their own stories orally, while you write them down. The catalyst once again, is alliteration.



Take, for example, a typical group story that began with a Nursery class in a Birmingham inner city school as the children thought about Munching Mike.

The children decided MM likes 'mints'. They *knew they must be right* with this speculation because Munching Mike always likes to eat things starting with his sound.



Well, there it was, the **mmm** sound right at the start of the word 'mints'! With a touch of guidance the teacher scribed their story for them beginning with: "Munching Mike is a little monster who munches mints by the mouthful."

Having thought of 'mmmud pies', 'made a mess', 'mixed up' etc. they also discovered that their word choices could provide ideas for the direction of the story. So their thinking skills were being stimulated along with their growing sensitivity to initial sounds. The completed story, about eight sentences long, became a favourite to read and reread, enjoyed not least because of all those recurring **mmm** sounds!

Life application: In the Letterland context, alliteration becomes a way of empowering children to take the initiative in their own learning, using it as an intriguing discovery

route, both in and beyond the classroom. With encouragement the children start to watch their own language, and become keen on finding good new words to link to any Letterland character. Playing with alliteration can also keep your teaching fresh, as each year your new class offers up new alliterative words and ideas from their own language backgrounds. Linking them to the Letterland characters they cause unexpected ideas and spark off new speculation, imagery and associations.

Playful oracy: One over-arching strategy remains common to every year: your opportunity to use Letterland to motivate every child to pay attention to their own speech, thereby developing early oral skills in a playful setting, and showing them how interesting it can be to go from their own speech to paper and on into the written word. The *Letterland Early Years Handbook* is full of ideas and many **a-z** linked Early Learning Goal activities at the pre-school/Nursery stage. The same process works just as effectively with normal school age children of 5-7, (and in intervention programs for at-risk children, children with learning difficulties and ESL children) using the main *Letterland Teacher's Guides* or *ESL Guide*.

Economy of Learning

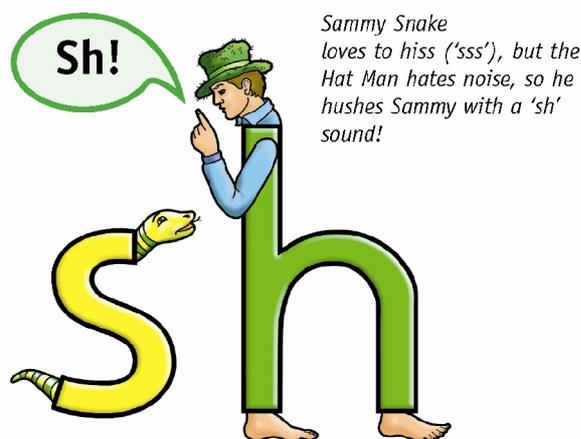
Special needs children, indeed all children, need and deserve that every cueing device we provide should be as supportive as possible. In Letterland, no information about letter functions has to be subsequently unlearned, invalidated or ignored. The strategy is *consistency* and *cumulative learning*. The economy comes in utilising prior knowledge and building on it. The **sh** story provides a useful example. The children learn about how Harry Hat Man hates noise so he only whispers his 'hhh' sound in words, and about Sammy Snake who loves making his hissing sound in words. Later they *build on that first knowledge to arrive at the new knowledge*: the 'sh' sound. The continuity is maintained by providing a logical parallel with real life. The children already know the Hat Man hates noise, so it comes naturally for them to understand his change in letter behaviour.

By illustrating this interaction, the new pictogram design enables children to literally **see** the change in sound. They can readily link letter *shapes* to letter *functions*, whether they be single letters or digraphs, because there is a *story logic* for each new sound. They sing about it and can act it out, too. (It turns out that countless 3 year olds know this **sh** story now, because their school-aged siblings use it when playing 'school' at home!)

The important point is this: with every little story you teach, you give the children an opportunity to use their minds! You give them an ideational bridge *which validates prior knowledge while leading to new knowledge*. In addition, if the child forgets the new sound, the story logic can function as a recall route to recover it.

Accessing All Learning Channels

There is plenty of scope for further focus on each letter (or digraph) as the children take part in creative activities, painting them in art, modelling them with playdough, singing about them (words and music provided on CD), pretending to be the Letterlanders in role play and Live Spelling, bringing the characters into games, and



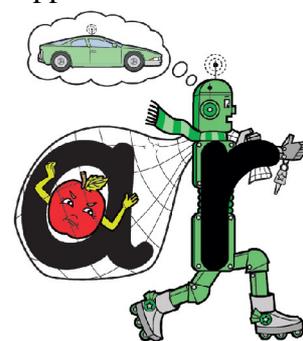
learning actions for each letter while practising the sounds, etc. The Letterland actions are carefully chosen to always invoke an image of the letter shape or of the character within the letter shape to build strong shape/sound connections. While featuring the letters playfully, all these visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and ideational cross-curricular activities provide support for children with a wide range of different learning styles.

Story Logic for Digraphs and Trigraphs

As the children progress to more digraphs and trigraphs, their habit of listening out for particular given sounds means that progress can be swift. Once again the Letterland logic rescues this stage from having to be memorised by rote and repetition. Normally, every time the letters contradict their usual behaviour in a word, there is *no child-friendly reason* for the new sound.

By contrast in Letterland teaching, when Annie Apple isn't saying 'a' as usual, there is a reason! The question becomes: "What's happened to Annie Apple?" It could be that:

- Mr A has appeared in a shower of Magic e's sparks and taken her place (**a-e**), or
- Wily Walter Walrus has splashed her (**aw**) so she cries, "Aw!", or
- Arthur Ar has captured her (**ar**) and is reporting back to Red Robot's headquarters with his surname, "Ar!".



The children are geared up to be on the look-out for an interaction within the word. Once again, the strategy is to replace rote learning with ideational content. Research in memory shows how even adults suffer from lack of ideational content when required to memorize miscellaneous unrelated facts. There are Letterland reasons for every 'wrinkle' in the English language for any child who needs a reason to remember the fact.

Teaching Pace

So far, all the Government's timetables for learning phonics appear to have been based on the premise that phonics is a difficult, unpopular subject which can only realistically be served out in small doses, spread out over 3 years. The most recent edition of the Letterland Teacher's Guide combines the **a-z** stage with all the most important digraphs and trigraphs in one publication. It also introduces a Phonemic Awareness Fast Track familiarising children with **a-z** shapes and sounds in 3 weeks. The aim is to make sure that teachers realise how natural and fun it can be to introduce **a-z** early on, to move straight into word building (quickly consolidating that first learning) and on into all the most important digraphs, during the first school year.

Summary

Letterland's objectives continue to be to teach phonics directly by:

- activating all possible learning channels
- enabling prior knowledge to be used as stepping stones to new knowledge
- developing early speech and language skills as part of early literacy
- actively involving children's imaginations, hearts and minds.

The ultimate objective is, of course, to provide an unpressured, playful and simultaneously *early* access to literacy. Credit goes to Prof. Rhona Johnston, Dr Joyce Watson, Sue Lloyd, Ruth Miskin and other members of the RRF for alerting the

Government to the need to place, as the top priority for all those responsible for the teaching of reading, *early mastery of the building blocks of written English*.

Note:

Opinions have been expressed (some by promoters of alternative phonic programmes) that children do learn the Letterland character names easily, but fail to learn their sounds. Here is one teacher's reply,

“We have taught phonics with Letterland successfully to over 600 pupils over 50% of which have Special Needs. As our Panda shows, we achieve consistently above average scores in KS1 SATs compared to like schools.” Esther Barford (SENCo and Literacy subject leader) Molehill Copse Primary School, Kent.

Another typical reply from other teachers using Letterland:

“How could teachers fail to get the sounds across, unless the teacher is under-resourced and/or not following the Teacher's Guide!”

Editor's comment: RRF members are used to the phenomenon of programmes not being implemented as their authors intend. We should not be surprised that this happens with *Letterland*, too. We hope to hear test results from *Letterland* schools in due course, so that we can compare them with other known results.

SNIPPET FROM THE USA

It has been reported on '27 News Vault' in Madison, Wisconsin, that the University of Wisconsin is using a gift of nearly \$3 million to provide Reading Recovery training for teachers. But Mark Seidenberg, a psychology professor at the same university is quoted as saying 'The evidence that it works better than programs that can be done in small groups is lacking' and that the initiative will take money away from more proven remedial approaches. Seidenberg is of course just one among many who believe that Reading Recovery is more expensive and less effective than some other interventions. We hope that Jim Rose will carefully consider the evidence on both sides.

**UNITED KINGDOM LITERACY ASSOCIATION
LITERACY NEWS AUTUMN 2005**

Under the heading 'Research Update' this publication contains an article entitled 'Looking beyond the headlines' by Ros Fisher. The article claims to 'raise questions about the interpretations that some phonics lobbyists have placed on these findings', but some of the points it raises are themselves rather questionable.

For one thing, the definitions which it uses of 'analytic' and 'synthetic' phonics are not a perfect fit with those used in Clackmannanshire. The definitions used in the UKLA article are Dorothy Strickland's, as quoted in the 'Sound Sense' paper written by Greg Brooks after the March 2003 DfES phonics seminar.

A more complex point concerns Ros Fisher's comments about the Clackmannanshire 'control programme'. She points out that as it involved analytic phonics and graded reading books used in a look-and-say way, 'it cannot reasonably be compared to the meaning based approaches more commonly found in UK schools'. The RRF would agree that the approaches found in UK schools are most commonly 'meaning based' –

different from the analytic phonics done in Clackmannanshire and even more different from the synthetic phonics programme which all the children had received by the end of the first year. Meaning-based approaches are used in the belief that they promote good comprehension, which, after all, is the ultimate goal of reading – so where do these approaches leave average comprehension levels at the end of primary school? Three and a half months below the average level in Clackmannanshire, according to the Macmillan Group Reading Test. This test was normed on a representative sample of UK children and therefore presumably on children taught by precisely the meaning-based approaches which Ros Fisher mentions, and yet the Clackmannanshire children scored above the average, despite being from the most deprived 10% of the population and despite having been taught by an approach which the UKLA evidently dislikes! Could it be that it was actually *because* they had been taught this way as beginners that they ended up comprehending very much better than children from their background typically do?

The Fisher article also implies that other things that the local authority did as part of a campaign to boost literacy attainment had a great deal to do with the Clackmannanshire children's success. Whatever else was done, however, was done after the children had received the 16-week synthetic phonics programme. The study does not provide evidence that results can be as good or better if other things are done instead of or before synthetic phonics. Does any such evidence exist?

MARKET FORCES?

A member of the International Teaching of Reading Forum (itorf) has reported that an Ebay search for 'whole language' has revealed 16 items, whereas a search for 'phonics' has revealed 1554 items. The writer concludes that when consumers are acting in their own best interests they choose phonics 99 to 1 over whole language. In doing a similar Google search, she found just over five hundred thousand hits for 'whole language' but over three million for 'phonics'.

RESEARCH DIGEST

Jennifer Chew

Cassar, M., Treiman, R., Moats, L., Cury Pollo, T., Kessler, B., 2005. How do the spellings of children with dyslexia compare with those of non-dyslexic children? *Reading and Writing* (2005) 18:27-49. The authors were interested in the question of whether children diagnosed as dyslexic made spelling mistakes of a different kind from those made by other children. They conducted a study in which they compared two groups of children who performed at the same level on a standardised spelling test: a group of dyslexics with a mean age of 11 years 7 months and a group of non-dyslexics with a mean age of 6 years 8 months. Their analysis showed no differences in the types of errors made by the two groups. In case there were subtle differences that their measures had failed to pick up, they had the spellings scrutinised by 44 teachers who were experienced at working with children with serious reading and spelling difficulties. The children's spelling attempts were typed out so that handwriting would not show which were the younger and older children. It was found that 'even the most experienced teachers could not reliably determine, based on a child's spellings alone, whether that child was a typical beginner or an older child with dyslexia'. The authors comment that 'the teachers' poor performance, rather than

reflecting poorly on them, shows that the two groups of children indeed produce very similar spellings'. They conclude that the same kinds of spelling difficulties (e.g. with consonant clusters) are experienced by relative beginners and older dyslexics and that 'good instruction that focuses on the kinds of difficulties that are experienced by typical children should help all children'.

Editor's comment: This study is particularly interesting in the light of the Channel 4 Dispatches programmes on dyslexia which was broadcast in September 2005. The focus there was reading rather than spelling, but similar conclusions were reached: that it was difficult to tell dyslexics and other poor readers apart and that teaching methods which were good for one group were good for all.

Hulme, C., Caravolas, M., Málková, G., Brigstocke, S., 2005. Phoneme isolation is not simply a consequence of letter-sound knowledge. *Cognition* 97, B1- B11. This is a further contribution to the debate about phonemic awareness. Specifically, the authors evaluated a suggestion made by Castles and Coltheart in *Cognition* 91, 2004 (see Research Digest in RRF Newsletter 52), that 'children may be able to perform phonemic manipulations on those sounds for which they know the corresponding letter, but not...for those sounds for which they have not yet acquired the graphemic link'. In experiments carried out with groups of English and Czech children, Hulme et al. found that 22 out of 24 Czech children and 13 out of 16 English children were able to identify at least one phoneme (either the initial or the final phoneme in a spoken single-syllable non-word) for which they did not know the corresponding letter. 11 out of 25 Czech children and 5 out of 16 English children managed this for 5 or more phonemes for which they did not know the corresponding letters. In a second study, the researchers found four Czech children who knew none of the 15 letter-sounds used in the experiment – one of these children could not isolate any phonemes but two succeeded in all 15 phoneme-isolation tasks and one succeeded in 10. Unfortunately, however, the researchers could not be sure that these children knew no letter-sounds at all – it is possible that they knew some which were not among the 15 used in the experiment. The researchers conclude, as others have done, that there is a reciprocal relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read and spell.

Editor's comment: While there is little doubt about the reciprocal relationship, the nature of this relationship may vary to some extent according to whether children are taught to read words by phonics alone or by using the NLS type of range of strategies. A study which was interesting in this respect appeared in 1987. It was by Perfetti, Beck, Bell and Hughes: Phonemic knowledge and learning to read are reciprocal: A longitudinal study of first-grade children (*Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol. 33 No. 3). In talking about 'children taught by direct code instruction', these authors suggested that 'their improvement in decoding may depend less on phonemic analytic abilities than does the improvement of children not taught coding directly'. The implication is that if something is directly taught, the ability of children to deduce it for themselves becomes much less important. If children are taught to link phonemes with graphemes from the start and are taught to read every word by sounding and blending, then they are being taught exactly what they need for word-reading purposes and there is much less margin for error.

Leppänen, U., Aunola, K., Nurmi, J-E., 2005. Beginning readers' reading performance and reading habits. *Journal of Research in Reading*, Vol. 28 No. 4, November 2005. This research was carried out with Finnish children. In Finnish

schools beginners are taught to read by relying on letter-sound correspondence knowledge. There are 21 correspondences in Finnish and just one is taught per week; it therefore takes about 6 months to teach all 21, but children start reading CV and VC syllables and words after the first few correspondences have been taught, which means that word-reading based on the taught letter-sound correspondences starts after just three or four weeks. The researchers investigated the effects of early reading skills on the extent to which children engaged in out-of-school reading and vice versa. They found that ‘the stage of reading acquisition is of importance in the formation of reading habits: it was particularly after the basics of reading had been learned that out-of-school reading began increasingly to contribute to children’s subsequent reading skills’.

Editor’s comment: This surely suggests that Frank Smith’s idea that children ‘learn to read by reading’ applies only after they have mastered the basics.

**EDITED EXTRACTS FROM THE SUBMISSION OF CELESTE
MUSGRAVE AND SANTINA DIMAURO TO THE
AUSTRALIAN INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF READING**

Celeste and Santina have both been Kindergarten teachers for over 16 years. They teach at Our Lady of Lebanon College in Sydney, a school where 99% of the children come from non-English-speaking backgrounds. They also give training courses on the benefits of systematic phonics as a foundation for reading and writing to teachers in Australia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Lebanon.

In 1991 we decided to reassess the way literacy was being taught in the Kindergarten grade. Up until then literacy was taught purely through a Whole Language approach. The children were given sight words to learn by memorising them... The reading of books also took on a Whole Language approach. It was then that we incorporated a phonics element into their literacy program, in conjunction with the Whole Language approach.

Initially, phonics involved teaching the children the 26 letters of the alphabet and the 26 sounds that went with them. After one year of phonics the children knew all their alphabet sounds but could not use these words to decode words in print. Therefore in the next year we decided to continue with phonics with the inclusion of a blending component. At the end of this particular year the majority of the children could read and write words containing the alphabet sounds. However, many of these children were still making simple mistakes with their reading and writing. When they found an unknown word containing a digraph, such as ‘shop’, ‘car’ or ‘beach’, the children would attack the words with their knowledge of the alphabet sound symbols or letter names. They were not equipped with enough sounds to read words which they used in their daily conversations.

Writing and spelling also caused a great deal of concern. The children in Kindergarten had the ability to hear all sounds in words and wanted to use these sounds when writing and spelling words. However without the knowledge of digraphs, the children were relying on memory to spell and were guessing the sequence of letter symbols in words. Many times there appeared to be no logic in this sequence. We once again realised that the literacy program needed to be reassessed...The inclusion of digraphs needed to occur in the Kindergarten phonics program. It was not until 1996 that we

discovered a phonics program which well and truly met the needs of the students in Kindergarten. We attended a teacher professional development course presented by Sue Lloyd, author of the Jolly Phonics program...

The principles behind this program were implemented during the following year and the results were astounding. The children improved in their reading and writing skills and did not need to rely on guessing to work out unfamiliar words....Learning digraphs in Kindergarten did not cause any problems as is believed by many educators...

The children were taught decoding skills to read words and encoding skills to write words. They also began to use the skill of blending to read words during Guided Reading sessions rather than relying on pictures and only the first letter in a word to read text. The children were taking responsibility for their own reading because they were given word-attack skills. Once word-attack skills were taught, then other necessary cues for reading [presumably comprehension] were explored.

After one year on the program the children in Kindergarten were administered a standardised test (Daniels and Diack) to evaluate the success of a systematic phonics program as a foundation to reading and writing. The results showed that the children had improved dramatically. Most of the children were ahead of their chronological age in reading and writing.... Many children were 12 to 18 months ahead of their chronological age. The performance gap between boys and girls in reading and spelling narrowed. Children with learning difficulties performed above their level of academic expectation....

The success of the 1997 children who were instructed using the Jolly Phonics program was then further monitored when they reached Year 3 in 2000 and subsequently Year 5 in 2002. Prior to the implementation of a systematic phonics approach, in particular Jolly Phonics, the children at our college always appeared disadvantaged because of the language barrier. Many of the children attained a literacy level in either Band 1 or Band 2 in the New South Wales Basic Skills Test. After the introduction of Jolly Phonics, the children showed a dramatic improvement in their Basic Skills results in Literacy. There is now a considerably lower percentage of children in the bottom two bands in Literacy in Year 3 and, amazingly, no children now in the bottom two bands in Literacy in Year 5. In fact, a comment recorded on our College's Basic Skills report for 2004 indicated that our students were exceptionally strong in spelling....

It is the belief of the teachers that the use of a systematic phonics approach in reading and writing has given the children vital skills to enhance their literacy standards. In fact systematic phonics has prevented major reading difficulties developing amongst children in the very first year of their schooling.

Throughout Australia basic phonics is used by many teachers in the classroom only as a remedial tool for those children who have not efficiently mastered the skills of reading and writing. Our results clearly highlight the important need for specific systematic phonics instruction to be a necessary feature in the English curriculum for all children during their first and subsequent years of schooling.

See also the case study of Our Lady of Lebanon College at www.jollylearning.co.uk.



NEWS FROM ANDHRA PRADESH AND THE GAMBIA

Newsletters 53 and 55 contained reports on projects being carried out in these two places. We have now had some informal feedback on both projects and hope to be able to publish follow-up reports in future Newsletters.

SNIPPET FROM DAVID CAMERON

Part of David Cameron’s education policy for the Conservative Party: ‘Restoring the credibility of A levels, radical reform of the QCA, synthetic phonics at the heart of literacy – these will be clear steps along the road. I’m ready for a huge battle with the educational establishment to banish the “progressive” theories that have done such damage for so long’.

TAILPIECE

The ‘progressive’ theories that David Cameron and other politicians may continue to be up against are illustrated by the recent experience of a member of the RRF. She had been working hard with the bottom group of her Year 2 children, to the point where they were using sounding and blending as their first reading strategy and were making real progress. One of the children was then seen by the Local Education Authority language consultant, who wrote the following on his report:

‘He seems to be trying to sound out the words with some success but without looking at the pictures for clues. He needs to be praised for giving a plausible word which fits in with the syntactic and picture clues without necessarily being the exact word. He should take home books with lots of repetition of key words.’

Will we still have language consultants making this kind of recommendation after the Rose review is published? We hope not.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

A tight schedule has made it impossible for us to include individual subscription reminders with this Newsletter. We hope to do so in the next one. In the meantime, subscriptions from members who know that they are due would be very welcome. £10 covers a year’s subscription (three Newsletters). Cheques should be made payable to the Reading Reform Foundation and sent to Mrs J. Chew, The Mount, Malt Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 9PB. New subscribers: please include a note of your name and telephone number (and e-mail address if applicable). Each Newsletter is published on the RRF website at www.rrf.org.uk at about the same time as hard copies are sent out. Past Newsletters can also be viewed and downloaded there.

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