

Wordly Wise

A synthetic phonics program is getting fantastic results in Scotland.

By Geraldine Bedell

Education, education, education. Tony Blair's first-term mantra feels a long way off. It sounded so good. But this week, as another manifesto is being written for a possible third term, a quarter of all English children are still leaving primary school unable to read and write.

Meanwhile, and not much noticed, last week two academics, Professor Rhona Johnston of Hull University, and Joyce Watson of St. Andrews University, published their seven-year study comparing methods of teaching reading and writing in Scotland.

This demonstrated that children taught to read by the so-called "synthetic phonics" method – where letter sounds are taught, then blended to make words – are on average three and a half years ahead of their chronological age by the time they're 11.

In Clackmannanshire in central Scotland, where the study took place, the boys – unusually – outperformed the girls.

And the children who made the most marked improvement were those from disadvantaged homes: in contrast to the picture nationally, they had not already fallen behind their peers by the age of seven. This confirmed American research which suggests that, while synthetic phonics doesn't disadvantage anyone, struggling pupils benefit most.

The Clackmannanshire study, admittedly, is the first to follow a single cohort of pupils for seven years, but there have been numerous examples of individual principals switching to synthetic phonics schemes and seeing their results improve dramatically and consistently.

To date, however, there has been no official interest in finding out more about synthetic phonics. The resistance to adopting a method that visibly, obviously works better, derives from two misunderstandings, one political, one practical.

The first is that synthetic phonics is traditionalist teaching of the stuffy grammarian type, backed by educational conservatives. True, some educational conservatives may favour it – but there is nothing cramping about being able to read. Educational liberals, those of us who believe that the education system is too narrow, prescriptive, test-based, and miserably obsessed with grading, should be embracing synthetic phonics with relief.

One great advantage of the method is that it teaches the "decoding" part of reading quickly, in 16 weeks, freeing children to get on with the more interesting comprehending part of reading.

The more practical misunderstanding derives from the fact that there is already a phonics component in the official approach to reading instruction, although hopelessly diluted.

Where good synthetic phonics programs will teach 43 letter sounds and combinations in 16 weeks, the national literacy strategy stretches the process out over years.

Vowel sounds such as /er/ and /ar/ aren't taught until the second year of primary school, meaning that for a long time there remains a clutch of words that children can't decode. To make matters worse, their reading books don't match their decoding level.

Imagine you are a child starting school, given a reading scheme book containing words you don't have the means to work out. You come across a word for which you know the first letter, but can't read the rest.

Should you guess the word from the picture? Probably not, because not all words have pictures. Should you read the word that follows and guess? You could try, but the possibilities are many. Should you try to work it out from the grammar? You're four years old. Yet these so-called "clues" are an approved part of the national literacy

strategy.

One of the head teachers in the Clackmannanshire study said starting synthetic phonics was a "professional life-changing experience". Jane Cameron, the head of Notting Hill Prep, a new independent school which opened using a synthetic phonics scheme, says her teachers had initially been wary of dropping the old "clues" method, but had all now converted.

At Elhurst Primary School in Newham, which has 950 pupils, 25 languages spoken at home and more than 40% of pupils on free school meals, the principal Shaded Ahmed introduced the Read Write synthetic phonics program in February 2004. The first test results, only three months later, showed a marked improvement.

"Previously, I was always disappointed that some children wouldn't read, that we had an average of 20% leaving our school below the level they should be," said Ahmed. "But we test internally every half term, and it is these struggling children who are making the most progress. The change in self-esteem has been enormous."

Tony Blair admits that for Britain to have a quarter of children leaving primary school illiterate is "a scandal". The government has missed its national literacy targets for the past four years. So why is nobody capable of drawing the obvious conclusion?

It might be useful if ministers made use of their own educations and opened their minds a bit. While the educational establishment clings to its shibboleths and a misplaced anti-traditionalism, children are being denied opportunities. Often, they are the very children that a Labour government should most be seeking to help.

(Adapted with permission from "When Words Fail Them", The Observer, Feb. 20, 2005. The Observer is Britain's leading left-of-centre Sunday newspaper. Ms Bedell has a son who had reading difficulties.)