Phonics Implementation with People Who Need AAC: What Does the Evidence Base Say?

Jane Farrall[1]
Nick Drover[2]
[1] Jane Farrall Consulting
[2] Springvale Park Special Developmental School

Short Abstract

The implementation of phonics, as part of literacy instruction, is a hot topic in education circles. Some Australian states have made synthetic phonics compulsory in school literacy programs. Australian Curriculum Version 9 has also recently included phonics in the English curriculum.

This presentation will go through the Information that we have about phonics instruction and people who need AAC. We will present what the evidence base says about synthetic phonics, and other forms of phonics instruction, for this group.

This information will include:

- Research published including people who use AAC and synthetic phonics instruction, and the lack of this research. We will also discuss whether we can generalise the research with neurotypical students to people who use AAC;
- Research with autistic literacy learners and phonics instruction, and the suggestion to use analytic phonics with some autistic individuals, and why this is a consideration;
- Research into literacy teaching with people who have intellectual disability, and suggestions from that around the applicability of the Simple View of Reading;
- The foundational skills required before commencing phonics instruction and the importance of ensuring that individuals have these skills in place before commencing such instruction;
- Research about phonemic awareness and people who use AAC, and the directions and information we can take from this.

We also recognise that Australian Curriculum and state-based curricula, still recognise that literacy is composed of many different areas and are recommending comprehensive literacy instruction via models such as The Big Six.

Long Abstract

In English literacy teaching, it is widely accepted that the inclusion of phonics instruction for literacy learners is critical for their development on their journey in learning to read with comprehension. The most commonly used model of reading, the Simple View of Reading

(Gough & Tunmer, 1986), specifies language comprehension and decoding as the two components that combine for every individual to read with comprehension. Phonics is the area of instruction that teaches students to decode, and as decoding is one of the two components of reading according to the Simple View of Reading, it is therefore critical for early literacy instruction.

The body of research often referred to as the Science of Reading does not include people who need AAC and has minimal inclusion of people with intellectual disability. For neurotypical students, some authors e.g. Wheldall et al., 2023, pp 133-137, state that systematic synthetic phonics is the most systematic and explicit form of phonics instruction. Other authors e.g. Castles et al, 2018, believe that analytic phonics instruction can be just as effective as long as it, too, is taught explicitly.

Version 9 of Australian Curriculum, the current version, and its state-based interpretations, has included phonics in the English curriculum for the first time. Additionally, some Australian States have made one type of phonics instruction, synthetic phonics, compulsory in school literacy programs. These changes mean that many schools are now investigating, or reviewing, appropriate phonics programs for use with their students. Some schools, however, are unsure about making this decision for all students as they don't know what the evidence base says about individuals who use AAC, and how this may differ from the evidence base for neurotypical students.

We will present what the evidence base says about synthetic phonics, and other forms of phonics instruction, for this group. While this information is limited, there is some evidence we can draw on about phonics instruction and people who need AAC.

We will then cover the research that has been published that includes people who use AAC and phonics instruction, and the paucity of this research. We will also discuss whether we can generalise the research with neurotypical students to people who need AAC. As part of this, we will include the research into phonics instruction and individuals with intellectual disability, where there is good evidence for different types of phonics instruction having a great outcomes, as long the approach is taught explicitly (Dessemontet et al, 2019)

We will also use Cognitive Load Theory to place this research into context. This theory plays a critical part in understanding how the working memory learns and retains information after it has been explicitly taught. Its impact on phonics instruction is to reduce inessential (extraneous load) while focusing on the relevant information (intrinsic load). Identifying an approach to teaching phonics that is focused on letter-sound co-relation while reading with comprehension, as intrinsic cognitive load, while removing parts of instruction that serve only to add extraneous cognitive load, is critical for all literacy learners (Lovell, 2020).

Using this theory as a basis, we will then cover the research into phonics pertaining to some groups of people who need AAC and phonics instruction. For example, with autistic literacy learners the recommendations are varied, and for some students there is a recommendation for analytic phonics as the preferred approach. There is also an overarching understanding that language-based skills are often the area of greatest need for this group (Fluery et al, 2021).

Finally, we will cover the foundational skills required for phonics instruction. Multiple studies with neurotypical individuals have shown that there are specific skills required before phonics instruction can be successful. The most important foundation skills are alphabet knowledge

and phonemic awareness. Research into phonemic awareness and people who need AAC will be discussed in this context.

While this presentation will focus on phonics, we also recognise that all states, and Australian Curriculum, also still identify that literacy is composed of many different areas and are recommending comprehensive literacy instruction via models such as The Big Six.

References

Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19, 5–51. doi:10.1177/1529100618772271

Dessemontet, R.S., Martinet, C, de Chambrier, A-F , Martini-Willemin, B.M. & Audrin, C. (2019). A meta-analysis on the effectiveness of phonics instruction for teaching decoding skills to students with intellectual disability, *Educational Research Review,* 26, 52-70.

Gough, P.B. & Tunmer, W.E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability, *Remedial and Special Education*, 7(1), 6–10.

Lovell, O. (2020). Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory in Action. John Catt Educational Ltd. Melton, Woodbridge, UK

Wheldall, K., Wheldall, R. & Buckingham, J. (Eds.). (2023). Effective Instruction in Reading and Spelling. MultiLit.