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# **Can Phonics Instruction and Big Book Shared Reading in Combination Work Better Than on Their Own?**

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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New Zealand.

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## Abstract

The present study is an experimental study, and the purpose was to make an empirical comparison between three ways of teaching: phonics instruction, big book shared reading, and combining phonics and big book. The study involved 96 Year 2 children from three primary schools in South Auckland. Children were taught in small groups of four according to different reading ability levels (“at”, “below”, and “well-below”) after being randomly assigned into one of four conditions: phonics only (P), big book only (BB), a combination of phonics and big book (PBB), and a treatment control (C). The researcher met with the groups once a week for 30 minutes, from May to November. Children completed pre- and post-assessments of word reading, passage reading, reading comprehension, spelling, pseudoword decoding, phonemic awareness, receptive vocabulary, and math.

Results from a 3-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the phonics and big book combined group outperformed the other two reading groups, and also the treatment control group in word reading, reading comprehension, decoding pseudowords, and phonemic awareness. The phonics only group outperformed the big book only group in decoding and phonemic awareness. The three ability groups (“at”, “below”, and “well-below”) responded similarly on norm-referenced tests to the different approaches used in this study. The intervention did not advantage one ability group over the other.

Sub-sections of the word reading, phonemic awareness, and decoding tests were also analysed. In the word reading test, results showed that the combined group outperformed the other three groups in reading short, regular one-syllable words, and short, one-syllable, slightly irregular words. In the phonemic awareness test, the combined group outperformed the other groups in segmentation, blending, and deleting the first phoneme. In basic decoding skills, the combined group outperformed the other three groups in ability to decode consonant-vowel-consonant (cvc) pseudowords. A further analysis of weekly phonics quizzes given during the 12-week training period showed that the combined group performed better than the other three groups, and that the phonics group performed better than the shared book group.

The findings of the present study suggest that a combination of phonics and big book shared reading is more effective way to teach reading to 6-year-olds than providing them with only phonics instruction, or only shared book experience.

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## Definitions

**Phonological awareness** is “the ability to consciously segment the speech stream into phonological units” (Tunmer, 1993). The speech stream can be broken down into different levels: (i) awareness that speech is made of words, e.g., there are three words in “see the basket”; (ii) awareness that words have form as well as meaning and that words are made of one or more syllables – called syllable awareness (e.g. two syllables in *bas/ ket*); (iii) awareness that syllables are made of onsets and rimes – called onset-rime awareness (e.g. *b* is an onset, and *as* is a rime, *k* is an onset, and *et* is a rime in the word *basket*); (iv) awareness that words can be segmented into constituent phonemes – called phoneme (or phonemic) awareness (e.g. the phoneme /b/ in *basket*). Phonemes are the units of speech sound represented by letters of the alphabet (Chappell, Stephens, Kinnison, & Pettigre, 2009; Gillon, 2004).

**Phonemic awareness** is one aspect of the phonological awareness. It is awareness that spoken words are composed of individual sound parts termed phonemes. Phonemes are the smallest units in spoken language. There are about 41 phonemes in English (i.e. *me* has two phonemes, *sock* has three phonemes, and *step* has four phonemes). Phonemic awareness is a skill, an awareness that develops to different levels. You can show phonemic awareness by identifying, counting, isolating, or segmenting them (Gough, 1996). Phonemic awareness starts with awareness of the beginning of the word, then the end, and lastly, the middle (Gough, 1996). Children can learn to segment or blend phonemes with or without letters of the alphabet (Gillon, 2004; National Reading Panel, 2000)

**Phonics** is a set of rules that teach the relationship between letters and sounds, which enables children to decode unfamiliar words. Different phonics approaches teach between 40 to 120 rules (Gough & Lee, 2007; Torgerson, Brooks, & Hall, 2006).

**Synthetic phonics** teaches children individual letter sounds very rapidly, and then it teaches how to blend the letter sounds from the beginning, middle, and to the end of the word (e.g., blending the sounds /b/ /a/ /g/ in the word *bag*). Children are taught some letter sounds first, and then they read real books. (de Graaf, Bosman, Hasselman, & Verhoeven, 2009; Johnston & Watson, 2007).

*Analytic phonics* teaches children letter sounds but does not teach them how to blend individual sounds to form a word. Children learn the sounds of letters by studying a set of words which share common beginning or ending letter positions (e.g. the initial /b/ in big, bus, book, boy) (de Graaf, Bosman, Hasselman, & Verhoeven, 2009; Torgerson, Brooks, & Hall, 2006).

*Systematic phonics* teaches children letter-sound correspondences explicitly and sequentially, from simple through to more complex correspondences. A systematic phonics programme has a scope and sequence (e.g., see Nicholson, 2005). This could be either systematic synthetic phonics or systematic analytic phonics (Torgerson, Brooks, & Hall, 2006).

### **Definition of the phonics instruction used in the present study**

The present study teaches specific rules for mainly Anglo-Saxon words using phonics lesson plans and ideas in *The Phonics Handbook* (Nicholson, 2005). The researcher taught the rules explicitly and also used modified TurtleTalk phonemic awareness activities (Gough & Lee, 2007). In the modified TurtleTalk, the researcher wrote the TurtleTalk words on the whiteboard, she pronounced each phoneme of a word slowly, one after the other, and pupils have to guess the word. Pupils also did the activity in reverse. The phonics instruction in the present study did not include either normal sentence context or specially written decodable sentence context.

There was no use of connected text. In terms of definitions, the phonics in the present study was systematic and synthetic, and included teaching of phonemic awareness using modified TurtleTalk.

### **Shared book reading using big books**

Shared book reading is an interactive experience. Students read Big Books together in a small group or as a whole class with guidance and support from their teacher (Ministry of Education, 2003). In shared reading of enlarged picture books (big books), teachers choose stories that are challenging to read but not too difficult for the group or class, that students would find too difficult to read on their own. These are books that the group would read at slightly below 90 percent accuracy. The teacher reads the story to the group, and points at the words while reading. Students revisit and reread the story several times as a group, focusing on critical thinking, problem-solving, and using

different strategies for word recognition (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009; Holdaway, 1982; Ministry of Education, 2001; Wiesendanger, 2001).

In terms of definitions, the phonics taught in shared Big Book reading is unsystematic and analytic in that children study words in the big book that contain a particular letter-sound correspondence. The selection of words for study does not follow a strict scope and sequence in terms of letter-sound patterns.

### **Definition of big book shared reading instruction used in the present study**

The shared reading instruction in the present study used guidelines from the Ministry of Education (2001) for Big Book reading. Children were taught in small groups of four. Each story was presented on separate occasions, being read to, with, and by the students. The researcher drew children's attention to one or two of the following things during each reading: phonics, punctuation, abbreviations (e.g., I'll), or an aspect of text structure such as plot or character.