

# New phonics test will do nothing to improve Australian children's literacy

September 18 2017, by Misty Adoniou

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Minister Birmingham released a report today recommending that all Year 1 students in Australia complete a phonics test. The panel responsible for the report has recommended that Australia adopt the Year 1 phonics screening check that has been used in England since 2011.

## What is phonics?

Phonics is the process of matching sounds to letters. It is an important skill when learning to read and write in English. There are two main approaches to teaching children phonics - synthetic phonics and analytic phonics.

Analytic phonics starts with taking a word that children know the meaning of, and then analysing it to see how the sounds in the word match the letters we see within the word. So five-year-old Emma will learn that her name starts with the sound "e" which is represented by the capital letter E, followed by the sound "m" which is represented by the two letters "mm," and ends with the sound "u," which is represented by the letter a.

Synthetic phonics starts with letters which the children learn to match with sounds. The meaning of the [words](#) are irrelevant, and indeed, inconsequential. The theory is that the children should master letter/sound matches first before trying to attend to meaning.

## Which phonics method is better?

There is no evidence that one phonics approach is better than the other. In England, the US and Australia, there have been major inquiries into reading and all have concluded that systematic and explicit phonics teaching is a crucial part of effective reading instruction. But none have found any evidence that synthetic phonics approaches are better than analytic phonics approaches, or vice versa.

All inquiries have concluded that whatever phonic instruction method is chosen, it should be one part of a suite of skills children should have when learning to read.

## What is the phonics test?

The phonics [test](#) is based on synthetic phonics. The children are given 40 words on a computer screen, with no context. The words are not put in a sentence, or given any meaning. This is deliberate, and an important feature of a synthetic phonics approach, as the children must show they are not relying on meaning or prior experience with the word in order to successfully decode it.

To this end, 20 of the words the children are given are nonsense words, like "thrand," "poth" and "froom," to ensure they are not using meaning to decode the words.

## Why are we introducing it?

Minister Birmingham is concerned about the numbers of students in Australia who are struggling with literacy. The decline in literacy standards of Year 9 students is very concerning, and he is right to be looking for solutions. But the solution will not be found in this phonics test for six-year-olds.

As the test has been already been in use for six years in England we are fortunate to be able to learn from their experience. [A major evaluation of the test](#) conducted by the Department for Education in England found that the test is not delivering improvements in literacy capabilities, and in fact, is delivering some unwanted side effects, like class time being spent learning to read nonsense words rather than real words.

Numerous other recent studies of the implementation of the phonics test in England provide valuable information that allow us to test the claims for the test against research evidence.

## What does the research say?

**Claim:** The phonics test has improved reading results in England since its introduction.

**Evidence:** Year 1 children in England are certainly getting better at passing the phonics test. Over the past six years, [pass rates have increased by 23%](#). This means around 90% of Year 1 children in England can now successfully read nonsense words like "yune" and "thrand."

However, [research has found](#) that the ability to read nonsense words is an unreliable predictor of later reading success.

And so far, the phonics test in England [has not improved reading comprehension scores](#).

As the test only tests single syllable words with regular phonic patterns, it is not possible to know how many English children can read words like "one," "was," "two," "love," "what," "who," or "because," as such words are not included in the test. This is unfortunate because these are amongst the 100 most common words in the English language, which in turn make up 50% of the words we read everyday - whether in a novel, a newspaper article or a government form.

"Yune," "thrand" and "poth," on the other hand, make 0% of the words we read.

**Claim:** The phonics test will pick up children who are having reading difficulties. Birmingham [has stated](#) "the idea behind these checks is to ensure students don't slip through the cracks."

**Evidence:** [Research in England](#) has found that the test was no more

accurate than the teacher's judgement in identifying children with reading difficulties. Teachers already know which children struggle. As researchers, [teachers](#) and [principals](#) have all said - teachers need more support in knowing how to support those struggling children.

**Claim:** The phonics test will provide detailed diagnostics to support teachers to make effective interventions. The chair of the panel recommending the test [says](#) that the phonics test will drill into the detail of phonics to establish what children know.

**Evidence:** [A thorough analysis of the test's components](#) found it fails to test some of the most common sound/letter matches in English, and indeed screens for a very limited number of the hundreds of sound/letter matches in English. They found that [children](#) can achieve the pass grade of 32 from 40 with only limited phonic knowledge.

[Other research](#) found the test fails to give any information about what the specific phonic struggles of a child might be , or whether the struggles are indeed with phonics.

These limitations mean the check has negligible diagnostic or instructional use for classroom teachers.

## **Learning lessons**

Australia is in the fortunate position of being able to learn from the research that has been conducted since the implementation of the phonics test and mandatory synthetic phonics teaching in England. The lesson is clear. The test is unable to deliver what was hoped. Australia should look elsewhere for answers to its literacy challenges.

Already state Education Ministers have begun to let Birmingham know that [they will not be taking up the offer of the national phonics test](#).

This may be an issue where Australia is able to overcome its intellectual cringe, and act on the research evidence rather than old colonial ties.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: New phonics test will do nothing to improve Australian children's literacy (2017, September 18) retrieved 25 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-phonics-australian-children-literacy.html>

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