

Phonics

Moderate impact for very low cost, based on very extensive evidence.



+4

Phonics is an approach to teaching reading, and some aspects of writing, by developing learners' phonemic awareness. This involves the skills of hearing, identifying and using phonemes or sound patterns in English. The aim is to systematically teach learners the relationship between these sounds and the written spelling patterns, or graphemes, which represent them. Phonics emphasises the skills of decoding new words by sounding them out and combining or 'blending' the sound-spelling patterns.

How effective is it?

Phonics approaches have been consistently found to be effective in supporting younger readers to master the basics of reading, with an average impact of an additional four months' progress. Research suggests that phonics is particularly beneficial for younger learners (4-7 year olds) as they begin to read. Teaching phonics is more effective on average than other approaches to early reading (such as whole language or alphabetic approaches), though it should be emphasised that effective phonics techniques are usually embedded in a rich literacy environment for early readers and are only one part of a successful literacy strategy.

For older readers who are still struggling to develop reading skills, phonics approaches may be less successful than other approaches such as Reading comprehension strategies and Meta-cognition and self-regulation. The difference may indicate that children aged 10 or above who have not succeeded using phonics approaches previously require a different approach, or that these students have other difficulties related to vocabulary and comprehension which phonics does not target.

Qualified teachers tend to get better results when delivering phonics interventions (up to twice the effectiveness of other staff), indicating that expertise is a key component of successful teaching of early reading.

How secure is the evidence?

Overall, the evidence base related to phonics is very secure. There have been a number of studies, reviews and meta-analyses that have consistently found that the systematic teaching of phonics is beneficial. There is some evidence that approaches informed by synthetic phonics (where the emphasis is on sounding out letters and blending sounds to form words) may be more beneficial than analytic approaches (where the sound/symbol relationship is inferred from identifying patterns and similarities by comparing several words). However, the evidence here is less secure and it is probably more important to match the teaching to children's particular needs and systematically teach the sound patterns with which they are not yet confident.

Several robust studies of phonics programmes in English have been published in recent years. The findings show that phonics programmes can be effective in English schools, but also underline the importance of high quality implementation. Recent evaluations of Switch-on Reading, a programme involving phonics components delivered by teaching assistants, and Fresh Start, showed that both had an average impact of three additional months' progress. However two other programmes, both targeting struggling, older readers, did not improve reading outcomes.

What are the costs?

Overall, the costs are estimated as very low. The costs associated with teaching phonics arise from the need for specific resources and professional training. Evidence suggests that the effectiveness of phonics is related to the pupil's stage of reading development, so it is also important that teachers have professional development in effective assessment as well as in the use of particular phonic techniques and materials.

What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Phonics can be an important component in the development of early reading skills, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, it is also important that children are successful in making progress in all aspects of reading including vocabulary development, comprehension and spelling, which should be taught separately and explicitly.
2. The teaching of phonics should be explicit and systematic to support children in making connections between the sound patterns they hear in words and the way that these words are written.
3. The teaching of phonics should be matched to children's current level of skill in terms of their phonemic awareness and their knowledge of letter sounds and patterns (graphemes).
4. Phonics improves the accuracy of the child's reading but not the comprehension. How are you planning on developing wider literacy skills such as comprehension?