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# Preface

The alphabetic principle governs the ways the letters of the alphabet correspond with the sounds of a language – in this case, English. Locating the alphabetic principle within the landscape of early years literacy research and practice, while also accounting for what lies beyond this essential aspect of learning to read and write, was always going to be a challenge for the editors of this book. At no time did we consider this task an easy one, but we always considered it achievable. As we embarked on the project, we were aware that teaching and learning about the alphabetic principle is addressed in a vast array of studies undertaken over many years, alongside reports, systematic reviews of the literature, a variety of teaching programs, and most importantly, in the rich repertoire of practices used by teachers in classrooms every day.

We were also very aware that diverse views on the place of teaching and learning about the alphabetic principle in the early years have generated a variety of teaching approaches amid intense debate. Claims about the value of specific approaches are often expressed in very strong terms, while evidence supporting each claim is regularly contested. Nevertheless, as we set out on our journey to bring this book to readers, we were unprepared for how intensely these different views continue to be debated, although it has become clear to us that all contributors to this debate share the same goal of providing teachers with the best and most up-to-date evidence to inform their pedagogical stance and practice. In this book, we survey a wide range of perspectives and approaches to teaching and learning about the alphabetic principle in order to help teachers navigate this challenging terrain more confidently.

The editors wish to thank all the authors who have contributed to this book with so much enthusiasm and respect, despite representing different perspectives on a topic that can generate such heated debate. The result, we hope, is a book that lays out the terrain for teachers, schools and school systems in a way that helps them plot their own pathway. We are confident that readers will respond to the information in the book using their professional judgement, underpinned by close knowledge of their teaching context and dedication to meeting the particular needs of their students.

We present this book to readers in three parts. Some readers will choose to begin with Part One and move through the chapters in order, reflecting on their own practice and understandings. Others will criss-cross through the text, starting with a particular chapter that interests them, to address their professional learning needs, or those of their students, at a particular point in time.

Part One offers three chapters which orient the reader to the topic. These chapters provide readers with a framework for thinking about the alphabetic principle and its place in the language system as a whole; in literacy development, teaching and assessment; and in the evaluation of school success. Part One concludes with a thought-provoking chapter from Peter Freebody drawing attention to the fact that in English the principles that govern the correspondence between the letters of the alphabet and the sounds of the language are anything but straightforward. He also revisits the well-known Four Resources model, a framework used to account for all the resources students need to develop in order to become successful readers and writers.

Part Two of the book includes contributions from well-respected authors who, chapter by chapter, roll out a rich landscape of pedagogical approaches for introducing students to the alphabetic principle, each representing a different perspective on the alignment between the alphabetic principle and the wealth of meanings that can be made with written language. We hope that this collection generates many productive conversations among educators, especially those with differing views about the place of the alphabetic principle in the teaching and learning of early literacy. In particular, we hope that this publication might encourage others to venture into this terrain with a similar collegial orientation. It is beyond the scope of one book to do justice to this field, so we look forward to future volumes which continue to explore for teachers and their students the many perspectives that feature in this space.

Part Three, a single chapter, reviews the landscape of early literacy practices laid out in the book. In this chapter we invite readers to reflect on the multiple perspectives on teaching the alphabetic principle presented in Part Two. This type of reflection will both enrich knowledge and understanding of the ways students become literate and expand teaching repertoires.

In all schools and school systems, in Australia and internationally, there has always been an emphasis on the teaching and learning of early literacy alongside a resolve to ensure all students become successful readers and writers, as is their right. In recent decades this area of the curriculum has come under intense public scrutiny. Educators must now also address perceptions, where they exist, and whether these perceptions are accurate or not, that literacy standards in schools and post-school education need to be ‘turned around’. For this reason, teachers are encouraged to collect and review evidence of student literacy learning in their own classrooms and to use that evidence to inform their teaching practice. Student progress is monitored against a range of documents, including the Australian Curriculum, the National Literacy Learning Progression, and State-based syllabus documents. These documents specify content to be covered and standards to be achieved, making explicit what counts as literacy learning in Australia at this point in our history. Teachers use these documents to inform their programming and to personalise instruction so it addresses identified student needs.

While there is general agreement that teaching about the alphabetic principle is an essential element of early reading instruction, how this is done and where it is located on the trajectory of literacy development remain topics of continued debate. This debate brings to mind the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The story originated in ancient India and is retold in different ways in different traditions. It tells of six blind men encountering an elephant for the first time. Each one touches a different part of the elephant and comes to a different conclusion about the nature of the beast. In one version, the blind men end up having a comical argument about who is telling the truth. In another, a wise person points out that they are all correct, each one having interpreted an aspect of the truth depending on where they are located in relation to the elephant.

We hope that this book goes some way towards mapping the location of some of the different perspectives that together add to our understanding of the nature of the alphabetic principle and its place in learning to read and write English. Expanding our understanding of the place of teaching and learning about the alphabetic principle in early literacy instruction has the potential to enhance opportunities for all students to engage with reading and writing in productive and fulfilling ways.

# About the authors

## The editors

**Dr Robyn Cox** is Associate Professor of Literacy Education at the Australian Catholic University. Before this, she was Principal Lecturer at the University of Worcester, UK, and a member of the executive committee of the United Kingdom Literacy Association. Robyn has held other positions at universities in Australia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. She is the author of several international journal articles in the field of literacy research and has been involved in teacher education in four countries over a 20-year period. Robyn is well known for her commitment to the development of a strong professional knowledge base in initial teacher education and remains dedicated to bringing accessible educational research and theory to teacher education students.

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## Other contributors

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**Ann Whiting**, M.Ed., an experienced international and Australian teacher and consultant, works with Lyn Anderson to conduct workshops modelling orthographic inquiry. They mentor educators in their quest for orthographic understanding and collaborate in planning resources to examine the sense and meaning of text in order to investigate the power of the written word.

# Reading: an essential activity in our society

Robyn Cox, Susan Feez and  
Lorraine Beveridge

**R**eading is an activity that, perhaps more than any other in our time, shapes the trajectory of our lives. In the act of reading, a configuration of skills, knowledge and dispositions coalesces in ways that enable the reader to make meaning from written text. The ability to read is the foundation of learning in our educational institutions and in the wider community. Learning to read, and reading to learn, are precursors to social and cultural participation and fulfilment, improved health and wellbeing, and material advantage – in summary, to what counts as a successful life in contemporary developed societies.

In this book the spotlight falls on those skills, knowledges and dispositions readers need in order to cross the sensory threshold into reading and writing English. These include perceiving and distinguishing the contrasting sounds of spoken English and knowing how these sounds are represented visually by the letters of the alphabet. Learning to read involves learning how the sounds of our language correspond systematically with the letters of the alphabet. The systematic correspondence between the sounds of spoken language and the letters used to represent these sounds in written language has become known as the alphabetic principle.

## ORIGINS OF THE ALPHABET

Teaching and learning about the alphabetic principle is popularly known as *phonics*, although the etymology of this term, derived from the ancient Greek word for ‘sound’, reveals only half the story, and in fact leaves out the most fascinating part. The word ‘alphabet’ transports us back 3000 years to the Phoenician sailors plying their trade across the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, between regions we now think of as Africa, Europe and the Middle East. They traded in ivory, spices, incense, silver, glass, and especially in the purple dye made from sea snails and used for royal robes that gave them their name, Phoenicians ('people of the purple cloth').

Because the Phoenicians were traders, they needed a quick and accurate way to keep records. At that time Egyptian writing was based on elaborate hieroglyphs, pictures representing both objects and some of the sounds of the language. The Phoenicians developed this idea. To record their transactions in written form (but more quickly and efficiently than was possible with hieroglyphs), they devised simple outlines to capture the sounds of their language. They used a simple outline of an ox head with horns to represent the first sound of the word *alep* (ox). This drawing evolved into the letter A, the first letter of the alphabet. An outline of an adobe house (the mud houses of the region we now know as Lebanon, where the Phoenicians came from) was used for the first sound of the word for house, *bet*, later becoming the letter B. In the same way, the letters C and G were derived from the first sound of *giml*, the Phoenician word for camel, and the letter D for the first sound of their word for door, *dalet*. Writing down the sounds of the language in this way, using a limited number of simple outlines, is the origin of the alphabet, which is now used to write down the sounds of most of the languages of the world, including English.

The early development of the alphabet is linked to the ancient Phoenician city of Byblos, the origin of the Greek word for book, *biblia*, from which English words such as ‘bible’ and ‘bibliography’ are derived. The Phoenician’s innovation, the alphabet, not only expanded their capacity to trade across the Mediterranean Sea, but also transformed human societies the world over.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING THE ALPHABETIC PRINCIPLE IN THE EARLY YEARS

Learning the correspondence between letters and sounds in the early years of school is an essential step in the literacy development of young children learning to read and write in English. For this reason, early years teachers must know about the alphabetic principle and its relation to other aspects of reading. They also must know how to apply this knowledge in their teaching. Knowledge about the alphabetic principle and its place in literacy pedagogy embraces a diverse range of perspectives, from research evidence and professional expertise to community expectations, all of which contribute to the landscape of early literacy education. This territory can be challenging for classroom teachers, where they are at risk of being buffeted by many hostile forces: persistent myths, conflicting traditions, divergent research findings, strident public debates, competing commercial interests and overwhelming accountability demands. Inevitably, teachers can too easily find themselves feeling professionally disoriented.

In a literate society, all members of the community have a stake in early literacy education. The shared community expectation is that all children will learn to read and write at school to a standard that enables them to participate fully and productively in society. This shared expectation is captured in two overarching educational goals for young Australians, the achievement of which the Melbourne Declaration has identified as a whole-of-community responsibility (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training & Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008, p.7):

- Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence.
- Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

Achieving these educational goals is the collective responsibility of governments, school sectors and individual schools as well as parents and carers, young Australians, families, other education and training providers, businesses and the broader community.

While these educational goals, and the responsibility for achieving them, are shared, how the goals might be achieved will always, and necessarily, be the focus of ongoing academic research, community debate and the professional development of teachers. One of the most enduring of these debates concerns the teaching of early reading, perhaps because the achievement of both educational goals in the Melbourne Declaration depends on all young Australians learning to read and write.

Almost all adults with a stake in early literacy education in Australia have learnt to read, although individual experiences and levels of reading achievement differ widely. Our memories of school, and of learning to read and write, colour our perceptions of what is involved. Our expectations of early reading programs may depend on our own levels of reading achievement, and on whether we are parents of young children, members of the wider community, researchers, policymakers or teachers. Parents want their children to experience early reading and writing in ways that either echo or differ sharply from their own memories of learning to read and write, depending on whether those memories are positive or negative. Community members want their taxes spent on educational programs that are seen to work, and providing evidence of what works is the job of researchers in the field of education. The task for policymakers is to draw on this evidence to support early literacy programs that achieve the goal of teaching all children to read and write as efficiently and as cost-effectively as possible in order to build a literate, skilled and productive workforce for the future. For teachers the task is an intensely personal one. Teachers want every student in their class to be effective and enthusiastic readers and writers, students who successfully make the transition from learning to read and write in the early years to reading and writing to learn throughout the remainder of their school years and beyond.

All these expectations can easily become entangled in debates about how best to teach the alphabetic principle. Untangling past memories of learning to read and write from current expectations of literacy programs has become even more challenging now that teachers are also expected to prepare their students for the rapidly changing, and hard to pin down, literacy demands of the 21st century.

## THE ALPHABETIC PRINCIPLE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the Australian Curriculum, reading, alongside listening and viewing, is identified as one of the communication processes through which we decode, comprehend, interpret and analyse texts. Texts are the means we use to communicate, and they can be written, spoken or visual, either in print or in digital, online forms. Traditionally, reading has been the process used to decode, comprehend, interpret and analyse written texts. With technological innovation, the language in written texts is increasingly combined with a range of other communication modes – including still or moving images, sound and interactive features – to create multimodal texts.

Face-to-face spoken communication has always been multimodal, because our spoken language is typically combined with gesture and other types of body language. Written texts have also always had the potential to be multimodal; that is, producers of written texts could always combine different handwriting styles or typefaces, different sizes and various layouts, alongside images. Film is multimodal because it combines moving images, human movement, speech and music. Until comparatively recently,

however, multimodal print and film texts could only be produced by specialist illustrators, publishers and filmmakers. With the advent of digital information and communication technologies, the texts we use every day are becoming more multimodal, and it is increasingly easy for non-specialists to compose multimodal texts using digital media.

Typically, reading multimodal texts means decoding, comprehending, interpreting and analysing not only written text, but all the other modes used in these texts and their organisation on the page. For this reason, the plural term *multiliteracies* has been coined for the multiple processes required to read and compose multimodal texts (Lamb, 2011; Kalantzis, Cope, Chan & Dalley-Trim, 2016). Nevertheless, whether a text is composed using written English only or in combination with other meaning-making modes, it is written down using the alphabetic principle. Decoding text represented by letters of the alphabet is as critical for reading digital texts as it is for reading paper-based texts. Making meaning from written text remains central to students being able to use texts of all types and modalities effectively in community, educational and vocational contexts. Becoming literate continues to mean learning how to read and compose written text, even if this now occurs alongside learning how to read other meaning-making modes. Learning how to read and compose written English necessarily involves learning the alphabetic principle.

## MEASURING READING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In recent decades, the what and how of teaching the alphabetic principle has become increasingly a topic of public debate and discussion, not only for those inside the teaching profession and among educational researchers, but also among a wider group of academics, policymakers and politicians, the popular media and the general public. While teachers remain responsible for teaching their students all the processes involved in reading texts (decoding, comprehending, interpreting, analysing), researchers from fields such as cognitive psychology and speech pathology, as well as politicians and media commentators, have focused public attention particularly on the first of these processes: how young children are taught to decode the combinations of letters used to write English down.

We can ask why the discussion about how to teach letter–sound correspondence has become so heated at this point in our history and in English-speaking countries in particular. Has this debate endured, for example, because of the distinctive ways the alphabetic principle is deployed when English is written down? Or is it because of the variable nature of literacy development among children, or because of social anxieties generated by rapid technological change?

One reason the debate has expanded beyond the educational realm is because of an increasing emphasis placed on high-profile, high-stakes assessment processes at the state, national and international levels. These include international reading surveys which provide governments with results they can use to evaluate publicly funded education, including the teaching of reading.

The first, and most well-known, of the international surveys of educational achievement is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey undertaken by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). PISA assesses students at age fifteen, as they near the completion of compulsory schooling. Its purpose is to evaluate education systems by assessing the extent to which students at the end of compulsory education can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and so are equipped for society (OECD, 2008). Soon after the first implementation of PISA in 2001, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) implemented a survey called Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). This survey is undertaken every five years and assesses the reading ability of 10-year-old students.

How do PISA and PIRLS measure reading, and how are they different? Every three years, the PISA

reading survey is used to test a sample (approximately 5000 learners per country) of 15-year-old students from approximately 70 countries. PISA assesses the reading proficiency of students, including the cognitive strategies, approaches or purposes that students use to negotiate their way into, around and among written texts (OECD, 2016). In contrast, for the purpose of the PIRLS survey, reading is defined as an interactive process where meaning is negotiated between the reader and the text. Every five years PIRLS is used to survey a sample of around 3500 10-year-old students from each of approximately 50 countries. Table 1.1 briefly compares the scope of these two studies.

**Table 1.1 Comparing PISA and PIRLS**

	PISA	PIRLS
frequency	3 yearly	5 yearly
student age	15	10
number of students per country	5000	3500–4000
number of countries sampled	72	50

*For a more detailed comparison, see Cambridge Assessment International Education (2017).*

It is sometimes said that PISA assesses the reading skills of students in each country and PIRLS assesses how reading is addressed in the school curriculum of each country (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2017). In other words, PISA assesses to what extent students at the end of compulsory education can apply their reading knowledge and skill to real-life situations, whereas PIRLS measures trends in the teaching of reading comprehension and investigates reading practices used at home and at school.

The value of international surveys as measures of reading achievement is a topic of debate (see, for example Berliner, 2011, 2015; Hanberger, 2014; Prais, 2003). Nevertheless, governments (and other providers of educational funding, as well as parents and taxpayers in general) are interested in the results of these surveys and how they rank their country's educational achievement on a global scale. When the results of these surveys are made public, public attention turns to how well students at school are learning to read and how well our educational systems in general, and teachers in particular, are teaching reading and writing.

In Australia, the ranking of our students on these global measures results in intense media focus, as do the measures of student and school achievement that emerge from high-stakes national testing regimes such as the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The results are used to sell newspapers, attract audiences to breakfast television, launch tweets and open up conversations at the school gates in ways which were not so common before the turn of this century. In many ways we find ourselves in new times in the ways we pay attention to the measuring of reading and writing as skills. Yet when we take an historical view and turn our attention to the way reading and writing have been taught and assessed in the recent past, we can see there have always been different approaches to the teaching of literacy over time, as well as different ways to understand what counts as literacy achievement.

## THE EVOLUTION OF READING ASSESSMENT

Prior to the 1980s in Australian schools, reading passages compiled into reading books and reading schemes were a popular resource in primary school classrooms. The passages were chosen to introduce students to the literary canon, to build general knowledge and to engage students in topics of interest

to their age group, while also being organised according to reading levels, sometimes colour-coded to allow students to monitor their own reading progress. The ability to decode written text was assessed by asking students to read aloud short, standardised written passages. Such tests were used to rank students in terms of ‘reading age’ and to place them in reading groups so the teacher could customise reading lessons to the level of each group. This type of assessment, however, has been shown to lack validity because of cultural bias (Hoover, 1987; Wood, 1989; Johnson, 2017; Alexander & Martin, 2004; Rowley, 1986) and because assigning reading ages is neither an accurate nor meaningful assessment of student reading ability (Wheldall, De Lemos & Wright, 2017). At the time, reading comprehension was assessed separately; students were given short extracts to read before answering a series of questions about the meaning of vocabulary items and other elements of the text.

By the late 1980s, a New Zealand educator, Marie Clay, had begun to influence the teaching and assessment of reading, first in New Zealand and Australian classrooms, and later in Canada and the United States (Groff, 2004). Clay argued that to become fluent and effective readers, students need to draw on three cueing systems (Goodman, 1967; Adams, 1998):

- *semantic cues* (meanings made by the text in its context, linguistic and visual meanings, inferred meanings, meanings drawn from knowledge about the topic, text producer and audience, and the purpose of the text)
- *syntactic cues* (the ways words are organised into grammatical structures)
- *graphophonic cues* (correspondence between letters and sounds).

Clay (1985, 1993a, 1993b) developed a technique through which teachers could analyse *misuses* when students were reading aloud in order to determine what each student needs to learn next to improve their reading. For example, when a student’s misreading or mispronunciation of a word shows the student is not able to decode the letters accurately, it suggests they need more knowledge and practice related to the correspondence between letters and sounds (the graphophonic cueing system). Clay’s work also enabled teachers to check other cues each student reader was taking from print and to use these cues in teaching. In this way, reading instruction in the mainstream classroom became increasingly individualised. Clay’s influence is often associated with the whole-language approach to the teaching of reading (Cambourne & Turbill, 1990; Groff, 2004, Rasinski, 1995; Smith, 1994), an approach increasingly contested in recent decades (Gray 1987; Martin 1990; Chapman, Greaney, Arrow & Tunmer, 2018, and see Feez, Chapter 2, this volume).

More recently, Clay’s work, in the form of the well-known Reading Recovery program, has been applied in some contexts to enable teachers, schools and systems to differentiate, and even individualise, reading pedagogy to ensure that all learners are supported in their journey towards becoming successful readers (Clay, 2016; D’Agostino & Harmey, 2016; Sydney Catholic Schools, 2018). In other contexts, the reported benefits of the Reading Recovery program continue to be challenged (Bradford & Wan, 2015; Chapman & Tunmer, 2016).

Until the 1990s, reading and writing tended to be considered as separate activities. From about 1990, the International Year of Literacy, ‘it was realised that the two could more productively be viewed together, as two aspects of the same phenomenon: using written language’ (Christie, 2005, p.4). Since that time, reading and writing have typically been viewed as related activities subsumed under the term ‘literacy’. In Australia, the focus in school systems and in schools shifted from teaching reading and teaching writing separately to teaching literacy. Educators also began to compare oral language development with literacy development, and primary schools began to report student achievement to parents in terms of the more general terms ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’.

## Teaching strategies

During the decades from the 1970s to the 1990s, a range of literacy teaching strategies were offered to classroom teachers. These accounted for theories of literacy instruction emerging from the work of scholars from diverse traditions:

- Chall (1967) argued for direct systematic teaching of the alphabetic principle in the first stage of reading development.
- Goodman (1967; 1986), Goodman and Goodman (2014) and Graves (1983) argued that reading and writing are best learned naturally through rich experiences with print.
- Stewart-Dore (1982) proposed strategies for teaching students to read effectively in the content areas.
- Cazden (1988; 1992) used terms such as ‘scaffolding’ (first used by Wood, Bruner and Ross in 1976), and ‘concentrated language encounters’ to describe the type of classroom discourse that supported learning about language and literacy.
- Gray (1987) argued that neither a skill-based nor a whole-language approach was effective for teaching marginalised students the literacy they need to succeed at school. He expanded Cazden’s ‘concentrated language encounter’ into an interactive teaching sequence in which teachers model the target language use for students, divide language tasks into manageable components and direct students’ attention to the essential or most relevant components of each task.

Some of these teaching strategies involve establishing the natural conditions under which children successfully learn to read and write, for example, by immersing children in rich experiences that involve engagement with print (Goodman, 1967; Goodman & Goodman, 2014; Graves, 1983). Others are designed to teach one or more aspects of reading and writing explicitly and methodically (Chall, 1967; Gray, 1987; Morris & Stewart-Dore, 1984). During these decades the assessment of reading and writing was widened to capture not only quantifiable scores but also qualitative measures of achievement (Goodman, 1986).

Since the turn of the 21st century, however, there has been an increasing trend in the public arena to use national and international high-stakes reading assessments such as those implemented through NAPLAN, PISA and PIRLS, as a means of quantifying the performance of both individuals and educational systems. As noted above, these testing regimes also result in the foregrounding of popular views about the teaching of reading which often endorse a ‘back to basics’ approach to teaching about the alphabetic principle, with a focus on direct and systematic instruction in letter–sound relationships, or phonics.

There is considerable evidence that explicit and systematic teaching of letter–sound correspondence when children are first learning to read enhances reading achievement (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl & Willow, 2001; Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018). Nevertheless, evidence that the gains made through this type of instruction can be sustained beyond the early years is considered by some researchers to be less robust because it is ‘based on achievement measures that typically test letter–sound knowledge and word knowledge in isolation . . . not on reading whole texts and developing reading strategies and skills in the context of reading’ (Xue & Meisels, 2004, pp.194–195). Evidence demonstrating which approach to teaching the alphabetic principle is most effective remains inconclusive (Torgerson, Brooks, Gascoine & Higgins, 2018).

At this point in the evolution of literacy assessment, it becomes important to pause and ask questions about the purpose of different types of assessment. What are we in fact assessing when we assess reading – especially if, as proposed by the Australian Curriculum, we consider reading to be a complex configuration of different types of skills that enable us to decode, comprehend, interpret and analyse texts?

## CONSTRAINED AND UNCONSTRAINED READING SKILLS

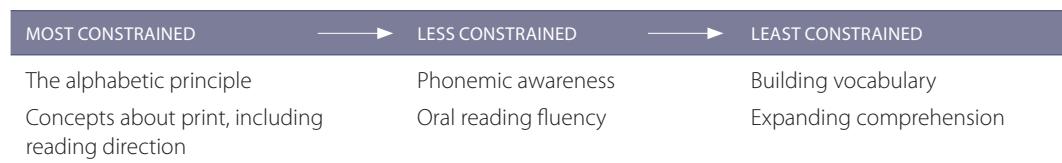
In recent years, conventional assumptions about the development and assessment of reading skills have been challenged by Paris (2005) who suggested that when we think about reading development, we need to account for, and achieve a balance between, ‘differences in the developmental trajectories of different reading skills’ (Paris & Luo, 2010, p.321). Further, Paris and Luo argue ‘conclusions that decoding skills deserve greater or earlier instruction for beginning readers than do unconstrained skills are not warranted, and there are liabilities for early reading pedagogy that overemphasise decoding skills at the expense of vocabulary, comprehension, oral language, writing, and critical analyses of literacy’ (Paris & Luo, 2010, p.321).

From this perspective, reading skills can be distinguished according to whether they are *constrained skills*, such as letter–sound correspondence, which can be learned comparatively quickly and assessed comparatively easily during initial reading instruction, or whether they are *unconstrained skills*, such as reading comprehension and vocabulary building, which develop more slowly throughout the school and post-school years. The skills needed to master reading can be organised on a continuum from the most-to the least-constrained reading skills (Figure 1.1; see also Luke & Woods, 2008).

Constrained reading skills include knowledge of the alphabetic principle, or letter–sound correspondence, alongside concepts about print, including reading direction. These skills are constrained because the knowledge is limited in scope. For example, there are only about 44 sounds in spoken English and 26 letters of the alphabet, and we read English written text from top to bottom and from left to right. In addition, the time needed to learn these skills is constrained; constrained reading skills are learned early and relatively quickly.

Less constrained skills include phonemic awareness (that is, awareness of the meaningful contrasts in the sound system of English) and oral reading fluency (the ability to read connected text quickly, accurately and with expression), both of which require more time to master than more constrained skills. Building vocabulary and expanding reading comprehension are the least constrained of reading skills because they continue to develop over a lifetime.

**Figure 1.1** The reading skills continuum



A program that incorporates systematic, direct and explicit teaching of a number of critical components is more likely to result in successful literacy outcomes, according to the findings of both the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) in the United States and the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia (Rowe, 2005). In the United States, the NRP identified phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension as the key components of reading, while the components of literacy identified by the Australian inquiry include:

- phonics
- oral language
- vocabulary
- grammar

- reading fluency
- comprehension, and
- literacies of new technologies.

## FRAMEWORKS FOR ORGANISING LITERACY KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

In Australia in the 1980s, the whole-language approach to the teaching of reading (Goodman, 1986), and the related process approach to the teaching of writing (Graves, 2003), were widely implemented. At the same time, most teachers were also explicitly teaching letter–sound correspondence, or the alphabetic principle (Dahl, Sharer, Lawson & Grogan, 1999; Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid 1998).

While whole-language approaches were engaging and motivating for many students, analysis of student work samples by educational linguists revealed that these approaches did not provide marginalised students with ‘sufficient support to read much more than basal picture books or to write more than a few lines of simple recounts or observations’ (Rose & Martin, 2012, p.3; see also Gray 1987; Rothery 1996). Subsequently, a series of extended action research projects resulted in the development of text-based writing and reading pedagogies, including genre and scaffolded literacy pedagogies. These were designed to intervene explicitly and systematically in students’ literacy development as a means of supporting successful language learning ‘through interaction in the context of shared experience’ (Rose & Martin, 2012, p.58; see also Derewianka, 1990).

Parallel to the development of text-based literacy pedagogies, several frameworks were developed to account for the full suite of skills and practices used by successful readers and writers. The most well-known of these frameworks, the Four Resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1990; Freebody, Chapter 3, this volume) identifies the following four roles of the successful reader:

- code-breaker (decoding texts)
- text participant (comprehending texts)
- text user (using and interpreting texts), and
- text analyst (analysing and critiquing texts).

Similarly, Unsworth (2001, following Hasan 1996) identified three sets of literacy practices used by successful readers and writers:

- recognising resources which construct meanings in written texts, including how spelling and handwriting works and how sentences and texts are organised
- using and reproducing these resources in texts relevant to the social context, and
- reflecting on the ways written texts are produced to achieve social goals, and critiquing the texts they read and write.

## THE ENGLISH WRITING SYSTEM

All the approaches, pedagogies and frameworks presented above highlight the fact that teaching alphabetic knowledge is a crucial initial step in early reading. Nevertheless, this initial step is complicated when teaching students to read in English, because the correspondence between the letters of the

alphabet used to write English down and the sounds of spoken English is not straightforward. English has been described as a *morphophonemic* language (Adoniou, 2016; Daffern, 2016) because in written English the alphabetic code is not only used to represent sounds (phonemes), but is also used to represent meaningful parts of words (morphemes). This is exemplified in the family of words built around the word ‘sign’. This word includes a letter, *g*, that does not correspond with any sound at all, but instead lengthens the sound of the preceding vowel, while in other words in the same family, such as ‘signal’ and ‘signature’, the letter *g* does correspond with a sound. What remains constant in this word family is not the pronunciation, but the spelling, which reveals to the reader that these words share the same or a related meaning.

A further complication facing teachers of beginning readers of English is that the pronunciation of many, but not all, *high-frequency words* in English does not correspond neatly with the letter patterns used to spell these words. For students to become fluent readers, they need to recognise high-frequency words quickly on sight (NSW Department of Education [DoE], 2011). Many high-frequency English words have their origin in the early history of the English language and both their pronunciation and spelling remind us of this fascinating history. It is estimated that high-frequency words constitute about half of the words we encounter in texts (NSW DoE, 2011; Adoniou, 2016). Many educators advocate explicitly teaching quick recognition of these words alongside teaching the alphabetic principle when teaching reading and writing in the early years (Konza, 2010; Ehri, 1997; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced the alphabetic principle, its origin, its role in learning to read in the early years, and its place in relation to 21st century literacies. A discussion of the measurement of reading achievement leads to an explanation of the distinction between constrained and unconstrained reading skills, a presentation of frameworks used to organise the different types of knowledge and skill required of readers and writers, and an introduction to the English writing system. These topics will be explored and elaborated in the chapters to follow.

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