

'Teaching reading is rocket science'

Approaches to early reading instruction

Key questions

- How do children learn to read?
- What do teachers need to know to teach early reading?
- What is the role of phonics and phonemic awareness?

Reading is a complex process of making meaning from texts. As readers engage with texts, they use cueing systems to make meaning; graphophonic, semantic, syntactic and pragmatic knowledge, and visual cues.

Expert teachers employ a wide range of teaching strategies based on a deep knowledge of how children learn to read and the needs of learners.

Phonics, the relationship between letters and sounds, and phonemic awareness, the awareness of sounds that make up spoken words, together with the ability to segment and blend individual sounds to form words, is an important part of reading, and is also important as students learn to write and spell. However, phonics and phonemic awareness are only one tool that children use to make meaning from texts. Effective readers also use knowledge about text structure and grammar as well as activating their own knowledge about the topic.

At times the teaching of reading has been driven by commercial reading programs. These play a role in early reading instruction, however research makes it clear that emergent readers need access to a range of rich materials in a variety of modes. It is critical that this range of materials include high-quality, authentic literature.

Reading should not be seen in isolation. Conversations about texts support students' reading skills. Reading a wide range of texts also supports students' abilities to write effectively.

Finally, teachers develop expertise as they respond to the needs of the students in their classroom; different students will need support in different aspects of reading and as teachers respond to these needs, they will add to their repertoire of teaching strategies. Teachers also pay attention to building comprehension skills, fluency and vocabulary knowledge in developing readers.

Key points

- Teaching reading is a complex process requiring teachers to use range of teaching strategies based on a deep knowledge of language.
- Teachers need to know about the structure of the language and how children learn.
- Effective teachers use specific and explicit instruction across all cueing systems in varied and meaningful contexts.

Further information

For more information, including media queries, contact Stephen Wilson, General Manager, +61(0)2 8020 3900 or publishing@petaa.edu.au

Resources to support teachers can be found on the PETAA website www.petaa.edu.au