

The blending enigma: What is best practice for teaching sounding out and blending?

Given the importance of automatic decoding skills to the development of reading fluency, **Ros Neilson** turned to the expertise of the DDOLL Network and invited DDOLL members to describe their nitty-gritty strategies for teaching fluent sounding out and blending within systematic synthetic phonics programs. The range of answers was quite surprising. In this article Ros presents a summary of the very useful viewpoints expressed.

At the very core of synthetic phonics programs is the goal of teaching young learners how to sound out letters and blend those sounds into words. Once mastered, this ability lays the foundation for the development of accurate and fluent word reading skills, without which fluent text reading cannot occur. Phonics programs vary, however, in how much detail they provide about strategies to achieve the early goal of sounding out and blending, and how much fidelity they demand. Quite

surprisingly, there seems to be only a small amount of relevant empirical research available regarding specific blending strategies (e.g. Weisberg & Savard, 1993; Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2020). This means that this aspect of phonics instruction is in danger of being treated more like an art than a science.

Is it a problem that there is a lack of consistency about how to teach blending? It could be argued that there are many ways in which good phonics programs differ, and it is likely that there are different effective ways to achieve the same goal. On the other hand, the lack of a consistently recommended strategy for teaching blending may indeed be a cause for concern, because success or failure in early blending has particularly important ramifications. When blending is not well taught, the outcome can be very disturbing – that is, young learners may display painfully dysfluent reading. It is indeed not uncommon to encounter students in remedial classes whose word identification attempts involve uttering a single separate phoneme for each letter in a word, followed either by desperately guessing a plausible word or helplessly leaving the sounds unblended. The problem is that this clearly inefficient reading strategy exposes a vulnerability in phonics approaches. When Whole Language proponents see this kind of laboured, dysfluent sounding out behaviour, it is very likely that the catch cry “*The child has been over-phonicked!*” will be heard. It is also likely that, when faced with students who show persistent failure with sounding out and blending, Whole Language teachers will feel vindicated in their preference for encouraging students to recite levelled readers by heart and read the pictures instead of the words. The

Whole Language approach to early reading at least gives both the teachers and the struggling students a superficial, if transient, impression of fluency.



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This predicament is the context in which I turned for advice to the experts within the DDOLL network, which consists of scientists, clinicians, teachers, and parents and contains a large and varied group of expert and experienced phonics teachers – see <http://www.cogsci.mq.edu.au/ddoll/>. I started a thread on the listserv that I called ‘The Blending Enigma’, in which I began by stating the obvious fact that blending can be tricky because the ‘letter sounds’ that we teach children – that is, phonemes pronounced in isolation - are quite different from phonemes as they are coarticulated in syllables. You don’t get the word *cat* by saying /k/, /a/ and /t/ quickly, even if you pronounce the /k/ and /t/ phonemes with no added voiced vowel. In my post I simply asked DDOLL members to describe how they taught blending. I would like to thank all those who contributed to the ensuing discussion,

either alerting me to published program material and research or describing their own practices. The teaching strategies that were suggested in the listserv were quite interestingly varied, and there were only one or two points that were made by all contributors. I will try at this stage to summarise the themes that arose in response to my question on the DDOLL network. I won't identify individual contributors because I can't possibly do justice to all the viewpoints expressed, and I concede that there are many other useful ideas that didn't crop up in response to my question - but I hope that the following sample of views will provide a springboard for further discussion.

Consistent themes: Explicit teaching and extensive practice

All responders to my question mentioned that some students tend to pick up blending easily with only a little modelling, but those students with learning difficulties need very careful modelling and extended practice. Explicit instruction in blending is always needed in mainstream classes, and 'dosage' is important for those students who need extra help.

Continuous versus staccato pronunciation of phonemes

Most contributors mentioned that they find it useful to begin to teach the blending process with continuant phonemes like the vowels and some consonants like /s/, /r/, /f/, /n/ - that is phonemes whose articulation can be prolonged - because this makes demonstration of the blending task easier. For example, if the word to be blended is *run*, the teacher would provide a model by saying each sound in a prolonged way without pausing between phonemes - "rrr...uuu...nnn". Some mentioned that although they start with continuants, they move as quickly as they can into pronouncing all phonemes separately, in a staccato fashion, so that they can check that the students can cope independently with this kind of presentation.

Several responders commented, however, that it doesn't seem to make much difference whether or not you start with continuous phonemes. It was

pointed out that most suggested sets of first sounds do include non-continuant - for example, the commonly used S-A-T-P-I-N group of initial letter sounds for teaching beginning phonics includes /t/ and /p/.

Using the vowel as an anchor

For young learners who find blending difficult, several contributors mentioned that they teach the student to identify the vowel sound in a CVC word before starting to articulate the first consonant.

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In this way the first consonant phoneme is released directly into the vowel, and it is possible to avoid pronouncing the first two phonemes separately as you begin to decode the word. For the word *run*, for example, the teacher would ask for the /u/ phoneme to be pronounced first, then show the student how to begin with "ru..." as they sound out the word.

Auditory modality versus use of alphabet letters from the start

Blending involves phonemic awareness, and some contributors mentioned

that they always teach the phonemic awareness component of blending in the context of alphabet letters. Some, instead, preferred to work on simple phonemic awareness first, providing blending and segmenting practice in the auditory modality before introducing letters. This difference in approach to the development of phonemic awareness is in fact a perennial debate on the DDOLL network (see Neilson, 2019).

Visual cues, gestures and props

Many contributors suggested using extra cues during the process of blending phonemes.

The most common extra cues that were mentioned were moveable plastic letters, used for both illustrating the coming together of sounds and for showing the location of changes as sounds in words were manipulated, e.g., a-t, at, c-at, ca-p, ta-p, and so on. Moveable letters are also available in several tablet Apps.

A sweeping gesture, moving the finger smoothly from left to right underneath the printed letters of the word being blended, was also frequently mentioned. Figure 1 illustrates the technique of the teacher modelling blending together with the class, in the context of reading 'Big Books' (Tse & Nicholson, 2014). There are also phonics systems in which the printed word is shown with loops from one grapheme to the next, with the hand gesture following the loops (Carnine et al., 2006, p. 90).

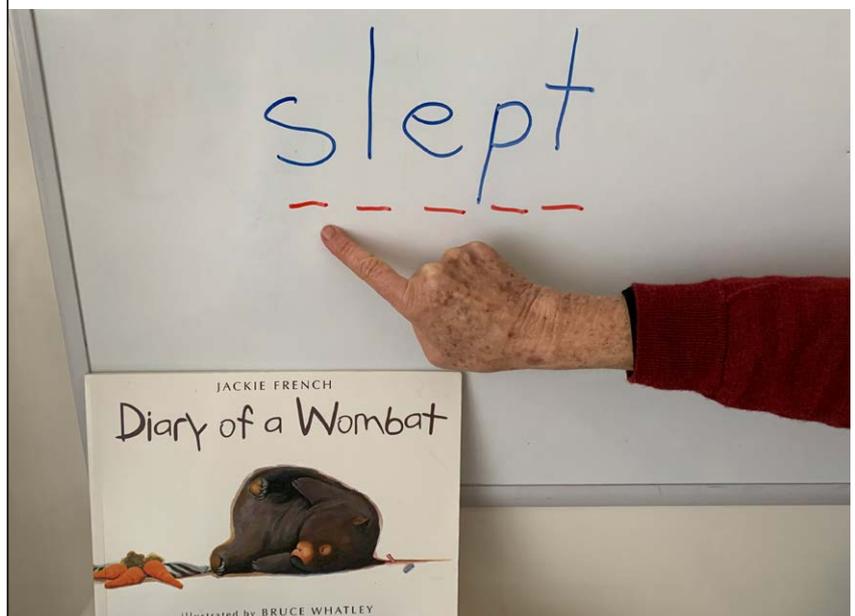


Figure 1: Modelling the blending of graphemes.

Whole-hand gestures mentioned included holding up one finger as each phoneme is sounded out, then making a fist with the fingers to represent the way in which the syllable is blended.

There was some mention of using role-play cues such as having children dress up as the letters of the alphabet, or hold letters in the air above their heads, and shuffle closer together to illustrate blending.

Concentration and auditory memory difficulties

One thought-provoking comment related to a teacher's observation that if students were unable to blend letters that they had sounded out themselves, they might be able to carry out the blending successfully when the teacher herself simply repeated the separate phonemes at the same pace. The suggestion was made that if children were able to concentrate on the sounds without having to retrieve the letter-sound correspondences, the task became easier.

Introduction of consonant clusters

Programs seemed to vary in their expectation that young students will be able to blend consonants in clusters as easily as they can blend CVC syllables. Some but not all programs include separate consideration of the order of difficulty of consonant clusters – for example, first introducing clusters at the ends of syllables (e.g. *cast*, *hand*), then teaching students to blend initial-syllable clusters with continuous phonemes (e.g. *slap*, *frog*), followed by clusters containing stops (*crib*, *stop*).

Conclusions

Students who sound out letters but cannot blend the phonemes into words have not been 'over-phonicked'. Rather, they haven't been taught phonics well. The collection of responses from the experts that I've tried to summarise here has been very thought-provoking for me, and a little disquieting. With so little empirical evidence about best practice, we are really lucky that many strategies seem to work, at least in the mainstream classroom setting.

I'm left with the conclusion that teachers of early reading should be aware that blending has to be an explicit component of what they teach, and

they must be prepared to give students as much practice as they need. Apart from that, I think it might be inevitable that the most competent teachers will simply make sure they understand the underlying linguistic issues, work with the program with which they feel most comfortable, monitor their students' progress, and respond, as good teachers do, to the strengths and weaknesses of each student they teach. Perhaps, realistically, that's all that best practice can be.

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Dr Ros Neilson is a retired but unretiring Speech-Language Pathologist who specialises in early language and literacy.