

# A Word on Phonics with Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell

*An excerpt from the Heinemann Podcast*

As anyone who teaches reading can tell you, phonics plays a critical role in literacy instruction. In a recent episode of the Heinemann Podcast, literacy leaders Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell discuss why phonics is an essential part of a cohesive literacy system. Discover what they mean when they say, “teaching is a science,” and how we can collectively continue to find new ways to extend our professional learning and to ensure that all students have access to the wonder of diverse books and writing.

## Teaching is a Science: Observe, Assess, Respond

Teaching reading is a science. Teaching is a science – a science of observation and decision making and knowledge. Effective teaching comes from responsive teachers making instructional decisions about the children in front of them, not by simply delivering a program or lesson. It’s thinking teachers, thoughtful teachers, knowledgeable teachers. And we have so much trust in teachers’ decisions, because the teacher must make the decision about the child in front of him, not something outside of that. So, our trust is in teacher knowledge and in assuring teachers have the opportunities to develop that knowledge. That’s what being a professional is all about. It’s in the teacher. It’s in continuous professional learning.

Language is fascinating, and when teachers understand how it works, they’ll be able to get children excited to learn how it works as well. Teaching the alphabetic system should not be underestimated. It’s very difficult to teach children how to use letter-sound relationships and word parts if the teachers themselves don’t understand the logic in the alphabetic system. We are very committed to helping teachers develop the body of knowledge for proficiency in the alphabetic system, and our materials provide teachers with instructional techniques that help children learn in very effective ways.

## Putting the Horse Back in the Barn

The young human uses everything at his disposal to learn. Flexibility is the key, and rapid word solvers have many ways to get to a word, and more than that, to monitor his accuracy of reading the word. The reader must see all the letters, use all the visual information, and connect it to the sounds of the letters and clusters of letters. That’s really important. The reader can also look through the word, but the reader must check if that word makes sense and whether it sounds like language. It *does* matter if he says “pony” instead of “horse” because he is not using the visual information available.

## The Myth of Three Cueing

When children make sense of what they read by checking if it sounds right and looks right, they are learning to use what Marie Clay referred to as sources of information: meaning, structure of language, letter/sound, sound/letter. Those sources of information do not mean the “three cueing system.” That is not the language we use or that Clay used. The misunderstanding around what some people call “three cueing systems” is related to coding that some teachers are using.

Rather, we help teachers look at the relationship between letters and sounds, and sounds and letters, then link that graphophonic knowledge with the meaning

of language, so when children read, they’re able to bring all of that together in a fluent literary processing system.

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Clay talks about the language systems going together: the cognitive understanding of the phonemic aspects of language, the sound system of language, the graphic system, the written symbols, and the knowledge of syntax. Phonemes, sounds, and symbols allow students to recognize words and get into words, and students rely on the knowledge of syntax that has been hard-wired through learning language in the home and the community.

There are many sources of information combined in a fairly complex way, so you can’t boil it down to something very simplistic.

## Phonics Instruction: Vital *and* Invigorating, Comprehensive *and* Explicit

While there are various perspectives on how to achieve effective reading instruction, there is total agreement that phonics knowledge is essential to effective reading. Learning phonics can be active, inquiry-based *and* explicit – and children can have fun as they learn.

Phonics and spelling aren't just principles for children to recite – they are for *reading* and *writing*, ultimately. It is important to teach children to have different attention to how letters sound and how words work when you take them out of text, but the real measure of effective phonics instruction is how children use that knowledge as readers and writers. Phonics cannot be allowed to consume the entire instructional time for reading so that kids learn a lot of phonics but *don't learn to read*.

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Children do not only develop their knowledge about letters, sounds, and words through explicit teaching in a specific phonics or word study lesson, *but* also within the context of reading and writing.

As a systematic instructional context of *Fountas & Pinnell Classroom™*, the *Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study System* includes explicit lessons designed for children to

learn about letters, sounds and words and how they work, *and* how to link that learning to the reading and writing process.

The ultimate goal of the *Phonics, Spelling, and Word Study System* is for students to develop a lifelong excitement about words, to find fascination in human language, and to ultimately enjoy a literate life.

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## The Alphabetic System as the Foundation for Literacy Learning

In any language, children need to understand symbol-sound relationships. Learning how letters, sounds, and words work does not have to be a boring drill.

In our work, we are focused on assuring that what we model and write about helps teachers understand the alphabetic system and engage students in effective ways. When a child really understands how letters, sounds, and words work, they demonstrate fluent processing of the text. Teachers use the data they collect to document the effectiveness of their children's learning, including evidence of strong phonics knowledge. The skillful teacher, through observation, scaffolds each child's learning to take the literacy further towards proficient reading.

## Elevating Teacher Expertise

Children develop phonological awareness and graphic awareness in complex ways from a simple starting point. No one will ever say the child does not need to look at the whole word or all the letters. A child who has just started learning can't do it all at once. It's important in the study of the development of children's literacy to be articulate about development, to understand what children attend to, to understand that learning will change over time, and not to get too simplistic at the risk of one-size-fits-all.

There is great importance in teachers understanding language and in particular, the alphabetic system. Our *Comprehensive Phonics Spelling and Word Study Guide* is really the body of knowledge that teachers need to understand, the principles of how language and words work.

We have always believed that what makes an impact in children's literacy learning is the teacher – it's the teacher's decisions and the teacher's observations, particularly the teacher's knowledge of proficient reading, that will enable the teaching of reading to be powerful.



<http://fp.pub/word-on-phonics>

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