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The research locus and conceptual basis for MULTILIT: Why we do what we do

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Abstract
MULTILIT is predicated upon contemporary, evidence-based best practice and research-based models for effective instruction of reading and related skills for low-progress readers. The conceptual foundations and operating principles of MULTILIT are described in Wheldall and Beaman (2000), while three government funded reports from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom have reviewed the effectiveness of different approaches to the teaching of reading. This paper draws on these resources to explain 'why we do what we do' in MULTILIT instructional programs, showing how MULTILIT relates to, and is consistent with, international research and best practice in this area.

Reading instruction in Australian schools

A key objective for Australian schooling is to ensure that all students are able to read and write at an appropriate level. In recent years, however, there have been concerns regarding the significant number of students who fail to achieve effective literacy skills. Recent evidence from the 2004 National Report on Schooling in Australia (MCEETYA, 2006) revealed that 11 per cent of Year 5 students did not meet the minimum National Benchmarks for Reading. The results were particularly poor for Indigenous students (31 per cent), students from non-English speaking backgrounds (14 per cent) and males (13 per cent). Although these figures are worrying, they become considerably more disturbing in view of evidence suggesting that the National Benchmarks provide an *underestimate* of the number of poor readers, with agencies such as the Australian Council for Educational Research reporting that up to 30 per cent of Australian students do not have adequate literacy standards (e.g., Marks & Ainley, 1997). Whatever the exact figure, these outcomes are unacceptable and demonstrate that our education system needs new policies and practices which are aimed at improving literacy outcomes.

Naturally, concerns regarding the extent of literacy failure in Australia have led to a renewed focus on the methods by which young children are taught to read in our schools. In Australia and other English speaking countries, Whole Language has been the influential teaching approach for early literacy learning over the past few decades (Ellis, 2005; de Lemos, 2004). Essentially, the Whole Language approach reflects a constructivist philosophy of learning in which students are viewed as inherently active, self-regulating learners who construct knowledge in developmentally appropriate ways. In the context of the classroom, students read self-selected texts, with very little explicit decoding instruction being provided (Harris & Graham, 1996). Although the Whole Language approach has gained widespread use, there has been increasing concern in recent years that its emphases may not be in the best interests for students with learning difficulties, and particularly for those experiencing difficulties in learning to read (see Ellis, 2005, for review).

In contrast to the popularity of Whole Language approaches, code-based approaches focus on explicit teaching of the structure and function of written and oral language. Code-based approaches involve an awareness of phonemes, syllables and morphology. Thus, unlike Whole Language approaches, code-based methods typically require a high degree of teacher-centred presentation of learning material, with an emphasis on explicit instruction, scheduled practice, and feedback (Westwood, 2003b). While the findings from local and international evidence-based research suggest that teaching practices based on code-based approaches are particularly effective for teaching students how to read (see Ellis, 2005, for review), the popularity of constructivism appears to have led many professionals in the field to reject code-based approaches, regardless of how well they are established by research (Westwood, 2003a).

Until relatively recently there has been little public debate about different approaches to the teaching of reading in Australia. Increased attention regarding the extent of literacy failure, however, as well as the methods by which children are typically taught to read, has evoked

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concern within the community and among educational stakeholders to review policies and practices with the aim of improving literacy outcomes. This was reflected in the Federal Government's decision to institute the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. The Inquiry Committee began its work in November 2004 and reported in 2005.

Findings of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy

The National Inquiry reached the conclusion that the evidence is very clear as to the essential features of an effective program for the teaching of reading. Whether from research, good practice observed in schools, or from advice from submissions to the Inquiry, it was apparent that "direct, systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching students to read" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 11). Before going any further, it is important to define some key terms.

First, what is systematic phonics instruction? Phonics is a method of instruction that teaches students correspondences between graphemes in written languages and phonemes in spoken language and how to use these correspondences to read and spell words. Phonics is systematic (as opposed to incidental) when all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences are delineated and taught in a clearly defined sequence along a dimension of explicitness depending on the type of phonics method employed. Conversely, with incidental phonics instruction, the teacher does not follow a planned sequence of phonics elements to guide instruction, but highlights particular elements opportunistically when they appear in text.

Second, what is Direct Instruction? Also referred to as explicit instruction in the National Inquiry report, this approach is based on the theory that clear instruction eliminating misinterpretations can greatly improve and accelerate learning. Lessons follow a prescribed model-lead-test format, whereby the teacher first models a strategy, and guides the students through examples. Specific skills are taught to students in an overt, step-by-step manner, and mastery of each step must be obtained before new learning can be attempted (see Ellis, 2005, p. 29). Direct Instruction is in contrast with implicit instruction (sometimes referred to as discovery learning in the literature), where the role of the teacher is to be a facilitator of learning, rather than its director. Here students are required to acquire knowledge and construct meaning through their own activities, and through discussion, reflection, and the sharing of ideas.

While the Committee identified direct, systematic instruction in phonics as a necessary condition for the teaching of reading, they clearly warned against the use of phonics instruction as the total reading program. Undeniably, phonics needs to be combined with other forms of instruction to create a comprehensive reading program. As stated in the report: "No one approach of itself can address the complex nature of reading difficulties. An integrated approach requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of a range of effective strategies, as well as knowing when and why to apply them" (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 14).

The importance of phonics for teaching students how to read is supported by several international reports, including *Teaching Children How to Read*, by the US National Reading Panel in 2000, and the UK report, *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Rose, 2006). The findings of these two landmark reports are summarised below.

Findings of the National Reading Panel into Teaching Children to Read

In 1997, the US Congress established a National Reading Panel (NRP) to assess the effectiveness of different approaches used to teach children to read. For over two years, the NRP reviewed evidence-based research on reading instruction. In April 2000, the panel concluded its work and submitted its report, *Teaching Children to Read*. This report is particularly significant in that the NRP only used studies that met rigorous scientific standards in reaching their conclusions. On the basis of their review of the research evidence, the NRP reached a number of important conclusions.

First of all, it found that the systematic phonics instruction (as compared with non-systematic or no phonics instruction) produces significant benefits for children from Kindergarten to Year 6 (overall ES = .41 derived from 38 studies), though the effects were slightly larger among students with learning difficulties (ES = .44), and particularly for those in Year 1 (ES = .74) As a result of its research, the NRP concluded that "explicit, systematic phonics instruction is a valuable and essential part of a successful reading program" (p. 10). In line with the recommendations of the National Inquiry report, the NRP reported that "teachers must understand that systematic phonics instruction is only one component – albeit a necessary component – of a total reading program" (2000, p. 11). Systematic phonics instruction should be integrated with other reading instruction to create a complete reading program. Importantly, the NRP identified that, in addition to systematic phonics instruction, specific emphasis also needs to be given to phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. These four additional key components

identified by the NRP are delineated below and further details provided as to why they are important.

Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes within words (for example, the word cat has three sounds or phonemes: /c/ /a/ /t/. When these sounds are combined fluidly, they make up the word 'cat'.). Phonemic awareness is frequently confused with phonics instruction, which entails teaching students how to use letter-sound relations to read or spell words (i.e., to translate printed text into pronunciation). The NRP identified that explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness improves students' reading and spelling achievement. More specifically, their meta-analysis of 52 studies showed that phonemic awareness instruction led to improvements in students' phonemic awareness (ES = .86), reading accuracy (ES = .53), and spelling (ES = .59). As a result of these findings, the NRP concluded that phonemic awareness should be an important component of classroom reading instruction.

Fluency and comprehension

As stated in the NRP report, "Fluent readers are able to read orally with speed, accuracy and proper expression. Fluency depends on well-developed word recognition skills, but such skills do not inevitably lead to fluency" (NRP, 2000, p. 3-1). One of the key reasons for the NRP's interest in fluency was the consistent finding that efficient word recognition skills are associated with improved comprehension (i.e., understanding what is being read). Indeed, "if text is read in a laborious manner, it will be difficult for the child to remember what has been read and relate the ideas expressed in the text to his or her background knowledge" (NRP, 2000, p. 3-11). The NRP recommended guided oral reading (that is, reading aloud to a teacher, parent or fellow student) as an appropriate and valuable avenue for increasing reading fluency and overall reading achievement. More specifically, its meta-analysis of 14 studies elucidated that guided oral reading improved reading accuracy (ES = .55), reading fluency (speed and accuracy of oral reading; ES = .44), and comprehension (ES = .35).

Vocabulary knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge refers to learning new words and what they mean. The NRP highlighted the importance of vocabulary development for reading comprehension, stating that "reading vocabulary is crucial to the comprehension process of a skilled reader" (NRP, 2000, p. 4-15). Although a formal meta-analysis could not be undertaken due to the deficiency of good quality studies available, the NRP recommended that vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly, and that repetition and multiple exposure to words as well as computer technology will assist vocabulary development.

Findings of the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading

In March 2006, the report of the UK *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* was released. This report was commissioned by the UK Government and undertaken by Jim Rose, a former director at Ofsted. In accordance with the findings of both the Australian National Inquiry and the US National Reading Panel, Rose emphasised the importance of systematic phonics instruction for teaching children how to read. He began the report by stating categorically that "the systematic approach, which is generally understood as synthetic phonics offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers" (Rose, 2006, p. 4). Importantly, Rose went on to identify the key features of well designed phonics programs. He ascertained, for example, that high quality programs were: followed consistently and regularly (ideally daily); implemented in short intervals (of approximately 20 minutes); advanced learning incrementally (moving from simple to more complex phonics skills); taught at a brisk pace, and ensured that children received regular praise for effort and achievement. In direct contrast with critics' assertions that phonics instruction is 'drill and kill', bores students and quashes creativity, Rose (2006) reported that students' responses to well-designed phonics programs were overwhelming positive, "one in which success was its own reward" (p. 16). He noted, for example, that students "took pride in demonstrating phonics skills, were becoming confident communicators, and showed positive attitudes to reading and writing" (Rose, 2006, p. 16).

The MULTILIT approach to reading

The MULTILIT (Making Up Lost Time In Literacy) approach to reading, developed by Professor Kevin Wheldall and colleagues from Macquarie University, is predicated upon evidence-based best practice and research-based models for effective instruction of reading and related skills for low-progress readers. Research has shown that the MULTILIT program is highly beneficial for low-progress readers (Wheldall & Beaman, 2000), and is advantageous with students from Indigenous, non-English speaking and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Drawing on the considerable body of empirical research

on literacy instruction, the MULTILIT approach incorporates both phonics and connected reading (i.e., emphasising both code and meaning) to deliver significant and appreciable gains in reading and related skills. The remainder of this paper will draw upon the findings from the three government reports on the status of reading from Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom to explain how 'what we do' in MULTILIT instructional programs relates to, and is consistent with, international research and best practice in terms of both teaching pedagogy and program content.

MULTILIT: Teaching pedagogy

Consistent with the findings of the three aforementioned government funded reports, direct and systematic approaches are a key feature of teaching in MULTILIT. This involves: explicit teaching of rules and strategies (using sufficient examples); frequent responding by students (both chorally and individually); students being given clear, unambiguous instruction, and students being kept informed of their academic progress through corrective feedback (Wheldall & Beaman, 2000).

MULTILIT also ensures that students receive regular praise for effort and achievement, an important component of teaching pedagogy emphasised in the report of the *Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Rose, 2006). Managing instruction is carried out by means of Positive Teaching (Wheldall & Beaman, 2000; Wheldall & Merrett, 1984; Wheldall, 1990) to create a positive classroom atmosphere with a task-oriented focus. Essentially, Positive Teaching encourages teachers to focus on students when they are behaving appropriately (i.e., 'catching them being good'), rather than continually reprimanding them for inappropriate behaviour. In line with traditional reinforcement theory, Positive Teaching advocates increasing teacher praise and approval, while decreasing disapproval and reprimands. MULTILIT teachers are thoroughly trained in Positive Teaching methods, and are encouraged to give frequent and specific praise, for both academic and social behaviour (Wheldall & Beaman, 2000).

MULTILIT: Program content

Consistent with international research and best practice in the area (see Ellis, 2005, for review), MULTILIT uses a balanced or (more correctly) integrated approach to literacy instruction. Rather than being confined to the 'either/or' dilemma of Whole Language versus phonics, MULTILIT integrates best practice from both approaches into programs to ensure the necessary balance between phonics activities and the reading, and appreciation of, informative and engaging texts. The *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program* comprises three distinct elements (Word Attack Skills, Sight Words and Reinforced Reading), each of which are briefly described below.

MULTILIT Word Attack Skills is a systematic instructional program for teaching students how to decode words, and provides instruction in both phonemic awareness and phonics (two important components of reading instruction identified by the NRP, 2000). Each level of the program is sequentially more difficult, with necessary pre-skills introduced first. There are three parts to each lesson: the Accuracy Probe, designed to teach the student decoding skills; the Fluency Probe, a timed automaticity and maintenance check; and a Spelling Component, which reinforces the decoding skills taught. Importantly, the Fluency Probe is designed to develop automatic word attack skills and improve reading fluency, another important component identified by the NRP.

MULTILIT Sight Words. When learning to read, it makes good sense for students to learn a small corpus of very common sight words so that they will not need to struggle to decode every single word they encounter in a sentence. The *MULTILIT Sight Words* program systematically teaches the automatic recognition of 300 high frequency sight words. The program comprises two main teaching sections: the Current list, which tests the student's ability to read automatically a list of 10 sight words; and the Revision list, which is a revision of previous lists which have been mastered. This program is intended to support both reading accuracy and fluency through developing a bank of sight words.

MULTILIT Reinforced Reading is designed to enhance students' independent reading skills, and is based on the set of modified tutoring strategies for use with older low-progress readers known as Pause, Prompt and Praise (PPP). During a PPP session, a tutor listens to a student read natural language books at an appropriate level of difficulty (between 90-95 per cent accuracy) for up to 15 minutes, providing support and feedback. The tutor spends a few minutes at the beginning and at the end of each session asking the student questions to encourage recall and to check that the student has comprehended what has been read. The tutor also explains the meanings of more difficult or unusual words at the beginning of the session in order to increase vocabulary knowledge. There are also specific versions of the program designed to improve comprehension and fluency, known as PPPC and PPPF, respectively.

Conclusion

The three government reports on the status of reading from Australia, the United States and the United

Kingdom all came to essentially the same conclusion: that direct and systematic instruction in phonics is an essential component of any effective program for the teaching of reading. Of course, none of these reports claim that reading programs should consist entirely of instruction in phonics. However, such instruction must be a substantial part of any program for teaching children to read if that program is to be generally effective, particularly for struggling readers. The MULTILIT approach to reading is a noteworthy Australian program for low-progress readers that is consistent with international research and best practice in the area of literacy instruction. In terms of teaching pedagogy, MULTILIT employs direct and systematic teaching approaches, and Positive Teaching techniques to ensure that students receive regular praise for effort and achievement. In terms of teaching content, MULTILIT embodies an integrated approach to reading and includes specific emphasis on all five of the specified pillars of effective reading instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension).

Note: Since this paper was presented, a revised version of the *MULTILIT Reading Tutor Program* has been published (MULTILIT, 2007).

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