

Spelfabet

Learning the building blocks of words – sounds, their spellings, and word parts

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Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention

A few people have asked me what I think of Fountas and Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention, as this program seems to now be widely used in my local schools.

I haven't used it myself, but had a brief browse through some of its readers for absolute beginners the other day, and here's what I found:

Reading by memorising and picture-guessing

Book 1 from Level A of Leveled Literacy Intervention is called "Waking up".

This blog post originally included photos of some of the pages in this book, but the publisher wrote to me on 2 April 2015 asking me to take both text and pictures down for copyright reasons. Without

them, it will be a little harder to make sense of this blog post, but I will paraphrase the text and you can imagine the pictures:

The (male hen) wakes up. (Rooster noise)

The phoneme-grapheme correspondences (PGCs) on this page are as follows:

- One-letter-equals-one-sound: e, r, s, t, w, k, u, p, c, o, a, d.
- Two letters equal one sound: th, oo, er, a...e, ck, le.

So just on page 1 of book 1, level A, there are 18 phoneme-grapheme correspondences! Far, far too many for beginners and strugglers.

Not only are there too many PGCs, but there is some serious spelling complexity in this book:

- the letter "t" is a stand-alone spelling in "rooster" and part of the digraph "th" in "the",
- the letter "a" as part of the "long" vowel spelling "a...e" in "wakes", but represents a different sound in "a-doodle",
- The letter "e" is typically (unfortunately for children) pronounced "uh" in the word "the", and it's also part of the "er" spelling in "rooster", the "a...e" spelling in "wakes" and the "le" spelling in "doodle",
- the letter "o" is used as a one-letter spelling in "cock" but also part of a digraph in "rooster" and "doodle-doo".

The next page goes like this:

The (female cattle) wakes up. (Cow noise).

The third page goes:

The (swine) wakes up. (pig noise).

By now we are up to 24 PGCs:

- One-letter-equals-one-sound: e, r, s, t, w, k, u, p, c, o, a, d, m, i, g, n.
- Two letters equal one sound: th, oo, er, a...e, ck, le, ow, oi.

Beginners can only realistically "read" this book by memorising the format, and substituting words to match the pictures. There is far too much spelling complexity for them to be expected to sound

words out.

The next pages contain pictures of a horse, a turkey, a sheep, a duck and a chick. No prizes for guessing the text, you can probably “read” the rest of this book even if you’ve never seen it.

There are a total of 42 phoneme-grapheme correspondences in this book. Why that doesn’t make teachers deem it quite unsuitable for beginners is beyond me.

Many of these PGCs are extremely complex/difficult, such as the four-letter spelling “eigh” in “neigh”, different pronunciations of “a” in “waking” and “quack”, and unusual spellings like the “aa” in “baa”. There are also consonant blends and two-syllable words.

OK, maybe the first book is a bad example. Let’s have a look at the next few books.

Title: Frog food. Repetitive text: I like bugs on pancakes. I like bugs on popcorn... soup...bread... pizza...salad...cake...I like bugs.

This book adds 11 PGCs not seen in the previous book, bringing us up to 53 PGCs just in the first two books in the series.

Title: The new puppy. Repetitive text: I got a little dish...blanket...collar....bed...toy...brush...bone... puppy.

Another 8 PGCs, so we’re now up to 61.

Title: Friends. Repetitive text: Orson is a big dog. Taco is a little dog. Orson has a big collar. Taco has a little collar....bone...ball...bark...bowl...bed...friend.

An additional 5 PGCs, so the absolute beginner has now been exposed to 66 in total. If they haven’t learnt a single one of them properly, nobody should be surprised.

Title: Sam and Papa. Repetitive text: I like to read books with my Papa...eat lunch...play ball...draw pictures...go shopping...watch TV...make cookies...I love my Papa! And my Papa loves me!

This book adds a further 13 PGCs, giving a tally of 79 PGCs just in the first five books in the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention box.

Sigh. At that point I gave up, and figured I had better things to do with my time than look at books that I would never in a million years use or recommend. They don’t even attempt an interesting nar-

rative, the pictures are nice but the repetitive text seems dull to me.

Giving these books to beginners and strugglers might be a way of teaching *reading-like behaviour*, but is not teaching actual reading.

Discussion among professionals

I'm a member of the US-based listserv Spell-Talk, where I learn a lot of interesting things about spelling and literacy generally, from all kinds of experts including people with relevant PhDs, professorships and decades of experience.

A few months ago there was some discussion on this listserv of Fountas and Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention, and here's my summary of what was said, which probably doesn't qualify as much more than professional gossip, but is still interesting, and permitted in the blogosphere:

Leveled Literacy Intervention is based on the same 1970s theory of reading as Reading Recovery. There are now many more effective programs that are consistent with current models of reading. The logic/science behind LLI's reading levels is not obvious.

Claims that Leveled Literacy Intervention is effective are based on research done by its publisher, but the data are not particularly impressive or robust. Everything teachers do has an effect. What's interesting from a research point of view is how large the effect of an intervention is. Improvements attributed to Leveled Literacy Intervention identified in Running Records (subjective and open to bias) were not identified by more objective assessment.

Leveled Literacy Intervention sessions include some work on decoding and encoding words, perhaps 5-10 minutes per half-hour session, which makes teachers who are unused to phonics think it includes a lot of phonics. This may be because they've never seen or used a really excellent synthetic phonics program.

Phonics skills learnt in word study activities in Leveled Literacy Intervention are not then practiced/reinforced in reading activities. Instead, when reading, children are given books containing few/none of the patterns that have just been learnt, and encouraged to use multiple cues and guessing, as per traditional Whole Language practice.

US Psychologist Dr Steve Dykstra summarised this approach thus: "It's like teaching children a little bit about a healthy diet, then serving twinkies and french fries for lunch. It is true you taught them something about a healthy diet. It is true."

After teachers use Leveled Literacy Intervention for a while, they reportedly start to independently query why the skills taught in the phonics part of the program seem to exist in isolation from the rest of the program, and aren't reinforced in the reading part of the program.

Better books for beginners

The first book of the [Little Learners Love Literacy](#) series (also [available as apps](#)) contains only six PGCs: s, a, m, p, i, t, with no digraphs, no spelling overlaps and no words longer than three sounds. This is quite hard enough for absolute beginners.

If you don't believe me, learn this code:

s = ◆	a = ㄅ	m = ○
p = □	i = ㄷ	t = ◆

Now scroll the above decoder off the screen and read the text from the first Little Learners book written in this code:

◆ㄅ○ □ㄷ□ ◆ㄷ○
◆ㄅ○
□ㄷ□
◆ㄷ○
◆ㄅ○ ◆ㄅ◆ □ㄷ□ ◆ㄅ◆
◆ㄷ○ ◆ㄅ◆
◆ㄅ○ □ㄷ□ ◆ㄷ○|

Easy, huh? Want to add another dozen PGCs, including two, three or four-letter spellings and

spellings that are used for more than one sound, into the mix? I thought not.

The first [Sounds~Write books](#) contain five PGCs: a, i, m, s, t. The first [Flyleaf book](#) contains six PGCs: l, a, m, s, y, e. The first [Beginning Reading Instruction](#) reader (on the iPad called “[Reading for all learners](#)”) has five: l, s, ee, a, m. The first [Dandelion Launchers](#) book (also available as [iBooks](#)) has five: s, a, t, i, m.

These are my idea of suitable books for four and five-year-olds having their first go at reading a book for themselves. Their schemes gradually and systematically introduce more PGCs until children have enough word attack to start to be able to successfully decode other books and printed information, and build solid mental images of printed words.

As well as reading such little books, very young children should work at tracing and copying letters and words, filling gaps in words, and reading, building and writing little, two and three-sound words in a variety of activities, then gradually making the words longer and the spellings more complex. Reading and spelling should be taught as the reverse of each other.

While children are learning to encode and decode in this way, and until they can read quality children’s literature themselves, adults should read it to them.

There’s no need to give beginners books that are far too hard for them, and which encourage them to think that reading is accomplished by memorising and guessing.

2018 update: Approaches to reading instruction supported by Learning Difficulties Australia can be found [here](#).

2019 update: Please watch [this video](#) from minute 52.33 for an analysis of the “gold standard” research on Leveled Literacy Intervention: https://youtu.be/zS7ice_mwE

This entry was posted in curricula, research, reviews, teaching strategies, whole language on December 7, 2014 [<https://www.spelfabet.com.au/2014/12/fountas-and-pinnell-leveled-literacy-intervention/>].

37 thoughts on “Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention”