

Questions and Answers

Understanding Structured Literacy



Is it a good or bad idea to use musical sounds with phoneme-type activities with a structured literacy programme. I'm asking as music can activate all brain regions, so could help struggling students access sounds (i.e. how music therapy works).

Your question is really interesting. It's absolutely a good idea to incorporate any aspects which will engage and interest our students and there is certainly plenty of research showing that music actively develops brain areas. So incorporating musical sounds into your phoneme teaching might be very beneficial (and probably enjoyable) for some students, although possibly not all. We'd be interested in any specific feedback if you're trialling this approach.

If a student with learning difficulties responded to something like Jolly Phonics before structured literacy was introduced, could they continue to use this alongside decodables?

Jolly Phonics is absolutely consistent with structured literacy principles, so there would be no problems at all with continuing to use it alongside other materials.

My school is adamant that we should not use levelled readers any more, so I am confused by your recommendation that we should use them instead of decodables.

There is a bit of a misunderstanding here. There is absolutely a place for decodables and that they should certainly be used as part of a structured literacy approach. Children should be exposed to a variety of reading materials, including books and stories which interest them.

Structured literacy emphasizes that children should not be encouraged to guess, but need to be shown how to decode words independently. That's absolutely correct. However, if decoding is being properly taught and encouraged, children will continue to use the same cues, even when they are reading more varied material. As with everything in teaching, a balanced approach is what is needed and we need to be encouraging children to explore stories which interest them, even if they do meet some words which they need help with.

Decoding skills and knowledge can be effectively taught with a range of game-type activities, rather than just through reading decodable texts. Variety and enjoyment are key to engaging our learners!

I've been told that StepsWeb is not structured literacy. Now I'm confused!

The StepsWeb online programme and supporting workbooks and hands-on resources are absolutely in line with structured literacy principles – and always have been. One difficulty is that some NZ educators have misinterpreted some of the structured literacy principles, which was explained in the webinar. Key differences are:

- **You have to teach syllable rules.**

Actually, the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) does not mandate this, although they comment that some structured literacy approaches do teach syllable rules. We emphasize the importance of teaching auditory syllabification, but do not advocate teaching syllable rules as such.

- **You must only use decodables, not levelled texts**

The IDA actually states that decodables are an important resource and should be used to teach decoding skills and discourage guesswork. Nowhere does the Science of Reading say that children should only read decodables.

- **Everything should be at an individual phoneme level**

The IDA states that the initial introduction to reading words needs to be at an individual phoneme level, which is absolutely what we recommend and incorporate into StepsWeb. The only difference we advocate is that there needs to be more emphasis on word families and onset + rime than the IDA recommends. This is in line with extensive research in this field.

I thought StepsWeb was just a spelling programme.

We describe StepsWeb as developing the core skills and knowledge needed for both spelling and reading. The structured Course can certainly be used as a spelling progression for your whole school. In that way, it can completely replace your existing spelling programme (and the need for spelling tests!). However, it doesn't aim to replace your reading programme. It's important that children have a wide range of reading experiences in class and at home, but StepsWeb teaches the core skills needed to access (and understand!) texts.

We have had feedback from many schools that they have seen the same gains in comprehension and vocabulary as they have in reading and spelling. Every word is seen and used in context.

Our school uses the Essential Spelling Lists alongside the StepsWeb Course. Is that a good idea?

Well, we include the Essential Spelling Lists in the Wordlists section of StepsWeb because some schools still use them. However, it's important to be aware that those words are already incorporated into the Course, where they're used repeatedly until they are automatic. As you may be aware, as students go through the Course, the programme continually analyses their errors and creates individualized reinforcement. And using the Course means that every learner can work at their own level.

What did you mean when you said about reading being a visual process?

One of the comments we have heard from some structured literacy advocates is that we shouldn't be talking about sight vocabulary any more. One teacher even said that reading is not a visual process, but a phonological one.

The reality is that the process of reading (and learning to read) engages a range of processes in the brain. Phonological awareness is certainly an important aspect, but visual recognition and visual memory also play a part.

One of the misconceptions in this field is that 'sight vocabulary' is words which have been taught only visually.

In reality, sight vocabulary words are ones which have been seen and decoded or explained, several times and are then stored in the Visual Word Form Area of the brain through orthographic mapping. Once this happens, that word no longer needs to be decoded, but can be instantly visually recognised.

If you're interested in this aspect, feel free to watch [Ros Lugg's webinar on Orthographic Mapping](#). This webinar is free and available to watch from the StepsWeb website.

Would it be possible to make the StepsWeb Course compatible with The Code?

The StepsWeb Course and The Code are both consistent with structured literacy principles already. If you compare the [StepsWeb Scope & Sequence](#) with The Code you can clearly see that. If you want to work out your own progression, that's fine. You can still use StepsWeb to reinforce your own lists. However, that planning has already been done for you with the Course – and you get the advantage of the automatic analysis and individualized reinforcement.

Have any more questions?
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