ACTA Position Paper - An Overview

Synthetic Phonics

Issues for Learners & Teachers of English as an Additional Language/Dialect

30/09/2026

Position Paper: main sections

Basic Concepts

- Basic linguistic concepts
- Who are EAL/D learners?
- Reading and learning to read English

Approaches to teaching phonics

- ACTA's approach
- Whole Language approaches
- Analytic approaches
- Synthetic phonics

Teaching EAL/D learners to read in English: Key issues

- Sound systems differ
- Starting points for learning to read English
- Decoding written English

Main sections — continued

To what extent do six commercial synthetic phonics resources take account of EAL/D learning needs?

- Letters and Sounds
- Read Write Inc
- Multilit suite
- Jolly Phonics
- Promoting Literacy Development
- Sounds Right

Mandatory phonics checks

Appendices

Reference list

Currently 78 pages • Fact Sheet — 8 pages with big headings

ACTA's Approach

We evaluate claims for pedagogic methods by asking:

RE THEORY

- what theoretical and pedagogic principles are explicated and/or assumed by the approach?
- are these principles grounded in solid, comprehensive and well-established theories of and knowledge about **learning and language development?**

RE EVIDENCE

- does the supporting evidence for the approach distinguish between various contexts and learners, and **explicitly include EAL/D learners?**

RE PEDAGOGY

- do the proposed teaching strategies and techniques **follow from** well-grounded theoretical and pedagogic principles?

RE REFLEXIVENESS

- are those advocating for this approach or method open to **questioning**, **scrutiny** of the approach, and responses based on **lived experience of teachers and learners?**

Key linguistic concepts — two examples

Phoneme

"the smallest contrastive unit in the sound system of a language, capable of ***distinguishing meaning*** between words" (Crystal, 2008).

A sound that is heard to change the meaning of a word: **pin / bin.**

Different languages make different phonemic distinctions.

Allophone

How a phoneme is ***produced differently*** in different word contexts.

Example: word-initial versus word-final **/p/.**

The paper explores the implications for EAL/D learners in depth.

The paper's final section & Appendix M details problems the Literacy Hub Phonics Check from a phonological perspective.

Fundamental literacy concepts

Reading is understanding the meaning conveyed by/in written language.

Learning to read is learning how written language *conveys meanings*.

NOTE: you can read a text without knowing how it sounds.

Decoding: dictionary definitions

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

"to find *the meaning* of something, especially something that has been written in code"

Cambridge Dictionary

"to discover *the meaning* of information given in a secret or complicated way"

Both definitions foreground discovering meaning.

Decoding in synthetic phonics

MultiLit

"translating written texts into spoken words"

Jolly Phonics

"reading a word by sounding out the letters and blending them together"

Where has meaning gone?

- deferred or displaced.
- ordinary meaning of "decoding" — narrowed and technicised.
- in practice: decoding — a separate process from accessing and understanding meaning.

Remember: people can read words & texts without knowing how they sound.

ACTA's position on sound–symbol correspondences & meaning

"ACTA endorses the teaching of sound-symbol correspondences in learning to read English, among the many strategies that should be taught and learned.

We do not endorse the teaching of 'decoding' — *however defined or interpreted* — **independently from understanding and making meaning.**

If a learner does not understand what they sound out or say as a sequence of words, they are producing **sounds**. They are not reading.

The focus on accurate production of grapheme–phoneme correspondences that is divorced from meaning and context is what we call ***barking at print***."

Decoding: ACTA's preferred definition

***Decoding* is a complex, interwoven process of**
accurately accessing & understanding the meaning(s) of written words.

The process requires
the coordinated and iterative deployment of different strategies
that draw from
orthographic, phonological, morphological, grammatical, semantic and discoursal knowledge.

Questions asked of each resource

The learner's L1	To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources assist teachers to utilise the EAL/D learner's L1?
Phonology	To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources take account of the EAL/D learner's existing phonological knowledge?
Learner age & educational profile	To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources take account of the EAL/D learner's age, maturity and previous educational background?
Oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making	To what extent do the six synthetic phonics resources **explicitly** develop oral English, vocabulary and meaning-making?

Questions cont.

Pseudo-words	What is the role of pseudo-words in the six synthetic phonics resources? Is this helpful for EAL/D learners?
Decodable readers	What role do decodable readers have in the six synthetic phonics resources and how do they respond to EAL/D learning needs?
Writing	To what extent does the approach to writing in the six resources take account of EAL/D learning needs?

Thank you.

Feedback welcome.

Talk to me (Helen Moore, Co-convenor ACTA Indigenous EAL/D Consultancy Group)
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