



# Differentiating phonics instruction

## The need for differentiated teaching

Victoria's population is characterised by cultural and socio-economic diversity. Students come to school with different levels of understanding about language, different degrees of English language competency and different literate experiences. Regardless of whether students are working at, above or below the expected standards, all students must make educational progress. Teachers need to ensure they are providing the learning environment and making the pedagogical choices

that will best support all students to progress. This includes [differentiating teaching and learning](#).

Differentiated teaching may involve making changes to:

- the content to be taught
- the degree of scaffolding provided
- teaching practices employed
- group size for instruction
- the number of exposures to a concept.

This paper relates to the following Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

**Standard 1:**

**Know students and how they learn**

- 1.2 Understand how students learn
- 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities

**Standard 2:**

**Know the content and how to teach it**

- 2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area
- 2.2 Content selection and organisation
- 2.3 Curriculum, assessment and reporting

**2.5 Literacy and numeracies strategies**

**Standard 3:**

**Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning**

- 3.1 Establish challenging learning goals
- 3.2 Plan, structure and sequence learning programs
- 3.3 Use teaching strategies

**Standard 5:**

**Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning**

- 5.1 Assess student learning



## The differentiated teaching of phonics

There has been consistent agreement amongst researchers, particularly since the release of the National Reading Panel's Report (NICHD, 2000), that phonics instruction is a necessary component of reading instruction for early and struggling readers (Savage & Cloutier, 2017; Suggate, 2016; Torgerson et al., 2019). Researchers have recognised that instruction in phonics is more effective when linked to instruction about print and meaning (Seindenberg et al., 2020). Additionally, research has demonstrated that the development of phonics knowledge and the components closely tied to it, such as phonological awareness and phonemic awareness are developmental (Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). However, students enter school with different levels of knowledge about phonics, therefore progression in reading and writing will not be the same for all students.

Differences in student learning progression may present challenges for teachers. These include:

- planning the teaching of comprehension in all modes of English, which embeds the teaching of phonics with other components of reading, including phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and oral language.
- providing explicit and sequenced teaching of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness and phonics that caters for student difference.
- ensuring that all students, regardless of their initial starting point or experiences, develop their knowledge of phonics and ability to apply this knowledge to contexts requiring reading and writing.



To meet these challenges, teachers need to:

- effectively navigate the complex interplay among various components of early reading – phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and oral language. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to develop strong pedagogical content knowledge. This knowledge can be deepened through various professional learning avenues such as reading, engaging in professional dialogues, mentoring, peer observation, and practices like teacher goal-setting and feedback.
- understand the developmental nature of phonological awareness and phonics knowledge. The [Literacy Learning Progressions](#) is one resource that can assist to map out these developmental trajectories. Understanding the progression of phonological and phonics development can ensure that a teacher’s instruction in phonological awareness and phonics is both explicit and systematic.
- differentiate instruction so that all students can develop their knowledge of phonics and apply it to reading and writing contexts. This involves adjusting the curriculum and teaching strategies in ways that will support each student to learn what they need to learn next.



## Suggestions to differentiate phonics instruction

The strategies listed below are suggestions to support differentiated teaching and learning of phonics.

### 1. Use of student literacy data

A key component of the [Framework for student improvement outcomes \(FISO 2.0\)](#) is assessment. In this model, leaders use evidence of assessment, including trend data, to monitor growth overtime. Data from the [English Online Interview \(EOI\)](#) and the [Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English \(DATE\)](#) can provide assessment information across a range of English components, including phonics and phonological awareness. Leaders may analyse literacy data and differentiate professional learning for teachers according to the needs of their students.

Teachers need to explicitly teach, scaffold and systematically monitor the introduction of phonics components, such as phonemes/graphemes, blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes, to reduce cognitive load and optimally position students for learning. Cognitive load, a concept introduced by educational psychologist John Sweller (1988), highlights how working memory impacts learning. Overloading students with information makes learning difficult while underloading prevents new learning. Using student assessment data about phonological awareness and phonics enables teachers to target instruction to fit within each student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development refers to the range between what a student can do independently and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other to support their learning. Analysing the EOI or DATE at the item level can help teachers to work out which students need extra support and which students need to be extended in their learning.



Comparing teachers' anecdotal notes with the formal assessment of the EOI and DATE can result in a comprehensive analysis of students' knowledge and skills. This information signals what students know and can do and what they need to know and do next, and supports planning for differentiation.

## 2. Explicit and systematic phonics instruction

Teaching explicitly requires teachers to directly explain each [concept](#) (Flanigan et al., 2022). One way of being explicit is to draw on the gradual release of responsibility model and employ the most supportive practices of [modelled reading](#) and [modelled writing](#), so that concepts and skills can be named and practiced in meaningful contexts. These practices are suited to whole class teaching, but also suited to differentiated practice in small groups. Systematically teaching phonics requires teachers to follow a teaching pathway that moves from teaching easier concepts of phonics to teaching more difficult concepts. In other words, teachers need to teach a comprehensive scope and sequence of concepts and skills which are presented in a logical order (Flanigan et al., 2022). For example, students are taught

the most common phoneme/grapheme correspondences before focusing on long vowel sounds.

## 3. Simultaneous integration of multiple components of reading and/or writing

Although at times it may be necessary to teach an aspect of phonological awareness or phonics in isolation, teaching and learning of phonics is most effective when considered within a context of other reading components (Seidenberg et al., 2020). Graham (2020) argues that the research concerning phonological awareness and phonics has predominately concentrated on reading, overlooking the relationship between reading and writing. For example, when reading, students gain knowledge of vocabulary, expand background knowledge, and examine text structure. This acquired knowledge can be applied to their own writing. Similarly, students' knowledge of spelling, phonological awareness and phonics skills developed when reading texts is applied when writing texts (Graham, 2020). Spelling is of particular interest, as it can only be learned initially through phonological recording, as students link written and spoken language (Seidenberg,



2017). Phonics should be considered in the contexts of decoding reading and encoding writing. [Language experience](#) incorporates oral language with reading and writing and can be used to target the teaching of phonics. [Modelled, guided](#) and [interactive](#) writing can also address phonics, alongside other aspects of literacy. Each of these practices offer opportunity for differentiated teaching. For students to become fluent and skilled readers and writers, they need to spend large blocks of time reading and writing for meaningful purposes, engage in explicit instruction and be provided with time for practising skills with connected texts (Kilpatrick, 2015).

#### 4. Differentiation of pedagogical practices

Teachers may create mixed-ability groups, where students engage in the same activity but for different purposes. For example, a small group [shared reading](#) activity may be selected for focussed teaching of oral language with a group of students, through sharing thoughts about the characters in the text. For other students, the same shared reading experience may be used to reinforce recently taught digraphs. In this example, the learning experience

is the same for all students, but the focussed content is differentiated.

Assessment data can reveal the degree to which individual students have understood a concept or skill, which provides useful information for grouping students and for determining the degree of support students will require. For example, a writing lesson may focus on a number of phoneme/grapheme correspondences, involving some students working independently and other students engaging in the supportive practice of [interactive writing](#). This example shows how the task may be the same, but the support for students may be differentiated.

#### 5. Goal setting for phonics

[Setting goals](#) for phonics learning requires a sound understanding of the developmental progression of phonic knowledge. Teachers can gain this knowledge by familiarising themselves with continua of learning, such as the [Literacy Learning Progressions](#), for phonological awareness and phonics and word knowledge. Teachers can support young students' goal setting for phonics learning, by breaking the learning into small, achievable steps.



## 6. Feedback

Extensive, specific and actionable **feedback** should be given to students as they are learning new content and skills in the areas of phonics and phonological awareness (Flanigan et al., 2022). Feedback about students' phonological awareness and knowledge of phonics can be given by teachers in-the-moment, as students are reading or writing. During instruction time, 'checkpoints' can be planned for in relevant parts of a lesson. This process ensures teachers and students can determine in real-time whether content in the lesson needs to be revised or revisited before progression to the next learning outcome occurs.

## 7. Professional collaboration and dialogue

Teachers' specialised knowledge matters for students' learning of early literacy (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). In the early years of schooling, when students are learning how to use the written code of English, teachers need to develop knowledge and understanding of the:

- interconnectedness of phonological awareness and phonics

- need for explicit and systematic teaching of phonics
- need to engage in differentiated teaching of phonics, to meet the needs of all students
- relationship between phonics, orthography and morphology
- support that phonics gives to reading fluency
- ultimate goal of learning phonics, which is to engage meaningfully with reading and writing.

Teachers develop the specialised knowledge needed to teach early literacy, through professional learning, collaborative planning with other teachers and leaders and through professional dialogue. Peer observation and moderation sessions, where students' work samples are discussed and assessment results shared can also support the development of professional knowledge.



## Suggestions for further discussion



1. How do our students vary in linguistic diversity and what does this tell us about the need for differentiated practices in phonics instruction?



2. What does our literacy assessment data tell us about our students' knowledge of phonological awareness and phonics?



3. How do we know whether students above and below expected literacy levels are progressing?



4. What teaching and learning examples can we share from our own classrooms to illustrate differentiated teaching in phonics?



5. What other teaching practices can we use to meet the differing needs of all our students?



6. How can we design lessons that incorporate the teaching of phonics with other aspects of reading and writing?



7. Can we see evidence in our planners, where phonological awareness and phonics are taught alongside comprehension, vocabulary building and oral language?



8. What criteria could we use if we were to engage in peer observation of differentiated phonics teaching?





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