

## **Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its importance.**

*Merv Gardner: President Caboolture Community Adult Literacy Group Inc.  
April 2021*

The Committee's website does not include a reference to what it understands as Adult Literacy.

Our organisation has taken the following as our guiding descriptors for the work we do with our learners and volunteer tutors.

Literacy involves the **integration** of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy and digital skills. It includes the **cultural knowledge**, which enables a speaker, writer, or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different **social** situations.

For an advanced technological society such as Australia, our goal must be an **active literacy**, which allows people to use **language** to enhance their capacity to **think, create** and **question**. This way, they can participate more effectively in society

I have read some of the submissions to the Committee and was particularly concerned with regard to the Dept of Education Skills and Employment response with the following quote

*"Further, in response to national and international evidence suggesting that one of the critical ways of teaching children to learn to read is through phonics, in December 2019, all Education Ministers amended the Standards and Procedures to add explicit requirements for reading instruction, including phonics, and to increase the time spent on English and literacy in training primary teachers."*

My concern is that 100% of adults who have approached our organisation for help with reading and writing know how to decode words using phonics. It is their understanding that if we can help them "sound out words faster" then they will be more competent readers and writers.

While the statement above requiring the teaching of children to read through phonics has not included the national and international evidence and which only **suggests** but does not specify learning to read through phonics only.

The statement also does not specify that only phonics based reading programs exclusively be taught but that phonics be included in a reading program. What this statement omits is what other reading strategies should be included in a learn to

read program and what other reading strategies should be included in the instruction in the training of primary teachers. Phonics is specified because it is simplistic and easy to test for efficacy if you test learners with only phonically based words.

This misguided approach to reading is based on the fallacy that English is a phonics based language, which it is not. Refer to the appendix 'A'

A phonics based reading program only helps when you use words that can be decoded using the sounding out method. As an adjunct to a phonics based reading program learners must also memorise the 1000s of basic and common sight words contained in English. They are called sight words because they are words that do not fit into a phonics based system. That is the letters do not make the common sounds attributed to them in a phonics program.

You may be interested in looking at the 1,000 sight words identified by Dr Fry in the 1950s and updated in 1980 as the words needed by school students to enable them to read the texts in the years 3 to 9. Allowing them to read 90% of the words.

<https://sightwords.com/sight-words/fry/>

On the flip side learners entrenched in a phonics reading system can have difficulty with spelling. This occurs due to the misunderstanding that the sounds we use in pronouncing words, **phonemes**, are not the way thousands of words in English are spelt. It is not unusual for a learner to be assessed at a higher level for reading than writing/spelling due to this reverse approach, of learners attempting to spell with their ears; what they hear. They can read what someone else has written correctly but then cannot spell those words when attempting to write them.

The sounds that letters make when spoken and a phonics based approach is predicated on hearing the sounds *phonemes*, of letters and words. This approach for many learners entrenches a lifelong habit of attempting to read with their ears and not their eyes.

As discussed above, how do the learners stuck in the phonics system of hearing letters and words move to reading with their eyes? We find our learners have little difficulty with the logographs commonly used in texts. Logographs are commonly used in English where a symbol is understood as a word. Symbols such as:

\$ @ & #

Arabic numerals which are our standard numbers are an example of logographs. Also mathematical symbols + % - x = etc.

In a similar way learners who wish to read fluently need to identify **sight words** as a whole as they cannot be decoded using a phonics system.

Any discussion on phonics must also include what has been called The Great Vowel Shift. English spelling started being standardised in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Great Vowel Shift is the major reason English spellings now often deviate considerably from how they are represented by pronunciations.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries England and Scotland were ruled by the so-called Vikings, invaders from Denmark and Norway. The Danes and the Norse occupied almost all of England. The Vikings coming from Scandinavia where the language is phonics based, embedded many words into what we know as English.

The anglicising of the once Scandinavian words which occurred as the great vowel shift in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century has meant that now what was once phonics based has migrated far from the original sounds. What this means for learners today is that huge numbers of words in English do not fit neatly into a standard phonics based reading program.

There has been tension between educators that promote phonics based reading programs and those who prefer a whole language approach. It is as if you have to choose sides like following a football team and become fanatical in following a particular team. In reality we need both systems of learning to read and apply strategies that suit the particular individual where their learning deficits occur.

The study of the inclusion of foreign words that have been appropriated into the English language is likewise huge. Words acquired from the classic languages of Latin and Greek as well as words from the British diaspora where we see words from India as well as the New World of the Americas. Bed clothes have become pyjamas, more recently Asian words have been appropriated; tidal waves have now become tsunamis. This word migration into English has brought with it the unusual sounds and spellings of these words.

What I am attempting to show in this brief submission is that the teaching of reading English is a complex matter and no one simple solution will fix the reading pandemic extant in Australia

today. Other submissions have brought to your attention the frightening statistics of the significant percentages of adults in our community with low level reading and writing skills. The Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys into adult literacy in 1997 and 2006 and The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) in 2012 have reinforced what many people in the field of adult literacy have known for many years.

We are often asked what system we use to assist people with reading. We say our system is called whatever works. Which is why we use professionally trained volunteer tutors to work one to one with our adult learners. In this way the tutor can tailor the learning strategies and activities required for each individual using texts that are relevant to the learner and their experience and goals.

## Conclusion

- a) There is no one quick fix strategy for adults to learn to read. If I could devise one I would be richer than Bill Gates.
- b) There needs to be a variety of adult literacy models and programs proposed and funded.
- c) Adult literacy programs need to cover; vocational education; community education and workplace education. This three pronged strategy will provide coverage for the majority of Australians.

Quoted below from a previous Federal Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) website on adult literacy.

**“Literacy provision must be available to all so that adults can fully participate in the labour force; use literacy skills at work; participate in adult education and training and use literacy at home and in the community. Literacy is not only about skills acquisition but the application of these skills in multiple environments for multiple purposes. Language literacy and numeracy are crucial underpinnings to learning to learn and generic skills and essential skills for the Australian population.”**  
DEST Website

## Appendix A

Here are some common examples of where vowels have a voiced pronunciation completely different from what we are taught are the sounds of those letters. This is confusing to both children and adult beginner learners. These words have to be remembered as sight words as they do not fit into a phonics based reading system.

For an amusing yet confusing look at the English language, you can look up The Chaos by Gerard Nolst Trenité, which can be found online here: [The Chaos - Gerard Nolst Trenité \(idallen.com\)](http://idallen.com)

### Examples

1. e makes an a sound in they
2. ai makes an e sound in said
3. o makes an i sound in women
4. a makes an o sound in was
5. s makes a z sound in was & as
6. f makes a v sound in of
7. a makes an or sound in all & water
8. o makes a short a sound in other
9. a makes an o sound in watch
10. e makes an I sound in pretty

You also may be interested in the common use of the Schwa in pronounced English.

Words such as:

Mother	mothuh
Father	fathuh
butter	buttuh
information	infuhmation
Brisbane	Brisbuhn
syringe	suhringe
pyjamas	puhjamas

The voiced uh sound is expressed throughout spoken English and creates difficulties with subsequent attempts at spelling.

**Some common loan words we now use:**

### Japanese

Tsunami; Sushi; Origami; Tofu; (lots of food words); Karaoke;

### Indian

Avatar; Pyjamas; Verandah; Bandanna; Bungalow; Candy; Dinghy; Chutney; Jungle; Khaki; Kama; Nirvana; Punch (the drink);

Pundit; Shampoo; Thug; Yoga. There are heaps more for you to find on the internet

### **Greek, Latin and French**

The list is too long. Look them up using Google or similar.

### **American Native Indian**

Squash; toboggan; Yankee; Chilli; Guacamole; Tomato; Canoe; Potato;

### **Danish/Norse/Viking**

Some of our everyday English words such as, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday have their origins in Old Norse. And because they were so violent words such as berserker, ransack, club and slaughter. Words about the landscape such as, dirt, dregs, mire, muck and rotten also come from Scandinavian origin.

If you are really interested look up Wikipedia for “Lists of English words by country or language of origin” and be prepared to be shocked.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of7_English_words_by_country_or_language_of_origin)

[Lists\\_of7\\_English\\_words\\_by\\_country\\_or\\_language\\_of\\_origin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of7_English_words_by_country_or_language_of_origin)

**PS:** This submission was written in the Lexend Exa font. Lexend is a suite of fonts designed for ease of reading for literacy learners. It is a sans serif font and can be downloaded for free online. The often maligned Comic sans is another font commonly found in word processors which assists beginner readers.