

An infant's brain is orientated to learn language literally from birth but the ability to read does not occur spontaneously and needs to be taught. The usual progression to read begins with the acquisition of oral language involving listening, speaking and later, beginning to explore and make sense of the written form via reading and later on, writing.

In this world of umpteen languages, each language uses a different set of distinctive sounds called 'phonemes', to form words. Certainly, this is prevalent in multilingual Malaysia. Babies are able to notice all the different phonemes present within their immediate environment and often their babble includes more sounds than that used in their home language. Research shows that phonemic awareness is the best predictor of early reading skills as this is where 'phonemes', the smallest units of sounds, form syllables and syllables form words. Children who understand that spoken language is made up of discrete sounds - phonemes and syllables - find it easier to learn to read.

By about 6 - 10 months, babies begin filtering out sounds that are not used in their home language and begin to streamline their babble producing sounds heard the most. Initially, speech is heard as a series of distinct but meaningless words but by the first year, most children begin to link these sounds to meaning. They begin to understand the names for familiar family members, objects in their environment, body parts, animals etc.

Kindergarteners have many hours of observation, listening and interaction with various people. During these interactions, i.e. bedtime stories where language is used to narrate the story, the turning of storybook pages to find out what happens next etc., helps to encode that print carries meaning. Through this exposure, children are introduced to and recognize what the written form of language looks like. By encouraging finger pointing

to words as stories are being read and/or while spelling words phonetically, the ability to relate letters to their corresponding sounds is reinforced. When children begin to name familiar objects with the awareness that certain objects may have the same beginning letter or when they begin to pick out rhyming words, the fact that sounds are represented by letters is further reinforced.

Children are exposed to the understanding that words can serve various purposes- like pointing to signs for specific places (e.g. McDonalds) and that writing can be used for different purposes- like writing a shopping list or writing a 'thank you' note for a gift. The way books 'work' is indirectly encoded when adults hold the book a certain way, when pages are turned one at a time, when words are read (in English) from left to right, from top of the page to the bottom of the page and that words start from the front of the book and move towards the back.

By Jennifer Peters-Lee

Reading... How it develops

**"The more you read, the more things you will know.
The more that you learn, the more places you will go"**
- Dr. Seuss





To become effective readers, children need to recognize:

- ▶ **The written symbols, letters and words used in reading**
- ▶ **That writing letters to form words follows conventional rules of the language**
- ▶ **That routine thinking and reasoning abilities are used to create meaning while reading**

It is said that between 4 to 9 years of age, a child will master roughly 100 phonics rules, recognize about 3,000 words with just a glance, and develop a comfortable reading speed approaching 100 words a minute. Children must learn to combine words on the page with punctuation and turn this into an image that is meaningful to them. The 'written symbols' used to read are the 26 upper and lower case letters of the alphabet. The 'conventional rules' govern how letters are written (direction, upper/lower case) and how they, in turn, form words (spelling, spaces between words). 'Routine skills' refers to the things readers do automatically without stopping to think about what to do. For example, we pause at a comma or period, we recognize high-frequency sight words and use what we already know to understand what we read. One of the critical routine skills is phonemic awareness – the ability to associate specific sounds with specific letters and letter combinations.

While most children develop phonemic awareness naturally over time through exposure to simple activities like reading favourite stories, poems and rhymes, some children may need to participate in specific activities designed to build this basic skill.

By the time children enter mainstream school and have completed year 1 and 2, they should have developed their language skills and knowledge to improve their

ability to understand a variety of simple texts while reading, thinking about what is known already, making, confirming and revising predictions etc. While reading, children also learn to apply word analysis when phonics and simple context clues are used to figure out unknown words or when using word parts (e.g. root words, prefixes, suffixes etc.)

Summary of Phases in Reading Acquisition:

Pre-alphabetic	Words are recognized and remembered by their shapes. At this stage, children can easily confuse words with similar shapes. The word bell, for example, could be confused with doll.
Partial alphabetic phase	Children recognize word boundaries, usually the beginning and ending letters of a given word. For example, they might recognize the word talk starts with t and ends with the k. Words with similar beginning and ending sounds can be easily confused at this stage, like take and tack.
Full alphabetic phase	Words are read by recognizing each letter and knowing the corresponding sounds represented by those letters blend together to form different words. So, they can tell the difference between talk, take, and tack.
Consolidated alphabetic phase	Children are aware of multi-letter sequences in familiar words. For example, they can see the similarities in the words take, cake, make, sake, fake, and lake. By 'chunking' a group of sounds as a single sound, words are read more efficiently.

Once words are recognised quickly and easily, children usually move from reading individual words to reading sentences and then paragraphs and focus less on decoding the print itself and focus more on comprehending what they are reading. **Ph**



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