

## Choosing Effective Programs for Low-Progress Readers

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### Statement of the Problem

A significant minority of Australian students leave primary school lacking the reading and related skills necessary for accessing the high school curriculum. Typically such children have experienced initial and continuing literacy instruction predicated upon a whole language model in which explicit skills teaching is eschewed in favour of a more general language and literacy enrichment approach. When these low-progress readers are offered remedial support, it often constitutes more of the same, albeit with possibly greater intensity.

### Proposed Solution/ Intervention

Students struggling to learn to read, for whatever reason, need explicit, systematic, intensive instruction focusing on what scientific research has shown to be the essential components of learning to read. As a result of research completed by reading scientists over the past thirty or more years, there is now widespread agreement on these essential components. National inquiries into the teaching of reading in the United States, in the United Kingdom and in Australia have all confirmed that effective reading instruction must address five key areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

### The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Most reading scientists now subscribe to the so-called 'simple view' in which reading is viewed as the product of decoding and listening comprehension. In order to be able to decode words, children need to be

able to segment and blend the sounds in spoken words (phonemic awareness) and to have a full grasp of letter-sound correspondences (phonics). In order to understand the words they read, students need to be able to decode words easily and quickly (fluency), know the meanings of the words they read (vocabulary) and have a good understanding of spoken language forms together with good general knowledge (comprehension).

### What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

There is little scientific evidence to support the efficacy of whole language approaches to reading instruction for low-progress readers. On the other hand, as the reports of the national inquiries make clear, there is substantial empirical support for the efficacy of explicit, systematic, intensive instruction in basic skills such as phonemic awareness and phonics, for example. Low-progress readers taught by these methods can make major gains in reading and begin to catch up with their peers.

### What should teachers look for?

Teachers of low-progress readers should employ programs of reading instruction that include explicit and systematic instruction in the five key areas outlined above, and these should be taught intensively. When selecting a reading program, specific evidence of its efficacy is also highly desirable.

**Key references may be found at:**  
[http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co\\_brief.aspx](http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/co_brief.aspx)

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