

# Research shows phonics not always the best reading tonic

*University of Otago*

*Monday, 4 July 2011*

Ground-breaking research in learning has found that children are primarily geared towards learning to read through storing words in the brain, and that phonics, used for “sounding out” words, is not necessary past the initial stages of learning to read.

The results of two research projects, conducted by Dr Brian Thompson, of Victoria University, and Associate Professor Claire Fletcher-Flinn of the [University of Otago College of Education](#), will be announced at the 17th Biennial Australasian Human Development Association (AHDA) Conference, which starts in Dunedin today.

The AHDA is the preeminent think-tank in the area of developmental psychology in the Australasian region.

In the first research finding, Dr Thompson, and Associate Professor Claire Fletcher-Flinn, and colleagues found that six-year-old Scottish children taught through phonics read at a much slower speed than comparable children taught through New Zealand’s more book-centred approach.

They also performed more poorly in deciding whether words were real or not at ages eight and 11, with non-words such as ‘blud’ being picked more often as real words, for example.

The researchers also found that Scottish university students who had been taught through phonics as children were worse at reading new or unfamiliar words that do not follow regular taught letter-sounds than their New Zealand counterparts.

It is becoming clear that explicit phonics instruction leaves a ‘cognitive footprint’, resulting in a long-term disadvantage when the reader attempts new words.

“These findings suggest that educators and policymakers need to look beyond any claimed short-term advantages of particular teaching methods, and take into account longer-term effects when considering the merits of different approaches to teaching reading,” says Associate Professor Fletcher-Flinn.

The second finding stems from a study of Grade 1 Japanese Kindergarten children, Japanese adults learning to read and New Zealand students taking Japanese in high school as a second language.

Associate Professor Fletcher-Flinn, Dr. Thompson and colleagues found that the same cognitive processes in learning to read words in a writing system based on the alphabet (letters), such as in English, occur in children learning to read a writing system based mainly on characters for syllables, called Japanese Hiragana.

This means that the same process of learning to read occurs in both children learning English and those learning Japanese, despite these being two different writing systems.

“This is a very important finding which suggests a general learning process for learning to read, regardless of the way the language is written,” says Associate Professor Fletcher-Flinn.

Both researchers agree that from the beginning, teachers should strongly support the child’s storage of vocabulary of print words, which have been connected to words in their spoken vocabulary.

This is already a feature of the Japanese teaching of beginning reading, and it is an important consideration for teaching here.

Dr Thompson and Associate Professor Fletcher-Flinn will present papers on their research at this week’s AHDA Conference, which finishes on Wednesday.

## For further information, contact

---

Associate Professor Claire Fletcher-Flinn  
University of Otago College of Education