FAST PHONICS

White Paper

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Contents

Fast Phonics White Paper

Fast Phonics is an online systematic, synthetic phonics program designed for emergent and early readers, as well as older students with gaps in their core reading knowledge. The *Fast Phonics* program teaches core phonics skills, including letter–sound correspondence, segmenting and blending, syllable manipulation, and spelling skills. Based on best practice reading instruction, it fully aligns with key curriculum initiatives to boost reading success. The many rewarding elements of the program keep children motivated to learn, laugh, and see what's next.

The 26 graphemes in the English alphabet make 44 phonemes, with many ways to spell these sounds.

Phonics: The Essential Element for Reading Success

Decades of psychological science research and comprehensive government reviews in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia have revealed a strong consensus around the importance of systematic phonics instruction during the initial stages of learning to read (Castles, Rastle and Nation, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rowe, 2005; Rose, 2006).

The complex orthography of the English language makes understanding the connection between sounds and written letters (the alphabetic principle) particularly difficult. Phonics is the process of learning to connect phonemes with their written graphemes. A systematic phonics program provides planned learning experiences that give learners the tools to decode words.

Significantly, early phonics instruction is more effective than phonics introduced after Grade 1 (National Reading Panel, 2000). Moreover, brain imaging studies suggest children continue to refine their phonics skills into adolescence (Froyen et al., 2008).

There are two main phonics teaching methods: analytic and synthetic phonics. Analytic phonics focuses on whole words first and introduces blending and sounds later in the sequence. Synthetic phonics involves identifying sets of letters and sounds; blending the sounds all the way though the word; and then segmenting sounds to spell each word.

Synthetic phonics as best practice

Academic research and government policy agree about the effectiveness of synthetic phonics instruction (Hempenstall, 2016). Synthetic phonics teaches letter–sound relationships in an ***explicit and systematic*** sequence. This 'first and fast' approach to reading instruction introduces children to individual phonemes and letter sounds, so that they can rapidly decode words and read independently.

The National Reading Panel concluded that 'systematic phonics approaches are significantly more effective than non-phonics approaches in promoting substantial growth in reading' (National Reading Panel, 2000:93). Additionally, the panel found that synthetic phonics programs were 'especially effective for younger, at-risk readers' (National Reading Panel, 2000:120). In addition, a large-scale study conducted by Foorman et al. found that systematic synthetic phonics was by far the most effective method of reading instruction (Hempenstall, 2016 quoting Foorman et al., 1997). The Common Core Standards Initiative includes phonics in the English Language Arts Standards for Kindergarten – Grade 5 (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2020).

Synthetic phonics instruction is grounded in research all around the world. Most notably, a longitudinal research project in Clackmannanshire, Scotland, linked synthetic phonics instruction to remarkable gains in students' reading abilities. The Clackmannanshire studies were seminal to establishing the pre-eminence of synthetic phonics instruction for emergent and early readers (see **Appendix A** for details).

Following the Clackmannanshire studies, the UK Government tasked Sir Jim Rose, then Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Primary Education, with conducting the *Independent review of the teaching of early reading*. The review examined the most effective method of systematic phonics instruction. The resultant 'Rose Report' concluded that 'the case for systematic phonic work is overwhelming and much strengthened by a synthetic approach.' (Rose, 2006) (See **Appendix B** for details on how synthetic phonics instruction has improved assessment results for students in England.)

In Australia, research established that systematic synthetic phonics had substantial advantages over analytic phonics for the reading and spelling skills of students in their second year of school (Christensen and Bowey, 2005). Research on high-performing elementary schools in Western Australia found that these schools used synthetic phonics programs in the early years (Louden, 2015). In 2005, the National Inquiry into Teaching Literacy in Australia recommended that teachers provide systematic, direct, and explicit phonics instruction to ensure that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency (Rowe, 2005).

Fast Phonics: The Essential Synthetic Phonics Program

Fast Phonics uses the power of synthetic phonics to boost reading skills. The program is a phonics 'first and fast' approach that uses high quality systematic, synthetic phonics instruction as the principle approach to decoding print. The program is designed for emergent and early readers (Kindergarten – Grade 2), as well as older students with gaps in their core reading knowledge.

Fast Phonics includes 20 'peaks' that cover a set of letters and sounds. The program ensures that children progress from simple to more complex phonics knowledge and skills and that they cover the major grapheme/phoneme correspondences. *Fast Phonics* has been specifically designed to be used in discrete, daily classroom practice. It recognizes that children learn in different ways and uses a multisensory approach to engage students with visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic activities.

With a range of animations, interactives, activities, and decodable books, *Fast Phonics* **explicitly and systematically** teaches, supports, reinforces, and assesses the core phonics skills, namely:

- letter–sound correspondence
- blending
- segmenting and spelling
- syllable manipulation.

Fast Phonics also covers pseudo-words. Pseudo-words are strings of letters that resemble real words. These types of words are included in phonics checks.

It is well established that phonics is one of five essential elements that students must master to become fluent readers. The other elements are phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). This paper focuses on the systematic synthetic phonics instruction provided by the *Fast Phonics* program; for detail about how *Fast Phonics* builds learners' phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency skills, see **Appendix C**.

Fast Phonics is a synthetic phonics program that explicitly and systematically boosts students' core phonics skills. Each of the 20 peaks in *Fast Phonics* includes up to 24 parts and focuses on a specific set of letter sounds.

Peak 1 introduces students to the letter /s/ and the sound /ssss/ in a fun mnemonic animation.

Successfully identifying letter–sound correspondence sees the cheeky Furballs go flying in *Flying Furballs*.

Four Square helps children identify letter–sound correspondence.

Students have fun identifying letter–sound correspondence in *Snowballs*.

Mountain Climb helps children to identify the location of sounds in words.

Letter-sound correspondence

Letter–sound correspondence is the foundation of phonics instruction. Children's knowledge of letter names and sounds is the best predictor of future reading and spelling ability (Piasta and Wagner, 2010 quoting Hammill, 2004; Scarborough, 1998; Schatschneider et al. 2004).

Fast Phonics teaches children to identify letter–sound correspondence in short, snappy sessions. Each peak uses animation to explain either a reading strategy or introduce a letter, phoneme, digraph, trigraph, or split digraph.

Next, students commence activities that reinforce their new knowledge. For example, in *Flying Furballs* children identify which of the three Furballs makes the phoneme that corresponds with the onscreen grapheme.

Four Square also explicitly teaches letter–sound correspondence. Students hear a phoneme at the beginning of the activity and must tap the square that includes the grapheme that the phoneme represents.

Similarly, in *Snowballs*, students match the marked snowball to the letter that appears at the top of the screen. Children tap on the letter to hear the sound that it makes.

Mountain Climb teaches students how to identify sounds at the beginning, middle, and end of a word. Children help Yeti climb a mountain by identifying the missing sound in a word. For example, the word 'might' is pronounced and appears on screen with a missing sound, such as 'm_____t.' The child is given four possible solutions for the missing sound, including /p/, /ee/, /k/, and /igh/. When a learner successfully identifies the missing sound, Yeti climbs to the next step, where a similar question will be posed.

Stretch It Out is one of many *Fast Phonics* activities that teaches blending skills. Students identify individual sounds and then learn how to blend through a word.
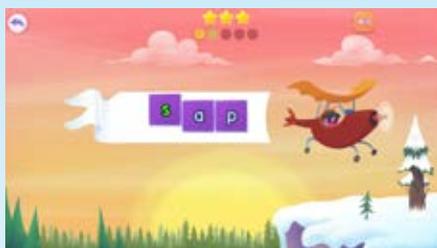
Fly the Flag is used in Peak 1 and Peak 3 to develop students' segmenting skills. The activity also features in Peaks 4, 8, and 9 with increasing difficulty.
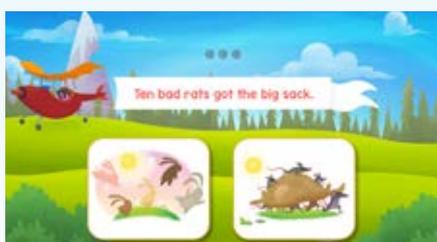
Send a Message hones students' spelling skills.

Blending

Blending is a key synthetic phonics skill. Unlike other types of phonics instruction, synthetic phonics teaches beginning readers to blend or 'synthesize' phonemes right from the outset, in order to develop word reading skills (Johnston and Watson, 2007).

Fast Phonics teaches students to blend phonemes in order, from left to right, 'all through the word' for reading. In the program students are taught to identify and blend sounds to decode words with consonant–vowel–consonant patterns, before moving on to more difficult words. For example, the six animations and 13 activities in Peak 1 **quickly and explicitly** introduce the sounds /s/, /a/, /t/, and /p/. In Peak 1, *Stretch It Out* teaches students to identify individual phonemes and then to blend all the way through the word to decode *tap*, *sat*, *pat,* and *sap.*

Segmenting and spelling

Synthetic phonics teaches children to simultaneously spell words by segmenting them into phonemes while teaching blending to decode. Moreover, they learn that segmenting is the reverse of blending (Glazzard, 2017).

Fast Phonics animations and activities teach students how to spell words by segmenting them into their constituent phonemes. For example, in *Fly the Flag* students assemble phoneme blocks to make the correct word and help Yeti catch the Furballs.

Students learn spelling skills in *Send a Message.* In this activity children type a dictated message to Yeti using recently learned words. For example, in Peak 6 students are asked to type the message 'Ten bad rats got the big sack.' When shown two images, children match the image to the message to demonstrate that they comprehend what they have written.

Full Circle teaches children to spell various words using letter tiles. For example, in Peak 2 students use /m/, /a/, /p/, /t/, and /s/ to spell *map*, *mat*, *sat*, *sit*, *pip*, *sip,* and *sap.*

In Peak 2, students spell CVC words using letter tiles in *Full Circle.*

Silly Bulls teaches syllable manipulation and blending through the word.

Syllable manipulation

Research indicates that the more attuned a child is to the phonological structure of words, such as syllables and phonemes, the more successful a decoder and reader he or she will become (Ritter, Park, Saxon, and Colson, 2013 quoting Lewis et al., 2006; Otaiba, Puranik, Ziolkowski, and Montgomery, 2009). Consequently, it is important to teach learners how to identify and manipulate syllables.

Fast Phonics includes syllable manipulation animations and activities from Peak 4 onwards. The *Silly Bulls* activity begins by introducing a new word, such as 'rabbit.' As most syllables contain a vowel (particularly in short words), the activity initially helps students identify the vowels in a word. It then explains that words can be broken up into syllables. To demonstrate this visually, the animation splits the word. Children read the syllables individually and then blend them together. They are then shown two images and must match the image to the word to demonstrate that the word has been read correctly.

Pseudo-words

As discussed, the initial focus of synthetic phonics programs is to teach children to identify, blend, and segment phonemes. Consequently, it is considered appropriate to practice these skills on pseudo-words. The ability to decode real and pseudo-words is the basis of the of the phonics screening check given to Year 1 students in England (equivalent to Kindergarten in the United States).

Furball Fun asks whether a word that appears on screen is real, such as 'town', or not, like 'pas.' Once students make a selection, the individual sounds in the word are separately enunciated.
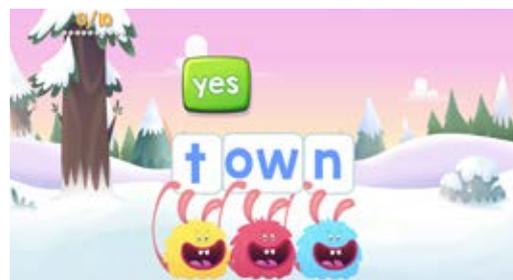

Furballs cheer on students who correctly identify words and pseudo-words in *Furball Fun*.
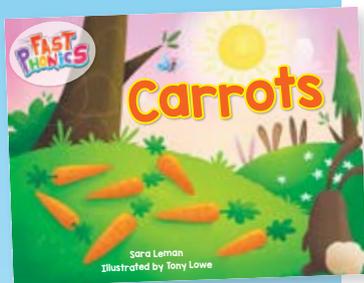
Fast Phonics includes a range of decodable books that reinforce students' knowledge. The end-of-book quizzes assess their knowledge and provide insightful data to inform your classroom practice.

The Placement Test ensures learners start the program at the most appropriate Peak.

Learners monitor their achievements in the *My Progress* area.
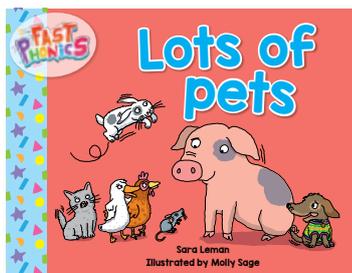
Decodable books

Synthetic phonics uses decodable books to 'cement' new knowledge (Konza, 2011). Each *Fast Phonics* peak includes up to four decodable books and an accompanying end-of-book quiz. Students enjoy using the books to practice their new decoding skills. Additionally, being able to read books gives learners confidence, which is critical in the earliest stages of learning to read. Feeling successful helps motivate learners to practice. These components work together to hone phonics skills, as research demonstrates these are key for literacy success. Furthermore, the end-of-book quizzes are an opportunity to reinforce and assess students' decoding skills.
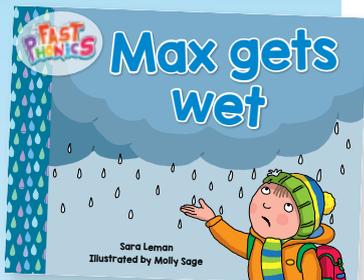
Assessment and reporting

Assessment and reporting are embedded in *Fast Phonics*. The program assesses letter sound correspondence; letter recognition; the ability to sound out phonemes; the ability to hear and blend phonemes; the reading of phonically regular words; and the reading of some irregular words.

Fast Phonics commences with a placement test. This test personalizes a student's program by identifying strengths and areas for improvement. It also ensures he or she begins on the most appropriate peak.

Each peak concludes with a narrated 10-question multiple choice quiz that reinforces and assesses children's phonics skills. Students immediately move to the next peak if they receive 80% or more on the quiz. Students who are unsuccessful can retake the assessment.

Additionally, each decodable book includes an end-of book quiz that assesses students' comprehension. There are up to four decodable books in each peak.

Children can monitor their own progress in the *My Progress* area. For example, students can view their average score for end-of-peak quizzes, as well as the total number of sounds and words learned, and books read.

Teachers can monitor students' progress via the Teacher Dashboard, where they can see what letters and sounds their students know and which decodable books they have read.

Yeti and the Furballs encourage students to progress through *Fast Phonics*.

Gems and Yeti Coins motivate students to complete *Fast Phonics* activities.

Fun upgrades encourage students to stay on task.

Motivation

Motivation is the key to learning any new skill, and reading is no exception. It is crucial for reading instruction to encourage students' reading motivation and engagement (Wigfield, Gladstone, and Turci, 2016). In large part, this is because motivation is a predictor of reading comprehension growth (Guthrie et al., 2007; Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, and Guthrie, 2009). Reading motivation is multidimensional; self-efficacy, and intrinsic (internal) and external motivation are the three most important factors.

Self-efficacy refers to a child's belief in their ability to complete a task. It is based on a child's previous experience and the encouragement and feedback they receive from others (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, and Perencevich, 2004). Successfully completing a task provides a child with the confidence to undertake a similar activity. For example, reading a decodable book provides a child with the confidence to attempt a second book. Confidence is vital to academic success. Indeed, believing in oneself is more closely linked to achievement than any other motivation throughout school (Guthrie, 2013).

Fast Phonics fosters self-efficacy in emergent and early readers. The program is specifically sequenced to build students' knowledge and confidence. Synthetic phonics instruction, such as that offered in *Fast Phonics*, quickly and deliberately teaches how to identify letter–sound correspondence and how to blend and segment sounds. The program maintains its fidelity to synthetic phonics instruction as children progress to high-frequency words that do not conform completely to letter–sound correspondence rules. This structure gives students the confidence to continue through the program.

Intrinsic motivation refers to a child's desire to complete a task for their own sake, such as reading out of curiosity or the desire to be challenged (Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997). External motivations are benefits that children receive for their efforts, such as rewards. While children respond positively to external rewards when learning to read, the key to ongoing reading success is intrinsic motivation (Cambria and Guthrie, 2010).

Fast Phonics understands this delicate balance and uses a range of external rewards to encourage students while simultaneously supporting the development of intrinsic motivations. For example, the playful characters, Yeti Coins, exciting upgrades, and interactive rewards in *Fast Phonics* engage and motivate students to keep learning. At the same time, the program's planned sequence of activities quickly builds and consolidates reading skills and confidence to ensure children move from decoders to master readers.

Peaks include carefully sequenced animations and activities to quickly introduce the concept of letter–sound correspondence, blending, and segmenting. Consequently, students can independently read decodable books by the end of Peak 1.
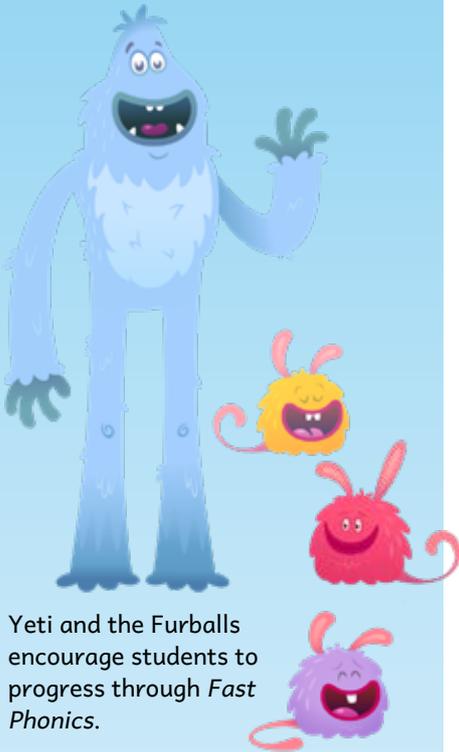
Transforming learning through technology

Digital technology has transformed teaching and learning in classrooms across the globe. There are significant benefits to incorporating technology into reading instruction, including increasing student motivation and personalizing programs to allow learners to learn at their own pace (Jamshidifarsani, Garbaya, Lim, and Blazevic, 2019).

Experimental and quasi-experimental studies have shown that information and communication technologies can positively affect children's literacy (Piquette, Savage, and Abrami, 2014; Cheung and Slavin, 2012). For example, a study of American kindergartners found that computer-assisted instruction to teach phonics, in addition to regular in-class teaching, can enhance students' reading skills, particularly for at-risk children (Macaruso and Walker, 2008). Similarly, a quasi-experimental study in Australia found that using a computer-based phonics program improved students' phonological awareness compared to regular literacy instruction (Wolgemuth et al., 2011).

Blended learning — combining digital and pen-and-paper activities and using data to provide a personalized education plan – is beneficial to developing phonological awareness, word attack (letter–sound knowledge), word identification skills, and reading fluency (Prescott, Bundschuh, Kazakoff, and Macaruso, 2017). Research has demonstrated that elementary school students, including children of low socioeconomic status and English Language Learners, who use a blended learning program make 'great progress' in English Language Arts and demonstrate 'significant growth on a standardized reading test' (Prescott, Bundschuh, Kazakoff, and Macaruso, 2017:505).

A useful schema for discussing the potential impacts of various reading technologies is the QAIT model of effective classroom practice (Slavin, 1994, 2009). This framework posits that effective teaching is a product of four factors:

- Quality of instruction — the provision of clear, well-organized, and interesting lessons
- Appropriate levels of instruction — content is appropriate and accords with students' prior knowledge, skills, and learning rates
- Incentive — students are intrinsically and externally motivated to learn the material
- Time — the program provides adequate instructional time (Cheung and Slavin, 2012).

Fast Phonics meets these criteria. The program has a clear, consistent lesson structure that is rigorously mapped to learning outcomes and uses best practice education research to teach, support, reinforce, and assess student knowledge. The extensive rewards and other motivational tools,

Information and communication technologies use can positively affect children's literacy.

Fast Phonics the systematic, synthetic phonics program where children can learn, laugh, and see what's next.

such as upgrades and animations, encourage children to complete all activities and, ultimately, to complete the program as proficient readers. The careful sequence of *Fast Phonics* peaks builds students' confidence as readers, helping them move from basic letter–sound correspondence to more advanced reading skills, including automaticity, fluency, and comprehension. As a synthetic phonics program, *Fast Phonics* deftly introduces concepts to students' existing decoding skills. Students' progress through the program at their own pace, and the interactive reading, spelling, and comprehension activities are opportunities to practice and reinforce their skills.

Teacher quality is critical to ensuring that students use online reading programs successfully (Duncan-Owens, 2009). The *Fast Phonics Teaching Guide* provides clear and detailed information to help teachers use the program effectively. Teachers can also quickly and easily access students' assessment results in the Teacher Dashboard to monitor students' progress and inform classroom practice.

Conclusion

Research demonstrates that synthetic phonics instruction provides a strong foundation for reading skill and reading confidence in learners. Being able to efficiently decode new words gives learners the confidence to read more, setting them on a more successful school trajectory.

Fast Phonics is a rigorous synthetic phonics program built on best practice research. The sequential program of 20 peaks introduces letter–sound correspondence systematically. By explicitly teaching segmenting and blending sounds early, *Fast Phonics* enables learners to make connections between letters, sounds, and pronunciation to develop a strong alphabetic principle.

Each peak thoroughly covers one set of letter–sound correspondence using highly motivating and engaging animations, activities, interactives, books, and quizzes. The teaching and strategy animations teach and reinforce systematic synthetic phonics. The multisensory interactive activities allow children to practice key phonics skills, including letter–sound recognition, blending all through the word, segmenting and spelling, pseudo-words, syllables, reading captions, and extended text. The decodable books and end-of-book quizzes allow children to use and reinforce their reading skills. The end-of-peak quizzes are an opportunity to assess students' abilities and monitor their progress. *Fast Phonics* also has a bank of printable resources, including a teaching guide and printable student worksheets to assist classroom practice.

Fast Phonics is rigorous but fun. This complete synthetic phonics program is a dynamic mix of maps, upgrades, and exciting learning activities where children can learn, laugh, and see what's next.

Appendix A

Clackmannanshire studies

The Clackmannanshire studies demonstrated that synthetic phonics instruction has major and long-lasting effect on children's reading and spelling.

The Clackmannanshire studies, as they are widely known, were conducted by Joyce Watson and Rhona Johnston on students in Primary 1 (approximately equivalent to pre-Kindergarten) in Clackmannanshire, Scotland. The studies demonstrated the pre-eminence of synthetic phonics instruction for emergent readers.

Study 1 investigated which aspects of phonics teaching most effectively produced independent readers. The study was undertaken as part of doctorate research in 1992–93 (before Clackmannanshire was formed) (Ellis, 2007). It tracked the reading and spelling development of Primary 1 students in 12 schools and concluded that the most effective method of reading instruction was to teach students to identify initial letter–sound correspondence quickly and to use a sounding and blending strategy (Watson, 1998).

Study 2 considered 'whether synthetic phonics was more effective than analytic phonics merely because letter sounds were taught at an accelerated pace' (Johnston and Watson, 2004: 343). In this study, 92 Primary 1 students were split into three groups and given two additional 15-minute tutorials over 10 weeks using either synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, or sight vocabulary training only (i.e. no additional phonics tuition beyond that included in the normal class program) (Ellis, 2007). Results demonstrated that synthetic phonics instruction, specifically the focus on teaching children to sound and blend letter sounds, led to better reading, spelling, and phonemic awareness and was thus superior to analytic phonics (Johnston and Watson, 2004).

Study 3 involved approximately 300 students and was conducted from 1997–99. The study was conducted in two phases and considered which type of phonics instruction was most effective. **Phase 1** saw students in Primary 1 classes taught to read using either phonemic awareness, standard analytic phonics method, or synthetic phonics instruction over a 16-week period. The children's reading and spelling was tested at the conclusion of the period. Unlike students in the other groups, the synthetic phonics groups were significantly ahead of chronological age for reading and spelling. These pupils also quickly began to read independently. **Phase 2** provided for students who had studied using the other phonics programs to complete the synthetic phonics program by the end of Primary 1. The students' reading and spelling skills were re-tested towards the end of Primary 2 (approximately equivalent to Kindergarten) and it was found that all pupils' reading and spelling skills were above chronological age (Johnston and Watson, 2005).

A seven-year longitudinal study examining the effect of synthetic phonics instruction on the word reading, spelling, and reading comprehension performance of pupils who participated in Study 3 was released in 2005. It reported remarkable results:

> At the end of Primary 7 (equivalent to Grade 5) word reading was 3 years 6 months ahead of chronological age, spelling was 1 year 8 months ahead, and reading comprehension was 3.5 months ahead (Johnston and Watson, 2005:8).

These scores were even more impressive as the pupils' initial receptive vocabulary knowledge scores indicated that they would be expected to perform below average chronological age on standardized tests:

> However, as mean receptive vocabulary knowledge (an index of verbal ability where the average is 100) was 93 at the start of the study, this is a group of children for whom normal performance might be expected to be below average for chronological age on standardized tests. Therefore this may be an underestimate of the gains with this method (Johnston and Watson, 2005:8).

Significantly, the study found that synthetic phonics was particularly effective for teaching boys to read and spell, and that it helped pupils from less advantaged homes advance their reading and spelling skills, especially in the early years of elementary school.

The study authors concluded that synthetic phonics instruction has a major and long-lasting effect on children's reading and spelling attainment (Johnston and Watson, 2005).

Appendix B

Synthetic phonics in England

Systematic synthetic phonics instruction has been a compulsory component of the primary school curriculum in England for over a decade. Since 2012, eligible Year 1 students in England (equivalent of Kindergarten in the United States) have undertaken a phonics screening check that consists of 40 words and pseudo-words. Only 58% of students met the expected standard in 2012; this increased to 82% students in 2019 (Department for Education, 2019).

In 2016, the London School of Economics concluded that a synthetic phonics program has long-term benefits for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those who do not speak English as a first language. It also found that this teaching method has large initial benefits for all students at age five and age seven (Machin, McNally, and Viarengo, 2016).

In 2019, the University of Oxford released research that tracked the results of students who completed the first phonics screening check in 2012, against their results in Key Stage 1 assessment of reading (equivalent to the end of Grade 1)) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) exam. The researchers were particularly interested in the progress of students who had initially failed the phonics screening test and retook the assessment the following year.

The results suggested that students who initially failed and then passed the check performed substantially better than students who failed both the check and the reassessment, even after performance on the initial phonics check was controlled for.

The relatively better performance of students who fail and then pass the check underscores the importance of intervention for students identified as having problems with phonetic decoding, in order to increase their likelihood of success at reading comprehension in later schooling. (Double, McGrane, Stiff, and Hopfenback, 2019).

"The initial effects [of synthetic phonics instruction] are large ... Most interestingly, there are long-term effects at age 11 for those with a high probability of starting their school education as struggling readers. The results for our study suggests that there is a persistent effect for those classified as non-native English speakers and economically disadvantaged ..."
London School of Economics (2016:20)

Children build their phonemic awareness skills in *Who's in the Tree.*

Build A Fire teaches and reinforces high frequency words.

Practice reading decodable words in *The Daily Dozen.*

Appendix C

Fast Phonics supports phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency

It is well-established that, in addition to phonics instruction, fluent readers must master:

- phonemic awareness — the ability to hear and manipulate the different sounds in words

- vocabulary — understanding the meaning of words, their definitions, and context

- fluency — the ability to read aloud with speed, understanding, and accuracy

- comprehension — understanding the meaning of text (Hempenstall, 2016).

Fast Phonics is primarily a synthetic phonics program, however it also incorporates these elements to support the development of successful readers.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes (the smallest unit of sounds in spoken words). It is an aural/oral skill independent of print. Several *Fast Phonics* activities encourage learners to listen to and identify spoken sounds, and thus build phonemic awareness skills. For example, *Who's in the Tree* requires students to listen to a phoneme and then identify the correct grapheme, digraph, trigraph, etc. in later peaks.

Vocabulary knowledge is an important predictor of reading comprehension (Muter, Hulme, Snowling, and Stevenson, 2004). In *Fast Phonics* students are systematically introduced to new words, many of which include visual support. The program's engaging activities allow learners to practice their new words, and their knowledge is reinforced in the decodable books that accompany each lesson.

Reading fluency refers to efficient and effective word recognition skills that permit a reader to construct the meaning of text. Fluency is manifested in accurate, rapid, and expressive oral reading and is applied during — and makes possible — silent reading comprehension (Pikulski and Chard, 2005). Hence, fluency bridges the skills of decoding and comprehension.

Fast Phonics activities build fluency and automaticity, including recall of **high frequency words** and vocabulary. For example, in *Build a Fire* students must correctly identify high frequency words, such as *the*, as they help Yeti build a fire. In *The Daily Dozen* learners have to read a word and match it to an image.
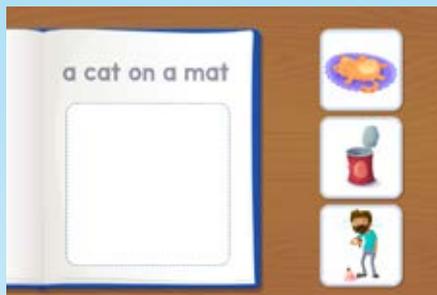
Captions and *Yes/No* build comprehension skills.

As previously mentioned, all peaks include decodable books. Initially these books are not narrated, which gives learners the opportunity to decode words and read independently. However, narrated text that models fluent reading is available if students do not pass the end-of-book quiz.

Reading comprehension is the process of engaging text for the purpose of extracting and constructing meaning (Snow, 2002). It is of paramount importance to academic success and future life outcomes (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, 2002).

The activities in *Fast Phonics* are specifically designed by education experts to teach skills that will allow children to read independently. For example, *Captions* requires students to read a caption and choose the best matching image. Similarly, *Yes or No* requires learners to read a question, such as 'Is the sun wet?' and determine the answer.

Comprehension skills are also required when learners access end-of-book quizzes. Each book includes 5–10 narrated comprehension questions and decodable answers.

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