

# Code-teaching or code-breaking?

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Code-breaking is what you do when you don't know the code.

There are two main approaches to teaching reading, which can be summarised as code-based and meaning-based. Code-based teaching works on the premise that there is a known, culturally shared, symbolic code. This written code represents another, spoken code. Teaching the relationship between these two codes is the focus of systematic synthetic phonics. Because it is not a natural process to interpret written symbols, this aspect of language must be taught systematically and explicitly to ensure that all readers not only acquire, but also master the skill. Once the code is mastered, the meaning of the text is available to the student and the cognitive benefits of reading accumulate.

The meaning-based approach to reading, exemplified in whole language and its descendant Reading Recovery, takes a code-breaking rather than a code-teaching approach. The text is approached as a puzzle to be solved, analogous to deciphering an intercepted wartime message. The code-breaker might consider the participants: from whom? To whom? Then there is the question of purpose: why was this written? The cracker looks for clues in the medium, or in other related messages that might have been discovered. Repeated words or phrases are checked. Reasoned guesses are made, checked, confirmed or disconfirmed. The hope is that eventually a pattern will emerge. The more that is known, the fewer possibilities there are for what the remaining text might mean. Assuming that the code is broken, the message emerges and its importance can be judged. Then it is on to the next message. Hopefully the lessons learned from the previous code-breaking exercise will help with this one.

The three fundamental differences between these approaches are accuracy, speed of return and efficiency. In the case of the code-teaching approach, mastery of the code, built with practice, will inevitably lead to greater accuracy than a less systematic approach. In terms of speed of return, the code-teaching approach may delay the deciphering of some messages – but only in the short term. The problem is overcome by efficiency: once the code is mastered, a great many texts can be deciphered quickly, and the intelligence gathered can be put to use.

On the other hand, while the code-breaking approach may yield some meaning early, the context, guess, confirm sequence is inefficient and often inaccurate. At a certain point (usually by the end of Year 4), readers need reliable information at their fingertips so that they can work with it. This stage is called 'reading to learn' instead of 'learning to read'. And it is at this stage that the inefficiency and inaccuracy of the code-breaking approach becomes apparent. Students taught this way have frequently not been taught to fluency, and the strategy of guessing and predicting has left them never being really sure what was in the text. While their teachers may feel pleasure that the students are "constructing their own meaning from texts" the students tend to feel like failures – because they are failing.

The code-breaking approach is unsupportable as an educational practice because:



- It wastes children's time, teaching them to use code-breaking strategies when we already know the code.
- As educators we have a responsibility to pass on our knowledge – not to require children to “discover” it.
- After a few years, the poor guessing strategies of code-breaking prevent children from accessing the knowledge that schools (and society) expect them to be able to find in written texts.
- The limitations of poor reading hinder the development of language skills, thinking skills, vocabulary and curriculum knowledge.

Regrettably, arguments about the merits of the two approaches will no doubt continue. Ideals about human nature, society and learning have deep roots in political and philosophical streams that are not easily severed – not even by the sharp blows of logic and empirical evidence. Teacher education institutions seem particularly prone to idealising code-breaking by positing that the code is not teachable; see John Walker's Literacy Blog ([www.thereadingcentre.com/2014/02/13/prate-and-lyle/](http://www.thereadingcentre.com/2014/02/13/prate-and-lyle/)) for a cogent response to a recent example of misconceptions

about the code.

For our part, the code-breaking approach of whole language has produced an unending stream of children reaching secondary school in need of help. We look forward to the day when logic prevails, and good teaching at primary school level makes Thinking Reading unnecessary.

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*Teacher training includes almost nothing on how children learn to read, why some find it so difficult, and what can be done about this, even though research by reading scientists has discovered a great deal about these matters.*

– Max Coltheart