

# Uta Frith's model of reading acquisition

This is an outline of Uta Frith's theory on the stages of the acquisition of written language, derived mainly through her research and practice into how children learn to read. It is widely accepted as the standard model of reading acquisition in alphabetic systems.

The stages are as follows:

## 1. Logographic

Initially, the child processes words in the same way as any other visual object or symbol and recognises them instantly. Thus, a limited number of familiar whole words are identified through their crude visual features such as shape or size, e.g. their name, names of close family, shops, common signs such as the 'M' for MacDonalds. Children at this stage are not aware that individual letters and letter combinations represent specific sounds.

## 2. Alphabetic

In this stage, the child needs to visually represent words in a different format from other objects or symbols and the concept of letter/sound relationship develops. The child acquires an explicit knowledge of phonemes, their correspondences with letters, and how to merge those sounds into words, as with *c - at* or *c - a - t*. Letter order and phonological factors play a crucial role, readers begin to develop 'word attack' skills and start to decode unfamiliar (and even nonsense) words. There has been some debate on whether children reach this stage as part of natural development, or whether the act of learning to read stimulates the development of alphabetic skills. In other words, non-readers will need to develop 'phoneme awareness' and they are most likely to do this through developing literacy skills.

## 3. Orthographic

This stage is reached when readers do not need to sound out words on a regular basis, but can recognise a large number of words automatically and instantly access their meaning, matching them to an internal lexicon that they have built up in the previous stages. Repeated exposure to the same words enables the child to store whole-word grapheme sequences in an orthographic lexicon. It is a much faster process than phonological analysis (i.e. having to 'sound out' words). Proficient readers are ones who have reached this stage, and they only need to 'sound out' unfamiliar words.

**Note:** Not all readers will go through all of these phases (for instance, dyslexic learners often get stuck at the alphabetic stage, or never master it and move on to the orthographic). Both 'whole words' (or 'look and say') and 'phonics' have their place in the teaching of basic literacy, but the eventual aim is to bring readers to the orthographic stage.

## References

- Frith, U. (1985) Beneath the surface of developmental dyslexia. In K. E. Patterson, J. C. Marshall & M. Download at <https://sites.google.com/site/utafirth/publications-1/reading--spelling-and-dyslexia>
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