

What is Structured Literacy?

A Structured Literacy approach is a pedagogical approach to teaching literacy. It is based on the science of reading and backed up by extensive research into the process of how we learn to read.

Many different programmes are based on this approach. They all share the systematic and explicit approach to teaching reading and writing, by teaching comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, alphabetic principle (the understanding of letter/sound relationships) and phonological awareness (the awareness of and ability to work with sounds in spoken language which sets the stage for decoding, encoding, and, ultimately, word reading) interdependently. Structured literacy programmes combine decoding and encoding and follow a systematic approach with a clearly defined scope and sequence of the sounds that are taught. The students are taught strategies to decode and encode that can be applied to all phonemes in the English language.



While struggling readers often use their visual memory and try to remember the shape of words, proficient readers use their auditory memory and store information about letters in connection with the sounds they make. The process of retrieving sound/ grapheme information to decode words quickly is called orthographic mapping.

Learners that struggle to read need to be taught explicitly to hear sounds within words and to manipulate them. Research shows that phonological awareness and skills such as phoneme manipulation, the breaking and making of words and the development of decoding strategies are essential for the development of orthographic mapping within the process of learning how to read. Structured Literacy addresses exactly that.

Why use a structured literacy approach?

The current New Zealand approach to teaching reading and spelling has been a successful approach for many years. As a matter of fact a lot of elements of Structured Literacy have been part of successful reading programmes at New Zealand schools. That's why this approach does not feel entirely new. However, Structured Literacy elements are interdependent, systematic and explicitly taught through all components of a Structured Literacy programme which goes beyond the approach that has been used at New Zealand schools in recent times.

Research shows - and we have been noticing - a growing number of students at our school that we have been failing. This means we have seen more tier 2 students across the whole school. We know that we are not alone with these observations.

In 2021 the Ministry of Education introduced the Better Start to Literacy Approach, which is a structured literacy programme, to respond to a growing need at our schools in New Zealand. Better Start targets Year 1. This development suited our school, as we had been exploring the SL approach since 2019. Our Year 1 teachers have either gained micro credentials in the Better Start programme in 2021 or are taking their papers this year, 2022.

How the structured literacy programme then assists learners to be writers

As the students become more aware of the phonemes (sounds that letters make) they start to record what sounds they can hear in words that they want to write. They work to crack the code of spelling rules so that they can expand on what they can write with confidence. At Gulf Harbour school we have developed a scope and sequence that the teachers and students follow that is developmentally appropriate. The students are regularly assessed to check they are acquiring new knowledge and skills and we have a number of different interventions to assist students that need further instruction or repetition of the key skills.

