

Phonics is an effective method for teaching reading. But phonics relies heavily on children's **phonological skills**. We examined the effectiveness of intensive vs. less intensive phonics for children with phonological difficulties at school entry.

Phonological skills?
Say the first sound in "box"
Say "cat" without the "c"

Phonics methods focus on *sounding out* letters, and then blending them together to make a word. But there isn't a simple mapping between letters and sounds in English, so it is debatable how many phonics skills should be taught (all possible pronunciations, or just the most frequent?)

Intensive phonics:

e.g., Letters and Sounds, Read Write Inc

Encourage children to sound out every word they encounter

Teach multiple pronunciations; **a** as in "h**a**t" "a**c**orn" "w**a**nt"; children may need to try different pronunciations before a word is sounded out correctly

No words taught by sight; even "tricky" words partly sounded out, e.g., "a**b**out"

Often use Reading Schemes (books where most words can be sounded out)

Less intensive phonics:

ERR (Early Reading Research, Shapiro & Solity, 2008)

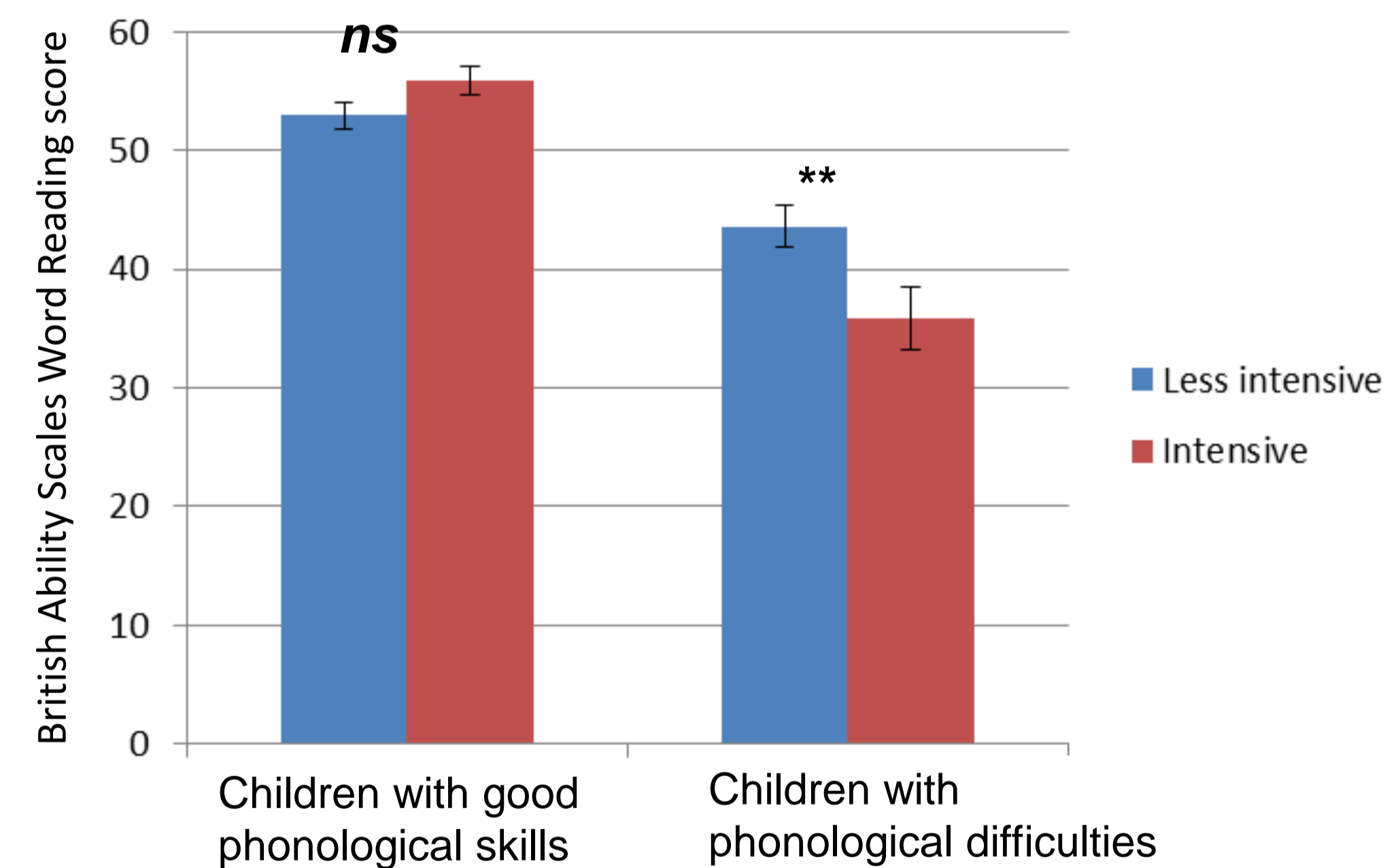
Encourage flexibility (sound out or recognise by sight)

Only the most frequent pronunciation is taught; **a** only as in "h**a**t" (so "a**c**orn" sounded out incorrectly; children learn to use context to correct themselves)

100 high frequency words learnt by sight (e.g., "want" recognised by sight)

No Reading Schemes (only Real Books).

The chart below shows the reading performance of 7 year olds who we tracked from the start of primary school (448 children). These children were attending schools in Birmingham using either intensive or less intensive phonics methods.



Either type of phonics was equally effective for children with good phonological skills (ns; non-significant difference).

Less intensive phonics was more effective for children with phonological difficulties (significant word reading advantage)**

Less intensive phonics programmes that teach only the most useful phonics skills plus some words by sight are more effective than intensive phonics programmes for children with phonological difficulties.

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Related publications: Shapiro, Carroll & Solity (2013). Separating the influence of pre-reading skills on word and nonword reading. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 116(2), 278-295.

Shapiro & Solity (2008). Delivering Phonological and Phonics Training within Whole Class Teaching. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78 (4), 597-620.