Accelerating the development of reading, spelling and phonemic awareness skills in initial readers. Johnston, R.S. and Watson, J.E., 2004.

Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal 17 (4), 327-357.
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/B:READ.0000032666.66359.62

In the first of the two experiments reported in this article, Johnston and Watson contrasted three different teaching regimes. The first of these was the 'analytic phonics' approach typically used in Scottish schools, where letters and sounds are taught at the rate of one per week and attention is drawn only to correspondences at the beginnings of words. The second approach was the 'Analytic phonics + phonological awareness' approach: children were given the same analytic phonics teaching as above, but were also given 'phoneme and rime awareness training in the absence of alphabetic stimuli'; these children were 'taught to identify initial, final and middle phonemes in words' and were taught to blend and segment, though only orally (i.e. not with letters). The third group of children received 'synthetic phonics' teaching: they learnt letters and sounds more quickly than the other two groups, learnt to read simple words by sounding out letters from left to right and blending the sounds, and learnt to spell by segmenting spoken words into phonemes and writing down letters. These programmes lasted for 16 weeks. The post-testing carried out at this point showed the synthetic phonics children to be 11 months ahead of the other two groups in reading and 9-10 months ahead in spelling. This was despite the fact that the synthetic phonics schools were the most socially disadvantaged. The children in the other two groups were then given the synthetic phonics programme. Fifteen months after this had finished, towards the end of the second year in school, all the children were retested. There was now no significant difference in reading between the children who had had the synthetic phonics programme in the first 16 weeks and those who had had it in the second 16 weeks, though some differences in spelling remained. Only 6 children out of 264 (2.2%) were reading more than a year below chronological age, and all of them were in the groups which had had other types of teaching before receiving the synthetic phonics programme. More than 100 children who were considered 'at risk' because of very poor initial phonological awareness scores were followed up, and by the end of their second year at school, the average reading and spelling ages of this group were several months above chronological age.

A second experiment was carried out, with different children, 'in order to establish whether synthetic phonics was more effective than analytic phonics merely because letter sounds were taught at an accelerated pace'. The researchers also investigated whether drawing children's attention to letter sounds in all positions in words (as distinct from just initial positions) made a difference. Three groups of beginners were given 19 training sessions over ten weeks. These sessions were in addition to the normal classroom teaching which the children received, which was of a typical Scottish analytic phonics type. All three groups worked with the same print vocabulary – that is, they read the same words, though by different strategies. The children in the first group were simply told what the words were but received no letter-sound teaching during the intervention (though of course they may have received some normal classroom teaching of this type). The second and third groups both learnt letter sounds at the rate of two per week: the second group was taught about these in only initial positions in words, but the third group learnt about them in all positions in words and practised reading words by sounding and blending. Three post-tests were carried out, one immediately after the ten-week training was completed, one a further ten weeks later, and the third at the beginning of the following school year. In all three, the synthetic phonics children

outperformed the others. The fact that they did better than the children who were taught letter sounds at the same rate but had their attention drawn to them only in initial position showed that it is all-through-the-word sounding out and blending which makes the difference rather than pace of letter-sound teaching. The study is also very useful in showing that additional training in phonological and phonemic awareness 'in the absence of alphabetic stimuli' is less effective than synthetic phonics.

…….

This research summary appeared in RRF newsletter No.53. 2004.