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Why lovers of the skirl should
now be heading to Glasgow



School robots divide experts over teaching of phonics

Whether it's a gimmick or a useful classroom aid, children love speaking toy

Polly Curtis
Education editor

Four-year-olds love a cuddly toy – especially one that can speak, has flashing lights and is allowed in class. Red the Robot is all those things, but he won't play Power Rangers. Instead, he wants to sit down to some good, old-fashioned phonics.

An army of Red the Robots is being deployed in schools and nurseries to help pupils as young as three learn to read. The 40cm-high toy can read stories and quiz pupils on their ABCs. Its manufacturer says it captures the imagination of children put off by traditional classes at a time when the government is desperately worried about children's literacy skills.

But it has been labelled a gimmick by opponents of phonics, the well-established but sometimes controversial method of teaching reading whereby children learn each sound then go on to decipher whole words. Red – rapid educational development – costs £130, inclusive of reading material. About 200 have been bought by schools and three local authorities have signed up to distribute them through primaries.

Academics at the Institute of Education who undertook an evaluation in three schools concluded that the robot “makes learning fun” where used appropriately. Children seemed to love it but teachers were “less inclined” to allow

the robot to take the whole class. Dylan Wiliam, acting head of the institute, says: “The research on the use of such technology shows that when it is well-designed it can actually be better than teaching even by the best teachers.”

Its manufacturer, Headstart, the educational wing of the toy company Impact International, says it could become an important aid to improving reading and writing. Representatives have had meetings with the Qualification and Curriculum Authority in an attempt to win the government's backing.

But some child experts expressed concern. Sue Palmer, author of *Toxic Childhood*, said: “Robots can't teach. The only effective teaching is by breathing, living teachers who can look a pupil in the eye and respond to them.”

It comes amid a battle over the inclusion of phonics in new targets for nurseries and childminders. From September all early years providers will have to show that children are reaching 69 separate goals by the time they start school at the age of four or five.

One says they must be able to “use phonic knowledge to write simple words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words”. The children's authors Philip Pullman and Michael Morpurgo have joined dozens of academics to oppose the reforms.

Margaret Edgington, of the OpenEye campaign, set up to oppose the government's proposals, said: “Of course children might take to it but that does not necessarily mean it's good for them. Three-year-olds should not be doing phonics. They should do what's normal in nurseries: singing, rhyming and playing.”

The road test Roxy and Charlie



Who's better, Red or your teacher? Red, says Charlie

“Wow,” says Charlie, five, when he first sees Red the Robot.

“He doesn't look like a robot,” says his best friend, Roxy, also five. “Robots aren't usually that ugly.”

The two children from London's East End are learning to read using phonics at school. They sound out the letters using perfect phonetic pronunciation and seem confident using Red's scanner on the pages of the book to identify the right letters and short words.

But Red is having a bad day. Sometimes he forgets which book he's reading. Sometimes his mind drifts and he goes quiet in the middle of one of the exercises, which are designed to be perfectly in tune with what Charlie and Roxy are learning at school.

Usually there would be a teacher or assistant to sort the problems out but we all look at the robot a bit disappointedly.

“I'm bored,” declares Charlie.

What's good about Red? “He's red,” says Roxy.

What's bad about Red? “He doesn't work,” says Charlie.

Who's better, the robot or your teacher? “The robot,” says Charlie.

Charlie and Roxy settle in to playing “teachers” with the robot and an assortment of cuddly toys. Ten minutes later Red the Robot is happily teaching penguins to cross a road safely.

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