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English Phonics: Reading and Writing



Unit 5: synthetic phonics

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Unit 5: synthetic phonics

5.1. What is synthetic phonics?

Synthetic phonics is a system which has been used in recent years in the USA and in Britain to teach native-speaker children to read and write. It has had a good deal of success there, especially for children with dyslexia, who found the traditional methods confusing and didn't respond well to them.

Traditionally, children were taught to sight read. Starting with the 20 most frequently used words in English, children were taught to recognise the groups of letters as a specific word. Unfortunately, in English, the most commonly used words are also fairly difficult to spell. The sound of the word doesn't seem to bear much relation to the letters used to write it. Once they had learned to recognise the first 20 words, words were taught in groups of about 5 words at a time, slowly building up the bank of words a child could read. Individual letters were taught as letters rather than sounds. So children learned that 'A' was / eɪ / and not / æ /. Knowing the names of the letters didn't help them with reading, because, of course, when we see the letter 'a' in a word, it is hardly ever pronounced / eɪ /.

The problem with sight reading

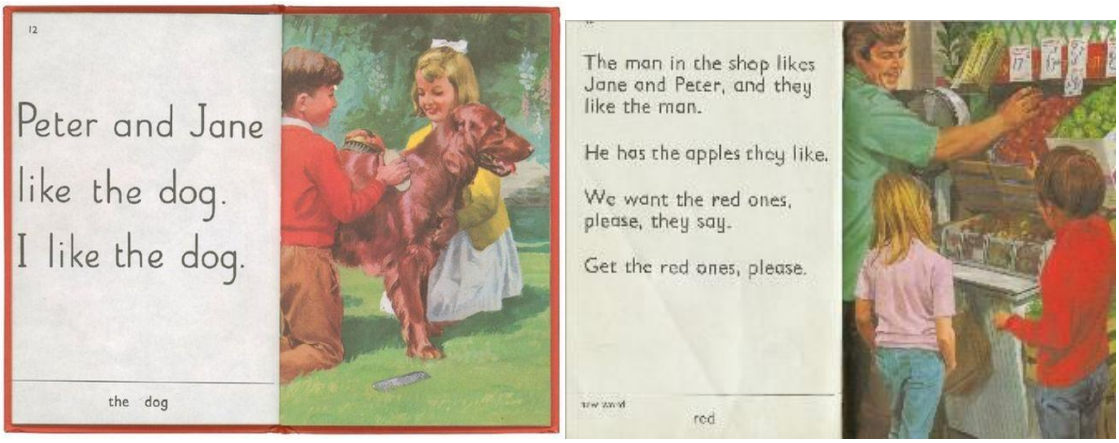
Of course this method of teaching, based on frequency of use, becomes clear when we look at the 100 most frequent words in the English language:

1. the
2. be
3. to
4. of
5. and
6. a
7. in
8. that
9. have
10. I
11. it
12. for
13. not
14. on
15. with
16. he
17. as
18. you
19. do
20. at
21. this
22. but
23. his
24. by
25. from
26. they
27. we
28. say
29. her
30. she
31. or
32. an
33. will
34. my
35. one
36. all
37. would
38. there
39. their
40. what
41. so
42. up
43. out
44. if
45. about
46. who
47. get
48. which
49. go
50. me
51. when
52. make
53. can
54. like
55. time
56. no
57. just
58. him
59. knew
60. take
61. people
62. into
63. year
64. your
65. good
66. some
67. could
68. them
69. see

70. other
71. than
72. them
73. now
74. look
75. only
76. come
77. its
78. over
79. think
80. also
81. back
82. after
83. use
84. two
85. how
86. our
87. work
88. first
89. well
90. way
91. even
92. new
93. want
94. because
95. any
96. these
97. give
98. day
99. most
100. us

Young children are usually taught to read through reading simple words and matching them with pictures, then reading simple meaningful sentences, and then moving on to short, simple stories with pictures to help comprehension. But if you look at the first 20 most frequent words in English, you'll notice that they don't exactly lend themselves to pictures or stories. The result was that the stories used to teach young learners were quite strange to read.

Here are some examples from the Ladybird key words readers, which were popular in the 1970s and 1980s:



[Source of images: http://www.ladybirdflyawayhome.com/oldsite/peter_and_jane.htm]

As you can see, the text was a little strange. In addition, of course, children were not learning to read by interpreting the sounds of the letters in the words. This meant that when they came across a word they hadn't learned before, they had no schemata to apply to the word, making it very difficult for them to read words they hadn't been taught.

Synthetic phonics teaches the sounds of English. Once the children have learned the sounds, they learn to combine, or synthesise them to make words. In English, however, there are more sounds than letter in the alphabet. There are 42 sounds in English and only 26 letters in the alphabet. So each sound is represented by either a letter or a digraph; two letters together.

The sounds are taught in a specific order. They are taught in groups of 6 sounds. The order the sounds are taught in is to make it as easy as possible to move from sound recognition to synthesis (putting the sounds together). The first 6 sounds taught are those that can be combined to make the most three-letter words.

Jolly Phonics is one of the most common syntheitic phonics methods, and we will be looking at this method as an example throughout this and future units.

There are, however, many different equally good methods in use. As a teacher, you may find yourself using a different method. This shouldn't matter, as all the methods follow the same basic principles.

Here are the sounds in groups of 6, in the order that they should be taught. We will look in more detail at what sound each grapheme (letter or digraph) represents later in the unit:

1. s, a, t, i, p, n
2. c k, e, h, r, m, d
3. g, o, u, l, f, b
4. ai, j, oa, ie, ee, or
5. z, w, ng, v, oo, oo
6. y, x, ch, sh, th, th
7. qu, ou, oi, ue, er, ar

[Image source: http://jollylearning.co.uk/overview-about-jolly-phonics/]

In the Jolly Phonics method, as in most others, each sound is accompanied by a song, a story and an action. The combination of these three aspects help fix the sound and the grapheme that represents it into the children's minds.

5.2. Tricky words and alternative spellings

Of course, many words can't be read by joining the sounds of the letters that they are made up of, for example;

I are go there he so my your come said here

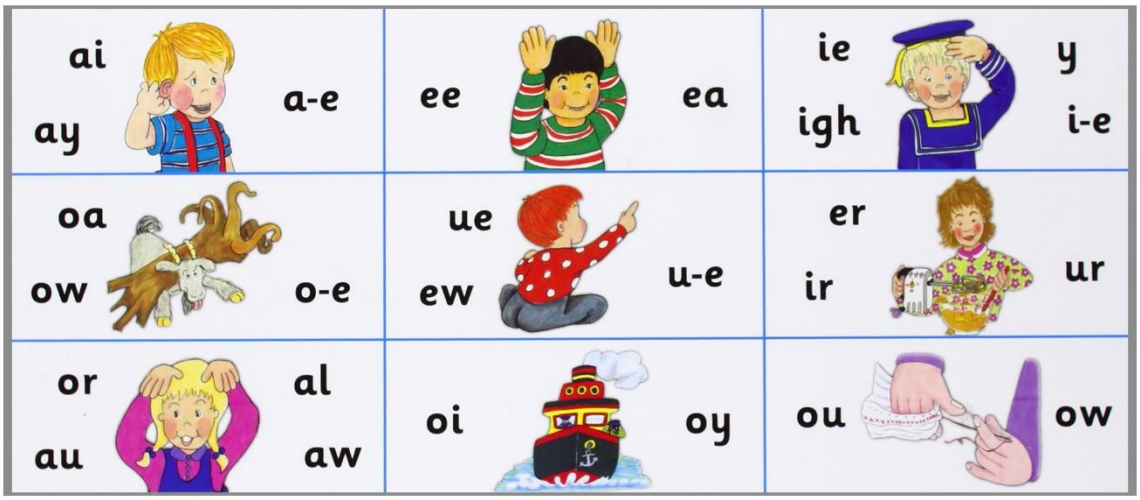
And, of course, in English there are many 'tricky' words, and they tend to be high-frequency words too, so it's important to teach them.

These words have to be taught in a different way, as they are not decodable (not easy to read by sounding out the letters). There are different ideas about how to do this, of course, but most teachers teach them through sight reading.

Other words, as we have seen in previous units, use different letters or combinations of letters to represent the same sound. For example;

Pearl prefers her purple skirt for work.

In this sentence, ‘ear’, ‘er’, ‘ur’ and ‘or’ are all pronounced in the same way. To deal with this problem, once children have mastered the graphemes and sounds on the initial list, the teacher can then introduce them to alternative spellings of the same sound. For example;



[Source of image: http://myenglishkitpradejon.blogspot.com.es/2015/09/]

5.3. Summary

Synthetic phonics is a system which has been used in recent years in the USA and in Britain to teach native-speaker children to read and write.

The sounds are taught in a specific order. They are taught in groups of 6 sounds. Each sound is taught through a story, song and action, which helps children remember the sounds. Here are the seven groups of sounds:

Group 1 - s, a, t, i, p, n

Group 2 - c k, e, h, r, m, d

Group 3 - g, o, u, l, f, b

Group 4 - ai, j, oa, ie, ee, or

Group 5 - z, w, ng, v, oo, oo

Group 6 - y, x, ch, sh, th, th

Group 7 - qu, ou, oi, ue, er, ar

In Spain, Jolly Phonics is one of the most popular methodologies for teaching phonics. Most primary course books nowadays include an element of synthetic phonics.