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English Phonics: Reading and Writing



Unit 6: Teaching Synthetic Phonics

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6.1. The order of the sounds

As we saw in the previous unit, the order in which the sounds are taught is important. In fact, the younger the learners are, the more important this is. Traditionally, the letters of the alphabet have been taught in the following order:

- vowels
- consonants in alphabetical order

Of course, it is clear that this is not the most logical approach to teaching learners to recognise sounds, to read and to write. The sooner learners can start to interpret words, and to form their own words from the sounds they know, the better. It makes the reason for learning the sounds salient to them; they understand why they are learning them. This helps keep them motivated to learn new sounds, as the new knowledge is instantly useful for them and helps them achieve fast, short-term progress.

Having said this, each school may decide on a slightly different order in which to teach the sounds, and different methods will have small variations between them too.

6.2. The importance of getting the sounds right

In synthetic phonics, it can't be stressed enough how important it is to get your learners pronouncing the sounds correctly right from the start. Again, the reasons for this are obvious; if learners don't get the pronunciation of an individual sound right, it will interfere with their ability to read and write words with that sound in them later on.

Teachers often make the mistake of adding an unstressed schwa sound (/ə/) to the ends of sounds. So instead of saying mmmmmmmmm for the 'm' sound, they might say something like muh /mə/ instead.

If you are not confident about your pronunciation of specific sounds, or even whole words, make use of the many online resources available to teachers for free nowadays. We will take a look at some of the resources you can use in unit 10.

As a teacher, it is also important that you are able to distinguish the individual phonemes in a word.

If you are unsure, keep a chart on your classroom wall to refer to. Say the word slowly to yourself and try to identify the sounds.

Consonant clusters, the differences between the /b/ and the /v/, or the different vowel and diphthong sounds, among others, can all be problematic. You should try to revise them regularly and listen to the recordings of the sounds included in the previous chapter, and websites such as www.howjsay.com to help hear the correct pronunciation of a word you are unsure about.

6.3. How much and how often?

It is also important to get the pace of instruction right. If you introduce the sounds too quickly, learners will not have time to assimilate them properly and will find it hard to remember them, or they may even feel overwhelmed or frustrated. But if you teach them too slowly, learners will get bored and may get distracted.

How many phonemes you introduce to your learners, however, will depend on how old they are, how much exposure to English they have, the size of the class etc. There are many factors to take into account. In general, about 2-4 phonemes a week would be about right for very young learners, for example under 5's. For primary-aged learners, however, you may be able to go at a faster pace.

In addition, you will probably not want to spend all of a class on phonics, but rather spend a few minutes of each class. This can be incorporated into the classroom routine, for example at the beginning or end of each lesson. With about 10 minutes of class time, you should be able to teach a new sound and spend some time reviewing sounds your learners already know. Once learners have learned the sounds and are beginning to read and write, you will be able to incorporate phonics work into other activities, and may find you don't need to dedicate specific stages of the class to phonics.

6.4. The three core skills

Once learners have learned the individual sounds of a group, you can begin to work on the three core skills they will need in order to learn to read and write. These are:

- Decoding

Decoding is reading. In order to read a word, learners must first synthesise it, or sound it out. Once they have identified the phonemes in the written word, they must then blend them. This involves saying the phonemes together with no pauses between them. By blending, learners can hear the word.

- Encoding

Encoding is spelling a word. To encode, learners must first hear the word. Then learner must segment the word they have heard. To do this they split the word into individual phonemes orally. Then learners must write down the grapheme for each of the phonemes they have identified.

- Handwriting

The final core skill is writing. Learners must learn to reproduce the graphemes for each sound. In older children, they may already have acquired this skill. If they have already started writing in their mother tongue, this will be easier for them to learn. In order to teach handwriting, the learners must learn how to hold a pencil correctly first. It seems obvious, but if they hold the pencil incorrectly, it will be much harder for them in the long run to write clearly and legibly.

The font used for synthetics phonics is different from that used for teaching Spanish to very young learners. Many teachers worry that learning two different ways to write letters will confuse the learners. In fact, young learners are almost always more capable than we give them credit for! Using two different fonts actually helps very young learners distinguish between the sounds and words of each language. They very quickly learn to apply the rules of pronunciation of English to letters they see written down in the phonics font, rather than the pronunciation rules of Spanish. It helps them keep the two languages separate in their minds, and help avoid confusion between the two.

6.5. Things to avoid

1. Avoid giving learners words they can't decode. Try to ensure the level of any texts the learners are working with contain only the sounds and graphemes they already know.

2. Avoid teaching letter names. Teach the sounds first. Learners can learn the names of the letter sounds later on. spell words out using sounds and not letter names too while the learners are in the first stages of learning phonics.

3. Avoid teaching learners to sight read. Sight reading, as we saw in unit 8, is when a child recognises the shape a word makes, without knowing the individual sounds or letters that make up that word. When teaching tricky words, first point out the difficult part of the word and explain the sound that those graphemes make. Then encourage learners to decode the word themselves, using the grapheme-sounds that they already know to decode the rest of the word. For example, when teaching the word like, first tell the learners that i_e in a word makes a /ai/ sound. then get them to decode the rest:

l – ai - k

6.6. Choosing what to teach first

In the last unit, we looked at word frequency, and how frequent words were often chosen as the first ones to be taught, because these were the most useful words to know how to read. With phonics, we can use a similar assumption in order to decide which words to teach first. In the 1940s, Edward W. Dolch carried out research into word frequency in children's books. He came up with a list of the 100 most common words:

a	and	he	I	in	is
it	of	that	the	to	was
all	as	at	be	but	are
for	had	have	his	him	not
on	one	said	so	they	we

with	you	about	an	back	been
before	big	by	call	came	can
come	could	did	do	down	first
from	get	go	has	her	here
if	into	just	like	little	look
made	make	more	me	much	must
my	no	new	now	off	old
only	or	our	other	out	over
right	see	she	some	their	them
then	there	this	two	up	want
well	went	were	what	when	where
	which	will	who	your	

[Source: https://www.nala.ie/tutors/top-tips/teaching-reading/common-words]

Many of these words are sight words, and should be taught as such. They are important because they represent about half of the words children will encounter when they begin reading.

Another important consideration is the letters or sounds you teach first. In the same way that you should start with the most frequently used words, it is important to start with the most frequently used sounds. In Jolly phonics, as we saw in the previous unit, the first six sounds are: s a t I p n. The most frequently used sounds in English are m, s, t and a. So if you are teaching phonics yourself, without following a prescribed system, you will probably begin with these sounds.

Finally, it is important to find the sounds that are most easily combined to form words. By combining these three aspects, your learners will see immediate and fast progress with both reading and writing.

6.7. Putting it all together

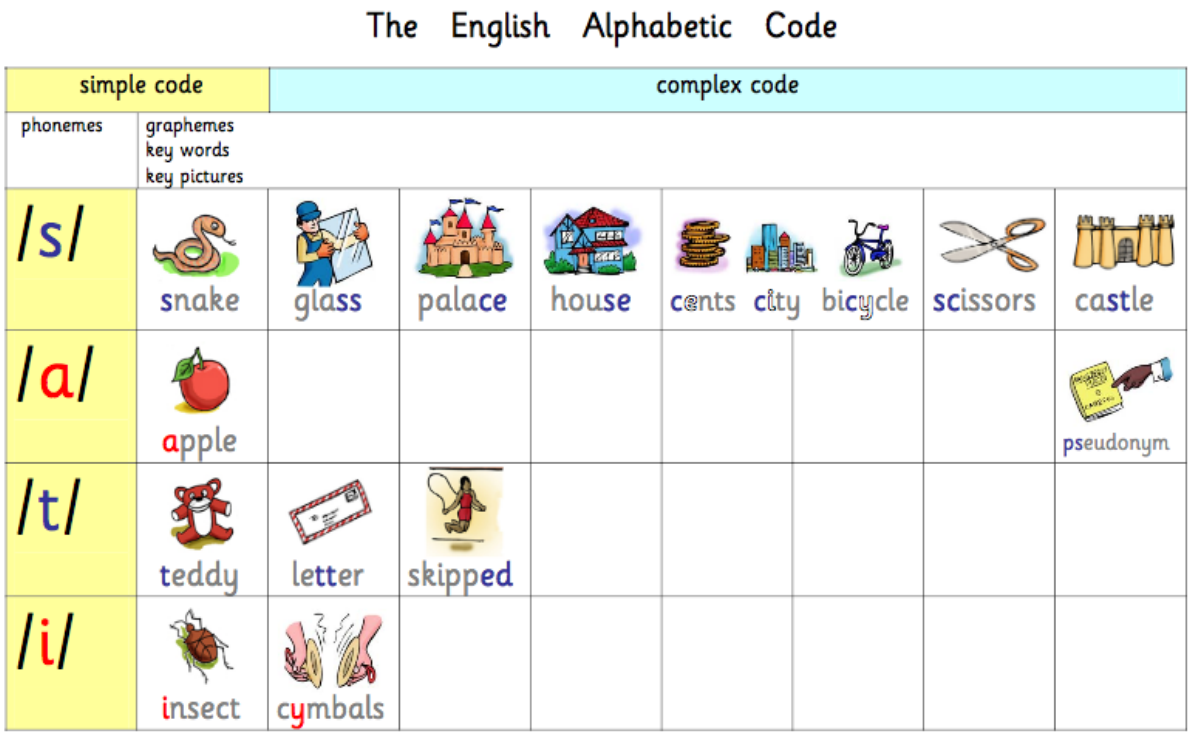
When you are teaching phonics, you are teaching the relationship between the smallest units of speech and the letters, or groups of letters that represent them. Learners find out that it is a reversible process; they can decode written letters into sounds to produce spoken words, and they can encode the sounds they hear into written letters to produce written words.

As we saw in unit 1, the English language is made up of a mixture of many different languages. Each contributing language has brought its own spelling-pronunciation

relationships with it, resulting in a complex alphabetic code with 26 letters representing 44 sounds. One phoneme (unit of sound) can be represented by one, two, three or four letters. So although the first steps of teaching synthetic phonics involve identifying the most common representation of each sound, it is also important to begin to introduce alternative spellings as soon as you feel your learners are ready for it. How ready they are will depend on their age, of course. For a three year old, it may prove to be too confusing to introduce more than one spelling of a sound. For a five or six year old, however, this would be more appropriate. Bear in mind that any three year old will be learning phonics for several years, and will frequently revise previous sounds as they get older. This constant revision process provides the perfect opportunity to introduce alternative spellings.

As a reference, the Alphabetic Code Chart is a useful document to print out and have to hand if you are teaching synthetic phonics. Here are some example charts. You will need to decide which one works best for you and your learners. Example chart 1 shows the sounds in the left-hand column, and alternative spellings, with pictures, in each row. Example chart 2 maps the synthetic phonics graphemes to the IPA chart we saw in previous units. This may be more useful if you are teaching older learners. Example chart 3 is similar to the first example, but the sounds and alternative spellings are coloured to indicate the unit, in the International Phonics system, in which each sound and alternative spelling is introduced. This would be useful if you were teaching using the International Phonics system and materials.

Example chart:



[Source: http://www.phonicsinternational.com/unit1_pdfs/The%20English%20Alphabetic%20Code%20-%20complete%20picture%20chart.pdf]

The Alphabetic Code chart has pictures to help identify the meaning of the word, and the phoneme within the word which is being shown.

The left-hand column contains the main grapheme that represents the sound itself. Then in each row, the different possible codes for this sound are shown.

Some teachers teach phonics in a linear way; they teach the sounds and graphemes first, then teach alternative spellings once learners are familiar with the sounds. Others prefer to teach simultaneously. That is, they introduce alternative spellings right from the beginning, but return frequently to revise the sounds and various spellings to ensure that they become fixed in the learners' understanding. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages, but one of the advantages of teaching simultaneously is that the teacher can differentiate the learning. This means that learners who are struggling can aim to learn only the graphemes in the left-hand column and the sounds they represent, while stronger learners have the possibility of learning more. This keeps all the learners motivated and challenged and avoids learners getting left behind or bored.

6.8. Who is it for?

Synthetic phonics was designed to help native-speaker children learn to read and write. So, does this mean it is not useful or appropriate for children learning English as a second or foreign language?

There is no reason to assume that it is not just as helpful for learners of English as it is for native speakers. Of course, it is not the only system a teacher should use to teach English, because a major element of language learning is omitted from the synthetic phonics systems; the *meaning* of the words is not being taught. Most synthetic phonics systems alone will assume that children know the meaning of a word they hear or read. But of course, non-native students will not necessarily have encountered the words before and so will need to be taught the meaning of the words alongside the spelling and how to read and write the words they are learning. However, most course books that include elements of synthetic phonics will have taken this into account, and will use synthetic phonics simply to compliment a good EFL syllabus.

Another question is that of the age of the learners. Phonics was designed for very young learners, specifically, children under 5. Does this mean it can't be used with older learners? Absolutely not! Of course, adjustments will need to be made to make it more age-appropriate, but older primary children (and even secondary children and adults) can learn a lot from synthetic phonics and it can be a useful classroom tool for correcting pronunciation errors once learners are familiar with it. For example, if a learner mispronounces a sound in a word, the teacher simply has to use the gesture for the correct sound, and the learner will immediately be able to correct themselves. And finally, it helps raise awareness of phonological aspects of the language too.

6.9. Teaching principles

Debbie Hepplewhite, author of the International Phonics system, states that there are specific key principles to teaching phonics. The principles incorporate knowledge and skills. As a teacher, you should teach both of these principles when you are teaching phonics.

Knowledge

You should know the alphabetic code. You should know the correct sequence for teaching the code, and you should know that the code is reversible (decodable and encodable).

Skills

There are three key skills: decoding (or reading), encoding (or writing) and handwriting (or forming legible letters).

Decoding should be taught without print. This means that the learners should be able to blend sounds to make a word. For example, the teacher says the sounds /k/ /a/ /t/, and the learners say 'cat'.

The next step is to teach learners to decode with print. To do this the teacher shows the learners a word on a flashcard, or writes it on the board. The learners sound out the graphemes and say the word aloud.

Encoding should also be first taught without print. To do this, the teacher says a word aloud, for example 'pig'. The learners say the sounds /p/ /i/ /g/.

Then learners can learn to encode with print. This is the same as word-level dictation. The teacher says the word, and the learners write it on the board, on individual whiteboards or in notebooks.

The first step of teaching handwriting is teaching learners how to hold the pencil correctly, with a tripod grip.

Next the teacher can model air-writing letters for the learners to copy. To do this, the teacher should always stand facing the same way as the learners. This means the teacher should stand with their back to the class. The teacher says a sound and models it by air-writing. The learners copy the teacher, using their finger as a 'pencil'.

Finally the learners can begin to write the letters down onto paper. Using the same technique, the teacher says a sound, and the learners write it. This can be built up slowly from individual sounds, to one-syllable words, to two-syllable words, and so on. As they write sounds or words, learners should always say the sounds out loud as they write them. This helps reinforce the sounds and graphemes further.

6.10. The teacher's role

The role of the teacher is to introduce new sounds and give learners sufficient practice of each sound in the classroom. The teacher should also systematically review sounds to help learners fix them in their minds as they build their bank of knowledge.

At home, or working individually, learners can practice the new sounds they have learned, using worksheets and decodable readers at the correct level.

The classroom environment is also very important when teaching phonics. The walls of the classroom should be used to display sounds/graphemes, words and sentences according to the level of the learners. This is very important as it gives the learners a constant supply of practice material and reinforces what is being learned in the classroom. It also provides a reference for the teacher and the learners when they are working on phonics, or even when they are working on something else but need to apply their phonics skills (decoding, encoding and handwriting). If the material is on the classroom wall, learners simply look up to find the information they need.

It is also important that phonics should be a whole school policy. In this way, teachers constantly reinforce the learning and learners can see how useful the learning is, as they apply it in various contexts. In bilingual schools, where learners are studying other subjects through English, if each teacher uses the same system for reading and writing in English, learners will feel more confident with it, and will progress more quickly as they are getting practice of the skills in more than just one subject.

Finally, in order to ensure learners progress quickly and understand how to decode accurately and quickly, it is important to give them plenty of practice at reading aloud. Texts should be at the right level for the learners; they shouldn't contain sounds or graphemes the learners have not yet learned. But children tend to progress quickly through the first stages of learning the sounds, meaning that it doesn't take long before they can start to read a variety of interesting and appropriate texts.

6.11. Summary

The three core skills

- Decoding (reading) Encoding (writing) Handwriting

1. Avoid giving learners words they can't decode.

2. Avoid teaching letter names.

3. Avoid teaching learners to sight read.

Approaches

The approach you use will depend on the age and ability of your learners:

Linear approach: teaching all the main sounds and graphemes, then teaching alternative spellings afterwards.

Two-pronged approach: Introducing alternative spellings alongside the sound and main grapheme.

As a reference, an Alphabetic Code Chart is a useful document to print out and have to hand if you are teaching synthetic phonics. Make sure you choose a chart that is useful and easy to use for you and your learners. As we have seen, there are many different versions available.

The role of the teacher

The role of the teacher is to introduce new sounds and give learners sufficient practice of each sound in the classroom. The teacher should also systematically review sounds to help learners fix them in their minds as they build their bank of knowledge.

At home, or working individually, learners can practice the new sounds they have learned, using worksheets and decodable readers at the correct level.

Learners should be given plenty of opportunities to read aloud in order to consolidate their learning.