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Implementing Synthetic Phonics in an ELT Context: Insights from the Pre-primary Classroom

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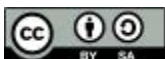
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Abstract

There are of course some notable differences between how phonics teaching works for L1 users, who are learning to read a language that is familiar to them, and for L2 users, for whom both the language and its writing system are new. L2 learners' first language may be quite different from English: it may have a transparent writing system with few variations in spelling, it may not be an alphabetic language like English and it may not have the same left-right print direction of English. There may be certain similarities between the writing systems for learners' L1 and English. Learners may not yet have fully acquired literacy in their L1 when their L2 phonics programme starts, or may be very young. These factors all need to be accounted for in L2 English phonics instruction. Other key differences concern the pronunciation of the sounds of English and L2 vocabulary, as learners will require explicit instruction and consolidation in each of these as part of an L2 phonics programme.

This paper explores the benefits and challenges of teaching phonics in an English Language Teaching (ELT) context, drawing on evidence from L1 research to inform L2 best practice, so that phonics instruction benefits L2 learners, whatever stage of their learning.

Keywords: phonics, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, letter-sounds, articulation, pronunciation, vocabulary.



Introduction

The increasing use of phonics in ELT contexts around the world is indicative of a growing interest in phonics as a key component of L2 pronunciation and reading instruction. Phonics is certainly a key component, alongside reading for meaning and reading for pleasure, of L2 reading instruction. There is a reliable body of research into the use of phonics for the development of early literacy in English as an L1 (Watson & Johnston, 1998; Dufva et al, 2001; Ehri et al, 2001; Johnston & Watson, 2003; Stuart et al, 2003; Johnston & Watson, 2004; Bowey, 2006; Calinan & van Der Zee, 2010; Johnston et al, 2012; Price-Mohr & Price, 2016; Johnston & Watson, 2019; Campbell, 2020), and some of the evidence is transferable to L2 contexts (Lázaro Ibarrola, 2007; Ali Rashid Al-Mamary, 2012; Borovik, 2013; Hardy, 2013; Nishanimut et al, 2013; Chu & Chen, 2014; Koirala et al, 2015; Andúgar & Pérez-Cortina, 2020; Papp, 2020; Corral & Hernández, 2021; Redón-Romero et al., 2021; Álvarez-Cofiño Martínez, 2019, 2023). Teacher knowledge of the processes involved in learning to read, and of the opaque nature of the English writing system, with its 44 vowel sounds and multiple spellings, are fundamental to successful phonics instruction. And all learners of English benefit from a systematic and explicit phonics programme, in order to progressively map letters and letter combinations onto sounds. These features of successful L1 phonics teaching can directly inform L2 best practice.

In English-speaking contexts such as the UK or USA, the teaching of phonics for L1 literacy development has received substantial consideration since the early 2000s, because phonic knowledge has been identified as pivotal to success for learning to read and spell in English. In ELT contexts this perceived advantage could extend to phonics being a vehicle for learning correct pronunciation of English sounds for both speaking and spelling, and to the development of vocabulary in English. Thus, understanding the letter-sound system of a new language is a valued route to both speaking and becoming literate in it.

Consequently, there is a need to understand how a successful ELT phonics programme might take account both of what research tells us about literacy development in English as a first language (L1), and the specific needs for learning phonics when English is a foreign or second language (L2). While phonics programmes designed for L1 contexts go some way to providing models for teaching phonics in L2 contexts, there is also a need to consider the range of differences for learners in the ELT context: these will include, for example, learners' age when being introduced to phonics, the previous literacy experiences of learners and differences between the learners' home languages and English.

In this paper, firstly, the main approaches taken to the teaching of phonics will be briefly described. Discussion focuses on the benefits and challenges of teaching phonics in an ELT context.

Next, some key considerations for teaching phonics will be pinpointed, highlighting the importance of subject knowledge for teachers and well-designed teacher training to ensure that teachers are supported in implementing phonics programmes. There are also some considerations relating to the learner, such as the age at which phonics teaching begins or learners' L1 literacy levels. Advice is also given in relation to the resourcing of the learning environment, what is appropriate at a given age or stage of learning.

Then, the aspects of phonics teaching that need to be considered before the implementation of an ELT phonics programme will be discussed. This includes practical considerations relating to using L1 phonics programmes in L2 settings, such as how frequently phonics sessions should and can take place, multisensory approaches for phonics teaching or ways to teach correct articulation of phonemes.

Finally, the delivery of ELT phonics will be covered. There is an example of how to use and adapt L1 phonics presentation sessions for an L2 context. Also, some reflection on what the order of introduction of the 44 sounds of the English phonetic system should be, to finish with some examples of classroom work in a Spanish state school with Pre- Primary children.

In the concluding section the key messages arising from this paper will be brought together and summarized. This is followed by the references.

The main approaches to teaching phonics

Phonics is important for the development of reading so that learners can understand how the sounds of English map onto the letters, and use this phonic knowledge to read and to make sense of words they have not seen before (Blevins, 2006; Levin, 2021). Phonic knowledge can also benefit learners' vocabulary development, and learning reading with phonics can also improve learners' pronunciation (Blevins, 2017).

The English alphabetic code is not transparent, and this makes it challenging to learn, and so teachers are advised to make their learners aware of differences between their L1 writing system and that of the English language (Blevins, 2017).

There are two main approaches to teaching phonics: a synthetic approach, which may better support the development of early literacy in younger learners, and an analytic approach, which may suit older learners.

Systematic synthetic phonics

For a phonics programme to be systematic and synthetic it must introduce phonemes to learners in an order that allows them to quickly start building a bank of simple, decodable words that they can read and spell. Learners pay attention to single phonemes in words and they blend or synthesize them to read the word (e.g. /b/+ /æ/ +/t/ = 'bat').

In order to be able to blend sounds, learners need to be phonemically aware: they need to be able to hear the individual sounds within words. This means that any systematic synthetic phonics programme used with young learners should include an initial stage that supports the development of both phonological and phonemic awareness through aural/oral games (i.e. Total Physical Response by raising up arms if they hear the target sound in words the teacher calls out, or cross arms over their chest if they do not hear the target sound (i.e. /s/ - chair, book, sun, kiwi, cats, Tuesday...); fly swatters game, to swat the grapheme/diagraph that represents the sound the teacher says, etc.).

Learners already proficient in their L1 will need some focus on developing sensitivity to phonemes that are present in English but not in the L1, what can be called "critical sounds", as for example the /ɪ/ sound in English for Italian L1 learners; for Japanese L1 learners, the distinction between /r/ and /l/ in English that is not made in Japanese; or the /z/ sound for Spanish L1 learners.

Analytic phonics

Where a programme takes an analytic approach, it teaches learners to recognize and hear patterns in words, and to read whole words drawing on prior knowledge of letters and sounds. To do this, learners "analyse" words using clues from recognising the whole word, the initial sound, parts of the word or syllables and the context. Learners are not encouraged to sound out individual phonemes as they are in the synthetic approach.

Analytic phonics instruction requires that learners have phonological awareness, thus, that they can hear sounds at the phoneme, rime and syllable level. For example, there might be discussion of how the words 'cat', 'kite', 'kitten' and 'cauliflower' are alike because they share the phoneme /k/. Instruction will also include recognising and using knowledge of the spellings of particular letter strings to read new words or parts of words. For example, learning words like 'knight', 'fight' and 'right' together because they contain the grapheme 'igh' as a representation of phoneme /aɪ/, clustered with a final 't'.

Where analytic phonics is based on the detection of spelling patterns at whole word level, it is likely to be more suited to older ELT learners who already have a grasp of how their own writing system works and have some insight into rime and syllables.

Choosing a synthetic or analytic approach

While some researchers argue that there is no convincing evidence that any single approach works consistently better than the other (Torgeson et al., 2019), researchers mainly agree that there is some weight of evidence to suggest that systematic synthetic phonics is the best approach for developing early reading skills (Johnston & Watson, 2003; Stuart et al, 2003; Johnston & Watson, 2004; Bowey, 2006; Calinan & van Der Zee, 2010; Johnston et al, 2012; Price-Mohr & Price, 2016; Johnston & Watson, 2019; Campbell, 2020).

The approaches to phonics teaching described in this paper largely reflect a synthetic phonics approach as best for pre-school and primary children (Blevins, 2017; Levin, 2021), but it is likely that an analytic approach may be more suited to learners fully proficient in their L1. This is because learners proficient in their L1 may already have some familiarity with spelling patterns common to their own language and English. Indeed, there are persuasive arguments for keeping an open mind about approaches to teaching phonics in ELT contexts because of the opacity of the English spelling system and the likelihood that, depending on the characteristics of their L1, learners may need to use both synthetic and analytic strategies to understand texts in English (Goswami, 2005).

Despite their differences, knowing how letters and sounds work together is part of both a synthetic and an analytic approach.

Benefits and challenges of teaching phonics in ELT contexts

Given the crucial role of phonics in learning to read and write in English as an L1, it could be assumed that the teaching of phonics would benefit the learning of English as an L2, while at the same time acknowledging that there may be challenges for learners and teachers.

Benefits:

- **Helps learners to make progress in word reading:** effective implementation of a phonics programme supports progress in both developing and applying phonemic knowledge (Levin, 2021). Learners can start to understand the ways in which phonemes and graphemes work together in English, and how the Grapheme-Phoneme correspondences are similar to, or different from, those of their L1. This phonic knowledge will help learners make progress in word reading.
- **Teaches the English words that are not decodable:** a phonics programme will introduce learners to exception words (tricky words) in English: words that are not decodable, such as 'do', 'what', and 'two'. Learning exception words help students learn strategies that will help them develop more effective and efficient word reading beyond being able to decode words which are phonically regular (Lloyd & Wernham, 1998; Miskin, 2011; Hepplewhite, 2011).
- **Helps improve pronunciation of English:** when preceded by a lot of aural/oral playful work with sounds, phonics teaching can raise younger L2 learners' sensitivity to the sounds in the English language. This is crucial for the correct articulation of phonemes and for the reading of both decodable and unknown words. For older ELT learners, a focus on the correct articulation of phonemes may aid pronunciation more generally.
- **Can contribute to vocabulary development:** there is emerging evidence that learning phonics in a foreign language may be particularly helpful for vocabulary acquisition (Bauckham, 2016). Being introduced to new vocabulary in meaningful contexts and learning while manipulating letter-sound correspondences systematically can help ELT learners to build a vocabulary in English.

- **Develops knowledge about language:** where links are made between learners' L1 and English, learners will develop the metalinguistic awareness that is acknowledged as a potential benefit of speaking more than one language (Adesope et al, 2010).

Challenges

- **Differences between the L1 and the L2:** as the sound system in English may be very different from that of the ELT learners' L1, teachers will want to consider how to make these differences explicit for their classes.
- **Developing new teaching strategies:** it is important that a phonics programme fosters the kind of talk-related environment needed to acquire a new language (Levin, 2021). This may require that ELT teachers learn new teaching approaches, which can be supported with appropriate training.
- **Learner motivation:** learning to read in English is challenging for many learners and it is important that teachers keep their learners' experiences of phonics engaging and stimulating and include activities to foster reading for meaning and pleasure (Blevins, 2017).
- **Variations in exposure to and proficiency in English:** learners will have very different levels of exposure to English both in and out of school. For example, some learners may come from homes where television is watched in English or they can attend private English lessons, while others experience neither of these. Some learners will be in international schools where English is the medium of instruction, whereas others are using and hearing English as part of one weekly lesson. Some learners are hearing English for the first time, aged three, in a pre-school phonics lesson, while others are introduced to it, aged seven or eight, when they are already proficient in their L1. Differences this significant will lead to obvious differences in the speed with which learners are likely to acquire a sensitivity to the phonemes and vocabulary of English.

Teaching ELT phonics: key considerations

Creating an environment which will foster a successful phonics programme involves a number of different factors. Teachers need good subject knowledge and may need to learn new methods for teaching phonics, and both of these areas require ongoing teacher training and support. Other factors are about learners: the age at which to begin phonics teaching, the influence of L1 literacy, the use of L1 in phonics lessons, and taking account of learner proficiency in English. There are materials to consider, in particular the advantages of 'real books' versus decodable readers. And moving beyond the classroom, there are possible effects of parent and carer support on pupils' capacity to make progress.

Teachers' subject knowledge

Research into literacy teaching in the UK and the US tells us that teachers who teach L1 English literacy successfully are able to do so because they understand how children develop as readers and why teachers might use the particular strategies and activities common to any phonics programme of teaching (Hall & Harding, 2003; Levin, 2021). This understanding is referred to as good subject knowledge for teaching phonics and early reading. Good subject knowledge is the basis of a successful phonics teaching environment, and stems from the following points:

- There are two elements involved in reading: word reading and language comprehension.

- There are 44 phonemes in the English language, many of which have multiple spellings, and some words are not phonically decodable.
- In a phonics programme, letters and sounds are introduced systematically, and within a phased structure.
- ELT students also need to learn English vocabulary in order to be able to read for meaning.

Effective phonics teaching is responsive to the needs of learners. Teachers should draw on their knowledge of their own learners and modify and adapt the resources they have to best suit their teaching and learning contexts.

Training and support for teachers

In order that practitioners can cultivate the necessary subject knowledge that will support good phonics teaching, it is important that they have access to high quality professional development and training. It is known from the implementation of curriculum initiatives in the UK that success at school level is closely related to the ways in which senior leadership teams engage with the need for their teachers to receive support and training (Earl et al, 2003). For the teaching of phonics, such training might include an introduction to the English writing system and to how phonics programmes are structured. Training content is likely to make an impact if it includes examples of best practice that can be related to the trainees' own classroom contexts. Training materials that include video footage of successful classroom practice will also be valuable, as teachers can then see phonics teaching in action, perhaps using methods that are new to them, and with strategies demonstrated step-by-step.

Learner age for beginning phonics

In L1 contexts, the teaching of letter-sound correspondences generally starts around the age of five years because this is when children usually start school, and because it is thought that by this age children have sufficiently developed phonological awareness to be ready to develop phonemic awareness (US National Reading Panel, 2000). In some ELT contexts, the teaching of phonics starts earlier than this (i.e. in Spain at the age of 3). It is recommended that early phonics teaching uses an aural/oral and multisensory approach (speaking and listening) and focuses on pre-phonics activities before the age of five.

Learner literacy in L1

In an L1 context, explicit instruction in phonics should first help learners to develop their knowledge of the **alphabetic principle**: the understanding that individual written symbols (graphemes) represent individual sounds of the spoken language (phonemes). This presupposes an awareness of individual phonemes in the first place – something which children acquire only through the process of learning to decode an alphabetic language (Blevins, 2017; Levin, 2021).

In an ELT context, learners (depending on their age and nationality) may have already learned to read in their L1, and, if this uses an alphabetic writing system, they will also have developed the alphabetic principle, including the awareness of sounds at the individual phoneme level. This knowledge can thus be transferred to learning to read in an alphabetic L2: some of the foundations of learning to decode written language will already be in place. We need to be mindful of the learners' L1 literacy skills, and the effects these may have on reading aloud in a foreign language. For example, Spanish learners of English (if they are already literate in their first language) may find it hard not to pronounce the letter 'j' as it would sound in Spanish (/X/), because this letter-sound correspondence may be completely automatic for them. Learners will need time and lots of practice to overcome these L1-based associations.

Conversely, in some ELT contexts, learners receive explicit instruction in English phonics at a very young age, and before learning to read in their L1. Where the L1 is alphabetic, it may be expected that these learners will experience an acceleration of progress when they learn to decode their L1, because of the knowledge of the alphabetic principle gained through their phonics work in English. However, teachers should proceed cautiously with such an approach, and where possible, base their phonics work on the use of songs and play when they are working with very young children.

Age-appropriate materials

Many resources for teaching phonics in English as an L1 are aimed at young children. Their content and presentation are therefore appropriate to the interests and cognitive development of children at this age (Levin, 2021). In contrast, learners in ELT contexts may start learning English at different ages, from pre-school, through primary school to secondary school, and beyond. In light of this, ELT teachers will want to consider how instructional approaches and resources need to be modified to reflect their own learners' particular needs.

It also needs to be remembered that most phonics programmes have been created by English L1 speakers for English L1 students (i.e. Jolly Phonics (Lloyd & Wernham, 1998), Read and Write Inc (Miskin, 2011), Floppy's Phonics (Hepplewhite, 2011), Heggerty (2003), Letters and Sounds (DfES, 2007), etc.), so ELT teachers will need to do adaptations of these programs before implementing them in their classrooms, especially as regards working on comprehension. English L1 students will understand the words they start blending and sounding out, as they are part of their everyday language. However, this is not the case of second language learners, who could be able to decode the written words in English thanks to phonics instruction, but do it in a mechanical but not comprehensible way. And, without comprehension, there is no real reading, just decoding.

In the same way, when using a phonics programme designed for use in English speaking countries, some of the images and activities depicted will be unfamiliar to learners in some ELT contexts. Teachers are advised to select or adapt phonics resources in order to present learners with meaningful vocabulary, images and activities that are recognizable from their own home and school-based experiences.

Planning for ELT phonics teaching

Successful phonics teaching requires using one phonics programme that introduces letters and sounds systematically so as to gradually build up learners' phonics knowledge. Young learners may need to work on developing phonological awareness before they are ready for a phonics programme.

ELT teachers need to plan for using an active, multisensory approach, especially with younger learners, and consider how to teach the articulation of phonemes. They also need to plan for introducing new vocabulary.

The discussion in this section of how to plan for phonics teaching draws on research from the USA into teaching phonics and guidance from the UK Department of Education for schools on selecting a phonics programme (National Reading Panel US, 2000; Department for Education, 2010). Ideally, we would refer to research conducted in ELT contexts, but, to date, research on ELT phonics teaching is very limited and has an insufficient evidence-base to draw on. That said, recommendations in this section would be useful in L2 situations.

Pre-phonics for pre-school learners

In order to be ready for a phonics programme, young learners need to have phonological awareness - an awareness of the sounds of language. Activities in this pre- phonics stage for pre-schoolers should

be playful and oral, and part of a language-rich environment where words and books are introduced to children within a meaningful context, with vocabulary, stories, nursery rhymes and related illustrations relating to the children's everyday experiences. Activities which develop phonological awareness will gradually develop awareness of the phonemes in English and an understanding of the visual appearance of the lower-case letters of the alphabet (Blevins, 2017; Levin, 2021).

Activity types include:

- promoting good listening, such as tuning into sounds, listening to and remembering sounds.
- promoting sound discrimination, i.e. listening to and identifying both environmental sounds and sounds in words.
- developing learners' sensitivity to patterns in voiced sounds, rhyming words, and alliteration. Stories are a good resource for helping learners hear rhyme and alliteration, and saying rhymes and singing songs are ideal activities for learners to say them.

Towards the end of this stage, activities should promote oral blending and segmenting of simple words (starting with CVC words –consonant-vowel-consonant-, as they are completely transparent in English), with children encouraged to use sound-talk (saying the sounds one at a time) to articulate the sounds they can hear in words. It is best to avoid using adjacent consonants (consonant clusters) e.g. nest, spin, or break, which are more difficult to both hear and articulate at this early age.

A systematic introduction to phonics

A good phonics programme will encourage learners to apply phonic knowledge and skills as their first approach to reading and spelling, rather than whole word reading. Letter-sounds are introduced in a systematic manner, starting with single sounds which map onto single letters, and progressing to more complex spellings of the 44 sounds in the English language (Lloyd et al., 1998; Blevins, 2006).

Frequency of phonics sessions

The preferred approach to phonics teaching for L1, which is supported by research evidence (National Reading Panel US, 2000; Department for Education, 2010) is that there should be daily sessions devoted to just phonics. Daily phonics sessions ensure optimal progress, with forgetting reduced to a minimum and maximal opportunities for practice of the newly learned phonemes and graphemes. Most L1 phonics programmes take this approach.

In ELT contexts where daily sessions are not possible, teachers can adapt their planning accordingly, mapping the phonics curriculum across perhaps two or three years of learning. The benefit of this is that it encourages collaboration between teaching staff. When implementing phonics with very young learners, it is advisable to introduce them as part of the daily routines ELT teachers do in class, such as the date, the weather, the season, etc. This way, students will anticipate that new sounds will be introduced, practiced or consolidated at the same moment in every session.

Multi-sensory approaches

Phonics activities should be multi-sensory because developing sensitivity to sounds in words is best related to aural and oral work. Using a multi-sensory approach means that activities use more than one of the senses, so that, for phonics, letter-sound correspondences are learned aurally and orally (sounds, songs and key words), as well as visually (flashcards and letters) and physically (associated gesture to each sound), thus making the learning process meaningful and oriented to the long term.

Multi-sensory teaching involves games and activities that support active learning strategies, and teachers will need resources such as word cards, concrete objects which relate to new vocabulary or which start with new phonemes, magnetic letters and flashcards, etc. to do this (Lloyd et al, 1998; Blevins, 2006, Blevins, 2017; Álvarez-Cofiño Martínez, 2019, 2023).

The phonics approach must be fun and playful, in a way that children feel comfortable and experiment with the English sounds in a systematic but not constricted way. Children should be the centre of the whole approach and the role of teachers will be that of a guide, a provider of content and resources to work in class, and a helper who will scaffold her children’s progress in phonics programmes.

Articulating phonemes

Opposite to English L1 contexts, the implementation of synthetic phonics methods in English L2 contexts is not aimed to reading and writing at early stages, but to help children become aware of the different point of articulation of the English sounds, thus improving their pronunciation a lot. L2 learners will benefit from practising articulating phonemes correctly. In L2 phonics teaching, this will involve an explicit focus on pronunciation that would not necessarily be included as part of the activity in an L1 phonics programme. Correct articulation is important because, without this, whole words may be pronounced in ways that are incorrect, and this might inhibit learners’ access to the meaning of words or how to spell them. Then, reading will turn up as a “side effect” when working on phonics in ELT contexts, since from the moment children are able to map sounds into their corresponding graphemes/digraphs, they will also be able to blend them together and sound out words, language chunks and simple sentences.

In order to prepare L2 for English phonics, teachers can do some “phonics gymnastics”, which consists on showing children how to correctly position the tongue and lips in order to articulate sounds correctly. This is helpful for non-native speakers of English because they become aware of the different position of the tongue and lips when they have to pronounce sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue’s phonological system. Doing exercises such as opening the mouth exaggeratedly, or rounding/stretching the lips quickly is like stretching your muscles before doing any kind of exercise: the warmer they are, the better and more elastic they will be to reproduce the new sounds correctly

There is some evidence of the usefulness of an approach called “cued articulation” for supporting pronunciation (Passy, 1990). This approach involves the teacher using a number of different hand signals which indicate where the tongue and lips should be positioned in order to pronounce phonemes correctly. Originally intended for learners with specific language disorders, it can also be of value for ELT learners because of the way in which the visual cue supports memory for correct articulation.

Teaching the articulation of phonemes is an interactive activity and can be playful, particularly for young learners (see Table 1 below for practical examples). Whether young or older, learners need to be able to experiment without fear of mistakes they might make. In addition, it is important for teachers to praise learners’ successes and not to labour over correct articulation, so as to maintain learner motivation.

Table 1 Practical ideas for teaching articulation to young learners. (Own elaboration)

Purpose of activity	Practice
Demonstrating how to articulate English phonemes.	Children can sit on the floor in a semi- circle facing the teacher, so that they can see the teacher’s mouth when he or she is presenting the sounds, and the teacher can see learners’ faces and mouths when they are saying the sounds.
Playful activities to help learners correctly position the articulatory organs.	Have the learners place a small mirror in front of their mouth when sounding out plosive consonants to see how the mirror gets foggy with the air exhaled; or putting their fingers in the alveolar ridge to pronounce correctly /t/ and /d/, feeling their tongue touching their finger nail when they pronounce /d/.

ELT phonics lessons: Insights from Spanish Pre-Primary Classes

The following examples of classroom work come from a Spanish state school in the north of the country, where Pre-Primary children are exposed to English phonics from the age of 3. Although with 3 year-olds only phonological awareness is worked (identify sounds in words, identify number of sounds, identify position of sounds in words, rhyme, alliteration, etc.), from the age of 4 on, children start working on English synthetic phonics programmes adapted to the ELT context they are at.

The recommended framework for a phonics lesson is as relevant to L2 phonics as for L1 phonics. What differs is the time spent on teaching and consolidation. This section presents a framework for phonics sessions, and outlines teaching strategies for phonemic awareness and vocabulary development that are likely to work L2 phonics teaching, as well as some straightforward assessment activities for assessing learner progress in phonic knowledge and skills.

Adapting phonics lessons for an ELT context

Depending on their L1, learners may have more difficulty hearing and pronouncing certain phonemes which are unfamiliar to them from their L1. In these cases, the phonemes may take longer to learn and articulate. The teacher may need to introduce these new sounds more gradually. In an ELT context it is generally recommended that teachers stop after the introduction of every two sounds to do a consolidation session (Álvarez-Cofiño Martínez, 2019); this is slower than for L1 learners, who will learn five phonemes and their associated graphemes over five days. L2 learners need more time to consolidate the new sounds, to practise new phoneme articulation and to understand new vocabulary in which the sounds will occur. In the case of the Spanish students described above, for example, “critical sounds” like /ʒ/, /w/, /z/, /Δ/, amongst others, need more time to be practiced and consolidated, as they do not exist in the Spanish phonetic system and children need to practice the point of articulation to be able to sound them out appropriately. From the author’s personal experience, in ELT contexts it is better to stop and consolidate those sounds that differ more from the phonetic system of the students’ language, than following the same pace of phonics programmes for English L1 speakers. Therefore, the recommended pace in ELT contexts would be:

- Session 1: Introduce a new sound.
- Session 2: Introduce another sound and revisit the previous one.
- Session 3: Practice and consolidate the two first sounds (using different resources and games).
- Session 4: Introduce a new sound and revisit the previous ones.
- Session 5: Introduce another new sound and revisit the previous ones.
- Session 6: Practice and consolidate the two latter sounds (using different resources and games).
- Session 7: Introduce a new sound and revisit the previous ones.
- Session 8: Introduce another new sound and revisit the previous ones.
- Session 9: Since we have already introduced the first group of sounds (six sounds per group), devote a whole phonics session to practice and consolidate the first group. From this moment, we can start practicing blending of CVC words with our students.
- Following sessions: follow the same schedule described above until all 44 sounds have been seen.

On the graph below, there is an example of the sounds introduction routine described before and used with the Pre-Primary Spanish students.

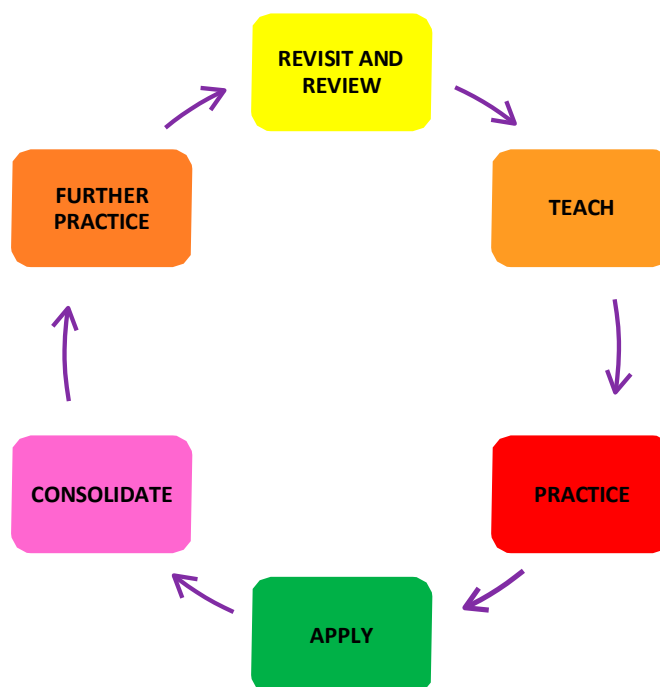


Figure 1 Sounds presentation routine. (Own elaboration)

It is important to remind here that, in ELT contexts, teachers must make some extra effort as regards working on comprehension, since L1 students will understand the words they sound out, but L2 speakers will need a lot of oral input through stories, nursery rhymes, games, etc. to work on comprehension. As well as this, ELT teachers will need to print small pictures that they can stick at the back of word cards (usually provided by phonics programmes) to scaffold comprehension when their students sound out those words (Álvarez-Cofiño Martínez, 2019, 2023).

Order of phonemes introduction

Teachers may want to ensure that the order of phoneme or grapheme introduction is a close match to children’s home language in order that links can be made between the two languages. However, in some contexts, this may not be applicable. In Spain, for example, phonemes in the L1 are not introduced in a set order, and teachers are therefore likely to use the order presented in an English L1 phonics programme, which is based on the frequency of appearance of the sounds in the language. Thus, the more frequent sounds are the first ones to be introduced. However, ELT teachers may modify their introduction in favour of introducing more familiar sounds earlier in the programme. This approach is more likely to foster early success and therefore the motivation for learners to persist in learning the new language.

Phases

1. Sound-letter identification. This is the earliest stage in phonics programmes, where children start mapping sounds onto their corresponding graphemes/digraphs. In order to practice this, many different manipulative games can be played in class using varied resources (i.e. flyswatters, paper plates, egg carton boxes, phonic fans, letter cubes, etc.)



Figures 2 and 3 Letter-sound correspondence resources

(Personal photo archive)

2. Blending and segmenting. Once children are able to identify several letter-sounds, we can start working on blending, a technique consisting on putting letter-sounds together in order to sound out longer units (words, sentences). As it has already been pointed out, starting with CVC words (consonant-vowel- consonant) is really motivating for children, as those words are completely transparent and easy to “read”. One of the most versatile resources for working blending are phonic fans. They are going to be the first “writing machine” for our students and, apart for using them to practice and consolidate both independent sounds (if called aloud in isolation), or blending (if words are called out), they can also be used for assessing children’s phonics knowledge.



Figures 4 to 8 Letter-sound correspondence resources: phonic fans, linking cubes, Mr. Wolf is Hungry

(Personal photo archive)

3. Tricky Words. These are words that do not follow the patterns of the main 44 sounds and they change their pronunciation, so that is why they are considered tricky. Most of these words are grammatical words, empty of content, and they need to be learnt by children. The best way to

help them do so, is to introduce them one per session and proceed the same way as with the individual sounds (teach, practice, apply, consolidate, further practice, review). Making magic with children was the best way this author found out time ago to help students “understand” that thanks to the magic, there are changes in the way we sound these words out, very different from the ones acquired with the 44 main sounds.



Figures 9 to 14 Tricky Words presentation set, contextualized reading cards, build up the word cards, manipulative games to consolidate

(Personal photo archive)

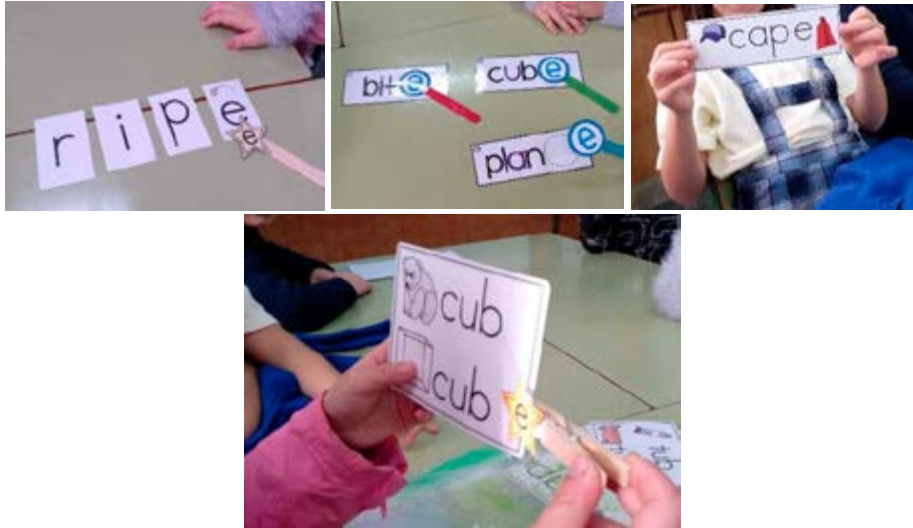
4. Alternative Spellings. Once teachers think that “everything’s done”, they face one of the most relevant aspects of the English phonemic system: alternative spellings. In English there are many sounds that can be spelled very differently, i.e. the sound /aɪ/ can be spelled “a” (bacon), “ai” (rain), “ay” (play), “eigh” (sleigh), “a_e” (cake) or “ea” (break). This is something children need to know in order to sound out and write (in the future) words correctly.



Figures 15 to 17 Tricky Words presentation set, contextualized reading cards, build up the word cards, manipulative games to consolidate

(Personal photo archive)

5. "Magic -e". Unstressed "-e" at the end of a word in English is mute and, sometimes, it even affects the sound of the previous vowel (i.e. cake, like, phone, cube). This is another of the peculiarities of the English language that must be worked with ELT learners, as there are many "magic -e" words in English.



Figures 18 to 21 "Magic -e", manipulative games to consolidate

(Personal photo archive)

6. Sounds features. Finally, ELT teachers must also take into account other characteristics of the English sounds such as long/short, voiced/devoiced, hard/soft, etc. Most of these features should be better worked in Primary Education, rather than in early years.



Figures 22 to 25 Different sounds features (length, rhyme, syllabication, hard/soft) manipulative games to consolidate

(Personal photo archive)

7. Reading. This would be the last step of the whole process. Reading means not only decoding, but also understanding what we read. This is why, a lot of oral practice, listening to stories, nursery rhymes, songs and chants are necessary to offer our children a quality input that allows them to read for meaning. The most usual path to comprehensible reading would go from word level, to sentence level and, finally, to text level. Word and simple sentence level can be worked at the Pre-Primary stage, leaving text level for Primary Education.



Figures 26 to 30 Different reading modes (CVC words, language chunks, pictograms, sentence strips, decodable books)

(Personal photo archive)

While we know that the teaching of phonics is essential for learning to read, and that children need to learn how to read for meaning, it is also of fundamental importance that reading is a pleasurable activity. Teachers in ELT contexts can usefully engage learners of any age with ‘real books’: picture books in English that are visually appealing and which tell stories with both words and pictures. Sometimes these books even have no words at all. ‘Real books’, including wordless picture books, can be a very useful in the ELT classroom resource because the discussion about the story in the pictures will support the development of and rehearsal of new vocabulary, and the discussion of story structures transcends languages. These activities foster reading for both pleasure and meaning (Daugaard & Johansen, 2014).

Common difficulties and suggested solutions from classroom experience

- *Should I teach the sounds and then the names of letters or the other way around? Or should I teach them at the same time?*

This might vary according to the age of learners we are working with. For very young children (under the age of 6) it is best to work only with sounds, in order to build phonemic awareness.

Introducing the names of the letters at the same time children are learning the sounds could be confusing for them. However, once children know well the sounds, they can then learn the names of the letters, which, depending on the time devoted to phonics along a whole academic year, could take place in Primary Year 1.

- *My students only have one phonics lesson a week; not every day as suggested by the phonics programme I use. Does this mean my learners cannot progress as the programme intends?*

It is helpful to be prepared to take longer than the phonics scheme might suggest, particularly when working with very young learners. Some schools teach English only once a week, progressing as far as they can with the phonics programme in the time available and ensuring that the content is taken forward into the next academic year. This involves close co-ordination of the English teachers within the school – and this has the advantage that all of the teachers are involved in phonics teaching.

- *We try to teach English phonics to children in pre-school. I am under a lot of pressure to do this.*

Where phonics teaching starts at 3 years old, as is the case of many schools in Spain, it should be focussed on playing with sounds. Phonics is not only about learning to read and write, it is about developing sensitivity to sounds in words, so a listening and saying approach can be very beneficial for developing young children's phonological and phonemic awareness.

- *My students have varying levels of proficiency in English. How can I deliver a systematic phonics programme that meets all their needs?*

This is a problem for teachers in English-speaking countries, as well, and is common across the curriculum. If extra time is needed for some learners to achieve mastery of phonics, then more proficient learners can be given additional tasks such as more challenging texts to read, more focus on accurate pronunciation, or exploring different spellings for phonemes.

- *There are so many specialist terms in phonics teaching. Do I need to understand all of them and do I need to use words like 'grapheme' and 'phoneme' with my students?*

Specialist terms used in the teaching of phonics can be introduced and explained in training for teachers before phonics programmes are implemented in schools. Where ELT teachers are trained language teachers, they are likely to be familiar with the terms already. What really matters is that teachers have secure subject knowledge for teaching phonics and that they understand the meanings of terms. And, obviously, these will not be used with students.

- *My English pronunciation is not very good and I worry that I cannot teach my students phonics because of this. I do not know if I am teaching the accurate articulation of phonemes.*

It is a fact that ELT teachers can actually improve their pronunciation through teaching phonics. Phonics training materials in ELT contexts can be particularly useful to teachers when they include explicit reference to articulatory phonetics by including specific training in the articulation of sounds that will help teachers to position the tongue and lips appropriately. This might be through use of audio-visual media that model phoneme articulation by a native English speaker.

- *I do not have time to assess all of my students' individual progress in phonics. How can I ensure their progress without doing this one to one?*

Assessment materials are usually included with a good synthetic phonics programme and these might help you track students' progress by, for example, noting which letter-sounds have been learned and which need consolidation. If you do not have time to complete paper records then you can usefully monitor students' progress by setting up whole class activities that check their understanding by revising material already taught, or, eventually, creating working stations that allow you work with smaller groups. You could use flashcards, CVC word cards and posters that contain already learned letter-sounds in order to assess whether learners have grasped them fully. The phased order to the introduction of the sounds in a phonics programme should also give teachers a useful benchmark for assessing where our learners should be, even though they will likely be learning at a different pace than children in an L1 country.

- *How can we teach children sounds using vocabulary that they do not know?*

In an L1 context teachers can mostly assume knowledge of the vocabulary being used as examples for new sounds, but in an ELT context, new vocabulary will need to be taught alongside a sound. Teachers can create flashcards to build children's picture vocabulary alongside their teaching of phonics, and have their learners practice sounds in different word families to create associations between new vocabulary items. Children need to be speaking and reading with full comprehension of the words they are saying or reading, and so phonics in ELT contexts needs to be a tool for vocabulary building.

Conclusions

The use of phonics in ELT contexts around the world is evidence of a growing interest in phonics as a key to teaching reading to L2 learners. In order for L2 phonics to be successful, it is important that ELT educational teachers understand best practice for teaching phonics and the theory behind it. A wide range of features in L1 phonics teaching will need attention before phonics is taught to L2 learners.

It is crucial that the teaching of phonics should be systematic and explicit in order to support learning of the ways that letters and sounds work together in the English system. This is because the English system is opaque, which makes it more challenging to read than a language with a transparent orthography, like Spanish. All learners, whether L1 or L2, need a phased introduction to the many different ways in which some phonemes may be spelled.

L2 learners will benefit from support with the challenges of learning English that L1 speakers do not necessarily encounter when learning phonics. For example, L2 learners will need explicit instruction in the correct articulation of phonemes because this is central to understanding the spelling system. This in turn will help them acquire accurate pronunciation in English. Alongside instruction in articulation, they will need to learn as whole words the exception words in the English language that do not obey phonic rules (tricky words). Another key feature for L2 learners is that phonics learning needs to involve plentiful exposure and consolidation of new vocabulary, in order that they can both decode new words and understand what they mean.

Teachers in ELT contexts will need to be attentive to the differences between their learners' L1 and English. Differences between writing systems will need to be explained so that learners understand the print direction of English, the alphabetic principle and the 44 phonemes in the English language. ELT teachers need to monitor how proficient their learners are in their L1 because this will make a difference to their capacity to learn English. And teachers will enhance their L2 learners' development of English phonic knowledge if they identify similarities between the L1 and English.

In terms of maintaining learners' motivation, when ELT teachers are using phonics programmes designed for L1 learners, they may need to supplement the materials to ensure that resources for their

learners are age-appropriate and culturally appropriate, to ensure comprehension and to retain learner engagement in the phonics programme.

Finally, phonics is just one part of learning to speak, read and write in English. And while phonics is arguably the key to accessing reading in English, the journey to reading competence and confidence will also include reading for meaning and reading for pleasure.

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