

Phonics Teaching Tips!

Teach a planned, systematic synthetic phonics programme and, in addition, adopt a rigorous approach to incidental phonics teaching:

1. Teach children never to sound out the 'end e' in words. Many words in the English language end with the letter 'e'. Whilst in some words this 'end e' alerts readers to decode the words with long vowel sounds (e.g. 'make' is /m/ /ai/ /k/ - not /m/ /a/ /k/), nevertheless, many words with 'end e' are not 'split digraph' words and this end letter 'e' does not require decoding with its own 'sound' (apart from words such as 'cafe' and 'acne'). The presence of the letter 'e' at the end of words, however, needs to be noted, over time, for spelling purposes.
2. Once the single vowel letters **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u** are introduced as code for their *short* vowel sounds of /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/ (as in 'at', 'enter', 'in', 'on' and 'under'), start to teach 'incidentally' (whenever the opportunity presents itself) that these single letters can also be code for the *long* vowel sounds of /ai/, /ee/, /igh/, /oa/ and /y+oo/ (as in 'table', 'me', 'find', 'old' and 'unit'). When decoding, teach, "If blending with the *short* vowel sound does not make a 'real' word, try blending again with the *long* vowel sound." This creates a very flexible early reader who understands that the decoding process needs to be addressed with common sense, **trying alternative sounds and able to modify pronunciation**. This also creates young readers who are not afraid of getting words wrong because that's what happens with this reading business in the English language – it's part of the learning process and not a totally precise state of affairs!
3. Teaching the notion of 'tweaking (modifying) the sounds' will address many words such as 'of', 'his', 'has', 'is', 'as', 'the', 'put' and 'pull' ("/o//v/, /h//i//z/, /h//a//z/, /i//z/, /a//z/, /th//u/, /p//oo//t/, /p//oo//l/"). It is a fundamental aspect of teaching the alphabetic code that we need to apply a level of common sense. If all the early words taught are totally straightforward, this can mislead the children and may not lead to an early ability to decode words fearlessly!
4. Teach the children to say only one sound when consonant letters are doubled. Whilst 'ss', 'll', 'ff' and 'zz' are taught as special cases for spelling purposes, it is easy to teach children to simply say the 'sound' once for any double consonant letters for reading purposes. If the notion of 'short vowels' and 'long vowels' for single vowel letters is introduced (see point 3. above), then children can learn that double consonant letters (including '-ck') are always preceded by **single letter 'short vowel sounds'**.
5. Once letter 'e' and letter 'd' have been introduced, then through your incidental teaching start to draw attention to them in 'wider reading' (for example, in shared Big Books and story books) and modelled in your general 'wider writing' when they are used as '-ed' verb endings. This addresses '-ed' verb endings as code for the sounds /d/ (rained), /t/ (skipped) and /(schwa u or i)+d/ (decoded). Also teach how to pronounce the letter '-y' endings as code for a /ee/ and /igh/ (funny, my). Address '-er' endings as soon as practicable (schwa /u/ or /er/ as in sister, mother, father, brother). These incidental early teaching steps are liberating for the possibility of reading more natural text in a wide variety of books and they also begin to help children with early spontaneous writing in addition to systematic controlled writing practice.

Teach a planned, systematic synthetic phonics programme and, in addition, adopt a rigorous approach to incidental phonics teaching – RATIONALE:

Incidental teaching is ESSENTIAL. Systematic programmes take a long time to deliver because there is a lot of alphabetic code to teach explicitly! Children cannot 'wait' to learn about a 'full' alphabetic code until it happens to occur in the planned programme. Teachers and learners need to be proactive and ambitious and teach incidentally to supplement the structured programme for reading and spelling skills!

Incidental phonics teaching should occur as the need arises naturally and where it is common sense. This may well be on a daily basis or several times a day including whenever children are asked to read aloud.

Incidental teaching should be a feature of general class teaching. It significantly increases and accelerates knowledge of the alphabetic code and personalises the teaching, addresses differentiation and provides constant revision.

For example: Alice is learning about the /s/ sound and the letter shape 's'. She thinks about her name and tells her teacher that she can hear /s/ at the end of her name but there is no letter 's'. The teacher tells Alice that she is right and together all the children and the teacher orally segment Alice's name to identify the sounds in it /a/ /l/ /i/ /s/. Now the teacher writes Alice's name on the board (or everyone looks at Alice's name card). The teacher leads the children along as they note the capital 'A' as code for /a/, the 'l' for /l/, the 'i' for /i/ and so what is code for the last /s/ sound? Once 'ce' is identified as code for /s/, it might also be appropriate for the teacher to quickly say (and write on the board if possible) that there are other words with 'ce' as code for /s/ like 'dance' and 'prince'. If there is an Alphabetic Code Chart nearby (see the free charts in Unit 1 of Phonics International), this is a good opportunity to find the /s/ row and to track along it to the code 'ce' demonstrating to children how the chart works. Alice may be the child who remembers this from now on as this bit of code information is very meaningful to Alice and she is already astute about letters and sounds. One or two other children in the group may remember this code too, so that when they look at story books, they see 'prince' or 'ice-cream' and can remember that the letter group 'ce' is code for /s/. Other children may not remember at this stage but, over time, more children will learn elements of the alphabetic code from constant, incidental teaching.

Free Unit 1 resources: <http://www.phonicsinternational.com/unit1.html>

When children read books aloud and encounter an unknown grapheme, the supporting adult can say, "In this word, those letters [*point*] ARE CODE FOR the /___/ sound" and then the child can blend the word. For some children, this will only support them to blend the word in this instance, but other children *will* be able to remember alphabetic code taught incidentally in this way.

It doesn't matter if children don't learn 'there and then' the code which teachers tell them about incidentally. This is, after all, an 'add-on' to the planned teaching and the constant 'drip-drip' approach will take effect.

The overarching message for incidental teaching, whether the teacher's explanation is very brief indeed or a little more protracted, is to say at the end, "...and I am [or, *the next teacher is...*] going to teach you more about that later". This reassures the child that they are not under pressure to remember it 'now' because it will be repeated and taught again 'later'.

Simple approaches to differentiation:

A teacher constantly differentiates his or her teaching as a tool of the trade. The SAME phonics resource can be suitable for ALL the children on the basis that the teacher understands each child can access the resource at his or her own level. The more simple the teacher's classroom management, the more focused the teacher can be to support those with most need. With phonics teaching, children can be trained in the skills and routines of using familiar resources so that many can complete basic activities independently, whilst the adults support the children who need extra teaching and/or supervision more directly.

Provide guidance for adults who hear children read:

"In this word, those letters (or 'that grapheme') are code for the /___/ sound."

When reading books, clearly some children will need more support than others. Even where books are designed to be cumulative and decodable, some children will need extra assistance such as reminding them, or teaching them, about specific letter/s-sound correspondences during the reading process.

Other children may have no difficulty reading books including alphabetic code that has not been formally taught as part of a planned programme. Some children are able to deduce code for themselves. **If teachers and parents are properly guided in how best to oversee the 'reading aloud' process, many more books will fall into the domain of being suitable for children to attempt to read aloud (see pdf link below).**

In other words, even where schools go to some lengths to provide cumulative, decodable books to match the level of alphabetic code already taught, the individualism and learning rate of the children will always make this a less than perfect system – fine in theory but not always in practice. If good guidance is provided for all the adults (for example, direct in reading record books, as part of school policies on reading, in the school prospectus and through training and information evenings), then this will ease the concern about 'decodability'.

This document (see link below) is a one-side '**guidance for parents**' leaflet which may be considered suitable to stick into children's 'reading record' books (free to download from the free Unit 1 of Phonics International):

http://www.phonicsinternational.com/unit1_pdfs/parents_guidance_for_reading.pdf

There need be no concern about variations in accent. Teachers or parents simply need to point to the letter group (grapheme) and say, "In this country/county/state, we pronounce those letters (or 'that grapheme') as /...../" then the learner can go on to sound out and blend the word).

When the general teaching tips above are applied along with a systematic phonics programme, the vast majority of learners will be able to access natural text surprisingly quickly!

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