CHAPTER 1

Phonics, Why and How

This Chapter will:

- Explain why phonics are important in teaching reading and writing
- Outline complex phonic patterns, and the roots of irregularity
- Explain the principles of teaching phonics
- Introduce and define key terms, including synthetic and analytic phonics
- Consider some alternative theories of reading

Phonics is systematic teaching of the sounds conveyed by letters and groups of letters, and includes teaching children to combine and blend these to read or write words. It is of crucial importance, for the following reasons:

- The majority of the information conveyed by letters concerns sounds.
- Letters tell us more than any other source of information, even when we have to interpret the information they provide.
- We cannot read fluently until we read accurately, and this depends on accurate use of the information conveyed letters. Skilled, fluent readers do not guess.
- Once we have learned what the letters are telling us in a word, we can store it in our memory and retrieve it more quickly than if we had to work it out.
- As English is not completely regular, most children are unlikely to be able to perceive and use patterns in language for themselves (Rose 2006: 18).

- Direct observation (Rose 2006: 66–9) in schools has shown a consistent link between phonics and successful reading.
- Almost all weak readers have difficulty in blending sounds from letters to make words. Almost all good readers do this well.

Regular and irregular languages

Alphabetic writing represents the sounds we hear in words by means of letters. For reading, learners reconstruct the word by blending the sounds represented by the letters. For spelling, they translate the sounds in words into letters. Although letters often give us more than sounds, their links with sounds are their most consistent and important feature, and there is some link with sound in every word. Children and adults who can use this connection fluently and accurately build up a store of words that they can read very quickly. Familiar words are scanned swiftly, as they contain information that has already been learned and stored in the memory, while learners have a valuable technique for working out new words, even when the sound connection does not tell the whole story.

In some languages, notably Spanish, Finnish and Italian, the links between sounds and letters are very consistent – what you see is what you say. In English, the connections between sounds and letters have been affected by historical events and long-term changes in speech and pronunciation. As a result, phonics work most, but not all of the time, and we have to adapt our brain to interpret what letters tell us rather than simply translate letters into sounds and vice versa. This means that we need to take care in presenting phonics, so that children do not become confused when they come across words in which the letters do not behave as expected. The main causes of irregularity in English are:

- In the 150 years after the Norman conquest of 1066, English was flooded with French. The spelling of roughly one-third of English words reflects this – *table*, for example, makes perfect phonic sense in French, where *l* is pronounced before *e*. Try it.
- Over the centuries since English began to be written down, several letters which used to be pronounced, such as *k* in *knight*, no longer are. They are still retained in spelling. Modern,

everyday speech takes further shortcuts, particularly at the ends of words and in pronouncing vowel (voice) sounds.

- In the late Middle Ages, there was a shift in the way vowels were pronounced. Some words are spelled as they were before the shift, and so vowel sounds are not always written as we now speak them. The most common example is probably *was*.

What is a Vowel?

Most of us have been taught that vowels are the five letters, *a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u*. But a vowel is first and foremost a sound made with the voice, and the letters we know as vowels have the difficult task of catching and representing these voice sounds. The system of voice sounds in English is complicated. It includes composite vowels, known as *dipthongs*, which begin in one part of the mouth and move to another – say *boy*, and feel how your tongue moves upwards as you pronounce the *oy*.

Knowing when and when not to pronounce a letter, how to pronounce it, and what emphasis to give different parts of similar words (*photograph*, *photographic*, *photography*) requires us to interpret what the letters tell us in the context of what we know about the word's meaning. *The Learning Brain*, by Sarah-Jayne Blakemore and Uta Frith, FRS (2005), summarises key evidence from brain scans that show readers in English using a distinct section of the brain, between the processing areas and long-term memory storage, that is concerned with interpreting information from letters after it has been processed. This area was not active in Italian readers, whose language is regular, but was very active in English readers. This shows that the brain adapts itself in different ways to the demands of different languages.

Letter combinations

Early in the disputes over phonics in the National Curriculum, the Conservative minister Kenneth Clarke, asked what he meant by phonics, replied 'c-a-t says cat'. So it does, provided we take care not to add stray bits of

vowel to the *c* and *t*, producing an effect like *ke a te*. But three-letter words such as *cat* make up a small minority of English, as scanning a few lines of almost any text will show. Many words use letters in combinations, and these do not always reflect what we might expect the letters to produce on their own. Some writers on phonics refer to a two-letter combination as a *digraph*, and a three-letter combination as a *trigraph*. In my experience, children are happy with the term *group*, and so am I.

A group in which letters do as we might expect is *sh*. Words like *ship* or *finish* show fairly clearly elements of both letters in the group, and this one is easy to learn. Words such as *patient*, *station*, though, use the group *ti* to produce the same sound as *sh*, and this is far removed from the normal sound produced by *ti*, as in *tip*. This type of group requires a greater adjustment of thinking in order to learn and use it. Similarly, the softening effect of *e*, *i* and *y* after c – *face*, *city*, *bicycle* – and, most of the time after *g* – *generous, ginger, Egypt* – requires us to modify our first choice of sound for *c* and *g*, and to use a system of alternative letters (*kettle*, *kill*, *Kylie*) or blocking letters (*plag**u**e*, *g**u**ilty*) if we want to keep the sound of these letters hard.

The most frequent combination of letters, and one that demands an early adjustment of thinking, is final *e* that alters the sound at the end of a three-letter word such as *mad* to *made* (or *here*, *bite*, *note* and *cute*). Children often find it harder to discriminate between vowels than consonants in the first place, and this additional demand requires a further, major adjustment to their thinking.

Some current writers refer to *e* in these words as a *split digraph*, teaching it with other two-letter vowel groups; this is also an effective way to present the pattern. Each English vowel letter represents more than one sound, and, most of the time, this is indicated by grouping it with another letter. Common vowel groups are *ai*, *ay*, *au*, *aw*, *ee*, *ea*, *ei*, *oo*, *ou*, *oi*, *oy* (*raid, stay*, *autumn*, *awful*, *steep*, *tea*, *eight*, *stool*, *out*, *boil*, *boy*). Adding an *e* after the vowel can be seen as making a group, or digraph, *ae*, *ee*, *ie*, *oe*, *ue*, which may be split by another letter (*hate*, *complete*, *site*, *vote*, *lute*).

There is no clear evidence as to whether the split group approach or the concept of having one letter change the sound of another is better – it is a matter of professional judgement, and may depend on the age of the learners and how

much they already know. It is beyond doubt, though, that in learning to read and spell in English we have to do much more than put single letters together to make words – we have also to learn, understand and interpret the use of letters in combinations and groups.

How do we tackle irregularity and letter combinations in teaching?

We need, above all, to be careful in what we say, so that we do not lead learners to think that the language is more regular than it really is. It is important to take care not to use absolute statements, unless we are completely sure that they are right. If we use, from the beginning, phrases such as 'usually', 'most of the time' or 'nearly always', we help children build up the idea that phonics are likely to help, but do not give any false guarantees. The importance of these qualifying statements is often greatest when children are reading on their own or at home, where the teacher is not on hand to provide prompts. Learners can't know in advance whether a word is regular or not, or even when letters are used in combinations, and they need to be prepared for the times when phonics don't work.The case study below shows what can happen if a child learns nothing more than applying one sound to each word.

CASE STUDY

Paul, 7

Paul came to see me because of a serious problem with reading, for which he had already had over a year of private lessons. Paul knew most of the sounds conveyed by letters, but tried to read by calling out the sound of each letter and then guessing at the word. When he came to *the*, he tried several times to make the sounds *t – h – e* into a recognisable word, became frustrated, and settled for *ten*. Paul's understanding of phonics as a single sound for each letter was preventing him from learning to read, and effective teaching began with helping him to adjust his thinking to take account of combinations and to blend rather than sounding out one letter at a time. By the end of our first lesson, Paul had read the cover and page one of *The Cat in the Hat*.

When I was learning to drive, my instructor told me 'we believe everything the mirror tells us, but we don't believe the mirror tells us everything.' For a long time, I used this in teaching reading, substituting *letters* for *mirror*. This was helpful, but it became increasingly clear that we couldn't always believe everything the letters told us – silent *p* at the beginning of words didn't really tell us anything. So, the maxim I teach is now:

We use what the letters tell us, but we don't believe the letters tell us everything.

This is consistent with experience of everyday life, from an early age into adulthood. Are children good all of the time, or most of the time? Is Mummy (or their teacher!) in a good mood all, or most of the time? Can we rely on the train all of the time, most of the time, or some of the time? We all have our mental picture of what we can and cannot rely on, and of the conditions that make things more, or less, reliable. We build up a similar mental picture as we learn to read, and part of our task as teachers is to help learners to do this.

Synthetic phonics: the mainspring

When we read, we retrieve and put together information that has been set down using the alphabetic system, and when we write, we use it to represent, in order, the sounds that we would otherwise say. This is *synthetic phonics*, or *word-building*. Teaching schemes based on synthetic phonics have these points in common:

- Letter–sound correspondences are taught in a clearly defined sequence.
- Children have a short, pacy lesson each day.
- The initial programme typically takes a little over a term to complete.
- Children are taught how to blend sounds to make words, and practise this.
- They learn to spell at the same time as they learn to read.
- Teaching uses attractive resources, songs, games and actions.
- Teaching provides many opportunities for language development.

The most important point is that they require children to blend sounds from letters to read words, and the next most important point is that they do this in a systematic way, beginning with the most straightforward combinations of vowel-consonant-vowel words, and gradually introducing more complex patterns. This approach has the long-term benefit of preparing children for advanced reading, when they will meet regular letter combinations in prefixes and suffixes.

Synthetic phonics enables readers to extract and use the information represented by letters, and, with practice, to build up a store of words that are read so quickly that they seem to take almost no time to work out. Teachers sometimes refer to these as 'sight vocabulary' or just 'words recognised at sight', though the most sophisticated tracking systems (Bald 2003) have provided evidence that we are, in effect, tracking the contours of the letters with our eyes in order to distinguish one from another. This process is so fast that words are fed into our mind virtually instantaneously, and we are then able to group them together into meaningful phrases.

Synthetic phonics in spelling is easily integrated with reading. Children can build words using plastic or magnetic letters as they learn to read them. This avoids them having to write each word by hand in the early stages, allowing all their attention to be focused on the sounds and letters so that they have maximum opportunity to understand and reinforce the connections. The research in Clackmannanshire (Johnston and Watson, 2005) was particularly successful in promoting spelling.

The emphasis on the language-rich curriculum, initially through games, songs and stories, is important. Some children have very limited experience of language outside school, and are totally dependent on their school or nursery both to teach the basic skills of using language for communication and to liberate their imaginations. Rose's (2006) recommendation that phonics lessons should be 'discret' means that teaching needs to be specific and systematic, but not that phonics should be taught in isolation from everything else – on the contrary, children should be encouraged to see patterns and apply sounds and sound patterns in a wide range of activities, including nursery rhymes, poems, puppetry, telling and retelling stories.

CASE STUDY

Tommy and Arabella Miller

When Tommy joined the nursery in an Essex port town, he communicated by pointing and making sounds, with an occasional single word. Tommy enjoyed rhymes, particularly 'Arabella Miller':

Little Arabella Miller

Had a furry caterpillar.

First it sat upon her mother

Then upon her baby brother.

They said, 'Naughty Arabella Miller,

Take away that caterpillar.'

Tommy would sit in the front row at assembly and joyfully belt out this rhyme, with its three sentences and twenty-seven words. It was not just an exercise in sound patterns, but a framework for extending language and participation in a shared activity.

Synthetic phonics schemes: two controversial points

- Irregular words are taught separately, but irregularity is not explained.
- Books are not introduced until children have learned to read the most common regular words.

Current phonics schemes teach irregular words as 'sight words', but neither they nor Rose explain why some words are irregular, and why, therefore, phonics do not always work. This issue is tackled in Chapter 4.

The slight delay in introducing books in phonics lessons has been criticised, but need not cause problems if the language-rich curriculum is properly understood. Modern phonic schemes are accompanied by stories, rhymes, short texts and other language activities. There is no evidence of negative attitudes resulting from this work. If, though, schools choose to use books from the beginning, it is important that they explain clearly to children that not all words work as we expect, so that they do not become confused when they meet an irregular word.

Analytic phonics: a subordinate tool

Analytic phonics is *wordbreaking*. Children are presented with words and learn to pick out letters and to associate them with the sounds they represent. In some schools, analytic phonics has been used as an alternative to synthetic phonics in initial reading teaching, and is sometimes reduced to having children identify the first letter in a word. The approach does not teach children to blend sounds to make words. Analytic phonics is not, therefore, an effective vehicle for initial reading teaching.

But we know that synthetic phonics does not always work, and it is at this point that analytic phonics is needed. For example, in the words *know*, *knight*, *knuckle*, and *write*, *wrong*, *wrap*, analysis shows us that the initial, silent letter, is always followed by the same letter. This is so regular that the two letters can be considered as a little phonic group, much like *qu*. Used in this way, analytic phonics enables children to learn substantial groups of words, many of them very common, that require an adjustment to our normal interpretation of letter sounds. Compare *warm*, *water*, *war*, for example, with *bat*, *sat*, *that*.

The influence of analysis in these examples is so clear that analytic phonics simply cannot be excluded from the teaching of reading in English. Its place, though, is subordinate to that of synthetic phonics. Even after we have analysed irregular patterns, we need to blend them with the regular ones in order to read the words.

Alternatives to phonics

Alternatives to phonics as a basis for reading and spelling have been proposed since the middle of the nineteenth century. Early theories were based on objections to boring, drill-based teaching, and proposed teaching whole words, leading to an approach known as 'look and say' that became widespread in the middle of the last century. Later theories attempted to combine evidence from psychology and linguistics – hence the term *psycholinguistics,* whose chief advocates are the writers Kenneth Goodman (1978) and Frank Smith (1967). The latest alternative theory was the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) Searchlights (DfES 1998), in which phonics, grammatical knowledge, the reader's previous knowledge, and context were all held to work together to shed light on words.

This is not the place to discuss all of these theories in detail, but the following are among their most significant flaws:

- Whole-word reading does not give children the information they need to work words out for themselves, leaving those who do not learn to do this for themselves to fail
- Kenneth Goodman's theory (for example, 1967), that readers predict what is going to come next and then check their predictions by sampling the text, has been disproved by direct observation of readers in action.
- Goodman's miscue analysis, still widely used for assessment, relies solely on a reader's errors for information about his or her thinking, and does not take account of what is read correctly.
- Frank Smith's assertion that English spelling is too irregular to be used as a basis for reading is based on the application of strict logic to the system. The mathematical theory of 'fuzzy logic', in which members of a set have most, but not all of its characteristics, is a more accurate fit for English spelling, and allows computers to read text aloud, a procedure Smith held to be impossible because spelling was so irregular.
- Searchlights' single model of reading did not take account of changes in readers' needs as their store of known words and vocabulary develops, and appeared to give phonics equal status with other sources of information at all stages. It had no basis in research (Schatz and Baldwin 1986).

Rose's main recommendations and their implications

This is a summary of Rose's (2006: 70–72) main recommendations followed by a comment on their implications.

- High-quality, systematic phonic work as defined by the review should be taught discretely. The knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high-quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in learning to decode (to read) and encode (to write/spell) print.

Phonics teaching needs to be systematic. The term 'discretely' implies that the work needs to be covered in specific lessons, and not simply as it arises in the course of other literacy activities. The term 'prime' means that phonic work should be the main approach to reading and spelling.

- Phonic work should be set within a broad and rich language curriculum that takes full account of developing the four interdependent strands of language: speaking, listening, reading and writing, and enlarging children's stock of words.

Schools need to plan for language development in all of the activities children undertake, and to ensure that teachers and assistants understand the ways in which language strands depend on and contribute to each other. Reading, for example, extends children's knowledge of words and sentence structures beyond those most will meet in everyday conversation outside school, and this contributes to writing. Our knowledge, understanding and confidence with words is built up by successful use of them in speaking as well as in writing.

- For most children, high-quality, systematic phonic work should start by the age of five. This should be preceded by pre-reading activities that pave the way for such work to start.

This implies that teachers will have to track young children's progress in language and early literacy activities carefully, in order to make sure that they are introduced to phonic work as soon as they are ready for it, but not before. There will be a need to intensify support for children who are not making normal progress.

- Phonic work for young children should be multi-sensory in order to capture their interest, sustain motivation, and reinforce learning in imaginative and exciting ways.

Multi-sensory work may be on a large scale, such as puppet shows, or on a smaller scale, such as manipulating plastic letters or playing phonic games on the computer.

- The Early Years Foundation Stage and the renewed literacy framework must be compatible with each other and make sure that expectations about continuity and progression in phonic work are expressed explicitly in the new guidance.

These materials are available from www.dfes.gov.uk.

- Additional support must be compatible with mainstream practice. Irrespective of whether intervention work is taught in regular lessons or elsewhere, the gains made by children through such work must be sustained and built upon when they return to their mainstream class.

Support and class teachers need to plan together so that additional teaching builds on and reinforces the work children do in class. The progress of children receiving additional teaching needs to be tracked particularly closely for this purpose.

- Phonic work needs to be managed, monitored and supported by feedback and training. It should inform governors' target-setting. One member of staff needs to be fully able to lead on literacy, especially phonic work.

This recommendation builds on the enhanced role of language co-ordinators developed during the National Literacy Strategy. Part of the work will include keeping up to date with revisions in national guidance, and adapting them to the specific needs of the school.

Pause for reflection …

What in your own teaching of reading and spelling do you find works best, and what causes you the most difficulty?

How do you explain to children why letters don't always behave as we expect?

Which of Rose's recommendations will have most impact on your school?

FURTHER READING

Independent Review of the Teaching of Reading. Jim Rose (2006) London: DfES. Rose's review has been extensively misrepresented. He is entitled to be judged on the basis of what he says, and not on what other people say that he says. The review can be found on www.dfes.gov.uk.

The Roots of Phonics:A Historical Introduction, Miriam Balmuth (1982) New York: McGraw-Hill. A comprehensive survey of the roots of sound–letter correspondences in English, and of the ways in which these have been handled in teaching. A particularly valuable book for students, as it brings together a wealth of material that is not readily available elsewhere. It has useful discussion of the history of alternatives to phonics.

CHAPTER 2

Key Elements in Synthetic Phonics

This Chapter will:

- Help plan the transition from early language development to phonic work
- Consider schemes of work. planning and teaching lessons
- Help you get the best from teaching assistants
- Provide an outline of recording work and tracking progress
- Consider additional assessment for children with learning difficulties

Modern settings for children under five are well organised to promote social and intellectual development. These goals are closely intertwined with language development. Settings are laid out with a range of interesting and stimulating activities so that, whatever children choose to do, they will be doing something the teacher would like them to do. In effect, much of the teaching is built into the environment, so that there is a productive triangle between the activity, the child and the adults. This arrangement provides an equally effective focal point for social interaction, which in turn promotes the development of spoken language beyond that which children need to meet their own immediate needs. As they are not constantly directing activities, adults are free to observe the children, to identify needs and track progress. At the same time, children will be learning to listen to and retell stories and rhymes, often being asked explicitly what they think, which parts they like best.

All of these features put early years practitioners in a strong position to decide when a child is ready to begin phonic work. The key questions are *Will the child benefit from the teaching?* and *Will the child understand it?* The boxes below lists sources of evidence that will help with the decision. The record sheet (supplied on the accompanying CD) can be used to collate this evidence, and at the same time provides a simple screening mechanism to identify children who need extra help.