



How to approach phonics with pupils learning English as an additional language

Research and top tips!

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What does the research say?

The trouble with any synthetic phonics scheme is that the approach does not help pupils learn English as an additional language any quicker. In fact, learning letters and sounds in isolation is an abstraction - **Pauline Gibbons Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning (2002)**. The more abstract the concept or task being taught, the less meaningful it is for pupils already struggling to learn in an unfamiliar language. Therefore, teaching phonemes and graphemes in isolation might help children to decode and 'read' unfamiliar words, but without any additional context or understanding, the words are meaningless for pupils learning EAL and the language learning is non-existent.

A learner's first language or languages will have an impact on how quickly and successfully s/he learns to pick up the English phonetic code. Speakers of EAL are often judged by native English speakers to be more fluent when their first language is closely related to English. This is because their pronunciation, knowledge of phonetic sounds, intonation, and stress and rhythm match English more closely. This suggests that when we teach phonics to young children we perhaps need to adopt a suprasegmental approach - **Lightbrown and Spada (2006)** and take these four areas of pronunciation into consideration, rather than teaching sounds in isolation.

Teaching phonics to pupils learning EAL: A synthetic or embedded approach? REAL Learners (2018)

Phonics is necessary but not sufficient... EAL learners have distinctive needs.

First language speakers of English will have heard, used and possibly seen many words they encounter in print by the time they start to learn to read. They generally have a tacit knowledge of how English 'works' and are likely to be familiar with conventional ways of selecting and structuring information. EAL learners may not have had similar experiences in English, though they may have in the other language(s). They may have limited knowledge of English grammar, reading comprehension and get held up at the clause or sentence level, even if they know individual words. They may have had limited exposure to different text types in English and have difficulty processing them, especially if practices in their other language(s) are different.

The impact of synthetic phonics on teaching children with English as an additional language to read – NALDIC (2015)

For EAL learners, many words are meaningless. Ward suggests that teachers should only use words within the vocabulary of the children they are teaching. He also points out that teachers forget that some children cannot yet hear or produce some of the sounds. It is therefore unhelpful to be teaching words containing these sounds until these specific issues have been addressed.

Phun with fonicks - Racing to English – YouTube

Bibliography

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- REAL Learners (2018) Teaching phonics to pupils learning EAL: A synthetic or embedded approach?
- Gibbons, P (2002) Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning. Heinemann, Portsmouth NH
- Lightbrown, P.M and Spada, N (2006) How languages are learned (third edition). Oxford University Press, Oxford.
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Some top tips

1. Use nouns rather than other types of words when selecting words for children to blend and segment. For example, 'cat' rather than 'sat'. Add visual representations to support the children and to reinforce when they are reading the word.
2. Provide more images and more opportunities for children to talk with adults. For example, when teaching the grapheme/phoneme correspondence 'm' is for 'mouse', show the children lots of images of mice and have a discussion about mice with them.
3. Pre-teach in a small group or 1:1 to give the children a chance to visit any vocabulary being used in the phonics session. Take time to discuss pictures in decodable reading books. The pace of the phonics session does not allow for this exploration, and it focuses on the mechanics of segmenting and blending.
4. Over-teach in a small group or 1:1 to give children an opportunity to process the information from the phonics session. It's another chance to talk about the vocabulary and explore the grapheme/phoneme correspondence.
5. In some languages, hearing specific sounds could be an issue. For example 'e' and 'a'. Providing some additional support for focused teaching and lots of opportunities for repetition will help with this.
6. Strategies such as Cued Articulation (Jane Passy) explicitly show children how to form sounds e.g. the shape of their mouth, where their tongue should be. This will help with the enunciation of phonemes, especially if they are not sounds usually made within a child's home language.
7. Provide lots of opportunities for children to experience Phase 1 type activities – rhyming, rhythm, alliteration. This could be incorporated into the daily routine.
8. Use flexible groupings. Don't always put your EAL learners with the bottom group. If they are with this group initially, then make sure you assess them regularly and be prepared for them to move on quickly. Remember EAL learners need good language role models.
9. Use your Bilingual Support Assistant (BLA) wisely! If you choose to have them support phonics, they will have more impact supporting the child with their understanding of vocabulary and supporting with the pre-teach and over-teach. The BLAs may not be able to pronounce the sounds exactly themselves and could be poor role models. It would be better to use your BLA to support other areas of the curriculum.
10. For older children joining school – CHECK – are they literate in their first language? How was this taught? Have they used phonics before for reading and spelling? If they have, exploit links between languages and point out the differences, e.g. 'h' in Spanish.

REMEMBER

What's good for EAL learners is good for ALL!