

Synthetic Phonics to the Rescue!

Children are designed to pick up language...



...just as spiders are designed to spin fairy's hammocks



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The Fairy's Hammock

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FROM SOUND TO TOPIC AND BACK

When it comes to learning a second language, nobody can deny that the earlier you start the better. Young children are naturally gifted language learners - they start with their mother tongue and go for it with enthusiasm. With initiatives such as the Bilingual Project jointly sponsored by the British Council and the Spanish Ministry of Education, the children's possibilities to make use of their capacities and curiosity by learning English are enormous. All we teachers have to do is tune in with our young students and give them the language through the topics relevant to their age and interests - and be able to do so in a way that keeps our children asking for more.



Storytelling: "The Boat and the Wind"



Will it sink?



Will it float?



Filling in the chart



Boat Race



Is the wind helping?

Most of my teaching experience has been with Infants (Nursery, Reception and Year 1), and I must say it has been my privilege. I am not Peter Pan, but every day I have the opportunity to return to Never Land, and thus recapture the magic look upon the world around me that adult haste denies us all.

I give my pupils stories, just as Wendy, but not all of them come out of books. Chants, poems and Nursery Rhymes are all right, but today's colour of the sky, the number of legs a spider has, Javier's Birthday, or the sound two letters make when they go walking together are excellent stories too.



This type of teaching is based on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and this approach has proven very clearly to me much more effective than traditional language teaching. CLIL has become the term describing both learning another (content) subject such as "Knowledge and Understanding of the World" by means of a foreign language, and learning a foreign language by studying a content-based subject. In ELT, forms of CLIL have previously been known as "Content based instruction", "English across the curriculum" and "Bilingual education". To put it simply, CLIL is a methodology in which a student learns some non-language subjects through a language, which is not his/her native tongue.



Reading is one of the main tools required by children who will not have any input of English Language other than the one at school. Although I felt deeply the need, I have been longing for years to meet an efficient and practical reading and writing method. For the first time now I can say I have a successful method: this is my most treasured finding and an experience I am happy to share.

By mere chance, five years ago, on the back of a handout from a course a colleague had attended at the British Council in Madrid, I read in a very tiny handwriting "Jolly Phonics". I looked it up on the Internet and thus entered into the most gratifying part of my teaching career.



Developed by Sue Lloyd in the 1990's, Jolly Phonics is a synthetic phonics method allowing children not only to recognize the letter sounds, but also to put them together and make new words. There is a storyline, action, song or jingle for each sound to make the learning



process enjoyable and easy. The story gives me the chance to widen the children's vocabulary: we dramatize it, add characters to it, fit it into whatever topic we are developing. This method fits into CLIL because, even though there is not much



reading comprehension in blending and segmenting, while learning the sounds through a story children are working in a rich and meaningful language context.



Blending and segmenting are the key processes to succeed as far as reading and writing go, but in a bilingual environment it is the storylines that introduce the sounds what make the difference. My pupils develop their oral comprehension through the acquisition of the knowledge enabling them to develop their reading skills, which will in turn improve their oral skills and linguistic confidence even further.

Oral comprehension + Decoding = Reading comprehension. One of my five-year-old pupils came up to me the other day holding a storybook in her hands: "Inés, what is -joust-?" I had to look it up in the dictionary myself before I dressed up with a helmet and a spear and began to ride on a beautiful black horse. Now, that is "content in context"!

Over the past years I have been invited to share my experience in a variety of Teacher-Training Programmes funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and The British Council. I have also given courses and talks for local government Teacher Training departments in many of the Autonomous Regions of Spain and for International and Bilingual Schools. The demand for training is proportional to the success teachers are already achieving through this method. Jolly Phonics is the good news in every teacher's mouth, the catchword spreading out: The struggle is over, synthetic phonics works.

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Synthetic Phonics and Analytic Phonics: Two different approaches:

Synthetic Phonics

- used in countries like Germany and Austria - the alphabetic code is taught before expecting children to read books
- teaches 44 letter sounds at a quick pace and how to blend them for reading e.g. c-a-t is cat, b-u-s is bus, s-t-o-p is stop etc.
- teaches phonemic awareness so that all the sounds in words can be identified and written e.g. cat is c-a-t, bus is b-u-s, and stop is s-t-o-p etc.
- teaches main digraphs - blending and segmenting regular words with digraphs e.g. sheep, boil, chart etc.
- teaches tricky words - blending and learning the 'tricky' part
- uses decodable texts initially - a free choice of books is given when there is fluency in the reading and an ability to work out unknown words easily
- has blending as the first strategy for reading unknown words
- word patterns covered at a later stage - for spelling rather than for reading

Analytic Phonics

- starts with a whole word sight vocabulary and reading books
- uses picture, initial letter and context cues for word recognition
- uses text that has a repetitive sentence - the picture gives the clue for the new word(s) introduced on that page
- gradually introduces the alphabet letter sounds to enable the initial letter to help with word identification
- segmenting and blending are demonstrated away from text - if it is done at all
- digraphs are rarely taught
- keyword sight vocabulary - memorised visually
- blending used as the last strategy instead of the first strategy
- word patterns covered at a later stage

Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles

(The Phonics Handbook, Sue Lloyd)

1. Teach letter-shapes just by their sounds at first, not their names. That eliminates half of one particular part of the learning, and leaves just the half that is going to be used directly ('directly' both in the sense of 'in a direct way' and in the sense of 'almost immediately'). Introduce letter names through singing an alphabet song in the first instance, but ensure that the **automatic response to letters and letter-combinations is saying the sounds** that they represent.

2. Teach letters and their sounds in groups that include consonants and vowels so that the children can read words, make words and spell words: · Teach blending all-through-the-word so that the children can immediately start using the few letter-sounds that they know in reading simple words. The practical application of code-knowledge makes them see the point of what they are learning and is very satisfying for them. While teaching blending, you cannot avoid pronouncing the whole word after the individual phonemes, but once the children begin to get the hang of it, avoid pronouncing the whole word whenever possible. Get them to arrive at a pronunciation by sounding out and blending. Teach segmenting all through the spoken word so that the children can immediately start using letter-sounds to spell simple words aloud and by writing.

3. Tolerate invented spelling at first provided that it is phonemically accurate. Children will understand the nature of the code better if they practise using it in both directions purely as a code (without worrying about spelling conventions - e.g. that the /k/ sound is represented in 'cat' by a 'c', not a 'k'). Avoid asking the children to write independently before they have been taught at least one way of representing all the main sounds in English.

4. Teach no sight words at first so that decoding is uppermost in children's minds and children do not develop an inappropriate reading reflex. When irregular words are tackled, teach the children to blend these words as well. Naturally they will have to be told the correct pronunciation. Then when an irregular word comes up in their reading the children will blend it and be reminded of that 'tricky' word.

5. Once the basic sounds of the alphabet letters have been covered including some digraphs, start introducing alternative sounds for the letters already learnt and alternative spellings for sounds.

6. Use texts which are decodable on the basis of what the children have been taught at any given point, and make it clear that these are not just to be decoded but also to be

read for meaning. Do not promote reading strategies, which are merely guessing words from pictures, context or initial letter cues.

7. Practise correct spelling, handwriting and simple punctuation through regular dictation. That is, controlled letters, spelling variations, words and sentences, which the children can be expected to write.

These evidence-based teaching principles mean that children are not just learning letter-sound knowledge in a pure form but are also applying it from a very early stage which helps it to become embedded.

Do's and Don'ts

Do

- read to the children and talk about the stories (oral comprehension).
- teach the 42 letter sounds first and fast:
 - blending all-through-the-word for reading,
 - and segmenting all-through- the-word for spelling.
- teach blending and segmenting of **regular** words only - for at least the first five weeks.
- teach tricky words systematically - blending first for reading and then learning the correct pronunciation.
- teach identification of sounds in words (all-through-the-word from left to right), and the main ways of writing the letters for the sounds.
- use reading books with controlled texts and decodable words initially. Free choice can start when there is fluency in the reading and unknown words can be quickly worked out.

Don't

- teach sight words*.
- expect children, in the beginning, to read books that have words that cannot be blended because the letter sounds have not been taught.
- use guessing words from the initial letter, picture or context for word identification. (Blending is the strategy for working out words, and then context if the blending does not give a recognised word.)
- use letter names for the first few weeks.
- spend time on phonemic awareness before teaching phonics with letters (children taught with Jolly Phonics were better at phonemic awareness than the children who had been taught with a phonemic awareness programme before learning to read).

- think that teaching rhymes, in the beginning, helps children to read (young children are not able to use analogy until they have a reading age of 7+).

* Sight words are words that can only be memorised by the shape of the word because the letter sounds have not been taught yet.

Stories

Based on "Storytelling with children" Andrew Wright

The environment of a young child is full of things he or she learns to use as tools. Language is one of these, and the natural way a child learns its first language can also be used by that child to learn other languages

From our adult point of view, stories help the children understand the world around them. From the children's point of view "Once upon a time..." are the magic words, which open the door to a world where anything is possible, and that is a language they are all fluent in.

The children's frame of mind

- 1) Try to get the children to sit much nearer to you. They will see you better but also it changes the relationship between you and them and each other. They know they are going to share something special. You can ask them to sit on the floor around your feet.
- 2) Use a story bag or a story hat or a friendly puppet to "announce" the story time. The children will recognize it and get ready for a story.
- 3) You can put some music on, but remember: Always use the same music and the children will know and get themselves ready.
- 4) Don't begin until you have everyone's attention unless you are confident that the sheer power of your telling is going to quieten him or her down.

Your manner: You must tell stories in your own way and that way must be a normal part of you. Just give yourself totally to your story and to your listeners if you want to get back a strong quality of listening and appreciation from them. Do not be afraid, you will not find a better audience!

Your voice...

- 1) Speak loudly enough for the children at the back to hear easily, but not by using your "teacher's voice"
- 2) Adopt a different voice for the narrator and for each of the characters. Make these voices very different: high/low, soft/harsh.

3) The pause is one of the most powerful of all qualities in storytelling. The children will try to predict what you will say next. Pause is a vital element of dramatic storytelling and it should be used at key moments.

4) Stress the important words in a sentence; this helps to convey meaning.

You should decide whether you want to simplify the language.

1) Tenses: past to present

2) Word order: Into the sack jumped the little cat / the little cat jumped into the bag.

3) Long sentences: The woodcutter, who had a kind heart, agreed. / The kind woodcutter said, "Yes"

Introducing a new word

1) Pictures can illustrate many objects, qualities, and action verbs.

2) Objects, (sometimes called realia) are an ideal way of showing the meaning of English words for concrete things. Young children like tactile learning. It is a good idea to let them touch, hold and perhaps use these objects.

3) Many items of vocabulary, including actions, feelings of emotion, adjectives, and adverbs, can be communicated by mime. Mime is particularly relevant to storytelling as it helps keep the children's attention and helps make the meaning much clearer.

4) Some words are best understood in context; for example, a comparative form needs a comparison. Sometimes you can create context in the classroom in order to introduce a new word, but it may well be that the best context is the story itself.