

What Makes Effective Phonics Instruction

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There is a big “whoo-haa” about teaching phonics in recent years in Macau, not only in the primary schools but also in the secondary schools. It is based on the fervent belief of some English teachers that their students will master English better once they learn phonics. Whether such a belief is well grounded theoretically or not is not the concern of this paper. Instead, I would like to discuss what exactly phonics is and what makes good phonics instruction in this article. I will also present a phonics lesson and propose some pointers for teaching phonics.

Phonics and phonological awareness

Phonics looks at the relationship of letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes) in written words. By matching the letters of a written word to the sounds, students are able to sound out the word (e.g. ‘f’ + ‘a’ + ‘t’ is pronounced as ‘fat’).

There are altogether 44 phonemes (including 5 vowels, 21 consonants and 18 diphthongs such as ‘th’, ‘ch’ or ‘sh’) that match the 26 letters of the English alphabet. The preliminary purpose of teaching students phonics is to help them “sound out” words by matching the phonemes to the letters.

The ultimate goal is to help them read aloud the written words and spell the words correctly.

Research evidence strongly supports teaching phonics directly and explicitly. It is mainly from proper instruction that children are able to develop the ability to match the letters of a written word to their sounds. Therefore, the acquisition of phonics should be made as one part of beginning reading instruction (Searfoss and Readence, 1994:169).

The acquisition of such ability is developmental. The authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985) offer the following advice which places phonics instruction in perspective, “The right maxims for phonics are: Do it early. Keep it simple. Except in cases of diagnosed individual need, phonics instruction should have been completed by the end of second grade.” (p.43) Hence, phonics instruction should be included as part of the classroom reading programs throughout the first few years of primary education.

The key to learning phonics is to develop children’s phonological awareness. According to Searfoss and Readence (1994), phonological awareness includes the understanding that:

- ◆ a word can be segmented into a sequence of separate sounds




- a word can be formed when individual sounds are put together
- words have rhyme and rhythm
- onomatopoeia (the use of English words which sound like the noise or the things that they are describing or representing e.g. 'Hiss', 'Buzz' or 'rat-a-tat-tat')
- a word carries meaning

An effective phonics program, thereby, must include a combination of learning activities which help students develop phonological awareness. This knowledge is not just about sounding out words but the recognition that words also carry meaning.

A proposed phonics lesson (some ideas are based on Longman's Phonics Fun)

<h3>Lesson Plan</h3> <p>Level: P2 Duration: 10 minutes Topic: Consonant 'C' Materials: Phonics rhyme, flashcards, power-point slides, phonics song, textbook Specific Instructional Objectives: By the end of the lesson, my students should be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify the sound 'c' 2. Associate letter c with sound /k/ 	
<h3>Lesson proper</h3>	
<p>Step 1: Tuning-in</p> <p>Students read aloud the rhymes with the teacher:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">"Cats can climb, cats can crawl, How many cats on the garden wall?"</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>(from The Big Book of Phonics)</i></p>	<p>Note: Teacher reads the rhymes once with moderate body movement. No teaching of vocabulary is necessary. Students are encouraged to read aloud with the teacher in the second round for the fun of reading it.</p>
<p>Step 2: Teacher demonstrates the sound and asks the students to repeat after her.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">e.g. cat cow car cup cap cut</p>	<p>Note: The letter "c" is pronounced as /k/. The sound /k/ is a plosive. 'c' + 'a' + 't' is read as 'cat'.</p>

<p>Step 3: Teacher air-writes the letter “C”.</p> 	<p>Note: Teaching the alphabet should be included in the lesson. Teachers should not make any assumption that the students know the letters.</p>
<p>Step 4: Teacher and students read aloud the words beginning with C.</p> <p>cat car cup cub cute can cool cold</p>	<p>Note: Teacher should minimize the teaching of vocabulary. Focus should be on the proper pronunciation of the word.</p>
<p>Step 5: Follow-up activity: The class sings a rhyming song with body movement.</p> <p>“Candy has a little cat, Little cat, little cat. Candy has a little cat; It can climb and crawl.”</p> <p><i>(The tune of “Mary has a little lamb”; lyrics rewritten by Lily Chao)</i></p>	<p>Note: Reinforcing the learning of the letter and sound by singing the fun song with hand gesture and body movement.</p> <p>Other fun activities such as blending word or decoding word can be carried out to reinforce learning of the letter and its sound.</p>
<p>Step 6: The class rereads the text in Fun Reading (see textbook <i>New Welcome to English 2B</i> p.11).</p>	<p>Note: Revisit the letter and its sound by reading the story in the textbook.</p>

Pointers

- P1 to P3.** Phonics should be taught early and end early (Anderson et al., 1985). Children should have the phonological awareness developed from a young age and they should be exposed to the sounds of English from kindergarten. Before going to upper primary, they should have the knowledge of the letter names and letter sounds. In other words, phonics instruction should end by P3 or earlier for a simple reason. If children still do not know the letters by then, they are not able to decode the texts they are reading in upper primary when the text requires various reading skills to comprehend. Since the fundamental goal in the lower primary is to prepare our students read and write effectively, phonics must be taught well at that level of primary education.
- A regular diet of phonic lessons.** Students need to have a systematic and explicit approach to learning phonics. They benefit most from a short lesson of phonics regularly, say 3 times a week. Each lesson should not be more than 10 minutes and it is best to be conducted before the main lesson of the day.
- Phonics should be linked to reading.** According to Chall (1989), phonics is an important component of learning to read. It is a necessary but insufficient component. The formula to success in reading is phonics plus more reading. Phonics lesson should include



reading aloud lots of interesting children's stories, rhymes and poems in which decoding and comprehension must be emphasized.

4. **Print is for communication.** The reading program in the lower primary should focus on providing students with daily reading and writing experience to establish that print carries meaning. Repeated readings of children's stories, practicing language through chants and songs, and using written messages around the classroom are a few experiences that help establish the idea.
5. **Early exposure to print and real books is an important condition for successful phonics learning.** Teachers should provide a print-rich classroom environment to encourage students to experiment with print, foster the development of phonological awareness, and build on the awareness they have already acquired.
6. **Major problem in Macau.** Many teachers do not know much about phonics, nor do they have much proper training in teaching phonics. In order to run an effective phonics program in school, the teachers must be trained properly how to sound out the 44 phonemes that match the 26 letters of the alphabet correctly and accurately. There are many commercial materials including reinforcement games and workbooks teaching phonics on the market. The school must invest a good package favorably used by the teachers. A well thought-through phonics syllabus with relevant teaching materials must be worked out by the team of lower primary English teachers. Most important of all, the

teachers must practice the sounds of the letters well before teaching.

Conclusion

Phonics is merely a supporting skill for helping children read aloud words and spell them correctly. It is well proven by research studies that there is value in developing phonological awareness of children and it should be taught as one of the essential skills to be developed. It is only based on a systematic and explicit instruction that our students in lower primary are able to acquire phonics skills for learning how to read. They will then get ready to learn by acquiring various reading skills in upper primary in Macau. 🇲🇵

References

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