

What is phonics?

- **Phonics** is a method of teaching reading and writing the English language. It focuses on how to translate written language into speech and speech into written language.
- **Phonetics** is a branch of linguistics that studies the sounds of human speech.
- The **letter name** is the name we give to the letters, i.e. /eɪ/, /bi:/, /si:/, etc.
- The **letter sound** (phoneme) is the sound the letter or letter combination makes /æ/, /b/, /k/, etc.
- The English language consists of approximately 44 sounds (phonemes). These sounds are represented by 26 letters.
- A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in speech. For example, the word cat has three phonemes c-a-t.
- A **grapheme** is the letter or letters that represent a phoneme. For example:
 - the **m** in man is a one letter grapheme
 - the **sh** in shop is a two letter grapheme (digraph)
 - the **igh** in light is a three letter grapheme (trigraph)
- **Blending** is the process of decoding in order to read. Children are taught the individual sounds (phonemes) which they join together to form words: c-a-t - cat
- **Segmenting** is the process of spelling and writing. Children are taught to listen and identify sounds (phonemes) in words. This is called sounding out a word, in other words, pulling it apart, which is the opposite of blending (joining). Children then represent those sounds in letters (graphemes): snail - s-n-ai-l
- A good time to learn the **letter names** (alphabet) is when the children have learnt most of the letter-sound (grapheme-phoneme) correspondences. It is useful for children to know the letter names when learning the digraphs.
- **Context words, sight words, and tricky words** are words which are phonically irregular, which the learning reader is unable to sound out according to the rules, e.g. 'the', 'no', 'one' and 'eye'. Many high frequency words or Dolch words (the most common words that appear in children's literature) fall into this category.
- A **reader** is a phonically decodable book. Children practise blending the phonemes to read the stories aloud. A reader is different from a story book in that it is **designed to be read by the child**, whereas a story book can be read to very young children. The language in readers is cumulative, so that children are given the opportunity to practise new phonemes and revise previously taught phonemes.

The benefits of teaching phonics to EFL learners

- The way the English language is represented is arbitrary and, for most children, very difficult to 'decode'.
- EFL learners who have learnt to read and write English using phonics have been exposed to the nuances in pronunciation in the English language from a very

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early age, and are able to distinguish sounds that a learner who has not had this exposure often cannot distinguish, for example “cat” and “cut”, “ship and “sheep”.

- Explicit phonics instruction helps learners to read, spell and pronounce words independently. Learners have a sound understanding of the Alphabetic code in English and their approach to reading and writing is more systematic.

When are children ready to read and write in English?

When children:

- ✓ have been exposed to quite a lot of spoken English;
- ✓ show curiosity about books and environmental print;
- ✓ understand that print holds meaning;
- ✓ recognise letters in their own name;
- ✓ can write some of the letters in their name.

Important considerations:

- Every child is different.
- Forcing children to write before they are ready can be detrimental in the long run.
- Reading and writing in the Early Years should always be natural, meaningful and fun.
- Phonological and phonemic awareness can be taught in a playful way from a very young age.

Learning the Letter Sounds

The letter sounds (phonemes) are generally taught in different phases.

PHASE 1

s (sit, bus)

a (cat, bat)

t (ten, pot)

p (pig, tap)

i (pin, six)

n (nap, ant)

m (man, map)

d (dad, sad)

As soon as each set of letters is introduced, children can use their knowledge of the letter sounds to **blend** and **sound out** words. For example, blending the sounds **s-a-t** to make the word **sat**. They can also start learning to segment words. For example, they might be asked to find the letter sounds that make the word **tap** from a small selection of magnetic letters.

PHASE 2

g (dog, pig)

o (dog, hot)

c (cat, cot)

k (pink, skip)

ck (duck, sock)

e (ten, egg)

u (bus, run)

r (rat, red)

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PHASE 3

h (hot, ham)	apple)
b (bat, big)	ss (dress, kiss)
f, ff (frog, muffin)	j (jump, jog)
l, ll, le (leg, doll,	v (van, vet)
	w (wet, well)

This is a good time to teach children the **letter names**, e.g. using an alphabet song. Children will continue to use the sounds when decoding words. Letter names are useful when it comes to learning digraphs and trigraphs.

PHASE 4

x (six, box)	th (then, thin)
y (yes, yum)	ng (sing, hang)
z, zz (zoo, puzzle)	ai (rain, tail)
qu (quick, queen)	ee (sheep, green)
ch (chin, rich)	igh (night, light)
sh (shell, fish)	oa (goat, boat)

PHASE 5

short and long oo (look, moon)	ear (hear, beard)
ar (car, park)	air (hair, chair)
or (sport, shorts)	er (river, under)
ur (purple, surf)	zh (measure, television, Asia)
ow (cow, brown)	ure (sure, picture, treasure)
oi (point, join)	

At the end of Phase 5 children have learnt all the phonemes (approx. 44 sounds), and at least one way of representing them (grapheme).

PHASE 6 and beyond

- Alternative spellings, e.g. **rain, day, make / night, fly, tie**
- Alternative pronunciations for graphemes are also be introduced, e.g. **ea** in **tea, head** and **break**.
- **ay, ou, ie, ea, oy, ir, ue, aw, wh, ph, ew, oe, au, ey**
- Magic 'e' - **a-e, e-e, i-e, o-e, u-e**
- Children can spell words phonemically although not always correctly.
- Children become more fluent readers and more accurate spellers.

Games for learning the letter sounds

- Pass the letter
- Moody Sounds
- Sound Hoops
- Point to the
- Flashcard
- Swat the sound
- I spy something with ...
- Stepping Stones
- Run and touch
- Phonemes race
- Colour the sound

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Letter Formation (Handwriting)

- Writing in the Air
- Writing in the sand
- Plasticine
- Mini white-boards
- Pasta, wool, coloured paper
- Writing on the walls/windows

RESOURCES

Phonics: How to pronounce pure sounds | Oxford Owl:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCI2mu7URBc>

Phoneme pop – an online game: http://www.ictgames.com/phonemeFlop_v4.html

Phonemes:

http://www.lancsngfl.ac.uk/curriculum/literacy/lit_site/lit_sites/phonemes_001/

British Council pronunciation app:

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/english/business/apps/sounds-right>

Phonics for Very Young Learners of EFL: A Creative Approach (British Council Teacher's Conference 2014): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqd1xTXi3zU>

Teach Phonics – Phoneme Chart: <https://teachphonics.co.uk/phonics-phoneme-chart.html>