

Approaching Phonics from A-Zebra

by David Lisgo

Phonics is traditionally thought of as a method of teaching beginners to read, write, and pronounce words using the sound value of letters, letter groups and syllables. However, it is much more than this: “The teaching of phonics has evolved to the point where we can say that phonics provides the easiest and most efficient access into language in the typical Japanese elementary school situation. It is the key to aural/oral work”. (S. Brivati, personal correspondence, 2002). Phonics takes the child beyond the traditional English conversation school which concentrates solely on listening and speaking, and allows the student to consolidate these skills through reading and writing activities. By doing so, the child gains tremendously in confidence and knowledge.

The English language has about 44 sounds which are represented in a multitude of ways using our 26 letters of the alphabet; this makes the teaching and learning of phonics a complex task. This article deals only with single letter sounds and combinations of these sounds.

Introducing Sounds: the order of presentation

There are a number of options available to the teacher with regard to the order of presentation.

1. Textbook order: the simplest way is to follow the order in which these sounds are introduced in your textbook but this is not always the best approach.

2. Alphabetical order: some textbooks, notably *Let's Go* (Nakata et al., 1992-1997) and *Alphabet Starters* (Carmen and Amy, 1999), follow alphabetical order. The main problem with this order is that a number of important letters, for example, “o”, “s”, and “t” are taught too late.

3. Letter formation order: the handwriting book *Get Ready* (Hopkins, 1990) is a good example of this approach. In it “c” is followed by “o”, “a” is followed by “d”, then “g”, which is followed by “q”. One problem is that letters representing similar sounds are not always kept apart and confusion can arise. Examples are “m”/“n” and “b”/“p”.

4. Letter frequency order: in this approach, the letters that are used most frequently are presented first. For example, the letters “o”, “s”, “t”, “a”, “r”, “e” are used in 50 percent of words in the English language and are therefore introduced early. If we use this method of determining the order, the letters are introduced according to the frequency in which they appear in that particular textbook.

5. Reliability order: this means that we have to consider how many different sounds a letter can make. For example, though “s” is very common it is not very reliable, as we can see in words like “is”, “Asia” and “sure”, while on the other hand, “v” is extremely reliable but not very frequent.

A combined approach is probably best but each teacher must decide for him or herself.

Introducing sounds: methods of presentation

There are two important points to remember at this stage:

1. Whenever possible, move from the known to the unknown.

2. Teach the sounds of the letters and not their names.

Most textbooks introduce capital and lowercase letters at the same time, but it is best to emphasize lowercase because lowercase letters are used in 95 percent of reading materials.

Anchor, or mnemonic, words help the child to learn and retain the initial sound of a word. Again, the simplest way of choosing anchor words is to use the words in your textbook. However, many textbooks have some troublesome anchor words and you need to look at your textbook critically to avoid difficulties. Here are some examples of words found in textbooks that do not fit the criteria mentioned above:

1. “igloo”, in the *Finding Out* series (Paul, 1991-1993). The vast majority of young Japanese children will know neither the Japanese nor the English word for this picture. The word “insect” might have been a better choice as it represents something the students are familiar with.

2. “X ray”, in *Let's Go Starter* (Nakata, 1997). The major problem with this word is that it doesn't start with the phonic sound /ks/, but the “x” name. Another anomaly is that it begins with a capital letter.

To introduce a new letter use a double-sided flashcard that has the anchor picture on one side and the letter on the other. Move from the picture (known) to the sound (unknown), for example, from “apple” to “a”, or from “ringo” to “apple” to “a”.

We see a learning cycle beginning to take shape: what David Paul describes as “The Questioning Cycle” (1991). The child “notices something new” (the apple flashcard); wonders what it is (ringo? apple?); tries to find out what it is (“appelu?”); and then “finds out” (“It's an apple”). She has

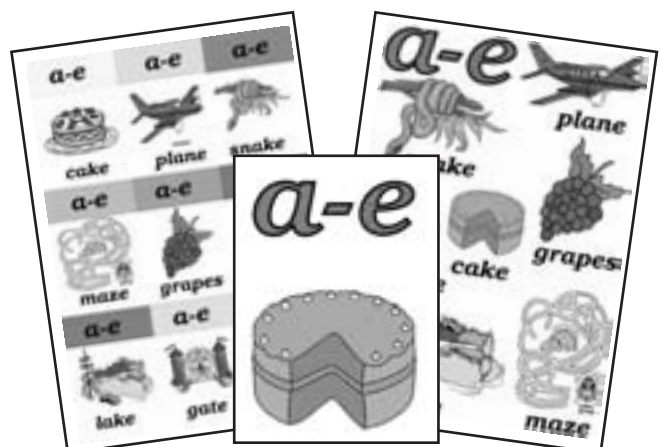




Fig. 1. Rime Column

now heard and pronounced the target sound (in the word “apple”) and is ready to move onto letter recognition. Often a child will give the name of the letter instead of the sound. To deal with this, I pronounce “apple” as “aypple” and some bright child always seems to guess the correct sound.

The learning cycle is not yet completed—the next steps are for her to play with the new language and relate it to her previous experience, by the use of songs, chants, matching games, slam games etc., which will link the new language to what she already knows. The child also practices writing the letter and we introduce vocabulary extension; this too is playing with the language. In the final step, the child has learned the sound and the anchor word and she adds it to her English language store, ready to be used at any appropriate time.

Blending and Segmenting

Segmenting is the ability to separate words into units of sound. Blending is the ability to join units of sound into words.

Sound blending

Sound blending can be introduced once the children have acquired the vocabulary and phonic sounds. In the first stage of “speech blending” sounds are blended to form single syllable words, for example, “a-n-t”, “d-o-g”, “c-a-t” and “t-e-n-t”.

Technique: The teacher sounds out any known word and the students call back the word they hear. Gradually

Fig. 2. Rime cards front and back (reversed).

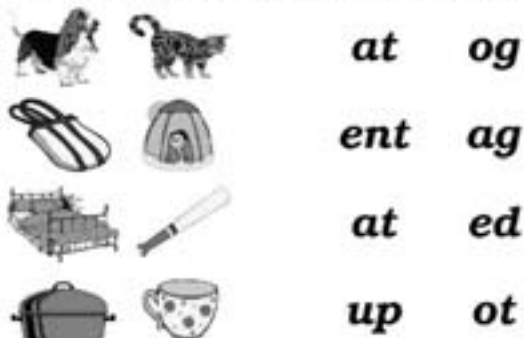


Fig. 3. Playing Rime Tic-Tac-Toe.

increase the space between sounds to about one second. Play “Stand and say”, where the children stand and call back the word.

Play “picture slam”, where the children find the appropriate picture and call back the word. Do not use word cards until the children are aware of and familiar with all the sounds in use and have some blending skills.

Word building

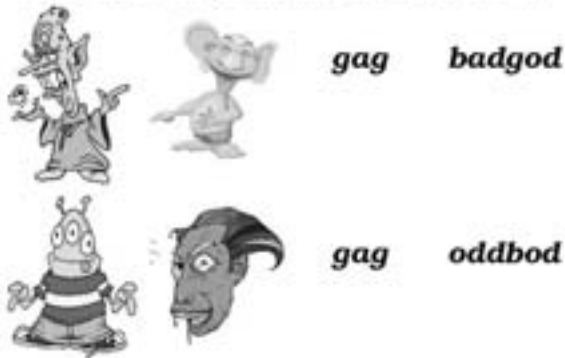
Technique: put the letter “a” on the board and have the children read it. Next, put the letter “t” on the board far to the right of the “a” and have the children read this sound. Gradually move the letter “a” towards the letter “t” reading each sound individually but gradually decreasing the time between sounds until finally you link the two sounds together into one syllable. Set up practice activities: use a column of vowels and move the consonant down the column as the students read; have the students match pairs of vowel/consonant cards in concentration, dictate vowel/consonant “words”, etc.

Use a similar technique to introduce the CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) pattern. Next move on to your target vocabulary and build the words up on the board, as follows: “a”-“at”-“cat”, “o”-“og”-“dog”, “e”-“egg”, “o”-“ock”-“sock” etc., using only single syllable words.

Auditory processing

I start with the letters “a”, “e”, “I”, “o”, “u”, “b”, “c”,

Fig. 4. Monster cards fronts and back (reversed)



A class act.

“d”, “g”, “t”, (from *Finding Out 1*, units one and two (Paul, 1991a)). Each child or group should have a set of letter tiles. Give the students a word, for example, “cat”, and have the children make the word using the tiles. Next, change one sound at a time and have the children form the new words, for example, “cat”-”cut”-”but”-”bet”-”bad”-”tad”-”tid”-”tod”-”bod”-”bid” and so on.

Once your students are proficient in realizing single sound changes, move up to two sound changes and then three.

Segmenting

Technique: give the child a picture of a cat and the letter tiles “a”, “c”, and “t”. The child forms the word “cat”, sounds it out, turns the tiles over, writes the word in her notebook, turns the tiles back over to check her spelling and starts a new set. This can be done as a whole class “cooperative” activity by using sets of pictures and letter tiles spread randomly on the table or floor, and having the class form the words.

Onsets and rimes

Before moving on to teach multisyllable words it is best to do some work on onsets and rimes. Basically, onsets are the consonant sounds which come before the vowel in a syllable. For example, “ant” has a zero-consonant onset, “dog” has a single-consonant onset, “frog” has a two-consonant onset and “string” has a three-consonant onset.



String a longs.

Every syllable has a rime. A rime consists of the vowel sound plus any following consonant or consonants. Rimes are what we use to form “word families”, for example, the “at” family: “bat”, “cat”, “fat”, “hat”, “mat”, “pat”, “rat”, “sat”, “that” and “vat”. A number of textbooks require the student to memorize initial consonant blends and word families but it is better to concentrate on teaching individual sounds and blending skills, so as not to confuse the child by overloading her memory.

Onset-rime activities

1. Odd one out: this is a very simple aural onset activity. The teacher says, for example, “dog, doll, milk, desk”. Obviously “milk” is the odd one out but it may not be obvious to your students.

2. Onset or rime column: produce a set of cards with a picture on one side and words on the other, with a space between the onset and the rime, for example, “c ap”, “c at”, “p ot”, “d og” and “n ut”. Cut the card between the onset and the rime. Put the onset cards in a column with the picture facedown (*see fig. 1*). The students then add the rimes to form words and then turn the cards over and check the pictures to see if the words are correct. “pot”, “dog” and “nut” will probably be correct but we could easily have half a “cat” and half a “cap” in the other two pictures. The children really enjoy this activity and it is a good activity for concentrating attention on the medial vowel and final consonant.

3. Tic tac toe using rimes: make a set of rime cards, with rimes on one side and pictures on the other (see fig. 2 and 3). Use single syllable words. Initially, the child reads the rime, turns the card over and completes the word. For example: “ed-bed”, “og-dog”. In a more interesting version, the child reads the rime and guesses the word before turning the card over to check. So we may have, “ed-bed-bed”, “og-dog-frog” (followed by laughter).

4. Picture guess: call out the rime and the children stand and guess the word. For example, the teacher says “at” and the child stands and says “cat”. The teacher says “That’s right” or “Sorry, not ‘cat’ but ‘hat’” showing the picture each time. If the students have more than one teacher, then it is best to show the rime as you say it, so that the children don’t become confused by differences in dialect.

By this stage many students will be able to read any single syllable word that is based on the single letter sounds of the alphabet, so it is important to give them every opportunity to practice this new reading skill through the use of picture-word card games and worksheets. If you want to check that your students haven’t just memorized the words then make a set of “monster cards” with pictures of aliens, dragons or monsters on one side and nonsense words on the other and use these in your card games (see fig. 4).

Syllables

A syllable is a unit of pronunciation consisting of a vowel sound alone or with one or more consonant sounds and pronounced with one impulse of the voice. The word “syllabification” refers to the division of words into syllables; which is, in my opinion, more of an art than a science.

Syllable awareness activities

1. Sound blending (multisyllable and compound words): this works in the same way as with single syllable words, except that words are divided into syllables or words instead of sounds. Multisyllable words are sounded as follows: “apple, apple”; “al-bum, album”; “oc-to-pus, octopus”. Compound words are separated into their component words: “ant-hill, anthill”; “bed-bug, bedbug”; “egg-cup, eggcup”. I divide words according to their spelling, which is why “ap-ple” is used instead of “a-pple”. The students will relate slow speed with spelling and natural speed with speaking.

2. Syllable clapping and counting: practice vocabulary by clapping out the syllables (softly); clap to show intonation. Ask the children how many syllables or beats there are in a word.

3. Rime links: this activity is an excellent introduction to longer words and really builds confidence in young learners. Have the child take a rime card and read the rime, take another and read them together, take another and add to the sequence and so on. For example, “ap”, “apot”, “apotin” and so on. I string about 30 together and have all the students try to read the sequence.

4. Word building (multisyllable and compound words):

we can build up the words, on the board, in a number of different ways for example: “go”-“goril”-“gorilla”, “ril”-“rilla”-“gorilla” or “la”-“rilla”-“gorilla”. Write words on the board with spaces between the syllables e.g. “go ril la”, “jack et”, “hot dog” and “um brel la”, spacing them according to their spelling not their pronunciation.

5. Dictation: teach the children the question “How do you spell...?”. Use your fingers to show the number of syllables in a word and then sound out the syllables slowly and clearly. For this activity, it is important to sound out words as they are spelled and not as they are spoken.

6. The king’s successor: the children stand in a circle with a king or queen in the center. The king gives out “orders”, such as “wal-king, wal-king, wal-king” and the children walk to the beat, while chanting in unison. Continue with words like “running”, “swimming”, “jumping” etc. making sure the words are divided at the natural pause.

Homework

The teacher is responsible for setting homework, making it interesting and checking it. Try designing worksheets for homework, bearing in mind that your worksheet of the day should mirror one of your last games or activities, so that the child can directly relate the homework to what is going on in the classroom. The importance of homework cannot be overestimated, only the brightest of children succeed without it and in our line of business all students need to succeed.

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The author has produced hundreds of worksheets and posters, which are available free and can be downloaded at <http://etjaichi.kweto.com/davidlisgo/BAH/index.html>.

All these worksheets and many others are available on CD-ROM (Windows and Mac) A small donation is requested to cover costs. If you are interested please contact David at 9-1,3 Shibushi, Shibushi-cho, Soh-gun, Kagoshima-ken 899-7103

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