



## Words, Letters and Sounds- Teaching Phonics

One of the first things that our students experience in the ESL classroom is how different English sounds to their mother tongue. As our students grow as efficient users of English, the importance of phonics should not be underestimated in their continuum of learning.

According to research carried out by the National Reading Panel, phonics and phonemic awareness, along with vocabulary, comprehension and fluency, are some of the essential blocks in an effective processing system for reading and writing. In addition to developing literacy in English, the explicit instruction of phonics will enable our students to incorporate phonological skills that are unlikely or different in English and in their language. By explicit instruction we understand a framework of teaching that is systematic and purposeful and it happens when teachers tell students why and when they use should learn and apply strategies and skills.

Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify, hear and manipulate the individual phonemes or sounds in spoken words. Instruction on phonemic awareness involves teaching students to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken syllables and words.

You can practice phonemic awareness with your students in several ways:

- Isolating individual sounds in words (*E.g. The first sound in hat is /h/*)
- Identifying which words in a set of words begin with the same sound (*E.g. like, look and little all have /l/ at the beginning*)
- Categorizing words with the same sounds (*E.g. "cat" doesn't belong with jam and jet*)
- Blending the separate sounds in a word to say the word (*E.g. /d/,/o/,/g/--- dog*)
- Segmenting a word into its separate sounds (*E.g. at---/a/,/t/*)

During these activities, learners should also pay attention to changes and differences in their mouths (lips, tongues and teeth) when they produce different sounds.

ESL students need to develop a new understanding of the alphabetic principle - the idea that letter and letter patterns represent the sounds of spoken language. When we work on that correspondence, we are teaching phonics to our students.

The instruction of phonics needs to provide guidance, support and a gradual release of independence with activities such as:

- Word families to build other words with the same pattern.
- Songs, chants and rhymes.
- Games and digital resources to classify and discriminate words and sounds.
- Graphic organizers, logs, cards and other artifacts to make, manipulate and categorize words in a hands-on approach.
- Listening and reading tasks to practice other features beyond the word level, such as rhythm and intonation.

Teaching phonics enables our students to recognize predictable patterns among words, letters and sounds in English. As they apply these connections, our learners develop progressive effectiveness in their language skills.

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### **References**

- US Department of Health and Human Services (2000): Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read.
- Bear, D.R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2008), *Word their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson/Prentice Hall