Phonics and Literacy instruction for young learners in EFL

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Introduction

This White Paper discusses the usefulness of teaching phonics at the initial stages of literacy development among young learners in EFL (English as a foreign language) classrooms. A summary of theory and research shows that phonics instruction can improve decoding, spelling, text comprehension and reading accuracy among emergent readers in their first language (L1), and is particularly beneficial for struggling readers and children whose first language is not English (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018; Machin, McNally & Viarengo, 2016). This paper argues that adapting L1 phonics instruction in the early years and primary EFL classroom may be beneficial, if used systematically and as part of a rich, meaning-focused pedagogy towards reading and writing development where comprehension and communication of meaning is the ultimate aim. This paper offers teachers and school leaders ideas on practical application on how to implement phonological based instruction into their EFL classroom practice.

Young learners

In this White Paper, the term 'very young learners' is used to refer to children aged between 4 to 6 in pre-school/early years settings and 'young learners' is used in reference to children aged between 7 and 12 in primary education.

Emergent literacy

Current thinking on children's literacy considers it as emergent and part of a developmental continuum rather than marked by clear shifts in maturation and reading/writing readiness.

The term emergent literacy is defined as skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing and the environments that support those developments, e.g. shared book reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

Phonics

Phonics is a 'method for teaching reading and writing of the English language by developing learners' phonological/phonemic awareness — the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds — in order to teach the correspondence between sounds (phonemes) and the spelling patterns (graphemes) that represent them' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phonics).

Sociocultural view of reading

While one of the universal aims of primary schooling is to develop basic literacy among children, it is important to recognise that early literacy outcomes are not universally sought to be achieved with pre-schoolers. There are differences in cultural expectations about the purposes of early years education, some focusing on formal early literacy instruction, others choosing to provide rich oral input first. However, all seem to have comparable literacy outcomes by the end of primary school.

There are culturally-influenced differences in the type of instruction that beginning readers are given once schooling begins. The norm in many teaching cultures is a teacher-fronted, non-interactive presentation in which the chances for beginning readers to find support in their individual cognitive capacity to decode and in particular to comprehend texts are very limited (Papp & Rixon, 2018). Relatively resource-rich contexts such as the USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia, on the other hand, have long placed emphasis on the cognitive benefits as well as the sense of security provided for children by carefully scaffolded reading experiences, either one-to-one or in skilful management of larger groups or whole classes, as in **shared reading** (IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Neuman, Copple & Bredekamp, 2000).

Critical pre-literacy skills

The capacity to predict future reading ability among L1 English speaking children is approximately as strong from kindergarten onwards as it is from year to year once formal reading instruction has begun (Scarborough, 2003). This implies that the key cognitive and linguistic precursors central in learning to read are already in place before primary school. Children who arrive at school with weaker verbal ability and literacy knowledge are more

likely than their peers to experience reading difficulties and require immediate support (Goswami, 2015).

Emergent literacy is thought to comprise two independent sub-domains: **code-related** and **oral language** skills which predict how well and how easily children will learn to read once exposed to formal reading instruction (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Goswami, 2003; Lonigan, 2006; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2005; Scarborough, 2003).

Code-related skills include:

1. knowledge of *conventions of print*, beginning forms of writing, knowledge of graphemes (letters in the alphabet) and grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules (the relationship between spelling and sound)

2. *phonological awareness*, that is, the ability to discriminate and manipulate the sound structure of language, including an awareness of rhyming and alliteration, identifying/breaking apart syllables, picking out initial sounds in words, blending phonemes together, segmenting words into their speech sounds, manipulating (exchanging/deleting) sounds in words

Oral language skills reflect more general language ability to support comprehension, and include:

- vocabulary knowledge

- semantic knowledge

- syntactic knowledge

- conceptual knowledge

- knowledge of narrative discourse

Improving young children's oral language development should be a central goal during the preschool and kindergarten years.

TEACHING TIPS

Teachers should encourage oral language development in the early years EFL classroom by:

- exposing learners to a wealth of listening activities: songs, chants, rhythm games, rhymes, poetry, stories

- giving information about the meanings and contexts of new words to expand oral vocabulary

- employing play-based learning, such as pretend play, drawing and creating, show and tell, etc.

Literacy-related behaviours in pre-school are considered important aspects of early literacy development and are viewed as having a significant impact on individual differences in later reading skills (Kennedy et al., 2012). The list of prerequisites includes recognition of letters of the alphabet and the direction of writing, letter features (horizontal, vertical, oblique lines, curves), orthographic awareness and phonological decoding.

Therefore, it is important to foster the following literacy-related skills in very young learners of English:

- recognition of letters of the alphabet

- recognition of the direction of writing

- drawing horizontal, vertical, oblique lines, curves

- phonological awareness raising, e.g. noticing sounds

- orthographic awareness raising, e.g. using magnetic letters/letter combinations, or picture cards with colour-coded phonemes, syllables, on an elastic string, etc.[1]

The aim of literacy instruction should be to 'turn listeners into readers' and ultimately to enable children to read independently. All literacy-related activities need to foster a positive attitude towards literacy and encourage engagement with spoken and printed text. Engagement can be achieved by establishing joint attention, imitation and repetition, as well as allowing choice by catering for children's individual preferences. Language play and creative use of language should be an essential part of pedagogy with young children. Reading routines and pretend reading help convey important information about reading and conventions of print (left to right, turning the page, role of illustrations, etc.). Very young children enjoy pre-reading activities such as looking at books and devising narrative from pictures or retelling a favourite story from memory. Children greatly enjoy shared reading activities and turn-taking with an adult. Alphabetic knowledge has great flexibility for incorporation into game-like tasks and activities. Classroom signs, labels, illustrated words, posters, etc. help young children understand the relationship of printed word to message.

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1 For phonological and orthographic awareness raising activities, see techniques used with dyslexic EFL students in the video at https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/dyslexia/0/steps/6774

Models of reading development

In English, there is far less transparency between sound and symbol than in most other alphabetic languages. The extreme orthographic depth (Katz & Frost, 1992) and complex syllable structure of English cause a problem to novice readers. This has led to different views of the best ways to teach how to read and write English (Chall, 1967, 1983/1996; Marsh, Friedman, Welch & Desberg, 1981; Frith, 1985; Ehri, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2017). The models that have been proposed to account for the development of native English-speaking children's reading skills are sometimes portrayed as competing with each other (Castles et al., 2018).

One theory suggests that reading development starts from the level of the phoneme and is built up from that, which represents the so-called phonological, sub-lexical route. In contrast, another theory suggests that initial reading ability relies on long-term memory of the visual appearance of words as whole symbols, the so-called visual, lexical, logographic route (see Table 1). These two theories representing the Phonics versus the Whole Word or 'Look and Say' teaching approaches have led to what is termed the 'reading wars' among theorists and practitioners (Meadows, 2006; Wyse & Jones, 2008).

PHONOGRAPHIC APPROACH	SIGHT WORD APPROACH
Involves the teaching of sound, e.g. sound picture relationships in a certain order	Involves the teaching of commonly used high frequency words that young children are encouraged to memorise in their entirety by sight
Believes that key skills are reversible and deals with encoding and decoding at the same time	Believes that children will automatically recognise these words in print without having to use any strategies to decode
May be complemented with sight word reading for early access to meaning in texts	Adopts a whole word/ look and say method

Table 1. Comparison of phonographic versus sight word approach

Much of the controversy about children's early literacy development concerns the timing, the roles and appropriate sequencing of focus on micro-processes in literacy instruction. Policymakers and materials writers translate models into recommended sequences for teaching focus and thus there is variation in the pace at which whole nations (and various generations within nations) go through the stages (Chall, 1983/1996).

Chall (1983/1996) described six qualitatively distinct phases for L1 reading development, presented as strictly chronologically sequenced and 'natural' stages of development. However, learners can go through them at different paces (faster or slower). Chall's first

three stages relevant to young children are displayed in Table 2 with hypothesised approximate ages.

Another influential model, developed by Ehri, proposed four stages of reading development, as seen in Table 3.

STAGE	AGE	FEATURES
0 Pre-reading	Birth to 6	Accumulation of knowledge about letters, words, books, signs. Guessing, predicting, 'pretend' reading. Phonological awareness.
1 Decoding	6–7	Learning of sound-to-letter relations, identifying words. Reading of short, simple and predictable texts. Understanding connected text. Discovery (flash of insight) of what reading is for: meaning.
2 Confirmation and Fluency	7–8	Recognition of words of increasingly complex elements using semantic and syntactic information and context. Reading more complex texts with more complex plots. Fluency through practice: wide extensive reading of different texts and/or repeated readings of the same texts. Reading aloud becomes more fluent and expressive, indicating comprehension of what is read.

Table 2. Chall's (1983/1996: 9) stages of reading development

STAGE	AGE	FEATURES
Pre-Alphabetic	Pre age 5	Reading is top-down, limited to using environmental and contextual cues, meaning-based, and relies on long-term memory of the visual appearance of words as whole symbols (the *visual / lexical / logographic route*)
Partial Alphabetic	5-6	Readers start recognizing the correspondences between graphemes and phonemes, but the insight is not fully developed, may begin to detect letters in words, match some letters to their sounds (*b, d, f, j*), identify initial and final sounds in words, but have difficulty with medial sounds in words, still heavy reliance on context, mistake similarly spelled words
Full Alphabetic	6-7	Letter-sound knowledge develops, strategy for sounding out common words, building of sight word vocabularies, readers have a good knowledge of the probabilities and contingencies that allow accurate and automatic reading
Consolidated Alphabetic	7-8	After more exposure to print, readers use their extensive knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences, as well as onsets (*p-, sp-, spl-*), rime (*-ip, -op, -ash*), affixal morphemes (*-tion, -ness, pre-*) and syllables (*at, in, ten*), to apply a strategy based on reasoning by analogy to known spelling patterns

Table 3. Ehri's (1995, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2017) stages of reading development

Teaching reading in L1 English contexts

In this section, we review the strategies of teaching reading to native English-speaking children to see how they might apply to L2 reading.

The 'reading wars' as outlined above have resulted in a situation where there is no one system of teaching L1 users to read English. Teachers tend to use a mixture of approaches. L1 readers learn to decode English by relating graphemes to phonemes, identifying common syllables, looking at *onsets and rimes* (sounds before and after the nucleus of a syllable), identifying morphemes and using various processing strategies.

Currently in the UK a phonics-based approach is mandatory.[2] The Whole Word or 'Look and Say' approach is not officially favoured, although some teachers continue to use them. For the 200 or so frequent but 'tricky' words (such as *one, two, eight, laugh, enough, who*) that cannot be decoded readily using regular symbol-sound relationships, rapid visual recognition is the only recourse from the start.

In the UK, children are first taught how to read and form single letters, e.g. *s, a, t, p, i, n*, then to recognise *digraphs and trigraphs* (graphemes composed of strings of two or three letters) such as *ck, qu, ch, sh, th, ng, ai, ee, igh, oa, oo, ar, or, ur, ow, oi*, and *ear, air, ure, er*.

Different commercial reading schemes are available and allowed.[3] Although following the same sequence of focus (e.g. single letters to di-/trigraphs), these present particular items in different orders and combinations. What they have in common is the **synthetic approach** to phonics (Wyse & Goswami, 2008), currently favoured by the UK government.[4] This means that children are taught to build up words from separate phonemes rather than to break down words that they already know and recognise their component parts and sound-correspondences. The latter approach, out of official favour during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, is known as **analytic phonics**. Some L1 reading experts have argued that there is no particular evidence to support the superiority of synthetic phonics, while many teachers find the analytic approach more child-friendly and cognitively appropriate for native L1 speaking children (Wyse & Styles, 2007; Wyse & Jones, 2008; Wyse & Goswami, 2008).

SYNTHETIC APPROACH	Children are taught to build up words from separate phonemes, e.g. pronounce a phoneme for each letter in turn /k, æ, t/, and blend the phonemes together to form the word cat
ANALYTIC APPROACH	Children are taught words by sight and then to break down words that they already know and recognise their component parts and sound-correspondences, e.g. recognise how the following words are alike in the following groups: *pat/park/ push/pen, cat/mat/bag/rag, nap/cup/tip*.

2 See *Progression in Phonics* (DfEE, 1999), *Playing with Sounds* (DfES, 2004), *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007)
3 Apart from the UK government-sponsored *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007), there are schemes such as 'Jolly Phonics' (Lloyd and Wernham 1994) and 'Read Write Inc Phonics' (Miskin 2011) in the UK, and 'Phono-Graphix' in the US since 1993
4 Since the *Rose Report* (DfES, 2006)

Analytic phonics, which operates only with words already known to the learners, is more suitable for use with foreign language learners (Rixon, 2011). The reason is that they do not have a large already-established lexical repertoire that would allow them to recognise many of the words by synthetic phonics techniques.

The important point to note about both synthetic and analytic phonics is that neither system presents letters and sounds in <a-z> order, but rather in orders based on principles such as frequency, similarity in appearances of letters, or generativeness of different combinations. For instance, the *s a t p i n* group of letters are generative of more real words than any other group of letters; *st sp* can occur both at the end and beginning of words, e.g. *st- op, lo -st,* but *br str wr* cannot.

By getting children to pay attention to letters and their combinations in a word, and by exposing them to a word several times in a range of semantic and syntactic contexts, children accumulate more general knowledge about orthographic regularities within the writing system: for example, the insight that in English, double letters such as 'll' tend to appear at the ends of words but not the beginnings. With repeated exposure to a word in extended reading experience, orthographic representations become more sharpened and stable. Research has found that reading experience affects fluent word reading: children need to see as many words as possible, as frequently as possible (Stanovich & West, 1989). However, the optimal number and complexity of phonics rules to be taught is still under discussion (Castles et al., 2018).

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The difference between the appropriacy of reading instruction may very well lie in the particular age group they are applied to: 4-year-olds are at a developmental phase different from 6- or 7-year-olds and will need a different 'proper match' or challenge in instruction. In addition, the learning style of groups of children in different contexts and cultures may be relevant, and fitness for purpose of instructional approaches may vary according to individual preferences among children. In actual practice a mix of methods and a range of approaches reinforcing each other may be the best practice with children (Porter, to appear).

The research literature suggests that principles of teaching reading to L1 speakers could inform teaching of English as a foreign language (Huo & Wang 2017; Lee 2000). Teachers should promote key skills (segmenting, sounding out, blending) in young L2 learners while using a mixture of developmentally appropriate approaches to teach L2 reading. Phonics should be approached as a series of playful games and exercises, using authentic materials, such as songs, poems and chants. Non-words should not be used with young L2 learners of English.

Role of L1 literacy in L2 development

There has long been a debate whether and how the nature of the L1 writing script (orthography), L1 phonological system (syllabic structure) and children's L1 literacy skills determine or influence the processes in learning to read and write in a foreign language. Typological differences relating to levels of phonological processing and orthographic depth will have an influence on the way a foreign language is learnt.

L2 readers from diverse L1 backgrounds may use different procedures relying on the strategies developed to read their L1 writing system. When Chinese and Japanese learners read English words, they may rely more on sight word knowledge. Spanish learners of English may be slower at word recognition, because they tend to convert graphemes into phonemes rather than making an attempt to quickly identify whole words (Landerl, 2006). Readers of consonantal Arabic may rely more on consonants than on vowels in reading English and may believe that vowels represent unnecessary information (Birch, 2015). The directionality of the L1 writing system can also affect L2 reading: for instance, when English is written vertically, English native readers read more slowly, but Chinese readers of English are much less affected (Bassetti, n.d.).

Young L2 learners possess several strengths related to phonological awareness:

- It appears that linguistic skills learnt in L1 transfer to the L2, especially phonological awareness

- L2 learners do not appear disadvantaged in establishing concepts of print needed for learning to read; the L2 may actually support or enhance the extraction of these concepts

- Bilingual children acquiring two languages that foster different levels of phonological awareness may benefit

by transferring metalinguistic understanding of one language to another, boosting literacy development

• There is some evidence that phonological transfer occurs even across typologically very different writing systems (e.g. alphabetic and ideographic)

Speech perception and phonotactics

L1 orthographic knowledge as well as L1 phonotactic rules (governing permissible syllable structures) influence the perception and production of L2 phonology (Bassetti & Atkinson, 2015; Escudero & Wanrooij, 2010; Nimz, 2018). *Phonological working memory* skills are needed in sound discrimination and establishing phonotactic rules. These are particularly important for children at the beginning of the L2 acquisition process, contributing to the growth of listening ability and vocabulary learning (Service, 1992).

Phonological

Learners need to learn how to perceive and distinguish meaning-bearing sounds in English e.g. such as liquids /l/ from /r/: *write* from *light, grass* from *glass, rice* from *lice*; other minimal pairs between voiced /b/ or voiceless /p/; a phonemic distinction that distinguishes *pin/ bin, pack/back, rib/rip* and *Lib/lip*; between vowels /æ/ and /ɛ/, as in *bad/bed, pat/pet, cattle/kettle;* or word initial or final /s/ and /ʃ/, as in *sip/ship* and *lease/leash*.

Perceptual differences between L1 and L2 have implications for teaching learners from different L1 backgrounds. For example:

• **Italian** learners of English have difficulty discriminating /ɒ/-/ʌ/, /ɛ/-/æ/ and /i/-/ɪ/ because they often identify both members of each contrast as instances of a single Italian vowel (*ship* versus *sheep, full* versus *fool*) (Flege & MacKay, 2004).

• Differences in speech perception abilities in **Japanese** learners of the English consonants /r/ and /l/ are due to age and length of exposure (Yamada, 1995; Aoyama et al., 2004).

• **Korean** child L2 learners between ages 4–7 find it difficult to discriminate /i/ from /ɪ/ and /u/ from /ʊ/ in English, as Korean does not make these distinctions.

• Errors committed by **Arab** learners of English at the phonological level are due to learners' difficulty in distinguishing the following pairs: /p/ and /b/, /f/ and /v/ and /ɪ/ and /e/ (leading to difficulty between *pack/back, pay/bay, push/bush, pull/bull, please, prefer,* as well as difficulty with *very/ferry, vast/ fast, live/life, every, have, five*) (Tushyeh, 1996).

• **Japanese** and **Spanish** learners have difficulty with the contrast between /v/ and /b/, and might substitute them for each other (*very/ berry, vest/best, avoid, available, every, even have, live, five, valley, about, a boy, able, ability*).

• French and Portuguese learners may pronounce /tʃ/ as /ʃ/ (cheap/sheep).

This information can be sourced from the Pronunciation Planner[6] from Cambridge University Press. This resource has been compiled to identify areas of difficulty with sounds for learners from twelve L1 backgrounds and therefore is of high priority for teaching. Another aspect that is helpful is the indication of problematic words at different levels of the CEFR.

Phonotactics

Phonotactic regularities are those that define permissible *syllable* structures, consonant clusters and vowel sequences (Storkel, 2001). For instance, /pn/, /kn/ and /zd/ are not permissible initial syllables in English, but are allowed between syllables: e.g. *happening* /hæpnɪn/, a*cne* [ækni], *Asda* /æzdə/. L1 learners acquire phonotactic rules by the age of 7 or 8 (Owens, 1996). Since children accumulate this knowledge based on information on frequency of occurrence, learning is usage-based.

Different phonotactic constraints between the L1 and L2 can create learning problems. Consonant clusters are generally difficult for learners whose L1 does not feature them. For example:

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6 http://languageresearch.cambridge.org/pronunciation

- Perception studies have indicated that L1 **Brazilian Portuguese** EFL learners frequently perceive an illusory vowel [i] in English consonant clusters that are not allowed in their L1. Production studies with these learners suggest that, when faced with English consonant clusters that are impossible in their L1, the preferred strategy is likewise the insertion of a vowel [i]. This is done to break the cluster, so that the resulting sequence no longer violates L1 phonotactic constrains. For example, *study* would be pronounced as [is.tʌ.di].

- Similarly, **Spanish** learners of English find it difficult to produce [s]+stop word-initially, because in Spanish, words with s+consonant onsets cannot exist, and phonotactic constraints call for the addition of a vowel /e/ (e.g., *study/estudy, stable/estable*).

- **Spanish** does not permit consonant clusters at the end of words, and often native Spanish speakers reduce final consonant clusters when speaking English (e.g., *soun* for sound).

- On the other hand, **Vietnamese** speakers learning English often simplify consonant clusters through deletion so as to produce CVC syllables, as opposed to deleting the cluster altogether (e.g. fir[st] → fir[t]).

- **Chinese** learners of English often delete /r/, /l/, /t/, /d/, /f/ and /v/ in clusters in the middle of a word after a vowel (e.g. *silver* becomes *siver*).

The rules and probabilities applying to the sequencing of phonemes provide a rich source of information for learners. Knowledge of common phonotactic patterns may help, for instance, to decide whether the continuous stream of sounds should be segmented as *ice cream* or *I scream* in a particular context, or help distinguish between a *name* versus *an aim* as well as *that stuff* versus *that's tough*. Focusing young language learners' attention on these features of the input may not only be fun, but also beneficial.

L1 interference can also affect other aspects of the phonology, including syllable structure, stress patterns and intonation. There is ample evidence that adult L2 learners use their L1's phonemic and metrical segmentation strategies (the rhythmic alternation of strong and weakly stressed syllables) in the L2 (McQueen, 2005). For example:

- In **Japanese**, consonant-consonant clusters are not allowed. So, in the case of a non-word such as 'ebzo', Japanese speakers hear /u/ between /b/ and /z/, and their representation of it becomes 'ebuzo'.

- **French** speakers 'misperceive' illegal word initial /dl/ and /tl/ clusters as legal /gl/ and /kl/ (Dupoux et al., 1999, 2011).

- Egyptian learners of English commit certain phonological errors due to differences between English and **Arabic** stress and intonation systems (Wahba, 1998).

Since children's auditory discrimination skills and phonotactic patterns are established very early on in their L1 (Sebastian-Gallé & Kroll, 2003), young L2 learners may be similarly influenced by their L1's phonemic discrimination and metrical segmentation strategies as adults, at least initially, in the language learning process. Even though automatised cognitive language learning mechanisms are resistant to change (Mitchell, Myles & Marsden, 2019), what may distinguish children from adults is that, provided they receive adequate exposure to the target language, the majority of young learners do not stay constrained by their L1 features.

Teaching phonics and reading to L2 learners

Children have a strong sense of fun, and thoroughly enjoy routine and repetition. Adult guided play-based learning (rather than rigid formal literacy instruction) is increasingly recognised as beneficial in early years curricula, and may positively impact on literacy outcomes (Han et al., 2010; McGuinness et al. 2014). Songs and rhymes practise manipulation of sounds and build phonemic awareness. Use of songs, chants and poetry can also improve stress and rhythm awareness. Rhythmic games (such as jazz chants, Graham, 1978; Craven, n.d.) support phonological processing skills and there is evidence that beginning readers draw on rhymes by analogy to support reading (Duncan, Seymour & Hill, 1997; Seymour Duncan & Bolik, 1999). The use of songs, rhymes, chants and poetry offer potential for fun and opportunities for interactive tasks as part of the curriculum. Materials should use audiovisual material that contain songs, rhymes, animated clips, activities and games involving language rhythm (music, poetry) and physical activity (clapping, dancing).

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L2 literacy should not be taken for granted but explicitly taught. However, for very young L2 learners, seeing the English words on the page may not be facilitative at an early stage. Some experts advise caution against focusing on reading and writing with younger children at an early stage in their learning, since 'the written form of English creates […] high cognitive and motor skill demands for pupils', as when confronted with written language, they 'have a huge decoding and sense-making job to do' (Cameron, 2003).

Another powerful reason for not including written language in materials for very young learners is that young beginners in the English language do not yet have a large lexical repertoire against which they may 'match' words on the page (Rixon, 2007). Using words on the page as facilitators of general language learning for young children is not well founded. A strong focus on teaching letters in strict alphabetical order and teaching initial letters and phonemes only results in an incomplete coverage of the phoneme repertoire. The letters <a-z> in word-initial position can represent at most 23 of the 44 phonemes of British RP English (Rixon, 2011).

In addition, teaching materials for children in many contexts allow only reading aloud activities with regard to early reading (Rixon, 2011). More cognitively engaging pattern-finding or analogy-using activities would better suit the needs of beginning L2 readers. Some phonographic approaches popular in L1 literacy instruction may be beneficial for young L2 learners' literacy development as follows:

Key skills: These skills are reversible: they work for both reading and spelling.

- Blending: Blend sound pictures (letters) to make words   *h o t*   *t r y*

- Segmenting: Segment words into sound pictures   *th / a / t*   *l / igh / t*

- Phoneme manipulation: manipulate sounds in and out of words   __ *a p*   *c a* __

- Awareness of overlap (*snow now*) and variation (*dog egg*)

TEACHING TIPS

Phonological awareness tasks should:

- teach children letters and letter combinations and sounds and the link between them

- relate graphemes to phonemes, looking at onsets and rimes (the initial consonant or consonant cluster and final vowel and consonant in a syllable), common syllables, and morphemes

- teach sound–sound picture relationships in a certain, principled, order

- teach encoding and decoding at the same time as key skills are reversible

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L2 learners should learn each letter by its sound, not its name. For instance, the letter a should be called /æ/ (as in *ant*), not /eɪ/ (as in *aim*). Similarly, the letter n should be nn (as in *net*), not en. This will help in blending. The names of each letter can follow later. The letters should not be introduced in alphabetical order, but in a principled way. For instance, as we have seen, the first group (*s, a, t, i, p, n*) has been chosen in some literacy schemes, because they make more simple three-letter words than any other six letters. Similar-looking letters (*b, d, p*) are sometimes introduced in different groups to avoid confusion, while other times they are introduced together and contrasted to make children note the subtle differences between them. Sounds that have more than one way of being written are initially taught in one form only. For example, children are taught how to write the sound /eɪ/ through the spelling -ai- (as in *train*), and then the alternative spelling -a-e (*gate*) and -ay (*day*) follow later.[7]

Sight words (words that cannot be decoded by knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules and therefore need to be memorised, such as *the, come, have* and *said*) should be displayed in thematic groups (see Appendix): pronouns, possessive articles, prepositions, demonstratives, adverbs, numbers, question words, quantifiers, connectives, auxiliary verbs, modal auxiliaries, articles, verbs, school-related nouns). Sight words need to be learnt by rote through repetition and feedback, so that children learn to recognise and name them fluently. These 'tricky' words are typically taught by flash cards

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7 For a recommended list for which order to teach alternative spellings in, see *Letters and Sounds* (p. 144, pp. 154–157)

with single words printed on them for children to name, or weekly word lists for children to take home. However, activity sheets involving the words might be more useful, such as the difference between *there/their, sail/sale*.

> ### TEACHING TIPS
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> Children learn best in context and through active discovery. They need hands-on activities. Teachers should:
>
> - get children to follow stories being read (whole books)
>
> - point out that print is all around them (environment words, names, labels)
>
> - get learners into the habit of 'looking with intent' to recognise patterns in print
>
> - encourage learners to take mental photos of words/hold the image in their mind/ break it down into sounds and 'sound pictures' (letter patterns and spelling)
>
> - take an interest in words as you come across them ('sounds like/looks like but') and talk about word families
>
> - air-write words/write words on each other's back/use their body to act out letters
>
> - be multi-sensory: get children to experience words with all their senses: hear look say touch move sound write

> ### TEACHING TIPS
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> In addition, once children have acquired the basics of literacy, teachers should:
>
> - offer choice, make reading materials easily accessible.
>
> - integrate reading with wider listening and speaking work, and include texts that encourage **extensive reading**. There is huge value in fostering a love of reading in children and a motivation to read independently (Arnold & Rixon, 2014)
>
> - provide opportunities for children to read texts that they are interested in, that their friends are reading, such as comics, books of song lyrics, movie novelizations, sporting skill manuals
>
> - use **shared book reading** *dialogically*, with much language interaction between the reader and the child, combining it with language activities with explicit focus on decoding instruction

Spelling and punctuation

The orthographic depth of English impacts its spelling system. In English, the letter <o> corresponds to at least 10 phonemes and the central vowel phoneme schwa /ə/ corresponds to at least 8 spellings (Cook & Bassetti, 2005). There is also the problem of homophones in English, that is, the different spellings for words such as /sent/ that can be spelt as *scent, sent* or *cent,* /tu:/ spelt *too* or *two,* /ju:/ written as *you* or *ewe* and /weilz/ spelt as *Wales* or *whales*. These are just some of the reasons why in more phonologically transparent languages such as Italian, German, or Hungarian, spelling is easier and faster to learn than it is in English for L1 children. English children take longer and they are more erroneous in their spelling

in the first years of literacy (Seymour, Aro & Erskine, 2003; Ellis et al., 2004). For a review of the development of spelling among L1 children see Treiman & Kessler (2014).

The dual route (phonological and visual) model that was suggested for L1 reading has also been proposed for L1 writing. Regular and/or infrequent words are spelt using the phonological route. On the other hand, the direct/visual/whole word route that relies on the orthographic lexicon is used with irregular and frequent words such as *eye, friend, yacht,* or *Wednesday.*

L2 writing can be affected by the writing system of the L1. Whether the L1 writing system is based around phonemes, consonants, syllables, or morphemes will influence the way some learners think of speech as consisting of phonemes, morphemes, or syllables (Cook & Bassetti, 2005) and represent it in their L2 writing. Spelling in L2 can also be influenced by the L1 phonological system or the L1 phoneme-grapheme correspondence rules. L2 learners of English produce misspellings that are evidence of difficulties with double consonants, diphthongs and consonant clusters not present in their L1.

Orthography, apart from spelling, also includes rules or conventions of punctuation (capitalisation, hyphenation, punctuation marks, etc.) (Cook & Bassetti, 2005). In L1:

- some **4-year-olds** may recognise some punctuation marks

- around **age 7** punctuation is used for meaning and use of full stops becomes conventional

- other basic punctuation is utilised only around **age 11** (Wyse & Jones, 2008)

L2 learners can also be affected by their L1 punctuation, such as different use of brackets, double quotation marks, full stops, commas and spacing, such as when Arabic learners of English use quotation marks as brackets, or add a space before punctuation marks.

Since the enabling skills of handwriting, spelling and punctuation are not automatised but controlled processes at the beginning of writing development,

they take up much of the attentional resources and leave little working memory capacities to be devoted to monitoring, evaluation and revision in young children.

TEACHING TIPS

- Teachers should regard handwriting instruction as an equally important means to improve literacy.

- They should focus primarily on the message rather than the spelling and punctuation.

- Marking YL writing should make allowances for the occasional lapse in punctuation.

Issues and challenges

Children must develop appropriate representations for print units (letters, syllables, tones, characters) for each language they are learning to read. Even languages written in the same alphabetic system will have different levels of orthographic transparency. Children may have very little spoken L2 knowledge when reading instruction begins, so L2 reading development may be affected by limited oral language knowledge (Grabe, 2010). Limited oral language knowledge may impact on key skills such as phonological awareness. Reading by word recognition, where phonological strategies are too effortful or have not been taught, may increase chances of errors. However, any delay for L2 learners, due to lack of spoken L2 knowledge, may be brief, as L2 learners may acquire vocabulary more quickly the second time around due to cognitive maturity and their existing L1 lexicon to support insights into conceptual-lexical mappings (Paradis, 2007).

Home and pre-school environments

Researchers and policymakers at national and international levels are increasingly focusing on the effects of family and pre-school influences on literacy development,

especially the quality of literacy exposure and instructional provision in the early years (Sylva et al., 2011). Ongoing research aims to highlight the role of parenting, teaching and curricula and their precise contribution to children's literacy development (de Haan Elbers & Leseman, 2014; Niklas & Schneider, 2017; Park, 2020). One of the strategies used is **shared book reading** which allows the use of **interactive strategies** with children which have been shown to contribute to their literacy development.

TEACHING TIPS

- These types of interactive strategies could be achieved in the classroom through teachers reading and discussing a variety of texts with children, and having conversations of an inferential nature about texts, such as:

    - predicting future events in a story,

    - asking textually implicit questions that require children to combine information across sentences,

    - asking children to capture all essential facts in any text they read,

    - explaining how two pieces of information can imply another unstated piece of information to fill in missing gaps in the information provided explicitly,

    - asking them to identify details of descriptions about how a character acts,

    - focusing on character intentions and feelings, asking children to make connections and inferences about characters' emotions by using details from the text and their observations, prior knowledge and experiences,

    - getting them to compare and contrast characters in different stories.

PARENT TIPS

- Similarly, parents can support the use of such strategies by doing the following:

    - having conversations that stay on a single topic if possible,

    - providing children opportunities to talk and extend their responses,

    - responding to each of their contributions, elaborating, expanding on and evaluating positively what they say.

Young children construct knowledge in experiential, interactive, concrete and hands-on ways. Language and cognitive development occur together in young learners, so any language teaching, either in L1 or L2, will contribute to the conceptual knowledge base and cognitive skills of children.

Assessment of oral language and reading abilities

As we have seen, L2 literacy development is dependent on skills already developed as part of the L1 curriculum, and children's mastery of the L1 and L2 oral language. Ideally, information on the development of literacy in each of the children's language (L1 and L2) should be collected. There should be clear guidance on the range, quality and complexity of what young learners may be expected to read and write, along with more conventional standards describing how well learners could be expected to read and write at each age group.

When designing language curricula and assessments for very young learners, it is essential to take full account of the theory and best practices in early childhood care and education.[8] In the general educational literature, the assessment of very young learners' development and

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8 See, for example, Donaldson (1987), Evangelou, Sylva, Wild, Glenny, & Kyriacou (2009), Fisher (1995), Garvey (1982), Meadows (2006), Montessori (1983), Tizard & Hughes (1984), Wells (1987)

the reporting of results is usually done for formative purposes and leads to a learner profile. The aim of assessment is usually to monitor a child's learning progress and anticipate their potential development. Pedagogical aims include identifying and building on their strengths in order to enable each individual child to reach their unique potential (Guddemi & Case, 2004).

In child L2 studies, young learners' oral and literacy development is measured by elicitation methods similar to those used in child L1 acquisition studies (e.g. elicited imitation and miscue analysis). However, these methods do not use language in interactive communication and therefore are not universally accepted. Elicited imitation is useful to diagnose difficulties: 'the types of errors and modifications that children make when imitating speech provide us with vital insight into the child's level of linguistic knowledge' (Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith, 2001).

The literature on sentence repetition as an elicitation method to gauge L2 proficiency argues that learners need to understand and parse the interlocutor's utterance in order to be able to echo it accurately and produce what looks like a formulaic response (e.g. Campfield, 2015; Campfield & Murphy, 2014). The understanding of the child does not have to be explicit – it can be approximate because elicited imitation is able to tap into not only those structures that are firmly represented but also those that are in the process of being acquired (Naiman, 1974).

The other assessment technique is called miscue analysis of children's reading aloud using **running records**. In L1 literacy teaching, reading aloud with correct phrasing and expression to aid the development of reading fluency and comprehension is one of the aims in the National Literacy Strategy in England. It has also been advocated in L2 reading assessment (Hasselgreen et al., 2011). Miscue analysis, an early but contested framework for one-to-one scaffolded work in both teaching and classroom assessment, 'provides a descriptive, qualitative, account of a child's reading strategies. It is based on the idea that the errors, or miscues, that children make while reading aloud provide valuable information about the way they use various reading strategies to work out what the print says …' (Goodman & Goodman, 1977).

Assessment of oral language as well as emergent reading and writing development should not be restricted to these techniques. Teachers should use a range of assessment types, including narrative and story approaches (comprehension questions, conversations, oral retelling) and portfolio comprising children's drawings and written work. It should be ongoing, task-based, interactive, with skills integrated. The results should be used for formative purposes to indicate strengths and areas of improvement in feedback that children and their parents understand. Techniques such as elicited imitation, running records and miscue analysis in reading aloud can be used to track progress and identify weaknesses. All tasks, for instruction and assessment, need to be realistic, relevant for children's interests and communicative needs, meaningful and offer the right amount of challenge but provide appropriate scaffolding and structure to be achievable. Tasks must be comfortably within the cognitive and motor skills range of learners and comprise words that they already recognise aurally. In summary:

- Teachers should expect and encourage children to read (aloud and to themselves) (parts of) texts differently according to the type of reading activity they are engaged in.

- For assessment, teachers should use narrative and story approaches (oral retelling, comprehension questions, conversations and portfolio comprising children's drawings and written work).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that using phonological based instruction in the early years and pri-mary English as a foreign language classroom may be beneficial for the development of reading and writing skills of young English language learners. Helping L2 learners on the journey towards literacy in English requires age appropriate and sensitive instruction which does not stop at rudimentary adaptations of L1 phonics teaching but considers and builds on the L2 learners' oral language skills as well as their existing L1 literacy skills. Emergent lit-eracy skills can be fostered by approaches that take current thinking on how children learn best within and outside the classroom into account. Instruction should view L2 literacy de-velopment as a complex set of skills, involving the improvement of oral skills and phonologi-cal awareness, using meaning-focused reading and writing activities, physical activity and explicitly teaching handwriting. In addition, L2 literacy instruction should embrace playful learning and formative assessment methods and involve parents in the education of children.

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Szilvia Papp is a consultant in educational assessment with special expertise in young learners. She has worked as Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics and TEFL at the University of Portsmouth and as Senior Research and Validation Manager at Cambridge Language Assessment where she worked on the Cambridge English Young Learners tests and Cambridge English's teaching awards (Delta, CELTA, TKT). She is the co-author (with Shelagh Rixon and John Field) of the volume in the *Studies in Language Testing* series on Examining Young Learners by Cambridge University Press.

Recommendations for further reading

Books on teaching pronunciation

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Glossary

affixal morphemes: morphemes that must be bound to a word, they can be prefixes, e.g. un-, in-, pre- or suffixes, e.g. -ly, -ed, -ing, -tion, -ness

alphabetic/letter knowledge: teaching letter-name and letter-sound correspondence, lower case and up-per case,

analytic phonics programs begin with whole words, and grapheme-phoneme correspondences are taught by breaking those words down into their component parts

blending: putting the sounds together to read a word

code-related skills: skills that facilitate children's abilities to acquire the alphabetic principle successfully and become accurate and fluent decoders of text, including phonological awareness, letter knowledge

consonant clusters: combinations of consonants that are allowed in a language, e.g. at the beginning of words: spot, trip, clap; at the end: tent, mend, damp; or at the beginning and end: trust, spend, twist

CVC: stands for consonant, vowel, consonant in a syllable

decodable text: practicing decoding words in text which is only composed of simple, decodable words

dialogic reading: a form of shared book reading, in which the adult uses different scaffolding techniques (e.g., asking specific types of 'wh-' and open-ended questions, modeling, using expansions and repetitions) to encourage children to talk about the pictures in the book and learn to 'tell the story'

digraphs and trigraphs graphemes composed of strings of two or three letters, two and three letters representing one sound

emergent literacy skills: some are code related, and others are meaning related

extensive reading: involves learners reading texts for enjoyment and to develop general reading skills; extensive reading material can be anything, such as magazines, graded readers, novels, comic books, etc.

extreme orthographic depth means there is no one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds. In the case of English, there are 26 letters in the English alphabet, but there are approximately 44 phonemes (24 consonants, 20 vowels) and around 52 consonant clusters used in English

grapheme: a written orthographic symbol (made up of a single letter or a combination of letters in alphabetic languages) that represents a sound (phoneme), such as *p, ai, sh, igh, tch, ough* etc. in English

grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules: the relationship between spelling and sound

guided reading: a teacher demonstrates word decoding when students encounter a difficult word during text reading

meaning-related skills: skills primarily associated with language that allow children to comprehend text once it is decoded, encouraged by practices such as dialogic reading or shared reading

metrical segmentation: the rhythmic alternation of strong and weakly stressed syllables

morpheme: a meaningful morphological unit of a language that cannot be further divided, morphemes can be words and affixes (prefixes and suffixes) or semantically related words (e.g. 'health' and 'healthy')

onsets and rimes: sounds before and after the nucleus of a syllable, i.e. the initial consonant or consonant cluster and final vowel and consonant in a syllable

orthographic depth/transparency: the complexity, consistency, or transparency of grapheme-phoneme correspondences in written alphabetic language, related to how complex print-to-sound correspondences are in a language and how unpredictable the pronunciations of words are on the basis of their orthography

orthography: the writing script in a language

phoneme: a sound that distinguishes one word from another in a language, for example the phoneme /k/ in English occurs in words such as cat, kit, scat, skit

phonemic awareness: the ability to delete, detect, segment phonemes and blend them into words

phonological awareness: the ability to discriminate and manipulate the sound structure of language

phonological processing abilities: these abilities include phonological awareness, rapid automatized nam-ing, phonological memory

phonological working memory: the ability to hold on to speech-based information in short-term memory, needed for reading and spelling

phonological/sub-lexical route: a theory of reading development that suggests that reading development starts from the level of the phoneme, and is built up from that, usually referred to as the phonics/phonographic approach

phonotactic rules: rules governing permissible syllable structures in a language

rhyme detection: detecting, discriminating and generating rhyming words

segmenting: breaking up a word into its sounds

semantic: relating to the meanings of words

shared book reading: teachers and parents reading to children; in typical shared reading the adult reads and the children listen

sight words: high-frequency, difficult-to-decode words, i.e. words that cannot be decoded by knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules and therefore need to be memorised, e.g. the, come, have, said

synthetic phonics programs teach grapheme-phoneme correspondences individually and in a specified se-quence, and children are taught early to blend individual phonemes together to make words
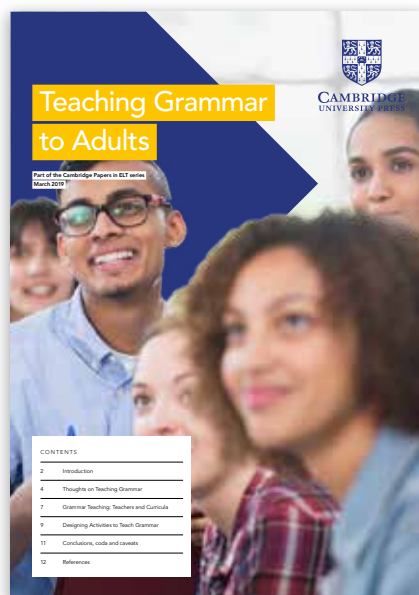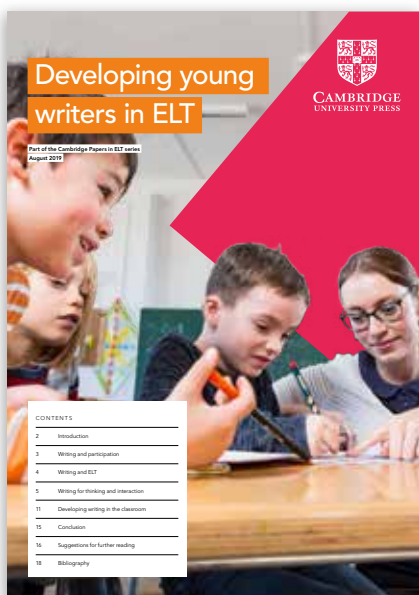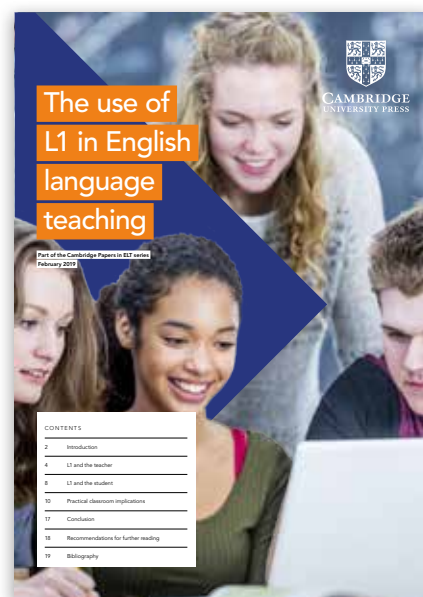
Appendix

The first 100 sight words ('tricky' words)

the	or	will	number
of	one	up	no
and	had	other	way
a	by	about	could
to	words	out	people
in	but	many	my
is	not	then	than
you	what	them	first
that	all	these	water
it	were	so	been
he	we	some	called
was	when	her	who
for	your	would	oil
on	can	make	sit
are	said	like	now
as	there	him	find
with	use	into	long
his	an	time	down
they	each	has	day
I	which	look	did
at	she	two	get
be	do	more	come
this	how	write	made
have	their	go	may
from	if	see	part

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