CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Overview

In this chapter, we will:

- introduce the concept of phonics
- discuss some limitations of phonics
- provide an outline of the book

What Is Phonics?

Phonics is an instructional strategy for helping children learn the sounds of a language (such as English), how they correspond to letters, and how to use this knowledge in decoding words. For example, if you see the word *cat*, it is not just a blob of chaotic squiggles. In fact, it consists of the letters <c> + <a> + <t>, and a child can be helped to read these as /k/ + /æ/ + /t/ and so figure out what the word is.

Now, you might immediately object by saying that English spelling is often not quite so simple. For example, we have words like *chase,* and if we try to decode it like we did with *cat*, we get something like /khæse/ which is not even close! But even with a word like *chase*, we can use some quite simple principles: the two letters <c> + <h> belong together as a "digraph" where they are usually pronounced /tʃ/, and what is sometimes called a "magic <e>" at the end of a word generally changes the pronunciation of <a> from its short sound /æ/ to its letter name /eɪ/. So, on this basis, it is actually not too difficult to work out the correct pronunciation of the word as /tʃeɪs/.

In this book, we will present the basic principles for the pronunciation of consonants and vowels while at the same time admitting that there are some

limitations to the use of phonics. In addition, we will offer basic guidance on how to use phonics to enable children to get started on the crucially important road to literacy.

Limitations to Phonics

While phonics can be exceptionally valuable for beginning readers, and indeed for all of us, who at times encounter unfamiliar words and need to decode how they should be read, it is important straightaway to acknowledge the limitations. We will here consider three basic drawbacks to the use of phonics as an instructional strategy:

- **unpredictability**: the pronunciation of not all English words can easily be predicted.
- **speed**: competent readers must learn to read extremely fast and automatically as well as accurately, and decoding the pronunciation of words may slow down reading speed.
- **meaning**: decoding individual words may detract from extracting the overall meaning of the text, or from the essential enjoyment of reading.

Let us consider these three issues in a little more detail.

Unpredictability

Above, we mentioned that <c> + <h> often occur together as a digraph that is pronounced /ʧ/. However, there are other words like *choir* where the <c> + <h> are unexpectedly pronounced /k/ rather than /ʧ/. And, even worse, we find words like *knight* where there are three silent letters, <k>, <g> and <h>. There are two basic reasons for this unpredictability:

> ### *Phonics in Chinese*
>
> Phonics is not much help for people trying to learn to read Chinese. If you come across 猫 and you do not know that it is pronounced /maʊ/ and refers to a cat, you are stuck.
>
> Actually, this is not entirely true, as you can look at the left side of the character and guess that it is an animal and look at the right side and maybe predict the pronunciation.
>
> Even though Hanyu Pinyin gives some access to the sounds of Chinese, it is still basically true that in order to read Chinese characters, you have to learn them one by one.

- English spelling was established a long time ago, and in the meantime, pronunciation has changed but spelling has not. In *knight*, all the letters were once pronounced.
- English words come from a wide range of different sources. For example, *ballet* comes from French where a final <t> is generally silent.

We will elaborate on these issues in the chapters on consonants and vowels later in this book.

While it is not a good idea to teach the history of English spelling to young children struggling with learning to read, this knowledge will help teachers to be aware of the complex nature of the task of learning to read. Some kinds of knowledge provide a foundation for teachers and do not need to be passed on to young learners, and many of the things discussed in this book constitute that kind of knowledge.

> ### *Phonics in Malay*
>
> Learning to decode in Malay is very easy indeed. If you encounter the word *kucing*, you can immediately predict that it is pronounced /kutʃiŋ/, though of course you may not know that it means "cat". This is because the correspondence between a letter and the way it is pronounced is quite direct or transparent in Malay. On the other hand, the relationship between letters and sounds in English is less direct and is sometimes quite opaque.

Speed

If you try to read each letter of every word separately, you will read very slowly and lose the meaning of the text. Proficient readers need to be able to read reasonably quickly. Part of the skill in reading is developing the ability to recognise words accurately and automatically, while using the context to infer meaning. If phonics creates a barrier to this ability to read quickly, it has failed.

When guiding young learners in reading, teachers need to apply a range of strategies to help children recognise words and learn to read them fast: sometimes phonics will help children in decoding the sounds of words; at other times, a whole-word approach is appropriate. We will use the term "sight word" to refer to a word that should be treated as a whole and not decoded into its individual letters or segments.

The exact balance of these two approaches, decoding words using phonics and learning words visually will depend on the individual learner. As teachers, we must always be flexible and never adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.

Meaning

One of the biggest problems with the use of phonics is that it can encourage a focus on individual words at the expense of meaning. In practising the decoding of individual words using lots of carefully prepared exercises and activities, we might overlook the fact that words contribute to the meaning of a text, and the ultimate goal of learning to read must be to extract and savour that meaning not just from the individual words but from the whole text.

In conclusion, phonics should only be used in tandem with lots of other activities, such as joint and guided reading of books and absorbing and appreciating a wide range of reading material. Phonics offers an exceptionally valuable tool for children learning to read, but it must be used together with other strategies such as building sight vocabulary, word analysis and dictionary use.

Outline of the Book

In Chapter 2, we will offer a brief overview of the theories of phonics and reading. Although this book is intended to be practical and not overwhelm teachers with theory, it is a good idea for you to be familiar with some of the theoretical background. In Chapter 3, we will discuss the pronunciation of consonants and how to teach them. Then in Chapter 4, we will do the same with vowels. Finally, in Chapter 5, we will discuss various methods of using phonics to teach beginning reading.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen that:

- Phonics is a technique for helping children to develop reading skills by learning the sounds of English and using that knowledge in decoding.
- There are limitations to the use of phonics in English, partly because of the irregular spelling system.
- One of the reasons for the irregular English spelling is that the language was written down a long time ago, and while the pronunciation has changed, the spelling has not; another reason is that a lot of words have been borrowed into English.
- Children need to learn some words by sight, as well as be able to decode others with the aim of developing accurate and automatic word recognition.

Further Reading

Phonetics is the science of speech, and a basic knowledge of phonetics is important for a good grasp of phonics. An excellent introduction to phonetics is Roach (2000). A text that is designed for teachers in Southeast Asia is Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo (1998). While we will try to ensure that this book does not use too much specialist terminology, readers might benefit from becoming familiar with phonetics by reading one of those two texts.

While we intend to provide a good grounding in phonics, many readers will want to investigate the topic further. Heilman (2006) gives lots of practical advice and plenty of activities and also provides a historical perspective on the use of phonics. The model of pronunciation used by Heilman is American English, so some adaptation will be needed if you are basing your teaching on British English. Hill (1999) is very practical with plenty of good advice for teachers and also an excellent overview of different approaches to phonics. Cunningham (2005) presents the use of phonics within a wider perspective of getting children to read. All these books use a modified alphabet instead of proper phonetic symbols, so in place of /æ/ and /eɪ/, you will need to get used to /ă/ ("a short /a/") and /ā/ ("a long /a/") when you read them.

An impassioned case against the use of phonics, especially its recent imposition in schools by the US government, is offered by Strauss (2005).

Discussion Questions

1. How well will phonics work as an instructional strategy in languages you are familiar with?
2. How are the sounds taught in another language you are familiar with?
3. To what extent do you think knowledge of the sounds of English might help children who can already read reasonably well?

Exercises

1.1 Give five words in English (other than *cat* and *chase*) where the correspondence between the letters and the pronunciation is predictable.

1.2 Give five words of English (other than *knight* and *ballet*) where the correspondence is not so readily predictable. What do you think is the source of the problem in each case?