Chapter 1.
Exploring post-16 phonics approaches

Introduction

This chapter outlines some of the key characteristics of our approach to using phonics post-16. In particular, it draws out the differences between using phonics approaches with children who are just beginning their literacy lives, and addressing the needs of adult or post-16 learners who bring much richer life experience to the task.

1.1 Reasons to explore post-16 phonics

What we are calling post-16 phonics is aimed directly at learners over the age of 16, respects everything older learners bring to a literacy course, and includes age-appropriate vocabulary and reading material. It does not involve a lot of drill and repetition and from this point of view may be very different from what people think of when they hear the word phonics: something that very young children do at school.

Here are some of the main reasons why we think post-16 phonics is worth exploring:

1. It's designed specifically for this age group

- Even basic phonic skills can be explored using words that derive from a post-16 learner's rich spoken vocabulary and applied to reading and writing age-appropriate, high-interest text.

- Post-16 phonics can give learners a new language with which to describe their reading and spelling. Once everyone has a vocabulary for talking about spelling and reading unfamiliar words, there is scope for 'incidental phonics'.

- Some learners will already recognise phonics vocabulary and may be interested in what it all means. It is already in some learners' 'funds of knowledge', often because their own children are being taught phonics in school.

- Our learner-centred approach prepares learners for the very wide variety of words they are expected to read and spell as part of the Functional Skills English (FSE) subject content without advocating drill or rote memorisation.

2. It's flexible – it can be used in a set sequence and/or structured according to learner need

- You can prioritise starting points for key elements of a learner's learning programme. You can choose and implement an appropriate support strategy that meets your learner's needs.

- You can identify where the learner is on a continuum of increasing complexity in spelling knowledge.

Whether taught in structured sequence with the least confident learners or used incidentally at the higher levels, phonics helps to reveal patterns so learners can read and spell many similar words quickly. In this sense, post-16 phonics is a 'self-teaching strategy' Share, D. L. (1995). Phonological recoding and self-teaching: Sine qua non of reading acquisition. *Cognition*, 55 (2), 151 – 218. Share, D. L. (1999). Phonological recoding and orthographic learning: A direct test of the self-teaching hypothesis. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 72 (2), 95 – 129.

3. It can help learners, whatever their starting point, become 'unstuck' quickly

- Phonics approaches in lessons can move learners from supported through degrees of independence to proficient more quickly than you might suppose, escalating reading and spelling development rapidly.

- Understanding grapheme-phoneme correspondences is a useful tool that can help unblock reading development for learners who have become stuck.

- Using phonics, you can identify and describe types of spelling errors that may have become 'fossilised' in learners' writing.

- A structured approach enables learners to practise past steps as they move on to new steps, making it especially suitable for those at the early Entry Levels.

- Post-16 phonics allows learners to continuously move forward. This helps keep interest levels high and can have a positive impact on a learner's motivation.

1.2 Why using phonics approaches with adults is different from using phonics approaches with children

Most readily available phonics resources are designed for use with young children, but children's experience and needs are very different from post-16 learners.

1. Young children are mostly emergent readers and spellers with limited experience of language, the world in general and education in particular. Post-16 learners without special educational needs are nearly always able to read and/or write some words and bring with them important knowledge of how written texts are used in our society.

- Adults and post-16 learners who are still at the early levels of reading acquisition arrive at a literacy class with a personal bank of sight words already in place and, with this, usually at least some knowledge of sound-symbol relationships.

- Post-16 learners will be able to draw on a range of metacognitive tools and strategies that are very different from those of 4- to 5-year-olds and can be used to enhance their learning. See, for instance, Duncan (2009) for a discussion of the value of gaining learners' perspectives on what is going on when we read.

- Post-16 learners also come with a variety of experiences of education, potentially negative. They may carry with them some embarrassment, shame or frustration around previous unsuccessful attempts at reading and spelling, and the lack of equity in the educational system.

- While most children are well aware that it is usual for them to only start to read and write in their school literacy classes, most adult emergent readers and writers will be aware that their surrounding society(ies) expects adults to be confident readers and writers already.

2. Most children have go to school for over six hours, five days a week, and spend a good chunk of this time on literacy work, while adult learners may attend classes only a few hours a week, for fewer weeks of the year. School practitioners know that they will see the same group of children (with very few absences) every day. Post-16 practitioners do not work under the same conditions.

- As adult literacy practitioners, we know that learners often cannot attend regularly, new learners will start at any time, and others will leave due to the many, many challenges of adult life.

- For those working in the criminal justice system, this is amplified because practitioners often do not know who they will be teaching on a given day or how long learners will be with them.

- Adult learners may also be less likely to be able to focus all of their attention on the sessions because of other potential worries on their minds, as well as mental and physical health issues at play.

3. **Primary school children in the early years are still developing their command of the spoken language and are encountering many aspects of language in its written forms for the first time.**

- Many post-16 learners will already have experienced formal literacy teaching at school, and this may well have included phonics instruction.

- In the case of learners for whom English is an additional language, they may already have experience of literacy in a different language that they can draw upon.

- Adults' motivations to return to learning are likely to be diverse. They will be aware of real-life literacy practices they need or want to engage in. They may want to develop their reading in general, or spelling in particular. They may need to be able to read a book to their child, or to complete some paperwork in the workplace. They may want to take a course of study, or gain a professional qualification that requires a certain amount of reading and writing.

- Post-16 literacy learners may find reading, writing or formal learning situations challenging. They may have busy and complex lives (like all of us adults!), yet these motivations push them forward. Post-16 phonics takes all these factors into account.

1.3 Using phonics approaches with adult and post-16 learners: principles and practices

The differences we outline above suggest some important principles that practitioners need to bear in mind. Here are some dos and don'ts of using phonics with post-16 learners.

✖ **Don't 'teach' phonics as an end in itself, use phonics to help learners access and create meaningful texts.**

✔ **Do** use phonics to teach reading and spelling. The goal is accessing meaning in authentic text and writing fluently.

✔ **Do** help your learners make connections between the sounds and the symbols of the language, using the principles in Part 2 of the toolkit. This may mean (re)discovering how phonemes and graphemes relate to each other in the English writing system.

✔ **Do** use the post-16 phonics principles to create a shared language with your learners that you can all use to discuss reading and spelling and share your reflections. Metalanguage is a powerful tool for adult learners.

✔ **Do** use phonics to break down barriers to learning and allow learners to discover the code for themselves. Talking together about the one-to-many principles and encouraging them to find and

explore patterns is an important part of post-16 phonics pedagogy.

✔ **Do** make the most of how you personally use phonics when spelling or reading unfamiliar words in everyday life. Try to find a text with an unfamiliar name or word to demonstrate what this looks like.

✖ **Don't 'teach sounds', draw on the sounds in learners' oral language.**

✔ **Do** acknowledge that your learners already have all the sounds in their speech – whatever their accents (see Chapter 12 when working with learners of the English language who may be developing their pronunciation as part of an ESOL course).

✔ **Do** explicitly highlight connections between phonemes (speech sounds) and graphemes (written symbols) when necessary.

✔ **Do** listen for clear pronunciation. This is not the same as listening for 'received pronunciation' (a particular accent). Clear speech features only insomuch as it aids spelling and can be spoken with any accent. In the writing example in Chapter 9, the learner has written 'after woods' instead of 'afterwards'. This is the kind of error that can be fixed by speaking clearly before writing and clearing up misheard words. We all have them!

✔ **Do** acknowledge that we all sometimes say words in an unnatural way to get to the correct spelling. Most adults, even teachers, say 'Wed nes day' and 'bus i ness' to help us spell.

✔ **Do** stress that spelling is not a simple transcription of anyone's speech. Some of the irregular correspondences between sounds and graphemes in the English spelling system are based on pronunciation from hundreds of years ago.

✖ **Don't apply the same sequence of phonics lessons to every learner.**
A systematic approach does not mean doing the same thing with every learner or group.

✔ **Do** pay attention to where they need to start. Getting to know the key principles set out in Chapter 5 and the sequence to teaching phonics set out in Chapters 6-8 will all help with this.

✔ **Do** give sufficient time to a sequence of lessons covering the basic code if your learners are very inexperienced with decoding and encoding. A sequence of lessons will help them feel safe and give them the confidence to move ahead quickly.

✔ **Do** use long words and age-appropriate vocabulary even at the most basic levels: 'admit', 'upset', 'victim', 'laptop', 'transit' are all composed of the simplest code. Each syllable is no more complex than words like 'cat' and 'mat', which most learners can already read.

✖ **Don't use invented words (often called nonsense words) out of context for the purpose of demonstrating phonics principles.**
Nonsense words can frustrate and confuse learners who may have limited spoken vocabularies.

✔ **Do** use less common words that can help learners focus on decoding challenges. A word like 'kelp' or 'finch' may be unfamiliar but it's easy to explain what they mean and a post-16 learner can more usefully apply their skills to them, expanding their vocabularies as they do so.

✔ **Do** use real songs or poems that may contain invented words if you want to help learners practice decoding. You can also use unusual place names, but be aware that long histories and a

tendency to 'localise' pronunciations have often distorted the relationship between phonemes and graphemes, for example, Kirkby ('kerby') or Leicester ('lester').

✔ **Do capitalise on learners' prior knowledge.**

✖ **Don't** ask learners to spend time on what they can already do. Always ask your learners if they can already do what you're asking of them when it comes to phonics. If they can spell and read all the little words then don't waste time on them. Instead, start with the longer simple words. Reflect on the proportion of familiar and new items in any particular lesson sequence. Research with younger children suggests a 20/80% split works to give a constant feeling of success and moving forwards. Decide what is the balance that works with any particular group.

✔ **Do** capitalise on what they already know. If a learner can already read some complex words by sight, don't make them analyse them phonically unless it will help with spelling. If they spell confidently and correctly in syllables, don't make them write sound by sound.

✔ **Do** use the expertise of one learner to help another learner. If one learner can already do something, ask that learner to explain it to a learner who needs help. This can build confidence in both learners, consolidate knowledge, and give you insights into thinking and teaching processes.

✔ **Do choose reading materials that interest adult learners.**

✖ **Don't** assume that phonics requires only 100% decodable text of the kind you might find in a phonics programme for young children. (See Chapter 10 for more on when decodable texts might be helpful.)

✔ **Do** ask the learner what they want to read and support them in meeting that goal. Don't unnecessarily restrict their diet of reading material.

✔ **Do** use decodable text if your learners want it. At the very basic levels it can help with confidence. However, make sure the language still sounds natural and the sentence structure is straightforward.

✔ **Do** experiment with providing reading material. You can make up your own decodable sentences incorporating the sight words your learners already have.

✔ **Do** look for a range of authentic texts with a percentage of words that are decodable for your learners at any given lesson. This takes practitioner time and practice but it's a skill that gets easier with experience. Encourage learners to bring in texts that they find and/or would like to read as well.

✔ **Do adopt an age-appropriate approach.**

✖ **Don't** cave in to learners or other practitioners who insist phonics is 'babyish'. Any teaching approach can be 'babyish', or not, depending on how it is done.

✔ **Do** make sure your lessons aren't seen by learners as 'babyish'. Move quickly, use long words for spelling and reading, find or create interesting adult-focused texts and resources.

✔ **Do** explain to your learners why you are trying out this approach and show them what they'll be reading and spelling in a few weeks. In particular, explain the thinking behind a focus on phoneme-

grapheme relationships and share appropriate terminology so learners feel they are engaging in a specialist, linguistic, adult thinking activity.

✔ **Do** think about learning a bit about the history of the English language, or English languages, with your learners. This will provide a (political as well as linguistic) context to the complexity of the spelling system.

✔ **Do keep pace and interest high.**

✘ **Don't** expect perfection. The English spelling system is complex and our attempts to classify and understand phoneme-grapheme relationships will never be perfect. But it is an interesting and useful process in understanding how written words relate to spoken words.

✔ **Do** keep moving forward once you're sure learners have assimilated the latest lesson, adding new graphemes and practising them in the context of reading and spelling. Phonics is cumulative.

✘ **Don't** think of phonics as a cure-all for every problem in literacy. It is, however, a foundational step that many struggling readers and spellers have missed, especially the one-to-many concepts. Once in place, the skills and knowledge a post-16 phonics approach builds will allow learners to feel they can really 'take off' in the rest of their literacy learning. All this means that post-16 phonics should enhance, not replace, current teaching.

> **" As learners build up a repertoire of grapheme-phoneme correspondences they learn not to be daunted by the variations they encounter but to take them in their stride. "**
>
> Gemma Moss, 2019

> **" Don't teach phonics, use phonics to enhance your teaching of reading and writing. "**
>
> Sam Duncan and Tricia Millar, 2019