Chapter 3.
Phonics and the post-16 literacy classroom

Introduction

This chapter uses three case studies, based on examples of classroom practice, to explore how post-16 phonics approaches can become a useful part of a wider literacy curriculum. The case studies help show why practitioners need to have a whole toolbox of techniques, methods and approaches that they can draw on when teaching, as well as the capacity to reflect on how well they work with a range of learners in different contexts. Each case study also provides ideas for teaching.

3.1 Phonics for post-16 learners

Post-16 learners come to literacy classes (including FSE) with a variety of backgrounds and experiences that affect their current and future learning. In addition, we all learn differently – we have different existing skills and different ways of learning. For the literacy practitioner, this is both a benefit (there are lots of options) and a challenge (it can be difficult to judge which option is best).

A practitioner working with a group of diverse learners needs two key skills:

- an ability to listen to what the learners have to say about their learning and respond to it; and
- the ability to be flexible – to adapt approaches to fit what will support learners best and give them confidence. This includes thinking about what to prepare in advance and what might be appropriate learning strategies for specific circumstances that arise during the course of the session.

The following case studies demonstrate both aspects to practice – stability in planning over the longer term and the ability to adapt. In each case, they also recognise that it is important to not use too many strategies at the same time as this could confuse learners.

3.2 Case Study 1. Mobilising phonic knowledge within a text, sentence and word framework at Entry Level 3

Alison is a literacy practitioner working with a group of E3 learners in an FSE class at an FE college. At the beginning of the class, there is a discussion about food, focusing on what the learners like to eat and what they cook. This will lead to reading and writing tasks. During the discussion, Alison writes up some key words to do with food and cooking, including those that will help with a planned reading. The learners then sit in pairs and read a short recipe together. Alison circulates, checking that no one is stuck, helping where necessary and noting any words that they find difficult to read.

In the discussion that follows she elicits from the learners what they have understood about the text and how it might relate to their own experience of buying, cooking and eating food, ensuring that everyone contributes something. As key words and phrases emerge from the discussion, Alison writes them on the board so that they can be used later in the session. Up to this point, the focus has been on text-level work with some word-level support.

The next task is for learners to write their own recipe. Alison projects the recipe they have read on the interactive white board (IWB) and elicits from the group the significant features of the genre. These include the format (image, headings, bulleted list of ingredients and method section), the language (use of the imperative, short sentences) and relevant vocabulary. At this point the whole framework – text, sentence and word level work – come together. If there is time, they might do an example together on the board before each learner settles down to write their own recipe.

Some useful vocabulary will already be on the board; other words that are relevant to the whole group's writing can be added as necessary, or given to individual learners. When recipes have been drafted and read to each other in their pairs, the group picks out some key words from their writing to work on. For example, someone had difficulty spelling the word 'roast' and another learner noticed that it had the same pattern as **toast.** From these two cooking words, Alison asks the group for other words with the same spelling pattern for the long 'oe' (/əʊ/) sound and they begin with some that rhyme – **boast, coast.** They gather together quite a list: **oat, goat, float, throat, coat, coach, soap,** and Alison points out the phonemes and graphemes in the words, and how the same grapheme <oa> forms the phoneme 'oe' /əʊ/ in these words.

Because they are working from the /əʊ/ sound, learners suggest some words with the same phonemes but different graphemes: **most** and **host.** Alison asks for any other ways they know of spelling the /əʊ/ sound, and elicits **snow, though, so, phone.** She writes these on the board too, but separately from the list of <oa> words, reminding them of the one-to-many principle. At this point, she does not talk through all the other spelling options, but instead concentrates on the <oa> grapheme and where that might be the most likely spelling option. By a process of questioning and eliciting, she draws their attention to the pattern of /əʊ/ + consonant(s) spelled <oa> and /əʊ/ at the end of the word leading to more varied choices such as <snow>, <toe>, <go> and <though>.

Learners then pick three <oa> words that they think would be useful for their own writing and write these in their personal wordbooks. In their pairs, they then practise making up sentences using those words. For their homework, they decide to write out these sentences for more practice in using those spellings.

3.3 Case Study 2a. Phonics takes the lead in a mixed Entry Level 1 and 2 group with diverse needs

Bruno works with a small group of beginning readers and writers in a community class at their local library. Some of the learners have a learning difficulty and one is partially deaf, so Bruno has to differentiate carefully for each learner. They all have different needs so have been working through Basic Code Plus with different levels of support. However, several weeks in, they all share a vocabulary for talking about words they want to be able to read and spell. They can also all read and spell the phoneme/grapheme correspondences from the Basic Code Boxes A, B and C and are about to start working on the ones from Box D – simple word endings.

They always start the session with some word work that allows learners to practise what they already know and introduces something new in the context of whole words. Last week, they added <ck>, <oy> and <ay> (Box C, Chapter 6, Basic Code Plus) and this week they're looking at the -er and -y endings.

They begin with a puzzle exercise using a multisensory approach and the words:

sister **winter** **cracker**

They say each word, count the syllables and then write them out using word boxes, placing one grapheme for each phoneme in each box.

s	i	s	t	er
c	r	a	ck	er

The learners say the sounds while they're writing the symbols – some writing in whole syllables and some saying each sound.

Bruno asks for more words that sound the same that the class would like to be able to spell. Hassan suggests **'hammer'** and Maria says **'yesterday'**. They'd worked on <ay> last week and she'd not been able to read it very easily. The unstressed 'er' (which most learners will pronounce as a schwa /ə/) isn't at the end, but she hears it in the middle of the word, and has spotted that it's just like the sound they are focusing on.

Dina wants to write **daytime** so Bruno makes up a word puzzle but is careful to note that the split vowel (the <i-e> in **time**) is something they'll work on next week. He'll come back to it then. They add some -y words, the other pattern they are looking at:

funny **lucky** **family**

Dina says she wants to spell **suddenly** so they add that.

Then they switch to a whole group discussion about how they celebrate birthdays and other special occasions in their families. Next Bruno gives the group a short text he's written on birthdays

incorporating spelling patterns they've already covered. To keep the text meaningful, he highlights words he thinks they may not easily decode in brown, and tells the class what they are. He says there are a few graphemes (also in brown) that they might not know. They can try to work them out or just ask.

> The Reddy family enjoys birthdays. Every member gets fantastic gifts and expects a big p**ar**ty. Prava Reddy's 60th birthday is in the summer, and the family is planning a big event to **celebrate.** Prava thinks it will be a big dinner, but the family is going to send her and her husband, Vikram, on a **cruise** to Italy. She has never been to Italy and she has never b**ee**n on such a big ship. If the family can k**ee**p the secret, it will be the biggest **surprise** ever!

Pairs take turns to read the sentences and help each other work out any unfamiliar phoneme-grapheme correspondences, listening for a word that makes sense in the context. Then they talk about 'the most fantastic gift I ever got' or 'the most fantastic gift I ever gave'.

If there's time, they can test each other on spelling the familiar words from the text, using word boxes. Maria wants to write **birthday** but struggles, so Dina makes a wordbox for her with all the sounds and helps her that way. **b ir th day.** Because Maria knows the one-to-many principles, she takes it in her stride that <ir> spells the 'er' sound in **birthday.** Dina puts **day** on one puzzle piece, which isn't technically correct, but Maria knows the word well so it's fine. Later they might write about 'the most fantastic gift I ever got' or 'the most fantastic gift I ever gave'.

3.4 Case Study 2b. Differentiating support by learner needs in a mixed Entry Level 1 and 2 group

In the same session as Case Study 2a, while the pairs are reading, Bruno is working with Hassan, who is partially hearing. They use the Language Experience Approach and Hassan says, "My brother looked for a job. He trained as a bricklayer (saying only two syllables: bricklair), but it so hard to find job. He just find job as labourer (again, in two syllables: labrer)." (For more information on the Language Experience Approach, see Hughes and Schwab (2010), pp. 162-163.)

Hassan's hearing impairment means he cannot discriminate between some sounds. He can distinguish syllables and connect his own combined perception of lip movement and unclear sounds with the written symbols. To help him, whether in front of the class, or working one-to-one, Bruno makes sure his lips are visible and he's making the sounds clearly.

In this case, Bruno transcribes Hassan's words but leaves blanks for **bricklayer** and **labourer** so they can practise using the -er ending from earlier in the lesson.

Bruno says **bricklayer** clearly with three syllables then asks Hassan to say it and count the syllables, **brick lay er.** Then Bruno asks him to write the first syllable on a small dry erase board. Bruno and his group like to use these because it's so easy to make errors disappear.

Hassan writes <brick> because it's a word they spelt while working with <ck> last week. In the next syllable, Bruno reminds him of the <ay> spelling they also did last week in **play, stay, May,** et cetera. Hassan hadn't connected those because of his hearing impairment, but he now 'sees' the sound as he says it clearly. Bruno asks him what he thinks that last syllable is and Hassan laughs because it's what they were working on earlier. Turns out he does know how to spell **bricklayer** now that he can think of it in three beats.

They work through several more job-related -er words that Hassan suggests from his time working on building sites. Bruno supplies the sounds they haven't yet covered (in **red**) and Hassan writes the ones he knows, especially the -er endings. They do **labourer** with puzzle pieces first because it's more complex than the others. Digraphs are in **bold.**

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bri**ck**l**ay**er

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lab**ou**r**er** – la bour er – start with l a b our then add -er. They notice the 'ay' (/eɪ/) sound in labourer has a different spelling than the one in **bricklayer.**

c**ar**penter

plumber

r**oo**fer

w**or**k**er**

Hassan then asks about **doctor** so Bruno shows him that a few words end in <or>, but that <er> is by far the most common.

The class finishes by talking about what words they will add to their personal wordbook. Maria says she can now spell 'yesterday' without any problem at all, and has added 'birthday' to her spelling repertoire even though they haven't done <ir> yet.

Hassan has conquered -er endings for many jobs, and has added 'doctor' to his wordbook.

They've all encountered the one-to-many principles incidentally through reading and spelling. They don't have to remember the details, but they're becoming aware of how the complex part of the English code works and are seeing that long words are much easier to read and spell when thinking in syllables and sounds rather than in strings of letter names.

3.5 Case Study 3. Using authentic materials as a basis for reading and writing instruction with a mixed E2/E3 group

Carey teaches in a 'Category C' training prison for men. She teaches a mixed E2/low E3 FSE class assigned to a 'sandbags' workshop. There are six learners in the group, varying in age from 19 to 54. She sees them five times a week for 1.5 hours a day.

The prison has recently introduced a project called 'job sheet learning'. Prisoners have to read workshop instructions in order to carry out a variety of practical tasks that include writing for others (such as lists and handover notes). The prisoners have been told by their workshop instructor that they will receive a bonus for successfully completing their job sheets each week.

The image below shows some 'job sheet' information prisoners have to be able to read and respond to:

GENERAL INFORMATION

Pack in bundles of 100

Bind with nylon wrap

1000 to a box

Bind box to the pallet with nylon wrap

This is the first 'job sheet learning' session and Carey has been reflecting on the following:

- If learners make rapid progress in session 1, it is likely to improve their motivation and confidence.
- They will probably know most of the phoneme/grapheme correspondences from Basic Code Plus (but she knows she needs to check).
- They may view long words as harder to read and spell than short words.
- They will probably have many sight words.
- They will probably be more confident reading than spelling (but, again, she needs to check).
- They may well consider a spelling lesson less taboo than a reading lesson.

Carey begins with a discussion about the work this group do. They have recently completed an order of sandbags for villages in the local area at risk of flooding, and one member of the group was previously in the army and shares a story about helping people to save their houses during a previous year's floods. Carey then initiates a discussion about the job sheets, focusing on the 'packing' station in the workshop and the tasks at hand: learners will need to read the instructions and then write a short list for the workshop orderly, who is going to collect materials from the stores, as well as handover notes for peers working at the 'packing station' the next day.

Carey has written the sandbag packing instructions on a flipchart page. She shows learners the text, circling the words **general** and **information.** She reads these words aloud to learners, explaining that words with more than one syllable like this are easier to read and spell if they are broken down into sounds. She illustrates this by sounding out the words slowly. Carey now distributes a copy of the text to each learner and asks them to read through it and highlight any words they find interesting in terms of spelling (that is, hard or unusual). Using words that learners highlighted and her understanding of Basic Code Plus and one-to-many concepts, she decides to focus on the following words in this session:

pa**ll**et

nylon

bund**les**

bind

inf**or**ma**tion**

Note: Single letter graphemes are shown here in normal font and graphemes with two or more letters are in bold. The ending <tion> is easier to remember as a whole syllable, so is in bold and underlined.

Carey takes the texts back in and hands out a mini white board and pen to each learner. She picks the first word on the list, **pallet,** and writes its graphemes on the flip chart out of order, as follows:

a t p e ll

Carey explains that not all sounds are represented by single letters and introduces the word grapheme to explain this. Here, two letters <ll> form one grapheme and have one sound /l/. She reminds them of the whole word, **pallet,** by saying it out loud, and counting the syllables. Next, she asks them to use the graphemes on the chart to spell each syllable. Carey reminds the group that this way of breaking down words is going to help them read and spell many long words in a short amount of time.

Carey hands out puzzle pieces with graphemes from the four remaining words and asks learners, in pairs, to match the graphemes to form the target words: **nylon, bundle, bind** and **information.**

General **information**

Pack in **bundles** of 100

Bind with **nylon** wrap

1000 to a box

Bind box to the **pallet** with **nylon** wrap

Next, Carey shows the whole text again and reads it aloud, asking learners to notice ('hear') the graphemes in the target words (emboldened to the right):

Carey now focuses on the more complex word **information,** writing its base word in the middle of a matrix, as follows:

in con re	**form**	a al er ed	tion

She explains that the base word **form** comes from the Latin word for **shape.** She asks if they can see a connection between **form,** meaning shape, and the word **information.** Carey now asks how many words learners can make from the base word **form** using this matrix (there are 11: **inform, informal, information, informer, informed, conform, conformer, conformed, reform, reformation, reformer**). Carey asks what is interesting about the prefix 're' and elicits that it means to do something again. She asks if learners know any other words with 're' at the start (for example: **repeat, reinstate**).

Next, Carey turns the group's attention to the writing tasks: three of them will focus on writing a list for the orderly who will collect materials from the stores and the other three will complete a handover sheet for their peers. She asks why it is important that they spell words correctly in both cases (because someone else will be reading their work and needs to get the right materials/start at the right place in their tasks). Carey collects the puzzle pieces and original texts for the group to encourage them to practise spelling independently but allows them to check their spellings by referring back to the texts at the end.

To end the lesson, Carey asks people to swap their group-written list or handover notes with others in the class and to read them through, focusing on checking that someone outside the class could follow them and accurately get/do what was needed. When the groups are happy with their texts, Carey asks the class to hand them to the orderly, who will now collect materials from the stores and pass the list to prisoners coming into the workshop the following day.

3.6 Reflection

These three practitioners, working with diverse literacy/English groups, respond in different ways to the needs of their learners. They are using phonics approaches to work on the relationship between phonemes and graphemes within a rich literacy curriculum that contains speaking, listening, reading and writing activities. In each instance, their approach is related to the learners' own language and rooted in how they wish to express themselves and what they want to learn.

Activity: Developing learners' spelling and reading strategies

These practitioners use different activities to develop their learners' spelling and reading strategies. In a similar situation, how would you respond?

What other phonics activities would you have used in these different settings?

What kinds of activities could be added to expand learners' vocabulary?

What else might help keep interest and engagement high?

Are there any other ways of making use of the diverse skills and knowledge that the learners have?

If more technology had been available, might this have helped further develop word-level work?

You might want to return to these questions as you read on in the toolkit, or discuss them with colleagues when you have the opportunity.

For wider guidance on teaching reading and writing to adults, please see Hughes and Schwab (2010).

> In some post-16 contexts, such as secure estates, the importance of protecting learners' self-esteem is paramount. Post-16 phonics safeguards learners' self-esteem by: keeping the pace fast whenever possible, never asking anyone to do something they have not previously learned and by starting with learners' own language.
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> Claire Collins, 2019