

Letters and Sounds – a Revolution in the Teaching of Reading

Introduction

The Reading Reform Foundation has been asking for years for effective evidence-based teaching of reading to be promoted in schools. At last it has happened. All over England, *Letters and Sounds*, a programme based on synthetic phonics principles, is being used to teach children to read.

Letters and Sounds was produced by the government to replace *Progression in Phonics* (PiPs) and *Playing with Sounds*. Those programmes were not working well enough and Jim Rose, whose recommendations had been accepted by the government, said that what was needed was systematic synthetic phonics (Rose, 2006). The government published core criteria based on synthetic phonics to be met by all approved published phonics programmes. Next they produced *Letters and Sounds*, which conforms to these criteria.

It seems a bit odd at first. There are already several proven commercial synthetic phonics programmes that conform to the criteria. As far as I know, no-one who called for the use of synthetic phonics asked the government to write its own approved programme, financed by taxpayers and delivered free to every school. *Letters and Sounds* is not compulsory and can be ignored by schools that choose to use a commercial programme that conforms to the criteria; so it is not needed for those who are already convinced that synthetic phonics is best. The reason must be that the government was concerned that some local authority advisors and schools were likely to ignore Rose's recommendations, but with an official and free programme they would come on board. It looks as though that was right. Many local authorities and schools that were resisting change are now promoting *Letters and Sounds*.

Is *Letters and Sounds* effective? In other words, does it help teachers* to teach and children to learn to read?

First, a few samples from many positive comments* from practising teachers:

- I am so impressed with the progress the September intake have made with Letters and Sounds.
- It has a good structure and is helpful in explaining various things.
- I can see a huge difference in my class's ability as a whole. PiPs didn't really follow anything... just random games and varying levels. L&S gives a proper scheme to follow.
- I'm very impressed with Letters and Sounds so far ... Both myself and my nursery nurse have noticed a significant improvement in children's reading as they are more confident 'sound-talking' unfamiliar words.
- The higher ability children are now well into Phase 5 and are reading well and writing independently ... The middle ability children have also made brilliant progress particularly with writing. They are very confident to have a go and I've noticed far less children coming to ask me how to spell a word ... It's definitely doing Letters and Sounds that has helped them ...
- It is hard work and there is a lot to fit in.... but I feel a lot happier with this than with PiPs, and so do the children.

And some questions and concerns:

- In the new Letters and Sounds document is there one single list of High Frequency Words? Do we still have to do 45?
- Help! My class are all on different phases of Letters and Sounds. Some are on Phase 2, some Phase 3, a handful on Phase 4 and two are ready for Phase 5. No idea how to organise them for my phonics lessons - how to support the lower and challenge the bright ones.
- I find often children can blend and segment adjacent consonants but cannot remember vowel digraphs. So why have a separate Phase Four?
- The people who wrote it don't seem to understand how much time the 5 part lesson would take.
- There is too much to fit into a 20 minute session.

- On one hand we are told to let them play and our role is to scaffold, but at the same time we are being told to get them reading vowel digraphs during the first term in F2. Look at EYFS (*Early Years Foundation Stage*) and Letters and Sounds, they are clearly not out of the same stable ...
- Is phonics part of literacy or not? ... I don't understand the new framework.
- Just to clarify, 20 minutes Letters and Sounds a day and then 40 minutes CLL (*Communication Language and Literacy*) activity per day? It's all driving me a bit crazy, so much to fit in and a lot of pressure from others to do stuff in the EYFS.
- Is it acceptable to use Jolly Phonics activities, songs and actions alongside the L and S programme? Some people I know seem to think not....

So what do teachers need to teach phonics effectively?

Busy teachers, new to synthetic phonics, do not have time to read the detail carefully in everything thrown at them. Local Authority training is often inadequate. These teachers need:

- easy access to clear guidance
- to understand the principles of synthetic phonics
- to know how the alphabetic code works
- to know what to teach and how to move on
- to be able to organise classes and plan lessons to teach in this way

They also need to understand how phonics fits in with everything else they are asked to do.

Is the guidance in *Letters and Sounds* clear and easy to access?

There are plenty of statements that explain the theory and principles of synthetic phonics clearly. For instance:

In order to comprehend text ... children must first learn to recognise, that is to say, decode, the words on the page. (p. 6 *)

Phonic work should be regarded as an essential body of knowledge, skills and understanding that has to be learned largely through direct instruction, rather than as one of several methods of choice. (p.10)

There is helpful material to guide and support teachers, for example:

- a sequence of teaching in a discrete phonics session
- procedures for teaching new grapheme-phoneme correspondences
- routines for learning to read 'tricky words'
- banks of words and sentences
- assessment sheets
- tables of phonemes and graphemes

But are they easy to access?

The *Letters and Sounds* folder sent to every primary school includes a manual, *Six-phase Teaching Programme*, a shorter book, *Notes of Guidance*, a DVD and a poster with details of the core criteria. The manual is divided into the six 'phases' to show progression. *Notes of Guidance* explains important principles and provides an overview of the programme.

The trouble is that *Six-phase Teaching Programme* and *Notes of Guidance* have 236 pages between them. I have spoken to teachers who have found the documents quite overwhelming. My biggest problem in writing this review was finding what I was looking for. Although there is a contents page for each phase, there is no overall contents page or index in either book. As I investigated the questions and concerns of teachers and other professionals, I found again and again that when I looked for specific information I could not find it, but when I carefully read both books, the answer was there and well explained.

Does *Letters and Sounds* help teachers to understand the principles of synthetic phonics?

Phases 2 to 6 of *Letters and Sounds* genuinely follow the principles of synthetic phonics as described in the Rose Review. They involve the key features of structured teaching of the alphabetic principle, including the reversible skills of blending sounds to read and segmenting words to spell. One of the most important principles of effective synthetic phonics teaching is the rejection of guessing strategies. The Rose Review expressed this weakly:

The knowledge, skills and understanding that constitute high quality phonic work should be taught as the prime approach in learning to decode ... (Rose, 2006, p. 70)

Letters and Sounds is much clearer:

attention should be focused on decoding rather than on the use of unreliable strategies such as looking at the illustrations, rereading the sentence, saying the first sounds and guessing what might fit ... Children who routinely adopt alternative cues for reading unknown words, instead of learning to decode them, find themselves stranded when texts become more demanding and meanings less predictable. (p. 10)

There is an explanation in *Notes of Guidance* of the logical and fundamental 'Simple View of Reading' described in the Rose Review. This shows the two separate aspects of reading – word recognition and language comprehension – and that phonics is about word recognition. Phases 2 to 6 of *Letters and Sounds* are definitely about word recognition.

However, in Phase One the two are confused. Phase One comes before children begin structured phonics lessons and is said to be about 'providing a broad and rich language experience for children'. A broad and rich language experience is crucial to education in Foundation Stage and forever, but it is not part of word recognition as in the 'Simple View' until children can read texts easily. Phase One activities all involve listening carefully to sounds. They are fun for small children and great for helping them learn to concentrate, listen carefully and appreciate the world around them; but they have very little to do with learning to read words. Letters are not involved, although oral blending of sounds and segmenting of words is taught at the end of the phase. There is no evidence that I know of that listening to sounds without letters helps children learn to read words. It would make more sense in the early years to concentrate on developing language comprehension through speaking and listening. Then, when the teaching of reading skills begins, bring in letters and sounds together in a multi-sensory way, looking at letters, as well as listening to sounds in order to blend and segment orally. Luckily, it is stated clearly that children do not have to master all the skills in Phase One before beginning Phase Two. It would have been even clearer if *Letters and Sounds* did not include Phase One at all.

Does *Letters and Sounds* help teachers to know how the alphabetic code works?

We know that many teachers do not fully understand the alphabetic code. For example, they may not realise that there are about 44 sounds in English. A teacher who reads the materials carefully and teaches accordingly is bound to pick this up. However, it is easier to teach effectively and flexibly if your own understanding is secure from the start. Adults, like children, learn the code better with direct instruction, so it would have been a good idea to have had a short section written specifically to explain it to teachers.

High-frequency words and 'tricky' words are especially confusing for teachers who are familiar with the discredited *National Literacy Strategy* (NLS) and do not fully understand how the alphabetic code works. The NLS has lists of high-frequency words to be taught as 'sight recognition' words. *Letters and Sounds* has similar lists. The difference is that the words are not called 'sight recognition' words. Instead they are divided into decodable and 'tricky' words or 'words with unusual or untaught grapheme-phoneme correspondences'. There is good advice about how to practise the 'tricky' words and some clear and helpful explanations in *Notes of Guidance*. For instance,

What counts as 'decodable' depends on the grapheme-phoneme correspondences that have been taught up to any given point ... About half of the 100 words (*occurring most frequently in children's books*) are decodable by the end of Phase Four and the majority by the end of Phase Five.

Even the core of high frequency words which are not transparently decodable using known grapheme-phoneme correspondences usually contain at least one GPC (*grapheme-phoneme correspondence*) that is familiar ... it is advisable to start from what is known and register the 'tricky bit' in the word. Even the word 'yacht', often considered one of the most irregular of English words, has two of the three phonemes represented with regular graphemes. (p. 5)

However, teachers who are confused about the relationship between high-frequency and tricky words may remain confused. Why do we need a list of high-frequency words that includes words that are not 'tricky' and why do we need to plan to practise them? If they are high-frequency, they will naturally be used and practised frequently.

Does *Letters and Sounds* explain what to teach and how to move on?

One of the best things about *Letters and Sounds* is that it shows how to build on the initial teaching of reading in an organised, systematic and structured way. Phases 2 to 6 show what to teach and how to progress to the end of Key Stage 1. There is an overview of the phases in *Notes of Guidance*.

The biggest problem with the phases is that they appear inflexible. As with most criticisms of *Letters and Sounds*, there is a paragraph that counteracts this criticism:

Although the six-phase structure provides a useful map from which to plan children's progress, the boundaries between the phases should not be regarded as fixed ...some children will be capable of, and benefit from, learning at a faster pace ... whereas others may need more time and support ... (p. 4)

Nevertheless, my impression is that the phases have caused more worries for teachers than anything else in *Letters and Sounds*. They do not seem to allow for differentiation within them. It would be easy to go through them in a flexible way with individual children or with groups organised by ability, but with whole classes of children all learning at different rates it is much more difficult. Phase Four highlights this problem. At this stage, according to the teaching programme, children are to stop learning new GPCs and spend a few weeks practising reading and spelling words with adjacent consonants. What should a teacher do if some of the children in the class cannot yet blend simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words, some need to consolidate what has been taught so far and practise blending adjacent consonants, and others are ready for more of a challenge? Once again, I eventually found a relevant line in *Notes of Guidance*:

Many children may be capable of taking this step (*with adjacent consonants*) much earlier, in which case they should not be held back from doing so. (p. 11)

So, if you are a class teacher, how do you follow the structure of the phases and at the same time avoid holding these children back? Should you try to organise separate ability groups, each working within a different phase, with all the difficulties involved in planning and managing several groups? Without phases it would be possible, at least in the early stages, to teach whole class lessons with built-in differentiation. For instance, as soon as children know the graphemes, 'a', 'n', 't', they could have a go at 'ant', which has adjacent consonants. Probably a few would be able to read it independently, most with help, and a few would have no idea how to blend at all. The first group would be properly challenged, the second would benefit from hearing how it is done and repeating it, and the third group would get a little further with their understanding that the squiggles called letters represent sounds. Later, children who were falling a long way behind the majority of a class could be given a daily boost with an extra short lesson, revising the GPCs they had not remembered and practising the skills of blending, segmenting and forming letters. Teachers have always had problems with differentiation and how to manage it, and *Letters and Sounds* cannot be expected to solve them, but the concept of phases as understood by many teachers has added to the problems.

Alphabet names and graphemes with more than one letter are introduced in Phase 3. Some teachers say that children struggle with these graphemes. I have found that there is no problem if they are introduced simply, in just the same way as the single letter graphemes: "This is /t/", showing the letter 't', and, "This is /oa/", showing the letters 'oa'. *Letters and Sounds* states that letter names are needed to provide the vocabulary to describe these graphemes, but there is no need at this stage for children to describe graphemes.

Does *Letters and Sounds* help teachers to plan phonics lessons?

In each of Phases 2 to 5, the teaching programme gives this straightforward sequence for a lesson:

Introduction, Revisit and review, Teach, Practise, Apply, Assess learning against criteria.

'Teaching' involves new graphemes and tricky words, 'practise' involves reading and spelling words, 'apply' involves reading captions. So, the basics are covered.

The section for each phase also includes suggestions about what to do in each part of the sequence. Unfortunately, some of the suggestions are fussy and there are too many of them. For instance, for blending in Phase 3 there is a game called, 'What's in the box?' The teacher has to get ready a set of word cards, a set of objects and a box. The children go through the reading procedure and then a toy or a child finds the corresponding object in the box. There are similar activities for other parts of the lesson. All these activities are too much to fit into the 20 minutes suggested in *Notes of Guidance*. Then, for the blending part of the lesson, there are two variations on the activity I described, two alternative activities and three further activities for small group work. This sort of detail fills between 22 and 35 pages for each phase. It is too much for teachers to read, take in, prepare and act on. If they skip it, they miss the important points that are interspersed with the detail.

The *Letters and Sounds* DVD is useful, as it shows excellent practice with real children, but it also shows sessions where there is too much talk instead of just getting on with the phonics.

Letters and Sounds could do with a template for a simple, short, inter-active, multi-sensory lesson. The essentials are learning GPCs, blending sounds to read, segmenting the spoken word to spell and forming letters. The same routine every day is fine. Children like routine. Teachers and children work more efficiently when they know what happens next without having to think about it or take time getting organised for something new. This is especially true for boys, and probably one of the reasons good synthetic phonics teaching works so well. That is not to say that the various time-consuming activities described are no good at all; they can help consolidate the phonics lesson at another time of day. The difficulty is that time is precious and there are other worthwhile things to do at school, such as art, music, listening to stories and so on.

There are no extra resources with *Letters and Sounds*. Schools may make them or buy them from commercial sources, but they must follow 'the sequence of the phonic content in a programme consistently from start to finish' (p. 8). This is difficult, because commercial resources, such as grapheme friezes for display, are made to match the sequence of the phonic content of other programmes.

How does *Letters and Sounds* fit in with everything else teachers are asked to do?

Teachers are expected to read, digest, plan, teach and report on the basis of a plethora of programmes, guidance and statutory requirements. There is the *Early Years Foundation Stage with Communication, Language and Literacy*; the *Renewed Literacy Framework* with twelve different strands; the *Early Literacy Support* programme; *Every Child a Reader with Reading Recovery*; the demands by advisors for guided reading, targets, more child-initiated learning, more structured teaching ... it goes on and on. *Letters and Sounds* is yet another one. The government may try to explain how they all go together, but it is not straightforward and some of it is blatantly contradictory. Teachers are understandably confused and frustrated by this.

Summary

Thanks to *Letters and Sounds*, many teachers are discovering for the first time that synthetic phonics works. Thousands of children are learning to read more easily than before, and fewer will suffer the misery of failing.

The principles of synthetic phonics are clearly expressed in *Letters and Sounds*. It provides a structure for progression and includes examples of good practice from some of the best commercial programmes with proven success. The DVD helps teachers to understand how to deliver crucial aspects with real children.

Nevertheless, *Letters and Sounds* has its flaws. One of the strengths of synthetic phonics is its simplicity, but *Letters and Sounds* appears complicated. There is too much for teachers to read and too many important points are lost in the detail. There is no specific section to explain the alphabetic code to teachers. The division into phases seems rigid and teachers are finding it difficult to organise lessons for children at different levels of understanding. Phase One is not about letters at all, only sounds.

The government is promoting the right method, but perhaps not in the best way. Teachers are professionals and tired of being told what to do. It might have been better if the money had been spent on providing schools with funds to buy into synthetic phonics training and choose their own resources. On the other hand, there are still too many intransigent and poorly-informed people with the power to dictate or influence decisions about teaching methods. Some of the same people are now training teachers in synthetic phonics, and their training is inevitably poor. Perhaps it was necessary to put synthetic phonics directly into schools via *Letters and Sounds*, to make sure that all children benefit as soon as possible.

Teachers are finding that the number of directives and initiatives passed down to them through a bureaucratic hierarchy is a nightmare, and *Letters and Sounds* adds to it. The government should make it a priority to untangle the muddle and throw out the detail.

Conclusion

If you are in a position to choose which phonics programme to use in your school, have a look at a few high quality synthetic phonics programmes, including *Letters and Sounds*, and make your own informed decision. There are several good programmes and they all have their strengths and weaknesses. The important thing is to teach children how to read and spell words using the alphabetic code. Keep it simple and enjoy the thrill of seeing children grow in confidence as they realise they can break the code and begin to read independently and accurately with no need for guessing.

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Notes

- * Throughout this review, 'teachers' refers to anyone who teaches, including teaching assistants.
- * Comments from practising teachers are either from the *Times Educational Supplement* message board or with permission from teachers I have met.
- * Quotes are from *Notes of Guidance*, unless indicated otherwise.

References

- authors not acknowledged (2007) *Letters and Sounds, Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics* (DfES)
- Rose, J. (2006) *Independent review of the teaching of early reading* (DfES)