Phonics and Student-Generated Texts for Emergent Readers

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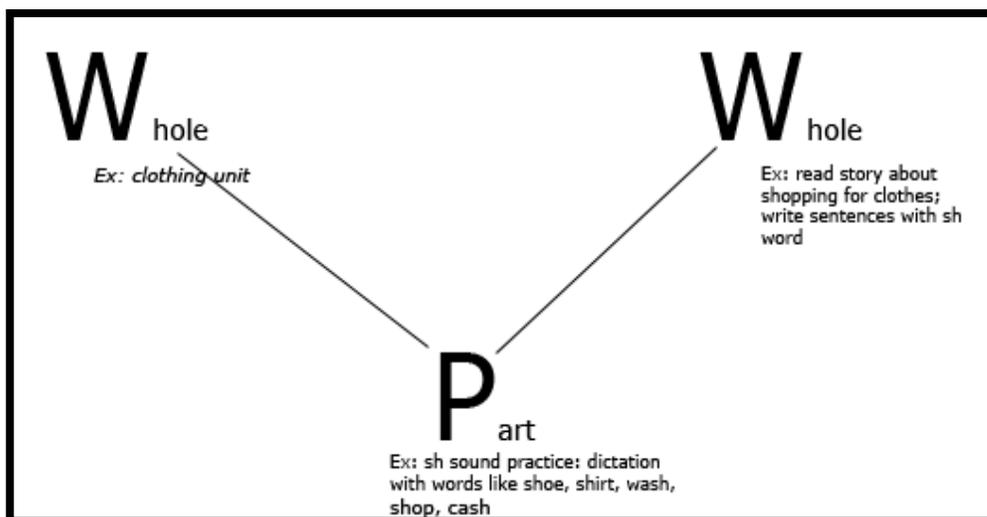Minnesota Department of Education   University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Balanced Literacy: Balancing top-down and bottom-up instruction

It's important to keep phonics work with low-level, low-literacy adult ESL learners *contextualized*. Begin with MEANING. Focus first on a relevant topic or an interesting text. Then, once students are comfortable with the vocabulary and comprehend the 'meat' of the lesson, you can move to some phonics work. The time you spend and emphasis you place on phonics should very much be secondary to the *meaning* of the lesson. Be sure to return to the topic as often as possible; show how the phonics work you're doing is connected to their progress with the larger topic. See the Whole-Part-Whole diagram below.

Phonics by its very nature removes your lesson from focusing on meaning. This is tolerable as long as the phonics work is contextualized, that is, that it begins with something important that students understand, and that the phonics work doesn't divorce your lesson from the larger task at hand: **comprehension**. *Phonics instruction that takes place in a meaning "vacuum" has very little impact on students' ability to read.* After all, the goal of all reading instruction is comprehension! Decoding words is only one of the many steps on the path to becoming a strong reader.

Whole-part-whole: Method of teaching reading that starts with a whole text (ex: vocabulary from thematic unit or a story) then pulls out specific parts to analyze for phonics/phonemic awareness skills, then goes back to the text to practice in context.

Whole
Ex: clothing unit

Whole
Ex: read story about shopping for clothes; write sentences with sh word

Part
Ex: sh sound practice: dictation with words like shoe, shirt, wash, shop, cash

From Julie Trupke-Bastidas, 2007

Three Principles When Teaching Phonics to Emerging Adult Readers:

1. **Communication first!** Start with a topic (problems in the house, describing family, getting a job, shopping for food, transportation, etc...) Once your students are comfortable with the vocabulary the topic involves and have had many, many opportunities to interact within the topic, THEN you can do some phonics work.

2. **Give students ample time for reading.** There is no doubt—the more you read, the better you get at it. Fill your classroom with opportunities for students to read: label things in the classroom, have a basket of interesting library books that students can flip through during breaks, allow students time to read silently, chorally, with a partner, and with you. Encourage strong reading habits by making meaningful reading a frequent and enjoyable activity in your classroom.

3. **Find ways to integrate phonics instruction with your regular textbook texts as well as student and class-generated texts (i.e. LEA stories).** Instead of using a supplemental "phonics" book, use your main text and look for patterns. This helps keep phonics instruction contextualized, relevant, and interesting for learners. Most adult ESL texts are organized thematically, which helps keep our phonics work contextualized.

Types of Student-generated Texts

- Shared experience such as projects, field trips, demonstrations – In the classic LEA, the class shares an experience, and then the instructor elicits from the students the story of what they did or experienced.
- Students' newsletters (from Alysan Croydon) – On Monday, the instructor asks, "What is your good news? What is your bad news?" Ss either write or dictate responses. These can then be posted on walls to be read, or collated into a "newsletter" for the week by the instructor. The newsletter then can be used as part of the text used throughout the week.
- Picture stories – Picture stories are viewed by learners, who then dictate the story of what they see happening and the instructor transcribes.
- Responding to a photo, pictures – Same as above.
- Using a volunteer/higher level student as a scribe – For any of these activities, learners may dictate their words to a volunteer or learner with stronger literacy skills, rather than to the instructor.
- Tape recorders – Learners gather in small groups around a tape recorder and are instructed, "When you're ready, turn on the tape recorder and make a comment or ask a question to someone in the group." With practice the conversations become more natural. The instructor transcribes part of the conversation to use as text.
- Journal entries – The students write down the day and date, and then respond to a prompt such as "What did you do yesterday?" The instructor responds to content rather than grammar/spelling.
- Texts for wordless books – The learners write words to go with particular pages. Other learners may be asked to match the words with the page it belongs to. Wide post-it tape works well here.
- Photo books – The learners and/or instructor bring in photos which are used to generate language and text.
- Class posters – A theme is given and learners find/draw pictures to go with words they provide.

Overheard Ss stories (from Alysan Croydon) – If before class or during break learners are sharing with others a longer story about something important (or exciting, or frightening) that happened to them, perhaps in awkward but determined English, the instructor can request permission from the learner to share that story the next day in class. The instructor then summarizes the event in simple, clear written English, and this typed and copied text is brought to class the next day to be used by the group.

Phonemic Awareness Activities

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are made of basic sounds. Activities include isolating, manipulating, blending, and counting sounds –with and without letters. Research has found it is helpful to present these sounds with letters, but you might also want to try some activities based on listening alone to really focus on the sound.

Getting Started:

| Blend the word	Review theme vocabulary by sounding out the parts of a word, and have students guess the word. Ex: Clothing unit: (s – o –k –s), (p- a-n t- s)….What is it? Expansion: have them find the picture of the item named. Higher level: some can write using inventive spelling (write the letters based on sounds).
Same first letter sound	Within the context of a theme, students can play hangman and then go through each letter and identify other words that begin with that sound. For example, hangman word: SKIRT. Students then generate: s (Somali, Sunday) k (kid, kitchen) I (in, is) etc. Higher level learners can write some of the words.
Sound chain	One student says a word that starts with end sound of other person's word. Ex: sweater---red---dollar—rest—today, etc…

Activities:

Where's the sound? Cup game	Is the sound I say at the beginning, middle, end of the word? Give each team or each student three cups to represent beginning, middle, and end (or first, middle, last). (Important: teach these terms—do several examples). Have them label the cups b-m-e (or f-m-l). They need to drop a chip or a letter into the right cup for where the sound is in the word. The sound, not spelling is important. Go through a list of words that have examples of each—ideally from your unit or from words they know. Lower-level: only beginning and end sounds Higher level: use multiple letter-sounds. Also, say the sound, they listen and find the letter tiles, and then put them in the cup.
Count the sounds *(more advanced)*	Say a word really slowly and have students count the number of sounds in the word. They can show the number of sounds by holding up fingers, or they can put a chip or bean in a cup to represent each sound. (c-a-t = 3, ph-o-ne = 3) Higher level students can write letters or arrange letter tiles to spell the words.

Does it rhyme?	The concept of rhyme can sometimes be confusing because often the emphasis is on letter-sounds is in the beginning of the word. It might be useful to really emphasize that rhyme is at the end of the word (use your hands or write the words to have them understand they are listening for the ending part of the word).
	
	There are several options for this activity:
	    a. Have students *listen* to three words and identify the one that doesn't belong. Write or circle the word.
	    (cash / shirt / trash) (go / stop / no)
	    b. Give students *pictures*, say a word, and they find the picture that rhymes with the word.
	    c. *Identify* the rhymes in a chant or song.
	    d. *Word families* activities below also emphasize rhyming.

Same sounds: Match pictures	Have students sort pictures by two sounds you're working on. (You may need to explain some of the pictures and emphasize the sound). You can also use the pictures to sort by beginning, middle, and ending sounds.
Large cards	Put letters or letter combinations on cards, hand to each student, and have students "spell out" words, starting with those related to your context, at the front of the room. This can be especially helpful for phonemic awareness. *(B-O-O-K, now B sit down, H come up. What word now? Now K sit down, D come up. What now?)* Take time to point out similarities and differences among the words you're working with.

Phonics: Teaching Letters and Sounds

Activities:

Fill in the missing sounds	To review the vocabulary words for your unit, give students a list of words that have one or more letters missing (try to choose ones that they could easily hear the sound of). Have students write the missing letters (without dictation). Many books have this activity (*Foundations, Lifeprints*, etc.).
	Exs: *__oa__ __a__*
	     __an, __oney, __ilk
	    bro__ __er, mo__ __er, fa__ __er
	    P__tsy, h__nd, B__nd-aid
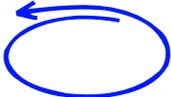
Circle the word	Students have a worksheet that has 3 word options. Call out a word, and they circle the word they hear.
	
	    1. sister son student
	    2. mother married male
	    3. father friend family
	    4. baby brother book
	    5. boy girl grandmother

Mixed up letters, Letter tiles	Like *Scrabble®* tiles, you or a student can call out words that the learners must spell out with the tiles. They can work individually, in pairs or groups. Make a game: Put folks into teams and assign points to the team who can spell the word correctly first!

BINGO	Play BINGO with sounds (initial, final, vowels, blends), word families, rhyming words, or entire words. This is another way to connect oral language to printed language.
Dictation	Connect oral and written language by having students try to write the sounds or words you call out. Encourage new readers to write only the first sound they hear, or the final sound, and later the entire word if they're able. Encourage "inventive" spelling. The literacy task of assigning symbols to sounds is a major undertaking, and students will need a great deal of practice. Dictation is also a good progress-checking activity.
Sort words by sound/letter	Sort pictures or words by the letter sound. This works well to discriminate long and short vowel sounds. Also, you can give students a paper with boxes for each sound (works well with digraphs vs. letters). They sort the pictures under the sound or words under the sound.

S socks, sandals, sweater	**A** sAndals, pAnts
Sh shoes, shorts, shirt	**T** tie, trousers

9-Patch	This simple grid can be extremely useful in working with sight words and in phonics work. You can use letters only to practice sound/symbol correspondences, or use full words on slips of paper to practice sight words. You can model the listening activity first, then let students take turns calling out sounds/words. Once the grid is complete, students can pair up and practice reading it to each other. It's also a great chart-reading activity.

1 name	2 number	3 new
4 school	5 street	6 state
7 date	8 driver's	9 dollar

Working with a longer text	Here are some ideas for using a longer text as a jumping off point for phonics work.

Getting comfortable with print is a huge step for emergent readers. Draw attention to patterns and sound/symbol relationships.
  ➢ Underline all the words that start with ____. What do you notice when I say these words? (all start with same sound…)

  ➢ Underline words with ___. (*sh*, start with *T*, ends with *ch*, have *oa*, etc.)

  ➢ How many times do you see the word _____? |

	➤ Focus students' attention on <u>word families</u>. By doing so, students can learn a number of words quickly while learning important patterns. Students can sort words on cards or slips of paper into particular word families, or you can do a number of the other phonics activities listed above working not on specific sounds, but on a particular pattern. For example: read a cake recipe and spend some time working with *make, cake, bake.* Other examples: *light, right, night…catch, match, scratch, patch…sing, wing, spring, string.* For more activities related to word families, please visit: http://mnlincs.themlc.org/minigrants.html
Same and different	This activity helps build the 'automaticity' that fluent readers use when reading. Create a pile of paper strips with a line in the center, and write two words on each paper strip that differ only by one or two letters. Students turn over a strip very quickly, just for a moment, and they must quickly determine whether the two words are the same or different. Then turn the paper over to check. <table><tr><td>shirt</td><td>skirt</td></tr></table>

Final Thoughts

- Try a variety of activities

- Balanced instruction: Don't spend too much time on phonemic awareness and phonics activities each week. It's important to keep these activities as one small part of your total curriculum.

- Remember that Whole-Part-Whole instruction means starting with meaningful context, using words from the context to focus on phonemic awareness and phonics, and then returning to that meaningful context.

Resources:

Croydan, A. (2005). *Making it real:: Teaching pre-literate adult refugee students.* Tacoma Community House Training Project. Available: www.tchonline.org/page.aspx?hid=1411

Fish, Knell, and Buchanan (2007). Teaching literacy to preliterate adults: The top and the bottom. *TESOL Adult Interest Section Electronic Newsletter,* September 2007.

Parrish, B. (2004). *Teaching adult ESL: A practical introduction.* New York: McGraw-Hill.