

A World of Phonics for the non-native speaker

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A world of phonics for the non-native speaker of English

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Phonics is a popular method of teaching how to read and write, especially designed for native speakers of English. It is a creative approach that quickly helps learners decode the English alphabet, by relating letters to sounds. Interestingly, it has also been welcome and widely used in EFL classrooms, yet some adjustments have proved vital.

Created for young native speakers of English, this approach implies a prior mastery of English sounds. Conversely, EFL students should learn new words and sounds before getting into actual phonics. Therefore, there are extra steps that EFL teachers should take: the teaching of new words containing new sounds. A further problem: The existing phonics material does not cover non-native speakers' needs. EFL teachers need to think about the particular sounds that EFL learners need to acquire to sound intelligibly.

Even if non-native English-speaking children are taught to read and write in their mother tongue through phonics, their strategies are untransferable to English. For example, when an EFL learner is taught the word 'three', they may end up producing >free< or >tree< if the needed consonant sound is not part of their mother tongue. In Spanish-speaking Latin America, this articulation has to be acquired, as the voiceless dental fricative >TH< is non-existent. It is very difficult to avoid a habitual articulation of the mother tongue. On the other hand, >TH< may be simple in Peninsular (Spain) Spanish variant. This sound is found in some words, such as 'Cecilia' or 'zanahoria.' Therefore, teachers should make this sound noticeable (Shmidt, 1993) and relate it to other spellings.

How can we teach against the interference of the mother tongue all the time, and still use an approach like phonics, which makes learning enjoyable? In Vygostkian terms, the mother tongue is the starting point where new articulatory habits begin, and

the new sounds will emerge through the activation of the “zone of proximal development” .The starting point will be different according to the different Spanish variants.

In River-Plate (Argentine) Spanish, >TH< is not found. It may be articulated when people put their tongue out. Still, speakers need to push some air out: This combination of movement and air is the articulation that triggers the “zone of proximal development.” If teachers were to describe all the procedure to young learners, this procedure would simply be forgotten, as meta-language cannot be used with children. A memorable story —whose conflict includes the new sound— may be the scaffold needed.

Stories are really important because they create an emotional bond with children .A sound like >TH< should be “noticed” (Schmidt, 1993) before it is acquired and stories provide the perfect scaffolding to create this learning memorable. Teachers need to create a magical learning environment, with perfect scaffolds to introduce the L2 sounds if they aim at changing articulatory habits (Palavecino, 2021).

‘Th Th Thumkie’ (Palavecino, 2022) is an illustrative story that provides the right scaffolding, and the song suggested in the story an opportunity for practice, going well beyond the time-honoured listen-and-repeat procedure. Children will remember that *Thumkie* puts his tongue out, and that it is naughty. They will sympathise with the character, knowing they are not supposed do this. Children later discover that *Thumkie* needs to put his tongue out to say his name and call out to his friends (words containing this sound). This is not naughty and makes *Thumkie* and the children happy.

In literature, conflicts are settled differently. EFL phonics stories’ conflicts are solved through a fantasy manoeuvre which fosters the acquisition of the new articulation starting from a familiar sound or movement in the mother tongue.

In short, in EFL phonics children enter the imaginative world that the story creates .When new sounds are presented in familiar narrative forms, the memory structure facilitates the brain’s retention of that information. Once memory is activated, training to hear the sounds in words follows. These stories have the potential to hook children to the solution of the problem. The solution often comes when they discover the character in words. The author of this paper has created a collection of phonics

stories, songs and games for what she has dared call EFL Phonics. Every teacher can create their own EFL world of phonics as well.

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