Accelerating language learning using phonics
About this guide

In the past, language teachers were taught very much to use the communicative approach. This method separated the sounds of words from the written word for fear of interfering with pupils’ understanding.

Current research suggests that it is actually far better to overtly teach pupils the sound-spelling link (phonics) from a very early stage as this helps them to better manipulate their second foreign language independently.

This guide is aimed mainly at primary and Key Stage 3 language teachers, giving a brief introduction to phonics along with practical and easy ideas to use in the classroom, links to helpful websites and suggestions for further reading.
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1 Code breaking in the foreign language

The principle of code breaking is to break the language, either written or spoken, into more manageable chunks. To then manipulate and use the language, pupils are taught to search for patterns and develop their own rules – the code. In breaking the code, pupils use their thinking skills, develop language learning strategies and become more autonomous learners.

Learning a second language is like putting together a jigsaw. Over time, pupils become better equipped to piece it all together unaided and can tackle and pronounce unknown language with growing confidence.

“Children do not arrive at primary school magically knowing how to read English … Why do we imagine they will learn to read another language if we do not teach the children the ‘code’ first?”

Jo Rhys-Jones, Talkabout Primary Languages
http://primarymfl.ning.com

Professional development for teachers
www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk
The letters and sounds technique

Pupils tend to be very keen on the letters and sounds technique as most will be familiar with ‘Jolly Phonics’ and its gesture-led approach from their primary literacy lessons. Younger language learners in particular enjoy this way of teaching correct pronunciation as it is fun and non-threatening and actively has them out of their seats. The same phonics methodology can easily be transferred to foreign language learning.

‘Le manuel phonique’, for example, teaches 36 key sounds and focusses pupils’ attention on the sound spelling link in French. Pupils are encouraged to ‘decode’ the language as they independently tease out sounds and structures and learn for themselves how to approach cognates and tricky words.

Pupils find it interesting to learn new and sometimes strange sounds. It is fun for pupils to find that there are some similarities. For example T in both English and French has the key word tennis and the gesture associated with T is moving the head from left to right as though you are watching a tennis match. There are, of course, many differences between the English and French sounds and associated words and gestures. A in English has ant as its key word where pupils gesture an ant crawling up their arm. In French, however, acrobate is the key word and pupils move their hand in a circular motion to depict this. Discovering these differences is also a key learning step.
3 Ways to incorporate phonics into your language lessons

- **Phonics bingo.** Your focus, for example, could be silent final consonants in French or perhaps the *V* and *W* sounds in German. Go through your unit of work in advance looking for examples of words with these sounds and preempt poor pronunciation before it occurs.

- **Love train.** Choose 3 or more key sounds e.g. *-in*, *-on*, and *-oi* and write them out on pieces of paper. Each pupil chooses one and goes around the room chanting this sound out loud in order to form a train with anyone else sharing this sound. This can be followed up with lots of whole class choral repetition at various speeds.

- **Mexican wave to a song.** Pupils listen to a song or rhyme and each time they hear a word which contains a particular sound, they have to do a mexican wave. Try this with tonguetwisters too!

- **Human spellings.** Using a washing line and pegs, pupils listen to the teacher who reads out a list of words which contain a particular sound e.g. *-ch* and they have to make the spelling by pegging letters onto the washing line in the correct order. Examples for *-ch* in French could include *cheval, vache, chat*.

- **Venn diagram.** The teacher draws a Venn diagram and asks pupils to put words into the correct segment of the diagram. This works well in German with the *-ei*
and -\textit{ie} sounds which often confuse pupils. Words like \textit{ein-und-vierzig} could go in the middle segment.

- **Mirror play.** Pupils watch themselves saying words containing a particular sound in the foreign language in a mirror. They are prompted to discuss what they see e.g. How does the mouth move? What is the tongue doing? Does your nose vibrate?

- **Register recall.** Having focussed on a particular sound using one of the methods suggested, present a list of unknown words in the target language for pupils to pronounce during the register. This shows how pupils are increasingly able to cope with unknown language.
Podcasting and new technologies to encourage accurate speaking

Pupils are increasingly in contact with new technologies and most are extremely technically savvy. As language teachers, we can use this to our advantage and give pupils a real reason for wanting to speak accurately in the target language.

It is thought that we often learn best when we teach others so through the medium of podcasting (audio and video voice recording), pupils are able to make massive improvements and help their peers in the process.

Podcasting is cheap and easy and pupils love it! Recordings can take various forms and can be made using digital voice recorders, free Audacity software (www.audacity.sourceforge.net), Easi-speak USB microphones (www.easi-speak.org.uk) and most modern mobile phones. To encourage listening practice outside of school, recordings of good pronunciation can be made available on languages blogs and wikis which host pupils’ work.

A further way to motivate pupils and give them a real reason to improve their developing foreign language skills is to practice with a live audience. This can be done simply using a video conferencing link with a foreign partner school (via Skype for example).

Case study

To encourage listening practice outside of school, recordings can be made available on languages blogs and wikis. Pupils at All Saints Roman Catholic School in York created ‘Rosbif Radio’ podcasts.

http://tinyurl.com/rosbifradio

Professional development for teachers
www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk
Where next?

New style GCSE languages exams place an even greater emphasis on speaking and writing. There has never been a more important time to focus on phonics and the sound-spelling link. Visit the following places for further information and advice.

Links into Languages
Contains valuable information on policy and promoting languages as well as resources from the LinkedUp programme.  
www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/resources

‘Do once and share’ phonics wiki
A free online web space (requiring registration) where teachers are encouraged to share phonics resources.  
http://doonceandshare.wikispaces.com

ICT in the classroom
Various articles on podcasting on Joe Dale’s Integrating ICT into the MFL classroom blog.  
http://joedale.typepad.com/integrating_ict_into_the_/podcasting/

Helpful tips on ICT and MFL from teacher José Picardo.  
www.boxoftricks.net

Learning and teaching the importance of phonics
This website contains links to sources of inspiration related to phonics and refers to various academic writings.  
http://hilarymccoll.co.uk/phonics.html

Professional development for teachers
www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk
10 MINUTE GUIDE:
Accelerated language learning using phonics

‘Letters and sounds: Principles and practice of high quality phonics’
A downloadable DfE guide to the use of phonics in the English primary classroom.
http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/84969

Phonics teaching materials
German phonics with sound files based on the letters and sounds approach.
www.slideshare.net/JacquiT/german-phonics

‘Le manuel phonique’ ISBN 978-1870946988
www.amazon.co.uk

‘Pas- à-pas’ ISBN 978-2218925450
www.amazon.co.uk

Wendy Adeniji has produced phonics resources in French, German and Spanish aimed at Key Stage 2 onwards.
www.trainingforlearning.co.uk

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External providers, resources and websites

Links into Languages cannot recommend or endorse any external parties or products mentioned in the guides. We cannot be held responsible for the content or reliability of externally linked websites and other resources.

Feedback

Did you find this guide useful? How have you used the advice and resources in your teaching? Do you have case studies or web links that you would like to share in a future edition?

Contact us with your feedback at: linksintolanguages@soton.ac.uk

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