English synthetic phonics in an international context: How using synthetic phonics with non-native English speakers can help with bilingualism - and suggestions for good practice

1. <u>What are the 'Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles' and why are they recommended so highly for teaching reading and spelling?</u>

For teaching reading, the word **synthetic** refers to *synthesising* or *blending* the sounds to make a spoken word. The reader scans through a printed word, from left to right, to note any letter **groups**, then utters a sound for all the graphemes from left to right and blends the sounds to achieve the target word. The **Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles**, however, include not only the process of teaching reading, but also the process of teaching spelling and handwriting – and the alphabetic code is taught as **reversible**.

Features of the Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles

In the simplest terms:

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS; APPLY AND EXTEND

Teach **alphabetic code knowledge** = the letter/s-sound correspondences

Teach **three core phonics skills** (and their *sub*-skills):

- **Decoding** - sound out recognised graphemes (letters and letter groups) all-through-the-printed-word and blend the sounds **to read the word**
- **Encoding** - orally segment the sounds all-through-the-spoken-word then select letters and letter groups as code for the sounds **to spell the word**
- **Handwriting** - form upper and lower case letters correctly **to write the word**

Apply to a **cumulative bank** of words for:

- **word level** pupil practice of all the core phonics skills

Extend to a **cumulative bank** of sentences and texts for:

- **sentence and text level** pupil practice of all the core phonics skills

Note: In leading-edge practice, spelling (starting with orally segmenting the spoken word therefore a sound-to-print process) is taught as the reverse of reading (which is a print-to-sound process) **generally within the same lessons**.

The Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles in full:

Teach the **alphabetic code knowledge** (the relationship between 44+ speech sounds and the many letters and letter groups that *are code for* the sounds) by systematically and comprehensively introducing the **letter/s-sound correspondences** of the English alphabetic code. If possible, introduce at least two correspondences per week at first, including vowel letters and sounds and consonant letters and sounds (dependent upon age, time spent on phonics teaching, capacity of learners to learn). Start with mainly one **grapheme** (spelling alternative) for each of the 44+ **phonemes** (the smallest identifiable sounds in English speech that change the meaning of a word) before broadening out to focus on further graphemes (spelling alternatives) and **pronunciation variations**.

Model how to put the letter/s-sound correspondences introduced (the **alphabetic code knowledge**) to immediate use with real words teaching the **three core phonics skills** of:

1. **Decoding** (reading) – **Synthesise** (sound out and blend) all-through-the-printed-word to 'hear', or 'discern', the target word. Modify the pronunciation of the word to sound like the 'real' word where necessary. (*Sub*-skills: hear the sounds /k/ /ai/ /k/, to discern the word "cake"; see the letter/s, then say the sounds)

2. **Encoding** (spelling) – **Orally segment** (split up) all-through-the-spoken-word to identify the **phonemes** (sounds) and know which **graphemes** (letters and letter groups) **are code for** the identified sounds. (*Sub*-skills: hear the sounds, then write, air-write, select grapheme tiles or point to the letters or letter groups)

3. **Handwriting** – Learn to write the **lower case** letter shapes, then the **upper case** (capital) letter shapes, of **the alphabet** correctly - including their positions on writing lines. Hold the writing implement with the tripod grip.

Provide regular dictation exercises from letter level to text level (as appropriate).

Provide **cumulative**, **decodable** words, sentences and texts which **match the level** of alphabetic code knowledge and blending skills taught to date, when asking the learner to read or write **independently**.

Emphasise letter **sounds** at first and **not letter names**. Learn letter names in the first instance by chanting the alphabet or singing an alphabet song. Distinguish teaching **the alphabet** from teaching **the alphabetic code**.

Do not teach an 'initial sight vocabulary' where learners are expected to memorise words as whole **shapes** (for example, through whole words on flash cards).

Do not teach or encourage guessing or predicting words from their shape, or from picture cues, context cues or initial letter cues (sometimes known as 'multi-cueing' or a 'range of reading strategies').

Introduce useful, common '**tricky words**' slowly and systematically emphasising the blending skill once the tricky or unusual letter, or letters, have been pointed out. For example, when teaching the word '**you**', say, "In this word (pointing at the printed word 'you'), these letters (pointing at 'ou'), **are code for** /oo/." ('Tricky words' are a small number of words, in which there are rare/unusual graphemes, or, common useful words in which not all the graphemes have yet been formally taught, which tend to be used in early reading material.)

Teach according to a **planned** and structured phonics progression – but also teach **incidental** phonics as the need arises. [The promotion of teaching *incidental* as well as *systematic* phonics is Debbie's '**Two-Pronged**' approach to synthetic phonics teaching and may be very helpful in a bi-lingual or 'English as an Additional Language' context.]

Note: The synthetic phonics teaching approach is set within a literacy-rich environment and requires a full range of further age-appropriate communication, language and literacy activities and creative opportunities in the English language whenever possible.

Synthetic phonics teaching is generally at the level of the 'phoneme' (smallest sound that usually changes the meaning of the word: /b/ /oa/ /t/, /k/ /oa/ /t/) and **not** onset and rime (short words split in two such as: r-est, tr-ick, fl-ap); **not** consonant clusters, blends or adjacent consonants (there are 76 consonant clusters such as: bl, sp, scr, -nd, -mp, -st) and **not** word families (word endings are the same such as: cake, make, take, flake).

<h1 style="text-align:center">The three complexities of the English alphabetic code:</h1>

1. One, two, three or four letters can be code for one phoneme (sound)
e.g. /**s**/ **s** as in '**s**at', /**f**/ **ph** as in 'gra**ph**', /**igh**/ **igh** as in 'n**igh**t',
/**ai**/ **eigh** as in '**eigh**t'

2. Most phonemes can be represented by different graphemes (letters or letter groups)
e.g. the sound /**oa**/ can be represented by: **o**, **oa**, **ow**, **oe**, **o-e**, **eau**, **ough**

3. Some graphemes are code for more than one phoneme
e.g. the grapheme '**ough**' can be: /**oa**/ as in th**ough**, /**u**/ as in bor**ough**,
/**ou**/ as in pl**ough**, /**or**/ as in th**ough**t, long /**oo**/ as in thr**ough**

Why are the synthetic phonics teaching principles recommended so highly for reading and spelling?

There is a **body of research** to show that the best reading results when teaching the English language are achieved by explicit teaching of the 'Five Pillars of Literacy': phonemic awareness, systematic phonics, fluency achieved by repetition, vocabulary enrichment and language comprehension. National enquiries were conducted in the USA (2000), Australia (2005) and the UK (2005-6).

In the UK, the parliamentary inquiry '*Teaching Children to Read*' (March 2005) followed by the national review '*Independent review of the teaching of early reading*' (*Final Report*, Sir Jim Rose, March 2006) looked at **leading-edge classroom practice** as well as the body of research – concluding that **systematic synthetic phonics** (SSP) should be recommended to all schools. In 2011, more emphasis was placed on the use of cumulative, decodable texts.

Systematic synthetic phonics is the best approach for teaching reading and spelling in the English language, regardless of whether learners are learning only English for their spoken language or where English is an additional language. In the UK, many learners are learning English as a new spoken language or it is their second or additional language - and systematic synthetic phonics teaching still achieves the highest results.

2. The English 'alphabetic code' as an essential visual aid: the Alphabetic Code Chart - and how this can help teachers in international contexts to teach the English 'sounds' and their spellings

Around **44** discrete (separate) sounds, or phonemes, can be identified in English speech compared, for example, to around **24** sounds in the Spanish language. There are, however, additional **combined phonemes** which make sense to teach, amounting to around **50 units of sound**. [Refer to your *mini Alphabetic Code Chart* and count the total 'units of sound' shown within the *slash marks* that are introduced.]

The use of an **Alphabetic Code Chart** helps teachers in international contexts to be aware of the differences between the English alphabetic code and the alphabetic code of the mother tongue – that is, the relationship between **spoken sounds** and their **spelling alternatives** (or 'spelling choices'). This is very important professional knowledge. Simpler alphabetic codes are known as **transparent** codes, whereas the English alphabetic code is much more complex and referred to as an **opaque** code. In England, a comprehensive alphabetic code may also be referred to as the **extended** code because a simple version of the code is taught systematically at first (simple: all the sounds and mainly one spelling as code for each sound).

The sound-to-graphemes shown on the Alphabetic Code Chart as a **visual** aid makes the sounds and their spelling alternatives '**tangible**' – *more easily grasped by the mind*.

With greater professional knowledge and understanding, and with a **large scale** *main Alphabetic Code Chart* in classrooms, teachers will be able **to engage their learners with the rationale** of the 'sounds' within spoken words and their 'spelling alternatives' for the English language.

The Alphabetic Code Chart in every classroom also supports the '*Two-Pronged*' **systematic** and **incidental** teaching approach, **enabling phonics teaching to be flexible and readily adapted according to the needs of the learners and reading and writing in the wider curriculum**.

3. The relationship between reading the words and language comprehension in the international context (based on the 'Simple View of Reading' model – Gough and Tunmer 1986)

In England, the **Simple View of Reading** is the officially recommended model (a 'useful conceptual framework') for teachers to understand the **two main processes** involved in reading. First of all the reader needs to be able to **decode** the word (read – or 'lift the word off the page') to know what the word '**is**', and then the reader's **oral comprehension** (level of spoken language) is required to unlock the '**meaning**' of the word.

reading = decoding x comprehension   R = D x C

1) **What *is* the word?**
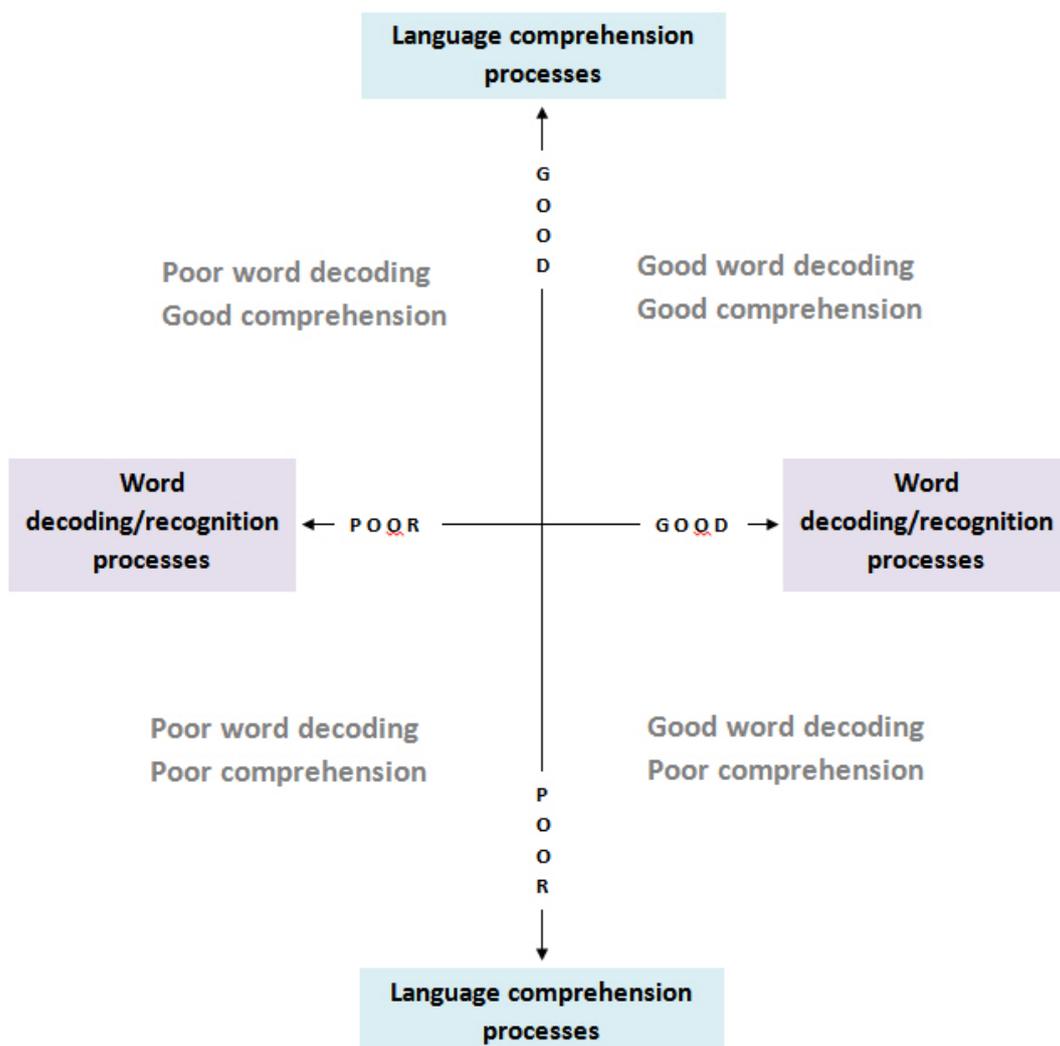2) **What does the word *mean*?**

This helps teachers to understand that they need to be able to teach their learners very good decoding skills (**to pronounce** the words either aloud or silently) but that learners also need to be able **to understand** the words that they have pronounced. **There is an order to this**: Comprehension is *not* used to *guess* what the word 'is'.

- **However**, learners can be taught the alphabetic code and how to blend the words **to become proficient decoders and 'pronouncers'** even when they blend words **for which they do not know the meaning**. They are still: 1) applying their code knowledge, 2) articulating the English sounds, and 3) practising their blending skill.

- Learners can be taught spoken language and what it means, whether or not they can decode printed words.

The decoding and language comprehension processes can be taught separately, and together, and each element of the teaching and learning supports the other.

Simple View of Reading
Gough and Tunmer 1986

The Simple View of Reading

	Language comprehension processes	
	G O O D	
Poor word decoding Good comprehension		Good word decoding Good comprehension
Word decoding/recognition processes ← P O O R	— G O O D →	Word decoding/recognition processes
Poor word decoding Poor comprehension		Good word decoding Poor comprehension
	P O O R	
	Language comprehension processes	

Think of learners with different language and reading profiles. How would they fit into the four quadrants?

How can this exercise support teachers in international contexts to provide appropriately for their pupils?

4. **How can teachers use, or adapt, a systematic synthetic phonics programme of work for their specific circumstances?**

VERY IMPORTANT: It is the **same alphabetic code knowledge** and the **same core phonics skills** (and their *sub*-skills) that need to be taught **regardless of**:

- the current spoken language, or languages, of the learner
- the level of language comprehension in English of the learner
- the age of the learner
- the stage of learning
- the capacity for new learning
- the time and frequency allocated to phonics teaching
- the time allocated for English-speaking teaching (language comprehension)

The phonics teaching can be taught:

- in all circumstances above in a **systematic order** - according to the specific synthetic phonics programme – it may be 'slower' or 'quicker' but so what?
- teachers teach and support with the **spoken English** as much as required **as part of** the phonics teaching – and **in addition to** the phonics teaching
- teachers can teach phonics **incidentally** - according to the learners' needs, English used in the wider curriculum, and whatever the school's context – **limited only by** the level of professional knowledge of the teachers

However, systematic synthetic phonics programmes are **not generally underpinned by a clear outline of the alphabetic code as shown on an Alphabetic Code Chart**. It may not be so easy to teach phonics incidentally throughout the wider curriculum without the knowledge and understanding of the teachers and learners being supported by a **main Alphabetic Code Chart in every classroom** as a visual aid and a starting point.

Consider:

If **only the English-language teachers** have the knowledge and understanding of the English alphabetic code and the three core phonics skills (particularly the **blending and segmenting** and their *sub*-skills), then support in the wider curriculum will be **restricted** by lack of professional knowledge of other members of staff.

The ultimate aim, therefore, in schools where decisions have been made to teach pupils the English language (spoken), and the English writing and reading system, is **for as many teachers and supporting adults as possible to understand the Synthetic Phonics Teaching Principles and the Simple View of Reading model**.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The *Oxford Reading Tree Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters* programme and the *Phonics International* programme have been designed to **train teaching staff about the alphabetic code to a practical adult level** as well as providing systematic resources and guidance for learners to learn effectively.

The programmes have also been designed to **inform and support learners' parents or carers in alphabetic code knowledge and the three core phonics skills and their *sub*-skills**.

In evaluating the usefulness of systematic synthetic phonics programmes in the international context, make sure that:

The programmes are very helpful for training adults to enable them to support incidental phonics teaching in the wider curriculum such as **other programmes of study (other subjects) and resources in the English language** and for working in partnership with parents or carers where possible - and, as a minimum, **informing** parents or carers about the teaching.

Remember the phrase:

"In *this* word, *these* letters ARE CODE FOR the /ai/ sound"

stra<u>aigh</u>t

Any letter/s-sound correspondences of the alphabetic code can be revised, taught, or modelled, at any time!

But you have to know the English alphabetic code to be able to teach it!

- **<u>Language support in the mother tongue</u>**

There are different approaches, opinions and experiences regarding whether, or how much, to use the mother tongue to support; 1) the phonics teaching and; 2) the teaching of the spoken English language as a new or additional language.

Professional judgement, experience and context will lead to the preferred practices of the teachers.

The learners' needs and responses will help to inform the teachers' judgements.

- **<u>Other programmes of work in the curriculum</u>**

Where other programmes of work are written in the English language, once again the school's context will lead to judgements by teachers of how much, and how, to support the learners with; 1) the phonics aspect of the written language and; 2) the spoken language.

Caution:

Look out for a **mis-match** between the **levels of written language in English in other subjects** compared to the current levels of phonics teaching and learning of the pupils.

Teachers **may need to adapt the exercises** provided for learners in other programmes of study:

 For example:

- Adapt other programmes to focus on **oral learning and exercises** where the reading and writing activities and expectations of the resources **are beyond the learners' level of alphabetic code knowledge**

- **Constantly point out, and model**, alphabetic code knowledge and the blending and segmenting skills **incidentally** (some learners will self-teach and be more advanced than others in phonics and/or spoken English, but constant modelling for phonics **and** oral language will support all learners according to their needs)

- **<u>English language teaching resources with conflicting approaches</u>**

Caution:

In England, '*whole language*' reading instruction practices have been officially replaced by systematic synthetic phonics teaching. The '*multi-cueing reading strategies*' (that is, guess the word from its shape, guess the word from the picture, guess the word that would make sense, guess the word from the first letter/s) **have been replaced by** the '*Simple View of Reading*' model. Teachers are beginning to understand that **learners should not be asked to read or write words independently that are beyond their alphabetic code knowledge**.

There are current 'English Language Teaching' (**ELT**) programmes, however, where pupils are being taught by whole words, whole sentences and texts, **which are now known to be too difficult for many English-speaking learners even in an English context**.

'Phonics' may be included in the ELT programmes, but there is often a **mis-match** between the level of teaching and learning expectations at whole word, sentence and text level (not alphabetic code based) compared to the level of phonics teaching and learning throughout the programmes.

Are learners being asked to read and write words, sentences and texts that are beyond them before they have been taught well enough in the English alphabetic code and the core skills and/or in the English spoken language?

Teachers need to be aware of the possible conflicting teaching methods within different programmes being used in their schools and be able to:

❖ evaluate the content and underpinning methodology of the other programmes and compare them with the conclusions of research and best-practice for reading and spelling instruction in the English language

❖ modify their use of ELT, or other programmes of work, if necessary

❖ lead professional discussions to evaluate past and current practices and programmes and compare these with possible future practices

❖ consider this field a 'work in progress' between teachers, programme writers (and publishers), researchers, and teacher-trainers

- **Time allocation**

Schools will allocate time to phonics and English-language teaching **according to how much they prioritise and value it**.

The more time spent on phonics and English-language teaching, the more proficient the learners will become more quickly.

But 'time' does not matter in that it is the **SAME** alphabetic code knowledge and core phonics skills provided in systematic synthetic phonics programmes so the only ADAPTING that needs to occur to the phonics programme is according to the age, stage of learning, and levels of language of the learners. If less time is spent on the phonics teaching, the learners will of course learn more slowly.

NOTE: Teachers can capitalise on opportunities for **oral language development** within the synthetic phonics programmes according to their judgement – for example, using the scenarios of the illustrations to talk about concepts of colour, counting, shape, size, positional language, family relationships, emotions, story themes, vocabulary enrichment, family values, simple grammar for speech and so on.

[The ORT *Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters* illustrations and the '*I can read'* illustrations in *Phonics International* link vocabulary to the phonics teaching for language, reading and writing – but **can also be used** to develop **rich oral language** as described above.]

- ## Handwriting styles

The approach to teaching handwriting may be very different in various international contexts compared to many English-speaking countries.

The English-based synthetic phonics programmes introduce an infant-friendly font – often *Sassoon Infant* (or similar). Children are taught a print style before being taught a joined style although some schools decide to teach a print style with a lead-in stroke.

Teachers in international contexts can make their own choices, for example:

- Choose to teach the English writing system with the same font as provided via the synthetic phonics programme's resources – even where a different style might be used for teaching the writing system in the mother tongue.

- Consider modifying the home country's writing system (if it is very different – for example, more elaborate, or joined from the outset) for infants so both languages are taught with a simple print font at first

- Consider modifying the resources of the English synthetic phonics programmes to match the home country's style

- Consider allowing learners to write in the font they prefer for either language and don't worry about any overlap of styles

- Evaluate what might be the most appropriate style for first-step teaching whatever the language

- Don't avoid the handwriting part of the English synthetic phonics programme because this is part of the core phonics **multi-sensory** teaching and learning. However, with very young beginners (three to four year olds), teachers may want to focus on letter shapes and saying the sounds with **air-writing** and **finger-tracing** rather than paper and pencil activities at first.

NOTE: In England, Debbie recommends that teachers teach with an infant font (print) first before teaching joined handwriting. Print-style writing and phonics learning work well together and print is easier for young beginners to master. Reading books for beginners are produced in print and not a joined font. See www.debbiehepplewhitehandwriting.com

- ## Informing parents or carers and potential partnerships

Working in partnership with parents or carers should arguably be the ultimate goal of teachers – especially for subjects as fundamentally important as literacy.

Not all synthetic phonics programmes provide methods or resources that can be easily shared with parents or carers.

The ORT Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters and *Phonics International* programmes, however, specialise in resources and methods which can readily be shared with parents or carers. As a minimum, parents or carers can be well-informed on a regular basis – including through internet support.

5. Core features and resources for the best synthetic phonics teaching and learning practice

*An **Alphabetic Code Chart** featuring the sounds, in the order that they are introduced in the programme, and the spelling alternatives which are introduced in the programme (including a main classroom chart and a mini chart for multiple uses)

***Handbooks** with clear alphabetic code information for professional development

*A range of **Frieze** material for each letter/s-sound correspondence introduced with a simple but effective **mnemonic system** (aid to memory such as key pictures and words)

*A range of **cumulative grapheme posters** (e.g. *Say the Sounds Posters*) for display and for learners' personal use to enable little-and-often *quickfire 'Point to the graphemes, and say the sounds'* and '*Hear the sounds, and point to the graphemes*'

***Tricky high-frequency words** introduced steadily throughout the programme – note the tricky, or unusual, parts of the words – display on the classroom phonics wall

*Memorable and engaging teaching and learning material to conduct teacher-led '*Revisit and Review'* sessions (e.g. *Grapheme flash cards*, *Say the Sounds Posters*)

***Grapheme flash cards** and **grapheme tiles** (especially for young beginners) to see and learn graphemes as discrete (separate) units (from print-to-sound for reading; from sound-to-print for spelling)

*At least some resources which are **permanently visible and accessible** to provide a constant bank of cumulative phonics material and **spelling word banks** (whereas electronic resources are switched off, games and activities are tidied away): e.g. *The ORT Floppy's Phonics Sounds and Letters books, Phonics International Picture Posters and Mini Posters*

*Paper-based multi-skills **Activity Sheets** or **Activity Books** which **belong to each learner** to provide a system for permanent reference and monitoring – and celebrating - and informing parents or carers

NOTE: Activity Sheets and Activity Books include **the focus letter/s-sound** correspondences to learn, and routine **activities for all the core skills** and, where applicable, the *sub*-skills.

***Cumulative texts** ('plain' texts) to read, comprehend, spell/write (self-dictations, dictations, copywrite), extend and/or illustrate – create word lists for **spelling word banks**

***Cumulative, decodable reading books** for learners to apply their code knowledge and blending skill