

Ask the Expert: Phonics

Phonics expert **Debbie Hepplewhite** has some fantastic advice for improving literacy across the curriculum...

Q

I teach English in an academy that serves a reasonably privileged area – children who join us in Y7 tend to be achieving at or above the expected levels for their ages, and we are blessed with enthusiastic, supportive parents. However, inevitably, every cohort includes a very small number

of students who struggle with basic literacy. We generally run targeted interventions for them that involve them being partly taught away from their peers. I'd really like us to be more inclusive in our approach – are there any strategies that we could employ in the main classroom, that would benefit the whole group (and not feel like a backwards step)?

A Central to my work is a demonstration of how most literate adults spell and read new words – usually leading to a shift in teachers' perception of the role of phonics for life-long literacy. We also need a shift in perception of the pupils themselves. Think about this: If you asked the pupils who receive targeted interventions how they regard their lessons involving phonics, do you think that they think they are being taught 'phonics adult stuff' or 'phonics baby stuff'?

What is the actual adult spelling skill to spell new, longer or more challenging words? It is invariably a phonics sound-to-print process with syllable-chunking for multi-syllable words. What part do letter names play in spelling? They are used purely for relaying an exact spelling from one person to another, letter by letter using the letter names. Literate adults use phonics for reading new words and longer words – usually applying their knowledge of our very complex alphabetic code automatically without even thinking about it. In other words, phonics for spelling and reading is the domain of adult literacy – and not just baby stuff. Sub-consciously known complex alphabetic code is core to adult literacy.

So, it's simple – for greater and immediate inclusion, TELL the pupils that we, the teachers, apply our phonics skills when faced with reading, spelling, writing or typing new, longer and more challenging words.

Whatever the subject being studied in mainstream, every adult should make explicit his or her thought processes for writing those longer words. Just say the sounds aloud as you write down the chemical names or historical sites. For reading the new and increasingly challenging vocabulary, model aloud the application of the complex code all-through-the-printed-words for those far-away geographical places. Next time you type an email, consider whether you 'think in sounds' through any of the words as you type. Share that information explicitly in your next IT lesson.

I provide a wide range of free downloadable alphabetic code charts from giant-sized to mini charts at alphabeticcodecharts.com. Some secondary schools already display them in every classroom. The phonics modelling in all lessons along with the charts will be particularly helpful for pupils for whom English is a new language and the suggestions above should remove any stigma of phonics being perceived as merely baby stuff for the 'learning support' pupils.



ABOUT THE EXPERT

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Q Now that spelling is to be taken into account for students taking their GCSEs, all teachers in our school have been instructed to pay particular attention to SPaG when marking homework assignments. I can see the reasoning – but it's immensely frustrating. My subject is history, and already I can see a change in students' work; their writing is more guarded, less creative. It's as though they are so concerned with spelling and punctuation, it's preventing them from expressing the full scope of their ideas. Is there anything I can do?

A

Definitely! Tell the students the concern that you have just raised here! Share with them your findings, or theory, or worries, that an increased focus on spelling accuracy and grammar appears to have affected the recording of

their ideas and reduced their use of ambitious vocabulary. Generate discussion about this with your colleagues but also, essentially, with the pupils themselves. What do they think?

Further, describe how it is your job not just to mark their spellings and grammar but to teach them and support them with spelling and grammar generally. This may mean you have to look at your policy for marking spelling and grammar – and how you are teaching these fundamental aspects of literacy as individual teachers and collectively as a school.

In other words, it may not be the advent of your attention to marking SPaG that is at the root of the problem, but whether or not you have an effective and supportive enough approach for marking and teaching SPaG as a school.

I'm so open with pupils that I would be likely to tell them that historically, for some time, there was a decrease in the focus on spelling and grammar in our schools and now this situation has reversed. You could even point out that, traditionally teachers became afraid to mark for spelling as they did not want to contribute to low self-esteem of weak spellers. I would definitely tell them about the history of our English language leading to a very rich spoken language but a very complex alphabetic code that needs explicit teaching.

By doing this, you are attributing weak spelling to the history of the language and the code – and not to the individual! As in the question above, you could use Alphabetic Code Charts in your school, but also consider showing pupils the alphabetic code chart for the Spanish language for a comparison – a language with half as many speech sounds and a much simpler writing system (tinyurl.com/tsphonics). Your pupils will appreciate that they need to work hard at noting how individual words are spelt and to organise spelling word banks in their general memory – but that they need to be mindful of their creativity and continue to use ambitious vocabulary in their writing and for their homework.