

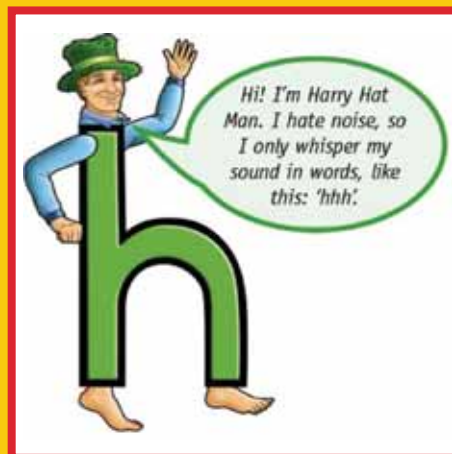
Synthetic Phonics – likenesses and differences

When David Cameron endorsed the importance of teaching synthetic phonics in the final televised leaders' debate during the recent general election campaign, many wondered what's the fuss all about? Lyn Wendon, originator of Letterland, explores the common ground and the differences in various approaches to teaching literacy through phonics.

All phonics programmes have to deal with the difficulty that the English language has 44 sounds, over 150 spelling patterns, and countless spelling rules. Hence the many years that teachers shied away from teaching phonics altogether, deeming it the best way to put children off learning to read. But research both in the UK and abroad has proved irrevocably that learning to crack the alphabet code with phonics is key to progress in both reading and spelling. Both past and present governments have embraced these findings, as have many educators around the world. But the challenge remains. How best to get all these phonic facts and rules into the heads of young children without putting them off? Many educators recommend that phonics should be taught first – but fast, a tacit acknowledgement that the subject is not a particularly child-friendly one. Some synthetic phonics programmes frequently review charts of all the letter/sound combinations, as if rote, little-and-often, is the best way to get the unappealing but all important facts into the children. Other programmes add an action for each letter sound, a good strategy for linking auditory and kinaesthetic learning channels.

Various other programmes add pictures to the a-z shapes to bridge the distance between the plain black abstract letters and their sounds, although these are mostly limited to single letters plus 3 or 4 digraphs. Here begin the differences in the Letterland approach to phonics from all the others. Letterland's embedded picture mnemonics precede all current publishers' mnemonics (its earliest versions go back to 1968) and include actions for each sound. Honed over many years, the mnemonics befriend children in learning the beginning sounds and letters as well as all the more advanced sounds and spellings (including the major digraphs and trigraphs). As devices for cracking the English alphabet code they gave birth to a phonic story logic that removes the need to memorise boring rules. This logic replaces rule talk with instructions in the language of childhood: storytelling. The combination of visual mnemonics, actions and little fictions that clarify the phonic facts at a child's level of understanding provide a natural route to phonemic awareness and

knowledge of all letter sounds and their spellings. Strong VAK (Visual Auditory Kinesthetic) involvement with phonic stories also develop speaking and listening skills, thinking and observation skills, encourage and guide creativity, and foster imagination and vocabulary development in exceptionally natural and unpressured ways, while still focusing on letters and sounds. The children draw near. They listen because they want to. And they understand from the start. Teachers enjoy the high level of interactivity that arises from the children participating in the phonic story logic and playing with language through alliteration, rhythm and rhyme. The children know that Letterland is an imaginary place, but they love to think of it as real. The Letterlanders speak directly to them and to each other (in illustrations, on video and in the software), sharing little fictions which carry the phonic facts by analogy, but always point back to the plain letters and their sounds.

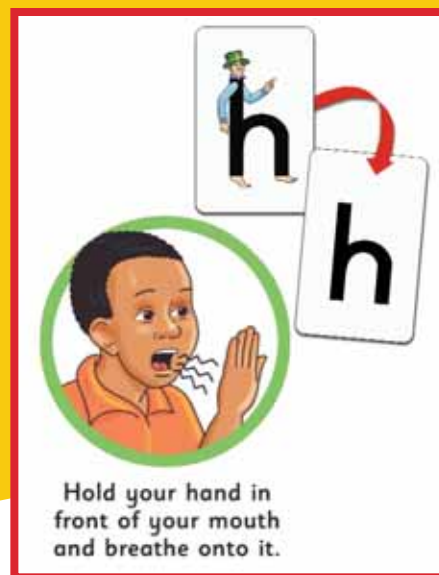


For example, initially children see the letter h as a meaningless shape. That changes when they 'meet' Harry Hat Man (normally invisible but reassuringly there if they need a reminder) and learn that he just whispers his 'hhh' sound in most words because he hates noise. Then comes some story logic, building on that first knowledge to arrive at the new knowledge: the 'sh' sound. Harry hushes Sammy Snake up with a 'sh'. The analogy is simply a logical parallel with real life, enabling children to understand and even see the changes in letter sounds! The important point is this: every little phonic story you teach, gives the children an

opportunity to use their eyes, their ears, their hearts and, above all, their minds to learn about letters and sounds.



The children are not aware that there is a very carefully structured programme underpinning all the fun and play, the actions for a-z, the music, the songs, the art and craft, the word games, and the role-play where they act out letter behaviour. But they quickly find that they can move beyond the scaffolding that these multi-sensory props offer, into the world of plain letters and reading with pleasure. And the pressure-free and drill-free way that they learnt will always be fondly remembered. Imagine that, phonics can be popular!



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