

Key Terms and Definitions

Many special words and technical terms are used in the field of Phonics education. To avoid confusion, we have included these key terms and their definitions here. These key terms and their definitions can be used as reference materials, for example, you may refer to them if you are studying the course Certificate in Phonics Teaching to Young Learners at PolyU Speed in Hong Kong. They are also beneficial to anyone interested in Phonics education.

Knowing these key terms means that you can have a better understanding of the concepts behind them. Understanding these concepts can help you to apply them in teaching Phonics. Applying these concepts can allow you to grow in your journey as a Phonics educator as well as a researcher.

We have compiled these definitions from several sources such as phonics websites and books (See 'Reference' at the end of this section). Some of them have come from Phonics practitioners who have been applying these concepts in their teaching. We hope that the definitions are user-friendly and can be understood by in-service or novice teachers, and parents who would like to teach their own children Phonics. The key terms are arranged in alphabetical order.

**The following list of key terms and definitions is not an exhaustive list of all key terms and definitions that are used in the field of Phonics education.*

Alternative Pronunciations

When reading English words, we discover that some vowel and consonant letters can be pronounced in more than one way. For example, the letters 'ow' can have the pronunciation /ou/ in the word 'owl', and the pronunciation /oa/ in the word 'bowl'. The sounds /ou/ and /oa/ are the alternative pronunciations for the letters 'ow'.

Alternative Spellings

When spelling English words, we discover that some vowel and consonant sounds can be spelt in more than one way. For example, the sound /ai/ can be spelt using the letters 'ai', 'ay' & 'a' in the words 'mail', 'play' & 'apron'.

Analytic and Synthetic Phonics

In **Analytic Phonics**, young learners learn to identify (analyse) the common phoneme in sets of words in which each word contains the phoneme that is the focus of the lesson. For instance, they might be asked to listen to the words *big*, *bag* and *bat* and decide in what ways the words sound alike. In **Synthetic Phonics** young learners learn to separate words into phonemes and then blend phonemes together to read the word, e.g. /b/+i/+g/= *big*.

Bigrams

Please see '*Unigrams and Bigrams*'.

Blending

To draw individual sounds together to pronounce a word, e.g. /c/ /l/ /a/ /p/ blended together reads *clap*. Blending can be done orally or with text. **Oral blending** involves hearing sounds and merging these sounds together to make a word. **Blending from text** involves looking at letters and putting their corresponding sounds together to form words or part of words. Young learners develop oral blending before they are able to blend from texts.

Bouncy and Stretchy Sounds

Some sounds can be stretched (stretchy) while others bounce (bouncy). **Stretchy sounds** are those that can be produced in one continuous sound, e.g. /nnnnnnn/ in *nap*. **Bouncy sounds** are those that are produced with a short pause in between, e.g. /p/ /p/ /p/ in *pan*.

Common Exception Words

This is the term used in the 2013 English National Curriculum for common words with unusual grapheme-phoneme correspondences. These are the words that *Letters and Sounds* and other phonics programmes refer to as 'tricky words'. They are common words with phonic irregularities, e.g. *one*, *who*, *should*. (See also **Tricky words**.)

Consonants, Adjacent Consonants or Consonant Blends

Consonants are phonemes marked by constriction or closure in the breath channel – represented by the letters other than a, e, i, o and u.

When consonants come side by side in a word, they are called **Adjacent Consonants** or **Consonant Blends**, for example: s/t in *stop*, c/l in *club* and s/t/r in *string*. Although we blend these sounds together, it is important to emphasise that the letters each have individual sounds.

CVC words

Consonant-vowel-consonant words. Young learners' early reading experiences will include words like *cat*, *dog*, *sit* and *pin*, which have single letters for each sound. Later, CVC words will include those with digraphs such as *chip*, *sheet*, and *wish*. CVC words can also be extended to include CCVC, CVCC, CCCVC words where C represents consonant sounds and V represents vowel sounds.

Decodable words, Decodable Readers (Phonics Readers)

Decodable words are words which can be easily decoded using phonic strategies, e.g. *cat*, *dog*, *lamp*.

Decodable Readers (Phonics Readers) are books with a controlled vocabulary incorporating only the letter sounds taught up to a certain point. The vast majority of words in this kind of text is 'regular'. This means that they can be read simply by blending together their letter sounds.

Decoding

The process of reading a word with Synthetic Phonics has two stages. Firstly, the individual grapheme-phoneme correspondence is recognised and then the phonemes/sounds are blended or synthesised into the word. Reading (decoding) and spelling (segmenting) are reversible processes that are taught simultaneously in **Synthetic Phonics**.

Digraphs

Two letters which combine to make a new sound. E.g. the sound /ng/ in the word *Hong* is written with two letters 'n' and 'g', but they make one sound. We can help kids to distinguish these by putting a line underneath, e.g. /ng/.

Encoding

The act of transcribing units of sounds or phonemes into graphemes (letters), i.e. spelling.

Formative assessments

Formative assessment generates data on student learning while it occurs - it is conducted during the learning process. Formative assessment is a way of framing learning activities such that they generate observable and measurable data for teachers and learners alike. During formative assessments, learners can discover what they have mastered already and which areas they need to improve. Teachers can discover which knowledge, skills and abilities should be clarified and strengthened.

Graphemes (Letters)

A grapheme is a written symbol that uses letters to represent phonemes. In the word *cat* there are three phonemes (sounds) /k/ /a/ /t/ and they are each represented by a single letter grapheme 'c' 'a' 't' respectively. In the word *shop* there are three phonemes (sounds) /sh/ /o/ /p/, but the first sound is represented by two letters 'sh' and these are known as digraphs. There are still three graphemes in the word *shop*, the first being represented by two letters. Graphemes can be represented by one letter, e.g., 's' for the sound /s/, two letters, e.g., 'sh' for the sound /sh/, and three letters, e.g., 'igh' for the sound /ie/.

Interaction patterns

Interaction patterns are the different ways learners and the teacher can interact in the class. Using the right **interaction pattern** is a fundamental factor in the success of any activity and the achievement of aims.

<i>for the following activities / interactions</i>	<i>use the following acronyms</i>
teacher instructing the whole group	T - Ss
teacher giving support to one student	T - S
pair work	S - S
group work	Ss - Ss
students giving ideas to teacher	Ss - T
student giving support to peers	S – Ss

**Above is a sample list showing some but not all interaction patterns and their corresponding activities.*

Lesson Plan

A lesson plan is a teacher's detailed description of the course of instruction or 'learning trajectory' for a lesson. A daily lesson plan is developed by a teacher to guide class learning. Details will vary depending on the preference of the teacher, subject being covered, and the needs of the students. There may be requirements mandated by the school system regarding the plan. A lesson plan is the teacher's guide for running a particular lesson, and it includes the goal (what the students are supposed to learn), how the goal will be reached (the method, procedure) and a way of measuring how well the goal was reached (test, worksheet, homework etc.).

Letter Formation

Letter formation is the sequence of movements followed by the pencil to form a letter. The starting position is the consistent point from which the letter begins when forming it.

Letter-Sound Relationship or Letter-Sound Correspondence

Knowing this means that you are able to match a letter to its corresponding sound or match a sound to its corresponding combination of letters, and vice versa.

Long and Short Vowel Sounds

The **long vowel sounds** say the name of the letter – for example, the letter “a” would be pronounced as /aɪ/ as in *baby* or *apron*. The **short vowel sounds** are usually introduced first before the long vowel sounds, for example, the letter “a” with the short vowel sound would sound like /a/ as in *cat* or *sat*.

Multisensory

Multisensory is often used to describe strategies that involve learners in activities that include the use of two or more sensory modalities simultaneously to take in or express information.

Orthographical

Please see '**Phonological and Orthographical**'.

Phonemes (Sounds)

Phonemes are individual sounds. In English, there are around 44 phonemes (the number varies slightly according to the accent and which phonics programme you look at.)

Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the phonemes in spoken words and to remember the order of the phonemes in words. For example, the phonemes in the word *big* can be segmented as /b/ /i/ /g/.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is a broad skill that includes identifying and manipulating units of oral language – parts such as words, syllables, and onsets and rimes. Children who have phonological awareness are able to identify and make oral rhymes, can clap out the number of syllables in a word, and can recognise words with the same initial sounds like *money* and *mother*.

Phonological and Orthographical word patterns

For example, for the word *short*:

phonological	orthographical
<i>short</i> - C V C C = consonant or consonant digraph V = vowel or vowel digraph	<i>sh or t</i> - <u>CC</u> <u>VV</u> C <u>CC</u> = consonant digraph <u>VV</u> = vowel digraph C = consonant

Schwa

An unstressed vowel sound roughly equating to /uh/. The schwa is the most common vowel sound in spoken English. A schwa sound occurs when a vowel letter, which makes a clear stressed vowel sound in most words, is instead sounded with an unstressed sound. E.g. the 'e' in *children* is pronounced as a schwa.

Segmenting

This means to split up a word into its individual phonemes in order to spell it, e.g. the word *cat* has three phonemes: /c/ /a/ /t/. Segmenting can be done orally and with letters. **Oral segmenting** is the act of listening to a whole word and then orally splitting it up into the sounds that make it.

Segmenting from text divides spoken words into their component sounds using letters, e.g., dividing *bat* into /b/ /a/ /t/ and writing 'bat'. Children need to develop oral segmenting skill before they will be able to segment words using letters and then to spell them.

Summative assessments

Summative assessment refers to the processes and instruments that provide a general and final assessment of student's learning within a given course or learning unit. Due to this, summative assessment is also formal in nature, and can include instruments that measure broadly the skills and content areas developed in a course; for example, course tests and final projects.

Synthetic Phonics

Please see '*Analytical and Synthetic Phonics*'.

Tricky words

When teaching systematic, synthetic phonics, we refer to common words with phonic irregularities as 'tricky words', e.g. *once, was, could*. (See also **Common Exception Words**.)

Trigraph

Three letters which combine to make a sound. The /igh/ in *night* is a trigraph.

Unigrams and Bigrams

unigram - a single item from a sequence, e.g. a single letter from the English alphabet such as 's'.

bigram - a pair of consecutive written units, e.g. two letters such as 'sp'.

Unvoiced and Voiced Consonants

In **unvoiced consonants**, the vocal cords do not vibrate in creating the sound, whereas the vocal cords vibrate in creating the sound for **voiced consonants**.

Vowels

They are phonemes where air flows through the mouth unobstructed. In reading instruction, 'a, e, i, o, u' are considered vowel letters, although vowel sounds can also be represented by consonant letters, such as 'y' in *myth* or *fly*, or a combination of consonant and vowel letters, such as 'igh' in *night*.

References

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Available online at www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/assessment-literacy

This publication is part of the series, How Language Assessment Works.

Cambridge Dictionary

Get Reading Right

Google Dictionary

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<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/interaction-patterns>

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Phonics International

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www.atozphonics.com

www.readingrockets.org

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