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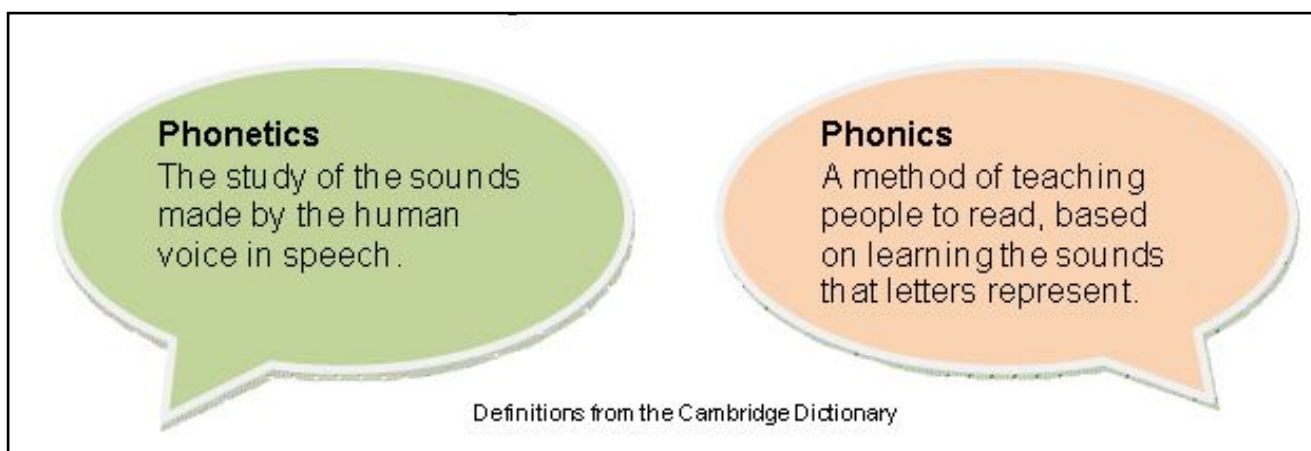
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Phonetics or Phonics?

by Marianne Jordan (Pronunciation.Club, Content Writer, Teacher Trainer)



Most learners of English have problems with learning the pronunciation of the English language. The problems occur because there are 26 letters of the English alphabet but at least 44 sounds. Some letters of the alphabet have only one sound, for example, the letters b, d and f. However, others have two or more sounds, for example, the letter 'c' has two sounds and the letter 'a' has seven different sounds. Hence the difficulty with reading, listening, writing, speaking and pronunciation for English language learners.

So what is the solution to this problem?

There are a few solutions to this problem. The first, and most common, is the "Listen and Repeat" method which can be effective for aural learners. However, not all learners are aural learners. The majority of learners of English will not be able to listen to all the sounds of English and repeat them perfectly the first time they hear them (unless they are also in their L1) nor be able to tell which sound each letter has by reading or listening to them. Teaching the sounds of English through phonetics and phonics, combined with listening and repeating, is much more effective for the majority of learners of English.

What is the difference between phonetics and phonics?

Phonetics and phonics both focus on the sounds of a language instead of the letters of its alphabet. Focusing on the sounds is more helpful for languages, such as English, which have more sounds than letters. However, each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Phonetics

"The study of the sounds made by the human voice in speech." (Cambridge Dictionary)

Phonetics is the study of all the sounds in all languages. It focuses on the sounds and also how they are made using the mouth, nose, throat and lungs. Each sound has a unique symbol. As these symbols represent all languages, they are called the "International Phonetic Alphabet" (IPA). There is a reference at the end of this article for an online interactive soundboard for you to listen to all the sounds of the IPA. There are also references to more online interactive soundboards that only contain the sounds of the English language (British and American English). Here are some of the advantages and disadvantages of phonetics.

Advantages of Phonetics

All good English language dictionaries include the IPA transcript beside every English word. (See references to online dictionaries below.) Phonetics includes teaching the formation of the sounds as well as the 'listen and repeat' this is very helpful for learners who are not strong aural learners or who do not have the sound in their L1. The IPA has only one sound for each of its symbols, unlike the English alphabet which has 1-7 sounds per letter. Many of the IPA symbols for the English language are also in other languages. Learners who can read the phonetic alphabet become independent learners in that they do not need an audio or a person to tell them how to pronounce words including problem words. There are no exceptions or rules. What you see is exactly how it is pronounced.

"The majority of learners of English will not be able to listen to all the sounds of English and repeat them perfectly the first time they hear them."

Disadvantages of Phonetics

The symbols can be overwhelming at first glance. The symbols that look the same as the letters of the alphabet may confuse learners, for example, the letter 'b' is the symbol /b/. It takes time to learn and teach (but saves huge amounts of time later.) Teachers must be able to teach phonetics correctly. As for phonics, there are many incorrect examples on YouTube, particularly for unvoiced sounds.

Phonics

"A method of teaching people to read, based on learning the sounds that letters represent."

There are two types of phonics teaching and learning:

1) Analytic phonics is where learners are taught to recognise whole words by sight and later break down the word into individual units of sound. This was the first method of teaching reading.

2) Synthetic phonics is where learners learn the individual sounds first and then put them together to form words. This is the improved method of teaching reading.

For this article, I refer to (and prefer) synthetic phonics as learners become independent readers faster with this method because there is no guessing what the word might be as for analytic phonics. Phonics uses the letters of the alphabet to teach the sounds of English. Phonics is a reading method in many native and now also non-native English-speaking primary schools. It is also used to teach native English-speaking adult learners to read if they missed this in primary school or are 'remedial' (learning difficulties) learners or remedial readers.

“Phonics is a reading method in many native and now also non-native English-speaking primary schools.”

TEFL teachers also use phonics to teach pronunciation to learners of English. When you teach minimal pairs, for example, /p/ and /b/, saying sample words such as 'pin' and 'bin' you may say "These words are the same except for the letters 'b' and 'p' or the sounds /b/ and /p/. You may also say "The letters 'eigh' in the word 'eight' are pronounced the same as the letter 'a' in 'ate'." However, using vowels, in particular, as examples can be confusing for students as they need to know how to pronounce the 'a' in 'ate' correctly for the English language. Languages such as Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, which also use the Latin alphabet, will have a different sound for the letter 'a' in their languages. Here are some of the advantages and disadvantages of phonics.

Advantages of Phonics

Learners who also use the Latin alphabet for their L1 will already be familiar with the letters of the alphabet for English. Learning the English sounds of the letters, preferably as soon as possible, will help them to decipher English words.

Learning English with phonics combined with the 'listen and repeat' method is faster than learning with the 'listen and repeat' method only.

Disadvantages of Phonics

Learners who also use the Latin alphabet for their L1 may pronounce the letters of the English alphabet the same way they pronounce them in their L1 instead of the English pronunciation. (This is the most common problem.) Phonics does not show where the stress is in words. There are many exceptions to English spelling rules such as 'i' before 'e' except after 'c' - beige, weird, leisure. As for phonetics, there are many incorrect examples on YouTube, particularly for unvoiced sounds.

My Personal Experience of Teaching Pronunciation

I first started teaching English pronunciation using the 'listen and repeat' method only. This is the easiest method for the English native-speaking teacher but the most difficult for non-aural learners of English.

I also started using phonics, but as an English native-speaking teacher, I had to relearn and remember that each letter of the English alphabet has between 1-7 sounds plus all the spelling and pronunciation rules and exceptions. Non-native English-speaking teachers are better at this as they had to learn the sounds of the letters as a foreign language (provided their English teacher taught the sounds correctly). Native English-speaking teachers can forget the rules or take them for granted until they study how to teach English pronunciation methods.

a /æ/	ai /eɪ/	ar /ɑː/	ar /ɑːr/	b /b/	ch /tʃ/	c,k /k/	d /d/
e /e/	ee /iː/	er /ɜː/	er /ɜːr/	f /f/	g /g/	h /h/	i /i/
ie /aɪ/	j /dʒ/	l /l/	m /m/	n /n/	ng /ŋ/	o /o/	o /ɑː/
oa /əʊ/	oa /oʊ/	oi /ɔɪ/	oo /u/	oo /uː/	or /ɔː/	or /ɔːr/	ou /aʊ/
p /p/	qu /kw/	r /r/	s /s/	sh /ʃ/	t /t/	th /ð/	TH /θ/
u /ʌ/	ue /juː/	v /v/	w /w/	x /ks/	y /j/	z /z/	

Phonics plus IPA equivalent online interactive soundboard

Pic with kind permission from:

www.pronunciation.club

I eventually started including the IPA after seeing how much more effective and 100% accurate it is. There were a few students who were not keen to learn the IPA symbols, so I continued to teach them phonics. However, it was clear that the students who learned the IPA were able to pronounce English faster and more accurately than those with only phonics. Slowly but surely the phonics students could also see the benefits of the IPA and how useful it is if for only their problem sounds.

However, I now teach the IPA to all beginner students, first and foremost, to save them wasted time and stress learning new words incorrectly. Unfortunately, incorrect pronunciation can continue to advanced levels. The more advanced the student becomes, the more aware they are of their incorrect pronunciation causing even more embarrassment and loss of speaking confidence for them. For more advanced students I identify their problem sounds first, then use the 'listen and repeat' method and also the phonetic symbol for each problem sound so they can identify the sounds in the phonetic script in dictionaries. Then I introduce the other IPA symbols including any stress marks. When they next come across a word they are unable to pronounce, I write the word in the IPA, and they can read and pronounce it correctly. What a joy for both student and teacher

Summary

The most accurate way of teaching English pronunciation is by teaching phonetics and preferably before teaching any vocabulary. Once the students know each of the sounds of English, write the IPA transcription beside each new word you write in alphabet letters to reinforce the sounds in the word. Learners will see exactly how to pronounce the word without having to know all the spelling and pronunciation rules. Next is including phonics. Phonics is useful if you are not sure of the correct IPA symbols and faster than copying and pasting if you are teaching live online. The letters of the alphabet are what they see most of the time. However, be aware of the many spelling and pronunciation rules there are in English. Reinforcing pronunciation in every lesson is the best language skill you can give to your learner as all the other skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, depend on it.

Other useful soundboards

The full International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for all languages: <http://www.ipachart.com> (accessed August 2018)

UK and US English:

<http://www.adrianunderhill.com/the-pronunciation-charts> (accessed August 2018)

UK and US English plus phonetics and phonics: <https://pronunciation.club/soundboards> (accessed August 2018)

UK and US and Irish Alphabet with letters and phonetics <https://pronunciation.club/soundboards> (accessed August 2018)

Phonetics plus comparisons with English and some other languages <https://pronunciation.club/soundboards> (accessed August 2018)

Online Dictionaries

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english/> (accessed August 2018) <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/> (accessed August 2018)

Academic References

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Robinson, Frank B, 1955 Phonetics or Phonics? Journal Article, The Reading Teacher, Vol. 9, No. 2, Phonics in Reading Instruction (Dec., 1955), pp. 84-88

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