

Rationale for teaching phonics

1. Teaching phonics develops phonological decoding (the ability to sound out accurately), and without explicit phonics teaching, decoding is limited.
2. Decoding is positively associated with motivation and improves confidence in production (speaking and writing).
3. Phonics teaching supports vocabulary learning, which is key to making progress in language learning.
4. Decoding enables learners to access new language autonomously; learners can engage with vocabulary learning more successfully in and beyond the classroom, even ahead of the lesson (flipped learning), allowing more lesson time to focus on language practice and use.
5. Teaching phonics teaches phonemes and each phoneme carries meaning; the function of the different sounds really matters. This links not only to vocabulary but also to grammar (je vs j'ai, aller vs allait, hablo vs habló).
6. Without teaching the sound-writing relationship, teachers logically confine themselves to presenting vocabulary first orally to their beginner learners, and only subsequently provide the written forms, which limits variety in teaching methodology.
7. Teaching phonics teaches the sound system; learners do not have enough exposure to become familiar with the sound system incidentally (i.e., without intentionally trying to learn it). Even an 'all oral' approach at primary would only give them a maximum of 120 hours (the equivalent of a few weeks in the womb in L1 acquisition!). So, explicit decoding teaching allows teachers to 'short-cut' to teaching the sound and writing at the same time.
8. The ability to sound out words accurately on first exposure supports errorless learning, avoiding an inaccurate initial representation which, if persistent, can lead to problems later.
9. Accurate decoding may allow learners to see that a written word is in fact a word that they already know orally.
10. Alternatively, learners' ability to spell an unknown word they hear means that they can then find out its meaning (via a dictionary, peer, teacher, books); having the correct or nearly (possibly) correct spelling unlocks the meaning!
11. In addition, learners can ask orally about the meaning of a word that they have read; you need to be able to pronounce a word to ask about it confidently in class (What does 'XXX' mean?).
12. The time spent on teaching phonics does not seem to delay progress in other areas (e.g., reading comprehension).

13. Decoding facilitates the recognition of cognates in the sound stream; learners are able to picture the spelling, and the spelling of cognates is easier to recognise than the sound. At GCSE, there is an expectation that learners will understand unfamiliar cognates in context, in both reading and listening. (AQA specification p.21).

