

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

PHONICS

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR LITERACY

Learning the phonemes in English is key to children developing reading and writing skills, so finding a school that teaches them effectively is critical, writes **Ben Young**



Phonics has a reputation as one of the more difficult aspects of language to teach and learn. Photo: Shutterstock

Learning to read is one of the most important skills for a young child to develop. Although not the only method of assisting with this, phonics is one of the most popular and important. Phonics teaches young children how to read and write English by demonstrating the relationship between the sounds, or “phonemes”, of words and their corresponding letters and syllables. Often, effective phonics teaching can be the difference between a student achieving fluency in the English language, or not.

When choosing a kindergarten, one of the most important criteria for parents to consider is whether a school has a sophisticated and effective approach towards teaching phonics. Fortunately, Hong Kong has many schools that do.

“The learning of phonics, or the sounds and letter symbols that represent those sounds, is one of many foundational skills that support students in becoming effective readers, writers and communicators for life,” says Aaron Van Borek, leader of language innovation at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS). “It is imperative that educators are thoughtful and intentional in the ways they go about developing student mastery in this area.”

Phonics has a reputation as one of the more difficult aspects of language to teach and learn. However, Van Borek says that by blending it in as part of a balanced approach to literacy, lessons become more effective as well as more enjoyable for both students and teachers.

“Students are explicitly taught letter names, sounds and characteristics, while at the same time, students explore, investigate and interact with print and real contexts in meaningful ways,” he says.

“For example, connecting letter sounds with their names and with the names of objects in their classrooms, through singing songs, reading stories together, participating in shared writing activities, playing games, as well as through other activities that connect to students’ interests and curiosities.”

One reason phonics can be difficult to teach is the large variance in student abilities. While phonics may come naturally to some students, others may struggle. Teachers need to pay close attention to students’ abilities and adjust the lessons to fit individual needs.

“We recognise that each student brings a wealth of prior knowledge and experience with letter and sounds to the classroom, and thus we start by getting to know our students and their specific, existing skill sets,” Van Borek

says. “Through carefully reviewing assessment data, we are able to tailor instruction to the specific needs of each student, ensuring that we are building on current skills, and providing the right amount of rigour and challenge. In this approach, students may not be all learning the same letter, sound or skill at the same time – but they will be learning a skill that is key to their individual success.”

The complexity of the English language is often taken for granted by native speakers. Things like irregular spelling rules, dialect differences and non-distinct sounds within single syllables seem intuitive, but are in fact complexities that phonics teachers have to be mindful of. Thankfully, CDNIS staff are privy to the field’s most advanced techniques and scientific concepts.

“Alongside the teaching of phonics, students also learn a variety of skills related to phonological awareness, which involves identifying, extending and manipulating spoken sounds and parts of words,” Van Borek explains. “This includes segmenting, blending, isolating and modifying sounds, along with generating rhyming sounds. These skills work in collaboration with phonics to empower students with flexible problem-solving strategies that are crucial when encountering new words in their reading and writing.”

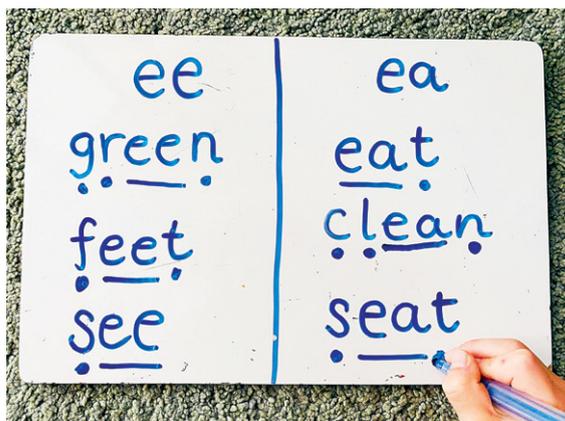
■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■



We believe that every child has an innate thirst for learning, and it is the educator's job to curate the best environment for that instinct to flourish

Phonics is used to teach the building blocks of language.

Photo: Shutterstock



However, Van Borek believes that what is even more important than theoretical knowledge concepts is ensuring that students are enjoying themselves.

"Seeing as this is the beginning of a lifelong relationship with reading and writing, we recognise the importance of making this first impression with literacy an incredibly positive one," he says. "CDNIS approaches the teaching of phonics by acknowledging that there is not a 'one size fits all' approach to student learning. Most importantly, phonics, and language instruction overall, is

taught with a focus on meaningfulness and joy, and as such there is an absence of rote memorisation.

"Through careful planning, and by observing and listening to students, teachers are able to develop engaging lessons and activities that empower students to grow in their overall confidence with literacy," Van Borek continues. "Students engage in lessons with enthusiasm, as learning tasks are hands-on, accessible, challenging and fun. As part of this beginning journey with literacy, we nurture students' identities so they see themselves – no matter their skill level – as capable readers, articulate authors, and effective communicators."

Another school that places a heavy emphasis on phonics-based education is the International Montessori School of Hong Kong (IMS), a not-for-profit school that, unsurprisingly, teaches the Montessori curriculum.

"Phonics are critical in learning English or any phonetic language as they form the building blocks for children to decode words when they are reading, and construct words when they are writing," says Karin Ann, co-founder of IMS. "Learning phonics – the sounds of the letters and how they are combined to form other sounds – allows children to manipulate the language freely and confidently, elevating their interest and ability in reading and writing, and forming the best foundation for their future language development."

Ann states that IMS' philosophy to learning phonics is the same as that for other subjects or areas, which is to guide the children in their learning journey from simple to complex, and from concrete to abstract.

"We believe that every child has an innate thirst for learning, and it is the educator's job to curate the best environment for that instinct to flourish," she explains.

"This is achieved through a myriad of language materials that allow the child to progress through hands-on learning, thereby building a deep interest and achieving a solid understanding at every step along the way. Montessori is really the most natural way to learn, and we often hear parents saying 'I wish I had gone to a school like that!'"

IMS uses the Montessori method to teach phonics which – unlike other methods – involves children learning the letter sounds using not just hearing and seeing, but touching as well.

"Each letter is cut out in sandpaper, and children feel the shape of the letter as they recite the sound, which builds muscle memory for future writing, and a deep knowledge of each letter," Ann tells us. "The next step is for children to create words by combining letters phonetically, and in Montessori we use physical letters to allow the child to do this even before they can pick up the pencil. Learning in this way brings tremendous success and satisfaction to the children."

She adds that the fact that IMS students learn phonics through "doing" and "sensing", and not just relying on paper and pencil, brings a powerful dimension to their learning that is not common in other preschools.

"The children are able to physically manipulate the English letters, becoming very engaged in forming their words and sentences, and promoting exploration of the language," says Ann. "The result is that the children are enthusiastic, successful and joyful, which is the ideal recipe for their continued success."

Finally, Fairchild Canadian Academy is a kindergarten and nursery that uses a Reggio-inspired approach – "learning by doing" – to teach phonics.

"Phonics may be encountered in many different situations through hands-on learning," explains Fairchild principal Betty Yau.

"Some children are more sensory learners and remember letter sounds through writing letters in sand with their fingers. Other children may be more visual learners, and seeing the letters around the classroom on a day-to-day basis and playing with the wooden letters will help the child reinforce the phonic sounds in context."

Yau believes that kindergartens often push children to learn phonics too soon, which makes lessons difficult and unproductive for teachers and students. Therefore, Fairchild is careful to ensure its students have developed the necessary fundamental and contextual knowledge and skills before moving on to phonics.

"Rote learning with no context will not provide any real language development; in fact, doing phonics too soon before children are actually ready can hinder language development," Yau says. "Similar to any area of a child's development, it's a continuum of progression, and skipping any parts in that natural development will not help the child. We believe that phonics should be taught when children are ready and have interest. This helps children to absorb and use the knowledge they have – in context, as they work out how to use that knowledge – whether it's related to phonics, or use of language in social situations."

Fairchild teachers are careful not to get too bogged down by the phonic symbols and sounds as some teachers often do. Instead, Yau believes children should learn phonics as naturally as possible.

"As native speakers learning a language we don't specifically learn the phonics sounds – we learn about the rhythm of the language, the vocabulary, the alphabet, how letters are used together in sentences and how the words are used in context, as we make sense of the language," she says. "This is done through back and forth interaction, known as 'serve and return', which happens between parents and children, teachers and children, children and children, and not necessarily through using phonic sounds alone."



Left: Native speakers of English learn the language differently. Photo: Shutterstock
Above: Two students working on their literacy together. Photo: CDNIS