

Synthetic Phonics Information

Can Do Cubes for synthetic phonics

(An introduction by Debbie Hepplewhite)

Can Do Cubes for phonics can be used as a stand-alone resource or as a multisensory complement to a full synthetic phonics teaching programme.

This product is based upon:

- the research and classroom findings on reading instruction, past and present;
- activities which are used commonly in successful remedial, and class based, synthetic phonics programmes;
- a wealth of teaching experience of the author and others.

What is the Synthetic Phonics Teaching Approach?

Synthetic phonics teaching is a simple to complex approach where learners are taught the alphabetic code.

Students start by learning a version of the *transparent* (simple, basic) alphabetic code before being introduced, systematically, to the *opaque* (complex, extended, advanced) alphabetic code.

The transparent code generally includes **one spelling variation** for the 44+ smallest, identifiable sounds (phonemes) of speech of the English language. The opaque code includes the **175+ spelling variations** of the English writing system for the 44+ sounds of speech.

Students should experience a rich communication, language and literacy curriculum *in addition* to learning technical knowledge and skills for basic reading, spelling and handwriting.

The complexities of the English writing code include:

1. one sound can be represented by one, two or more letters (e.g. z-i-p, sh, ng, igh)
2. one sound can be represented by different spellings (e.g. o, oa, ow, oe, o-e, ough)
3. one spelling can represent multiple sounds (e.g. ough - though, thought, through, bough)

The Teaching Principles

STAGE ONE:

Introduction of a transparent or simple alphabetic code

Core knowledge

Teach the core knowledge of one spelling variation of 42+ letter/s-sound correspondences rapidly (e.g. within one school term). Teach the correspondences as letter **sounds** at first - not letter names.

Core skills

Teach the three skills of -

1. sounding out and **blending** all-through-the-word for reading, tweaking the pronunciation of the blended word where necessary
2. **segmenting** the single sound units (phonemes) all-through-the-spoken-word for spelling, knowing the sound to letter/s correspondences

3. **writing** all 26 letter shapes correctly (starting with lower case) with the tripod pencil hold

NB: At first, use text that includes only words that can be decoded using the letter/s-sound correspondences that have been taught. Pupils can then effectively rehearse their level of code knowledge and skills and be successful.

There is no need to teach *consonant initial blends* (e.g. **bl, br, sc, scr, str**) and *end blends* (e.g. **lk, nt, ct**) as these are **different** phonic units - multiple phonemes - and this complicates the teaching and learning. Ensure plenty of rehearsal, however, of blending and segmenting words with consonant blends.

There is no need to teach *onset and rime* and *word families* (e.g. **z-ip, dr-ink, scr-eam**) as this can also confuse *early* learning.

Warning: When reading text, do not allow the **guessing** of words from whole word-shape and picture, context or initial letter cues (clues). This causes flawed reading habits and dilutes and damages the phonics teaching. Do not look for **words within words** as this also will lead to errors and misunderstanding.

The Can Do Cubes version of the simple code

Letter/s which feature on each cube.

Cube 1	s	a	t	i	p	n
Cube 2	c	k	ck	e	h	r
Cube 3	m	d	g	o	u	l
Cube 4	f	b	ai	j	oa	ie
Cube 5	ee	or	z	w	ng	nk
Cube 6	v	oo	y	x	ch	sh
Cube 7	th	qu	ou	oi	ue	er
Cube 8	ar	y	ce	ge	se	ve

STAGE TWO:

Introduction of the opaque or complex alphabetic code

Immediately following the completion of the *simple alphabetic code* letter/s-sound correspondences, systematically teach the *complex alphabetic code*, starting with the most common spelling and pronunciation variations for both spelling and reading purposes. Keep refreshing the students' understanding of the simple code.

Learning the relationship between letters and sounds and sounds and letters!

The pupils need to know which letters or combination of letters represent which sounds of speech. The letter/s-sound correspondences (and the sound to letter correspondences for spelling purposes) can be introduced to pupils either through a specific, multi-sensory, **mnemonic** system (which provides a hook to recall the relationships of letters and sounds) or can be taught through simple *whole words* where the focusing on the relationships between sounds and letter shapes with careful *finger-tracking* acts as the mnemonic.

Teaching the correspondences by using real words:

This word is **sat** . Move your finger under the appropriate letters as you say the word. Repeat the word as your finger tracks the appropriate letters underneath the written word, and, this time, *slow down* the exercise, causing the individual sounds to be distinguishable. 'So this letter shape is / **s** /, this one is / **a** / and this one is / **t** /.' Move your finger under the letters again uttering the sounds **purely** [without the schwa effect - **uh**] as you do so. Now, physically separate out the letters and ask the pupil to recall which letters represent which sounds. Repeat as often as necessary.

NB: All letters and letter combinations can be introduced through simple words in this way and a complicated mnemonic system is not necessary.

Mnemonic systems can be *very effective* when they are multi-sensory, involving actions, shapes, sounds; they can help the learner to remember letter shapes and directionality of writing letters, and they can also create a fun element which is particularly engaging and memorable for younger pupils.

Mnemonic systems can be counterproductive as they may *complicate* the introduction of the correspondences. Teachers may *dislike* particular systems, or the hook element may be over emphasised (whereby both teachers and learners forget that the mnemonic system is *only* to teach the correspondences for the purposes of reading and writing).

It may seem *inappropriate* for some older students to use a mnemonic system which was designed for younger, beginner readers. In this case, a mnemonic system could be chosen with the age of the student in mind, or adapted to be more age-appropriate, or simply use *whole words* carefully selected to introduce or revise the correspondences.

Can Do Cubes for phonics is ideal for introducing correspondences to both younger and older students. The individual cubes are simply pushed together to form the selected word and then separated to segment the individual sound units.

The cubes can also be used as a multisensory supplement to any other mnemonic system.