5. Synthetic Phonics – Background Knowledge

Synthetic Phonics is an integrated approach to word reading that explicitly teaches the correspondences between individual letters or groups of letters and their related sounds (graphemes and phonemes), as well as the skill of blending the individual sounds together to read whole words. This skill can then be inverted so that words can be broken down (segmented) into their component sounds in order to spell them. Much evidence has been collated in recent years to show that teaching children to read words using Synthetic Phonics has a positive effect on children's long-term ability to read and comprehend text (especially for those younger children who might otherwise have been identified as being in danger of falling behind).

Although it is true that many English words are not entirely phonically regular, the fact remains that around 50 per cent of words are completely decodable if the reader has the necessary toolkit of GPCs (and of the remaining words, the majority have only one sound, usually a vowel-sound, that is not regular). This means that if we teach children to read words using a synthetic phonics approach, we are equipping them to read, at first try, at least half of all words in the English language and to have a good chance of working out the tricky GPC in most of the remaining words.

A phoneme is defined as the smallest unit of sound into which a spoken word can be broken down. For example, in the word 'cat' there are three phonemes /c/ … /a/ … /t/. In this example, each phoneme is represented by a grapheme comprised of one letter. The word 'cheese', in contrast, also comprises three phonemes /ch/ … /ee/ … /z/, but in this instance, the graphemes that represent the phonemes each have two letters: 'ch', 'ee', 'se'. Graphemes can be comprised of either one, two or three (very occasionally four) letters and there will always be the same number of graphemes in a word as there are phonemes.

In a synthetic phonics programme such as *Success for All Phonics*, children are first taught the most common GPCs in the English language so that they can quickly begin to apply this knowledge to read whole words (blending), and soon after, to spell them (encoding). Over the course of the programme, they will be introduced to a number of alternative ways of representing the same phonemes, including some of the less-common GPCs. There are many more graphemes than there are phonemes as there are multiple ways of representing most phonemes as shown in the table below.

GPCs Presented in ***Success for All Phonics*** Programme

/s/	/a/	/t/	/p/	/i/	/n/	/m/	/d/	/g/	/o/
sat ki**ss** hor**se** thi**st**le **c**ircus for**ce** **sc**ene	sat	**t**ip kick**ed**	**p**in	p**i**n cr**y**stal	**n**ut d**o**ne **gn**at **kn**ife	**m**at co**me** la**mb**	**d**og buzz**ed**	**g**ot	g**o**t **w**atch
/c/	**/e/**	**/u/**	**/r/**	**/h/**	**/b/**	**/f/**	**/l/**	**/j/**	**/v/**
cat **k**id so**ck** **sch**ool che**que**	p**e**g h**ea**d	m**u**g s**o**n y**ou**ng	**r**ed **wr**ong	**h**ot	**b**in	**f**an cu**ff** **ph**one	**l**eg do**ll** litt**le** mod**el** met**al** penc**il**	**j**am **g**iant chan**ge** ba**dge**	**v**et ha**ve**
/w/	**/x/**	**/y/**	**/z/**	**/qu/**	**/ch/**	**/sh/**	**/th/**	**/ng/**	**/zh/**
web **wh**en	fo**x**	**y**am	**z**ip fi**zz** free**ze** chee**se** ha**s**	**qu**een	**ch**op wi**tch** pic**t**ure	**sh**op **ch**ef lo**ti**on pre**ci**ous pa**ssi**on	mo**th**	thi**ng**	trea**s**ure vi**si**on

/ai/	/ee/	/igh/	/oa/	/oo/	/yoo/	/oo/	/ar/	/or/	/ur/
r**ai**n s**ay** b**a**ke th**ey** v**ei**n **eigh**t p**a**per	gr**ee**n dr**ea**m h**e** comp**le**te ch**ief** happ**y** k**ey**	m**igh**t p**ie**s k**i**nd b**i**ke fl**y**	b**oa**t g**o**ld j**o**ke sh**ou**lder sn**ow** t**oe**	z**oo** bl**ue** gr**ew** fl**u**te fr**ui**t s**ou**p	d**ue** n**ew** c**u**te **u**nicorn	c**oo**k p**u**t sh**ou**ld	c**ar**	b**or**n m**or**e l**aw**n P**au**l b**a**ll t**a**lk d**oor** p**our** w**ar**	b**ur**n jump**er** b**ir**d **ear**n w**or**k
/ow/	**/oi/**	**/ear/**	**/air/**	**/ure/**	**/ire/**				
c**ow** cl**ou**d	b**oi**l b**oy**	y**ear** p**eer** sinc**ere**	h**air** c**are** w**ear** wh**ere**	c**ure**	f**ire**				

Glossary of Phonics Terms

Term	Definition	Example
Phoneme	The smallest unit of sound in a spoken word. You cannot see a phoneme; you can only hear it.	The sound /d/ at the beginning of the word 'dog'.
Grapheme	The written representation of a phoneme. A grapheme can comprise either one, two or three (and *very* occasionally four) letters.	The grapheme 'ck' represents the /k/ sound at the end of the word 'chick'.
Digraph	A digraph is a grapheme that comprises two letters.	The word 'queen' has two digraphs – 'qu' and 'ee'.
Split Digraph	A split digraph is a digraph that is split by a consonant, usually a long vowel sound.	In the word 'some' the sound /u/ is represented by the 'o' **and** the 'e' even though they are separated by the grapheme 'm'. We would refer to this as the split digraph 'o-e'.
Vowel Digraph	A vowel digraph is a grapheme with two letters that represent a vowel sound (either short or long).	The digraph 'ea' represents the /e/ sound in the word 'head'. The digraph 'ue' represents the /oo/ sound in the word 'blue'.
Trigraph	A trigraph is a grapheme that comprises three letters.	The trigraph 'tch' represents the /ch/ sound in the word 'pitch'.
Vowel Trigraph	A vowel trigraph is a grapheme with three letters that represent a vowel sound (either short or long).	The trigraph 'oul' represents the /*oo*/ sound in the word 'could'.
Grapheme–Phoneme Correspondence (GPC)	The relationship of the phoneme and the grapheme that represents it and vice versa.	To see the grapheme 'sh' and know the sound that it will make. Or, to hear the sound /sh/ and know how to write the grapheme.
Blending	To say the sounds in individual words sufficiently quickly that they synthesise to make a word.	To hear the separate sounds /sh/ … /ee/ … /p/ and to 'glue them together' to say the word 'sheep'.
Segmenting	The opposite skill to blending. It involves being able to break a word into component phonemes.	To hear the word 'fish' and say the phonemes /f/ /i/ /sh/.
Decoding	To look at the individual graphemes that comprise a word, from left to right, and link with the corresponding phonemes.	To see the written word 'dog' and then say the phonemes /d/ /o/ /g/.
Encoding	To represent the phonemes in an individual word with the appropriate graphemes (spelling and writing).	To hear the spoken word 'cat', say /k/ /a/ /t/, and write appropriate graphemes to spell the word.