

Sound it Out

Phonics is a way of teaching children to read quickly and skillfully



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HOW DID YOU learn to read? For many adults, chances are this is a difficult question to try and answer. We all know how we learnt to talk - we listened and we copied - but we have few memories of learning to read.

For most of us, we learnt to read by looking at a set of letters, grouped together in a particular order, and being told the word by an adult. We learnt with short words to begin with, gradually growing in length. But when you think about how many thousands of words there are in the English language, this is a very complex task to be asking of young minds. Fortunately, there is an easier way.

For approximately the last 15 years, many primary schools around the world have reverted back to a teaching technique called "phonics" or "letters and sounds" as you might know it.

To describe this simply, this means teaching children the sounds that each individual letter, or combinations of letters, make in a word, so that when children see a word they don't recognize (which we ask of children all the time), they can break the word up into smaller chunks, as in "sh-i-p" - say each sound individually, then blend the sounds together to read the word as a whole.

In total, there are 44 sounds in the English language. We make each sound by moving our mouth and tongue in a different way. "But wait! There are only 26 letters in the alphabet. How can there be 44 sounds?" I hear you say.

At this point it is important to understand that some sounds are represented by more than one letter. Take the word "fish" for example. While there are four letters in the word, we only make three sounds when we say the word. If you try saying the word *verrrrry* slowly, you will notice that your mouth changes shape three times. Once, to make the 'fuh' sound (by placing your top teeth on your bottom lip); a wide, open-mouthed smiley shape to make the short 'i' sound, and a pursed lip shape to make the 'shhhhh' sound. That's three.

Try it with a different word, for example "shout."

You moved your mouth three times, right? If not, check again.

If you're sitting in a room with other people right now, they're probably wondering if they're sitting next to a crazy person, but hopefully you're starting to get the idea.

This is a skill that children begin to learn from the age of four and become very proficient in by the age of six. By mastering this knowledge and skill, children are able to decode unknown words by themselves, without adult support, meaning they can read independently at a younger age than they would otherwise.

If you have young children you're probably already quite familiar with the idea, but never quite understood it. That's why at Saigon Star International School, we run Letters and Sounds workshops for parents, so that parents feel confident in supporting their child at home with the same techniques that are taught in school.

Take the test - How many sounds are in each word below? (Answers are at the end.)

- 1) hat
- 2) car
- 3) rash
- 4) thin
- 5) bring
- 6) chair
- 7) shower
- 8) shark
- 9) rainbow
- 10) darkness

As children move through school, they learn that sounds can also be represented by various letter combinations. For example, the long 'ay' sound can also be represented by 'ai' in "brain" or 'a_e' in "cake." The other major benefit to teaching children phonics is that children can use and apply their knowledge and skills to become independent writers at a much younger age too.

- 1) THREE 2) TWO 3) THREE 4) THREE
 5) FOUR 6) TWO 7) THREE 8) THREE
 9) FIVE 10) SIX ■

