

# Teaching children to read English

Tim Ward – March 2010

## We need variety

Whenever we teach young learners at school, whatever the subject, we need to start with their world and what they know from home. Take reading, for example – what kinds of reading are children familiar with at home? The answer is almost certainly that there's a huge range of experience. Some parents read to their children and others don't. Some children learn to read and write simple words like *mummy* or *daddy* and some don't. Some children see their parents reading and writing and some don't. Some children will receive direct instruction from their parents while some will get much more casual and informal help. This means that, some children will learn more about texts than others such as how to guess meanings from pictures, how to spell out simple words and so on.

What all this means is that one specific teaching method will not be successful with all children. This is why a good course like *Family and Friends* will use a range of teaching strategies that match the needs of all the different kinds of children that teachers see in schools. We need to start with where children are and build from there.

## What does 'variety in teaching reading' mean?

### 1) The bottom-up approach – phonics

One of the things children do when they read in their mother tongue is try to sound out words letter by letter and then put them together. This is what *phonics* means – teaching children how written letters correspond to sounds. It's a tried and trusted method and *Family and Friends* uses it to the full to teach reading in English. The best place to begin phonics teaching is with the sounds of the first letters of words children already know or are learning. We do this in various child-friendly ways. Let's take the example *a is for apple*. Children listen to the letter name and sound, and point to a picture of an apple. Then they listen and chant.

Chanting, a kind of rhythmic singing, is a way to help children remember letter sounds. As an example, here's the chant for the letters a – d:

This is an apple, a, a, apple.

This is a bird, b, b, bird.

This is a cat, c, c, cat.

This is a dog, d, d, dog.

All the while, of course, there are pictures and flash cards to help children associate the letter with the word and its meaning. Then there are fun revision activities to help cement the learning, and reading and circling activities in which children circle the letters at the beginning of words. We do all this because the first sound of a word is easy to hear so children can build an association between the letter and its sound. The great thing for teachers is that one lesson fits to one teaching unit for example, the sounds a, b, c, and d are taught in one *Family and Friends* lesson. If a teacher has more time then there are lots of extra revision activities – and the more practice a young child gets the better. (There's also a separate alphabet book which helps learners become familiar quicker with the new alphabet.)

A unique feature of *Family and Friends* is the way it teaches digraphs – letter combinations which in English have one sound only for example *sh* and *ch*. Digraphs are very common in English, so it makes sense to teach these to children early on. Some approaches to teaching reading use the *International Phonetic Alphabet* (where for example  $\theta$  represents *th*) to get round this sort of issue; but this is extremely confusing as it involves teaching another set of symbols for sounds that children will never see anywhere else. Consequently we don't recommend using the IPA with *Family and Friends*!



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Once children know the sounds of the letters they can sound out words phonically. To read the word *cat* using phonics, the child sounds out each letter of the word, saying the sound for *c* (like *k* in *king*), the sound for *a* (like *a* in *apple*), and the sound for *t* (like *t* in *tiger*). The child may say the sounds haltingly at first, with a break between each; but as the child becomes more confident, he or she can blend the sounds together to create the word seamlessly. *Family and Friends* keeps this process simple for children by starting with CVC words – these are easy three – letter words consisting of a consonant followed by a vowel and then another consonant. Some of the first words taught this way are *cat*, *man* and *fan* where the middle vowel sound is the same. These words are taught in one lesson but there are a lot of extra fun activities for teachers who have more time.

What's more, *Family and Friends* explores blends (combinations like *fl-* or *bl-*) and teaches children spelling patterns (like the magic - *e*, which changes the sound of the vowels in words like *bike*, *white*, *kite*, *line* and *nine*). In this way, phonics provides a sound basis for teaching reading.

## 2) Whole-word recognition

Of course there are other ways in which children learn to read. Many children learn to recognize the whole shape of a word, for example instead of spelling out the word *tiger* children might recognize it as a whole. Moreover, in English there are lots of words you can't spell out letter by letter (e.g. *two*, *blue* and *through*) and children need to learn to recognize them. This is also known as *sight vocabulary*. *Family and Friends* teaches whole-word recognition in lots of different ways, for example there are many different memory games and fun activities which can be performed using flashcards and word cards. But there are other ways too; such as looking at labelled pictures.

## 3) Reading longer pieces of writing

All children will be good at guessing the meaning of words from pictures; and children whose parents read to them will be used to longer texts and how to take meaning from them, but we should be careful about asking young learners to read longer texts – it can be really discouraging to be faced with too much writing! *Family and Friends* supports children in their reading progress by letting them follow texts, songs and chants in the book while listening to them on the CD. Teachers can then get their children to read short texts or dialogues which have been practised orally many times before.

## Motivation and variety

One thing that's clear about young learners is that if they succeed, they are motivated and that if they are motivated, they succeed – it's a virtuous circle. It's vital then, to *scaffold* learning – to build step by step in a way that helps children to stay on course. *Family and Friends* achieves this through its methodical progression, starting with phonics, and developing whole-word and longer text skills – but at the same time offering a range of varied, fun activities to support that learning. What's more, the test booklet and customizable iTools tests are the perfect preparation for international exams such as Cambridge Young Learners English Tests and Trinity Examinations.



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