

# **A national strategy to train teachers to accurately articulate the 44 phonemes of spoken English and to accurately identify the graphemes of written English**

Alan Davies

Paper written for OFSTED Invitation Seminar on  
The importance of phonics in learning to read and write  
Strand Palace, London, 29 March 1999

"These weaknesses are not intractable. If they are to be remedied, they will require: more urgent action in classrooms to improve the teaching that is not satisfactory, particularly the teaching of word level work."

OFSTED, 1998, p4

Approximately a half of the weak lessons were taught by the key teachers who, it must be remembered, had a major responsibility for disseminating the principles and practice of the National Literacy Project across the school as a whole."

OFSTED, 1998, p8

Purpose of seminar: to ensure that phonic work is taught efficiently and well  
The purpose of this seminar is to bring together a group of those with acknowledged expertise, who have done prominent work in the teaching of reading, to achieve a consensus about the crucial importance and content of teaching phonemic awareness - to ensure that the phonic work in the National Literacy Strategy is taught efficiently and well.

Consensus on the crucial importance of teaching phonemic and graphemic awareness  
Having read all the submitted papers, no one can have any doubt that there is a consensus about the crucial importance of teaching phonemic awareness (speech sound awareness). Also, no one can have any doubt that there is a consensus about the crucial importance of teaching graphemic awareness (spelling choice awareness).

This consensus is logical given that, for Word Level Teaching, the building blocks of spoken words are phonemes and the building blocks of written words are graphemes - when reading we change graphemes to phonemes and when spelling we change phonemes to graphemes.

Teaching phonemic and graphemic awareness

It seems logical that the main focus of teaching phonemic awareness should be the 44 phonemes of spoken English. Support for this focus comes from three main sources, written guidance in the National Literacy Strategy document Framework for teaching (DfEE, 1998) and verbal comments by the Prime Minister and the National Literacy Strategy Director.

In the National Literacy Strategy document Framework for Teaching, it is stated that, "A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word. There are approximately 44 phonemes in English" (DfEE, 1998, p85). At the OFSTED Literacy Conference, 7 December 1998, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, defined phonics as, "The skilled process of teaching children how the 44 sounds in the English Language are represented by a letter or a group of letters" (The Publishers Association, 1999, p7). John Stannard, National Literacy Strategy Director stated in the Times Educational Supplement, 19 March 1999, that, "Many teachers are doing the first stage of phonics reasonably - the initial letter sounds - well. But they are having more difficulty teaching children to identify and spell the 44 phonemes" (Hackett, 1999, p20).

If reading and spelling involve both phonemic and graphemic awareness, and they are of crucial importance in learning to read and write, we need to implement, as a matter of urgency, a national strategy to train teachers to accurately articulate the 44 phonemes of spoken English and to accurately identify the graphemes of written English - if phonic work is to be "taught efficiently and well". That is, if reading and spelling are to be taught in our schools as related phonographic skills and we heed inspection evidence (such as the HMI evaluation of the National Literacy Project) and the recent conclusions of the National Literacy Strategy Director.

National strategy to train phonemic and graphemic awareness in teachers

At the end of the training, teachers should be able to:

- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the twenty-four consonant phonemes.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the seven short monophthongs.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the five long monophthongs.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the eight diphthongs.
- Blend phonemes for reading (beyond 'initial letter sounds').
- Blend phonemes in clusters for reading.
- Segment words into phonemes for spelling (beyond 'initial letter sounds').
- Segment clusters into phonemes for spelling.
- Explain why digraphs are not clusters of 'initial letter sounds'.
- Explain why the two letters 'q' 'u' are a consonant cluster not a digraph.
- Explain why the letter 'x' is not a graph but a letter representing a consonant cluster.
- Explain how accent influences children's phonemic and graphemic awareness.
- Explain how allophonic variation influences children's phonemic and graphemic awareness.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell unstressed vowels in polysyllabic words.
- Accurately articulate, identify, read and spell the phonemes in children's names.
- 

Conclusion

John Stannard, National Literacy Strategy Director, has stated that, "It is vital that children are taught to identify and blend sounds for reading and to segment and spell sounds in words for writing" (Stannard, 1999, p18). However, as indicated by evidence from inspection and my own conclusions from work with thousands of teachers over many years (in developing the various THRASS<sup>®</sup> resources, such as the THRASS Resource File, Davies and Ritchie, 1998) many of our teachers are not able to accurately articulate the 44 phonemes and to accurately identify the graphemes in written words. As a consequence, phonemic awareness and graphemic awareness are not taught efficiently and well in many of our schools so, if this seminar endorses the importance of phonics in learning to read and write, it must follow that urgent action is needed to dramatically improve the quality of phonic teaching in our schools.

**Davies, A and Ritchie, D.** (1998) THRASS Resource File. Chester: THRASS UK LTD  
DfEE (DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT) (1998) The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching. London: DfEE

**Hackett, G. (1999)** Soundings off. TES Friday, March 19. London: Times Educational Supplement.

**Office For Standards In Education (1998)** The National Literacy Project: An HMI Evaluation. London: Ofsted.

**Stannard, J. (1999)** The phonics war is phoney. TES Letters. Mch 5. London: Times Ed. Supplement.

**The Publishers Association (1999)** Literacy and numeracy. EPC Brief.1/99 London.