

Session 2 “Teaching Phonics – How to read”

2.0 Reading Skills

How do Malaysian children learn to read English?

Malaysian children learn *how to read* in Bahasa Melayu. However, they also need to learn to read, write, speak and listen in English. In the early years of their schooling, their teachers need to build on their emerging reading skills without causing confusion.

2.1 How is Reading in English Different from Reading in BM?

In BM, the relationship between letters and sounds is wonderfully regular and reliable!

Unfortunately, being an ancient language with elements of several other European languages mixed into it, English does not have the same advantage. There are three types of words:

- Some English words can be decoded sound by sound, using the English graphophonics system, and the meaning can be learnt, relating to a picture/action or a known BM word or phrase.
- Some English words *appear* to have the same letters and even meaning as the BM words. These are “False Friends” and can cause confusion because the pronunciation and/or meaning is different from the BM word.
- Some English words cannot be deciphered using graphophonics. These are “Sight Words”, and need to be memorised and recognised instantly.

2.2 Are any letters in BM

exactly the same as the English Letters?

Look carefully at the alphabet below. Can any of these be read exactly the same in English as in BM? (The chart is from <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/malay.htm>)

Latin alphabet for Malay								
A a	B b	C c	D d	E e	F f	G g	H h	I i
a	be	ce	de	e	ef	ge	ha	i
J j	K k	L l	M m	N n	O o	P p	Q q	R r
je	ke	el	em	en	o	pe	ki	er
S s	T t	U u	V v	W w	X x	Y y	Z z	
es	te	u	fe	we	iks	ye	zet	

Mark the symbols in the chart which represent the same sound in both languages.

2.3 Making use of the Phonemic Chart

How would you teach the English word **apple**?



How is it different from the BM word **epal**?

Do they have the same sound? (*The answer is 'no'!*)

Can you explain the difference between English 'a' /æ/ and BM 'e' /e/?

Can you explain the difference between the English '-ple' /pəl/ and BM 'pal' /pa:l/?

2.3.1 The Main Problem is the vowels.

If you listen to different people speaking any language, you will hear a great many variations on how any one word is spoken. The same person may even say the same word several different ways. And yet we understand each other if we know the language. To describe every single difference we use Phonetic symbols, shown in square [] brackets.

However, some of the differences are not significant. Some of them are dialectical variations, or individual variations, or just free variation that doesn't change the meaning. A significant difference can usually be demonstrated with a 'Minimal Pair' – two words that are otherwise identical, with the only difference in sound indicating a change in meaning. *For example:* in English 'ship' and 'sheep' make up a minimal pair that demonstrates there is a **phonemic** (not just phonetic) difference between the two vowel sounds.

Phonemes are written between two forward slash symbols: //

The Phonemes of a language are the significant sounds, the differences that indicate meaning. In some languages, each phoneme is represented by a separate symbol.

How many vowel phonemes does Bahasa Melayu have?

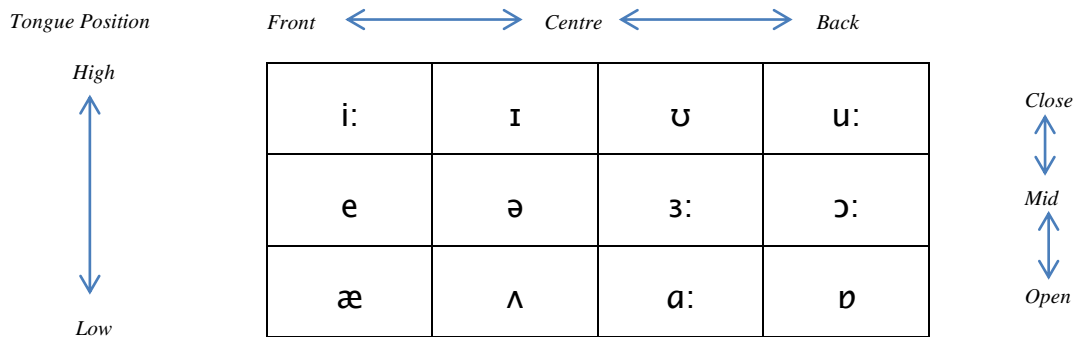
How many vowel symbols does Bahasa Melayu have?

How many vowel phonemes does English have?.....

How many vowel symbols does English have?

2.3.2 The Vowel Phonemes

Looking at the simple vowels on the phonemic chart, the positions are important:



- Moving from **left to right** on the chart, the position of *the raised part of the tongue* goes from front (vowels on the left) to back of the mouth (vowels on the right).
- Moving from **top to bottom** on the chart, the *position of the tongue* as a whole (in relation to the top of the mouth) goes from ‘close’ (the tongue is close to the roof of the mouth) to ‘open’ (the tongue is low in the mouth).

Thus /æ/ is a front, open vowel, while /e/ is a front, mid vowel. So the important difference is to lower the tongue to go from /e/ to /æ/.

The English vowel in /pə/ is centre (front – back), mid (open – close) whereas the BM vowel in /pɑ:l/ is centre, open.

So the difference here involves raising the tongue a little to go from / pɑ:l / to /pə/.

Discuss with your group:

How important is it for you to teach correct pronunciation as children learn to read words?

.....

Are you familiar and comfortable with using the phonemic chart?

.....

Would you / do you use the phonemic chart and symbols to teach children?

.....

2.3.3 Activity: dealing with “False Friends”

Words that appear the same or similar in two languages, so that they can cause misunderstanding or wrong translation, are sometimes called “False Friends”.

The activity below is about helping students learn to read accurately in both languages.



1. How would you teach the English word **cat**?



What are the three sounds? /k/, /.../, /... /.

How is it different from the BM word that looks like exactly the same word:

cat which means in English.

What are the sounds in this BM word? /dʒ/, /.../, /.../.

Are any of the three sounds is the same in both words?

2. This common English word is pronounced differently and has another meaning in BM.

but

Use the vowel chart (above) to explain the phonic difference between the English word “but” /bʌt/ and the BM word “but” (English ‘boot’) /bʊt/.



3. This English word and this BM word have essentially the same meaning, but not the same pronunciation.

cake / kek



The difference is not in the simple vowels. Can you explain the difference?

It must always be remembered that phonics is the step up to fluent word recognition. Automatic and effortless reading of all words – decodable and tricky – is the ultimate goal. By repeated sounding and blending of words, children get to know them, and once this happens, they should be encouraged to read them straight off in reading text, rather than continuing to sound and lend them aloud because they feel that this is what is required. They should continue, however, to use overt or silent phonics for those words which are unfamiliar.

Taken from (Department for children, schools and families, 2008, p. 110) phase 4