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A Guide to Phonics for Schools in Wales:

A Summary for Teachers and Teaching Assistants

CAL:ON CYMRU

Canolfan Addysgu Llythrennedd:
Offer tuag at Newid

Centre for the Advancement of Literacy:
research-led Outcomes and Nation-wide change



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This is a summary of A Guide to Phonics for Schools in Wales. It provides practical guidance for teachers and teaching assistants on teaching phonics in Welsh and English. The Welsh Government's Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Plan (2026) sets the expectation that all schools should use systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) as part of teaching children to read. This guide explains how to put that approach into practice alongside oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, and wider reading and writing.

Key Terms

The glossary explains key terms and gives their Welsh equivalents. In examples, < > marks written letters or letter groups and // marks spoken sounds. Sound examples use familiar letter forms rather than formal phonetic symbols.

TERM	WELSH	WHAT IT MEANS	Examples
Blending (synthesising)	Cyfuno	Combining individual phonemes to form a spoken word. In decoding, learners identify the phonemes represented by the graphemes and blend them to read the word.	/d/ /r/ /a/ /m/ /a/ → drama
Decoding	Dadgodio	Reading words by applying knowledge of GPCs (see below) and blending.	-
Digraph / trigraph	Deugraff/trigraff	Two/three letters representing one phoneme. In Welsh, digraphs such as ll, ch, dd, ff, ng, ph, rh, and th are letters of the alphabet in their own right.	In English: sh (digraph), igh (trigraph) In Welsh: ch, dd, ff, ng, ll, ph, rh, th
Encoding	Amgodio	Spelling words by segmenting phonemes and selecting graphemes.	-
English common exception words (sometimes called tricky or irregular words)	Geiriau eithriad cyffredin Saesneg (gelwir rhain yn eiriau anodd weithiau)	High-frequency words that cannot yet be read or spelled fully using the GPCs taught so far, or that use less common spellings learners have not yet learned. Teach these explicitly, while drawing attention to the parts that are decodable.	*the, said, one*
GPC (grapheme-phoneme correspondence)	CGFf (cyfatebiaeth graffem-ffonem)	The relationship between a grapheme and a phoneme.	In English, <s> → /s/. In Welsh, <f> → /v/.
Grapheme	Graffem	A letter or group of letters representing a sound.	In English: s, sh, igh. In Welsh: l, ll, ch.
Letter knowledge	Adnabod llythrennau	The ability to recognise letters, know their names, and understand the sound(s) they represent in print.	-
Morphology	Morffoleg	How words are built from meaningful parts, such as base words, prefixes, and suffixes. A prefix comes before a base (*un*happy) and a suffix comes after it (help*ful*).	-
Orthographic mapping	Mapio orthograffig	The process by which readers store written words in memory by connecting their spellings to their pronunciations and meanings, so that words can later be recognised quickly by sight (i.e., word recognition).	-
Phoneme	Ffonem	The smallest contrastive unit of sound in a language.	The three sounds in *mam*: /m/ /a/ /m/
Phonemic awareness	Ymwybyddiaeth ffonemig	A specific type of phonological awareness: the ability to identify and manipulate phonemes.	Hearing that *sat* is made up of /s/ /a/ /t/.
Phonological awareness	Ymwybyddiaeth ffonolegol	Awareness of the sound structure of spoken language, including words, syllables, and rhyme.	Identifying and manipulating sounds in spoken words.
Segmenting	Segmentu	Breaking a word into phonemes to spell it.	piano → /p/ /i/ /a/ /n/ /o/
Sight words	Geiriau cyfarwydd	Words that have been learned and can be retrieved quickly from memory.	-
Word reading	Darllen geiriau	Reading a written word, either by decoding it, or by recognising it automatically.	-
Word recognition	Adnabod geiriau	Reading a familiar word accurately and automatically, without conscious decoding. This develops through successful decoding and learning the word's written form.	-



Why phonics matters for reading and spelling

Phonics teaching helps learners use the alphabetic code of any language clearly and efficiently. SSP:

- Enables learners to decode unfamiliar words by identifying the phonemes represented by known graphemes and blending them.
- Helps learners to spell accurately by segmenting spoken words into phonemes and selecting appropriate graphemes.
- Supports automatic word recognition so learners can focus increasingly on meaning.
- Builds foundations for reading, spelling, writing fluency, and access to the wider curriculum, including for learners who find literacy challenging.

Phonics should be taught alongside other knowledge and skills so learners can understand what they read.

Comprehension depends on both word reading and language comprehension. Teach oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension from the outset, alongside phonics.

Writing also draws on several skills. As spelling and handwriting or keyboarding become more automatic, more attention is available for planning and composing.

What systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) means in Wales

In line with Welsh Government's commitment, this guide focuses on the role of systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) in teaching reading. 'Synthetic' comes from synthesising, putting sounds together.
SSP involves:

- Teaching the GPCs explicitly from the start, following a planned, step-by-step sequence in each language.
- Teaching learners to blend the phonemes represented by graphemes as the primary way to read unfamiliar words, and to segment spoken words into phonemes for spelling.
- Giving learners daily opportunities to apply taught content in words, sentences, and connected text, through both reading and spelling.
- Checking what learners can recall and apply, then using this information to decide what to teach, revisit, or practise next.

Do not encourage guessing unfamiliar words from pictures, context, or the first letter.

SSP sits within broader literacy teaching, including oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, handwriting, spelling conventions, and meaningful word parts (morphology).

Features of effective SSP teaching

Schools may use different SSP programmes[1] and resources. Effective teaching has the following core features:

- **Coherence across Welsh and English:** Plan a clear teaching sequence for each language, with consistent approaches and terminology. Make similarities and differences explicit. Match independent reading and spelling practice to content taught in that language, including any English common exception words taught explicitly.
- **Systematic teaching:** Follow the school's planned sequence, teaching the alphabetic code in small steps with regular practice and review.
- **Building on earlier learning:** Revisit taught GPCs and move from simpler to more complex GPCs and word structures. Develop phonemic awareness alongside GPC teaching where learners hear, blend, and segment phonemes while connecting them to print. They do not need to master oral sound activities before beginning phonics.
- **Explicit instruction:** Explain the goal, model the process, and give guided practice with feedback, before learners apply skills independently. Keep all learners actively involved. Model phonemes clearly, avoiding an added vowel such as "uh" after a consonant where possible, while respecting valid accent and dialect differences.
- **Remembering and reviewing:** Ask learners to recall taught correspondences, for example by saying the sound for a displayed grapheme or writing a taught grapheme for a spoken sound. Give prompt feedback. Return to content in later lessons and use learners' responses to decide when more modelling or practice is needed.
- **Applying earlier learning:** Include previously taught correspondences alongside newer ones in reading and spelling practice. Adjust the number and difficulty of items so learners can respond accurately with appropriate support.
- **Common exception words:** In English, teach the unfamiliar correspondence within the word, alongside the parts learners already know. For example, teach <ai> representing /e/ in *said* while drawing attention to <s> and <d>. Say the word, explain its meaning, map its phonemes to graphemes, and practise reading and spelling it. Revisit it in later lessons. Welsh words may also need explicit attention to a less familiar correspondence or word structure.
- **Correcting errors:** Prompt the learner to look at the graphemes and use the taught routine. Model the correct response if needed, then ask the learner to read or spell the word again. Keep feedback brief and supportive and revisit the item later.

[1] *Also sometimes called packages.*

Teaching phonics in Welsh and English

Learners can draw on phonemic awareness, blending, and knowledge of how print represents speech when learning to read in another language. Transfer is helpful but not automatic and so it is important to check what learners can do in each language. Welsh spellings generally represent sounds more predictably than English spellings, although Welsh pronunciations can vary with position, word, and dialect. The two codes have both similarities and differences:

- **Shared or similar correspondences, such as <b>, <d>, <m> and <t>:** check whether learners can use these in the new language and adjust the amount of teaching and practice accordingly.
- **The same letters with different sounds, such as <f> in Welsh *fel* and English *fun*, or <ch> in Welsh *bach* and English *chip*:** signal which language is being read and model the relevant sound. Plan introductions carefully and avoid introducing competing values together when this causes confusion. Once each has been taught, use clear "In Welsh... In English..." contrasts and check learners can use both.
- **Patterns specific to one code, such as English split digraphs (<i-e> in *bike*) or Welsh <rh>:** teach these explicitly as new learning. Some sounds will already be familiar; others may need modelling and practice. **Appendix A** of the full guide compares the codes. These sequencing suggestions draw on knowledge of the languages and professional judgement; Research has not yet established a single best order.

English phonics in Welsh-medium settings:
Begin explicit English phonics early in Year 3, while continuing Welsh literacy teaching.
This is the practical sequencing recommendation in the full guide, not a research-established optimal starting age. Check learners' English GPC knowledge and word reading, build on skills already secure in Welsh, and teach the English-specific correspondences they still need. Use short, regular sessions, with age-appropriate materials, alongside English oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Welsh phonics in English-medium settings: Teach Welsh GPCs alongside Welsh language teaching. Learners who can decode a Welsh word may not yet understand it. Teach the vocabulary they will meet, build listening and talk in Welsh, choose practice texts with accessible language, and check understanding as well as the accuracy of reading aloud. Model sounds that are unfamiliar to learners.



Progression across school phases

These broad school phases are planning examples, not Curriculum for Wales progression steps or fixed attainment bands. Use assessment to select the content each learner needs. SSP should be underway in Reception. Do not defer it until Year 1 or until oral-awareness activities have been mastered.



- **Nursery (typically ages 3-4):** develop oral language through talk, stories, songs, and play. Include brief attention to speech sounds and early links between sounds and letters.
- **Reception and early primary (typically ages 4-7):** teach SSP in a planned, cumulative sequence. Blend and segment using taught GPCs from the outset, starting with simple words such as English *at* and *sat* or Welsh *mam*. Teach letter names alongside letter sounds and practise spelling and letter formation. Extend to letter groups, adjacent consonants, and alternative correspondences as knowledge grows. Read matched connected text and develop language, comprehension, and wider reading alongside this teaching.
- **Later primary (typically ages 7–11):** teach any remaining code knowledge and extend fluency, spelling, word structure, and vocabulary across the curriculum. Introduce English-specific correspondences when English literacy begins in Welsh-medium settings. Reduce dedicated phonics teaching when decoding is secure and continue targeted support where needed.
- **Lower secondary (typically ages 11–14):** check word reading, fluency, and comprehension and target support to identified needs. Teach longer words, meaningful word parts, and subject vocabulary without repeating phonics content learners already know.
- **Later secondary (typically ages 14–16):** develop the reading and writing needed in each subject, including academic vocabulary, spelling, word structure, and word origins where useful. Continue targeted code teaching when assessment shows it is needed.



Using different types of text

Decodables are books or passages designed to give practice in GPCs learners have been taught. Other texts may include grapheme–phoneme correspondences that learners have not yet been taught. Use decodable texts for early independent reading practice in the language being taught.

Alongside this, provide regular read-alouds, where an adult reads and learners listen and discuss; and shared reading, where adults and learners attend to the same text with modelling and supported participation. Include stories and information texts to develop language, knowledge, comprehension, and enjoyment. Learners who need more decoding practice should continue to access this wider reading. Broaden independent reading as learners can read and understand a wider range of texts successfully. Use assessment rather than a fixed age or deadline to reduce reliance on specially matched books.

Morphology

Teach meaningful word parts alongside phonics, linking pronunciation, spelling, and meaning. For example:

- Introduce common grammatical endings when useful, such as *-s*, *-ing* and *-ed* in English and *-au* in Welsh.
- Teach common prefixes and suffixes, and revisit them in word families such as *help, helpful and unhelpful*.
- Extend to less common word parts, Greek and Latin roots, and word origins as these arise in curriculum vocabulary.

Use a planned sequence informed by learners' knowledge. Teaching word parts complements decoding and helps explain spelling and meaning, although it does not replace the GPC teaching a learner still needs.

Assessment

Check word reading, spelling, and understanding. Brief checks of taught GPCs, blending and spelling, alongside observation of reading in text, help you decide:

- What needs to be retaught.
- What needs further practice.
- Who needs additional support and what that support should address.

Assess reading accuracy and fluency alongside language comprehension skills (e.g., vocabulary) and understanding of texts (reading comprehension). Accurate reading aloud alone is insufficient to demonstrate comprehension. Use the results together, taking account of teaching and language experience; a single reading score should not determine the support offered.

Supporting all learners

SSP provides a foundation for learners who need code instruction, but learners' needs and responses vary. Maintain ambitious learning goals while adapting pace, the amount of practice, grouping, materials, language support, and teaching prompts. Preserve explicit, systematic, and cumulative teaching, with smaller steps, and more guided practice where needed. Some learners need support principally with language, fluency, or comprehension. Review progress, adapt provision that is not helping and seek specialist advice where appropriate. Reduce teaching prompts as independence grows, while retaining access support the learner still needs.

Secondary schools

Use transition information and brief assessments to identify learners who need further support. A standardised word and pseudoword reading measure can help identify possible decoding difficulties (pseudowords are made-up words used to check decoding of unfamiliar letter strings.) Interpret this alongside spelling, fluency, comprehension, and teaching history. ReadingScreen is available free through CAL:ON Cymru. Provide age-appropriate, targeted teaching for identified gaps, including English-specific GPCs where these have not been taught. Check its impact and avoid repeating secure phonics when the main need is language or comprehension.



Choosing resources to support phonics teaching

Schools may use a commercial SSP programme[1], locally developed materials, or a combination. The provision should meet the definition of SSP above, with a coherent sequence and consistent routines. Section 4 of the full guide and **Appendix B** explain how to evaluate it. This checklist concerns phonics and its application in reading and spelling. Schools also need to plan wider literacy teaching.

Some important considerations for schools provision:

- Does the programme explicitly teach GPCs in a cumulative sequence, blending to read, and segmenting to spell, with daily application in words and texts?
- Does it provide planned progress and review, with clear guidance on adapting pace and support when assessment shows this is needed?
- Does our provision make relevant Welsh–English similarities and differences explicit, with a clear teaching sequence for each language?
- Do independent practice texts match taught content, alongside supported access to varied, richer texts?
- Do checks of learning lead to clear decisions about reteaching, practice, and additional support?
- Are impact claims of commercial programmes supported by credible comparisons with other provision and suitable independent assessments? Who was studied, in which language, and under what conditions? Improvement before and after teaching alone does not show that a programme caused it.
- Do we have suitable, systematic materials for each language, judged by the same standards and coordinated across Welsh and English?
- Can staff deliver the core SSP features accurately, with training, induction, and coaching, while adapting support to learners' assessed needs?

[1] *Also sometimes called packages.*

Where to find more

The full guide provides the evidence, fuller explanations and additional examples:

- The role of phonics, the definition of SSP and the evidence: Sections 1 and 2.
- Phonemic awareness, progression, bilingual teaching, texts and morphology: Section 3.
- Effective SSP teaching and choosing and evaluating programmes: Section 4.
- Assessment and support for learners, including at secondary level: Section 5.
- How the Welsh and English codes compare: **Appendix A.**
- The phonics programme checklist: **Appendix B.**

Key terms are in this summary's glossary; sources and further reading are in the full guide. CAL:ON Cymru provides professional learning and the Reading Screen.

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