

# Introduction to Essential Letters and Sounds (ELS)

The principles of ELS are based upon:

- The delivery of whole-class, high-quality first teaching with well-structured daily lesson plans
- The use of consistent terminology by teachers, children and parents
- The use of consistent resources that support effective teaching
- Repetition and reinforcement of learning
- Regular and manageable assessment to ensure that all children 'keep up' rather than 'catch up'
- The 'E' model.

## The 'E' model

The 'E' model underpins all teaching and learning in ELS.

'E' model components	Description
<b>Embed</b>	The theory and pedagogy behind ELS
<b>Enact</b>	How to deliver ELS lessons in your school
<b>Enable</b>	How to ensure all children 'keep up' rather than 'catch up'
<b>Execute</b>	How to lead ELS in your school
<b>Evaluate</b>	How to assess children's progress
<b>Evolve</b>	Optional bespoke training



## Embed – The Theory and Pedagogy behind ELS

ELS teaches children to read using a systematic synthetic phonics approach. It is designed to be used as part of an early learning environment that is rich in talk and story, where children experience the joy of books and language whilst rapidly acquiring the skills to become fluent independent readers and writers. ELS teaches children to:

- decode by identifying each sound within a word and blending them together to read fluently
- encode by segmenting each sound to write words accurately.

We know that for children at the end of Key Stage 1 to achieve the age-related expectations, they need to read fluently at 90 words per minute. As children move into Key Stage 2, it is vitally important that even those who have made the slowest progress are able to read age-appropriate texts independently and with fluency. For children to engage with the wider curriculum, they need to be able to read well, making inferences and drawing on background knowledge to support their developing understanding of a text when they read. To do this, they need to be able to draw not only on their phonic knowledge but also on their wider reading and comprehension skills, each of which must be taught. The first step in this complex process is the link between spoken and written sounds.

ELS whole-class, daily phonics teaching must begin from the first days of Reception. Through the rigorous ELS teaching programme, children will build an immediate understanding of the relationship between the sounds they can hear and say (phonemes) and the written sounds (graphemes).

Every ELS lesson has been designed to ensure that the minimum cognitive load is placed on the learner. The structure of the lessons allows children to predict what is coming next, what they need to do, and how to achieve success. It is important that the whole school understands how ELS works, and adheres to the ELS system, using the same terminology. This is why whole-school training in ELS is provided.

When you implement ELS effectively in your school, you will waste no phonics learning time even if staffing and/or the learning environment changes. Children will get the same high-quality first teaching every lesson, every day throughout the ELS programme.



## Enact – How to Deliver ELS Lessons

ELS is based on simplicity and consistency, and the programme is delivered through whole-class lessons. Throughout ELS, you will use the same teaching sequence – Show, copy, repeat – until each child is independent. The teaching sequence is the same in all stages of the lesson, from whole-class teaching to one-to-one intervention. Children are given the opportunity to hear and say each sound, first in isolation, and then within words and sentences. When introducing a new grapheme–phoneme correspondence (GPC), you will use a mnemonic or rhyme with an accompanying picture to ensure that children understand. Children then hear this sound in the context of a word, and a picture and/or definition is given to support their understanding. Practice and repetition are key.

### Give, give, give

- Give the GPC – share the new sound or spelling being taught.
- Give the word – put it into context.
- Give the meaning – ensure children can use the vocabulary.

## Using decodable readers

It is vital that whilst children are learning to read, they read books that match their phonic knowledge. The Oxford University Press decodable readers support Essential Letters and Sounds. These books have been carefully matched to every aspect of the programme and a matching chart can be found on the Oxford Owl website.

These books are intended to be used during the Review lesson on Day 5 of each week and as home readers. They are also recommended for use in other reading sessions to give children plenty of opportunities to develop their phonic knowledge and reading fluency. Children keep the books for one week and re-read them at least four times in this period, so it's important to communicate this to parents to ensure their support. Re-reading ensures that children develop their reading skills and fluency. This, in turn, supports their learning in school; as children become more fluent at reading, they are able to focus on their new learning.

More information on how to use the decodable readers can be found in 'Execute – How to Lead ELS in Your School'.



## **Enable – How to Ensure All Children ‘Keep up’ Rather than ‘Catch up’**

A whole-class approach ensures that all children benefit from the full curriculum. Children who encounter difficulties are supported by the teacher throughout the lesson, and where further support is required, ELS has three interventions to ensure that any learning gaps are quickly filled.

### **Supporting all learners**

ELS is designed on the principle that children should ‘keep up’ rather than ‘catch up’. Since interventions are delivered within the lesson by the teacher, any child who is struggling with the new knowledge can be immediately targeted with appropriate support, usually during the Apply activity.

We know that children – especially those with educational difficulties – learn better in a mixed-ability environment where their learning is scaffolded not only by the teacher and support staff but also by their peers. In this most fundamental area of learning – learning how to read – this support is even more vital, not only to their success but also to the outcomes of the programme as a whole.

Over-learning, alongside a range of Apply activities, helps children who acquire phonic knowledge more slowly to succeed. In ELS pilot schools, all children learned to read at a similar fast pace, because children with additional support needs were rapidly targeted throughout the lesson, and any remaining gaps in their knowledge were closed the same day. Studies show that the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics supports all children’s developing skills when learning to read, and that phonemic awareness (the ability to discern and copy sounds in words) is key to progress. Children’s phonemic awareness supports them when learning how to read, and our rigorous and robust teaching methods ensure that all children build phonemic awareness.

If children require further support to achieve the outcomes of the lesson and keep up with the pace of the programme, ELS has three interventions that are to be delivered on a one-to-one basis: oral blending, GPC recognition and blending for reading. These are intended to be short and concise and last no longer than five minutes. They can be delivered in isolation, or different interventions can be used together to support children each day. This helps ensure that children do not spend excessive time outside of the classroom or in group intervention sessions where they are removed from the rest of the curriculum.

## **Execute – How to Lead ELS in Your School**

In order to achieve its objectives, ELS must be followed with rigour and fidelity. To ensure this happens in your school, you will need a member of staff who is responsible for ensuring



that ELS is taught consistently. It is also important that this member of staff completes the 'Execute' training component to ensure the success of the programme.

## **Evaluate – How to Assess Children's Progress**

It is important that children's progress is assessed thoroughly, so that any gaps can quickly be identified. Assessment of the children's reading skills is key to ensuring that all children make rapid progress through the programme, and that they keep up rather than catch up. Using the assessment cycle alongside your daily in-class assessments will ensure that all the Reading Teachers know where every child is in their early reading journey. ELS is designed to remove the likelihood of 'gaps' in children's knowledge occurring, to avoid children falling behind and to ensure rapid progress where children are transferring their decoding and encoding skills to reading and writing.

Assessment needs to occur in the fifth week of each half term, to allow all members of staff to target and close any gaps that may be present in either sound knowledge or reading skills. By undertaking assessment in the fifth week you will be able to action a direct intervention before any upcoming school holidays. ELS includes specific revision points throughout the programme. Each of these revision points focus on specific skills to support children's rapid movement through the programme, the consolidation of their understanding and the re-activation of knowledge.