

Teaching Tricky Words in a Phonics Programme

What is a **Common Exception Word** or **Tricky Word**? This is any word that has a sound or sounds in it that the children have not been taught at that point and/or are irregular. These words are hard to sound out with the existing letter-sound correspondence knowledge that the children have. A tricky word at one point is usually not tricky after certain phonemes and their varying graphemes have been taught. Sometimes only parts of the word represent a challenge, with the other parts representing common sounds.

Let's look at some examples. The word *the* is usually introduced very early in beginning reading texts because it is a high-frequency word that appears a lot in English texts. It is one of the glue words that helps to bind a sentence and story together. It is just a small word of only three letters, but from a decoding point of view, it offers some challenges that make it tricky at the early stages of reading. All sounds in the word *the* will not have been taught to children yet. These sounds are the digraph /th/ (two letters, one sound), which makes a voiced and unvoiced sound, but in this case it is the voiced, and the letter *e*, which in this case represents an unstressed vowel, the schwa sound /ə/. Later in a synthetic phonics programme, these sounds will be taught and then the word is no longer tricky.

Another example is the word *is*. Initially, children will learn the short /i/ sound as in *pin*. So this part of the word is not tricky. But the first sound learnt for /s/ will be as in *sit*. In the word *is*, the *s* is represented by the /z/ sound. So this part of the word is tricky until the sound /z/ is taught and children learn that one of the graphemes for this sound is *s*. Other words such as *his*, *as* and *has* are tricky too at the early stages.

In a decodable reading series, the initial tricky words are usually from a first 100 high-frequency words list. Some words from this list are decodable, e.g. *at*, *in*, but many are not. These are high-frequency words that are also tricky. But being high-frequency words, children are likely to meet them in the books they read and so will need to know them.

How do you Teach a Tricky Word?

Traditionally, tricky words have been taught to children as a whole by sight, using flash cards and repetition. The reality is that most tricky words only have tricky parts and other parts that the children know. This means that these words can be analysed and decoded with children to better help them understand and remember them. This also reflects the teaching approach used for synthetic phonics. So let's say the word being introduced is *go* and at that stage the children know the common sound for *g* as in *get* and *o* as in *got*, then the only tricky part is the *o*, which in this case represents the long *o*. For this word, start by reading the word to children and getting them to repeat it. Then read the word phoneme by phoneme (sound buttons can help), pointing to the letters as you say the sounds. Then point to the parts of the word that children know and ask them to give you the sounds. Lastly, point out the tricky part and tell children the sound this letter or letters make. This way, children can draw on and apply the phonic knowledge they have while also learning about the tricky part of the word so that they can read it.

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