

Phonemic Awareness through Phonics

An analysis of two phonics systems for young learners

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1. Introduction

English is central to Sweden's education system. It is a core subject that is presented in the early grades to open doors for communication and academic opportunities. Swedish learners are praised for their English proficiency (EF Education First). Early exposure to English through media means that Swedish learners excel in receptive skills, including listening and reading comprehension (Sundqvist 2009). However, achieving accurate pronunciation and prosody, which refers to stress, intonation, and rhythm in speech, particularly in stress-timed languages, remains challenging as English phonics teaching is delayed. This leaves learners to rely on Swedish phonological patterns, which refer to the sound system and pronunciation rules of the Swedish language, when speaking English. Research suggests that a clear focus on phonics in the early years may help with these challenges (Kehoe & Havy 2019). The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (see section 2.4.3) underlines the significance of early language exposure, particularly in developing phonological skills. Delayed attention to pronunciation issues may make it challenging for learners to achieve native-like pronunciation later in life. The National Reading Panel (2001) has shown that systematic teaching of phonics enhances literacy skills and supports foundational language development, including pronunciation. Phonics-based educational materials, such as *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*, which are the focus of this study, offer structured and interactive methods to improve pronunciation and prosody in young learners. This study will explore the potential benefits of incorporating phonics-based methods into early English education for Swedish learners aged 7-9 teaching English early in primary school in grades 1-3.

2. Background

Section 2.2 discusses the context of English in Swedish Schools and focuses on the early stages of language learning, specifically pronunciation challenges that occur in grades 6-7. In section 2.3, pronunciation issues for Swedish learners of English are presented, and in section 2.4, theoretical support for early pronunciation teaching is presented, with sections on Krashen (2.4.1), Vygotsky (2.4.2) and the Critical Period Hypothesis (2.4.3). Finally, an overview of previous studies in this area is presented in section 2.5.

2.1 Phonics instruction and pronunciation

Phonics instruction, which teaches young learners the relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds, is a key factor in developing phonological understanding. This, in turn, forms the foundation for reading, spelling, and accurate pronunciation (The National Reading Panel 2001). Blending, segmenting, and repetition are key to phonics instruction. Blending combines individual sounds to form words, such as /s/, /a/, and /t/, to form the word ‘sat’. Segmenting breaks words into their component sounds, such as splitting “dog” into /d/, /o/, and /g/, and repetition reinforces sound-letter association through regular exercise, leading to a correct articulation of English phonemes. This connection between phonics and pronunciation means that it improves literacy and spoken accuracy, essential for second-language learners.

2.2 English education in Swedish schools and the case for phonics instruction

In Swedish schools, English is a core subject in the national curriculum, but it becomes mandatory starting in grade 4 for children between the ages of 9 and 10. Some schools introduce English earlier in grades 1-3, between the ages of 8 and 9, but this is on an optional basis. Usually, English teaching begins in grade 3, with the curriculum proposing 60 minutes of English lessons per week, highlighting communicative competence in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. There is no specific emphasis on phonics and pronunciation at this age. Upon reaching grade 4, English teaching becomes more structured, with the prioritization of vocabulary and grammar and reading comprehension becoming the core components. This approach aligns with the Swedish focus on practical language skills; the Swedish National Agency for Education’s guidelines, as outlined in *Lgr11* (Swedish National Agency for Education 2018: 34), stress that English education highlights communication and language exposure in the early years of education.

The lack of attention to pronunciation and phonics in early English education may create challenges in pronunciation for Swedish learners. Research by the National Reading Panel (2001) demonstrates that systematic phonics instruction improves reading and pronunciation skills. Additionally, studies on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which will be discussed further in section 2.4.3, highlight the importance of early language exposure for effective phonological development (Lenneberg, 1967), supporting the idea that neglecting phonics in early years may contribute to later pronunciation difficulties. Otterstedt (2016: 11–12) claims that there needs to be more phonological awareness, particularly among Swedish learners who may need help with

specific English sounds that differ significantly from Swedish sounds. Otterstedt emphasizes the importance of phonics for improving pronunciation.

Swedish students in grades 6 and 7 often struggle with pronunciation. Jevring (2015) explored Swedish learners' challenges in perceiving and producing English sounds absent from Swedish phonology. While her findings were not specifically focused on grades 1-3, her study included learners in grades 6 and 7, highlighting difficulties with sounds not present in the Swedish sound system. It provides insight into pronunciation and challenges that are likely to be relevant to young learners. Common difficulties included articulating English sounds absent in Swedish phonology, such as /θ/, /ð/, /w/, and /r/. Jevring (2015) found that these phonemes are notably challenging due to an absence of teaching methods targeting these differences. According to Tholin (2013) and Otterstedt (2016), pronunciation is overshadowed by grammar and vocabulary instruction in classroom time and curriculum design. There is also an emphasis on intelligibility over native-like pronunciation, which deprioritizes teaching prosody and phonetic nuances. Swedish learners of English are generally known for their strong proficiency in English, and most of Sweden's population speaks English as a second language. However, the risks of delayed English exposure are highlighted by Henry (2014), who states that delayed exposure to English can limit students' ability to form accurate sound patterns, leaving them reliant on Swedish phonological rules when speaking English.

These findings suggest that the Swedish education system needs to reevaluate its approach to early English education. As Tholin (2013: 34–35) mentioned, the current curriculum's lack of emphasis on phonics and pronunciation has resulted in persistent challenges for learners, especially in oral proficiency. Implementing phonological teaching practices in primary school, aligning with critical language acquisition periods when learners are most receptive to sound patterns (see 2.4.3), may help overcome these challenges.

2.3 Pronunciation issues for Swedish learners of English

Swan and Smith (2001) highlight common challenges faced by Swedish learners of English, especially in terms of pronunciation, even though Swedish belongs to the Germanic family like English. Swedish learners often grapple with specific English phonemes that are absent in their native language, such as /θ/ (*th* as in *think*), /ð/ (*th* as in *this*), /ʃ/ (*sh* as in *sheep*), and /w/ (*w* as in *wish*). Swan and Smith (2001) stated that these challenges often lead to phoneme substitutions,

with /θ/ being replaced by /t/ or /f/, and /ð/ by /d/, reflecting the influence of Swedish phonological patterns. Additionally, Swedish learners might encounter challenges in vowel length distinctions and English stress patterns, which can be unfamiliar to Swedish speakers. These pronunciation issues reflect gaps in phonological awareness and stress the need to help Swedish learners overcome these barriers. As well as the difficulties with /θ/ and /ð/, Otterstedt (2016: 42) points out that Swedish lacks the /w/ sound, leading learners to substitute it with a /v/ sound. This issue is problematic with minimal pairs like *west* vs. *vest*, where only one sound changes the meaning of a word. This can limit students' ability to express meanings accurately. Swan and Smith (2001) discuss other pronunciation challenges, such as vowel sounds. The distinction between /æ/ (as in *cat*) and /e/ (as in *bet*) may be difficult to perceive and produce accurately. Besides, English prosody, including stress and intonation patterns, can differ from Swedish, leading to a “sing-song” quality in the speech of Swedish learners. Researchers like Jevring (2015) and Kehoe and Havy (2019) contribute relevant findings on phoneme acquisition and interference, as will be discussed in section 2.5. Their collective work underscores the necessity of targeted instruction to address non-native sounds in English, particularly for Swedish learners.

2.4 Theoretical support for early pronunciation teaching

Various linguistic and cognitive theories provide a strong argument for emphasizing early pronunciation instruction in SLA, such as those by Krashen and Vygotsky, which will be discussed in 2.4.1 and 2.4.2. The Critical Period Hypothesis is explained in 2.4.3.

2.4.1 Krashen

Krashen's theories can be linked to the importance of delivering meaningful input and lessening barriers to language acquisition in the context of pronunciation teaching for Swedish. Krashen's Input Hypothesis emphasizes the role of comprehensible input, i.e., exposing learners to language that slightly surpasses their current proficiency level to facilitate language acquisition (Krashen 1985). Another theory proposed by Krashen (1982: 30–32) is the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which highlights the emotional factors impacting language learning. When learners feel motivated, relaxed, and confident instead of anxious or stressed, they have a greater chance of developing their language skills. The learner's emotional state, anxiety, or lack of motivation can block language input and delay learning. Phonics-based learning materials can be helpful in relieving

stress by incorporating engaging, interactive methods such as songs, chants, playful activities, and drawing. Krashen's Input Hypothesis also applies to phonics instruction, emphasizing comprehensible input and language beyond learners' current ability, made attainable through support. Phonics materials like *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* are designed to introduce simple sounds that gradually increase in complexity, providing a structured learning process. Through repetition, meaningful context, and engaging activities, these materials help learners internalize sounds while reducing anxiety, thus lowering the affective filter to improve language acquisition.

2.4.2 Vygotsky

Vygotsky's theory (1978: 84–89) of social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaboration in learning. He suggested that learning is most effective within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what learners can do individually and what they can do with guidance or collaboration. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs best when students are given tasks slightly beyond their current ability, with support from more knowledgeable peers, teachers, or materials. In this context, collaborative learning and scaffolding are crucial components. Vygotsky's theories, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and social interaction, highlight the importance of collaboration in phonics instruction. Materials like *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* provide scaffolding through structured exercises such as blending and segmenting sounds, supported by visual aids and interactive activities. Social components, like practicing pronunciation with peers or following guided instructions, aid learners in refining their decoding and articulation skills by connecting phonics to meaningful contexts. These materials align with Vygotsky's emphasis on a socially enriched and effective learning process.

2.4.3 Critical Period Hypothesis

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) suggests that there is a biologically determined window during which language acquisition occurs most easily. This period is believed to end around puberty, after which it becomes increasingly challenging to achieve native-like proficiency in pronunciation and prosody. Lenneberg (1967) argued that the brain's capacity for language learning peaks in childhood, with a decline in plasticity after puberty. This decline makes it

difficult for late learners to acquire certain language features, especially phonics and intonation. Further research by Birdsong (2006a) extended this idea, highlighting that late learners often struggle with pronunciation and prosody despite being able to acquire grammar and vocabulary. Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2003) state that learners who miss the critical phonological acquisition period often struggle with accents and pronunciation. Liu (2021) also commented that while late learners can still acquire certain linguistic elements, becoming skilled at pronunciation and prosody becomes challenging. Research supporting this hypothesis includes studies on second language (L2) learners' pronunciation abilities. Asher and García (1969) examined English pronunciation among 71 Cuban immigrants in the United States. They found that those who began learning English at a younger age attained native-like accents compared to those who started later.

The CPH suggests an optimal period for language learning, usually before puberty, which is highly relevant to early pronunciation teaching. In the context of Swedish learners, without early and focused phonics instruction, learners may fail to acquire accurate pronunciation patterns, which will affect their spoken English proficiency in the long term. Swedish learners starting in grades 6 and 7, where the age group is between 12 and 14, may find pronunciation challenging because they are already past the most effective window for acquiring native-like pronunciation, in contrast to younger children who are still within the critical period.

2.5 Previous studies

The significance of early support in developing phonological awareness and proper pronunciation skills in second language acquisition has been widely acknowledged. Kehoe and Havy (2019) explored how early phonological acquisition is shaped by factors such as phonetic complexity, language exposure, and vocabulary size. This research implies that delays in systematic phonics and pronunciation during this critical window can hinder phonological development, potentially leading to challenges in mastering pronunciation and prosody as learners advance.

The effectiveness of phonics instruction in early language education has been extensively documented, according to findings from the National Reading Panel (2001). Systematic phonics instruction especially improves young learners' reading and spelling abilities. This method provides a foundation for literacy development by teaching learners to decode written text through sound-letter associations. While the panel's findings primarily address reading outcomes, phonics

principles implicitly enhance pronunciation and prosody as learners better understand how sounds are produced and connected in English.

In learning to read in their first language, phonics instruction has been found to be beneficial in enhancing phonological awareness and helping children understand the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and letters (graphemes) (Johnston & Watson 2005). Smith (2022) found that phonics-based approaches materials have shown measurable improvements in pronunciation and reading skills, particularly at the elementary level. Similar research by Bowyer-Crane et al. (2008) examined the effectiveness of two intervention programs to improve early language and literacy skills in children with poor oral language abilities at school entry. They had 152 participants from ages 4 years and 9 months with oral difficulties. The intervention phonology with reading (P+R) program focused on letter-sound knowledge, phonological awareness, and reading practice. The second program was an oral language (OL) program emphasizing vocabulary development, comprehension, inference generation, and narrative skills. During the 20 weeks of daily intervention sessions, children in the phonology with reading program improved literacy and phonological measures, showing enhanced decoding abilities. Moreover, the children who participated in the oral language program demonstrated notable gains in vocabulary and grammatical skills, which are for reading comprehension. This finding highlights the importance of tailored early intervention on the positive effects of phonics-based interventions on early language skills, including sound recognition and fluency. Although this research was on first-language acquisition, second-language learners are likely to benefit in a similar way.

3. Aim and hypothesis

This essay analyzes the practicality and effectiveness of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* for Swedish ESL learners. The focus will be on assessing techniques such as blending, repetition (see section 2.2), and visual aids and evaluating to what extent these educational materials are suitable for young Swedish learners in grades 1-3 (aged 7-9). It is hypothesized that using educational materials like these will provide and, therefore, help establish core phonological skills, minimizing students' dependence on Swedish phonics patterns and promoting stronger fluency.

4. Material and method

This section describes the materials to be analyzed (section 4.1) and outlines the approach to analyzing them (section 4.2).

4.1 Material

This section focuses on the phonics-based learning materials selected for analysis: *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*. These books have been chosen because both are taken from global phonics systems and are recognized for their systematic approaches to teaching phonological awareness, pronunciation, and prosody. They are designed to teach fundamental phonics and address specific pronunciation difficulties for young learners.

The first book analyzed is *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* from the *Jolly Phonics Activity Books* series. The target audience is Swedish learners learning English as a second language (ESL). *Jolly Phonics Activity Books* were initially designed for first-language (L1) learners in English-speaking contexts and are typically used in preschool and early primary education. However, *Jolly Phonics Activity Books* have been widely adapted for second-language (L2) learners, specifically in multilingual and ESL contexts. They methodically introduce phonics concepts through blending, repetition, and visual aids, focusing on building fundamental sound recognition and pronunciation skills. These materials are suitable for grade 1, provided they align with the students' language proficiency levels.

The second material to be analyzed is *Oxford Phonics World*, an interactive phonics program that uses digital tools such as videos, storytelling, and resources to monitor learners' progress and learning. The resources enhance auditory and visual phonemic awareness, crucial for learners at the primary stage of English acquisition. *Oxford Phonics World* also offers physical materials such as workbooks, cards, phonics readers, and phonics cards. In contrast to *Jolly Phonics*, *Oxford Phonics World* was explicitly designed for L2 learners, making it a dedicated ESL resource. These materials are highly relevant for Swedish students learning English as a second language, as English is often introduced later in the curriculum, typically around grade 1 or grade 3.

The reason for selecting *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* for analysis is because they both focus on the fundamentals of phonics, which is essential for building foundational literacy skills in English. They differ in that *Jolly Phonics* is hands-on and approaches

phonics through activities like letter tracing, while *Oxford Phonics World* incorporates digital tools, such as audio, and repetition, using chants and songs.

4.2 Method

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach to explore whether phonics-based teaching, specifically *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*, can support young ESL learners in Sweden. The target group is primary school students in grades 1-3, aged 7-9. A detailed comparative analysis of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* will be carried out to explore how both educational resources align with SLA theories in terms of providing phonics practices.

The exercises and activities in *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* were studied and categorized based on two central aspects: what they teach and how they teach it. This approach provided a clear framework for analyzing the content of these educational materials and their teaching techniques. I examined the specific phonics concepts and skills targeted by each activity in terms of what they teach. This included sound recognition, focusing on English sounds absent in Swedish phonology, such as /ð/ or /v/. Additionally, I analyzed the different types of activities, specifically those aimed at teaching blending, where students combine sounds to form words and use of repetition. I also compared the use of visual aids and teacher guidance provided. The use of multimodal learning approaches, such as multi-sensory activities in *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and combining digital tools in the *Oxford Phonic World* comparison, will be considered. By categorizing the exercises and activities in this way, the pedagogical value of each resource will be evaluated, focusing on both the phonics content taught and the methods used to deliver it. This analysis will help decide how well this educational material meets the specific needs of Swedish ESL learners and evaluate the alignment of the methods used with SLA theories.

5. Analysis

This section begins with an overview of the content of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* (section 5.1) before focusing on their treatment of problem sounds for Swedish learners (section 5.2) and the exercise types included (section 5.3). “Phonics materials in relation to the Swedish curriculum” (section 5.4) also reveals a disconnect between phonics resources like *Jolly Phonics* and *Oxford Phonics World* and the Swedish curriculum’s broader focus on language

development. An overview of the lack of curriculum integration (section 5.4.1) underscores this disconnect, bringing to light the need for better integration. Moreover, “Narrow focus on phonics” (section 5.4.2) addresses key gaps in aligning the phonics materials with the Swedish curriculum (*Lgr11*). “Curriculum integration suggestions” (section 5.4.3) offers ideas on better-integrating phonics materials with the Swedish curriculum. The suggestions emphasize the importance of including communicative and contextualized activities, such as role-playing and interactive tasks, to ensure phonics instruction aligns with the curriculum’s focus on practical language use and the development of broader language skills.

5.1 Overview of content

Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1 offers a tactile, multi-sensory approach to introducing phonics through letter tracing, blending, and picture-matching exercises. It is designed for young learners and highlights high-frequency sounds like /s/, /a/, and /t/ but does not cover advanced sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/.¹ *Oxford Phonics World* provides a comprehensive phonics curriculum designed for ESL learners. It includes all 44 English phonemes and covers the sounds /θ/, /ð/, /w/, and /r/ through a mix of interactive digital activities, blending exercises, and hands-on workbook tasks. Additionally, *Oxford Phonics World* integrates storytelling and multi-method tasks to enhance engagement and contextual learning.

Analysis of the content showed that there are 14 exercises in *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and 17 in *Oxford Phonics World*. The findings are organized into key categories to emphasize how each book approaches learning, as shown in Table 1. The following sections, 5.2 and 5.3, give examples of each category.

Table 1: Overview of features of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*

Category	Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1	Oxford Phonics World
Problem Sounds	Focuses on foundational sounds like /s/, /a/, and /t/ but lacks exercises, especially targeting problem sounds for Swedish learners, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /w/.	Broad coverage, explicitly addressing /θ/, /ð/, /w/, and /ʃ/ through listening drills, blending exercises and contextualized examples.

¹ These sounds are addressed later in the *Jolly Phonics Activity Books* series, specifically in Books 4 and 6.

Exercise Types	Primarily, it focuses on repetitive tracing, blending, and writing exercises.	It includes interactive activities like games, sound discrimination tasks, and creative tasks, such as example matching and sentence formation.
Blending Techniques	There is a strong emphasis on blending CVC words, and step-by-step exercises gradually expand phonemic awareness. Multisyllabic words are introduced late in the book.	Blending is included but less emphasized. Exercises often use blending in conjunction with sentence-building and sound-specific tasks,
Repetition	There is a heavy reliance on repetition through tracing and blending exercises.	It uses repetition across different modalities, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
Visual Aids	Simple and child-friendly visuals that support sound object associations, though they are not always culturally specific.	Vibrant and engaging visuals that contextualize sounds within themes, for example, animals and daily routines.
Teacher Guidance	Clear progression and instructions, making it suitable for use with little teacher intervention.	It requires teacher facilitation to navigate its less structured approach, especially for young learners. The material needs teacher guidance from the start and throughout the units.

5.2 Problem sounds

The sounds that young Swedish learners find challenging, as outlined in section 2.3. Educational materials like *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* aim to address these challenges. However, *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* may require supplementation for comprehensive phonological instruction, as it introduces only the first group of sounds: /s/, /a/, /t/, /i/, /p/, and /n/. The sound /s/ is introduced through a multisensory approach combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements. Learners are taught the letter “s” and the associated sound, accompanied by an action where they mimic a snake’s wavy movement, as shown in Figure 1

below. Also, learners trace the letter “s” while repeating the sound, engage in picture-matching activities, such as “snake” or “sun,” and complete coloring tasks featuring objects starting with /s/.

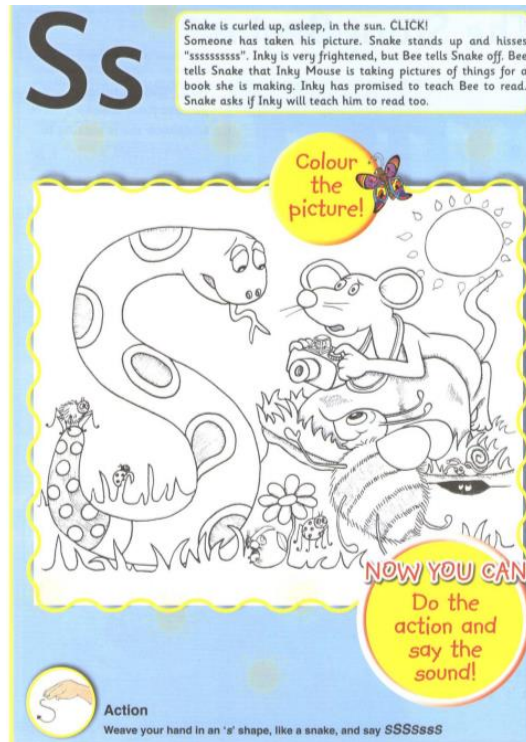


Figure 1: Jolly Phonics introduction to the sound /s/

Oxford Phonics World takes a more comprehensive approach, with its units covering a broader range of sounds and integrating various activities into one platform. Unlike *Jolly Phonics Activity Book One*, *Oxford Phonics World* addresses problem sounds for Swedish learners, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /f/. Exercises often involve listening and speaking exercises that help learners differentiate between sounds, such as /w/ and /v/, that Swedish learners may confuse. For example, learners are encouraged to listen to minimal pairs and practice pronouncing words like *vest* and *west*, as will be discussed in depth in section 5.3.

5.3 Exercise types

The structure of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* is highly systematic, with each chapter focusing on building foundational phonics skills. The first letter sound, /s/, is introduced using a multi-sensory approach to engage learners and build their understanding of the sound’s pronunciation. For

example, learners trace the letter “s” on the worksheet, following directional arrows while repeating the /s/ sound to connect the sound with its written form, as seen in Figure 2. They then emphasize blending it with other sounds to form simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words, such as *sat* and *pin*, as shown in the image on the right in Figure 2.

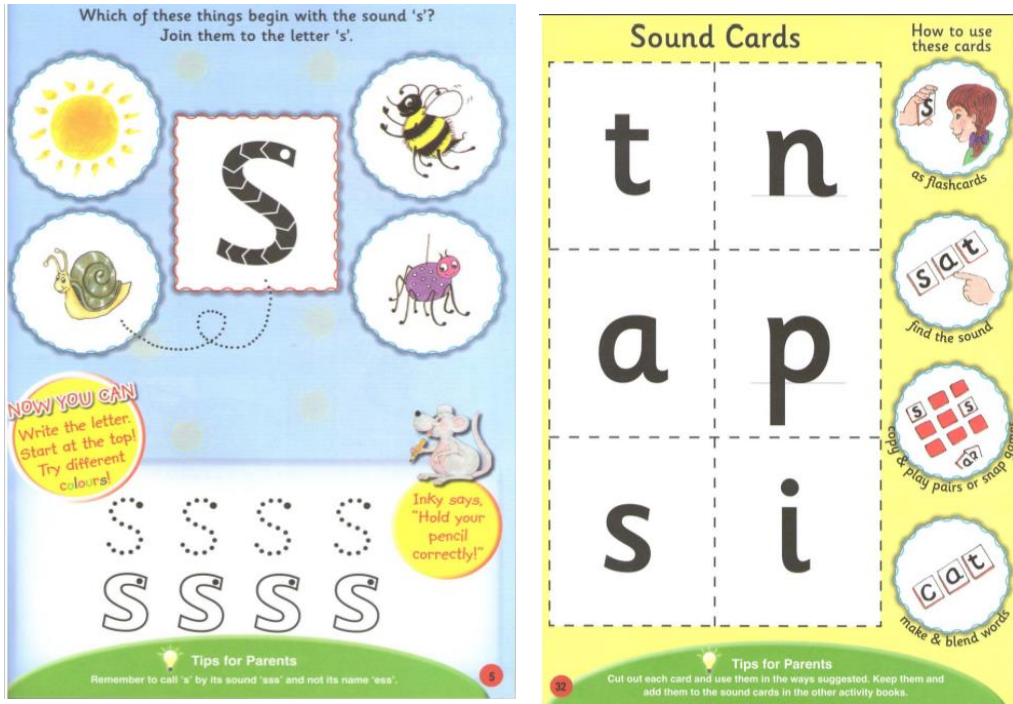


Figure 2: On the left hand side, *Jolly Phonics* exercises for /s/, and on the right hand side, *Jolly Phonics Sound Cards* exercises for /s/, /t/, /n/, /a/, /i/, and /p/

Visual aids, like pictures of a snake for the /s/ sound, help the young learners associate letters with objects. These activities align with phonics principles that systematically present sounds and promote blending, which are critical steps in developing early literacy and pronunciation skills. This sets the stage for phonemic awareness and decoding skills, introducing letter formation and identifying sounds for writing. It also develops motor skills for letter information, associates the sound /s/ with its written representation, and identifies the sound in initial word positions. Blending activities involve forming simple words like *sat*. The next letter /a/ builds on this by introducing writing practice for these sounds, focusing on repetition through tracing and simple writing

exercises. The exercise helps learners develop fine motor skills while reinforcing sound-letter associations.

Later in the book, the letter /t/ is introduced; learners trace it and identify objects starting with /t/, such as *tree*. They then blend sounds with /s/ and /a/ from the previous letters to form simple words, aiming to build their blending skills and sound recognition while practicing fine motor skills. The last three letters, /i/, /p/, and /n/, are then introduced in the book. Each letter has tracing exercises and sound-object matching by doing an action related to the chosen letter and blending practice to form words like *pin* and *tip*; the aim is to consolidate sound-letter associations, introduce early word-building, and complete the words from working from the start with /s/, /a/, /t/ and /p/, /i/, and /n/, to build up the sounds they were introduced to into words, *sat* and *pin*.

In *Oxford Phonics World*, listening and speaking exercises help learners differentiate between sounds e.g. by listening to minimal pairs and practicing pronouncing the words. Each unit in *Oxford Phonics World* incorporates interactive activities, such as matching sounds to pictures, sound discrimination games, and fill-in-the-blank tasks. Blending is included but not as central as in *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1*; instead, *Oxford Phonics World* emphasizes multisensory learning with activities that involve listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Visual aids in the *Oxford Phonics World* digital platform are vibrant, simple, yet detailed, often presenting sounds in thematic contexts, such as farm animals, everyday objects, or spontaneous objects added to the song at the end of the clip. An example of an exercise in *Oxford Phonics World* is on the sound /w/ in level 1, introducing the sound /w/ with a video and object that starts with the letter and a tracing to visualize how to write the sound /w/. A dictionary on the platform for unit six goes through the words mentioned in the video, such as *web*, *water*, and *wolf*, with auditory features that can be played by clicking, as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4: images of animals and objects accompanied by auditory features

When comparing *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*, it is important to assess their approaches to teaching challenging English phonemes to Swedish learners. These include substituting /w/ with /v/ and /z/ with /s/. *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* address blending, repetition, and sound identification differently.

Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1 is part of a seven-book series designed to introduce the learners to all 42 phonemes in English systematically. Book 1 does not yet cover more complex sounds like /θ/, /ð/, or /ʃ/. These sounds are presented in later books in the series, such as Book 4, /ʃ/, and Book 6, /θ/ and /ð/. This step-by-step approach ensures learners master basic phonemes before advancing to challenging sounds. Blending is a primary focus of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1*, with exercises that assist learners in combining sounds to form words. While this structured approach is effective for building foundational reading skills, the lack of problematic phonemes like /θ/ and /ʃ/ limits its immediate practicality in addressing the specific needs of Swedish learners facing challenges with these substitutions.

As for *Oxford Phonics World*, it takes a broader approach to phonics, covering foundational and complex phonemes earlier in its digital platform. It explicitly addresses sounds that are challenging for Swedish learners, such as /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/, /w/, and /z/, through listening and speaking activities. Learners practice distinguishing these sounds from common substitutions, for example, /θ/ vs. /t/ or /f/, and /ð/ vs. /d/ using minimal pair exercises such as *thin* vs. *tin*, *then* vs. *den*. This early exposure helps Swedish learners develop accurate pronunciation and reduce phonological

interference. While blending is incorporated into *Oxford Phonics World*, it is not the primary focus. Instead, blending combines sentence-building, sound discrimination games, and real-world context, supporting a multisensory approach to learning pronunciation and prosody. The variation can make the digital tool engaging for young learners in grades 1-2 and adaptable for older learners in grade 3 with teacher guidance.

5.4 Phonics materials in relation to the Swedish curriculum

Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1 and *Oxford Phonics World* are carefully aligned with the Swedish curriculum (*Lgr11*), addressing specific areas of need. The Swedish curriculum prioritizes practical communication skills, encouraging students to develop proficiency in using English for meaningful interaction and comprehension in real-world contexts (Swedish National Agency for Education 11). The alignment of *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* in relation to the Swedish curriculum (*Lgr11*) reveals a gap in addressing the broader language skills emphasized by sound recognition and decoding. This gap is significant, as the Swedish curriculum strongly emphasizes developing practical communication skills (section 5.4.3). These areas are marginalized in the phonics resources, restricting their ability to support the Swedish curriculum's objective fully. In addition, the Swedish curriculum advocates for a more integrated approach that includes activities such as role-playing, dialogues, and interactive exercises. The lack of role-playing and dialogues in the materials stresses the need for more interactive exercises to support the Swedish curriculum fully.

5.4.1 Lack of curriculum integration

One pivotal issue is the lack of direct alignment between the materials and the language objectives identified in the Swedish curriculum. This disconnect is evident in the lack of focus on using phonics knowledge in context-based tasks like sentence formation, dialogue, or listening comprehension activities. The materials' lack of integration with practical communication skills necessitates teachers to adjust, underscoring the need for a more cohesive approach.

Additionally, research by Sundqvist (2009) suggests that while Swedish learners are exposed to English outside of school through media and other forms of extramural English, this exposure does not fully address the specific pronunciation challenges they face in the classroom. To overcome this gap, pronunciation practice is incorporated nationally into classroom activities,

particularly in materials that support early language learners. This practice is not just a suggestion but a necessity to ensure learners overcome specific pronunciation challenges, such as the production of non-native sounds like /θ/ and /ð/.

5.4.2 Narrow focus on phonics

The materials, *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*, mainly focus on phonics and pronunciation, but the Swedish curriculum strongly underlines listening, speaking, and vocabulary development. The resources do not represent these skills, limiting their ability to comprehensively support the curriculum's goals—the Swedish curriculum advocates for a more integrated approach that includes role-playing, dialogues, and interactive exercises. The absence of these elements in the materials highlights the need for more additional interactive exercises to support the Swedish curriculum fully, emphasizing the importance of adaptability in educational materials.

The Swedish curriculum encourages differentiated instruction to cater to diverse learners. However, the progression in *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* is relatively fixed, making it challenging to adapt the materials to accommodate students with varying skill levels. Including customizable exercises and direction for tailoring lessons is crucial to improving their alignment with curriculum needs.

5.4.3 Curriculum integration suggestions

The phonics-based materials should be integrated into the Swedish curriculum (*Lgr11*), and it is essential to integrate phonics and language skills, such as listening, speaking, and vocabulary development, which are stressed in the curriculum. *Lgr11* highlights the importance of “communication in different contexts” (*Lgr11*: 36), and the goal is to develop decoding skills and the ability to use language effectively in particular situations. *Lgr11* emphasizes literacy development as a central component of language education. The curriculum defines literacy as the ability to “understand and use written language” (*Lgr11*: 38), including decoding skills through phonics and communicating effectively in speaking and writing. Phonics must be integrated with other language skills, especially speaking and listening, guaranteeing that young learners can decode words and use them meaningfully in context. Educators play an important role in this integration, ensuring that phonics is a standalone skill and a part of a broader communicative

context. Linnea et al. (2001) reiterates the importance of a balanced approach to literacy development. They argue that while systematic phonics instruction is essential in early reading development, it should be combined into a broader instructional framework that includes speaking, listening, and vocabulary development. Ehri et al. (2001) further suggest that learners' communicative competence is at risk if these other skills are ignored, a concern that should be at the forefront of educators' attention. Their research indicates that integrating phonics into a meaningful, communicative context is crucial for fostering literacy and pronunciation development.

While phonics materials like *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* focus on individual sounds, they do not address the comprehensive skill set needed for effective language use. *Lgr11* states "language development should be purposeful and occur in authentic context" (*Lgr11*: 38), indicating that phonics instruction should not be isolated but integrated into real-world tasks. Adapting materials for real-world tasks is a crucial step in making the curriculum relevant and applicable to the learners' lives. Addressing the materials should be adjusted to include more communicative exercises, such as role-playing dialogues, creating sentences, and interactive functions that enable learners to use vocabulary and sounds they have learned in context. These tasks will help close the gap between decoding and functional language use, as outlined in *Lgr11*'s statement on "building an understanding of both linguistic structures and their communicative functions" (*Lgr11*: 36).

Another component of *Lgr11* is its focus on listening and speaking skills. This alignment is a necessity for our students' practical education. The curriculum encourages students to "listen actively and respond appropriately in different contexts" (*Lgr11*: 37), which requires learners to practice pronunciation in context.

As Sundqvist (2009) noted, informal exposure to English outside the classroom can lead teachers to presume that learners do not need pronunciation practice. However, this assumption can overlook gaps in specific pronunciation skills, such as the production of non-native sounds like /θ/ and /ð/. Therefore, to ensure these sounds improve, more structured and planned pronunciation practice should be integrated into the materials, with activities that aid listening and speaking in real communicative situations.

In addition, *Lgr11* emphasizes the importance of "developing the ability to express oneself clearly" (*Lgr11*: 38), which includes grammar and vocabulary but also correct pronunciation. *Jolly*

Phonics Activity Book 1 and *Oxford Phonics World* could integrate more interactive tasks involving individual sound production and its use in natural, contextualized communication, ensuring learners develop accurate pronunciation skills alongside other language competencies.

6. Discussion

The analysis reveals significant differences between *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*, particularly in their approaches to teaching problematic sounds to Swedish learners (see section 2.3) sounds early, as they directly impact intelligibility and fluency in English. *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* emphasizes a structured introduction to phonemes, focusing on blending and foundational skills. In contrast, *Oxford Phonics World* provides earlier exposure to problematic sounds through varied, multisensory activities.

Oxford Phonics World, the interactive approach, enhanced by its bright and playful visuals with songs and interactive exercises that let the learner participate with other classmates, is likely to appeal to younger learners in grades 1–2. At this stage, children often enjoy colorful and theme-based activities that make learning feel like play. For slightly older learners in Grade 3, while these visuals and themes may initially seem more suited for younger learners, the flexibility of this educational material allows it to be adapted to serve their needs. Teachers can emphasize more advanced tasks, such as blending multisyllabic words, sentence-building, and independent reading exercises, making it equally effective for this age group. As for *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1*, it is a straightforward visual aid with a more structured approach. It suits grades 1–3. It can be done from the start in grade 1 with Book 1 to the following books in the following grades, following the *Jolly Phonics Activity Book* series. However, for Swedish learners who continually substitute with /ð/ with /t/ or /θ/ with /f/ and /ð/ with /d/, the absence of early practice with these sounds in *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* is a limitation. Teachers may need to provide supplementary materials to help learners with these problem sounds until they progress to later books in the Jolly Phonics Activity Book series.

It is also important to consider these resources through the lens of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, and previous research in this area. In 2.3.3, the CPH was outlined, which highlights the significance of early language exposure, arguing that children acquire language most effectively during a critical period when their cognitive abilities are particularly open-minded to systematic instruction. As Lenneberg (1967: 176) stated “The brain's capacity for

language acquisition diminishes after puberty, making early exposure critical for native-like fluency”. This theory directly supports structured phonics programs like *Jolly Phonics Activity Book One* and *Oxford Phonics World* for young learners, as both programs introduce foundational phonemes and blending skills during this crucial developmental window.

Birdsong (2006a) extended Lenneberg’s CPH, extending its application to SLA. While Lenneberg (1967) argued that language acquisition is most effective before the end of puberty, Birdsong demonstrated that age-related effects on SLA are nuanced. His research, including a replication of Johnson and Newport (1989), showed that younger learners can acquire native-like pronunciation (Birdsong, 2006b: 9–49). Educational materials such as *Jolly Phonics Activity Book One* and *Oxford Phonics World* align closely with Birdsong’s research by targeting learners in the critical period, especially those in grades 1-3. *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1*, with its structured progression and emphasis on blending, repetition, and decoding, supports foundational skills needed for language acquisition during early childhood. In contrast, *Oxford Phonics World* presents problematic sounds such as /θ/ and /ð/ early in the program, providing young learners with valuable auditory exposure and differentiation exercises crucial for achieving proper pronunciation during the critical period.

Henry (2015) emphasized common interference patterns in Swedish learners, such as substituting /w/ with /v/ and /z/ with /s/. She argued that addressing these issues requires targeted phonics instruction and sounds and recommended incorporating exercises to help learners identify and produce the correct sounds. Those exercises help learners differentiate between similar phonemes and practice their accurate articulation. *Oxford Phonics World* proves beneficial for Swedish learners by prioritizing difficult sounds and providing early opportunities due to practice with these phonemes. However, *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* support on blending and repetition offers a robust scaffold for learners, even if problematic sounds like /θ/ are introduced later.

Considering Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (see section 2.1), previous research has shown that diverse and engaging activities significantly improve ESL learner motivation, especially among younger children (e.g. Tholin 2012). This finding aligns with the approach of *Oxford Phonics World*, which uses interactive games and thematic visuals with this principle, encouraging sustained interest and participation among Swedish learners. Tholin (2012: 54) noted that “motivation is a key factor in successful ESL acquisition, and engaging materials play a central role in maintaining student enthusiasm”. Swedish learners benefit from this interactive approach,

especially in grades 1–3, contrasting with the repetition-heavy exercises in *Jolly Phonics Activity Phonics 1*.

7. Conclusion

This study evaluated two phonics-based teaching systems for use with Swedish young learners, considering them from both a practical and theoretical perspective. The results suggest that it is useful to implement phonics-based teaching early in English education to address pronunciation challenges faced by Swedish learners of English. The absence of a clear focus on phonics and pronunciation in the early years of English education in Sweden may contribute to ongoing challenges in mastering English phonemes and prosody. Theories such as the CPH, which stresses the importance of early exposure to language for ideal phonological development (Lenneberg, 1967), Krashen’s input Hypothesis (1982), and Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism (1978), provide support for using early and structured phonics educational materials like *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World*. Krashen stresses the importance of comprehensible input that introduces learners to challenging language patterns. At the same time, Vygotsky highlights the significance of cooperation and guided learning in achieving complex skills. Materials like *Jolly Phonics* and *Oxford Phonics World* deliver valuable scaffolding through repetition, visual aids, and interactive exercises, which improve learners’ ability to internalize English sounds and prosody effectively. Furthermore, the broader implications of phonics-based learning, as evidenced in National Literacy Trust Reports and PIRLS data, show that phonics improves literacy outcomes and helps close the gap between reading and oral proficiency. These educational materials are aligned with SLA theories and contain practical methodologies that may be useful for Swedish learners.

In conclusion, combining phonic-based approaches into the Swedish English curriculum for early primary school education, specifically grades 1-3 (ages 7-9), may help to address pronunciation challenges. By leveraging structured educational materials such as *Jolly Phonics Activity Book 1* and *Oxford Phonics World* which are clearly aligned with SLA principles, Swedish learners can enhance their phonological awareness, helping them achieve oral fluency and linguistic proficiency in English. It should be noted that a limited amount of material has been analyzed in this study, and further research is needed on the effects of phonics-based instruction. It would be useful to evaluate the materials in the classroom, for example, and investigate which

types of exercise are most useful for Swedish learners. Further studies on a wider range of materials are needed to deliver more profound insights into shaping educational approaches and teaching methods.

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