

The Syllabic Structure of Spanish

There is a long tradition of using the syllable as the basis for presenting sounds at the initial phase of reading instruction in Spanish. This practice reflects the structure of the language. It makes sense to use the syllable, the smallest element of sound easily isolated and recognized by children, for a phonetic approach to literacy development.

In contrast to English, where the sounds of written syllables are not easily recognizable, Spanish is truly syllabic. In Spanish, many children's games are based on pronouncing words in syllables so even very young children are experts at doing this.

Another difference from English is that Spanish consonants are never pronounced in isolation or in consonant combinations. A Spanish consonant is always spoken along with a vowel either preceding or following the consonant. This explains, for example, why native Spanish speakers have difficulty pronouncing English words that begin with an *s* blend, such as *spea**k***, *Spa**n**ish*, and *spea**c**ial*. Native Spanish speakers tend to add a preceding *e* sound. Presenting young children with syllables is totally natural, while having them practice isolated sounds of consonant phonemes would go against the nature of the language.

The Spanish syllables fit very specific patterns in order of frequency and presence in children's vocabulary.

V	vowel
CV	consonant plus vowel (or diphthong or triphthong)
VC	vowel plus consonant
CVC	consonant vowel consonant
C + l/r + V	consonant blend (<i>b, c, d, f, g, p, or t</i> plus either <i>l</i> or <i>r</i>) and vowel
C + l/r + VC	consonant blend (<i>b, c, d, f, g, p, or t</i> plus either <i>l</i> or <i>r</i>), vowel, consonant
C + l/r + VCC	consonant blend (<i>b, c, d, f, g, p, or t</i> plus either <i>l</i> or <i>r</i>), vowel, consonant, consonant