

Fonetic English

Tutor Guide: Teaching Native English Speakers

How to use the FE tools to take students from slow decoding to fluent reading

1. Why English is hard to read — and what FE does about it

Most native English speakers can speak fluently before they start school. They know thousands of words. They understand grammar. But reading is different — and for many students, it stays hard for years.

The reason is simple: English spelling is erratic. The same letters make different sounds in different words, and there is no reliable rule to tell a reader which sound to use. A student looking at the word 'signed' has no way of knowing which of the 76,800 possible sounds is the correct sound. The spelling does not contain enough information for the sound to be decoded. This is not the student's fault. It is a lack of information in English spelling.

Humans remember things that make sense. So if the sound and spelling of a word make sense, students can remember the sound of the word by sounding it out a few times. The student will be able to look at the word and instantly know its sound. This is called a sightword.

Humans have evolved a filter to stop us remembering random information so our minds are not clogged with low value information. Our minds see erratically spelled words as random information, and students need to overcome the memory filter if they are to remember it. This means students must remember the sound of an erratically spelled word by rote, which means hearing the word and seeing its shape, and repeating until it sticks — which can take 20 to 50 repetitions per word. That is slow, and it is boring.

What Phonetic English does

FE adds pronunciation to all the information needed to intuitively sound out any English word directly to standard English spelling — without changing the spelling. This allows students to learn sightwords quickly. Because the spelling and shape of the word do not change when marked up in Phonetic English, students can read the word in standard English.

So students learn sightwords using Fonetic English and then they can read those sightwords in standard English because they can recognize the word with or without Fonetic English markup.

Research supports this. In countries with phonetic languages — where words can be sounded out reliably — literacy rates are significantly higher than in English-speaking countries, and dyslexia is diagnosed far less often. Fonetic English applies the same principle: make English decodable, and students learn to read faster, with less struggle and more confidence.

The goal of reading is fluency. Reading involves running your eyes over a line of written words and “hearing” the “silent word sounds” in your head. Reading repurposes the speech part of the brain to “hear” the “silent sounds”. Because the speech part of the brain is repurposed, humans understand best when reading is at the speed of speech, about 100 words per minute, which is called fluent reading. Fluency comes from sight-word recognition: seeing a word and instantly knowing its sound, without having to think about it. When reading becomes automatic, the brain can focus entirely on meaning rather than on working out the sounds of words. FE is the fastest route to building that recognition.

2. What the student sees in FE text

It is worth being clear about this, because it surprises many people the first time they see it.

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With Fo·ne·tic ·Eng·lish, thēre^A is^Z next to^{oo}
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·sēe·ing text in Fo·ne·tic ·Eng·lish.

A student reading FE text sees the word exactly as it appears in any English book or website. The spelling does not change, so students can learn to decode a word sound using Fonetic English and can quickly remember the shape of the word and the sound.

Humans evolved to be able to recognize the shape of camouflage predators. Humans can read using in multiple fonts. Programs like CAPTCHA use this skill to disguise words so that humans can show they are real humans. Because Fonetic English preserves the shape of the word, students can read that word in standard English as well as Fonetic English.

What FE adds all the information needed to sound out any English word:

- Sound characters appear as small superscript letters above a spelling character when that character does not make its usual sound. The student learns these characters as part of learning FE. Once learned, they remove all ambiguity about which sound to make.
- Silent letters are greyed out. The student can see them — which matters for spelling — but knows not to say them.
- Syllable breaks are marked with a solid dot for a stressed syllable and a hollow dot for an unstressed syllable. This guides the student to the correct rhythm and stress of the word.

A person who can already read English can pick up FE text and read it immediately. The Fonetic English cues are intuitive and do not get in the way. For a student who is still learning, those same cues remove every source of ambiguity.

Important: the FE font

The FE cues are rendered by a custom Fonetic English font designed specifically for this purpose.

The font has also been designed so that no two letters look alike in reflection or rotation. Characters that are commonly confused — like b, d, p and q — have been made visually distinct from each other. This matters especially for students who struggle with character recognition and character reversal.

3. The core principle: you are building automaticity, not explaining rules

This is the most important thing to understand before you start teaching with FE.

The goal is not for a student to consciously apply rules. The goal is for recognition to become so fast and effortless that the student does not have to think at all. This is called automaticity, and it is what separates a fluent reader from a struggling one. Fluent readers can devote all their focus on understanding what they read, so comprehension and learning outcomes can markedly improve.

The FE tools measure automaticity directly through response time. When a student responds quickly and correctly, their brain is recognising — not calculating. When they are slow, they are still thinking it through. Your job is to help them get from thinking to recognising.

What this means in practice

Praise effort and the willingness to correct, not right answers.

A wrong answer is valuable. It tells the student's brain exactly what needs to change. A student who gets something wrong and then corrects it is learning more effectively than a student who guesses right.

Do not make a big deal of errors. The system corrects them automatically. Your role is to keep the student in a relaxed, focused state where they can move quickly and try again without anxiety.

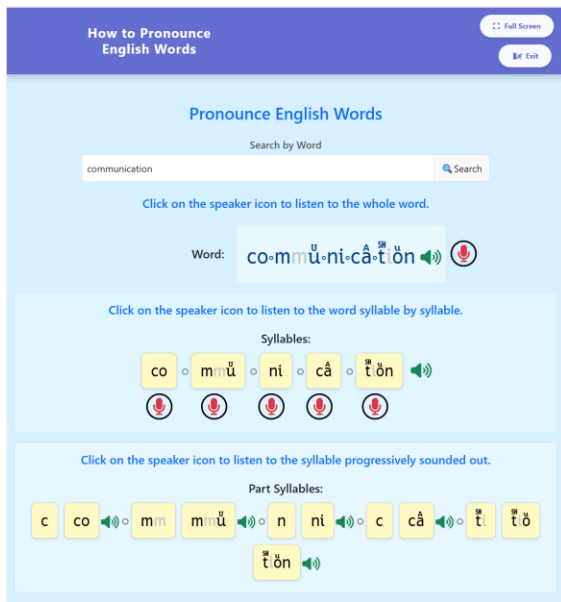
Speed is the signal you are watching. When response times drop, the student is building the neural pathways needed for fluent reading.

4. Teaching tools for native English speakers

FE has five main tools that are used for native English speakers. Each one targets a specific skill. You will use them in roughly the order they appear here, but you will also run them in parallel once a student has the basics. Stage 1 (sounds) should be introduced before Stage 2 (syllables), but from Stage 2 onwards you will often be working on two or three stages in the same session.

Note: you can open two tool windows at the same time. This is useful when, for example, a student is reading and wants to hear how a word sounds — you can have the Pronounce Any Word tool open alongside the eReader.

In the image below, the student has clicked on the word “communication” in the eReader and types in “communication” into the tool “How to pronounce any word” to better understand how to pronounce it.



Stage 1 — Learning English Sounds

This is where every student starts. It covers the 42 sounds of English and their FE representations.

What it teaches

English has 42 sounds (phonemes) but only 26 letters. This means letters must make more than one sound, and FE needs a unique character for each sound. The English Sounds tool teaches students all 42 sounds and the FE character that represents each one.

Why this matters

Most native English speakers can produce all 42 sounds — they use them every day when speaking. What they often do not know is the sound of each letter in isolation. They can recite the alphabet by letter name (A, B, C...) but the letter name is not the same as the letter's usual sound. The usual sound of 'c' is the sound it makes at the start of 'cat', not the name 'see'. Many students — including older teenagers — do not know this distinction.

Learning to associate each FE character with its sound is the foundation of everything else. Without this, a student cannot use the FE cues in text.

Learning Mode

The tutor and the student can scroll through 14 pages, each showing 3 sounds. The tutor should ask the student what sound the Phonetic English character makes to find those characters and sounds that the student does not know. The tutor can show the student that the sound of the character is played when you click on a speaker icon. This is how students can learn the sounds of the Phonetic English characters.

Practice Mode — Basic

The student hears a sound and selects the correct box from 3 displayed options. This is well suited to younger children who are learning the FE alphabet for the first time.

Practice Mode — Advanced

The student hears a sound and selects the correct box from 6 options showing only the FE characters. Response time is recorded. This is the target mode: the student should eventually be able to do this quickly, without any conscious effort.

For students from other language backgrounds

FE has analysed a large number of languages to identify which English sounds match sounds in the student's native language, which are close, and which are missing entirely. When you select the student's language from the dropdown menu, the tool reorganises the content to focus on what the student actually needs to learn.

- Same sounds: the student already knows these. They just need to learn the FE character for them. This is fast.
- Close sounds: similar to the native language equivalent. These can usually be learned quickly with a little attention.
- Missing sounds: the student has never produced these in their native language. These need more time and practice.

For native English speakers, this distinction is less relevant since they can already produce all 42 sounds. The focus is on learning the FE characters for each sound.

Tutor tip — what to watch for in the first session

Ask the student to say each sound as they click through the Learning Mode.

Common gaps for native English speakers:

- The short 'u' sound as in 'put' (different from 'but') — many students do not distinguish these
- The difference between voiced and unvoiced 'th' (as in 'that' vs 'think')
- The 'ng' sound at the end of 'sing'

When you find a gap, note it and give it extra attention in practice. But do not let this slow down the overall progress — move through the tool and come back to problem sounds.

Stage 2 — Learning Syllable Sounds

Once a student knows the FE characters, this tool will quickly help a student to quickly and reliably decode syllables and single syllable words. A second tool, similar to the first tool, teaches students to recognize the sound of multisyllable words.

Why syllables?

A syllable is short. Because it is short, it puts very little load on working memory — the part of the brain that holds information while you are thinking. This matters because working memory can only hold about 2 to 4 new pieces of information at a time, and for as little as 20 seconds.

When a student learns the sound of a syllable – the student sees a syllable and instantly knows its sound – the syllable moves into long-term memory. From that point on, the syllable no longer takes up working memory space. Learning just 200 of the most common syllables is enough to decode thousands of English words.

Progressive Sounding Out

The key technique is progressive sounding out. Rather than saying each sound separately and then trying to blend them (/c/ ... /a/ ... /t/ ... cat), the student builds the syllable step by step, adding one sound at a time:


- /m/ → /me/ → /men/ → /ment/

At each step, the student holds only two things in working memory: the sound they have built so far, and the next sound to add. This keeps the cognitive load small and makes accurate blending much easier. A student can see and hear the progressive sounding out of any English syllable by using the Sounding out Syllables tool and can practice their own pronunciation right inside the tool.

Sounding Out Syllables Lesson 1 Learning Mode Advanced practice Full Screen Exit

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← Previous Practice Next →

Note: The syllables are displayed in **alphabetical order**.
When you think you have learned the sounds, test your self using the practice mode.

Learning Mode

The student sees a grid of syllable boxes. Clicking a box plays the full syllable. Clicking the speaker icon plays the syllable progressively sounded out — step by step, as described above. The student clicks through the syllables at their own pace, hearing and repeating each one.

Practice Mode — Basic

The student has the same 6 boxes as in the learning Mode. The student hears a sound and clicks the correct syllable. Response time is recorded and displayed. The aim is to drive response times down until the student can identify the syllable without any conscious effort.

Practice Mode — Advanced

Advanced mode has 6 boxes in a line and displays syllables the student may not have seen. A sound is played and the student must click on the box or boxes that have characters representing the sound. This may require the student to decode the syllable sound on the fly, which integrates progressive sounding out, reinforces the sound that Fonetic English characters make and helps students to sound out words syllable by syllable.

Pronounce Any English Word

This tool lets the student type in any word and hear it pronounced, both as a whole word and syllable by syllable, with each syllable progressively sounded out. It is a useful reference tool during reading — if a student encounters a word they cannot decode, they can look it up here. The Pronounce Any English Word can be opened next to the eReader.

Stage 3 — Practice Recognizing Words by Sight

Practice Recognising Words by Sight

This is a separate tool from the Syllable tool. It works the same way — hear a sound, click the correct representation — but the student is now working with whole words rather than syllables.

Words are grouped by number of syllables. The student practises the same way as with syllables: hear a word, click the correct representation. This is the bridge between syllable recognition and full word sight recognition. Practicing recognizing words by sight will mean that the student will need to decode on the fly the syllables they do not already know. If students have learned some prefixes and suffixes, they will be able to recognize them and infer the meaning of the word if they know the root word.

How much time to spend on syllables before starting to read?

This is a judgement call. Some students enjoy the syllable practice and find it satisfying — the immediate feedback and improving response times give a clear sense of progress. Others get bored and want to read.

A good rule of thumb: once a student can comfortably identify the most common syllables in Practice Mode without much hesitation, start reading. You do not need to complete all 200 syllables first. Students can continue syllable practice as homework while they begin reading in sessions.

The syllable tool is well suited to homework because it is self-contained, self-correcting, and quick to do. Assign specific groups of syllables and check the response time data in the next session.

Stage 4 — Vocabulary

This tool teaches word meanings. It is used alongside the other tools, not after them. Vocabulary work keeps sessions engaging and gives you a second way to assess where a student is.

How vocabulary is taught

Words are taught in short sentences. The student reads the sentence in FE and can click on any word to see its meaning either in only simple, familiar English words — never using harder words to explain an easier word, or by having an precise translation of the word into a student's native language.

The student can also click on the whole sentence to see a translation of the full sentence. This is more useful than word-by-word translation because many words change meaning depending on context. The full sentence translation gives the correct meaning for that specific use.

Word lists by level

Vocabulary is organised into CEFR levels: A0, A1, A2, B1 and B2. For native English speakers, A0 and A1 words are typically already known. The student's starting point for new vocabulary is usually A2, though this varies by age and background.

Approximate age	Starting vocabulary level
4–5	A0–A1 (learning the words they already say)
6–7	A1–A2
8–9	A2–B1
10–11	B1
12–13	B1–B2
14–16	B2
17+	B2–C1 depending on the student
Struggling adult	Start at A2 regardless of age, adjust quickly based on performance

These are starting points only. Adjust immediately based on what you see in the first session.

Prefixes and suffixes

FE marks syllable boundaries in words, which makes prefixes and suffixes easy to spot visually. The vocabulary tool includes courses that teach the meaning of common prefixes and suffixes. This is important because a student who knows a root word and understands common prefixes and suffixes can infer the meaning of many words they have never seen before. This reduces the total number of words that need to be learned by around 30%.

The FE Dictionary

The dictionary gives the full pronunciation of any word — as a whole, syllable by syllable, and each syllable progressively sounded out. It also contains definitions, related words, phrasal verbs and idioms. Students can use this during reading sessions when they want to explore a word further. It is suggested that tutors keep it separate from the vocabulary teaching flow — use it as a reference, not as the main teaching method.

Stage 5 — The eReader

The eReader is where reading practice happens. It is the most important tool for building fluency, and you should get students into it as soon as they have enough foundation to make reading productive.

Why reading matters so much

Fluent reading is the goal. It means reading at roughly the speed of speech — fast enough that the brain can focus on meaning rather than on decoding. This level of fluency requires two things: a large bank of sight words, and myelinated neural pathways (meaning the brain's reading circuits have been strengthened through practice until they work very fast and reliably).

The only way to build both is through a lot of reading. Every time a student reads a word, that word's neural pathway is reinforced. The more they read, the faster their pathways become. The faster the pathways, the more they can read in a session. Reading is a compounding skill — it builds on itself.

What the eReader provides

The student reads FE text at the right level for their current ability. They can:

- Tap any word to hear it pronounced and see the syllables sounded out.
- See word-by-word translations (for ESL students or when a word is unfamiliar).
- Compare their own pronunciation to the correct pronunciation.
- Answer comprehension questions at the end of each text. If they get an answer wrong, they receive a hint and a second attempt. By the time they arrive at the correct answer, they understand why it is right.

What to read

Students read best when they are reading something they find interesting. Choose texts based on the student's interests and school subjects where possible. The level of the text should be slightly challenging — not so easy that no new words appear, and not so hard that every sentence is a struggle.

When to start reading

Do not wait for syllable mastery to be complete before starting reading. As a guide:

- If the student is engaged with the syllable tool and making progress, you might spend most of the first two or three sessions on sounds and syllables before starting the eReader.
- If the student is getting restless or bored with syllable practice, start reading earlier and continue syllable work as homework.
- For older students or adults with weak literacy, getting them into real reading quickly is usually more motivating than drilling syllables. Use the eReader early and return to the syllable tool for specific gaps.

5. The first session

A first session will usually run for about an hour. Here is how to structure it.

Step 1 — Talk first (5–10 minutes)

Before opening any tool, have a brief conversation with the student. You want to understand:

- Find out how old the child is? Were they read to as a child? Are they at school? What grade?
- How do they feel about reading? Are they frustrated, embarrassed, curious, or just going through the motions because someone else sent them?
- What is their current reading level roughly? Ask them to read a short passage if you are unsure, or ask them about their experience at school if they are at school.

Then explain briefly what FE is and what the session will involve. Keep it simple:

What to say to the student

"English spelling doesn't always match the way words sound — which makes it hard to learn words by reading them. Phonetic English adds some extra information to the text that tells you exactly how each word sounds. We're going to learn that system, and then we're going to use it to read.

Reading uses the speech part of our brain to "listen to silent words in our minds". So it is no surprise that we understand better when we read at the speed we speak – about 100 words per minute. To do that, students need to be able to look at a word and instantly know its sound and meaning.

Speed is important. Don't slow down to try to be right all the time. If you get something wrong, that's useful. It tells us what to work on next. So don't worry about errors.

Let's start by looking at the sounds of English and the characters that represent them."

Step 2 — English Sounds tool (15–25 minutes)

Open the English Sounds tool. Go through the Learning Mode together.

1. Ask the student to click on each sound box and repeat the sound aloud.
2. Watch and listen carefully. Most native English speakers can produce all 42 sounds, but many do not know which letters make which sounds. Note any gaps.

3. Pay particular attention to sounds that are easy to confuse: the 'u' in 'put' versus the 'u' in 'but'; voiced and unvoiced 'th'; the 'ng' sound in 'sing'.
4. Move into Advanced Practice. Have the student select the correct FE character when they hear a sound. Watch the response times.

Do not try to complete all 42 sounds perfectly in the first session. Get through what you can, note the gaps, and assign the Practice Mode as homework.

Step 3 — Syllable tool: Learning Mode (10–15 minutes)

Introduce the Syllable tool. Explain what progressive sounding out is and demonstrate it on a simple syllable ('cat', 'ment', 'tion'). Then let the student try.

Go through a set of common syllables in Learning Mode. Ask the student to say each one aloud after hearing it. If they find this straightforward, move to Practice Mode and start recording response times.

Assign a group of syllables as homework for Practice Mode.

Step 4 — Teach the student how to use the tools independently (10 minutes)

Before the session ends, walk the student through using the tools on their own. This is important — homework only works if the student can do it without you.

- Show them how to navigate between Learning Mode and Practice Mode.
- Show them how to replay a sound if they miss it.
- Show them where their response times appear.
- Tell them what you want them to complete before the next session.

Setting homework expectations

Be specific. Don't say 'practise the sounds'. Say: 'Do Practice Mode for the first 20 syllables. Try to get your response time under 2 seconds for each one.'

The tools are self-correcting, so the student does not need to worry about making mistakes on their own. Encourage them to do short sessions (10–15 minutes) rather than one long one. Frequent short practice is more effective for building automaticity than occasional long sessions.

6. Ongoing sessions

After the first session, a typical 30 to 60 minute session runs as follows:

Check the homework data first

Open the dashboard before you speak to the student. Look for:

- Response times that are still slow — these are the sounds or syllables that need more work.
- Consistent errors on specific items — these tell you where understanding has broken down, not just where the student is slow.
- Whether the student actually completed the homework — the data will show this.

Do not spend a lot of time talking through the data with the student. Use it to plan the first 10 minutes of the session. Go straight to the specific sound or syllable that is causing difficulty and practise it until the response time drops.

Reading is the priority in ongoing sessions

Once a student has enough sound and syllable knowledge to read, most of each session should be spent reading. Use the eReader. Sit with the student, listen to them read, and note where they hesitate or mispronounce.

When a student stumbles on a word:

5. Ask them to look at the FE cues on the word.
6. If they cannot decode it, ask them to sound out the syllables making up the word.
7. If they still cannot manage it, use the Pronounce Any English Word tool to hear it together.
8. Move on quickly. Do not dwell on a single word for too long.

After reading, return to the syllable or sounds tool for any specific gaps identified during reading. This targeted practice is much more effective than working through tools in sequence without a clear reason.

Adjusting the level

If reading is too easy — the student reads without hesitation and all comprehension questions are correct — increase the level. If reading is too hard — the student stumbles on many words and comprehension is low — drop back a level. Do not stay at a level that is frustrating or boring.

7. Different types of students

Native English speakers arrive with a wide range of starting points. Here is how to think about the main groups.

Young children (ages 4–7)

A child in this age group can speak English but is just beginning to learn to read. They know many words by sound but have not yet connected those sounds to letters and written words.

Start with the English Sounds tool. Use Learning Mode only at first — Practice Mode can be introduced once the child is comfortable with the characters. Keep sessions short and varied. Children this age learn best through repetition that feels like play rather than drill.

Use A0 and A1 vocabulary. These are words the child already uses in speech. The goal at this stage is not to teach new words but to connect words the child already knows to their written form.

Older children and teenagers with reading difficulties

A student in this group has been struggling for years and may be embarrassed or defensive about their reading. Handle the first session carefully. Frame everything in terms of the system, not the student: 'English spelling is genuinely difficult — English spelling is the problem, not you.'

Most students in this group can produce all 42 English sounds but may have not connected them reliably to letters. They may also have gaps in vocabulary at the A2 and B1 levels — words they hear but have never seen written down.

Move through the English Sounds tool relatively quickly — most of this will be familiar. Spend more time on syllables, particularly longer and more complex ones. Get them into reading as soon as possible, because reading at an appropriate level with FE support is usually more motivating than tool practice.

Students who may have dyslexia

The FE font has been designed with character confusion in mind. Letters that are commonly reversed or rotated — b, d, p, q — have been made visually distinct from each other, so no two characters are mirror images or rotations of another.

Dyslexia is a broad term and students diagnosed with it vary enormously in what they find difficult. In countries with phonetic languages — where words can be decoded reliably from their spelling — dyslexia is rarely diagnosed and rarely prevents students from reading well enough to succeed

academically. This suggests that much of what is called dyslexia in English-speaking countries is a response to the erratic nature of English spelling.

FE may help significantly. Follow the same workflow as for any student, but expect progress to be slower and give extra time to the English Sounds and Syllable tools. Watch for specific character confusions and note them — the response time data will show which characters a student consistently misidentifies.

Struggling adults

An adult with weak literacy has often had years of frustrating experience with reading instruction that did not work for them. They may be highly motivated to improve but also anxious about being seen to struggle.

Start the English Sounds tool without any suggestion that the content is basic. Frame it as 'this is the FE system — we need to make sure you know it before we use it.' Most adults will move through the 42 sounds quickly.

Get them reading real text as quickly as possible. Adults generally respond better to material that is relevant to their life — news, topics they care about, professional content — than to educational readers designed for children. The eReader can convert text **produced** by the tutor or student. In addition a new service will be introduced where Fonetic English can generate specific materials that interest the student. For example, if the student is studying history, Fonetic English can generate materials written at the right level for that subject, so the student builds English skills while learning content that matters to them.

8. The dashboard and homework

The tools log everything: which items the student attempted, whether their answer was correct, and how long it took. You can see this data via the dashboard.

What to look for

- Slow response times on specific sounds or syllables — these are the items to target in the next session.
- Consistent confusion between two specific items — for example, always selecting the wrong character for a particular sound. This tells you the student is not yet discriminating those two sounds reliably.
- Whether response times are improving over time — this is the key indicator of progress. Falling response times mean the student is building automaticity.
- Homework completion — you can see whether the student actually did the assigned practice.

The dashboard data will become more powerful over time as AI-generated reports identify patterns and suggest specific interventions. For now, focus on the basics: response time and error patterns.

Assigning homework

Homework is important. The tools make it measurable and self-correcting, which means students can practise independently without needing you to supervise.

Be specific when you set homework. For example:

- 'Do Practice Mode on syllable lessons 1 to 20. Aim to get your response time below 2 seconds for each one before the next session.'
- 'Read the first two sections of the text we started today. Click on any word you are unsure about.'

Short, frequent practice is more effective than long occasional sessions. Encourage 10 to 15 minutes of tool practice each day rather than one long session the night before a lesson.

9. Quick reference

Situation	What to do	Tool to use
New student, first session	Talk first. Then go through English Sounds Learning Mode together. Move to Advanced Practice. Introduce syllable tool.	English Sounds → Syllable Tool
Student knows sounds but is slow on FE characters	More Advanced Practice on English Sounds until response times drop.	English Sounds — Advanced Practice
Student bored with syllables, wants to read	Start reading. Continue syllables as homework.	eReader + Syllable Tool (homework)
Student stumbles on a word while reading	Ask them to use FE cues. Break into syllables. Use pronunciation tool if needed.	Pronounce Any English Word
Student has slow response times on specific syllables	Identify the syllables from dashboard. Practise them directly at start of session.	Syllable Tool — Practice Mode
Student's reading is too easy	Increase level immediately.	eReader
Student's reading is too hard	Drop level. Do not grind at a frustrating level.	eReader
Student confuses two specific characters	Use English Sounds tool. Play both sounds side by side. Ask them to identify which is which.	English Sounds
Student wants to know what a word means	Use vocabulary tool or FE dictionary.	Vocabulary / Dictionary
Student does not complete homework	Talk about it directly. Check the dashboard together in the session.	Dashboard

FE is a tool that makes English much easier to read. Your job as a tutor is to help students trust it, use it until it becomes second nature, and then read as much as they possibly can. The reading does the rest.
