

Phonemes in Use: Multiple Activities for a Critical Process

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Several decades of research have established the critical role of phonemic awareness in the development of beginning reading. Phonemic awareness contributes centrally to children's acquisition of the alphabetic principle—the understanding that the letters of the alphabet represent phonemes in speech. This understanding makes early phonics instruction useful for children and facilitates children's ability to blend letter sounds while decoding words, to learn sight words reliably, and to spell phonetically. Given this importance, it is vital that teachers understand phonemic awareness and can teach it effectively.

Phonemic awareness is often referred to as the ability to recognize and manipulate phonemes—the individual sounds in words in oral language. While this is a practical way to talk about phonemic awareness, scholars often point out that phonemes commingle with one another in speech and that the “individual sounds in words” are more of a hypothetical notion than a linguistic reality (Lieberman, 1998). This commingling of phonemes suggests why it can be difficult for children to acquire phonemic awareness. Recent research suggests that instruction that helps children to attend to vocal gestures (the particular ways that we position our mouths as we produce phonemes) is effective in developing phonemic awareness and has a positive effect on the students' word reading (Castiglioni-Spalten & Ehri, 2003). This type of explicit attention to vocal gestures can be helpful at the beginning of phonemic awareness instruction. A second key finding in phonemic awareness research is that instruction involving segmenting and blending phonemes combined with a focus on the letters that represent those phonemes contributes greatly to success in beginning reading and spelling (National Reading Panel, 2000). This is the type of phonemic awareness instruction that I address in this article.

For several years I have helped teachers in Wyoming meet the needs of students who enter kindergarten or first grade with little phonemic awareness or decoding ability. We have learned that after

having received some basic instruction in phonemic awareness and letter–sound relationships, students benefit greatly from a variety of activities combining phoneme segmenting and blending with letter–sound instruction. As a result, we have borrowed, adapted, and invented in order to create a small set of activities focusing on what we call “phonemes in use.” These activities all involve segmenting and blending phonemes within the context of reading and writing words, but each one does so in a slightly different way. This variety allows children to develop a robust ability to apply phonemic awareness to tasks of reading and writing and supports students who may struggle with this critical process. Here, I offer brief descriptions of our five phonemes-in-use activities and practical ideas for implementing them in the classroom.

Beginning-Middle-End

We borrowed the Beginning-Middle-End activity from *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2003). The activity involves three steps. First, the teacher places the letters of a three- or four-letter word face down in a pocket chart so that the students cannot see them and tells the students the word (e.g., *man*). Second, the teacher and students sing the following brief song to the tune of “Are You Sleeping, Brother John?": “Beginning, middle, end; beginning, middle, end / Where is the sound? Where is the sound? / Where's the *mmm* in *man*? Where's the *mmm* in *man*? / Let's find out. Let's find out.” After the song, one student comes forward, picks the position (beginning, middle, or end) that he or she believes the sound is in, and turns around the letter card. If the child reveals the letter *m* the teacher asks the class, “Does this letter make the *mmm* sound?” and confirms, “Yes, it does, doesn't it? We hear the *mmm* sound at the beginning of *man*.” The class then repeats this process for the other two phonemes. Of course, the game is more engaging if the teacher does not ask for the phonemes in sequence. Beginning-Middle-End is useful as an extremely brief, whole-class

activity. I recommend that teachers use Beginning-Middle-End one or two times each day during kindergarten and early first grade, selecting words that reinforce the letters that students are studying.

Say-It-And-Move-It

Say-It-And-Move-It was the cornerstone of the extremely effective phonemic awareness intervention researched by Ball and Blachman (1991) and made available to teachers in the manual *Road to the Code* (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 2000). Say-It-And-Move-It involves moving tiles one at a time from the top of a piece of paper down to a line at the bottom, saying each corresponding phoneme while doing so (/m/, /a/, /n/) and then running a finger under the tiles while blending the phonemes to make the word (*man*). I like teachers to introduce Say-It-And-Move-It at the same time that they begin letter-sound instruction and to use the activity to reinforce the letters being taught.

Students are given a couple of blank tiles and tiles with the letters that they are currently learning (e.g., the letters *m* and *b*). The teacher then announces a two- or three-phoneme word that begins with one of those letters (e.g., *my*) and asks the students to find the tile with the letter that makes the phoneme they hear at the beginning of the word. The students put the *m* tile together with a blank tile at the top of their paper and then move the tiles down while saying each phoneme, using the *m* tile to represent /m/ and the blank tile to represent /long i/. Then they run their fingers under the letters while saying the word *my*.

At this point, the students place the tiles back at the top of the page. The teacher and students repeat this sequence with other words that either begin or end with the letters being practiced. For instance, for a session focusing on *m* and *b*, the teacher might give the following words: *my*, *man*, *ram*, *him*, *mat*, *be*, *bat*, *tub*, *bow* (using only two tiles because there are only two phonemes), and *rub*. For each of these words, the students use the *m* or *b* letter tiles to represent the /m/ and /b/ phonemes and the blank tiles for all other phonemes. It is important that the children practice hearing the target phonemes at the beginning and end of the words. The teachers that I work with like to do Say-It-And-Move-It daily in small groups as a part of a series of fast-paced letter-sound activities.

Scaffolded Spelling

As children carefully stretch out words and attempt to represent the sounds through invented spelling, they develop phonemic awareness (Richgels, 2001). Motivated by this insight, we developed the brief activity of Scaffolded Spelling as a way to increase phonemic awareness and reinforce letter-sound knowledge in the context of writing words. In simple terms, Scaffolded Spelling engages students in carefully stretching out the phonemes in simple words, writing the letters that correspond to those phonemes, and reading the words that they have written. The teacher begins by choosing three to five words that include letters that the children have or are currently learning. For instance, if a kindergarten class has just studied the phonemes represented by *m*, *b*, *s*, and *t*, the teacher might choose the following words: *man*, *sat*, *bat*, and *tab*. The teacher introduces the first word and asks the students to stretch it out and listen for the phonemes. During this step, the students put their hands to their lips and “stretch the word like bubble gum,” slowly pulling their hand away from their lips while carefully articulating each phoneme in the word. The teacher then tells the students to stretch the word again, to stop after “the first sound of the stretch,” and to think about what letter makes that sound.

The students then write the letter on a white board or half sheet of paper. Next, the teacher directs the students to stretch the word again and listen for the second sound in the stretch. They then write the letter that makes that sound. The students repeat this process for the last sound in the stretch and thus complete their spelling of the word. The group repeats this process with two or three more words and then the teacher and children read the list of words that they have written two times. As children learn more letter sounds, the teacher can begin to incorporate words featuring consonant digraphs and clusters. Typically, it takes only a few minutes to write three to five words. Yet in those few minutes the children have listened for the individual phonemes in words, reinforced their knowledge of the letters that represent those phonemes, and practiced a deliberate process for invented spelling that they can use while writing independently. As with Say-It-And-Move-It, many teachers that I work with incorporate Scaffolded Spelling into a daily set of fast-paced word study activities.

Word Mapping

Efficient and reliable sight-word learning occurs when children completely map the letters in a word's spelling to the phonemes in its pronunciation, thus producing lasting bonds in memory between a word's spelling, pronunciation, and meaning (Ehri, 1998). Inspired by this principle, I developed a visual letter–phoneme mapping activity to use with high-frequency words. Word Mapping borrows a portion of Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, and Donnelly's (1996/1997) Word Analysis Chart. The teachers that I work with use a large laminated version of this chart (shown in Figure 1) for daily word mapping.

The teacher begins Word Mapping by announcing the high-frequency word to be mapped. The teacher and students segment the word together, counting the phonemes on their fingers. The teacher then writes the number of phonemes on the chart. Next, the teacher writes the word, asks the students to count the letters, and adds the number to the chart. The teacher maps the letters to the phonemes before filling in the “because” line. First, the teacher writes the word. Then the teacher segments the word orally, asking students what letter or letters best represent each phoneme and writing those letters below the spelling. (We continually remind the students that the proper spelling is on top and that the letters below stand for the sounds we hear in the word.) The teacher then returns to the beginning of the word, asks the students what letter or letters make each sound, and draws arrows connecting the letters to the sounds they make. When there is a consonant digraph or vowel pair in which two letters make one phoneme, we make a Y-shaped

arrow to map this relationship. Silent letters have no arrow connecting them to phonemes. Finally, the teacher asks the students to use this visual map to explain any discrepancy between the number of sounds and letters (e.g., “The *th* makes one sound” or “The *e* is silent”) and summarizes their explanation on the chart. If the sounds and letters are the same, then the students simply respond, “Each letter makes a sound.” While the teachers use Word Mapping to introduce nearly all high-frequency words, they do not do so with a few words that contain multiple irregularities or highly unpredictable letter–sound relationships (such as *one*) that might prove to be confusing. I suggest that teachers use Word Mapping in a whole-class setting for each new high-frequency word that they introduce (one to two per day).

Word Wall Boxes

The last activity, Word Wall Boxes, provides children with a daily review of three previously introduced high-frequency words while continuing to build their phonemic awareness. The Word Wall Boxes activity uses a sheet featuring Elkonin boxes (Figure 2). Popularized by Reading Recovery, Elkonin boxes provide another way for students to map the letters of a word to its phonemes. The teacher begins the high-frequency word review by asking a student to choose a word from the word wall. The teacher directs the students to the first line of boxes on their sheet and asks them to cross out any boxes beyond those required for the phonemes in the word (e.g., “How many sounds does *the* have? Two? OK, count two boxes and

Figure 1
Word Mapping Chart

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| The word is _____. | Map: |
| It has _____ sounds. | Spelling: l i k e ↓ |
| It has _____ letters... | |
| because _____. | |

Figure 2
Word Wall Boxes Sheet

| Word Wall Word Boxes | | | | | |
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cross out the rest”). Then, the teacher asks the class to stretch out the word carefully and write the letter or letters that represent each phoneme in the corresponding boxes (*th* *e*). Many teachers work along with students on the overhead. Then the students write the word on the line beside the boxes and repeat this process with two additional words. Finally, the children read the three words written on the lines chorally and independently. As when using the word analysis chart, the teachers that I work with do not use the Elkonin boxes with a few words containing multiple irregularities or highly unpredictable letter–sound relationships. If a student chooses one of those words during the word wall review, I recommend that teachers simply review the word by talking through its irregularities with the students.

Each of the activities that I have described prompts students to use phonemic awareness within

the context of reading and writing words. Used together as part of a fast-paced word study block or sprinkled throughout the day, they offer children multiple opportunities to develop and solidify this critical process in beginning reading.

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