

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics, Grade 1

Introduction

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In Grade 1, the instructional emphasis is on Phonemic Awareness and Phonics. This is when children are expected to make the transition from emergent reader to reader. Learning to decode the English language is not intuitive but once children learn to connect the English sounds to their spellings, children are able to use their knowledge of the code to read confidently. Research shows, however, that the acquisition of certain skills and abilities helps to ensure success in learning to decode. Careful scaffolding of this instruction provides children with a sequence and foundation upon which they can build.

In this course you will visit the classroom of first grade teacher Julie Canzone. Ms. Canzone guides her children through carefully sequenced lessons in phonemic awareness and phonics.

Although it is hoped that by first grade most children will be able to hear and manipulate the sounds of spoken language, this ability should not be assumed. By starting the lesson with engaging phonemic awareness activities, Ms. Canzone can be assured that her children do, indeed, possess this essential knowledge.

Next, Ms. Canzone goes on to introduce /s/ spelled s. In doing so, she is also introducing the children to the routine that will be used to introduce each sound and spelling.

Ms. Canzone uses the instructional routines presented in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!*. This allows her children to concentrate fully on learning the new content rather than on learning new activity structures. By providing continuous support and familiar lesson formats, Ms. Canzone creates a classroom environment that is nonthreatening and supportive.

Teaching Example 1

In Teaching Example 1, Ms. Canzone demonstrates the two basic types of activities associated with phonemic awareness lessons—oral blending and segmentation. The ability to hear and manipulate the sounds of spoken language is the critical first step in the process of learning to read. At school entry, the level of a child's phonological awareness appears to be a strong indicator of the success that child will experience in learning to read (Stanovich, 1986). In fact, children who become successful readers invariably have phonemic awareness, whereas those who lack it invariably have difficulty in hearing and distinguishing individual phonemes (Tunmer & Nesdale, 1985). Fortunately, phonemic awareness can be taught so those children coming to school lacking in phonemic awareness can and do learn to hear, distinguish, and manipulate the individual sounds.

Phonemic Awareness

Good readers automatically translate each letter in a written word into its corresponding sound, thus allowing them to pronounce the word. Before this is possible, they need to understand that spoken words are made up of individual sounds or phonemes. The purpose of the oral blending activities is to help children distinguish and manipulate the individual sounds of spoken language.

Ms. Canzone starts the phonemic awareness lessons by engaging in quick game-like activities that require her children to substitute sounds in words ("Apples and Bananas") and to substitute a sound quickly and think of rhymes as they do it ("Consonant Riddle Game"). Ms. Canzone does not write the words for this activity.

Although the final oral blending activity does include the writing of words, children are not yet expected to know the sounds of the letters. First Ms. Canzone tells her children the word she has written (*hamburger, cinnamon, Janelle*). As she substitutes each initial sound and spelling, she tells her children the sound. The point of the activity is to substitute initial sounds; however, as her children do this oral blending activity they learn that:

- Each spelling (letter or letter combination) in a word has a corresponding sound.
- Changing a sound changes the spelling, and in fact changes the whole word.
- Changing a spelling changes the meaning of the word.

Since the phonemic awareness activities are concerned with the *sounds* and being able to distinguish and manipulate the *sounds*, activities often involve nonsense words.

Note that in the segmentation activity, her children have a bit more difficulty isolating the final sound of the words than they did when working with initial sounds. Final sounds are more difficult to hear, but it is crucial that they be able to hear and distinguish all of the sounds in a word.

Oral blending activities set the stage for reading. Segmentation activities prepare children for writing or spelling. Each of these types of activities is essential in building a solid foundation for reading.

Teaching Example 2

In Teaching Example 2, Ms. Canzone introduces her children to the first of the sound/spelling correspondences they will learn. In doing this, she uses the *Sound/Spelling Cards*.

The purpose of the *Sound/Spelling Cards* is to remind children of the sounds of English and their spellings. The name of the picture on each card contains the target sound at the beginning for the consonants and in the middle for the short vowel sounds. In addition, the picture associates a sound with an action. This association is introduced through an interactive story in which the pictured object or character "makes" the sound. These cards are a resource for children to use to remember sound/spelling associations for both reading and writing.

Introducing the Sound/Spelling Card

Ms. Canzone starts the introduction of /s/ spelled s by referring to the appropriate *Sound/Spelling Card*. Throughout the introduction of the sound/spellings, Ms. Canzone will follow a specific instructional routine. By doing this, her children become familiar with what will happen and what they will be expected to do. This frees them to concentrate on new learning rather than on wondering what comes next.

Note the following in Ms. Canzone's introduction:

- She starts with the picture on the cards facing the wall. Up to this point in the year, the cards have been used as simple alphabet cards. As each new sound/spelling is introduced, the card is turned over with the picture and the spelling(s) facing out.
- She doesn't refer to *letters*. She refers to *spellings*. This is important, as some of the sounds of English are represented by multiple letters. For example, the sound /sh/ is spelled *sh*. One of the spellings of /e/ is *_ea_*. This may seem like a fine distinction, but children learn quickly that there are more sounds than letters and the spelling for a sound may combine several letters.

As the children proceed through this introduction, they:

- See the spelling.
- Say the sound.
- Hear the sound.
- Write the spelling.

Multiple and varied experience with each of the sound/spellings helps to ensure success for children.

Teaching Example 3

Teaching Example 3 continues the introduction of /s/ spelled s. Since learning the sound/spelling correspondences is the single most critical aspect in learning to decode words, the initial introduction of each of these correspondences is systematic, explicit, and thorough. Nothing is left to chance, and no assumptions are made. Each sound/spelling correspondence is introduced in the same way, thus ensuring that children have been given the information they need to go on. As the year progresses, they have hundreds of opportunities to practice these correspondences and become comfortable and efficient with them.

Watch as Ms. Canzone leads her children through a thorough practice of the target sound/spelling. After the initial introduction, the children:

- Listen for the target sound in the initial and final positions as well as supply words with the target sound in these positions.
- Practice writing the spelling.
- Practice identifying words, using picture cues containing the target sound.

It is important to note that the workbook activity is not independent practice. It is an integral part of the teacher-directed lesson.

Teaching Example 4

Teaching Example 4 demonstrates the strategies and techniques involved with sound-by-sound blending. With sound-by-sound blending, children are taught to identify each spelling in a word and associate that spelling with its sound. This enables them to pronounce the word. Children of this age have a much larger speaking vocabulary than reading vocabulary. In most cases, once they can pronounce an unfamiliar word, the meaning is clear to them.

Sound-by-sound blending provides the maximum amount of teacher support for this crucial introduction to decoding. In addition, it makes clear to children that all of the spellings of a word are equally important and that they must attend to each one.

Sound-by-sound Blending

The primary purpose of the sound-by-sound blending activity is to make sure children can transfer their knowledge of individual sound/spellings to words and sentences and to give them a strategy for decoding unfamiliar words.

Each spelling is written and pronounced before the next spelling is added. Children learn to blend each new sound, blend through the vowel, and then blend the group of sounds. This attention to each and every sound/spelling reminds children that although initial sounds are important clues, recognizing the initial sound is only the first step in decoding an unfamiliar word.

The blending activities presented in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* encompass much more than simple decoding. Ms. Canzone takes the opportunity of working with these words to:

- Individualize the lesson by having different children provide sentences containing the blended words.
- Reinforce knowledge of word analysis by pointing out the use of s in the formation of plurals.
- Encourage children to think of full and expressive sentences by having them extend the simple sentences they offer for the words.

- Introduce high-frequency sight words—those words that are phonetically irregular and therefore cannot be blended but which are essential in making sentences flow naturally.
- Discuss features of a sentence such as capitalization and end punctuation.

Note especially throughout the lesson how Ms. Canzone models pronunciation and intonation as well as continually giving her children visual clues as she moves her hand under the individual letters and the words.

Teaching Example 5

With sound-by-sound blending children are given full support by the teacher. This is not, however, the way in which children will encounter words in their reading. Whole-word blending teaches them how to isolate spellings in their heads and blend words as they appear in print. With whole-word blending, the teacher is removing some of the support. The words are written out completely before children blend them. Whole-word blending is the strategy they will use for the rest of their lives as they encounter unfamiliar words. Although at this point children blend each word, they will eventually use the blending strategy only for those words they find difficult. This is what all good readers do when faced with unfamiliar words.

Whole-word Blending

Ms. Canzone starts this activity by using sound-by-sound blending. In this way, she is making sure her children are secure and confident that they can blend the sounds. She moves quickly to whole-word blending. Although this is more difficult than sound-by-sound blending, children are eager to take on the challenge. They know that they are not expected to be "perfect." This is a learning experience—not a test.

Although Ms. Canzone writes each word in its entirety, she still has her children attend to each spelling in the word. This reinforces the fact that each sound/spelling in a given word is important to the decoding of the word.

Teaching Example 6

Teaching Example 6 continues the whole-word blending lesson by demonstrating whole-word blending of sentences. This can be much more difficult for children, as they are encountering many words in connected text. This, however, is the essential bridge from reading individual words out of context to reading the type of connected text they will encounter in their everyday reading.

The scaffolding of essential skills in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* is subtle and carefully thought out to provide children a gradual increase in complexity and difficulty. In this way, almost imperceptibly, they are given the knowledge and strategies necessary to become efficient, effective readers.

Whole-word Blending: Sentences

Note that as Ms. Canzone leads children to independence in using the blending strategies, she:

- Makes sure they understand the words they are blending.
- Reinforces the notion that this skill helps them read words and sentences naturally by stopping to reread the words and sentences with natural intonation.

The final review in any blending lesson involves children finding the word on the board that completes a riddle of sorts. This game-like activity serves several purposes and is fun for children. Through the Developing Oral Language activity, children:

- Show that they know the meanings of the words.
- Demonstrate their ability to actually read the words by isolating the correct word on the list.

Since all of the words in a given blending lesson concentrate on very specific sound/spellings, the words on the board look very much alike. In finding the target word, children need to read carefully and distinguish slight variations in spellings. In addition to expanding their oral language skills and strengthening their decoding abilities, Developing Oral Language activities are a great way to help children build confidence in their growing ability to read.