

Teaching what comes BEFORE phonemic awareness

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Here is a teaching technique to *avoid* if you want your non-literate learners to learn to read: “Just keep repeating the word and showing them the picture until they get it.” *

Repetition, normally a good thing for ESOL learners, will not help adult new readers learn the art and skill of reading. Like any beginning readers, adult non-literate learners need fundamental phonological skills *before* they can begin reading successfully. Many reading teachers begin instruction by teaching learners about phonemes—the sounds that letters make and that make up words. However, phoneme awareness is not the most fundamental of phonological skills, and starting there when learners lack more basic skills is like asking a skater to do figure skating when she or he has never even worn skates.

To get ready for phoneme awareness, the learners first need to be aware of larger chunks of sound in speech without reference to text. Counting words in short sentences they *hear*, even in their first language, is a fun way to build this awareness. Do this with lots of multisensory activities to guarantee good learning. For example, learners can start by stepping on pieces of paper on the floor, one for each word in the sentence you say. Then they can place index cards in a line on a central table or make marks on the board as they say the words in a sentence you have said carefully. Be sure you *initially* select strong learners who will be successful and can demonstrate well what to do. Once everyone has the idea from such group-observed activities, learners can use counters—pieces of paper, poker chips, etc.—to mark words for individual practice. I suggest avoiding clapping or finger tapping for word counting because these will be the primary ways of counting syllables and phonemes. Remember that all these activities involve listening and motor response only—no words are written.

Once the concept of counting words is *mastered* over several weeks with many kinds of activities, learners can move on to syllables. Don't explain the idea of syllables in detail. Just help learners make the transition by having them listen as you say one-syllable words (words they know: box, chair, pen, book). Say them again, clapping once for each word. Then begin naming two-syllable items: pencil, paper, notebook—now clapping as you say each syllable clearly. Have students clap too. Next, demonstrate the two syllables by holding the ends of a rubber band in each hand and pulling on its ends, one pull for each syllable. Give learners rubber bands and have them pull on the bands as they say the two-syllable words. When they are all doing this easily, you can move to three syllable words (telephone, radio, eraser).

This entire process may happen in one lesson or may take several days for all learners to understand. Move beyond three syllables when all can count syllables correctly. Don't forget to review words in sentences now and then with index cards. Then use some of those words and rubber bands and do syllables again. You may need to stop and help learners discover the differences in syllable structure between their language and English.

Hmong, for example, is a mono-syllabic language, so Hmong speakers need to realize that one word in English can have several syllables.

Learners can review syllables individually or in pairs by using pictures of things they know for prompts. (Note: If you use drawings or pictures, be careful that your learners can interpret them readily so you are not setting them up for failure. Many non-literate learners do not see two-dimensional information [pictures and drawings] as literate learners do). Counters for syllables should be different from the ones used for counting words. Having a wide variety of pictures prevents easy memorization. Whenever you introduce new vocabulary, be sure to have learners count syllables in the words using their rubber bands.

More advanced learners will profit from these activities also, as they often do not actually *hear* all the words in sentences or are not sufficiently conscious of syllables. In pairs, one reads a sentence and then the listening partner places a marker or card for each word. They can sort vocabulary words by number of syllables either by placing cards with words written on them under a number indicating syllables, or writing words in lists. These learners, obviously, will be able to see words as they think about syllables, but should begin by listening only.

While working carefully through this progression over many days and weeks, do other phonological work with the low-literate learners and with those literate in non-alphabetic languages, who will not know what phonemes are either: Have them listen to the beginning sound of two words (without naming the letter or sound). Exaggerate the beginning sounds and ask simply if what they hear is the same (“B-ook B-ag (pantomime listening) and ask, “The same?” Yes? No? B-ook C-oat the same?). This may take quite a bit of demonstrating at first. When learners do this easily, they can sort objects or pictures of things that start with same sounds--a good way for you to check if they really get this notion. Be sure to give them lots of practice in listening and sorting to master this skill. When it is easy for them, have them begin to listen to the ends of words to compare sounds. Be careful to use final sounds that are simple consonants only, no vowels or blends.

Once word and syllable counting and the initial and final sound identification skills are mastered, the idea of phonemes—sounds in words—can be presented. This will go hand in hand with teaching learners the alphabet and the sounds for each letter. I suggest starting with the letters for the sounds you have used for initial and final sounds to show them what the symbol for that sound is. Then add other letters as they understand the idea. (Those who are from cultures that are literate may want to move ahead with the alphabet much sooner, which is fine, but do not skimp on the phonological skills practice for them.) Show learners how to use many kinds of manipulatives to learn the alphabet—pasta, stencils, blocks, follow-the dots. If learners have a way to keep track of their individual progress in learning the alphabet, they will retain it much better.

When they *know* the alphabet, learners can begin to identify medial vowel sounds in words and associate them with letters. This is a hard step for many because as sounds are

not separated in words the way syllables are and vowels are less distinct. Again, using manipulatives will help enormously for this process. Use counters to show the sounds in words, then manipulative letters to show how letters/sounds make up words. You may need to go back to saying three words and having learners indicate first, middle and last words with index cards to help them understand the notion of where sounds are in words. When learners fully understand the idea of beginning, middle and final sounds in words that they know well (hat, box, cat, dog, bed), then textbooks designed for very beginning adult ESL readers (e.g. Talk of the Block or Sam and Pat.) would be a good next step.

Although careful, incremental building of pre-literacy phonological skills takes time, it is creating the foundations on which learners will be able to successfully build further reading skills. It is time extremely well spent.

* Heard at a conference in a presentation on teaching non-literate learners to read