

Beginning Phonics with Pre-Kindergarten Learners

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This article describes a step-by-step approach to teaching phonics to pre-kindergarten students.

Start a Long-Term Plan

A child's English education should include such things as awareness of English sounds, recognizing sound-symbol associations (including letter combinations), learning useful phonic rules, reading both phonically regular words and phonically irregular words. It is important to adapt to the child. A very young learner sometimes goes into a non-vocal mode of 'I am not going to speak English just now'. The activities below include adjustments for non-vocal children.

Teacher Preparation

First check that you are comfortable pronouncing isolated English sounds. For example, 'man' becomes *mmm-aaa-nnn* not, *muh, aa, nuh*. This is important because your skill at this plays a large part in determining a child's success. If you are uncertain, you could buy a cassette tape such as 'Corrective Reading Sounds Tape' (Glang, 2000).

Getting Started

There are two kinds of phonics-related strands that can be introduced in your lessons:

Strand 1. Playing with English sounds

Strand 2. Basic sound-symbol relationships

Each activity (after the first use) will take only thirty seconds to one minute of lesson time. The teacher can use these activities between activities in which the child is not required to be so vocal (e.g. coloring, moving, listening). This helps to maintain the children's attention.

Strand 1: Playing with English Sounds

Children need no reading skills for this strand, though it prepares them for future reading and spelling. If a child does not yet readily imitate your English, you could play the following sound games by yourself, letting him or her 'listen in'.

The 'Say this' Game

Your aim is to train the child to imitate what you say whenever you give the cue *Say this*.

1.) To accomplish this, start by using a prop that the child can already name in English. For example, if the child can say some color names and you have some color cards, say *Let's play the 'Say this' game*. Show a yellow card and say *Say this*: (pause) *Yellow* (in a louder voice). The child responds *Yellow*.

2.) Continue showing the card. Repeat *Say this*: (pause) *Yellow* a few times, using gestures to train the child how and when to respond.

3.) Stop using the card but repeat, *Say this*: (pause) *Yellow* until the child is responding reliably.

4.) Continue by using other words known to the child (e.g. food names), and sounds. Use six per session, without visual props. For example, *Say this*: (pause) *Sushi*. *Say this*: (pause) *Am*. *Say this*: (pause) *Mmm*. Show your pleasure as the child tries to imitate you.

Sound Blending or the 'Say it fast' Game

A. (Pausing between word-parts)

T: *Let's play 'Say it fast'. My turn to say words fast. Listen: Ice* (pause) *cream. Say it fast. Ice-cream. My turn again. Ham* (pause) *burger. Say it fast. Hamburger.*

Your turn. *Ice* (pause) *cream. Say it fast.*

S: *Ice-cream.*

T: *Ham* (pause) *burger. Say it fast.*

S: *Hamburger.*

(Continue with 3—4 other well-known words, e.g. 'snow-man', 'base-ball', 'pop-corn', 'su-shi'.) Use similar easy words in future lessons.

B. (No pauses between word-parts.)

Begin in a later lesson after the child is firm on part A above.

T: *Let's play 'Say it fast'. My turn to say words fast. Listen: (say 'am' slowly, stretching out the sounds)*

Aaaammmmm. (pause) *Say it fast. Am.* (Accompany your slow *aaammm* and fast *am* with the respective cues of slow and fast side-to-side hand movements across the front of your body.)

My turn again. Oooonnnn (accompanied by slow hand movement).

(pause) *Say it fast. On* (accompanied by swift hand movement). *Your turn.*

Aaaammmmm. (pause) *Say it fast.*

S: *Am.*

T: *Oooonnnn.* (pause) *Say it fast.*

S: *On.*

If the child mistakenly says *Oooonnnn* instead of *on*, you repeat *Oooonnnn* and again give the direction to *Say it fast*. Answer *On* together with the child. If the child is in a non-vocal mood, play the game by yourself for about thirty seconds. Prepare four or five words per lesson. Use only words made from stretchable sounds. The regular phonic sounds of b, c, d, g, h, j, k, p, q, t, and x cannot be stretched out so use those sounds only at the end of words, e.g. 'mat' stretched out as *mmaaat*. See the end of the next activity for sample words.

Sound Segmenting or the 'Say it slow' Game

This game is the same as above, but done in reverse. Note that it is

more difficult.

T: *Let's play 'Say it slow'. My turn to say words slow. Listen: Am. (pause) Say it slow. Aaamm.*

Mm. (pause) *Say it slow.*

Mmmmm.

T: *Your turn. Am. (pause) Say it slow.*

S: *Aaamm etc.*

Correct errors as in the previous game. Remember, if the child does not speak, play by yourself, letting him or her 'listen in'.

More sample words to use are: 'am', 'it', 'Sam', 'sad', 'sit', 'mad', 'if', 'Sid', 'fat', 'miss', 'fig', 'fit', 'rat', 'rag', 'add', 'lot', 'luck', 'not', 'nut', 'in', 'on', 'sick', 'rip', 'ran', 'sock' and 'lock'.

The Rhyming Game

The teacher chooses some longer words that the child knows, including Japanese words, or names of popular characters like 'Mickey Mouse'. Use three rhyme sequences per lesson, each sequence containing six words. At first the child just listens, but may start contributing rhymes in future sessions. Rhyme as though you are having a great deal of fun. Be sure to use the words *Let's rhyme with* each time. Little learners need consistent cues.

e.g. 1. Say, *Let's rhyme with 'Mickey Mouse'.*

Mickey Mouse: Ricky Mouse, Sicky Mouse, Licky Mouse, Nicky Mouse, Vicky Mouse.

2. Say, *Let's rhyme with 'hamburger'.*

Hamburger: shamburger, whamburger, lambburger, ramburger, famburger.

3. Say, *Let's rhyme with 'banana'.*

Banana: hanana, manana, fanana, shanana, janana.

At a later date, encourage the child to complete your rhymes, e.g. *Let's rhyme with 'Mickey Mouse'. Mickey Mouse: Ricky... (pause) and gesture the child to say Mouse, Sicky Mouse, Licky Mouse, etc.*

Strand 2. Basic Sound-



Symbol Relationships

General Considerations

Use multiple written examples of the one letter. For example, if teaching 's', show examples of the letter 's' written in a variety of colors and sizes (from huge to tiny) and presented on various mediums (paper, cloth, plastic, whiteboard, book). This most quickly focuses the child's attention on the elements common to each example (i.e. that it is the letter shape which determines the teacher's spoken sound), while disregarding irrelevant features (color, size, position).

The teacher can use the teaching pattern below to introduce every new sound-symbol relationship. The pattern provides a clear and familiar structure to the child, enabling faster learning in later lessons.

Teaching a Sound-Symbol

Relationship (using the example 's')

You need:

A) Five positive (+) examples of 's'. Suggestions are:

(+1) a medium size 's' written in black on a white card (keep this card for future review);

(+2) and (+3) identical to each other in size, color and background color, and medium;

(+4) a large 's' written in color (perhaps on the whiteboard) and

(+5) a small black 's' on a white background (Examples 2-5 can be disposed of after the lesson).

B) Three non-examples (-) of 's'. These should be letters, objects or pictures that the child already knows.

Suggestions are:

(-1) a picture of a ball;

(-2) a doll and

(-3) a crayon.

Future non-examples should include similar, previously learned letters. Be ready to move swiftly from one example to the next. Practice!

Presentation (Time: one minute)

a. Show positive example (+1).

T: *This is s.* (Speak distinctly.)

Always say the letter's hissing sound *sss*, not the letter name *ess*.)

b. Show positive example (+2).

T: *This is s.*

c. Show the identical positive example (+3).

T: *Is this s?* (Nod affirmatively and say, *Yes*.)

d. Show positive example (+1) again.

T: *Is this s?* (The child should indicate affirmatively, either by nodding or by saying *Yes*. If not, repeat the question and answer. Do not give the answer without first repeating the question. In this beginning stage, you are not only teaching 's', but are also teaching the question.)

e. Show non-example (-1) e.g. picture of a ball.

T: *Is this s?* (Give a negative movement of the head and say, *No*. After this, no longer respond with the child or give hints by body language

unless the child makes an error.)

f. Show non-example (-2) e.g. doll

T: *Is this s?* (Negative indication from the child.)

g. Show positive example (+4).

T: *Is this s?* (Positive indication from the child.)

h. Show non-example (-3)

T: *Is this s?* (Negative indication from the child.)

i. Show positive example (+5)

T: *Is this s?* (Positive indication from the child.)

It is important to show your delight whenever the child answers correctly. The above presentation is suitable for the child who cannot respond vocally (but who can show understanding through head movements). For a child who readily speaks English, you can modify the above sequence from step c onwards, replacing the question *Is this s?* with *What is this?* In step c give your sam-

ple answer *s*. In steps d-i, the child responds *s* or names each non-'s' item (*a ball, a doll, a crayon*).

A General Teaching Strategy for Introducing Further Letters

- a. Show positive example (+1).
- b. Show positive example (+2).
- c. Show the identical positive example (+3).
- d. Show positive example (+1) again.
- e. Show non-example (-1)
- f. Show non-example (-2)
- g. Show positive example (+4)
- h. Show non-example (-3)
- i. Show positive example (+5)

A beginning series of letters, sequenced to prevent confusion might be:

(short vowel) a, m, t, s, (short vowel) i, f, d, r, (short vowel) o, g, l, h, (short vowel) u, c, b, n, k, v, (short vowel) e,

w, j, p, y. The teacher can introduce a new letter whenever the child seems firm on the previous letters. At another time during the lesson, you can use a non-verbal game such as the following. Put some examples of 's' among items that the child already knows (other letters, or pictures, or real objects). Ask *Where is 's'?* The child indicates each 's' by pointing or touching.

References

- Camrine, D.W., J. Silbert and E.J. Kameenui (1996) *Direct Instruction Reading* (3rd ed.). Hemel Hempstead:Prentice Hall (You need this book to know the next steps. It can be ordered online from amazon.co.jp)
- Glang, A. (*speaker*) (2000) *Corrective Reading Sounds Tape* (audio cassette recording). Eugene, OR: Association for Direct Instruction (email Erica Eden at erica@adi-home.org)
- 'Letterland' cards: These enable young children to focus on the sound and shape of each letter. Catalog Available. Japan Free Phone: 0120-538-837, Douglas and Satomi Corin