

PD 3 PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Let's start with a quiz.

What is a **phoneme**?

Is it

- (a) A letter?
- (b) A sound?
- (c) A rule of spelling?
- (d) A foreign word?



That's right – it's a **sound**.

In the word **cat**



there are three phonemes (distinct sounds):

c a t

/k/ /æ/ /t/¹

Phonemic awareness – sometimes called phonological awareness – is **not** the same as phonics.

¹ All the sounds of English (and all other languages) can be described in the universally recognised International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), set up in 1897, which assigns every phoneme its own symbol. The /k/ sound (in cat) is the same as the 'c' in cap. Its /æ/ sound is the same as in bat. NB The IPA is for teacher use only. It is far too complex for children and should not be used in class.

Phonemic awareness is *not* about how sounds and letters match or how to sound out letters to form words; it is only about **hearing and thinking** about or **manipulating the individual sounds** within words Phonemic awareness is something that should be taught *before* phonics ... so children receive maximum benefit from their phonics instruction. ... The importance of phonemic awareness in reading has been shown in studies that have revealed the close connection between phonemic awareness and reading achievement (Torgesen et al): young children with well developed phonemic awareness skills tend to be successful readers while children without these skills usually are not.²

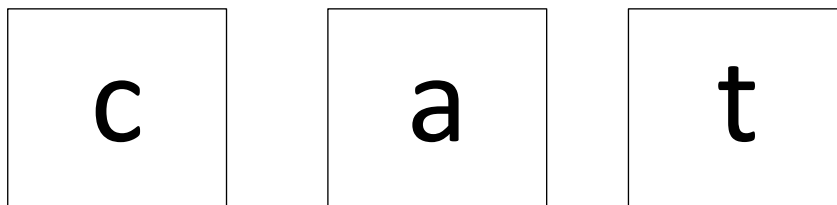


Hearing sounds

It is necessary to put ourselves in the minds of the children here.

When letters and words become such a common part of everyday life, after many years of practice, we tend to forget what it was like to learn them for the first time.

For them, hearing the individual sounds can be quite challenging.



All words (with the exception of “I” and “A”) are blended composites of letters. Our sample word – “cat” – spoken aloud – would take about half a second to say. Try it. We are expecting children to pick out those three sounds and connect them to symbols (letters).

² Shanahan, T. (2005), *The National Reading Panel Report: Practical Advice for Teachers*, Learning Point Associates

As adults, we have long since automatised the alphabetic code, and we see the three letters as completely distinct parts of a composite whole (the word 'cat'). Children have only just begun to think about words and the idea that they are clusters of sounds.

To demonstrate this, another quiz.

How many phonemes are there in these words?

1 ran

2 rain

3 reign

4 ate

5 eight

6 straight

The answers?

1 ran (3 phonemes) ... /r/ /æ³/ /n/

2 rain (3 phonemes) ... /r/ /ei⁴/ /n/

3 reign (3 phonemes) ... /r/ /ei/ /n/

4 ate (2 phonemes) ... /ei/ /t/

5 eight (2 phonemes) ... /ei/ /t/

6 straight (5 phonemes) ... /s/ /t/ /r/ /ei/ /t/



You can see the problem. Only one of these test words (ran) matches up in terms of its **letters** with the number of **sounds** in the word. Seven (in a sample of just eight) have either more or fewer letters than their component sounds. Take **eight**: only two phonemes, but five letters.

Being aware of the phonemes – hearing the individual sounds - takes quite a lot of concentration. That is why teachers are advised to take it slowly, building gradually up from getting children to recognize the idea that sounds are represented by letters in simple words (like cat) ... and only coming to the more complicated letter-sound correspondences (eg “ate” or “eight”) much later.

³ IPA symbol: /æ/ as in cat

⁴ IPA symbol: /ei/ as in say

The average length of a word in English is five letters.⁵ A quick scan of the hundred most common words⁶ (50% of all words) reveals that the average word is just four letters long. Some 21% of all English words are just three letters long. The task is not too challenging, as long as one moves from simple to complex in graduated stages.

Why go to all this trouble? Because it's the only way to progress forward. As the International Reading Association has said:

“Recent longitudinal studies of reading acquisition have demonstrated that the acquisition of phonemic awareness is highly predictive of success in learning to read - in particular in predicting success in learning to decode. In fact, phonemic awareness abilities in kindergarten (or in that age range) appear to be the single best predictor of successful reading acquisition.”⁷

A sample program

How does all this translate into what to do with children?

The following sample⁸ of phonemic awareness instruction is offered as one way of setting up a sequence of teaching points.

Phonemic awareness task	Demonstration activity	Example
Isolating phonemes	Students identify specific sounds at the beginning, middle and end of words.	Teacher (T): What is the first sound in the word dog? Student (S): /d/
Blending onset-rimes (The onset is the leading consonant in a syllable; the rime is the vowel and following consonants)	Students blend onset-rimes to form real words.	T: What word can you make by blending these two sounds together? s ... and S: sand
Blending phonemes	Students blend phonemes to form real words.	T: What word is made from blending these sounds: /b/ /a/ /t/? S: bat
Deleting phonemes	Students identify the word that remains when a phoneme is removed or deleted.	T: What word is left when we drop the /s/ from the word spot ? S: pot

⁵ <https://www.ilovelanguages.com/how-many-letters-does-the-average-english-word-have>

⁶ "The Oxford English Corpus: Facts about the language". (2011) *OxfordDictionaries.com*. Oxford University Press. What is the commonest word?

⁷ *Phonemic Awareness and the Teaching of Reading*, (1998), International Reading Association

⁸ *A Closer Look at the Five Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction: A Review of Scientifically Based Reading Research for Teachers*, (2004) Learning Point Associates

Segmenting words into phonemes	Students break a word into its individual sounds by counting the sounds or by moving a marker for each sound.	T: Show me how many phonemes there are in the word bake . S: three - /b/ /a/ /k/
Adding phonemes	Students make new words by adding a specified phoneme to a word.	T: What word do you make when you add a /b/ to the beginning of the word ring ? S: bring
Substituting phonemes	Students make a new word by replacing a specified phoneme with another.	T: Say the word bag . Now change the /b/ to an /r/. What is the new word? S: rag

Reading experts in the field suggest that

“Phonemic awareness instruction is more impactful when provided early ... in preschool and kindergarten. Small doses (5-18 hours total) can be highly effective and one study suggests that four hours of instruction was just as effective for kindergartners as 11 hours. Of course instructional duration and intensity depend on children's individual learning needs. Research supports providing phonemic awareness instruction in small groups as one effective way to tailor instruction while monitoring children's progress.”⁹

How does Ziptales help?

Ziptales has its own phonemic awareness/phonics module: **Easy Readers**.

It is a set of short decodable texts which delve into the basics of phonemic awareness, in a fun way, with lots of pictures, animations and high motivation funny stories.



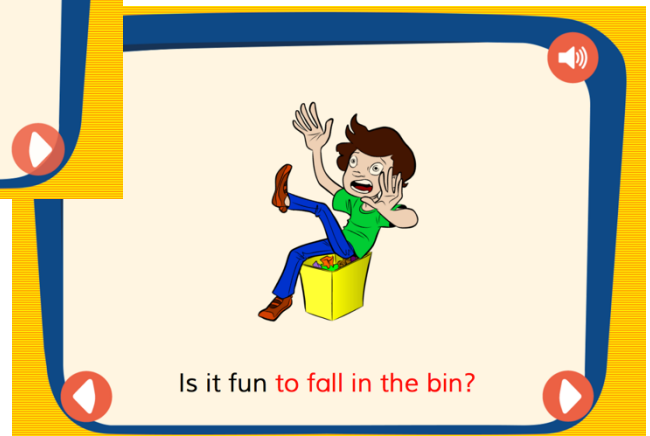
⁹ Piasta, S. & Hudson, A. (2022), 'Key Knowledge to Support Phonological Awareness and Phonics Instruction', *The Reading Teacher*, ILA

The lessons are arranged from simple to more difficult. In the short vowels section, there is a sequence – a, e, i, o, and u. All the words are short.

Here are screen shots from the lesson on the short vowel I (“Is it fun?”).



The language is carefully controlled so that children are not confronted with too many challenging words. There are jokes, and rhymes, and lots of repetition – so that the basics (the phonemes being taught) come through loud and clear.



Teachers will have a variety of options for teaching phonemic awareness, but the **Easy Readers** are a not-to-be-missed set of high value resources.