

Reading and English **Worksheets** Don't Grow Dendrites

20

Literacy Strategies That Engage the Brain

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EDUCATION

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Introduction

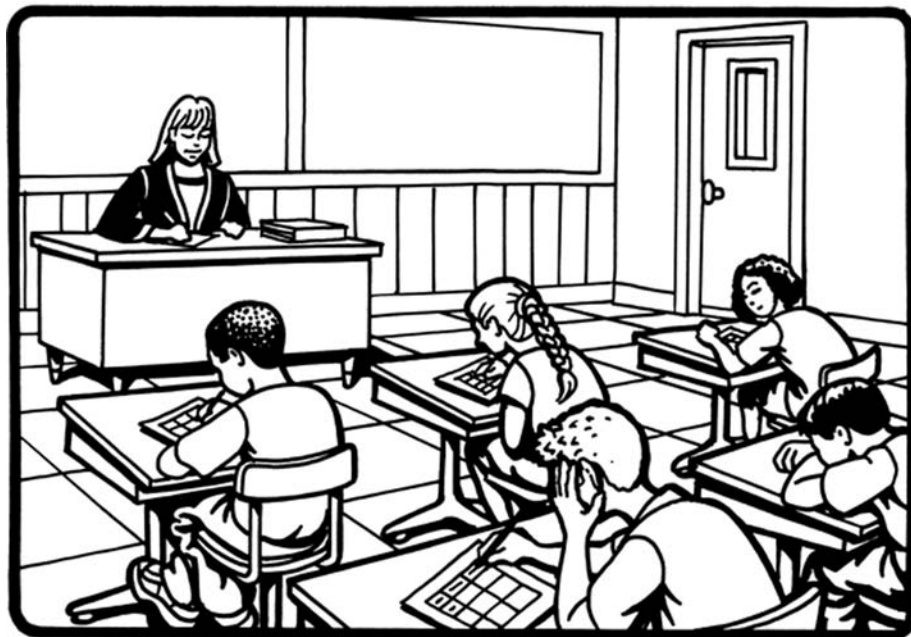
Allow me to tell you a story about Livingston Primary School. Today is Visitors' Day, when families, friends and other educators can drop by the classrooms to see what takes place. Imagine a year four classroom. The teacher is Mrs Riley who is required to teach English during the first block of the day. She has had little training in this domain and begrudgingly accepted the responsibility because teaching reading comes with the position. Mrs Riley doesn't love to teach; the way she sees it, at least as a teacher, she'll have her summers free.

Before visitors even enter the classroom, they can hear Mrs Riley screaming at two students who are talking without permission. When the visitors arrive, Mrs Riley is not happy to see them and begins to make excuses as to why her lesson plans are not available for review. The lack of visuals on the walls is immediately evident – no student work is displayed, no vocabulary words are posted. Her visitors take seats in the back of the room and begin to observe the lack of activity. They look over the shoulders of several students in the back row and surmise that the students are supposed to be completing vocabulary worksheets on which they circle the most appropriate word for a given sentence. This is one of about fifteen worksheets they are to complete. When students finish one, they are instructed to continue to the next one.

Meanwhile, Mrs Riley takes a seat at her desk and begins to write. It seems as if she is marking essays. She glances up occasionally to see what her visitors are doing (they sense that she feels they are invading her territory) or to reprimand a variety of students for talking when she has demanded absolute silence.

It would seem that this worksheet activity could only last so long and that soon the students will be involved in the authentic task of reading, but this doesn't happen. Thirty minutes later, the majority of students are still at various points in their private worksheet stacks. Some have given up and laid their heads on their desks. Others are obviously angry because they have been told to stay after school, the consequence for not being quiet when instructed to do so. Because there are no lesson plans, it's impossible to know what else will happen within this ninety-minute period.

Let's proceed to the classroom of Mr Benson, a year five teacher. When his visitors enter the room, Mr Benson does not notice because he is actively engaged with his students. Discovering the visitors' arrivals, he warmly greets them and offers places to sit. He then proceeds back to a table where he is conducting a guided-reading group of six students.



What a difference between this class and Mrs Riley's! The walls are replete with visuals that obviously support classroom instruction. One wall displays content-area vocabulary words arranged alphabetically in clusters. Student work adorns a noticeboard on the back wall. All students are actively engaged. Visitors to the class immediately notice several students sitting on a rug, independently reading books they have selected from the classroom library. Three pairs of students are doing partner reading where they can elect to read a paragraph or a page aloud or pass their turn. They have been taught to read only loud enough for their partner to hear so that they don't disturb other students, who are writing at their desks. They are all writing in journals, composing their own step-by-step explanation for the process of long division. Three students are seated at the computer, surveying the Internet for information related to an upcoming studies of society and the environment project.

After about fifteen minutes, Mr Benson engages all students in a role-play in which they take turns acting out their content-area vocabulary words. The room is filled with laughter as students take turns selecting a given word and trying to get the class to guess the word as they pantomime it. The lesson plan describes a variety of whole-class and small-group activities that have students reading, writing, listening and talking. This is a classroom the visitors are reluctant to leave.

These are two classrooms in the same school but distinctively different from one another. In Mrs Riley's classroom, students are engaging in the artificial act of completing countless worksheets, in the hopes that this activity will make them better learners. In Mr Benson's classroom, authentic tasks ensure that students not only develop the ability to read, but a love of reading as well. After all, students who do not choose to read are no better off than those who do not know how.

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Phonemic awareness



Phonemic awareness should be playful, engaging, interactive, and social.

– Yopp, 1995

A phoneme is defined as the smallest unit comprising spoken language. In the English language, there appear to be almost fifty phonemes. In fact, before excited parents hear their baby say ‘mama’ and ‘dada’, that baby has already said forty-seven other phonemes (P. Leach, 1995, as cited on *Prime Time Live*, ABC News). Unfortunately, none of the other phonemes the baby said gain quite the attention of those two magic words that all parents love to hear.

Alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness – *the ability of the student to focus on or manipulate phonemes in spoken words* – have been identified by correlational studies as the two best predictors of how well students will acquire reading skills during their first two years of school (National Reading Panel, 2000). Fluency in reading begins when students are capable of hearing and recognising individual sounds in speech, when students know that spoken words and syllables are composed of a series of spoken sounds and when they realise that if one letter is changed in a word, it can completely change the meaning (Teele, 2004).

Instruction in this area should move from the easier skills of phoneme identity and isolation to the more difficult skills of categorisation, blending, segmentation and deletion. A brief description of each skill follows. Phoneme isolation asks students to recognise the individual sounds in one word; for example, *What is the first sound that you hear in the word fast (/f/)?* Phoneme identity requires that students identify the sounds that are alike at the beginning, middle or ending of two or more words. An example would be, *What sound is the same in the words mat, mix and mud?* Phrases that exemplify alliteration are helpful in teaching phoneme identification; for example, *She sells seashells down by the seashore* or *The nice neat night nurse needs new nylons*.

Phoneme categorisation or so-called oddity tasks require a student to determine whether two or more spoken words are the same or different or to identify the odd word in a series of three or more words. Examples of this skill are as follows: *Which word does not belong: tan, van, house, man? Which word does not begin with the same sound as the other words: cat, boy, car, can?* More difficult tasks include the following: *Which of the following words do not end with the same sound: run, can, sat? Which of the following words do not have the same middle sound: pig, sit, lap?*

Phoneme blending requires that students listen for individual sounds and blend them into a known word; for example, *What is the following word: /s/ /p/ /u/ /l/ (spool)?* Segmentation of phonemes occurs when students are asked to count or mark the individual sounds in a word: *How many different phonemes do you hear in the word drip?*

One of the most difficult skills in this area is phonemic deletion or having students recognise what word parts remain when a specific phoneme is removed. An example would be, *What would bread be without the /ead/?*

Although activities will be provided for each of the aforementioned types of phonemic manipulation, research has shown that instruction focusing on only one or two types, such as blending or segmentation, is far superior to that which focuses on several types (National Reading Panel, 2000; Partnership for Reading, 2001). This may be due to a number of factors, including the confusion caused when too many types are taught at one time, the limited amount of time the teacher can spend on any one type, or the student's inability to master the easier manipulations before proceeding to the more difficult ones. The activities that follow will be instrumental in incorporating brain-compatible strategies to help students acquire phonemic awareness skills. Students do not realise that while they are playing games, working with a partner or singing a song, they are actually laying the foundation for the acquisition of reading skills.



RELEVANT RESEARCH

When the twenty-six letters of the alphabet are introduced prior to the sounds, twelve of the phonemes are not included (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

Poetry strengthens students' oral and written language abilities, expands their knowledge of content and adds to their knowledge of social skills (Pinnell & Fountas, 2004).

Hearing syllables in words has been considered the bridge between children's ability to hear a phoneme and their ability to hear a word. This skill has been identified as a predictor of future reading ability (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

Phonemic awareness activities should be playful and interactive and are best taught within the context of authentic reading and writing and not in isolation (Anderson, 2004; Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

Students acquire phonemic awareness best when they are taught using a wide variety of teaching methods that match their learning styles (Teele, 2004).

When the brain is involved in phonemic awareness, oral language neural pathways are reshaped and will be used later for reading (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004).

Instruction in phonemic awareness can help improve the reading and spelling abilities of all students including beginning readers and older, less capable ones (Partnership for Reading, 2001).

A well-executed phonemic awareness program should take no more than twenty hours of class time throughout an entire school year with instruction differentiated based on need (Partnership for Reading, 2001).

A number of reading experts attribute reading difficulties in children and adults to a lack of phonemic awareness (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998; Lyon and Fletcher, 2001).

It is better to concentrate on only one or two types of phonemic instruction rather than instructing in several types (Partnership for Reading, 2001).

The connection between phonemic awareness and real reading should be clear and explicit to the student (Partnership for Reading, 2001).

Instructing students in the manipulation of phonemes in words yielded highly effective results whether students were reading words, pseudo-words or comprehending (National Reading Panel, 2000).

When phoneme manipulation was taught with the accompanying letters, children acquired phonemic awareness better than when it was taught without letters (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Children taught to manipulate phonemes with accompanying letters were better spellers than those who were taught phonemes only through speech (National Reading Panel, 2000).

When the brain's angular gyrus is damaged, reading and writing are not possible because it is within this structure that letters are translated into sounds or phonemes (Carter, 1998).

Phonemic awareness should be playful, engaging, interactive and social (Yopp, 1995).

An effective approach for developing phonemic awareness along with word identification and spelling is the use of word boxes (Clay, 1993; Yopp, 1995).

Teachers should be encouraged to stimulate students linguistically with strategies such as storytelling, word games, rhymes and riddles in order to facilitate phonemic awareness (Mattingly, 1984).