Word level reading and spelling

The next step from phonics

Orthographic mapping is the process of storing words (symbols, sounds and meaning) into our long-term memory.

This means both **recognising** (reading) and **retrieving** (spelling) written language at the word level.

This handout aims to give you some strategies to support this stage of learning further.

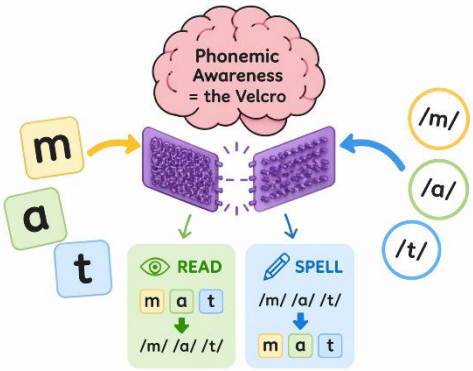
Phonemic Awareness and Ehri's Theory

Phonemic awareness is our ability to detect and manipulate speech sounds. A helpful way to think about Ehri's theory of reading development is that phonemic awareness acts like the "Velcro" that makes reading and spelling stick.

- **Letters (graphemes)** are one side of the Velcro
- **Sounds (phonemes)** are the other side
- **Phonemic awareness** is what helps the two sides attach

If a child can clearly perceive and work with sounds in words (e.g. /m/ /a/ /t/), the "Velcro" is strong. They can:

- ✓ **Connect letters to sounds when reading**
- ✓ **Pull the right letters from memory when spelling**



If phonemic awareness is weak, the Velcro doesn't stick well. Letters and sounds don't reliably connect, making reading and spelling much harder and more effortful. Phonemic awareness allows children to *anchor* letters to sounds so they can store and recall words efficiently.

The stronger the phonemic awareness, the more likely a child can succeed at the word level with reading and spelling tasks.

- For students that need it, provide targeted 1:1 intervention, daily.
- Using letters within the task can support learners with weak working memory, but it also adds to the cognitive load if their letter knowledge is not robust.

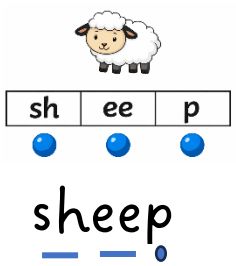
Guessing vs decoding

Learners should *never* be encouraged to guess, or use cues other than the letters present, to determine the word. Guessing is *never* a helpful compensatory strategy for beginning readers. Books they are using to learn to read should only have words that they are able to decode (e.g. '*decodable readers*', not '*predictable readers*'). If they are reading other ("authentic") books, you can tell them words that they can't decode yet.

- Teach your learner about **guessing vs decoding**, to develop their awareness of the difference.
- Play practice games where the learner gains tokens for decoding and loses them to the adult every time they guess.
- Reading practice at home also needs to support sounding out rather than guessing.
- Learners might *check* that the word they have read makes sense. This means they decode the word first, *then* think about if it makes sense in the sentence. This builds comprehension skills while making sure they learn to read well.

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Elkonin Boxes



Elkonin boxes support a learner to map the sounds they can perceive onto the page. They support an understanding that **digraphs** (two letters = 1 sound) and **trigraphs** (3 letters = 1 sound) represent just one sound.

- It is helpful for the learner to do lots of practice of this, with words that they can segment into sounds.
- Children can also draw a line/dot for each sound they perceive in a word, which is helpful if they don't yet know the correct spelling pattern for that sound.

Good font tip:
Phonics Sound Button Font

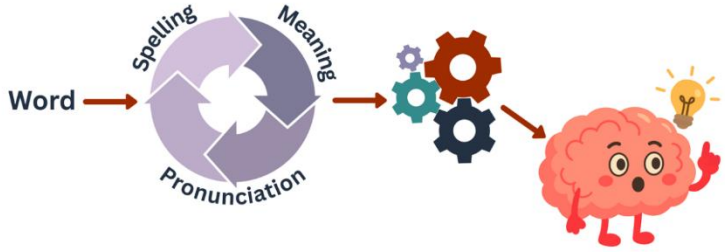
Word Chain Tasks

Learners may benefit from **word chain**, or 'switch it' activities to support discrimination and manipulation of vowels and consonants. For example *cat → cot → pot → pat → pit → sit*. Note: only one *sound* changes at a time. Depending on the learner's level, you might have them changing *two letters* but *one sound*. For example: cat → cot → shot → shop → ship → rip. You can also do this as an auditory task, using coloured shapes instead of letters.

- These tasks can be completed with letter tiles/magnets.
- Control the number of choices, as this allows you to support the cognitive load.
- If the learner is able, use of a pen and wipe-board spellings is more powerful than using tiles/magnets.

Word meanings and vocabulary

When children learn to read and spell, they don't remember words just by how they look on the page. Instead, they build strong connections between sounds, letters, and **meaning**. This process is known as **orthographic mapping**, and vocabulary plays a vital role in making it work.



A word's spelling, meaning and pronunciation are knitted together in long term memory for easy access when reading and writing.

A word is much easier to remember when it has meaning. If a child knows what a word means, their brain has something to "attach" the spelling to. Without meaning, the word is just a string of letters.

Meaning acts like glue, helping the spelling stick in memory.

Spelling relies on the same memory system as reading. When children understand a word:

- They are more likely to remember its correct spelling
- They can self-check by asking, "Does this look right for the word I mean?"

The written word is representing a spoken meaning. Some words sound the same when spoken but mean different things ("homophones"). This difference in meaning is reflected in the spelling e.g.

sail vs sale; meet vs meat; be vs bee

Parents and carers play an important role in developing vocabulary for reading success.

- Talk about new words during everyday activities
- Explain unfamiliar words while reading together
- Use rich, descriptive language rather than simplified alternatives
- Encourage children to ask about words they don't know
- Link new words to real experiences
- Talking about words that sound the same but are spelt differently.

Evidence based digital practise:

- Nessy
- GraphoGame
- Touch-type Read and Spell
- Reading Dr: Spelling sounds 1, Blending sounds 1, Word builder.

By building strong vocabulary knowledge, we are helping children create the solid mental word maps they need for confident, skilled spelling and reading.

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