

### Listening Skill or How to learn phonemic awareness.

Sometimes things seem self-evident even when they are, in reality, wide of the mark. For instance, the idea that we can hear all the sounds of our language all the time in our everyday speech. We think that all we have to do is say something and everyone else will hear its constituent sounds, clear and distinct. This is absolutely not so, however, as is shown by physical analysis of conversational speech. The details of language are considerably mangled and blurred when we talk. Words fracture, or merge; boundaries wobble and disappear. Many sounds are swallowed altogether. We do not say *the cat sat on the mat* – we say something more like 'ca' sa' oth' ma'. We believe we hear the 't' in cat but that is because we are already good spellers and know that it is there, despite the fact that conversationally it is usually not, in fact.

As Adams (1990 p.69) says '...however psychologically real a phoneme may be, it is acoustically evanescent... [phonemes] are not acoustically discrete.' and '...it is not just that knowledge of a word's spelling can influence the way in which people 'hear' its sounds but also the very likelihood that they will 'hear' a sound at all.' (ibid. p.401). Speech does not deliver phonemes reliably; frequently it hardly delivers them at all. Adams again: '...there is no way to know that, say, the word cat is composed of three phonemes except by having, somehow, learned that it is.' (ibid. p.69) We learn *phonemic segmentation* largely by learning to spell. (Read Adams 1990 pp. 65-81 for an elegant summary of the debate, as well as Goswami and Bryant 1990 and Scholes 1998.)

Normal speech, then, is astonishingly fuzzy and imprecise. The all-important phoneme isn't reliably there. Listeners have to rely more on other cues such as context, body language and prediction, and rely correspondingly less on precision listening. Speech criteria are woopy; too woopy, in fact, to be reliable for spelling purposes. Listeners get used to deploying an approximate, imprecise criterion when listening to speech, a laid back criterion well suited to the approximate, imprecise signal coming in. To 'hear' the spelling truth, to come to know the real correspondences between the sounds of the language and its lettering, a literacy student needs to learn to apply a tighter criterion.

It's not, incidentally, that he can't do this precision listening. He is not suffering from any 'phonological awareness deficit'. In some circumstances he will listen much more carefully to detail, as do we all, and will be able to discriminate it as well as the next man. The problem is that he doesn't need to do this when deciphering speech, so he doesn't exert himself to do so. (Nature always deploys the most economical option to any end.) What a literacy student has to do is to learn that he needs to apply precision listening (of which he is perfectly capable) in the literacy context, when trying to 'hear' candidate spellings, actually or silently.

I called this aptitude 'listening skill' when I was a rookie tutor, before I was sufficiently educated to have heard the term 'phonemic awareness', which is what it actually is.

I am not a phonics fanatic by any means, but spelling and sound are related and a legitimate strategy, when seeking a candidate spelling, is to replay the word as its sounds, mentally or actually, and listen to the result. As we have just seen, though, you have to do this much more accurately and carefully than when in smeary, everyday conversational mode. The mental ear must be 'tuned up' for spelling far more than it is for talk. This purposeful induction of precision listening, this exercising of the mental ear, turns out to be the teaching of phonemic awareness.

And phonemic awareness is easily taught. As a novice tutor, I could dimly see the need for deliberately accurate listening, for conscious improvement of discrimination. What I did not initially suspect is how easily this can be taught, or learned. I did not see how fundamental the skill was, and how, once deliberately learned in one context, it would readily generalise to others. It surprised me how much difference it made to performance, and to confidence, cheaply and in such a short time. Using the technique was a real eye-opener for me.

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My method goes like this:

1. Make lists of words. Each word in the list should contain only one of two or three alternative sounds which you know your student confuses and needs to distinguish.

For example: a list might exercise the ear in distinguishing between the sounds of “cl” and “cr”, or those of the “short e” and the “short i”.

In the first case your list might read “cream, climb, crumb, clean, cliff, creek, clone, criminal ...and so on.

In the second case your list might go “will, well, till, bill, end, spend, better, hit, blister, bitter ...and so on.

2. Make the student absolutely aware of the need for detailed listening, that this can be learned and of how this exercise goes in practice.
3. Tell the student which letter or letter patterns to listen for in an upcoming list. (The student may jot them down as an aide memoire if this is felt helpful – eg “s/sh” or “er/y” or a/o.)
4. Read the list aloud to the student one word at a time. All the student does is to listen and declare, after each word, which of the letter patterns it contains. The student sings out, for example, either “bee / ell” or “bee / ar”, (if the list is rehearsing bl & br) or perhaps “eye / enn / gee” or “why” (if rehearsing –ing or –y endings).

Important note: The student sings out letter names – not just sounds. (Learning to listen carefully is not the same as learning that spelling is primarily a phonic activity!)

Another such: The student is very specifically not asked to do any more than recognise the previously agreed letter patterns, particularly not to spell any of the words. This must be made clear from the very beginning. (Sufficient unto the day ...) The skill to be learned is pure listening, pure aural letter, or letter pattern, discrimination, absolutely nothing more. The lesson to be learned is that this higher level of discrimination is to be deliberately deployed around spelling.

Yet another such: place the student under no additional pressure – such a choice exercise is stress enough. Make very sure that you allow good time to assimilate and that the student is happy with the method and can “hear” any errors before banging on. As with any such exercise, if it doesn’t go well and easily, stop.

Keep it light and this will make a cheerful break with big payoffs in terms of learning to listen accurately to demand, and of becoming that precious bit more confidently autonomous.

Making the lists was tedious and ate time. If you would like mine, write to me at [HKerr@aol.com](mailto:HKerr@aol.com).  
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### References

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