

See it, feel it, move it, read it: Reading with all your senses for adult EAL learners

By Heidi Brooks, Canada

Introduction

Ahmed was a highly motivated upper literacy student with fewer than six years' education in his first language. He had good attendance and a positive attitude about school and learning. His speaking and listening skills were strong, and he communicated effectively. At the time, Ahmed was employed at a local pizza shop, and his goal was to get his Canadian citizenship and open a family business.

I first met Ahmed when his teacher referred him for reading support. She observed him struggling to read basic CVC words—single-syllable three-phoneme (sound) word that follows the pattern of consonant sound, vowel sound, consonant sound. He had trouble distinguishing words like *pat* and *pit*, for example. His spelling, reading fluency, comprehension and writing were also a challenge. We determined there was a large gap between his oral communication and his ability to read, write and spell.

Phonological awareness and reading difficulties

I spent 17 years as School Psychologist in the public school system before I became an EAL Instructor at the *Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia* (ISANS) five years ago. My experience working with children and youth in the school system and now with adult learners at ISANS told me that gaps like the one displayed by Ahmed could be a sign of dyslexia, a specific reading disability impacting reading. Research has shown that there are a few areas of processing in the brain that are most often linked to dyslexia, the most common of these is phonological awareness. If you teach reading, it is important to have a good understanding of phonological awareness as empirical evidence has shown that it is one of the most essential skills in reading acquisition for both children and adults (Fracasso et al., 2014; Moats & Tolman, 2009).



Phonological awareness is a broad term referring to an ability to consciously attend to and manipulate the sounds in words and language. This includes skills like recognizing rhyme, segmenting sentences, breaking down words into their sounds, identifying individual sounds, deleting or adding sounds, taking the words apart and putting them back together and blending the sounds. All these processes happen in the brain. It's important to note, these processes are auditory in nature and occur independent of print.

For example, when presented with the word *map*, a learner with well-developed phonological awareness should be able to identify a rhyming word (*sap*), state what remains when the initial phoneme /m/ is removed (*ap*), identify the final sound (/p/), and segment the word into its sounds (/m/-/a-/p/). Tasks such as these are commonly used for assessment and instruction.

An informal assessment using these types of activities revealed that Ahmed experienced significant difficulty with phonological awareness, suggesting that deficits in this area contributed to his reading and spelling challenges.

Once again, my experience working with children with learning disabilities showed that the most effective method for teaching phonological awareness was a multisensory approach. This means using the senses of sight, touch and movement to teach students to hear and manipulate the sounds in words. This approach is effective because more neural pathways are activated in the brain, and a deeper level of processing is achieved.

Multisensory instruction in practice

Although substantial evidence supports multisensory instruction for children with dyslexia, limited research exists examining its application with adult EAL learners. Despite this gap in literature, I felt that there was a high likelihood of success with Ahmed using a multisensory approach to improve his phonological awareness. Over the next few months, I worked with him one-on-one, twice a week for an hour for a total of 20 hours.

He made steady improvements over these weeks and by the end was able to demonstrate good phonological awareness skills and decode 3 – 5 letter words using both short and long vowels. His spelling accuracy improved, and although his reading fluency remained slow, he was able to decode words with accuracy and represent phonemes correctly in writing. Continued reading practice of authentic texts led to gradual gains in fluency.

In my current role as Accessibility Instructor, I work with adult learners in literacy and mainstream classes ranging from Foundation L to CLB 3. Many of these students are suspected of having dyslexia. Over the



last two and a half years I employed many of the same strategies I used with Ahmed with over 20 students who were referred due to weak reading, spelling or writing skills. Currently, I work with students one-on-one and in small groups (up to 5) for two one-hour sessions per week. Through structured and explicit instruction, students learn how to discriminate sounds, say and write the sounds in isolation and in the context of words, sentences and books. After building a strong foundation, we move on to higher level phonics concepts that allow them to read and understand more complex words.

What does literacy instruction look, feel, and sound like when EAL students use all their senses? Above all else, phonological awareness requires listening. For some students, this can be difficult. A multisensory approach scaffolds sight, touch and movement to teach students to hear and differentiate the sounds in words and later how to manipulate these sounds for the purpose of reading and spelling.

One multisensory approach is explicitly teaching students movement and physical action to help them learn letter sounds. Let's say a student is learning the sound /b/. I physically mime the movement of bouncing a ball with my hand while saying, /b/, *ball*. I ask the student to copy my movements and words. On top of that, a visual element can be added by showing a photograph of a ball, while continuing to say, /b/, *ball*. The combination of saying the letter sound and the complete word, the action of bouncing a ball and the visual of the picture layer to form a multisensory approach. Generally, this technique is used in small group settings with Foundation L learners who are still working on learning letter names and sounds. This approach is also used by classroom instructors so the whole class can benefit.

When I began working with Ahmed, he was a CLB 2L student, so he already possessed a good knowledge of most of the consonant sounds. However, he struggled with hearing the difference between the short vowel sounds reflected in his reading and writing. For example, reading or writing *mat* instead of *mit*. This is one of the most pervasive difficulties I see amongst students, and I spend a lot of time teaching this skill.

To address this challenge, each short vowel sound was paired with a key word and a physical action:

- /a/ hold an apple and eat it while saying, *apple*
- /i/ make the left-hand look like a round cup and use the pointer finger on the right hand to point *in* the cup, while saying *in*
- /o/ use the right hand to turn a light switch *on* and *off* while repeating these words
- /e/ crack an egg using the right hand to hold the egg and both hands to separate the shell as if putting it in a bowl while saying *egg*
- /u/ point toward the sky and say *up*



Using this method, Ahmed was able to learn to pronounce, read, and spell all the short vowel sounds. With my small group instruction, this sound action routine became a predictable component at the beginning of each session until students showed mastery with short vowel sounds.

Sound boxes and blending boards

Once Ahmed could recognize and produce several consonant sounds and at least one vowel, I introduced more complex phonological awareness skills by adapting and integrating versions of two well-known multisensory tools (Elkonin *sound* Boxes and blending boards). The *sound box* was developed by Psychologist D. Elkonin in the 1960's to help young children develop phonological awareness skills by segmenting spoken words into individual sounds. The blending board does not have a single author but is central in the Orton Gillingham approach.

Ahmed practiced identifying, ordering, adding, deleting, segmenting and blending sounds using these adapted sound boxes. You will recall that phonological awareness is an auditory process. The Sound Box shown in Figure 1 acts as a manipulative tool to practice phonological awareness by adding sight, touch and movement to an auditory process. By using this method regularly Ahmed gradually learned to practice the skills of phonological awareness by using different colors to see the difference between consonants and vowels for spelling and reading. Also, by seeing and touching the letters while listening to and reading the sounds, additional sensory pathways could be laid for deeper learning. Over time, this process helped him hear the sounds in words. This temporary support was gradually reduced as he learned the new concept and skills and independence developed.

Once Ahmed developed proficiency with the first sound box process, he practiced CVC word dictation in a chain (or ladder) format using the multilevel sound box shown in Figure 2. This is a strategy that is commonly used to teach phonics, often using nonsense and real words. The idea is that the cognitive load is minimized since the student can use the previous word as an anchor. Words are dictated by changing only one sound at a time. Once again, short vowels are shown in a different colour, in this case yellow, to visually identify them as vowels. Writing can also be a multisensory technique in this way as it engages all senses (hearing, sight, feeling and movement) at the same time.

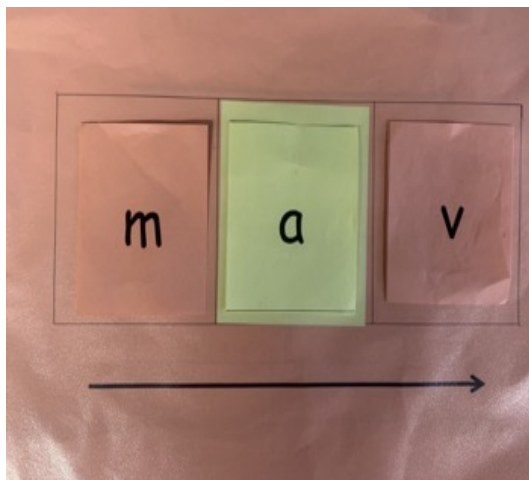


Figure 1: This first Sound Box has removable letters. This is used to teach students to identify and manipulate sounds (phonemes). Vowels are identified in yellow to differentiate them from the consonants.

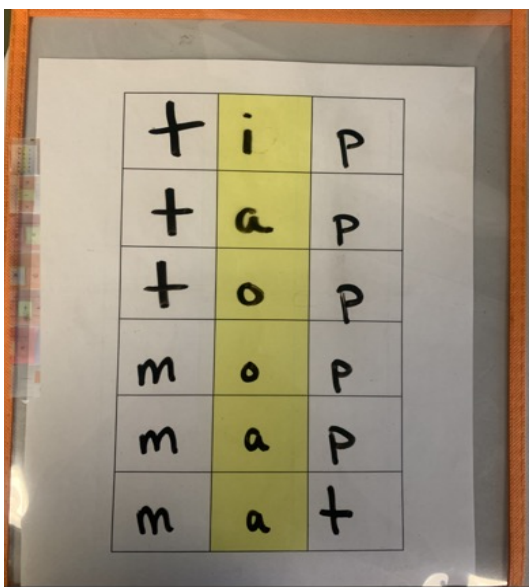


Figure 2: This chaining Sound Box is used with a plastic pocket (or sheet protector) and erasable marker. It can be used in the same way as the first sound box but can also be used to practice listening for just one sound change (called chaining) as is shown above.

Outcomes and implications

These are a few examples of multisensory approach to teaching phonological awareness that have been successful with the adult EAL learners at ISANS. I highly recommend a slow, measured approach when using these tools to avoid cognitive overload. When teaching the short vowels, for example, start with the short a, and work towards ninety percent mastery before introducing the short i. Then constantly assess to ensure previous skills have been maintained. If you teach literacy, this approach should be familiar, limiting the amount of new information that is taught, while always circling back to review previously learned material. This is good teaching practice at all levels.

Following individual intervention, I often model the same strategies with the learner's whole class. This creates the opportunity for the referring instructor to use the technique to the benefit of all students and the learner that required the intervention. In the case of Ahmed, this experience significantly increased his confidence because he was able to assist peers and participate more actively in oral reading. All the strategies I have outlined here can be implemented in a classroom setting.

I continue to build and revise my reading intervention program and the tools I use with my learners to match their needs. I recently completed the Orton Gillingham (OG) classroom educator course and in turn have implemented and adapted many new multisensory approaches with positive success for students requiring additional, individualized support. Lately, I've enjoyed sharing these ideas with colleagues across Canada in workshops for ISANS, TESL Nova Scotia, BCTEAL and TESL Ontario.

Reading may never be easy for Ahmed, as I suspect he likely does have dyslexia, but he is happy, doing well and continues to improve his reading and writing skills. I am happy to say that Ahmed graduated from his literacy program and has recently completed CLB 3 and is currently working on CLB 4. He is getting closer to his goal of Canadian citizenship.

References

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Author Bio



Heidi Brooks is an Accessibility Support Instructor at Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia. She holds a Master's degree in School Psychology and spent 17 years working as a public-school psychologist where she primarily focused on assessing learning and behavior. She began her career as a literacy instructor at ISANS before moving into her current role. She provides reading and writing support to adult learners using a multisensory approach based on best practice in learning disability research. She recently completed The Orton-Gillingham course (Classroom Educator Level) where she learned many new strategies to support adult EAL learners struggling with reading, spelling, and writing.