Sound Expectations: Revisiting Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words to Foster Acceleration

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Editor’s note: Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words is a key component of Clay’s observation instruments and of teaching procedures in Reading Recovery lessons. Moreover, it is a critical component of Clay’s theory of reading and learning to read and write and an essential element of the strategic activities involved in becoming literate. This article discusses theory and procedures that inform teaching decisions relative to hearing and recording sounds in words throughout Reading Recovery lessons. A summary set of questions is offered to support teacher reflection and analysis of children’s progress and their instructional support of that progress.

Introduction
Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words (HRSIW) is one task within Clay’s An Observation Survey of Literacy Achievement (2006) and an important set of procedures within the lesson format of Reading Recovery. In Clay’s theory, it is also a key element of the reading process and a significant contributor to early literacy learning. Those who become Reading Recovery teachers usually have good understanding of HRSIW as an Observation Survey task and as a lesson component, but its role in the reading process and the development of strategic activity may not be thoroughly understood or appreciated. For this reason and for others that will be discussed below, there are sometimes limitations in teaching procedures with HRSIW that can inhibit a teacher’s effectiveness in accelerating children’s learning.

The underlying capability for HRSIW is phonological awareness — the ability to focus on the sounds of language rather than their meaning; more specifically that ability is phonemic awareness, a specialized form of phonological awareness, which is the ability to focus on the individual sound segments in words and phrases. Evidence of these abilities in young children can range from low to high levels. For example, an interest in alliteration and rhyme signals a beginning level of phonological awareness, whereas, the ability to manipulate word segments by omitting them or transposing them represents a high level of phonemic awareness (e.g., omitting the /t/ from the oral word stand to say sand). HRSIW involves a fairly high level of phonemic awareness plus the knowledge of correspondences between sounds and their most common spellings. However, for children who struggle in learning to read and write, awareness of speech sounds often begins at an early level; for example, a child may hear only some sounds in certain word positions and have limited knowledge about how to record these sounds.

Literacy research over the past 30 years has converged on the point that phonemic awareness is a significant element in successful literacy learning and performance (Adams 1990; Liberman & Shankweiler, 1979; Snow, 1998). Debate continues on how much and how quickly to develop this awareness in children’s school careers. However, it is clear that phonemic awareness is an important factor in the ability to learn and retain words, both in reading and in writing (Ehri, 1991; Clay, 2005b, p. 59) and in the development of independent reading ability.

Phonemic awareness receives special emphasis in theories of reading focused on phonics and word reading (Adams, 1991; Moats, 2000). In these theories, phonemic awareness helps establish the ability to relate letters to sounds, which they see as the critical element in word reading. Advocates of these theories favor phonemic awareness training as an intervention to prevent reading failure and as a treatment for children struggling to learn to read. How much, how early, and how effective phonemic awareness is in such interventions is, however, an item of debate.

In Clay’s theory, phonemic awareness plays a more comprehensive role in reading and in writing processes and in the process of becoming literate. Clay defines reading as a process in which readers use information from several sources, including information from text and print and infor-
mation stored in the mind to solve problems in order to create meaning from interactions with text (Clay, 2005b). Along with meaning, concepts about print, and visual perceptual processes, information about the sounds of language and words (phonological information) is a critical source of information, and phonemic awareness is an underlying capability needed in order for that information to be accessed and utilized. In Clay’s theory, all of these sources of information, including the sounds of language, play an important role in strategic activities during reading — monitoring, searching, cross-checking, confirming, and self-correcting. And of course, awareness of sounds plays a significant role in writing, which provides excellent opportunities for children to develop or advance their phonemic awareness and learn more about sound-symbol relationships, particularly when accompanied by skillful tutoring (Clay, 2005b).

The goal of Reading Recovery is to help children become independent learners who progress at an accelerated pace. The ability to hear sounds in words is an important factor in the development of strategic activities; therefore the ability to help children acquire and use this capability is critical in accelerating children’s learning. Effective teaching for HRSIW emanates from increased knowledge of aspects of language and linguistics and from awareness of teaching practices that scaffold assistance to learners based upon their individual strengths, progress, and abilities. This article will discuss some of these issues and put forward some suggestions that may improve the decisions teachers make as they work to foster literacy development, especially for struggling learners.

Appreciate the Importance of HRSIW

If teachers do not understand the fundamental importance of phonemic awareness—if they do not understand that it plays a role in all the strategic activities that enable Reading Recovery children to accelerate their learning—then they may feel little urgency in introducing these activities to children. Sometimes teacher leaders convey the notion that HRSIW is a difficult process; one that is best to introduce a bit later after other routines of the lesson format are well established. At other times, the teachers themselves see this as a difficult topic, one they do not understand well and they postpone its introduction.

Certainly the teacher needs to assess each child’s readiness to begin working with HRSIW. A very few children may need to work through affective or communication issues before they attempt to focus so narrowly on small elements of language. Nevertheless, most children can and should begin working on this process very early in their series of lessons. Certainly they should begin early on activities to assess and develop phonological awareness and be prepared to move on to phonemic awareness as soon as the child appears ready. Probably the best recommendation is to start as soon as Roaming Around the Known (the first 10 sessions) has been completed.

In Clay’s theory, meaning, concepts about print, visual perceptive processes, and the sounds of language and words play important roles in strategic activities during reading — monitoring, searching, cross-checking, confirming, and self-correcting.
Recognize the Difficulty of Identifying Phonemes

One reason teachers might make HRSIW hard for the child is that they might not appreciate the difficulty for beginners (nonliterate persons) of identifying phonemes. In fact, phonemes are not distinct, unvarying, and discrete entities. First of all, phonemes are not absolute sounds; they alter their form in different word contexts. The sounds fall within certain limits, but it is not a simple process to learn, for example, that the various sounds of /t/ are all examples of /t/. Initial /t/, as in top, is aspirated (accompanied by a puff of air), but the /t/ within a cluster, such as in stop, is not aspirated, and could easily be identified as /d/. The consonant /t/ occurring between two vowels, as in water, in some dialects receives just a bare flap of the tongue that doesn’t sound much like the /t/ in top, and in other dialects may emerge as a glottal stop (for example, bottle sounds like /bo-ull/ with a stoppage of breath in the center). And final /t/, in words like got and put and test may sound quite different in different dialects — sometimes almost disappearing. Adults tend to be unaware of these subtle variations in language sounds because they have learned how to spell these words, and the consistent spelling tends to convince them that the sounds are the same.

A second reason that phonemes are difficult for children (or any beginner in literacy) to identify is that they do not occur as separate sounds in words. Instead, they are blended with the sounds around them, carrying features of those neighboring sounds as well as the features associated with their own identity. Different vowel sounds can make a neighboring consonant sound quite variable. For example, the three words, keep, cop, and cool all begin with the consonant /k/ (despite spelling differences), but the different vowels change the placement of the /k/ in the mouth from high in the palate to low in the throat. Also, different consonants can make vowels sound quite different. Short A followed by an unvoiced consonant (in words such as back, bat) may sound different from the /a/ in words such as bag, or ban (followed by a voiced consonant)3. Children may well be confused by these variations, while adults, knowing the spellings, have usually grown insensitive to those differences.

Clay advises us to make it easy for the child to learn. However, there are ways in which the task of HRSIW may be presented that can make it difficult for a child, resulting in feelings of insufficiency and a dislike for the task. Clay has provided a set of activities to ease children into the process. Clay advises us to make it easy for the child to learn (Clay, 2005a, pp. 32–38). However, there are ways in which the task of HRSIW may be presented that can make it difficult for a child, resulting in feelings of insufficiency and a dislike for the task. For many (perhaps most) children who enter Reading Recovery, progressing directly to the use of boxes to represent individual phonemes can be too challenging. Clay has provided a set of activities to ease children into the process of paying attention to the sounds of words rather than their meaning ( phonological awareness), so it is important to begin with those tasks for almost literate adults are quite sure it is there because they know the spelling. Beginning readers and writers, on the other hand, are often unaware of the /t/ in such words; they may be attending primarily to the tongue position as they say the words. Similar effects can be noted with /l/ and /r/.

English is a phonetic language; however, the English spelling system fits rather loosely and irregularly onto the phonology of the language. Adults who have learned to write and spell English lose their sensitivity to these variations and nuances. Their knowledge of the spelling system can cause them to be unaware of sound differences that children might notice and to ignore variations in children’s pronunciations of words that affect how children hear sounds in words.

Make It Easy for Children to Learn

Clay advises us to make it easy for the child to learn (Clay, 2005a, pp. 32–38). However, there are ways in which the task of HRSIW may be presented that can make it difficult for a child, resulting in feelings of insufficiency and a dislike for the task. For many (perhaps most) children who enter Reading Recovery, progressing directly to the use of boxes to represent individual phonemes can be too challenging. Clay has provided a set of activities to ease children into the process of paying attention to the sounds of words rather than their meaning (phonological awareness), so it is important to begin with those tasks for almost
all children so that they experience success from the start.

In these early activities, teaching proceeds through demonstration and careful observation and control of what the child is attending to (Clay, 2005b, pp. 72–73). The child must hear the word spoken by the teacher and the child must say the word himself as he tries to analyze it into component sounds, and then learn to listen to what he is saying in a new way. Children begin by identifying syllables because this is much easier and the sound breaks are clearer. Children are encouraged to clap the syllables of words because this relates physical motion to the sound peaks and emphasizes the breaks (counting syllables, however, is both unnecessary and distracting). Letters and boxes are not used initially so that children's attention can be focused clearly on sounds. Pictures representing the spoken word might be helpful to help assure the child is thinking of the same word the teacher is saying, but teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that children may name or pronounce the word differently from the teacher. If the child is distracted by visual stimuli, the teacher might even ask him to say the word with his eyes closed.

When the child is clearly attending to the sounds of words and is successful in clapping and hearing syllables, the teacher shifts his attention to the sounds of individual phonemes within words. Teachers need to remember that these sounds do not actually exist in isolation; they are not discrete sounds, rather focal points of sound that may be influenced by and blended with other sounds. Pictures are used to make clear to the child the word in question. The teacher demonstrates and then asks the child to articulate the word slowly and concentrate attention on sounds within the word. The teacher may stress and emphasize a sound (but not break the word unnaturally into fragments) so the child can hear it better and even use a mirror to show the child what his mouth is doing as he makes certain sounds. Attention and awareness are the goal, and these activities are designed to facilitate this.

The next step involves the introduction of visual boxes and movable tokens as a representation of the individual phonemes of the word. The teacher again demonstrates through slow articulation, while simultaneously pushing a token into a box for each focal sound (phoneme) as she comes to it. The child is then asked to do the same thing and try it with other words. The child and teacher share and alter the tasks of saying and pushing until the child demonstrates control—not only of the task—but also of the concept that he is listening for individual sounds within a word, and until he is able to identify at least one or two sounds through this process. He does not need to be able either to spell or write that sound yet or to identify all the sounds of the word. What matters is that the concept is established and some initial success has been experienced. In her most recent revision of teaching procedures, Clay (2005b) says that tokens should no longer be used beyond this point, except for occasional difficulties in sorting out a hard-to-hear sound (e.g., the sound in a blend such as the /l/ in play or the /t/ in stop) or for lapses in the child's performance or understanding. The tokens serve as a tangible, physical representation of the idea of individual, component sounds. Once the idea is grasped, the token may become more of a distraction than a way of focusing attention on the identity of sounds. Tokens may also inhibit the transfer from physical/tangible processing to mental processing, which is the ultimate goal.

One way to help children begin the process of HRSIW is to choose clear examples to work on. Single-syllable words with single consonants that have one common sound (words in the patterns of CVC) are the best place to start.

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Scaffold Instruction to Support Learning

Providing the right support to a learner at the best time, in an effective way, is the elusive goal Reading Recovery teachers pursue. Traditional ideas and practices about teaching and learning may persist, however, and make the task of HRSIW difficult for children. One still prevalent view of teaching is that learning occurs by holding children to the standard of accurate performance: If they are incorrect, they should do the task again to get it right, and if they still aren’t right, being told the answer (and rehearsing) will lead to learning. For children who have difficulty acquiring a new form of mental processing, making accurate performance the goal from the start can have very negative effects. The learning goal needs to be acquisition of the process, not getting the word written correctly on the practice page. Words should be written correctly on the story page itself, but the teacher may need to write words for the child or give considerable help early on in order for that to occur.

If a child is just beginning the process of attending to sounds in words, a breakthrough may come with awareness of one dominant sound in a word. To ask him to continue to listen for other sounds at this point may put him again in a situation of failure — such as he has been experiencing in the classroom up to this point. Teachers need to be careful not to ask children to do tasks that are quite clearly beyond their capability at any point in time, and they need to acknowledge and celebrate successes and use those as beginning points for continued growth. Teachers need to realize that children may begin identifying sounds primarily on the basis of one feature of a sound. For example, the hissing quality (sibilance) of /sl/ or /fl/, or the placement of the lips and tongue in pronouncing a consonant may be the child’s clue, and he may confuse sounds that are similar in that regard (e.g., identify /g/ as a /kl/ or call an /fl/ a /vl/).

Teachers need to guard against being too helpful to children, creating a dependence upon the teacher rather than independence. The procedures on pages 73–74 in Clay’s text (Clay, 2005b) are intended to make a difficult task accessible for children who have not yet been able to hear sounds in words. Each time a new learning plateau is addressed (e.g., working with boxes, hearing sounds in sequence, switching to letter boxes, etc.) procedures are suggested that can help the teacher give clear demonstrations and direct the child’s attention. However, procedures need to change over time as the child’s abilities change.

The teacher needs to be aware of where each particular child is in the process of learning and using the ability to hear sounds in words, and she needs to support this learning in all parts of the lesson. Her decisions to offer or withhold support should always be informed by careful observation of indicators that might signal the child’s developing awareness of new things about language and print.

Be Sensitive to Child Language

Children need to become aware of the sounds of the words they want to write — which means they are identifying sounds in words in their own language, which may be at variance with the teacher’s language. There are several factors that contribute to such variance. One reason for difference is the persistence of immature, child-like sound productions among many children, even after they enter school. Some children struggle with the production of particular consonants (/fl/ and /sl/ are notorious for this); many pronounce clusters with /sl/ or /fl/ (often called “blends”) in ways that differ, but which may not be noticed by adults (for example train is pronounced almost as /chrain/ and dress is pronounced as if it were /press/). Patterns such as these tend to be somewhat common, though not all children will have them; therefore the teacher needs to be sensitive to individual differences in how children pronounce words.

A second important reason for variance of child language from teacher language is dialectic variance. Many children come from homes in which the language spoken by the family differs noticeably from the language of the teacher and the school. It may be a different language—such as Spanish, or Hindi, or Croatian—or it may be a slightly different dialect of English. Dialects tend to be mutually comprehensible and based upon the same orthography (spelling), but the word forms may be slightly different and the sounds themselves may be noticeably different.

As children pronounce the words they are trying to write, such differences (both immaturities and dialect differences) will become apparent and the teacher needs to decide how to respond. If the child writes the word (or word part) just the way he says it (for example “dat” for that, “teef” for teeth, or “screet” for street), the teacher should be pleased that
the basic process (becoming aware of sounds) is developing nicely. The general rule to guide her responses should be: “That’s how it sounds, but this is the way we write it.” In cases of developmental immaturities (such as “wed” for red or “chrip” for trip), the teacher needs to know whether this is an articulation issue that is still beyond the child’s ability to control. The speech teacher can be a good source of help in sorting this out — don’t hesitate to involve her or him in such cases. If it is a sound that the child can say (but habitually reverts to an immature form), you might ask him to pronounce the word as you do and listen for the sounds. However, even when the child cannot pronounce the sound, he is usually thinking the correct sound in his mind and often will write the correct sound even if he pronounces it differently.

If the variation is dialectic, the teacher should realize that it is not her place to try to change the child’s speech. The long-term goal of education is to expand the child’s language resources to include competence in the dialect favored by and accepted by the school and mainstream organizations. But this will not happen easily or in the early grades. Children should not be made to believe that there is anything wrong with saying “wif” for with — after all, his family may talk that way — but it is always spelled W-I-T-H. Gradually, over several years of reading and writing and listening in and out of school, children will internalize both forms, and when motivation is sufficiently high and conditions are right, they may begin to code switch, that is speak in the two alternate forms in different contexts. Some evidence of code switching can be seen even in first-grade children; however, it is not the teacher’s job — especially the interventionist (the Reading Recovery teacher) — to force this or to think of changing the child’s language from an “incorrect” to “correct” form of English.

Initially, many struggling readers may have very limited alphabet knowledge and knowledge of letter-sound relationships. The choices children make for recording sounds can help the teacher understand how the child is saying the word, what he is hearing, and what he knows about letters and letter-sound relationships. Some children will limit their choices to the few letters they know. Others may use the sounds they hear in letter names as their bridge to recording a sound (Read, 1971). For example, a child may write the word got as G-I-T, choosing I for the vowel sound because the letter name “ay” (I) gives him the same mouth position as the vowel sound in got. One child to whom this author administered the Writing Vocabulary Test depended upon the name of the letter N to get his vowel sound in many words. He wrote “nt” for it, “ns” for is, “knm” for come, and so on. When he finished he said, “Whew, there sure are a lot of N’s in those words!”
Change Over Time in HRSIW

Children must progress through several layers of learning about HRSIW on their way to become independent readers and writers. The initial goal of HRSIW is learning to hear sounds in words and learning how to write letters that represent what you hear. Children will increase their knowledge of letters and letter-sound relationships during this activity, but the overall goals are more complex. Clay tells us:

The main purpose of the activity is to help the child to distinguish
- easy-to-hear sounds
- hard-to-hear sounds
- and common spelling/sound patterns in English
- and the 'quirky' things about spelling in English.
(Clay, 2005b, p. 80)

The teacher will help the child gradually increase the number and word positions of sounds he hears. Gradually she will help him begin to hear and record sounds in sequence, and hear sounds in multisyllabic words and in letter blends and clusters. She should also help the child become more independent by challenging him to use his developing skills as he writes words into the story, rather than simply copying them from the box or the practice page. She can also foster left-right visual and sound analysis of words by having the child make a slow check of words he has written into boxes. Based upon her observations of what a child is able to do in writing and in assembling the cut-up sentence, she can increase or adjust her expectations for the child’s monitoring in reading.

Beginning readers have much to learn about letters and sounds. Clay makes clear however that it is not just letter-sound relationships that we need to foster, but linkages between what we hear and what we see. It is not just links between sounds and how we write them, it is links between letters and words we see (or want to write) and the sounds that may be associated with them. One of the changes teachers need to make in dealing with HRSIW is to “gradually shift from using the question ‘What can you hear?’ to the question ‘What letters would you expect to see?’” (Clay, 2005b, p. 75). Clay goes on to remind us,

The secret of successful instruction in hearing and recording sounds in words is to have a teacher who knows how to help a child ‘hear’ the sounds singly or in clusters, and how to ‘see’ the letter forms and recurrent patterns. The teacher guides the child to the most efficient links between letters and sounds, or clusters and patterns of sound. Being able to do this will improve every aspect of learning to read and write.
(Clay, 2005b, p. 81)

Work done with magnetic letters is not intended as a method of learning sound-symbol associations. However, links between visual and auditory processing can and should be made occasionally as the child works with words in isolation. If the child has solved a word or tried out a new combination, a slow check across the word to connect sounds and letters can be used to validate his work. Such linkages across reading, writing and word-working activities help the child to build a literacy processing system.

Moving Beyond HRSIW

Clay gives us conditions for moving beyond the use of boxes simply to record and write individual letters. If the child knows sound associations for most consonants, writes some vowels, and is hearing sounds in sequence in words (Clay 2005b, pp. 76-77), it is time to introduce letter boxes — a set of boxes representing the number of letters within a word. For example, a word such as chill would merit three boxes in early lessons, but now it merits five boxes. The decision to make these kinds of changes will be informed by the teacher’s close observation of how the child notices things such as silent E at the ends of words and double letter combinations and how the child responds to information she supplies about oddities of the English language, such as unexpected letters (e.g., “ck” at the ends of words) and word varieties such as homophones, etc. (e.g., see and sea, or to, too, and too.)

Even before the concept of letter boxes has been introduced, a child may be ready to try writing a new word by “making it like a word you know.” This calls the child to use the analogy of similar sounds to use similar letters to write a word. This key concept (using analogies) is different from the idea of letter boxes (sounds and spellings are not always equivalent), but it carries over into that new learning as well. If will and tall end in double L, perhaps full does also; of course the child may also extend this idea to words like pencil and learn one more thing about the quirks of English spelling. The main point here is that teachers need to understand that it is counter-productive for children to over-rely on the single strategy of HRSIW to
write words. The teacher’s guidance of the child’s decision making during writing needs to take into consideration his growing awareness of how words work as well his level of strategic activity and abilities and habits of using all sources of information.

Role of HRSIW in Strategic Activity
In Clay’s theory, the ability to hear sounds in words plays a critical role both in learning to write and in learning to read. In writing, hearing and recording sounds is one way to decide how to write a word (writing known words quickly and using analogies from known words and word parts are two other ways of independent solving). In reading, HRSIW is a source of information used in strategic activity, but its role in strategic activity changes over time.

According to Clay, learning to read is facilitated by utilizing the child’s strengths in oral language and ability to grasp and follow meaning in connected text (1991, 2001, 2005a, 2005b). The beginning reader faces the task of relating meaningful oral language to printed language. This process usually begins at the level of one-to-one matching — matching oral words to letter blocks on the page that represent words. This involves an early level of phonological awareness—the ability to identify words and syllables as units in oral language—but not phonemic awareness. It also involves directional orientation, and establishment of the concept of “words” as blocks of letters separated by space, and the ability to “see” or look at print in this way.

Very soon the novice learns a few words and letters which can serve as “footholds in print” (Clay, 2005b, p. 23) to help the child relate oral language to print. The child uses a word known visually (or a letter in a word, like the S in s) to “read” the word, and he may use this information to monitor his reading. He may read a line confidently or he may show some behavioral sign that he recognizes a mismatch between what he said and what he is seeing. Although the child is showing some learned response to a visual form (word or letter), phonemic awareness is most likely not involved at this point.

When the child is able to identify initial sounds in words by using the Elkonin boxes during writing, the teacher can demonstrate checking a reading response by comparing the beginning letter to the beginning sound. This might be done occasionally with final sounds (when initial sounds are still elusive), however, this involves a risk that the child may fixate on final letters — jeopardizing the acquisition of left-to-right processing across printed words. Demonstrating this process on words correctly solved can give the child a feeling of accomplishment.

Reassembling the cut-up sentence provides many opportunities for the teacher to demonstrate, observe, and assess this process. When the child is at an early stage in learning, the teacher needs to make sure that she is writing out the sentence in large, easily readable print. For some children she may even need to mark the words to indicate which is the top and which is the bottom of the word. A child trying to read, “Sam was on the way to …” might be looking at “saw” or “no” or “yam” as he tries to complete this task.
Other opportunities to demonstrate the use of HRSIW to check responses arise after the running record and after other text reading experiences. The teacher needs to realize that she is preparing the child for the strategic activity of monitoring based not only on meaning and language structure, but also on the basis of visual information and sounds represented by letters and letter combinations. The child has already made a response (has read or written the word) and early or easily. The child must have certain knowledge of a sound associated with the letters he is looking at and the ability to use those sounds in combination with the expectations of meaning and language arising from the text, as a trigger to call up a word.

In order to improve ability to do this, children verify or validate responses they have produced while reading the story. A few (one or two and maybe three) carefully selected teaching points during a lesson might be very powerful in helping the child learn how to use his awareness of sounds as a source of information in reading. This can be done when the child has made an incorrect response (the teacher might say, “That makes good sense, but notice something else”) and also after responses that were correctly solved. The ability to use phonemic awareness to monitor and to check responses is an important step on the way to learning how to use sounds to search and generate responses. Becoming more confident and fluent with HRSIW during writing and in reassembling the cut-up sentence also strengthens these associations.

The ultimate goal is that child can mentally hear and identify sounds in words sequentially and that he uses this ability strategically as he solves words in reading and writing texts. For example, if he is reading a story and the meaning and language structure lead him to expect the word dragon (which he has never seen in print before), he should be able to compare the letters he sees against the sounds of the word dragon that he hears in his head. He should also be able to look at a series of letters on the page and see them as something familiar — a letter or letter commonly associated with sounds, perhaps as a common pattern or part of a known word, and be able to use these letter-to-sound links to call up a word that fits into the language and meaning of the text he is reading.

Check on Yourself as a Teacher

The process of teacher decision making to help struggling readers is always complex and will always be somewhat tentative. That process is made easier in Reading Recovery because we promote and foster independence in problem solving beginning in Roaming Around the Known. Independence, of course, allows for impulsiveness and error, so those factors need to be taken into account also as we steer and guide the child’s growing independence along pathways of effective, accelerated learning. It might be useful as you reflect on your teaching and the child’s performance and progress, to consider the following questions concerning this topic of hearing and recording sounds in words and its role in learning to read and write.

1. Are you focusing your decisions on how the child is acquiring the ability to hear sounds in words, rather than a goal of accurate performance — getting the word written correctly?
2. Are you making sure the child is saying (articulating slowly) the word that he is taking to boxes?
3. Are you choosing appropriate words for each child to take to boxes at that point in his development?
4. Are you giving the child too much help (e.g., exaggerating sounds for him beyond the point that he needs this kind of demonstration)?

5. Are you giving enough help to the child so that he feels successful and finds the task easy?

6. Are you making it easy for the child by asking for performance and/or knowledge that is within his capability or range of proximal development?

7. Are you sensitive to the possibility that the child’s errors and approximations may arise from features of the child’s language, such as immature articulation (/cht/ for /tś/, /lw/ for /lj/, etc.), childish word forms (e.g., “horsie” for horse, or “bisgetti” for spaghetti), or other idiosyncrasies?

8. Are you aware of performance differences due to dialect and are you responding to these in ways that respect the speech of the child and the speech community in which he lives?

9. Are you helping the child make links between what he knows and is able to do in writing, in reading, in word work, and in all parts of the lesson?

10. Are you considering the child’s ability to hear sounds in words as a source of information for monitoring, and confirming responses in reading?

11. Are you helping the child move beyond HRSIW as the way to get to new words by learning how to “make it like a word you know” and learning how to use common spelling patterns that fit into letter boxes?

12. Are you observing and assisting the child in developing the ability to “go from letters to sounds” — to search for and use letters and associated sounds to come up with responses to new words?

13. Are you recording and studying the interactions during lessons to build consistency across the parts of each lesson and from lesson to lesson to support the child’s growth?

Careful observation and recording of the child’s performance will help you address these questions, but it is also important to utilize Clay’s texts, your teacher leader, and the help of your colleagues during training, continuing contact sessions, or through special consultations.

**Summary**

Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words is a process that can enable young beginners to move quickly to independence in both reading and writing. It can also enable them to learn more about their language and how it is represented in print and in writing every time they engage in literacy activities with thoughtful engagement. Teaching decisions relative to HRSIW are not easy. They depend upon a teacher’s understanding of several things: Clay’s theory and her discussion and description of procedures; ideas from linguistics and child language development; and how words work in English. And of course, careful observation of each child’s performance and progress, and teaching decisions based upon hypotheses formed through reflection upon these close observations.

**Endnotes**

1 Phonemes are defined as the smallest difference in sound segments that make a difference in meaning. For example, *bat* and *pat* are two different words signaled by the difference between /b/ and /p/.

2 Linguists refer to them as “segments” but by no means do they see them as separated fragments of sound.

3 Dialects strongly affect these kinds of differences. Linguists began referring to “short” vowels as “unglided” vowels, but in many parts of New England the word *man* is pronounced almost as a two-syllable word — /may-un/.

4 One linguist’s daughter asked her parent how to spell *cocoa*, and was insistent that it should not have two Cs because the two sounds of /k/ are different.

5 Careful decision making is involved in doing this, because children differ greatly in their impulsiveness and their resistance to or dependence upon teacher intervention. Errors will be made, both by the child and the teacher.

6 Even very young children usually understand the concept of “word” in oral language, but identifying individual oral words can be very tricky because they are often melded together and distorted in sound within continuous speech.

7 It can be argued that strategies are not taught or learned through direct teaching; however, demonstrations such as have been described here can assist the child in “discovering” a strategy that works and in adding it to his repertoire.
About the Cover

An ESOL student whose first language is Bosnian, Endrina Kasumovic is now a successful second-grade student after Reading Recovery lessons at Simonton Elementary School in Georgia. Endrina finished first grade above grade level and continues to thrive—as noted in this observation by her second-grade teacher, Yasmin Galle:

To look at Endrina, you would not even think that this child is in school, not to mention she is in second grade. This is a little girl in all senses of the word, but her strength comes across in other ways. She is just as tough and as strong as the other kids in the classroom that are twice her size. And she loves to read and write.

The first time I sat with her to do a writing conference, I was blown away at her ability. Because of her scores on the CRCT, she is now part of an enrichment group led by our FOCUS (gifted and talented program) teacher, and I have selected her to be tested for FOCUS as well. Endrina loves to read Froggy books, collect Dora the Explorer items, and has never missed a day of reading and homework. She is a model student and a great peer helper to other ESOL students in my class. She is still reading above grade level and has no trouble doing independent work.

Endrina enjoys reading so much, she begged me to let her read a story to the class once during our read aloud time, and I gave in. My students sat so still for Endrina that I even got somewhat jealous—she is just that respected in the class.

References


About the Author

Noel Jones is an associate professor emeritus of the University of North Carolina Wilmington where he taught from 1977–2003, and also a Reading Recovery trainer emeritus. Before coming to UNCW, he served for 20 years as a classroom teacher, reading specialist, and reading curriculum director. His current research interests are phonological development, phonemic awareness, word learning, and curriculum issues.