

SOUND BOXES

What is it?

Sound Boxes or Elkonin boxes are a tool that you can use to develop a visual representation of the act of segmenting phonemes in a target word. A chart made up of boxes is used as a scaffold to help learners break down words (segment them) and identify the constituent parts (phonemes). Sound Boxes are a valuable resource that you can use to assist readers and spellers in hearing sounds in words. Although sound boxes are dominant in early years' instruction, this activity can also be effective for struggling readers and writers who may be having difficulties identifying sounds in words when they are spelling.

Why is it important?

There is strong research evidence to support the importance of phonemic awareness in learning to read and spell (Ehri & Roberts, 2006, Torgensen & Mathes, 1998). Phonemic awareness does not guarantee reading success, but good readers display competence in this skill and so it is seen as an important area for instruction. Sound Boxes can be adapted to a range of developmental levels. The process draws on and builds students' phonological awareness (the awareness that language is made up of units of sound that can be isolated and identified in the stream of speech) and can impact their ability to write words by listening to the sounds they hear in them. In the Sound Boxes activity, students listen for individual sounds and identify characteristics of each word such as: the number of sounds in the word, the position of those sounds in the word, and the letters that might represent those sounds. On the Sound Boxes chart, each box provides a space for the representation of a single phoneme, or sound (e.g. a single letter sound such as /p/ or a letter combination sound such as /sh/ /th/ /oo/).

Things to consider before starting

Words for analysis should be selected that are close to a child's developmental understanding about words and how they work. For example if a child is still learning single letter sounds then simple consonant-vowel-consonant (cvc) words, like r/a/t or p/o/p should be used. For children who are more advanced, the teacher may choose words with consonant blends (bl) and digraphs (ch). Children at similar developmental levels may be grouped together. Words carefully chosen from familiar text are very useful as they ensure a whole-to-part sequence of instruction and provide the children with a meaningful context for learning the skill.

Steps in a Sound Boxes Session

1. Prepare your resources before gathering the students together. You will need whiteboard constructed or laminated sound boxes, counters, flashcard images, pencils/quick erase markers.
2. Gather students to a common area to introduce the Sound Boxes idea.
3. Explain that you are going to help them listen for sounds in words because this will help them read and spell words more easily.
4. Model the process of segmenting a previously chosen word by slowly articulating the word (stretching the word out) phoneme-by-phoneme. Ensure all sounds are identifiable.
5. Show the students how pushing a counter into a box for each phoneme helps you identify how many and which sounds are in words. You may also describe which sounds you hear at the beginning, middle and end of each word.
6. Once you have done this, have the students join you in the activity. Guide the students to stretch the word with you while the counters are being slid into the boxes from beginning to end of the chart. Take some minutes to reflect on the sounds heard, the order and the process of listening to sounds.
7. Gradually the students should participate in this activity showing more and more independence. Students can practice in pairs or small groups. Allow them to use picture cards of simple words (e.g. hat, pin, dog) and sound-box templates or whiteboards. They should always say the sound and move the counter, taking turns sliding the counters in each box while saying each sound in a word.

Ideas for Extending Sound Box Activities

This activity can be extended to build more sophisticated phonemic awareness skills and, by the inclusion of letters, it can link to phonics instruction and invented spelling.

Example 1: Sound Sequencing

Begin by reading a list of three letter words or showing a group of pictures, all of which have the /n/ sound in them (e.g. nap, pan, ant). Students should listen for the position of the /n/ sound in each word and place a counter in the box where they hear the /n/ sound. They should slide a counter in the first box if they hear the /n/ sound at the beginning of the word; a counter in the middle box if they hear the sound in the middle of the word; or slide it in the last box if they hear the /n/ sound at the end of the word. This activity builds awareness of sound-sequence, which is an important for blending during decoding and spelling.

Example 2: Making Words

You can replace the counters with plastic or magnetic letters and ask students to select the letter they hear and slide it into the box representing that phoneme. In this approach students get the added advantage of seeing the representation of a word build up before them as they sound it out. This activity reinforces the connection between sounds and letters (phonics) and is a great way to work on word building.

Example 3: Have a Go

You can use quick-erase markers to have students record the letters that represent the sounds they hear as they listen to the words. They can do this after pushing counters or instead of pushing them. Recording letters helps students become used to the idea that spelling words is an active problem-solving process that their awareness of sounds in words helps along. Link this explicitly to your Invented Spelling work at writing time and you will find that the two activities reinforce each other.

References

- Ehri, L.C., & Roberts, T. (2006). The roots of learning to read and write: Acquisition of letters and phonemic awareness. In D.K. Dickinson & S.B. Neuman (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (Vol. 2, pp. 113–131). New York: Guilford
- Konza, D (2011) Phonemic Awareness Paper Two: Understanding the Reading Process. South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services www.decs.sa.gov.au/literacy
- Torgensen, J.K., & Mathes, P.G. (1998) What Every Teacher Should Know about Phonological Awareness. Paper prepared for Florida Department of Education: Division of Public Schools. Florida



My Sound Boxes

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Date