

# Should we teach phonemic awareness?

## By Jennifer Chew

In his 1994 book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker, an eminent American professor of linguistics, points out that in casual speech, phonemes are uttered at the rate of 10-15 per second. He also writes that 'Each phoneme's sound signature is colored by the phonemes that come before and after, sometimes to the point of having nothing in common with its sound signature in the company of a different set of phonemes. That is why you cannot cut up a tape of the sound *cat* and hope to find a beginning piece that contains the *k* alone. As you make earlier and earlier cuts, the piece may go from sounding like *ka* to sounding like a chirp or a whistle.' (p. 183)

That tells us that individual sounds in spoken words are not nearly as clear as people who are alphabetically literate think they are. The sounds which we learn to relate to letters are highly stylised or artificial versions of the sounds in spoken words, but most of us don't realise this. Letters influence our thinking about speech-sounds so much that unless we are very careful when we try to analyse phonemes in spoken words, we think in terms of letters rather than strictly in terms of sounds. This may not always be obvious until people make certain types of mistake, such as saying that 'box' has three phonemes when in fact it has four, or that the spoken word 'think' without the /k/ sound is 'thin' when in fact it's 'thing'.

These are real examples from published articles – the authors should have known better as they claimed to be talking about phonemes not letters, but their errors are useful in showing how they were actually relying on letter-sound knowledge.

In fact research on adults who are not alphabetically literate has shown that they have little or no awareness of phonemes in spoken words. This is also true of young children who have not yet learnt to read and write. Some people think this means that we should teach phonemic awareness (PA) without letters as a first step, but this overlooks both what linguists tell us about phonemes and the help that literate people get from letters in thinking about the sounds in spoken words. Without that help, it's difficult for anyone, let alone young children, to become aware of phonemes.

In 2001, an analysis of 52 different studies on PA was published. It was done by Prof. Linnea Ehri and colleagues for the US National Reading Panel, and was entitled 'Phonemic awareness instruction helps children learn to read: Evidence from the National Reading Panel's meta-analysis'. An important conclusion, however, was that 'PA instruction was more effective when it was taught with letters than without letters'. The researchers, like Pinker, point out that 'Sounds are ephemeral, short-lived and hard to grasp'; they go on to say that 'letters provide concrete, visible symbols for phonemes', that this is likely to make things easier for children, and that 'because letters bring children closer to the task of applying PA in reading and spelling, we would expect transfer to be greater when PA is taught with letters'. In fact, they found the effect size for both reading and spelling to be almost twice as large when letters were used than when they were not used.

The best approach is to teach letters and sounds together from the start, and, as soon as children know a few correspondences, to teach them to read words by saying sounds for letters from left to right and blending the sounds. This helps them to start understanding how spoken words are made up of phonemes. Their PA will be letter-sound-based rather than purely sound-based, but this is exactly what they need for reading and spelling purposes.

