

Teaching Early Literacy Skills When Masking in Schools

Since March of 2020, when the COVID pandemic forced schools into remote learning, mask requirements for in-person learning and disruptions to learning through quarantines, educators have scrambled to develop new ways to teach to continue providing quality instruction to students. Primary students in particular, face unique challenges for learning as schools navigate the ramifications of “the new normal.”

Primary educators who teach early reading skills to young students face a unique challenge where masks for all individuals are required: how do we adequately teach the critical foundational skills of phonological and phonemic awareness and phonics when students cannot see our faces?

This document aims to support educators in addressing this challenge to provide targeted, explicit instruction of consonant and vowel phoneme production and phoneme grapheme correspondences in kindergarten and first grade, as well as for struggling students who require additional instruction. Ideally, the suggestions here will provide not only support for individuals making adjustments to instruction for mask requirements, but also a structure for virtual learning in the event students will need to work remotely.

Planning for Instruction

Consider which early literacy tasks require visual support that is impacted by masking. How can we make accommodations to the way we teach to work around this problem? Here are some recommendations:

- 1. Use video.** In a setting where masking is not required, record a short video of yourself introducing the new concept. Make sure your face is centered and easy to see, and keep this brief, explicit, and engaging. Use a similar format for each introduction so that students know what to expect. This can be as simple as using the camera on your computer to record and save, or recording yourself on your cell phone and emailing the video to yourself so that you can display the video on your computer or projector. If you are more tech savvy, you may wish to create a channel to house your videos for future use, or embed your videos into a presentation that can be continued once the video portion is completed.
- 2. Incorporate visual supports.** Pictures or objects provide support to all students during instruction, but are especially helpful for English learners and for students who struggle with phonemic awareness. Using multiple examples of words in which the target sound occurs and providing pictures for support can help students make a connection between the phoneme and key words that contain the sound. Visuals can also be helpful when identifying the place and manner of articulation for the target phoneme, such as picture cards for mouth placement. These can be purchased commercially or made in the classroom.
- 3. Explicitly teach place and manner of articulation when first introducing a consonant phoneme and its corresponding grapheme, and highlight characteristics of vowel phonemes.** While this is always a good practice when introducing phonemes through direct instruction, it is especially important at a time when students may not have visual reinforcement throughout the day and teachers are unable to watch students’ mouths as they produce sounds. Ensuring that instruction includes these elements may correct production errors early on that could cause confusion when reading and spelling.
- 4. Connect phoneme to grapheme while producing the sound.** Provide students a direct connection between the phoneme and the grapheme (letter or letters) that represents it while they can watch you produce the phoneme for visual support. Multiple opportunities to connect the phoneme to the grapheme with practice through airwriting or other multisensory practice will help solidify the connection quickly so students can begin applying the new learning in word level reading and connected text.

Here is an example of what a lesson might look and sound like that incorporates all four components:

“Hello everyone! Today we are going to work with a new phoneme (sound).The new phoneme is /th/. Say it with me: /th/.

We hear the /th/ sound in the beginning of the word:

- “**th**orn” (display a picture). Say it with me: “thorn.”
- “Thumb” (display a picture). Say it with me: “thumb”
- And we hear /th/ at the end of the word “bath.” (display a picture). Say it with me: “bath”. “



“When we make the /th/ sound, what do we do with our mouth?” (Pause to let students produce the sound).
“ Yes. We place our tongue between our teeth.” (demonstrate/picture card)

“Where does the air come from? Does it come out of our mouth, or out through our nose?”
“Yes, the air comes out through our mouth.” (gesture/picture card)



“Is the sound continuous, or does it stop?”
“Yes, The air is continuous; it doesn’t stop unless we stop making the sound.” (gesture/picture card)



“Is our voice box turned on, or turned off? Is there buzzing or no buzzing when we make the sound?”
“Yes, our voice box is turned OFF” (no buzzing). (Place hand on throat/picture card).



Give me a thumbs up if you hear the /th/ sound in the word I say.
Give me a thumbs down if the word does not contain the /th/ sound:

- “Thick” - (thumbs up)
- “Fat” - (thumbs down)
- “Path” - (thumbs up)
- “Thump” - (thumbs up)
- “Tack” -(Thumbs down)
- “Thing” (thumbs up)

“When we want to read or spell a word that contains the /th/ sound, we spell it with two letters! This is called a digraph, two letters that represent one sound. The /TH/ sound is spelled with the letters “TH”.” (display letter card or write on a white board.) When we see these two letters together, they make the /th/ sound. What sound do the letters TH represent? (/th/)



“Let’s say the letters and write them in the air as we say the /th/ sound:”
(Demonstrate: TH says /th/....TH says /TH/...TH says /TH/.)

It is important to stress that the example provided demonstrates ONLY the introduction to the target phoneme and the corresponding grapheme, since this is a point in instruction where it is most beneficial for students to see how a phoneme is produced. Once the initial lesson has been demonstrated explicitly with visual access to the teacher's face, the teacher can then resume the lesson in person (and masked) to include blending and/or segmenting activities and opportunities to encode (e.g. Phoneme Grapheme Mapping), as well as opportunities to practice in connected text. If the lesson is being provided as a first introduction to basic phoneme grapheme correspondences, a next step could be explicit teaching in letter formation and subsequent practice, all which can be done reasonably easily while the teacher is masked.

Take Advantage of the Outdoors

In addition to the suggestions above, consider how outdoor spaces around your school or classroom might be utilized to provide targeted instruction if masks are not required in outdoor spaces. A brief "fresh air break" might be the perfect setting for targeted instruction where it is beneficial for students to be able to see the teacher's face, focus on their own production with hand held mirrors, or watch a partner as they produce a target phoneme or practice phonemic awareness activities. Of course, follow all school and district guidelines for social distancing or other precautions when taking advantage of outdoor space.

Resources for Support

[44 Phonemes by the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy](#) This resource provides a clear model of articulation for each of the 44 English phonemes, including key words.

[Logic of English: Phonograms](#): This site provides an interactive chart that contains basic phonograms (the symbol that represents a speech sound or group of sounds). By clicking on an individual phonogram, you can either hear audio of the correct pronunciation of speech sounds spelled with that phonogram, or toggle at the top to view video demonstrating the pronunciations. By clicking on the individual tabs at the top of the chart, you can customize the cards to show pronunciation and key words or select to enable marks that indicate which phonograms represent consonants, vowels, or r-controlled vowels. This resource can be helpful for planning, particularly for ensuring correct pronunciation of consonant and vowel phonemes. One note of caution: several phonograms listed are representative of more than one speech sound (e.g. "wor") or represent spelling patterns typically addressed in later elementary grades.

[UFLI Virtual Teaching Resource Hub](#) - Created by the University of Florida Literacy Institute, these resources for virtual teaching support explicit instruction in phoneme-grapheme correspondences, including modeling of correct phoneme articulation and customizable Powerpoint and Google slide templates for explicit teaching. A link to a suggested scope and sequence for skill instruction is also available for educators who need support.

[Mississippi Department of Education Virtual Literacy Instruction Guide for K-5 Teachers](#) This guide was put together by the Mississippi Department of Instruction to support virtual instruction for the 2020/2021 school year.