

RAISING PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS: A TASK THAT BENEFITS LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH AND WITHOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

Teachers are tasked with many roles in the language classroom. In addition to teaching language, many must also act as cultural interpreters, counselors, disciplinarians, motivational speakers, and more. One task that language teachers may hesitate to take on is diagnosing learning disabilities in language learners. While language teachers are knowledgeable in how a second language is acquired and what techniques support successful second language acquisition (SLA), they are often not trained to diagnose learning disabilities so often connected with language. For example, dyslexia is a learning disability that interferes with the reading process. But what should language teachers do when all language learners inevitably struggle with reading at times? How do teachers know when the barrier to learning is related to a disability and not to the language difference? More likely than not, teachers will not be able to make such a diagnosis on their own. Moreover, even if teachers had the training, their institutions might not have the resources to support the student with a disability. Instead, language teachers should turn their attention to what they do best, and that is teaching the language using bottom-up skills and top-down skills that support all language learners, including those with learning disabilities.

This week, Teacher's Corner offers a familiar reading task that promotes phonological awareness by focusing on decoding and distinguishing between the minimal pair of /p/ and /b/ in the final position of single-syllable words. This type of activity supports language learners with and without learning disabilities. Learners are given opportunities to practice identifying and decoding two letters, linking those letters to their corresponding sounds, and ultimately distinguishing between the two sounds. Each of these skills are the foundation to learning to read and speak in a new language and benefit all learners of a second language, regardless of a learning disability.

LEVEL

Beginning, but all levels could practice distinguishing between the spoken sounds

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Reading
Speaking
Listening

GOALS

Students will be able to

- Recognize the letters *p* and *b* in the final position of single-syllable words
- Distinguish between the sounds of /p/ and /b/ in the final position of single-syllable words

MATERIALS

- Word list of minimal pairs (see Appendix A); you may want to add pictures to help define the words
- Cut-outs of letters used in word list (see Appendix B)
- Minimal pair pyramid (see Appendix C)

PREPARATION

- Make enough copies of the minimal pair word list (Appendix A) for all students.
- Write the minimal pair word list on the chalkboard or on a large piece of paper to reference.
- Make copies of the cut-outs of letters (Appendix B) and put each set into three envelopes. (Make enough sets so that students working in pairs would each get a set).
- Make enough copies of the minimal pair pyramid (Appendix C) for each learner.

ACTIVITY ONE: RECOGNIZING THE LETTERS AND SOUNDS

1. Begin class by telling students they will practice reading and pronouncing the letters *p* and *b*.

- a. Warm up the group by asking students to think of words that have the sound /p/.
 - i. Ask students to share some of the words and write their suggestions on the board.
 - ii. Repeat the task asking for words with the sound /b/.
 - b. Circle any of the words on the board that end with the sounds /b/ or /p/.
 - c. Point to the circled words and ask for volunteers to read them aloud.
 - d. Explain that today, they will focus on those letters and sounds at the ends of words.
2. Give each student a copy of the word list of minimal pairs (Appendix A).
- a. Have students read the words silently.
 - b. Then, ask one side of the room to circle the words that end in the letter *p* and ask the other side of the room to circle the words that end in the letter *b*.
 - c. When they are finished, have students find a partner from the other side of the room.
 - i. In their pairs, the students who circled the words ending in *p* should read each word they circled aloud to their partners.
 - ii. Then, the students switch, and the students who circled the words ending in *b* should read each word they circled aloud to their partners.
 - d. When students are finished, bring the class back together as a group and have the *p* students read their words aloud in unison. Repeat with the *b* students.
 - e. Have students return to their partners and ask them to switch papers. Now the students will read the circled words on their partners' papers. For example, students who read *b* words before are now reading *p* words.
 - f. Once again, bring the class back together and have the students read aloud in unison the words they just read to their partners.
 - g. Draw the students' attention to the word list of minimal pairs written on the board. Point to a word, say the word, and have the students repeat the word. Continue through the list, pointing to words and having students repeat the words after the teacher.

ACTIVITY TWO: MINIMAL PAIR PYRAMID

1. Explain to students that now they are going to use minimal pairs to follow a trail down a pyramid.
2. Hand each student a copy of the minimal pair pyramid (Appendix C).
3. Explain that at the top of the pyramid are two words and the teacher will read one. Then students will go to the next set of words stacked under the word they heard. The students should mark the word they hear. If they follow the path correctly, they will end up on the same word as the teacher at the bottom of the pyramid.
4. Go through the pyramid several times.
 - a. After each trip down the pyramid, ask all of the students which word they should be on.
 - b. Write the word on the board, and then take students back through the pyramid to see where they heard a word incorrectly.
5. Use the pyramid at the beginning of the next class, or intermittently throughout classes, to reinforce and practice the sounds.

VARIATIONS

For anyone looking to adapt this activity, consider having students work in small groups to read through the lists of minimal pair words as quickly as they can, going around in a circle. Learners who pronounce the /p/ or /b/ sound incorrectly force the game to stop, and the whole group must start from the beginning of the list again. Have groups time themselves to see how long it takes them to get through the lists without making any mistakes. After all groups have finished, ask groups to share their times, and the group with the fastest time wins.

APPENDIX A: MINIMAL PAIR WORD LIST

Minimal Pairs: **b** and **p**

1. lap lab
2. cub cup
3. cab cap
4. dip dib
5. rib rip
6. slab slap
7. tap tab
8. rope robe
9. gap gab
10. lobe lope

Minimal Pairs: **b** and **p**

1. lap lab
2. cub cup
3. cab cap
4. dip dib
5. rib rip
6. slab slap
7. tap tab
8. rope robe
9. gap gab
10. lobe lope

Minimal Pairs: **b** and **p**

1. lap lab
2. cub cup
3. cab cap
4. dip dib
5. rib rip
6. slab slap
7. tap tab
8. rope robe
9. gap gab
10. lobe lope

Minimal Pairs: **b** and **p**

1. lap lab
2. cub cup
3. cab cap
4. dip dib
5. rib rip
6. slab slap
7. tap tab
8. rope robe
9. gap gab
10. lobe lope

APPENDIX B: LETTER CUT-OUTS

Letters for Envelope 1	Letters for Envelope 2	Letters for Envelope 3
l	a	p
c	u	b
d	i	
r		
t		
sl		
g		

APPENDIX C: MINIMAL PAIR PYRAMIDS

lap								lab							
cup				cub				cap				cab			
dip		dib		rip		rib		slab		slap		tab		tap	
rope	robe	gab	gap	lope	lobe	cab	cap	tab	tap	dib	dip	cup	cub	rib	rip

lap								lab							
cup				cub				cap				cab			
dip		dib		rip		rib		slab		slap		tab		tap	
rope	robe	gab	gap	lope	lobe	cab	cap	tab	tap	dib	dip	cup	cub	rib	rip

lap								lab							
cup				cub				cap				cab			
dip		dib		rip		rib		slab		slap		tab		tap	
rope	robe	gab	gap	lope	lobe	cab	cap	tab	tap	dib	dip	cup	cub	rib	rip