



# WHY IS A PHONEME WALL MORE EFFECTIVE?

Imagine a student working on a writing project. They are writing about their sibling turning "one," so they are attempting to encode the high frequency word "one." Because the word has been previously taught, it must be on the word wall. Perhaps this student is able to segment the word "one" and isolate the initial phoneme /w/, but now they may be confused - what letter makes that sound? They might look for the letter "w," but traditional word walls would place "one" under the letter "o." Moreover, this does not match with the student's thought processes regarding the sounds they are hearing.

Research shows that phoneme walls support students literacy development by more clearly connecting speech to print (Bottari, 2020). In the example above, the student is struggling with a high frequency word. Often, words that do not follow a typical pattern, like sight words, are taught as "tricky," and a student's only way of knowing these words is to memorize. This practice undermines students' agency and underestimates students' abilities to learn the patterns of the English language and apply them independently when reading and writing new and unfamiliar words (Miles, 2018). Phoneme walls are created alongside explicit phonics instruction, which foregrounds that letters can have multiple jobs. Students, by using the phoneme wall, can also see patterns within these grapheme-phoneme relationships such as when to use "c," "k," "ck," or "ke."

Now, imagine that same scenario. A student is attempting to write "one," and they hear the sound /w/. Using the phoneme wall, the student can match the sound they hearing with the visual of the mouth making the same sound and see the different graphemes that produce that sound. The sight word, which will have been previously taught by matching the phonemes with the graphemes, will be easier for student to recognize because the relationship between the sounds they are hearing and the letters they see on the wall is clear (Miles, 2016).

## CREATING A PHONEME WALL WITH STUDENTS

Phoneme walls should be developed alongside both phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. Most researchers agree that a strong literacy foundation begins with developing students' phonemic awareness skills (segmenting and isolating phonemes), but other research shows that this instruction is only effective when connected with phonics instruction - teaching students which graphemes produce those phonemes (Mesmer, 2015). A phoneme wall is not something that is created at the beginning of the school year before students arrive in the classroom. For a phoneme wall to be truly effective, it must be created as students learn particular phonemes and graphemes.

### Name Studies

The creation of the phoneme wall can begin with personal name studies of the students. Students analyze their names, breaking it down into phonemes. They also study the meaning of their name, introducing students to the word study skills they will use when learning new words. Once students have completed their name studies, their names can be the first words on the phoneme wall. They can be placed by any sound in their name: initial, medial, or final phoneme. For instance, I would add my name, Paige, to the vowel valley because I learned that grapheme "ai" can make the /ā/ phoneme, and that is pretty cool!

### Scavenger Hunt

In this activity, students will "search" for words in books or in the classroom. Students will write these words on Post-It notes, and then students will place word in appropriate place on wall. This activity can be introduced through a read-aloud. The teacher models selecting interesting words while reading, segmenting the word into its phonemes, and placing the new word on the phoneme wall. Then, students practice choosing 2-3 words during the shared read-aloud. After practicing, students are able to add words to the phoneme wall as an independent activity when they are doing their own reading.

### Word Study Skills

The creation of the phoneme wall develops students word analysis skills, allowing them to recognize patterns in the English language. Before putting a word on the wall, students should thoroughly analyze the word.

#### Structured Word Inquiry (SWI): Four Questions

1. What does the word mean?
  - a. Have students use the word in a sentence
  - b. Develop student-friendly definition
2. How is it built?
  - a. Find the base of the word
  - b. Does the word have prefixes or suffixes?
3. What are its relatives?
  - a. What other words are in the family?
4. How is it pronounced?
  - a. Segment the phonemes
  - b. Identify which graphemes produce which phonemes
  - c. **Put on phoneme wall!**

1. What does the word mean?
  - a. I am a **teacher**.
  - b. Teachers help us learn new things.
2. How is it built?
  - a. Base: teach
  - b. Suffix: "er"
3. What are its relatives?
  - a. Teaching, reteach
4. How is it pronounced?
  - a. /t/ + /ea/ + /ch/ + /er/
  - b. **This word could be placed in the /ch/ category of the phoneme wall.**

# PHONEME WALLS & ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

A phoneme wall can be leveraged to support ELLs, but it can also become confusing if a sound in English is different from the sound produced in a different language by the same letter. The phoneme wall, however, can be explicitly taught and organized in a way that makes sense for English language learners. For instance, the vowel sounds in the English language differ from the vowel sounds in other languages. The vowel valley is extremely useful in explicitly teaching these sounds and the multiple graphemes that produce different vowel sounds. Further, it can also be effective to include the sounds produced in other languages in the phoneme wall. Scholar Lori A. Helman argues that "after a foundation has been built on the commonalities of the two languages, it will be necessary to systematically outline how the two languages differ" (457). The phoneme wall gives space in the classroom for this comparison. For example, in the vowel valley, the phoneme /ē/ could include a place for the grapheme "i," specially highlighted in a way that makes clear that in Spanish the "i" grapheme can make the same sound.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Name Studies



Sight Word Project



SWI



Word Sorts



More Examples of Wall



Starter Kit



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