# Using Elkonin Boxes

One of the earliest researchers to link phonological awareness to reading was Elkonin (1963), a Russian psychologist. He developed a method of teaching children to segment the sounds in a word by moving markers into boxes on a piece of paper, hence the name "Elkonin boxes". This early use of Elkonin boxes to assist in the development of phonological awareness has since been adapted to accomplish many related objectives.

Elkonin boxes may be used in several ways during tutoring sessions and during classroom reading instruction. In UFLI lessons, the boxes are used to help students hear the sounds in words and recording the sounds in sequence.

The following activities for using Elkonin boxes are recommended to help the student develop the phonological skills necessary to read and write:

1. Introduce the boxes with pictures that represent short, regular words. Model for the student how to say the name of the picture slowly and move a marker (a penny or chip) into a box for each sound in the word *as you say the sound.* Help the student practice moving the markers independently. If necessary, prompt the student to watch your lips as you pronounce each sound, or let him observe himself in a mirror to help him detect each sound visually.
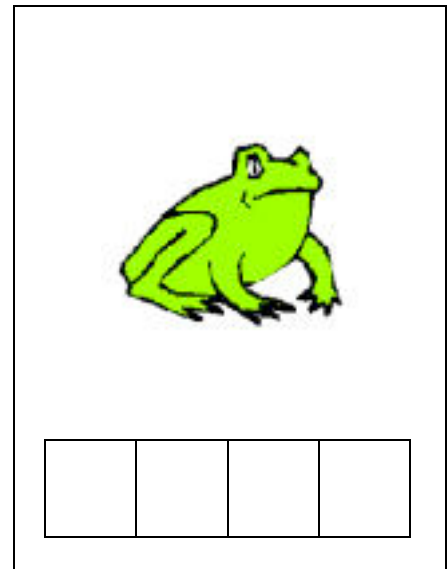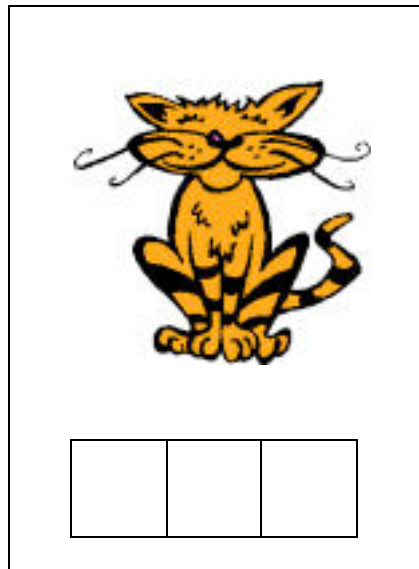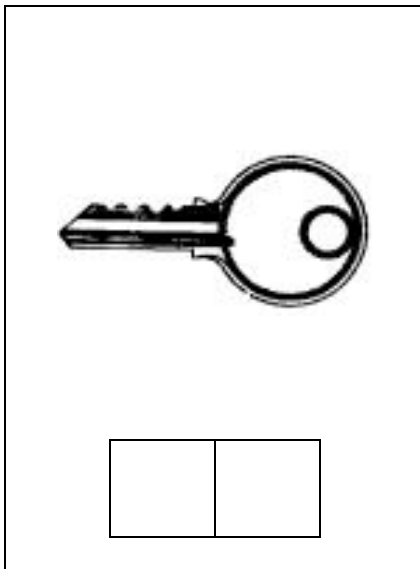
2. During the sentence writing portion of the tutoring session, help the student write the words by drawing boxes on the practice page. Select only words that have few sounds and that have regular spellings. Begin by having the student push markers into the boxes as described above. Then ask him to identify the letter that makes the first sound and prompt him to write that letter in the first box. Help the student identify the letter that corresponds to each sound and write it in the appropriate box. If the student needs a model of how to write the letter, show him a magnetic letter or a letter card with the letter. At first, do not emphasize the order of the sounds. Let the student enter the letters he knows, and provide the other letters for him. As he becomes more confident with this procedure, begin to require that he enter the letters in the correct order from beginning to end.
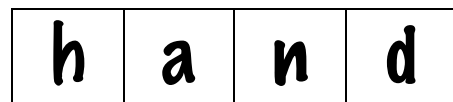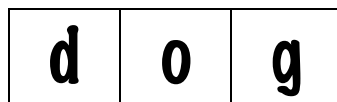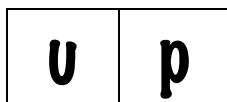
3. Ask the student to count the number of sounds in regularly spelled words to determine how many boxes should be drawn. Help the student understand that the number of sounds you hear in a word corresponds roughly to the number of letters you see--the length of the word.

4. As you move from words with regular, simple spellings to words with more difficult spellings, you may need to put more than one letter in a box to represent a single sound. Use this opportunity to point out to the student that, often, several letters work together to make one sound and some letters are silent.

p	ie

sh	o	p

t	i	g	er

5. To help the student progress to spelling more difficult words independently, use dotted lines to split those boxes in which two letters are required to make one sound.

s h	e

r	e a	l

f	a r	m	e r

6. After sufficient practice with each of these activities, the student should be able to make his own boxes when needed. Eventually, the student should be able to spell the words using the sounding-out techniques without the Elkonin boxes.

Elkonin boxes can be drawn on paper, chalkboards, or wipe-off boards. They can be used in large groups, small groups, or literacy centers. They can also be used as a method of spelling practice. Studies that have employed Elkonin boxes have consistently found them to be a powerful tool for teaching struggling beginning readers (e.g., Joseph, 2002; Lane, Pullen, Hudson, & Konold, in press).

References

Elkonin, D. B. (1963). The psychology of mastering the elements of reading. In B. Simon & J. Simon (Eds.), *Educational psychology in the U.S.S.R.* (pp. 165-179). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Joseph, L. M. (2002). Facilitating word recognition and spelling using word boxes and word sort phonic procedures. *School Psychology Review, 31*, 122–129.

Lane, H. B., Pullen, P. C., Hudson, R. F., & Konold, T. R. (2009). Identifying essential components of a tutoring model for struggling beginning readers. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 48*, 277-297.