

THRASS PHONEME MACHINE - Independent Review

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THRASS PHONEME MACHINE Version 4.13
Free to download

Many therapists will know of the excellent THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading And Spelling Skills) materials available (some for p&p only and some to purchase from www.thrass.co.uk). A review of resources from THRASS, which appeared in the RCSLT Bulletin in June 2005, gave 5/5 for contents, readability and value. Research has also demonstrated excellent improvements with spelling and reading when the resources are used for reading recovery input.

Phoneme Machine

The following bulleted description is made up of quotes from the guide to the Phoneme Machine from THRASS. The PM software has been available for free downloading for a while from their site. This is the amazing offer from THRASS which was recommended to members of the ASLTIP Yahoo group some weeks ago. Visit www.phonememachine.com

The Phoneme Machine has three main sections:

- The Calendar Chart (Calendar)

The Calendar section has children's voices saying the days, dates, months, numbers, colours, and letter names.

- Word Grid (WG)

In the WG section, a female voice and moving human lips pronounce the words and phonemes and a male voice names the letters. The WG section has 'auto-functions' to blend, read and spell (BRS) the 500 basewords of English.

- Phoneme Grid (PG)

In the PG section, a female voice and moving human lips pronounce the phonemes. The PG section has a grid location for each of the 44 English phonemes (speech sounds), enabling the learner to play 'Locate the Phonemes' for each of the basewords.'

There is so much in this software that some fairly serious practice is required to be able to switch between functions easily and I recommend printing off the PowerPoint Interactive Guide to have by you. Individual therapists may not need all the functions. Parts of the package could however be very useful in work with clients of all ages from the young child working on establishing a wider set of speech sounds, through children with articulation and/or reading difficulties, to older clients trying to regain the well-known series contained in the Calendar section, and high frequency words for reading and spelling. The WG and PG sections could be used in training sessions to help parents or other professionals get to grips with 'real' phonics: there are still many out there saying the sounds of all the letters in a word and thinking they are doing phonics. THRASS marks Non-Phonographic Spellings (letters that are Not Playing Sensibly!) and you can choose to have vowel/consonant graphemes differentiated by colour.

The Calendar Chart

The common sequences of days of the week, dates (seen as a number, spoken as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.), months, numbers to 20 (presented in figures and words), common colours, and the alphabet (in lower and upper case) are on one screen. You can zoom in and move around so you don't have to see it all at once. As you point at an item, it is highlighted but it isn't spoken until you click. This gives a 'test' opportunity for prediction! The real voice for this screen is a chorus of children – but the quality is very clear. A fantastic teaching tool!

The Word Grid

This shows 500 high frequency words arranged from one-letter to nine-letter words. At the simplest, by selecting the speaker, you can point at a word which will then be highlighted. If you double-click it, the real voice speaks it. You can zoom to show only a few words and move around with arrows. (If, like me,

you never mastered steering a narrow boat because it doesn't go the way you expect then you will have to concentrate!) If you change to the Auto mode, things become more complicated and I found it required practice to know what would happen next as I chose the different options! But basically you can choose which word group (from the THRASS levels) to work on and work through these words with a choice of blend/read/spell elements (you can select the full BRS or R or S). You can also choose your own group of words e.g. to make your own word list from the 500, or to make up a sentence by selecting words in that order.

The Phoneme Grid

If you have a word displayed and select the PG, you can recreate the word by clicking on the correct sounds in turn from the full chart of 44. It is great these are marked with the IPA symbols (although you may choose not to display these). (You cannot however choose sounds and have them spoken as a word you want e.g. a child's name!) If you haven't chosen specific words, you can use the PG just to look at the moving mouth sounding the phonemes you choose. E.g. you could alternate /p/ and /b/ to demonstrate the voicing, or sequence /s/ and /t/. (I have found working with screen reader programs such as those by Widgeit or Penfriend that children often seem to focus on the voice+screen combination more than on an adult repeating an instruction. Whether this is because it is an *identical* repetition or that it fixes their gaze, or what, I don't know! One little boy even said *I think I listen again* and proceeded to do so to good effect.)

There are additional suggested possibilities for spelling with an interactive set of spelling tiles, and for playing 'synth and seg' (games about segmenting words and synthesizing) – again you can only work with words from the 500. Personally I found these elements less easy to 'play with' but am ready to admit I was working with the PowerPoint guide in one hand! I also managed to get my laptop running in a loop with one voice spelling while something else flashed up and could only escape with Alt+F4. Still, working with children, they always enjoy it hugely when I get in a muddle with the machinery and they tend to remember the whole lesson much better!!! There is a proviso on the opening screen that the Phoneme Machine is 'work in progress' and users are invited to contribute ideas for improvements so I'm sure the final version will have things sorted to be idiot-proof.

I would have paid just for some bits of this program. Considering the whole thing was free to download, it was a wonderful offering from THRASS. Why not see if you can still take advantage of the free download offer?

Footnote

The THRASS Phoneme Machine programme is free to those in the THRASS UK territory that register for the software (that is, for customers located in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South America, Central America and the United States of America). Once you have registered, you will receive a unique Serial Number to activate the software. This covers its use on any number of computers at the same address.

The latest updated version, Version 5, is free for download from www.phonememachine.com