



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Phonemic Awareness*

“The lack of phonemic awareness is the most powerful predictor of difficulty in learning to read.”

~ Bill Honig, Linda Diamond, and Linda Gutlohn, 2000
Teaching Reading Sourcebook for Kindergarten through Eighth Grade, p. 2.16

WHAT IS PHONEMIC AWARENESS?

Think about these words – telephone, phonograph, phonics. They all contain the Greek root *phon*. Can you guess what *phon* means? If you guessed (or already knew) it means sound, then you are correct. Phonemes are the smallest units of sound. The root *phon* has three phonemes - /f/, /o/, /n/.

Speech is a continuous stream of phonemes. Phonemic awareness is “the ability to notice, mentally grab ahold of, and manipulate” (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 130) the individual phonemes within that continuous stream. Students or potential readers need the awareness to be able to answer these questions. How do *click* and *clack* sound different? Can you hear the individual sound in *click* that is different from just one sound in *clack*? Can you blend the sounds /m/ and /i/ to form the word *my*? These tasks require phonemic awareness.

RESEARCH REVIEW

Phonemic awareness, “the foundation upon which reading skills are built” (North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 2004) begins to develop in the cradle as we realize some sounds are *special*. These *special* sounds are human speech. Noticing one’s own language and developing the ability to control it is called metalinguistic awareness. As we grow and experience language we develop the ability to identify and manipulate language in smaller, more discrete chunks.

Phonological awareness is a continuum of “sensitivity to any size unit of sound” (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 130) and includes the ability to

distinguish individual words in a stream of speech (Hempenstall, 2003), rhyme words, count syllables and separate parts of words (e.g., as in /ch/ and /air/ of *chair*). Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness and “concerns the structure of words rather than their meaning” (Hempenstall, 2003).

One of the best predictors of successfully learning to read is phonemic awareness (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), 2000). Streams of speech flow seamlessly; individual “phonemes are folded into each other” (NICHD, p. 2-11) and are articulated together. Young children may find it difficult to isolate each discrete phoneme in order to match it to a letter in a word. This difficulty makes explicit instruction “critical because ... phonemic awareness is necessary for using phonics, the knowledge of specific letter-sound associations” (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, 1998, p. 1).

The English language uses 26 symbols or letters, alone or in various combinations, to represent the 43 vowel and consonant phonemes in our language. “Without phonemic awareness – [this] symbol system is arbitrary” (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 131). Imagine trying to choose a symbol to represent a sound (phoneme) if you can’t identify the specific sound. The report of the Committee for the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children states that the development of phonemic awareness should be a priority goal in kindergarten classes (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Yopp and Yopp (2000) assert that phonemic awareness instruction should be:

1. only part of a broader literacy program,
2. deliberate and purposeful,
3. and child appropriate.

Phonemic awareness is critical but is not meaningful unless it is part of a more comprehensive reading program. Overemphasis on phonemic awareness alone will not serve our students well. Other elements of phonological awareness, such as rhyming or identifying separate syllables may provide a bridge to phonemic awareness and should not be ignored. Rhymes and syllables are larger chunks of sound that a student may identify more readily. Experience with larger chunks can lay the foundation for identifying individual chunks or phonemes.

For generations, pre-school and kindergarten teachers have been developing their students' phonemic awareness unintentionally as they sang songs and chanted rhymes with their young charges. As we have learned more about the role phonemic awareness plays in the reading process, we understand the need to provide deliberate and purposeful phonemic awareness instruction. For example, when reading *Some Smug Slug* (Edwards, 1996) the teacher should explicitly point out the alliteration patterns in phrases like "swallowtail swooshing" or "scolded a squirrel".

Child appropriate phonemic awareness instruction is "playful and engaging, interactive and social, and stimulates curiosity and experimentation with language" (Yopp & Yopp, p. 131). Teachers take advantage of children's natural engagement with "storytelling, word games, rhymes and riddles" (p. 132) to provide opportunities to identify and manipulate individual sounds and sound patterns. For example, students can create their own rhymes patterned after phrases like "beavers with fevers" or "chimp with a limp" in *Who's Sick Today?* (Cherry, 1988).

Teachers should consider the following when planning instruction (Yopp & Yopp, p.132-133).

- Unit of sound
- Operation to be performed
- Oral cues and concrete manipulatives

Yopp and Yopp (2000) suggest starting with rhyming words as the easiest unit of sound for students to hear and manipulate. They suggest moving on to syllables then onsets and rimes. An onset consists of all consonants in a word before the vowel and the rime being the rest of the word. For example, in the word brown /br/ is the onset and /own/ is the rime. In the word bear /b/ is the onset and /ear/ is the rime. Laying this foundation with larger units of sound provides the foundation some children need before they are able to identify and manipulate individual sounds, or phonemes.

Several operations are possible when working with phonemes. They include:

- **Matching** — The ability to hear if the sounds are alike. Do cat and kite begin with the same sound?
- **Isolation** — The ability to isolate sounds. What is the beginning sound of cat? What is the ending sound in cat?
- **Substitution** — The ability to substitute one sound for another. What word would you have if you changed the /c/ in cat to /h/?
- **Blending** — The ability to blend sounds together. What word would you have if you blended /c/, /a/, and /t/?
- **Segmentation** — The ability to identify individual sounds. What are the sounds in the word cat?
- **Deletion** — The ability to identify words that have a sound removed. What word would you have if you left off the /c/ in cat?

Instructional practices specifically designed to develop phonemic awareness are usually oral. Cues, such as clapping for each sound heard, may support students as they identify each phoneme. Sometimes it is helpful to use concrete manipulatives, such as plastic disks, to represent each phoneme.

The Russian psychologist David Elkonin (Joseph, 1998) developed a strategy for supporting students as they identify phonemes and blend them in the correct order. A rectangle divided in sections that correspond to the number of sounds is placed in front of the child. For example, the word *bath* has 3 phonemes - /b/, /a/ and /th/ so a rectangle with 3 sections would be used.



Place holders are provided for each phoneme as well. These place holders can be plastic disks, beans, cubes, wood squares or anything else that will fit into the spaces for each phoneme. As the child articulates each sound, she moves a placeholder into the appropriate section of the box. In our example, *bath*, as the child articulates /b/ she would move a placeholder into the first box. As the child articulates /a/ she would move a placeholder into the middle box. Finally, as the child articulates /th/ she would move a placeholder into the last box. Elkonin boxes can be helpful when a child has difficulty identifying phonemes in the same order they occur in a word. A teacher might help children identify beginning and ending sounds first, then the medial phoneme(s) until they are able to identify all phonemes in order.

According to Joseph (1998), Marie M. Clay also recommends the use of similar strategies for developing phonological awareness and orthographic awareness. Clay has incorporated word boxes into the routines of Reading Recovery teachers who use word boxes to help students attend to sounds in spoken language and to match sounds to print. Word boxes are part of a comprehensive program to scaffold students' learning from sounds to word identification and spelling. Joseph reported on his adaptation of Clay's process in his study of word boxes to teach word recognition and spelling intervention for third and fourth grade students with learning disabilities. The six students in Joseph's case study showed high levels of maintenance and transfer in word recognition and spelling after interventions with word boxes (Joseph, 1998).

SUMMARY

Phonemic awareness concerns the "structure of words rather than their meaning" (Hempenstall, 2003); phonemes are some of the building blocks for that bridge. A variety of instructional activities that supports students as they develop the ability to identify and manipulate individual phonemes are some of the building blocks for that bridge.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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