

# Phonemic awareness essay



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Phonemic awareness is described as an insight about oral language and in particular about the segmentation of sounds, that are used in speech communication. Phonemic awareness is characterized in terms of the facility of the language learner to manipulate the sounds of oral speech. A child who possesses phonemic awareness can segment sounds in words (for example, pronounce just the first sound heard in the word top) and blend strings of isolated sounds together to form recognizable word forms.

The term phonemic awareness is used alongside with the term phonological awareness, which refers to an understanding about the smallest units of sound that make up the speech stream known as phonemes.

Phonological awareness encompasses larger units of sound as well, such as syllables, onsets, and rimes. Speech scientists have discovered that the human brain is specifically adapted for processing many different kinds of linguistic information, and one part of our biological endowment allows us to process the complex phonological information in speech without actually being aware of the individual phonemes themselves.

This is one of the human abilities that make acquiring speech a natural process, so that almost everyone in the world learns to speak a language with very little direct instruction. Since phonemes are represented by letters in print, learning to read requires children to become consciously aware of phonemes as individual segments in words.

In fact, phonological awareness is most commonly defined as one's sensitivity to, or explicit awareness of, the phonological structure of words in one's language.

In short, it involves the ability to notice, think about, or manipulate the individual sounds in words. One of the early signs of emerging sensitivity to the phonological structure of words is the ability to play rhyming games. In order to tell whether two words rhyme, the child must attend to the sounds in the words rather than to the meaning of the words.

In addition, the child must focus attention on only one part of a word rather than on the way it sounds as a whole.

As children grow in awareness of the phonemes in words, they become able to judge whether words have the same first or last sounds; with further development, they become able to isolate and pronounce the first, last, or middle sounds in words. At its highest levels of development, awareness of individual phonemes in words is evidenced by the ability to separately pronounce the sounds in even multi-syllable words or to tell exactly how two words like task and tacks are different. (The order of the last two phonemes is reversed.)

In our language, the alphabetic principle presents two important learning challenges to children. First, individual phonemes are not readily apparent as individual segments in normal speech. When we say the word dog, for example, the phonemes overlap with one another (they are co-articulated), so that we hear a single burst of sound rather than three individual segments. Co-articulating the phonemes in words (e. g. starting to pronounce the second phoneme, /r/, in the word frost while we are still saying the first phoneme, /f/) makes speech fluent, but it also makes it hard

for many children to become aware of phonemes as individual segments of sound within words.

The second challenge presented by the alphabetic principle in our language is that there is not always a regular one-to-one correspondence between letters and phonemes. For example, some phonemes are represented by more than one letter (e. g. , ch, sh, wh, ai, oi).

In addition, sometimes the phoneme represented by a letter changes, depending on other letters in the word (not vs. note, fit vs.

fight, not vs. notion), or pronunciation of parts of some words may not follow any regular letter-phoneme correspondence patterns, such as in yacht or choir. If understanding and using the alphabetic principle in reading words presents such learning challenges for children, the obvious question, and one repeatedly asked over the last century, is whether it is really necessary for children to understand the principle and master its use in order to become good readers.

On the basis of research on reading, reading development, and reading instruction conducted over the past twenty years, we now know the answer to this question is very strongly in the affirmative (Beck & Juel, 1995).

Children who quickly come to understand the relationships between letters and phonemes, and who learn to use this information as an aid to identifying words in print, almost invariably become better readers than children who have difficulty acquiring these skills (Share & Stanovich, 1995).

About the phonological structure of words, several research studies have shown that children who know more about nursery rhymes at age three are those who tend to be more highly developed in general phonological awareness at age four, and in phonemic awareness at age six (Bryant, MacLean, Bradley, & Crosland, 1990). Some very recent work has begun to verify that children who come from backgrounds in which they have been more frequently exposed to letters and their names and to various kinds of reading activities show more advanced phonological awareness upon school entry than those with less experience in these areas.

After children enter school, the growth of their phonological awareness depends not only on what they are taught, but on their response to that instruction.

Reading programs that contain explicit instruction in phonics produce more rapid growth in phonological awareness than approaches that do not provide direct instruction in this area. In addition, children who respond well to early reading instruction grow much more rapidly in phonological awareness than those who experience difficulties learning early reading skills.

In this sense, phonological awareness is both a cause and a consequence of differences among children in the rate at which they learn to read. Those who begin reading instruction with sufficiently developed phonological awareness understand the instruction better, master the alphabetic principle faster, and learn to read quite easily. In contrast, those who enter first grade with weak phonological awareness do not respond well to early reading instruction and thus do not have the learning experiences or acquire the

reading knowledge and skill that stimulates further growth and refinement of phonological awareness.

Can direct instruction in phonological awareness help children learn to read more easily? There have been many research studies showing that it is possible to stimulate growth in phonological awareness by explicit instruction. We also know the effectiveness of oral language training in phonological awareness is significantly improved if, at some point in the training, children are helped to apply their newly acquired phonological awareness directly to very simple reading and spelling tasks (Bradley & Bryant, 1985).

For example, children who have been taught a few letter sounds and who have achieved a beginning level of phonemic awareness should be able to identify the first letter of a word when they hear it pronounced. They might also be led to substitute different letters at the beginning of a word like cat to make different words. They could also be asked to pronounce the “ sounds” of the letters a and t, and then blend them together to form a word. Most instructional programs in phonemic awareness begin with oral language activities.

However, most also conclude by leading children to apply their newly acquired ability to think about the phonemic segments in words to reading and spelling activities. This is a very important point. Stimulation of phonological awareness should never be considered an isolated instructional end in itself. It will be most useful as part of the reading curriculum if it is

blended seamlessly with instruction and experiences using letter-sound correspondences to read and spell words.

We also know from recent research that instructional programs in this area must go beyond very beginning levels of general phonological awareness to activities that draw attention to the phonemes in words. Thus, programs that only teach rhyme or syllable awareness will not be as effective as those that help children to become aware of individual phonemes in words.

In order to build phonemic awareness in all children, classroom teachers should know a little about the structure of language, especially phonology.

Phonology is the study of the unconscious rules governing speech-sound production. In contrast, phonetics is the study of the way in which speech sounds are articulated, and phonics is the system by which symbols represent sounds in an alphabetic writing system. Phonological rules constrain speech-sound production for biological and environmental reasons. Biological constraints are due to the limitations of human articulatory-motor production.

For example, humans are not able to produce the high-frequency vocalizations of whales.

Other constraints on our ability to produce speech have to do with the way our brains classify and perceive the minimal units of sound that make a difference to meaning the units we call phonemes. The differences between the sounds of two phonemes are often very subtle: Compare /b/ with /p/. Yet, these subtle differences in sound can signal dramatic differences in meaning:

Compare bat with pat. Fortunately, because phonemes are the basic building blocks of spoken language, babies become attuned to the phonemes of their native language in the first few months of life.

However, this sensitivity to the sounds of the phonemes and the differences between them is not conscious. It is deeply embedded in the subattentional machinery of the language system. Words and syllables are more salient and more directly perceivable than individual phonemes, activities that involve counting the number of words in a sentence or syllables in a word can be used as initial steps leading to isolated phoneme synthesis and segmentation (Lundberg, Frost, & Peterson, 1988). Word counting can be done for any sentence selected from a reading or writing lesson.