

Phonemic Awareness: It's All in the Sounds of Language

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Abstract

Phonemic Awareness is the understanding that words are made up of individual sounds. These individual sounds are referred to as phonemes. Within the English language, there are about 44 sounds, and several of these are rather difficult for children to grasp. Mastery of phonemic awareness is a foundational skill for reading, yet is often skimmed over or not reinforced within today's classrooms. Perhaps this lies in a misunderstanding of the importance of phonemic awareness. This paper highlights several phonemic awareness activities that are immensely useful in building and reinforcing phonemic awareness – activities that not only focus on phonemic awareness, but incorporate music and movement which enhance student engagement and retention. Such activities provide concrete language support for ELLs.

Keywords: *phonemic awareness, phonemes, oral language, listening comprehension, active learning, English Language Learners (ELLs)*

Introduction

I recently observed one of my preservice teachers explaining phonemic awareness as the sounds of language while using words and letters for the entire explanation. This seems to be a frequent misconception of our undergraduate students as we have struggled to make sure they are prepared to understand the difference between phonemic awareness and phonics before becoming certified teachers. Preservice teachers have a difficult time thinking about a pre-reading skill not being a pencil and paper task or simply reading words or letters from a page. It is not about passing the

certification exam, although that is important, but rather about internalizing the difference between these two extremely important concepts to more accurately and effectively teach that content. So just what is phonemic awareness?

“First of all, phonemic awareness is not phonics. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds-phonemes-in spoken words. Before children learn to read print, they need to become more aware of how the sounds in words work. They must understand that words are made up of speech sounds, or phonemes (the smallest parts of sound in spoken word that make a difference

in the word's meaning)." (What is Phonemic Awareness p. 1)

Why Phonemic Awareness is Important

Phonemic awareness lays the foundation for future reading success. Basic skills in phonemic awareness range from word awareness to manipulation and deletion of sounds. Specifically, these skills include word comparison (long vs. short), rhyming (hear and produce rhymes), syllables (blend and segment), onset-rime blending and segmenting, blending and segmenting individual phonemes, and phoneme deletion and manipulation. All of these foundational skills are essential for the development of more complex reading skills, and if children experience difficulties with these basic skills, they will likely have difficulty with later reading experiences, possibly related to dyslexia or other similar processing challenges. Due to the growing numbers of dyslexia diagnoses and lack of familiarity with early literacy concepts, all kindergarten and first grade students in Texas will now be assessed in phonemic awareness skills. If the students have low scores, they will be screened further for potential dyslexia.

Activities to Teach Phonemic Awareness

Children learn these skills through a variety of contexts and no child will learn in the same mode as another. With that in mind, teachers need to provide multiple opportunities for children to discover phonemic awareness through engaging activities. Physical activity, music, poetry, and games are means by which to enlighten children's language skills and put them on the path to become independent readers. All these activities are used in our Reading Methods courses in which teacher candidates have deemed them effective to help understand and internalize the meaning of phonemic awareness. Due to the nature of the activities, all the presented tasks appear to work with English Language Learners (ELL) as well, as there were Korean student teachers visiting the classroom

the day the activities were implemented. They expressed gratitude for the chance to work on their English skills with fun learning tasks. Exposure to oral language skills with the usage of pictures and songs will increase ELL students' language development.

Activities such as those included within this article demonstrate teacher and student engagement/involvement, which reflect research-based practices for motivation and knowledge for teaching. Research by Skinner and Belmont (1993) revealed teacher involvement as central to children's engagement in classroom activities and subsequent positive effects on their learning. The knowledge of teaching refers to a teacher's knowledge of quality strategies and practices that clearly demonstrate not only content knowledge of curriculum, but how to apply/show children what to do to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Physical movement:

These first activities promote physical movement while practicing phonemic awareness skills.

Syllable toss. This is a simple game that can be manipulated to fit any phonemic awareness skill. Place a poster board or flat surface on the wall that includes circles with numbers 1-5 written in the middle of the circles. Students pick up a picture card, say the word aloud, and toss the soft ball to the circle that matches the number of syllables they said are in the picture they selected. For example, they will pick up a picture of an umbrella and toss the ball into the circle with a number three because it has three syllables. ELL students may use their first language to determine the number of syllables. An example would be a picture of a cat, having one syllable in English. In Spanish gato has two syllables, producing a potentially incorrect answer for the child. As the teacher monitors the station, allowing a child to use their first language can help the teacher gauge the child's understanding of the skill being used. If this

child tosses the ball to the number two after seeing the picture of the cat, they have correctly identified the number of syllables. The teacher can reaffirm this and work with the child to also perform the same task while saying the English word for the picture.

Phoneme hop. This game can be modified to work with any segmentation of words or sounds. It requires placing five connected squares on the floor with painters' tape (any tape can be used, but this is removed easier without leaving residue). Students pick up a picture card or object and orally state what it is. They will then hop one square at a time to represent the number of phonemes in the picture/object they selected. For example, they would select a "pig," say the word, and hop three times since pig has three phonemes: /p/ /i/ /g/.

Phoneme ring toss. For this activity, five cones are labeled 1-5 and placed in a pattern a few feet away from where the children will stand. This area should be designated with a taped line on the ground. Students will select a picture card or object and orally state what it is. They will then segment the word into phonemes and toss a ring onto the cone that represents the number of phonemes in the picture/object they selected. For example, they would select a "fish," say the word, and toss the ring onto the cone labeled with a 3 since fish has three phonemes: /f/ /i/ /sh/.

Rhyming Kick. This game requires a larger area to set up the game. A child's play tunnel is preferred for this game to have a direct path for the ball; doing this also helps to keep the ball in a contained area. If a tunnel cannot be used, place painter's tape along the floor where the ball should be kicked or rolled. Students will select an object or picture card, say the name of the object/picture card, then kick the ball through the tunnel. As the ball rolls to the wall, the child will say rhyming words for the object/picture until the ball hits the wall.

Oral Language and Alliteration

Developing oral language competency enhances the ability to read. One excellent activity combining oral language and phonemic awareness is alliteration, which is the repetition of the initial sound in several words within phrases or sentences. For example, a familiar one is "Susie sells seashells by the seashore." A key strategy for teaching alliteration, particularly with younger children, is to begin by using their names. If my name is Mary, I might say "Mary munches on marshmallows" or "Mary marches with monsters." As the teacher, I would provide my example first, then ask my students to think of the beginning sound of their name, and devise an alliteration. After a few minutes, I would ask children to verbally share.

Music and Movement with Silly Songs

Most children, regardless of age, enjoy being silly. What better way to engage them in literacy activities than by using silly songs! When combining silly songs with movement, learning is enhanced and additional support is also provided to English Language Learners (ELLs). One favorite is "Knuckles and Knees" by Jim Gill (Gill, 1999). There are two key phonemic awareness aspects in the song – initial sounds and rhyming words. Listeners are told to "bend your fingers to show your knuckles." They then travel through the song tapping their knuckles on different body parts (knees, nose, tummy, toes, hair, hips, legs, lips). The song moves slowly at first with a four-beat pattern for each "tapping," then speeds up as the "refrain" reviews every body part. After the song (and the giggles settle down), the teacher leads a discussion about which words begin with the same sound (knuckles/knees/nose; tummy/toes; hair/hips; legs/lips) and which words rhyme (nose/toes; hips/lips).

Rhyming

As mentioned in the previous section (Music and Movement with Silly Songs), rhyming remains

an essential component of phonemic awareness. A variety of activities lend themselves to building a child's awareness of rhyming sounds -- words that end with the same "sound chunk" -- the simplest being just changing the initial sound (onset-rime) -- the onset is the initial sound, and the rime consists of the vowel and consonants that come after the initial sound. Examples: say pain -- change the initial sound to /r/ = rain. Remember -- we only ask the students to change "initial sound" and never use the term "letter." Expanding rhyming for increased vocabulary provides children a wider range of words -- using words such as herd/bird, drought/about -- they have the same "sound chunk" at the end. What seems to negatively affect our pre-service teachers is the sound chunks are not spelled the same -- and that should never come into discussion -- since we are focusing on sounds and not letters.

Some helpful activities involve sentences leaving one word blank. The teacher says, "Look at the fox in the ____." The children fill

in the blank with box. "I saw a giraffe who started to ____ (laugh)" (Zganc, 2010). In addition to traditional nursery rhymes, a vast assortment of poetry for children exists, in addition to many quality children's books that are filled with rhyming words. Through daily read alouds, the classroom teacher can reinforce children's awareness of rhyming words.

Closing

All of these activities can be modified to fit into any classroom that needs review or just some movement and singing about language. ELL students gain understanding of English while participating in the various risk-free tasks which focus on oral language, pictures, and movement. Children will learn the necessary skills through playing with language using the various modes mentioned in this article. We cannot jump ahead to letter recognition or reading if children do not understand how language works. Phonemic awareness is a vital component of the ability to read and should not be overlooked.

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