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HotSheet 2: Effective Practices for Phonological Awareness



Paige C. Pullen
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Phonological awareness has received a great deal of attention in recent years. As a result, a plethora of information is available to teachers who wish to incorporate phonological instruction into their curriculum. Some of the resources and strategies provided for teachers are based on sound research, but others are not. The purpose of this guide is to define phonological awareness and provide a brief summary of the more and less effective practices for implementing phonological awareness instruction.

What is phonological awareness?

Phonological awareness is an understanding of the sound structure of language; it is the knowledge that the speech flow is composed of smaller units (*i.e.*, words, syllables). Phonological awareness comprises four levels: word, syllable, intra-syllabic (or onset/rime), and phoneme. The term *phonological awareness* refers to the awareness at each of these levels. *Phonemic awareness* refers to the ability to detect and manipulate sounds at the *phoneme level*. Competence in *phonemic awareness* is critical to the acquisition of decoding skills.

Children acquire facility with phonological skills beginning with larger units (words) and moving progressively to smaller units, finally gaining competence at the phoneme level. For example, a child may learn to blend two small words to make a compound word, then progress to the ability to blend syllables, then onsets and rimes, and lastly, phonemes. In addition to blending, phonological awareness includes the abilities to detect, match, segment, rhyme (recognize and generate), and manipulate sounds in language. Table 1 describes each of these phonological awareness skills.

Table 1: Phonological Awareness Skills

SKILL	DESCRIPTION
Detect	Listen to each word. Do you hear the /t/ sound? <i>table, tiger, car, stop</i>
Match	Listen. Which word has the same beginning sound as red? <i>can, book, radio</i>
Blend	What word do these sounds make? <i>f-r-o-g</i>
Segment	Say this word sound-by-sound. <i>star</i>
Delete	Say <i>meet</i> . Now say <i>meet</i> , without /m/.
Recognize Rhyme	Do these words rhyme? <i>car/star; hat/sat; grow/green</i>
Generate Rhyme	Tell me a word that rhymes with <i>boat</i> .
Manipulate	Say <i>tap</i> . Now change the <i>t</i> and the <i>p</i> . What word do you have now?

Table 2: Important Phonological Awareness Terms

TERM	DEFINITION
blending	A phonological skill that requires the child to combine smaller units of sound into a normally spoken word.
elision	Also called deletion; requires complex phonological manipulation. A sound unit is removed from a word to create a new word.
onset	the part of a syllable that precedes the vowel (in meet, /m/)
phoneme	the smallest unit of sound
rime	the part of a syllable from the vowel to the end of the syllable (in meet, /eet/)
segmenting	A phonological skill that requires the child to separate a normally spoken word into smaller units of sound

Why is phonological awareness important?

Research has demonstrated clearly that one result of phonological awareness instruction is improved acquisition of early decoding skills and higher reading achievement. In prediction studies, phonological awareness has been isolated as the most robust predictor of early literacy skills, followed by knowledge of letter names.

Although many factors predict later reading achievement (e.g., mother's level of education, socio-economic status), little can be done in the classroom to address these issues. However, teachers can make a difference in a child's future reading achievement by providing instruction in phonological awareness. Improvements in PA result in improvements in reading skills, particularly when the instruction is paired with letters.

Phonological Awareness Facts

1. Phonological awareness is necessary, yet not sufficient for successful acquisition of decoding and spelling skills.
2. Blending and segmenting phonemes are the two phonological awareness skills most useful for the acquisition of decoding skills.
3. More phonological awareness instruction does not mean that it is better instruction, and more is not necessary.
4. The relationship between decoding skills and phonological awareness is reciprocal; PA is necessary to acquire decoding, but as decoding skills improve, so do phonological skills.
5. Phonological awareness is a reliable predictor of later reading achievement.
6. Early intervention can result in improvements in phonological awareness.

Phonological Awareness Practices that are Less Effective

PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Phonological awareness instruction that does not include letters of the alphabet	PA activities alone produce some benefits for children. However, when you link letters with the sounds in PA activities, students achieve better reading gains.
Phonological awareness instruction presented in whole class settings	Although children benefit from large group instruction in PA, research indicates that greater gains are made when instruction is provided in small groups.
Phonological awareness activities that focus on a variety of manipulation types	By focusing on too many PA tasks at one time, children may not have the opportunity to master any one type of task. Rather than implementing a variety of tasks, select one or two tasks and teach to mastery.
Sorting activities to promote phonemic segmentation	Although sorting activities (e.g. sorting picture cards based on their beginning sound) does improve some aspects of phonological awareness, research has shown that these activities do not promote phonemic segmentation.

Research provides clear direction on teaching phonological awareness effectively. These guidelines should be considered for both general and special education teachers.

Phonological Awareness Practices that are More Effective

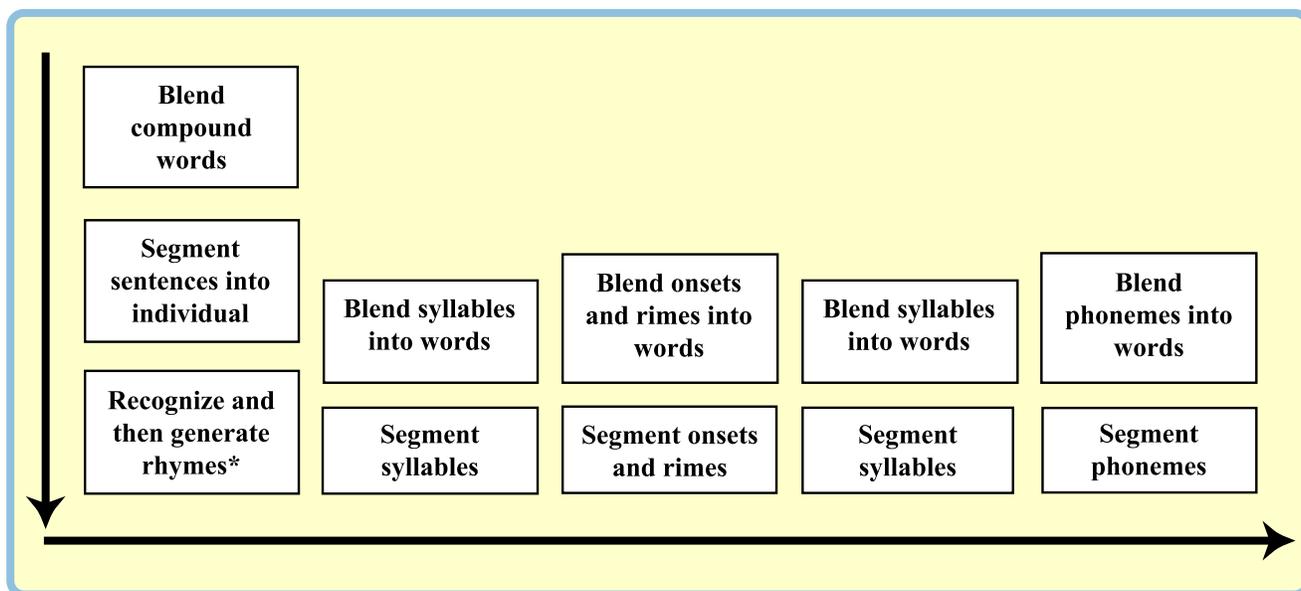
PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Use letters of the alphabet for phoneme manipulation activities rather than using phonemes alone.	Implement activities that combine PA with letters. For example, use letter tiles, magnetic letters, or other manipulative letters to practice blending and segmenting with your students. Research demonstrates that combined letter and PA instruction is more effective than PA alone. Further, research supports the use of manipulative materials for improving phonological awareness and decoding skills.
Provide phonological awareness instruction in small groups.	Research demonstrates that small group PA instruction is more beneficial than either one-to-one or whole class instruction.
Emphasize blending and segmenting skills at the phoneme level.	To make full use of the alphabetic principle, children must be able to blend and segment the sounds of language. Thus, activities that help children develop the ability to blend and segment at the phoneme level will be most useful in their acquisition of decoding skills.

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PRACTICE	EXPLANATION
Implement explicit instruction on phonological tasks.	Teach new PA tasks by first modeling the task, then helping the child perform the task, and finally, having the child perform the task alone. This explicit series of steps in teaching phonological awareness skills is more effective than a more constructivist approach.
Use sound boxes to promote phonemic segmentation	Sound boxes, also referred to as Elkonin boxes, help to make concrete, the abstract concept of breaking a word apart, sound-by-sound. Research has shown that when children participate in such tasks, they perform better on segmentation tasks than children who participated in sorting activities. Draw boxes to represent each sound in a word. Push chips into each box as you produce each sound.
Scaffold children’s development of PA by moving progressively through the four levels: word, syllable, onset-rime, phoneme	Phonemic awareness, and in particular, blending and segmenting at the phoneme level are the most critical phonological awareness skills. However, some children may not be ready for these abstract tasks. Begin with larger sound units, and move progressively to smaller units. See the PA task progression figure for a sample hierarchy of skills.
Use “blendable sounds” in PA instruction	In all phonological awareness activities, make sure that you are using letter sounds that are “blendable”. See the PA blendable sounds box for more information about this more effective practice.

Hierarchy of Phonological Awareness Tasks



* Some children have particular difficulty with the concept of rhyme, and thus, may need very explicit instruction. The task requires the manipulation of onsets and rimes and may come later in the development of PA for some children.

WHAT ARE “BLENDABLE SOUNDS”?

Children learn the sounds of letters so that they can blend those sounds to form words. However, as teachers, we often distort the sounds of letters when we try to produce them in isolation. This is understandable, since many letters cannot be reproduced purely in isolation. Here are some tips that may make it easier for some children to learn to blend sounds together.

1. **Continuous sounds** are sounds that can be held out (e.g., all vowels, m, s). Teach children to hold out continuous sounds in blending activities. Continuous sounds are easy for children to blend together.
2. **Stop sounds** are sounds that cannot be held out (e.g., t, d). They are difficult for children to blend. Teach children that these sounds are quick sounds. Avoid adding an /uh/ when you produce these sounds. In other words, don't say /kuh/ /a/ /tuh/ and expect children to blend those sounds to make *cat*. Instead, think of what you hear when you say a word with one of these sounds at the end (e.g., *mad*). Say the sounds as you hear them at the end of words.
3. Because continuous sounds are easiest to blend, begin new PA tasks with continuous sounds. Progress to words with stop sounds. For example, *sun* is easier to blend than *dip*.

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Resources for Assessment of Phonological Awareness

Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP) (Pro-ED)

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (<http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>)

Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment (ERDA) (<http://harcourtassessment.com/>)

Fox in a Box (<http://www.sraonline.com/>)

Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening (PALS) (<http://pals.virginia.edu/>)

Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) (<http://www.tpri.org/>)

Woodcock Diagnostic Reading Battery (WDRB) (<http://www.riverpub.com/>)



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