

IDEAS for Excellence

*Featured Inside—Assessing
Young Learners' Literacy Skills*

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"How Are Cat, Cup, and Cow Alike?"

Phonemic Awareness Can Help Young Learners Develop Literacy Skills

by Norma Inabinette, Ed.D.

Would a builder construct a house without making sure its foundation is sound and secure? Of course not. In the same way, educators must ensure that young learners have a language foundation in place before they learn to read. Reading requires a learner to translate written text into meaningful oral language. Thus, it is critical for learners to have strong oral language skills before reading instruction begins. Without a good command of oral language, reading has no foundation upon which to develop and expand. Once oral language is firmly established, it is much easier to introduce reading and the probability of reading success is much greater.

When formal reading instruction begins, the goal is to help learners become independent readers, to give them tools that will enable them to unlock words on their own. This process generally starts with "word attack" skills and phonics instruction—the sound/symbol relation-

ships that enable learners to match text with the sounds of their oral language. However, before even beginning phonics instruction, learners must have a command of phonemic awareness (i.e., the oral aspects of words). Readers cannot successfully attack unfamiliar words if they are not aware that words have sounds, that those sounds can be manipulated, and that graphic symbols represent those sounds.

Sounds of Language

In the simplest terms, phonemic awareness is the understanding that oral language is comprised of sounds that can be manipulated. Young children love to play with sounds. When first learning to talk, children mimic the sounds they hear. They often chant sound combinations that may not represent "real" words, but are appealing because of the flow of sound. When children start experimenting with language, they should be encouraged to create new sounds, new sound combina-

tions, and alterations in sounds so that language becomes real and exciting to them.

Most children naturally develop the ability to manipulate sound through experimentation, without any formal instruction in how sounds are made. However, some children do not develop this sense of language. These children need help from parents/guardians and teachers in order to develop a mature sense of language. This intervention process can start with simple language tasks, such as adding silly names to the learner's name (e.g., Mitzzy-itzy-bitzy-mitzy; Pat-bat-cat; Josh-gosh-mosh; Lola-mola-cola) or making up silly sentences (e.g., The fat cat sat on the mat.). Further development of the learner's phonemic awareness comes with an understanding of its components. Parents and educators can help learners achieve their full language potential by familiarizing



themselves with these aspects of oral language.

The Components of Phonemic Awareness

There are eight interrelated, yet discrete components of phonemic awareness. While these components can be identified independently, they are intertwined so that development in one area often impacts skills in another. These components do not develop in any particular order. It is important to note that phonemic awareness is an oral phenomenon. The understanding of the oral sounds transfers to phonics when formal reading instruction begins, but phonemic awareness does not involve the printed form of letters. Let's take a closer look at each of the eight components of phonemic awareness: (NOTE: The // marks found in the following components represent the oral sounds of language.)

1) Phoneme Identification. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a language. For example, the word *cat* has three phonemes or sounds: /c//a//t/. While *cat* has a one-on-one sound/symbol correspondence (i.e., each sound is represented by one printed symbol or grapheme), the number of symbols needed to form the sounds is not critical in phoneme identification. The word *bike*, for example, has four graphemes (printed symbols) but only three phonemes (sounds): /b/, /i/, and /k/. Thus, phoneme identification refers to the learner's ability to recognize the units of sound in a word. Learners do not need to manipulate the sounds at this stage, but they must recognize that there are individual sounds. We often test a learner's knowledge of phoneme identification by

asking questions such as, "What are the sounds in the word *pig*?"

2) Phonological Counting. This aspect of phonemic awareness rests on the learner's ability to identify the number of sounds in a word (e.g., the word *cup* has three sounds—/c//u//p/.) Phonological counting often is assessed by asking questions such as, "How many sounds do you hear in *map*?"



▲ Children's phonemic awareness impacts their reading success.

3) Word Matching. A third component of phonemic awareness is word matching, an oral phenomenon that requires the learner to recognize that some words contain the same sound elements as others. For example, it is important for the learner to know that *pen*, *pet*, and *part* all begin with the same sound and that *cat* and *dog* do not. Since it is easier for the human ear and eye to recognize beginning sounds and letters than the other letters in a word, we begin with those sounds in word matching instruction. We also utilize first letters when we begin formal phonics instruction. As phoneme identification develops, it is important for learners to realize that there also are similarities and differences in final letters (*part*/

dart and *dog/dot*) and in the medial portion (*mad/sad* and *rub/rib*). Testing of this skill may involve asking the learner questions such as "How are *cat*, *cup*, and *cow* alike?"

4) Isolation of Sounds. The isolation of sounds relates to the learner's ability to separate one sound from the others. We measure this ability by asking the learner, "What sound do you hear at the beginning of *big*?" As with the other skills, we move from the initial sound to the final sound and then to the medial sound.

5) Blending of Sounds. Once learners are aware of the sounds of the language, they need help blending the sounds together to form more complex sound units. For example, learners need to be able to blend the individual sounds of /t//a//g/ into *tag*. Learners who have difficulty with this word attack skill often cannot hear and then blend the correct sequence of sounds, even though they may be able to attach sounds to individual symbols. We often measure ability in this area by asking questions such as, "What word is this: /l//a//p/?"

6) Rhyming. Rhyming, of course, is the ability to recognize that some words end in the same pattern as other words. To demonstrate the phonic relationship between similar words (*cat*, *hat*), the reader must first recognize that the words are related by sound. We often measure this ability by asking a question such as, "How many words do you know that rhyme with *tall*?"

7) Phoneme Deletion. Phoneme deletion requires the learner to remove a sound from a word and then pronounce the remaining sounds. We often measure this

ability by asking questions such as, “What word do you get when you take the /r/ out of *rat*?” Later, we move from the initial sound to the final sound and then to the medial sound.

- 8) **Manipulation of Sounds.** The final component of phonemic awareness involves manipulation of sounds. This aspect asks the learner to change sounds to create new word units. We often measure this by engaging the learner in a task such as, “Say *cow*. Now change the /c/ to a /p/. What do we get?”

Certain components of phonemic awareness are more difficult than others. Achieving success in one area does not guarantee success in another. The learner’s command of each area will depend in large part on past experience. For example, some learners may be familiar with rhymes because their parents read them poems and nursery rhymes, but they may not be able to blend sounds together effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate a learner’s command of each aspect and then to create an instructional plan that will develop those areas that need to be strengthened.

Key Terms

grapheme: printed symbol

literacy: the ability to read and write in a language

phoneme: the smallest unit of sound in a language

phonemic awareness: the understanding that oral language is comprised of sounds that can be manipulated

phonics: a method of teaching children to read in which they are taught to recognize the relationships between letters and sounds

From Sounds to Symbols

As learners become aware of the sounds of language, it is appropriate to introduce the graphic symbols that represent those sounds. This introduction can begin as soon as learners seem comfortable producing and recognizing sound units. How should graphic symbols be presented? There are many options. While doing word matching activities, you might write the words learners are hearing on the board. Allow them to see and hear the words, emphasizing the similar sounds and the relationships between the words. The same can be done with the manipulation of sounds. As learners understand that *cap* can be changed to *rap*, show them how the graphic symbols change as well by erasing the first letter of the written word and substituting another, using moveable letters to demonstrate the change, or giving the learners cards with consonants that can be placed next to the *ap* to form *rap*, *cap*, *lap*, *sap*, *map*, and so forth.

Conclusion

Developing learners’ phonemic awareness will give them a strong foundation for reading and writing and will enable them to see the natural, logical connection between oral language and reading and writing. It also will reinforce the concept that words are related by both sounds and graphic forms. Encouraging learners to be language consumers (listeners and readers) and producers (writers and spellers) helps them understand the relationship between print and oral language. It then becomes easier for learners to transfer knowledge and skills from one area to another—from oral letter sound recognition, to phonics, to rhyming, to the spelling of similarly constructed words.

If learners fail to develop strong phonemic awareness, they will have difficulty attaching sounds to the symbols they encounter in reading. Becoming an independent reader will be a challenge. Compare this to builders who attempt to construct a house without professional tools. While they may manage to build the walls and roof, the process is laborious and the poor construction will lead to problems down the road. A learner who attempts to decode printed symbols without a firm understanding of the sounds of language is as handicapped as a builder without tools. ■

Dr. Norma Inabinette is a professor emeritus at California State University, Fullerton. Her 27-year teaching career included a specialization in the diagnosis of reading disabilities and remedial instruction. She also directed the campus reading clinic, providing instruction to community members with reading disabilities. She currently conducts staff development and consults with school districts, publishing companies, and community agencies throughout Southern California.

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Assessing the Literacy of Young ELLs

by Beverly Amori

It can be daunting to think of assessing the development of very young children's literacy skills, knowledge, processes, and behaviors, especially when the children are English language learners (ELLs). Assessing students unaccustomed to test-taking in a second language can lead to anxiety and inaccurate results. Despite the obstacles, however, assessment of these students' literacy skills is critical for several reasons:

- Educators need information about students' abilities in order to make good instructional decisions.
- Educators need to verify that the students have acquired and are expanding important skills and knowledge.
- Educators must assess students' development of essential processes and behaviors related to literacy.

Educators can evaluate literacy by observing the child, reading anecdotal reports, examining student work over time, and consulting teachers and parents. Current practices in schools, however, dictate the use of standardized tests to generate additional information.

Early literacy assessment instruments should be norm-referenced, standardized tests. Such tests generate information about a student's stage of development in relation to other students. A given score (indicating a student's stage of development) in conjunction with other student information allows school personnel to design appropriate instruction for that child.

Early literacy assessments should help educators answer questions such as: How well developed is a student's understanding of written English words? What is the student's capability for comprehending new text? Can the student construct meaning from passages of print? What does the child know about phonics? What is the student's developmental stage in terms of writing?

Testing should lead to better teaching. In the case of young ELLs, it is essential that the curriculum and delivery of instruction match students' needs.

Beverly Amori is the instructional specialist at Emery Park Elementary School in the Alhambra School District and is a co-author of the IPT® Early Literacy Test.

Speaking Out...

How can teachers involve parents in helping students learn to read?

Jean Reid
Reading Specialist, Cora Kelly Magnet School (K-5)
Alexandria City School District
Alexandria, Virginia

Before children even enter school, parents should read every day with them.



They should read predictable books and nursery rhymes.

Dr. Seuss books are great. Parents should teach their children to read words that are important to them, such as the names of their favorite restaurants or foods. They also can read them silly rhymes to help develop their phonemic awareness.

Gina Chavez
Regional Director, California Reading and Literature Project
California State University
Los Angeles, California

One great idea is for teachers to have parents write notes to their children that they will read during school. I once had

a parent who wrote a note to her daughter and placed it in her lunchbox every day. When my student opened her lunchbox, she would find the special note and proceed to "sound out" the words. If she got stuck, she would ask me for assistance. Before I knew it, this first grader was reading the school memos that I had left lying on my desk!

Alison Guy
2nd Grade Teacher, James S. Hunt Elementary School
Broward County School District
Coral Springs, Florida

I have my students record the number of minutes they read each night with their parents. Parents



can read to their children or vice versa. I recommend that they read together at least 20 minutes a night. I also encourage them to read "real-life" words together while shopping and on the road. ■

Congratulations

More Resources...

Do you want to learn more about reading instruction?

Then don't miss the summer online issue of *IDEAS for Excellence!* The lead article will focus on guidelines and practical strategies for teaching reading to English language learners. If you would like the article e-mailed directly to you, please send your name and e-mail address to info@ballard-tighe.com.

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We applaud **Dr. Diane L. Brooks** for the publication of *Readings and Activities for Character Education* (Cobblestone Publishing Company, 2001). This resource book offers ways that educators can incorporate the principles of character education into the curriculum.

Best wishes to **Deanna Cortez** who left her position as state bilingual director in Utah to pursue a position with the Bueno Center at the University of Colorado.

Congratulations to **Nancy Giraldo**, the new state bilingual director for Utah.

Hats off to **Dr. Jesse Gonzales** of the Las Cruces Public Schools in New Mexico on the completion of his doctoral degree from New Mexico State University.

Shari Gonzales is the new principal of Lowell Elementary School in Albuquerque, NM. Congratulations!

We applaud **Dianne Hales**, the new ESL coordinator of the Granite School District in Salt Lake City, UT.

Rena Henry retired this year from her position as bilingual director of the Central Consolidated Schools in New Mexico. Best wishes!

Flora Lenhart was appointed director of special services at the Colorado Department of Education. Well done!

Hats off to **Clara Lopez**, the new principal of Los Niños Elementary School in Las Vegas, NM.

Congratulations to **James Lujan**, named bilingual director of San Bernalillo School, NM.

Kudos to **Abby Moquino**, the new director of Indian education for the Bernalillo Schools, NM.

Congratulations to **Dr. Roderick Paige**, named U.S. Secretary of Education.

We celebrate with **Karen Woods**, named New Mexico's 2000-2001 National Distinguished Principal. ■



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