

Phonemic Awareness: Not a Question of Efficiency but of Sufficiency

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What is Phonological Awareness?

There are a number of definitions that came out pertaining to phonological awareness. According to Troia (2004), phonological awareness “is sensitivity to the segmental nature of speech, an explicit understanding that spoken language comprises discrete units ranging from entire words and syllables to smaller intrasyllabic units of onsets, rimes, and phonemes.”

When a child enters a school, he/she would possess a certain level of phonemic awareness. Some researchers and teachers regard this as a strong telling factor of how fast a child would learn to read (Adams, 1998). Phonemic awareness is something that can be developed by different kinds of instruction, and it is increasingly perceived to accelerate a child’s writing and reading skills (Adams, 1998). Phonological awareness can also be defined as the ability to clearly hear and see as well as determine sound units by segments, up to the smallest unit, even beyond the syllable (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

Awareness of phonemes refers to having the ability and experience to understand phonemes in spoken words (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999). It is also the ability to manipulate such phonemes. Phonemes are known to be the smallest unit of the spoken language (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999). They can be represented by single letters such as letters “c” or “s”. Moreover, they can be a combination of two letters such as “ch,” “th”, or “sh.”

The term “phonemic awareness” has been interchangeably used with phonological awareness. It has gained popularity among scholarly writers in the 1990s in the attempts to evaluate early-literary development and reading disability among children (International Reading Association, 1998). It is widely studied because of the insight it can give in terms of oral language development. Marks of having good phonemic awareness appear when one is able to perform sound segmentation once heard through someone’s speech. It is further

characterized when the listener has the ability to manipulate and vocalize the sounds of oral speech upon hearing it (International Reading Association, 1998).

According to a research by Sensenbaugh (2000), there are five levels of phonemic awareness: hearing rhymes and alliteration by their knowledge of nursery rhymes as the primary measurement, comparing the sounds of the words for rhyme and alliteration, blending and splitting syllables, phonemic segmentation, and manipulating phonemes by adding or deleting parts of it.

How is Phonological Awareness Developed?

A number of activities have been created to develop the phonemic awareness among children. Most activities toward this make the children listen to the sameness, difference, number, and order of speech sounds (Sensenbaugh, 2000). As far as most research goes, phonemic awareness is something that can be taught and developed. It can happen naturally, but activities can be administered to further enhance this skill. There are instructional activities that can make students become more aware of phonemes before actually receiving more formal reading instruction (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

Preschool students can be engaged in activities that could attract their attention to sounds in words like nursery rhymes that would familiarize them with rhymes as well as alliteration games (Sensenbaugh, 2000). Letter-sound relationships can also be mixed with segmentation exercises. Examples are always helpful to exhibit segmentation and blending (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

Activities should be performed in a playful environment and should not be in the form of drills and rigid memorization (Sensenbaugh, 2000). Group settings also encourage interaction with the children. Teachers should be prepared with the differences children would have in terms of achieving phonemic awareness (Sensenbaugh, 2000). Oral activities

done every day to emphasize and establish learning by sounds can make a difference in the child's awareness.

Phonemes are also seen as separate units but are spoken as a unit (Sensenbaugh, 2000). They are also co-articulated, which means that the speaker fuses the phonemes together into a single syllabic unit (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

Assessment of Phonemic Awareness

The old way of measuring a child's phonemic awareness was by tapping out sounds in the words. Researches have shown how phonemic awareness has explored other ways of gauging the student's awareness (Snider, 1997).

Current researches have shown how phonemic awareness is not just a single ability but a combination of different abilities to do a number of tasks (Snider, 1997). The easiest task to assess is recognizing rhyming words or producing words that would rhyme. This is due to the exposure to numerous nursery rhymes. Another task is identifying the words with the same or different beginning, middle, or end. The third task is blending, which identifies a word as each phoneme is pronounced separately. One of the most difficult tasks that are part of the phonemic awareness is phoneme manipulation. Blending task and phoneme manipulation tasks as well as phoneme segmentation tasks achieve more than 90-percent reliability as a valid test (Snider, 1997). Combination of phoneme segmentation and phoneme deletion can be predictive of initial reading acquisition more than any single test (Snider, 1997).

Significance of Phonological Awareness

Researchers see the potentials measuring phonemic awareness has on assessing the ability of the student to read. In search of reliable indicators and predictors of educational achievement, phonemic awareness serves as the one of the best predictors in evaluating reading skill acquisition (Sensenbaugh, 2000). Some researches indicate that it is even better

than predictors like IQ, vocabulary, and listening comprehension (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

However, the International Reading Association (1998) does warn that is not the only predictor for such evaluation.

Research indicates a relationship between phonological awareness and learning to read as well as a causal role in reading acquisition (Sensenbaugh 2000). This awareness is also considered as a necessary condition to learn how to read. Children actually do not learn how to read without having to develop phonological awareness (Sensenbaugh 2000). Phoneme awareness can also be critically linked to the knowledge of letters that is critical for children to understand reading (Sensenbaugh 2000).

Phonological Awareness and Level of Reading Skills

According to Sensenbaugh (2000), “awareness that spoken language is made up of discrete sounds appears to be a crucial factor in children learning to read.” As noted, an important aspect of phonemic awareness and the study for assessing it is out of the fact that it is correlated to reading skills.

Some researches such as Adams’ (1998) agree with the fact that phonemic awareness plays the “strongest single determinant” for evaluating whether or not a child can have an easy or difficult time in learning how to read. He further said that the level of phonemic awareness of the child can actually tell whether he or she would fail or succeed in learning how to read (Adams, 1998).

Since research actually indicated that phonemic awareness is the deepest form of phonological awareness, it points to the fact that it is really crucial to a child’s success in reading as well as in spelling (Troia, 2004). Phonemic awareness can actually facilitate the process of how the children can begin to read with the use of phonological decoding or identifying printed words (Troia, 2004). This requires changing single letters and letter

strings into phonemes according to how each sounds and interchanging the letters to pronounce a certain word, then a phrase, then a sentence (Troia, 2004).

According to Sensenbaugh (2000), “phonemic awareness is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of learning to read.” Beginner readers who had at the very least awareness of the phonemes and know how to relate them to their graphic representations or printed letters, further reading instruction show how prior knowledge actually heightens their learning and thus their awareness for the language is also elevated (Sensenbaugh, 2000). Since phonological awareness is something that is teachable, students who have been trained more under the awareness of phonemes gave way to a much improved reading acquisition (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

A research by Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1995) has shown that preschoolers who are exposed to phoneme at a very young age have enhanced literary development. There is an independent contribution to children’s alphabetic principle out of their phonemic awareness as well as letter knowledge.

In another research relating early reading to phonological awareness, a meta-analysis study was done to see if there was a valid impact of the said awareness regarding the children’s word-identification and reading skills (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999). This study evaluated how when phonological awareness was combined with letter training, there was a more effective outcome instead of just using phonological awareness (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999). The research has shown that phonological awareness does not have such a strong effect on the study; however, it held a very significant factor in the overall process of reading, spelling, and reading comprehension.

In relation to reading, the meta-analysis study showed that it is one of the predictors of reading but not necessarily the strongest one (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999). The skill of reading cannot solely rely on phonemic awareness alone. The educators must also recognize

the importance of letter training and relating the phoneme sounds to the written letter rather than having instructions based on listening alone (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999).

In another study relating phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge to decoding words, children who have high level of phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge seemed to have been able to decode new words soon after learning the group of words. The group of words that was learned and decoded by the respondents was composed of letters that was previously known (Barnsley, 1997). This result confirmed the researcher's hypothesis that using decoding and encoding instruction could heighten the reading skills of the students when used with phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge. Explicit instruction in decoding actually helps a student in deciphering new words (Barnsley, 1997). A weakness of this study lies in the fact that it was conducted over a short period of time. The method conducted only used a group of 10 words that may not be enough to be highly relied upon.

Two longitudinal studies were conducted by Snider (1997) to examine the relationship between phonemic awareness and reading achievement in the primary grades. Qualitative and quantitative data studies were combined to discover the relationship between phonemic awareness and future reading achievement. This study was said to have confirmed the predictive value of phonemic awareness to determine later reading achievement (Snider, 1997).

The researcher pointed out a weakness in applying the information garnered from this study. She warned against generalization of the individual student's ability to read and his or her phonemic awareness levels. It does not always mean that when phonemic awareness task is not completed satisfactorily the students would have a delay in their development or have already a language disorder because phonemic awareness was not considered as a diagnostic tool for learning disabilities (Snider, 1997).

Phonemic awareness held many complexities in terms of its different components, and some are not fully researched yet. The study noted that some respondents did not do very well in the phonemic awareness evaluation as kindergartners, but when they were in third grade, they have actually become average readers (Snider 1997). This is yet another study that proved how phonemic awareness may not be the best determinant of a child's future reading skills; however, it does play an important factor that educators cannot take for granted.

A research by Christiansen (1997) showed the roles of letter knowledge and how it being used with phonemic awareness can acquire high-level skills in reading. In the past researches, it was established that there is a significant relationship between reading and phonemic awareness.

Christiansen (1997) used a general linear model to indicate how letter knowledge plays a role in a student's reading performance. Years before, letter knowledge was perceived to have played the biggest role in being a predictor of reading. The popularity and attention given to phonological awareness has not included letter knowledge as a predictor when evaluating its relation to reading (Christiansen, 1997). It is presumed that when a student has knowledge of the sound-symbols or the letters, the child would be able to decode and develop a "sight-word vocabulary" based on what he is seeing (Christiansen, 1997, p. 341). Stronger results would be obtained when such symbol recognition is combined with high levels of phonemic awareness.

This study pointed out an interaction between phonemic awareness and letter knowledge (Christiansen, 1997). It was noted that phonemic awareness was assessed to have increased; directly related to this is the impact of increased letter knowledge on reading (Christiansen, 1997). This was done with a "Clay-Ready-to-Read-Words Test" in the midyear.

This implies that both phonological awareness and letter knowledge have positive relations with learning to read. However, a greater implication is the fact that a collaboration of the two predictors provides a greater impact for the students' reading skills (Christiansen, 1997). Despite this, it should be considered that there were some inconsistencies with the interaction effects that lie in the impact of school learning on the students' development (Christiansen, 1997).

A position paper from the International Readers Association (1998) acknowledged the fact that phonemic awareness can predict the child's ability to successfully read. There is no valid evidence that this relation is strong enough to be the sole predictor. In fact, there are some researches that say it could not be considered one. Since phonemic awareness can support an understanding for the alphabetic principle, this predictor serves to play a crucial part in a child's ability to read (International Readers Association, 1998). When a child has no awareness of phonemes at all, any alphabetic print would logically mean nothing to the learner as he or she could not relate it to any sequence of sound (International Readers Association, 1998). Printed symbols are meaningless to someone who has no concept of phonemic awareness as reading would mean having to discover and decode letters and words into units of sounds (International Readers Association, 1998).

Other Researches on Phonemic Awareness

Longitudinal studies regarding reading acquisition point to phonemic awareness in terms of the students' ability to decode letters or graphical representations of phonemes. There is a considerable amount of disagreement about the relation of phonemic awareness and learning how to read or reading acquisition although it is clear that phonemic awareness is qualified to be a predictor (Troia, 2004).

In a research by Adams (1998), phonemic awareness can be difficult to notice because people are not attentive of the sounds of the phonemes that they produce or hear. They “process the phonemes automatically, directing their active attention to the meaning and force of the utterance as a whole” (Adams, 1998). For educators to be able to teach this to the students, they must actually understand how phonemic awareness works despite the difficulty in understanding all the aspects of this complex topic. The challenge for the educators is to be able to point out to the students the phonemes by showing their existence and separability (Adams, 1998). This reminds the educators and reveals to the students that despite the fact that they are spoken as a whole unit, they can actually be segmented by syllables. Breaking down the word is also a task that could help the student read.

There had been different views in terms of assessing a child’s reading acquisition success. Some support the whole language assessment while others see importance in recognizing phonics as it is related to the reading instruction (Sensenbaugh, 2000). The debate over this matter cannot take away the fact that phonological awareness still remains to be a crucial factor to the reading process and progress of a child.

Still, other researches would insist that students with high phonemic awareness can outperform those who have low level of awareness who had traditional basal instruction or whole-language approach (Sensenbaugh, 2000). Whole-language advocates believe that children naturally develop the necessary ability to read by being exposed to print-rich environment, but in reality, some students really need direct instruction in phonological awareness (Sensenbaugh, 2000). On the other hand, “phonics only” supporters should see that solid visual familiarity of each letter is also important in being able to read as it does not only stop at phonemic awareness (Sensenbaugh, 2000).

Conclusion

Phonemic awareness plays a very important role in helping the students acquire the skills to read, listen, and write. Past researches have proven the relationship between phonemic awareness and predicting the reading acquisition of the students over and over again. This points to the fact that educators should further work on novel activities to further enhance and heighten the level of phonemic awareness of students to prepare them to read.

Some researches even went further into collaborating phonemic awareness with other reading tasks such as letter recognition. However, researches have shown that phonemic awareness training can impact a student's skill stronger if it is paired up with other reading tasks as it cannot be sufficient enough by itself (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1999).

Even the International Reading Association (1998) is worried with the fact that much concentration on phonemic awareness would lead to an abandonment of other essential reading activities needed to have a balanced literary curriculum. Phonemic awareness is an effective predictor of a student's reading acquisition achievement; however, it is not sufficient to stand alone and provide the student necessary skills to be good readers. When educators train students to elevate phonemic awareness as well as combine such tasks with other literary activities, it can further result to excellent reading acquisition achievement.

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Outline: Phonemic Awareness: Not a Question of Efficiency but of Sufficiency**I. Phonological Awareness**

1. Phonological awareness can also be defined as the ability to clearly hear and see as well as determine sound units by segments, up to the smallest unit, even beyond the syllable (Sensenbaugh 2000)
2. Phonemic awareness is something that can be developed by different kinds of instruction and it is increasingly perceived to accelerate a child's writing and reading skills (Adams 1998)

II. Developing Phonological Awareness

1. Pre-school students can be engaged in activities that could attract their attention to sounds in words like nursery rhymes that would familiarize them with rhymes as well as alliteration games (Sensenbaugh 2000).
2. Letter-sound relationships can be blended with segmentation exercises (Sensenbaugh 2000).

III. Assessment of Phonemic Awareness

1. Recognizing rhyming words
2. Identifying the words with the same or different beginning, middle or end.
3. Phoneme segmentation
4. Phoneme manipulation

IV. Significance of Phonological Awareness

1. Measuring phonemic awareness has on assessing the ability of the student to read.
2. Predictor to evaluate reading acquisition

V. Phonological awareness affects the ability to read

1. Research prove the necessity phonemic awareness and learning to read

2. Assessment of phonemic awareness can reveal ability for reading acquisition
3. Reveals phonemic awareness is part of a whole system of skills needed to learn how to read

VI. Results from Research on Phonemic Awareness

1. Phonological awareness is efficient in facilitating reading acquisition.
2. The need for a balanced literary curriculum as it is not the only predictor of future reading acquisition.