



Session 4

Understanding Phonological Awareness

son: *Is that a butterfly?*
 dad: *Yes, that's a butterfly.*
 son: *But-ter-fly. Hey Dad, is but a word?*
 dad: *Yes, but is a word.*
 son: *Is ter a word?*
 dad: *No, ter is not a word.*
 son: *Is fly a word?*
 dad: *Yes, fly is a word.*
 son: *Dad, is ter a word?*
 dad: *Didn't we just go through this?*

-Justice & Schuele, 2003

Learning Objectives

Define the terms phoneme, syllable, and alphabetic principle.

Demonstrate awareness of the tasks and activities through which children can demonstrate their phonological awareness.

Analyze children's phonological awareness on a continuum of shallow to deep.

Reflect on why phonological awareness is one of the most important areas of literacy development for young children.

Describe an activity a teacher could use during classroom whole-group time to enhance children's phonological awareness.

Overview

Phonological awareness describes children's sensitivities to the phonological – or sound – structure of spoken language, or speech.

When we produce speech, we are actually linking segments of sounds together. Phonological awareness is an individual's awareness of these segments. Two of the major segments that are linked together in production of speech include:

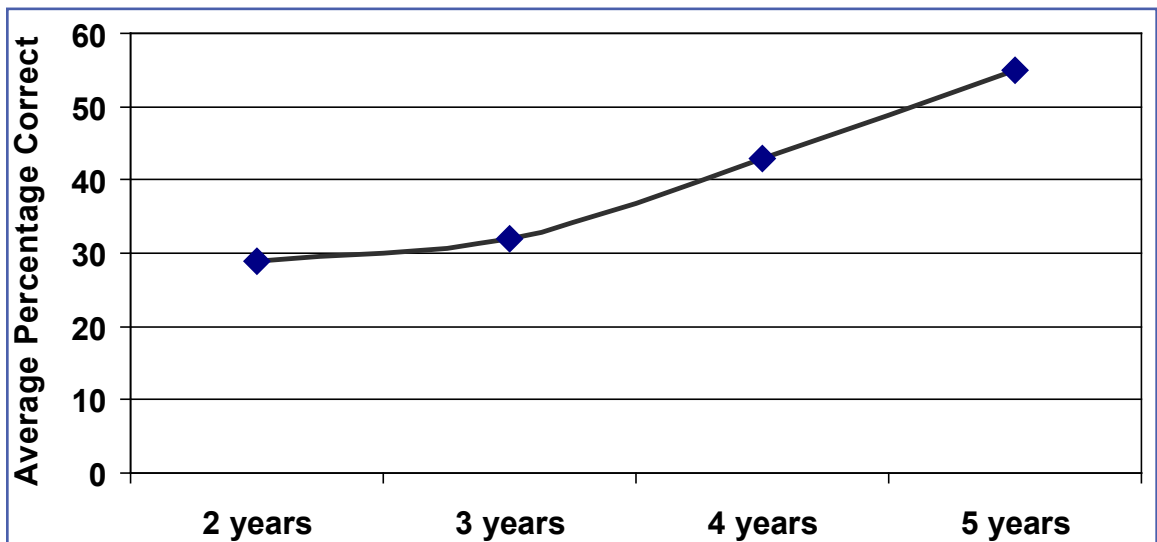
Phonemes:

A phoneme is the smallest meaningful unit of sound in speech. Phonemes include both vowels (beat, bat, boat) and consonants (cat, man, match). The English language uses about 44 phonemes that are combined in various ways to make syllables and words. Alphabet letters map onto phonemes to create written language. However, there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and letters (e.g., ch in match is one phoneme/speech sound but is spelled using three letters; oa in boat is one phoneme/speech sound but is spelled using two letters).

Syllables:

A syllable is the smallest meaningful unit of words, and consists of at least one vowel which creates the *nucleus* of the syllable. Words may be one syllable in length (cat, mill, ten) or several syllables in length (caterpillar, million, tennis). One part of a syllable is the *rime* – the rime of a syllable is the vowel plus any consonants that follow: cat, mill, ten, flow. By identifying the rime of a syllable, we can identify words that rhyme (cat, hat; mill, hill). Identifying and generating rhymes is an important developmental milestone in the area of phonological awareness in early childhood.

During the preschool years, children gradually become sensitive to these various sound units of language – phonemes, syllables, rimes – through both explicit instruction by parents and teachers as well as informal activities such as listening to rhyming stories and playing word games. Phonological awareness improves gradually over time during early childhood, as shown in the graph here. This graph shows growth over time – from 2 years to 5 years – in children’s ability to identify the initial phonemes in words (e.g., the b in bat).



(Adapted from Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony, & Barker, 1998; graph shows the average percentage correct on an 11-item beginning sound task for children at 2-, 3-, 4-, and 5-years of age)

A child can demonstrate his or her phonological awareness through a variety of tasks or activities:

Syllable blending: Child blends several syllables to make a word (e.g., *What do you get when you say sis...ter together?*)

Syllable counting: Child identifies the number of syllables contained in a word, by clapping or counting (e.g., *How many syllables are in the word elephant?*)

Syllable deletion: Child removes a syllable from a multi-syllable word (e.g., *Say batman without the bat.*)

Rhyme detection: Child identifies which of a set of words rhyme (*Which words rhyme: sail, boot, nail?*) or indicates whether two words rhyme (e.g., *Do sail and nail rhyme?*)

Rhyme production: Child produces a word that rhymes with a target (e.g., *What rhymes with boat?*)

Beginning sound identification: Child identifies the first sound of a word (e.g., *What's the first sound of the word bat?*)

Beginning sound matching: Child identifies two words that share the same first sound (e.g., *What's a word that starts with the same sound as bat?*)

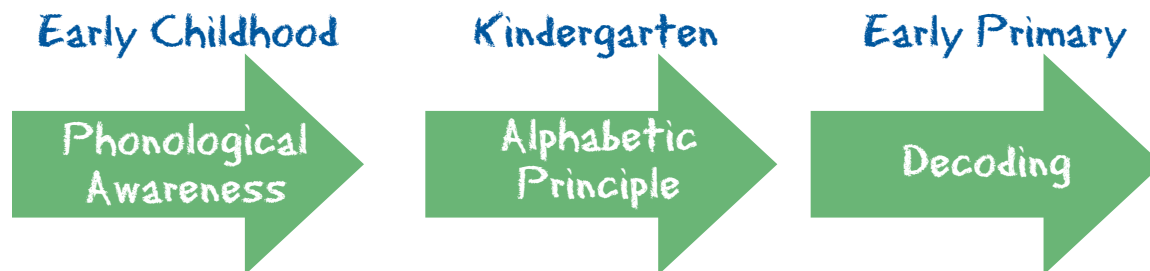
Beginning sound deletion: Child removes the first sound from a word (e.g., *Say beat without the b.*)

Phoneme blending: Child blends a series of sounds to make a word or syllable (e.g., *What word do the sounds /b/... /i/... /t/... make?*)

Phoneme segmenting: Child breaks apart the series of sounds that make a word or syllable (e.g., *Tell me each of the sounds in the word bit.*)

In general, phonological awareness activities that focus on large units of sounds – syllables and rime units – are easier for young children than those that focus on small units of sound – the phoneme. Therefore, the typical four-year-old child will be more successful with the first five tasks targeting awareness of syllables and rime units than the latter five tasks focusing specifically on phonemes. However, just because some phonological awareness activities might be difficult for children does not mean we should not do them!

Phonological awareness is one of the most important areas of literacy development for young children because it has a causal relationship with later reading skills. The term causal relationship indicates that one thing causes another thing to happen. Phonological awareness – children's awareness of different sound units within spoken language – leads children to understand the alphabetic principle, in which sounds are mapped onto letters. In turn, an understanding of the alphabetic principle leads children to develop decoding skills, as depicted here:



As this illustration shows, children who enter kindergarten with better-developed phonological awareness make greater gains in early reading instruction, including understanding of the alphabetic principle, than children who enter kindergarten with poor phonological awareness. In turn, children who develop a good understanding of the alphabetic principle during kindergarten will go on to make more rapid progress in beginning word instruction and

development of decoding skills in the early primary grades. Children's preschool phonological awareness is one of the best predictors of whether a child will progress as a reader in the primary grades or whether the child will struggle.

Terms and Background Knowledge

Vocabulary

Phoneme – The smallest meaningful unit of sound in speech; there are approximately 44 in English.

Syllable – The smallest meaningful unit of words; these consist of at least one vowel which is the *nucleus* of the syllable.

Rhyme detection – Phonological awareness tasks in which a child identifies which of a set of words rhyme or indicates whether two words rhyme.

Beginning sound identification – Phonological awareness tasks in which a child identifies the first sound of a word.

Phoneme segmenting – Phonological awareness tasks in which a child breaks apart the series of sounds that make a word or syllable.

Alphabetic principle – The relationship between spoken language and written language whereby phonemes in speech correspond to letters in print.

Listen and Learn

Activity 1. Children's Awareness of Rhyme

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 4, Activity 1* from the RIA DVD menu.


As we begin to think about the phonological awareness of young children, it may be useful to think about children's awareness of rhyme. Watch this educator lead some rhyme activities.

What strategies did she use to teach the concept of rhyme?

Activity 1. Children's Awareness of Rhyme

How are the children asked to demonstrate their phonological awareness? What tasks were used?

What might a child's performance on these types of tasks tell you about his or her phonological awareness?



Activity 2. Learning Objectives

Review the learning objectives for the target domain of Phonological Awareness addressed in *Read It Again—PreK!* These include:

- To identify when two words share a rhyming pattern
- To segment words into syllables and to blend syllables into words
- To identify when two words share the same first sound
- To produce words that share a rhyming pattern
- To produce a word starting with a specific first sound

Which of these objectives do you give the most attention to in your classroom? Why?

What teaching techniques or materials do you commonly use to address these objectives?

Which of these objectives do you tend not to address? Why?

Activity 2. Learning Objectives – Reviewing Phonological Awareness

What's New?

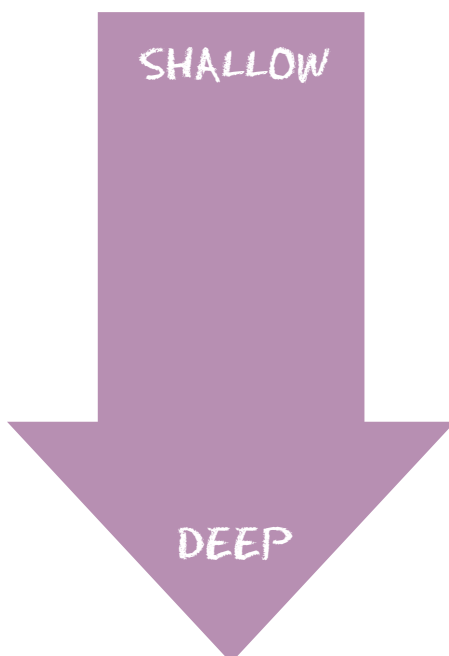
This lesson addresses two new topics related to phonological awareness:

- ◇ From Shallow to Deep
- ◇ How Much Phonological Awareness is Enough?

Topic 1. From Shallow to Deep

As discussed earlier in this lesson, children can demonstrate their phonological awareness on a range of tasks targeting awareness of syllables, awareness of rhymes, awareness of beginning sounds in words, and awareness of the individual phonemes that make up words. However, young children's performance on these tasks is not uniform, in that a four-year-old child may perform very well on a task that examines awareness of syllables (e.g., syllable counting) but perform very poorly on a measure that examines awareness of phonemes (e.g., phoneme counting). This is because a child's development of phonological awareness tends to follow a pattern whereby children first show awareness of syllables (syllable awareness) followed by awareness of rhymes (rhyme awareness). This is followed by awareness of beginning sounds (beginning sound awareness), which in turn is followed by an awareness of the individual phonemes that make up words (phonemic awareness). One way of thinking about phonological awareness is that children progress through certain levels of awareness. They progress from a shallow level of awareness that involves awareness of syllables and rhymes to a deep level of awareness that involves awareness of phonemes, first in the beginning position of words and later for all the individual sounds contained in words. This progression is shown in the following figure.


Topic 1. From Shallow to Deep



Level of Awareness	Example Tasks/Activities
Syllable Awareness	Syllable blending Syllable counting Syllable deletion
Rhyme Awareness	Rhyme detection Rhyme production
Beginning Sound Awareness	Beginning sound identification Beginning sound matching Beginning sound deletion
Phonemic Awareness	Phoneme blending Phoneme segmentation

For children who are of preschool age, phonological awareness may exist only at shallow levels. For children who have a shallow level of phonological awareness, participation in syllable and rhyme awareness tasks may be relatively easy, while participation in beginning sound and phonemic awareness tasks would be very difficult.

Listen and Learn



Activity 3. Assessing Children's Phonological Awareness

Turn on your DVD player and watch *Session 4, Activity 3: Examples 1 and 2*. As you progress through these examples, you will notice that answers appear after each one so that you can compare your responses with ours.

Watch this four-year-old complete several different phonological awareness activities.

Which two types of phonological awareness tasks did the child complete?

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Which type of activity did the educator use to test syllable awareness: syllable blending, syllable counting, or syllable deletion?

Which type of activity did the educator use to test phonemic awareness: phoneme blending or phoneme segmentation?

Which activity did the child complete quite easily?

Which activity seemed to be quite difficult for the child?

Activity 3. Assessing Children's Phonological Awareness

Topic 2. How Much Phonological Awareness is Enough?

In the previous section, we noted that children's phonological awareness develops gradually over time and moves from shallow levels of awareness to deep levels of awareness. It is reasonable to ask: How much phonological awareness is enough? In other words, as a preschool teacher, what level of phonological awareness should I help the children in my classroom to achieve?

For children to be successful in acquiring the alphabetic principle – typically addressed in kindergarten – some deep phonological awareness is helpful. Children who have some understanding of what a phoneme is and how to attend to sounds within words and syllables will find it much easier to develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle than children who have only shallow phonological awareness.

This means that the preschool teacher should engage children in activities that target deep awareness, namely, activities that help children attend to the beginning sounds of words. Activities that ask children to attend to all of the sounds in words may be too difficult at this time, although many children who are four years of age are able to focus on the beginning sounds of words. This can be helpful to future reading development and is an important indicator of school readiness.

It may be helpful to watch a teacher engage a child in a few different phonological awareness activities and to identify which activities are focused on shallow levels of awareness and which are focused on deep levels of awareness. In particular, for activities that focus on deep levels of awareness, identify those activities in which the teacher helps the child to focus on the beginning sounds of words.



Topic 2. How Much Phonological Awareness is Enough?

Listen and Learn



Activity 4. Assessing Children's Phonological Awareness

Turn on your DVD player and watch *Session 4, Activity 4: Examples 1, 2 and 3*. As you progress through these examples, you will notice that answers appear after each one so that you can compare your responses with ours.

What three types of phonological awareness tasks does this child complete:

Example 1: _____

Example 2: _____

Example 3: _____

Of the three activities, which two focused on shallow levels of awareness?

1. _____

2. _____

Of the three activities, which one focused on deep levels of awareness?

Which activity seemed to be the most difficult for the child?

Now, listen to what we have to say:

Turn on your DVD player and select *Session 4, Discussion* from the RIA DVD menu.

Activity 4. Assessing Children's Phonological Awareness: From Shallow to Deep

Reflect and Apply

Reflect

1. Think about a child in your classroom. Write that child's name here: _____.

How often in a given week do you implement activities to build phonological awareness with this child?

Do you think this is enough opportunity for this child to strengthen his or her phonological awareness?

2. Look at the five phonological awareness objectives addressed in *Read It Again–PreK!*

- To identify when two words share a rhyming pattern
- To segment words into syllables and to blend syllables into words
- To identify when two words share the same first sound
- To produce words that share a rhyming pattern
- To produce a word starting with a specific first sound

Which of these objectives do you give the most attention to in your classroom? Why?

Which of these objectives do you give the least attention to?

What could you do this week to provide additional opportunities for children in your classroom to learn this objective?

3. Which children in your classroom, in your opinion, have shallow levels of phonological awareness?

What do you think is the reason for this?

Which children in your classroom, in your opinion, have deep levels of phonological awareness?

What do you think is the reason for this?

Apply

1. Play a game of “Turtle and Rabbits” during whole group time. Explain to the children that you will be playing the part of the turtle and you will be saying words very slowly. Their job is to act as “rabbits” who will repeat back the word more quickly, which will require them to blend syllables. Begin with simple compound words such as *cupcake* or *cowboy* and then move to longer words (e.g., *alligator*, *helicopter*, *refrigerator*, *alphabet*). As children become more comfortable with the game, invite one child at a time to become the “turtle.” Whisper a word to the child to say slowly as the class of “rabbits” practices saying the word more quickly and blending syllables. Were the children able to blend syllables? Were there differences among the children in their ability to blend syllables? If so, why do you think these differences occurred?
2. Engage children in a “Sound Hunt” around the classroom. Give each child a bag or basket and challenge them to find three items that start with the same sound as the first sound of their name (e.g. *Sophie* could place *scissors* in her bag). Were the children easily able to identify the initial sound of their name in various items around the room? Were there differences in performance among the children? If so, why do you think these differences occurred?

3. Ask two children in your classroom to take part in the following phonological awareness tasks:

- **Syllable counting:** Have the child identify the number of syllables in a word by clapping or counting (e.g., *How many syllables are in the word 'rainbow'?*)
- **Rhyme production:** Have the child produce a word that rhymes with a target (e.g., *What word rhymes with 'soap'?*)
- **Phoneme blending:** Have the child blend a series of sounds to make a word or syllable (e.g., *What words do the sounds /h/... /a/.../t/...make?*)

Study their responses and identify whether or not each has (a) a shallow level of phonological awareness, or (b) a deep level of phonological awareness. Were there differences among the two children in their performance on these tasks?

Resources

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