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Author: Sensenbaugh, Roger
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Phonemic Awareness: An Important Early Step in Learning To Read. ERIC Digest.

With little or no direct instruction, almost all young children develop the ability to

understand spoken language. While most kindergarten children have mastered the complexities of speech, they do not know that spoken language is made up of discrete words, which are made up of syllables, which themselves are made up of the smallest units of sound, called "phonemes." This awareness that spoken language is made up of discrete sounds appears to be a crucial factor in children learning to read.

This Digest discusses the concept of the awareness that spoken language is made up of discrete sounds, why this concept is so important to early childhood educators, its relation to the debate on the best type of reading instruction, and finally, teaching methods that may help children in developing such an awareness.

WHAT IS PHONOLOGICAL/PHONEME AWARENESS?

Stanovich (1993-94) defines "phonological awareness" as the ability to deal explicitly and segmentally with sound units smaller than the syllable. He also notes that researchers "argue intensely" about the meaning of the term and about the nature of the tasks used to measure it. Harris and Hodges (1995) present a brief essay on phonemic awareness. Another oft-cited source (Adams, 1990) uses "phonemic awareness" almost exclusively. Phonological awareness sometimes refers to an awareness that words consist of syllables, "onsets and rimes," and phonemes, and so can be considered as a broader notion than phonemic awareness. Each term is widely used and perhaps (if incorrectly) used interchangeably. In preparing this Digest, both terms were used to search the ERIC database. For the purposes of this Digest, each author's use will be followed.
Adams (1990) describes 5 levels of phonemic awareness in terms of abilities:

*to hear rhymes and alliteration as measured by knowledge of nursery rhymes

*to do oddity tasks (comparing and contrasting the sounds of words for rhyme and alliteration)

*to blend and split syllables

*to perform phonemic segmentation (such as counting out the number of phonemes in a

word)

- *to perform phoneme manipulation tasks (such as adding, deleting a particular phoneme and regenerating a word from the remainder).

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Educators are always looking for valid and reliable predictors of educational achievement. One reason why educators are so interested in phonemic awareness is that research indicates that it is the best predictor of the ease of early reading acquisition (Stanovich, 1993-94), better even than IQ, vocabulary, and listening comprehension.
Phonological awareness is not only correlated with learning to read, but research indicates a stronger statement is true: phonological awareness appears to play a causal role in reading acquisition. Phonological awareness is a foundational ability underlying the learning of spelling-sound correspondences (Stanovich, 1993-94). Although phonological awareness appears to be a necessary condition for learning to read (children who do not develop phonological awareness do not go on to learn how to read), it is not a sufficient condition. Adams (1990) reviews the research that suggests that it is critical for children to be able to link phoneme awareness to a knowledge of letters.

Once beginning readers have some awareness of phonemes and their corresponding graphic representations, research has indicated that further reading instruction heightens their awareness of language, assisting then in developing the later stages of phonemic awareness mentioned above. Phonemic awareness is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of learning to read (Yopp, 1992).

Instruments to test for a child's phonemic awareness tend to be short, easy to administer, reliable, and valid. Stanovich also provides a quick (7-minute) and easy-to-administer phonological awareness test in an article in which he discusses his career as a researcher. Yopp (1995) presents a similarly brief assessment instrument and offers detailed evidence for its validity and reliability.

RELATION TO THE "GREAT READING WARS"

Phonological awareness and its role in beginning reading has the potential to confound supporters at both extremes of the whole language vs. phonics "debate" over reading instruction. Regardless of instructional technique, phonological awareness is an essential element for reading progress (Griffith and Olson, 1992). In another study, Griffith et al. (1992) found that children with high phonemic awareness outperformed

those with low phonemic awareness on all literacy measures, whether they were taught using a whole language approach or traditional basal instruction. Whole language advocates need to admit that not all children develop this necessary ability simply through immersion in a print-rich environment, and that some children will need direct instruction in phonological awareness. "Phonics first" supporters (and perhaps even "phonics only" supporters) need to admit that teaching students letter-sound correspondences is meaningless if the students do not have a solid visual familiarity with the individual letters and if they do not understand that the sounds (which can be complex, shifting, and notoriously rule-breaking) paired with those letters are what make up words (Adams, 1990).

What is needed, and what many practitioners probably already actually implement, is a balanced approach to reading instruction--an approach that combines the language- and literature-rich activities associated with whole language activities aimed at enhancing meaning, understanding, and the love of language with explicit teaching of skills as needed to develop fluency associated with proficient readers. Honig (1996) offers a review of reading research supporting such a balanced approach and presents detailed guidelines on how to integrate whole language principles with the necessary foundation reading skills.

TEACHING METHODS

Research indicates that phonological awareness can be taught and that students who increased their awareness of phonemes facilitated their subsequent reading acquisition (Lundberg et al, 1988). Teachers need to be aware of instructional activities that can help their students become aware of phonemes before they receive formal reading instruction, and they need to realize that phonemic awareness will become more sophisticated as students' reading skills develop.

The following recommendations for instruction in phonemic awareness are derived from Spector (1995):

- (1) At the preschool level, engage children in activities that direct their attention to the sounds in words, such as rhyming and alliteration games.
- (2) Teach students to segment and blend.
- (3) Combine training in segmentation and blending with instruction in letter-sound relationships.

(4) Teach segmentation and blending as complementary processes.

(5) Systematically sequence examples when teaching segmentation and blending.

(6) Teach for transfer to novel tasks and contexts.

Yopp (1992) offers the following general recommendations for phonemic awareness activities:

(a) Keep a sense of playfulness and fun, avoid drill and rote memorization.

(b) Use group settings that encourage interaction among children.

(c) Encourage children's curiosity about language and their experimentation with it.

(d) Allow for and be prepared for individual differences.

(e) Make sure the tone of the activity is not evaluative but rather fun and informal.

Spending a few minutes daily engaging preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade children in oral activities that emphasize the sounds of language may go a long way in helping them become successful readers and learners.

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Roger Sensenbaugh is CIJE Coordinator at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication.

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