



Ünal Gezer, M. (2021). Storybooks, Songs, and Games: Tools To Boost Early Literacy Development in Primary English Classrooms. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET)*, 8(4). 2683-2700.

Received : 23.06.2021
Revised version received : 14.09.2021
Accepted : 16.09.2021

STORYBOOKS, SONGS, AND GAMES: TOOLS TO BOOST EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

(Review study)

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Abstract

Determining later academic achievement, early literacy skills are all of the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for successful reading and writing during formal education. Early literacy skills consist of several sub-skills including phonology knowledge that determine primary-level reading. The present article is prepared for English language instructors teaching English at early grade levels, specifically at pre-primary and early years in primary education (Grades 2, 3, and 4 for public; Grades 1, 2, 3, and 4 for private institutions) as a reference to utilize when practicing phonological and phonemic awareness with young learners of English. The study which taps into phonological and phonemic awareness and recommends putting phonics instruction into practice in the early years of literacy education in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts is an instructional resource for teacher trainees and in-service instructors with limited experience and knowledge in young learners' literacy education. The paper has two major parts, first, phonological awareness types are explicated, operational definitions are provided and classroom activities are presented. In the second part, storybook and song integration for a linguistically-rich early literacy acquisition in primary EFL classrooms with young language learners are further discussed.

Keywords: Storybooks, songs, games, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, phonics, early literacy development, teaching English to young learners, English-as-a-foreign language

1. Introduction

In 1997, English was first introduced as a compulsory school subject at Grades 4 to 8 in Turkey. In 2012, a new action plan was put into practice to revitalize the overall quality of education, including English curricula for early grade levels. A major revision of this curricular decision was to tailor English instruction according to cognitive and linguistic development of young language learners by integrating a variety of activities including songs and chants, stories, Total Physical Response (TPR) activities and, arts and crafts (Kırkgöz, 2006; Kırkgöz, Çelik, & Arıkan, 2016). Turkey's Ministry of National Education- MoNE-(2013) projects highlighting communicative skills in the first four years of primary education with very limited amount of reading and writing practice. Literacy skills introduction and practice are not based on a developmentally appropriate framework. Appropriate practice of early literacy skills is lacking in the primary English curriculum and instructional materials and this is the gap the present study aims to fill in. The following practices are recommended for young language learners who can be described as the learners in Turkish EFL context, attending earlier grade levels starting pre-primary at private schools and primary grades (Grades 2-onward) for public schools. Currently, Grade 2 is the earliest grade level for English introduction at public schools.

The threshold for English language introduction has been getting lower and lower at a global scale (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011). Young language learners comprise a delicate learner

profile that needs special care and attention (Cameron, 2001; Enever & Moon, 2009; Moon, 2000; Linse & Nunan, 2005). This special group requires English language teachers to know about child development theories, special teaching techniques, and resources and tasks suitable to the needs of children (Gürsoy & Korkmaz Çelik, 2012; Yangın Ekşi & Aşık, 2015). It has been validated that phonological awareness has a strong relationship with early reading and writing (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). The present practice-oriented guide is prepared for both in-service English language instructors teaching languages to young ones and for pre-service teacher training. Turkey's MoNE emphasizes child-centered and experiential early language instruction that is active and playful; however, it is not clear how the recommended early English instruction is put into practice (Haznedar, 2012). Learning how to read and write in EFL makes it imperative for language instructors to understand that first and second languages may differ linguistically. Sometimes, the mastery of mechanics of English by students is taken for granted, especially considering the fact that young learners with somewhat limited proficiency in their first language should begin their English reading and writing instruction from scratch. Even children whose first languages are alphabetic need to transition from one alphabetic language functioning based on a consistent alphabetic principle (e.g. Turkish) to not so consistent one (e.g. English). Differing phoneme-grapheme correspondences across orthographies necessitate directing young learners' attention to these features early on. In bottom-up approaches of literacy instruction, the reader decodes each individual letter by matching the minimal units of meaning in the sound system (phonemic level) to conclude the meaning of the written material. This step is often missed or ignored in EFL programs and young learners are expected to deal with meaning even before they decipher the target words. Decoding which is making connections between the letters (i.e. graphemes) and the sound equivalents (i.e. phonemes) of those letters is a foundational skill which impacts accuracy, fluency, and lastly comprehension of young language learners. Songs, storybooks, and games are often used by the teachers of young language learners because early language instruction should be "enjoyable and interesting; active and hands-on; supported and scaffolded; meaningful and purposeful; and culturally appropriate and relevant" (Shin, 2014, p. 557). The essential skills for success in EFL early literacy development requires special attention and the tools to tap into phonological and phonemic awareness in an interactive manner through multi-sensory engagement are described in the following sections.

2. Essential skills in EFL early literacy development

2.1. Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that includes identifying and manipulating units of oral language- linguistic constructs such as words, syllables, onset and rimes, and phonemes. Children who have developed strong phonological awareness can identify and produce rhymes, alliteration, recognize words in a sentence or syllables in a word. Once excelling these phonological awareness skills, they can notice the same initial, medial, and final sounds and they become capable of manipulating individual spoken sounds. Phonological awareness is an auditory skill which is all about listening to the language and hearing and sounding out words. As part of phonological awareness, young learners learn the rhythm and sounds of language. When the rhythm is recognized, children can break sentences into words and words into syllables.

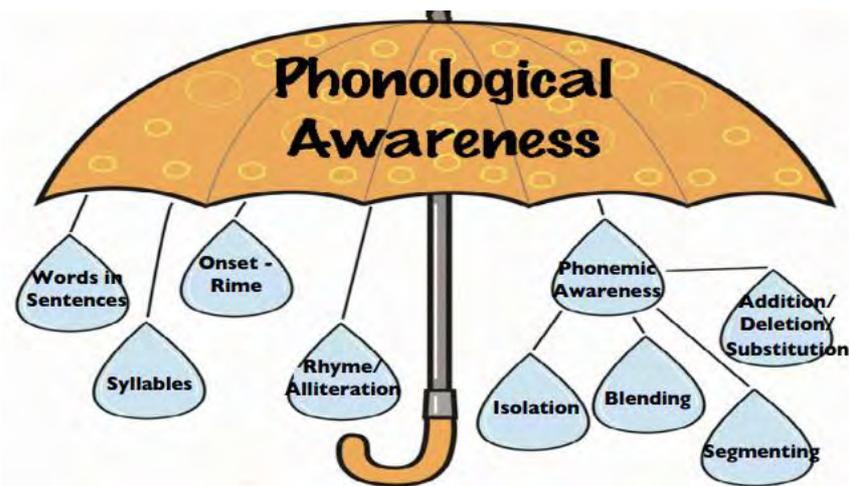


Figure 1. The umbrella term: phonological awareness

2.2. Words in Sentences

The coarsest unit of phonological awareness are words in sentences. Sentences or phrases consist of words and young learners' attention can be directed to these linguistic constructs. Words are the units that can stand alone in sentences. Young learners can be asked to listen to a phrase or sentence and count the number of words that they hear. This activity gives the implicit message to the young ones that there are words in sentences.

Words in a Sentence Activity I: "Clap each time you hear a word in the sentence". "Mary had a little lamb." Students are expected to clap five times. This activity can be done orally and it is a useful listening practice with young ones. TPR can be incorporated by clapping or hopping. The instruction can be "Hop or clap each time you hear a word" which is again done orally and aurally. This version can be practiced with very young ones and with smaller groups.

Words in a Sentence Activity II: If the young learner has advanced literacy skills and is able to read and write: "Write a four-word sentence". For instance, "Who ate the cake?" Or "Write a sentence with seven words" as in "Jack and Jill went down the hill." This activity is more demanding as it requires production and counting. Thus it should be practiced with older young learners.

2.3. Syllable

A sub-unit of phonological awareness is syllable awareness. Syllable is a unit that includes a vowel. Each syllable includes a vowel. Because syllables are finer-grained linguistic units compared to words, they might be harder to pin down for young learners. Various techniques can be utilized to find out the number of syllables in a word.

Techniques to count the number of syllables are:

One is to put the hand under the chin and see how many times the jaw touches the hand. A **second** method is clapping each time the mouth opens and clap for each syllable (ba-na-na three claps). The **third** one can be done by keeping the mouth closed and saying the word with the lips sealed. By placing the tip of the finger over the throat to feel the number of times the throat vibrates, one can find the number of syllables. The **fourth** method is simply listening to the target words and paying attention to the number of times the voice track opens (or the times you hear A, E, I, O, U as individual sounds).

2.3.1. Segmenting words into syllables

In this activity, the instructor asks children to dissect the target words into syllables.

Syllable Activity I: This activity is suitable for those young learners who cannot read yet. “Let’s listen to this word and find out how many syllables there are. –Computer–” (Students are expected to listen to the target word carefully and say *com-pu-ter* which is a total of three syllables)

Syllable Activity II: This activity is appropriate for those who can read. “Let’s read this word and find out how many syllables there are. –Mayonnaise–” (Students are expected to read carefully and say the target word has three syllables).

2.3.2. Blending syllables

In this activity, the instructor simply asks children to blend the syllables.

Syllable Blending Activity I: “The syllables of this word is in mixed order. Come up with a meaningful word by combining these syllables accurately”

ter-pu-com – computer lon-wa-me-ter – watermelon

2.3.3.. Reverse the order of syllables

In this activity, the instructor asks children to flip the order of the syllables of a target word.

Syllable Reversal Activity I: This activity can be accomplished orally and aurally. The instructor can say the syllables of a word verbally and have students listen and respond verbally. “Let’s listen to the syllables *-door-bell-*. Can you reverse the order of these syllables? Bell-door.” A slightly more challenging version can be played in the following way: the syllables are provided in writing and learners receive the following prompt from the instructor: “Let’s read these syllables and reverse the order of them. lon-wa-me-ter”. Watermelon should be the correct answer in writing.

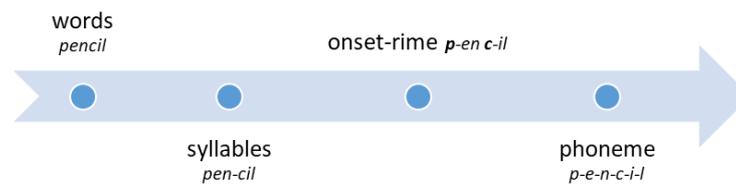


Figure 2. Coarse-to-fine-grained early literacy constructs

2.4. Onset-Rime

Onset and rime are even finer-grained units existing within syllables. Following the path of coarse-to-fine level of literacy constructs from words to syllables and syllables to onset-rime requires a finer-grained analysis. Onset is the initial phonological unit of a syllable, often represented by a consonant (e.g. ‘c’ in car). Some words do not have an onset. *Obligation*, for example, consists of four syllables: ob-li-ga-tion. The first syllable does not have an onset; however, the following three have /l/, /g/, and /t/ respectively as the onset of the consecutive syllables.

Rime refers to the string of letters that follow the onset usually with a vowel of the same syllable. In the same example, *oor* in *door* is the rime and *d* is the onset. Teaching onset-rime is delving into finer linguistic units. Learning how to locate onset and rime of a syllable is helpful for young learners to notice chunks within words which facilitates decoding and word spelling.

Potential ways to explain onset are: a) the syllable has a vowel, not a consonant, in the initial position (*appear- ap-pear*), b) the onset consists of one consonant sound (*believe- b*), and c) the onset consists of multiple consonants, a consonant cluster (*blister-bl* or *strap-str*).

Teaching children onset-rime will help young EFL learners gain an understanding of word families which establishes the foundation of reading and spelling achievement. Onset-rime not only instructs word families but they also help young ones understand how syllables are formed: consonant-vowel-consonant (*cat-CVC*), or consonant-vowel (*you-CV*), or consonant-vowel-consonant-consonant (*CVCC*) as in *kick*.

Onset-Rime Activity I: Onset-rime slides can be helpful for young learners to practice onset-rimes in different words in a fun and engaging way. In one set, the rimes are provided (e.g. -*ail*) and options for onset are provided as well. One of the onsets on the sliding tape is *m* so the child will match the onset with rime and the next one on the sliding tape is *n* so it is *nail*. There are several examples provided below.



As shown in Figure 3, onset-rime can be practiced with everyday items and recyclables. In this image, toy eggs are being used for practicing onset-rime.



Figure 3. Onset-rime eggs

Onset-Rime Activity II: Onset-rime can be practiced with another game called Rime House. This can be played with children who cannot read and write or those who are literate in the target language. The goal of this activity is to segment, blend, match onset and rimes in words. Imagine there is a picture of a two-story house and on the roof, there is a target word – *cat*— with a picture of cat. First, the child either orally or in writing finds the onset in this mono-syllabic word- *c*- and then the rime which is *-at*. Then, the child finds the cards with the same rime such as *hat, mat, bat*. There are other cue cards on the table and children will locate the matching cards on the floors and in the rooms of the rime house (e.g. *bat, hat, and mat*). This can be done in writing for those children who are literate and verbally with those who cannot read yet. In this activity, young ones learn how to segment the syllable into onset-rime and how to pair the existing rime with new pair of onsets.

Onset-Rime Activity III: This activity is called Rime Sort is more visually-appealing and it is played this way: there are picture header cards such as *fan, cap, lamp*. Children, then, segment the onset and rime for each column: *f-an, c-ap, l-amp*. The words in the header (on top of each column) are pictures and there are written cards that will match. Locating the onset

and rimes once, children sort out other cue cards and place them under the right column. Under *fan* column (with a picture of a fan), *man, tan, can, plan* can be placed. Under the picture of *lamp*, other words such as *camp, ramp, champ, and stamp* could be placed. This activity can be modified as all in visuals or all in writing for less and more advanced learners.

Onset-Rime Activity IV: This activity is to reinforce automaticity and accuracy in sorting out onset-rimes in words. This game, because it requires speedy participation of young learners, is played with a timer. There are two students in this task, one reads the list and the other checks on the accuracy. There are lists of words with a specific kind of rime such as *-in* as in *bin, pin, fin, chin*, or *-ot* as in *hot, pot, lot, not*. Student A reads and Student B checks whether all the words were read accurately. Once Student A finishes reading they can take turns.

2.5. Rhyme

A sub-set of phonological awareness, rhyme, enables young language learners notice some words have common letter sequences at the final position and that they rhyme, which provides a head-start to learning to read. Rhymes are one of the most significant head-starts into early reading. Before practicing rhyme with young ones, one needs to find out whether young learners can recognize and come up with rhymes. If children come from a different L1 background, checking on their rhyme awareness in their respective native languages should be completed before checking on their English rhyme awareness. A rhyming test is applied and items included can be as simple as *yes* or *no*. “Do the following words rhyme?” “*Fish – wish?*” Yes, they do rhyme! “Do the following words rhyme?” “*Cup and mug?*” No, they do not rhyme. If a child can recognize rhyming words, they can produce rhyme on their own and eventually they start recognizing rhyme in words.

Rhyme Game Activity I: Rhyming Bowl is a game designed to tap into young language learners’ phonological awareness. Imagine there are bowls and in the center of each bowl is a word. Let them be *cake, man, and phone*. Young learners can be asked for other words that rhyme with *cake* and they can come up with *bake, fake, take, sake*; and for *man*, they can have *pan, can, tan, van*.

Rhyme Game Activity II: *Get off the Bus* is the name of this game. Imagine there is big, yellow school bus. The bus has seats and only the passengers that rhyme together can be seated in the same row. First, the rhyming word pairs are introduced and are practiced by the young learners to make sure young ones feel confident about the target words. In this game, the rhyme cue cards include visuals to facilitate reading process. *Bat-hat, hen-pen, star-car*, and other pairs are revised first. This step is necessary to make sure young ones are familiar with the terms before playing the game. In the next step, words are provided in sets of three. *Bat- hat- hen* is a sample set. One passenger does not fit in this row and it needs to be taken out. This is the last word- *hen-* that does not fit and it should get off the bus!

Rhyme Game Activity III: *What is in the Sack?* is another rhyme activity which can be played at school or at home with caregivers. Imagine there is a sack full of household items! In this hands-on activity, young ones are asked to pull an item out of the sack and tell what it is. Then they are expected to come up with another real or nonsense word that rhymes with these objects. If the child picks up a *spoon*, he may say *moon* as a real word or **foon* as a nonsense word to practice rhyme. Because this game-activity is production-based, young learners need to go through necessary stages with plenty awareness gaining, and practice activities before asking them produce a rhyme.

In order to engage young ones with rhymes, a medley of games, song and chants, and storybooks can be utilized. This is vital to design a linguistically-rich literacy awareness and

skills acquisition environment and to vary the mode of literacy practices for learners with different learning styles: auditory, visual, and kinesthetic.

2.6. Alliteration

Alliteration can be defined as simple as repetitive sounds in a text. It is usually consonants in words repeated close together in a sentence. Alliteration is a type of phonological awareness that exists in every language. Depending on the child's L1, alliteration can be practiced in L1 before practicing it in EFL. Tongue twisters, children's rhymes are rich sources of alliteration. One of the longest-known alliteration must be *She sells sea shells on the seashore* where the combination of /s/ and /sh/are repeated. Alliteration can be practiced with longer texts such as:

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper,

If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper,

Where is the peck of pickled pepper, Peter Piper picked? (/p/ is the repeated sound)

Alliteration Game Activity I: The activity is based on the names' of the students. This is a great way to get to know the learners or to acknowledge young ones' names. Imagine there is a Mary in the class. *Marvelous Mary* can be the initial level of alliteration. If possible, alliteration can be taken to the next level with a full sentence as in: **Marvelous Mary made a mushroom muffin**. It is clear that /m/ is repeated over and over again.

In this age of technology, alliteration and tongue twisters can be practiced through applications and other technologically-enhanced tools. Depending on the availability, technology can be integrated into primary EFL classrooms to practice alliteration.

2.7. Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the most refined unit of phonological awareness. It is the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds, called phonemes. Phonemic awareness is practiced orally and aurally and the foundational unit is individual spoken sounds which are called phonemes. A sub-unit of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness deals with the most finely-grained units—phonemes—to tap into young learners' phonological awareness. It has proven to be one of the biggest predictors of how well children learn to read and spell during the first two years of academic life. It is also known in the literature children who are at risk for reading difficulty have low levels of phonological and phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness can be enhanced through systematic intervention with plenty practice and awareness-raising activities.

Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. Phonemes establish the smallest units comprising spoken language. Phonemes form syllables and words. *Mat*, when analyzed phonemically, consists of three phonemes: /m/ /a/ /t/. The 26 letters of the alphabet transforms into 44 phonemes. Those 44 phonemes are represented by over 250 graphemic representations which are letters and letter combinations. Developing phonemic awareness is crucial for young language learners to be functional readers who can recognize words and spellers who internalize the knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences and the basics of the alphabetic principle.

Phoneme awareness begins with spoken sounds and moves into written words through phonics instruction. Phonemic awareness should not be confused with phonics as phonemic awareness does not involve print or letter names. It is critical to understand the difference between the two, as reading is phonologically based not visual as it is often thought to be.

Phonemic awareness instruction provides children with an understanding that the words they hear in oral language are not whole units but are co-articulated sounds that make up a

word. Once children have this understanding, they can isolate, blend, segment, and manipulate related sounds. These phoneme manipulation skills are crucial to become a fluent reader.

Phoneme manipulation includes adding, deleting, and substituting sounds in words. Once engaged in these phonemic awareness activities, students learn they can make more words by manipulating individual sounds. If young learners are capable of manipulating phonemes orally, they will be able to transfer these skills to reading and writing during phonics instruction.

With the practice of phonics instruction, one can understand the evidence of phonemic awareness skills in reading and spelling practices of young learners. Educators and parents can observe students blend sounds to read words and transform unknown words into sight words by quickly manipulating phonemes when decoding the words.

When learners write, they direct the attention to the way words are spelled and the sounds associated with those letters. Novice spellers may spell out the word *cat* as **ct* simply by relying on the initial and final sounds. Phonemic awareness can be practiced with young language learners who are not familiar with the letters of the alphabet. For instance, they can understand /m/ is the initial sound of *man* without knowing the letter *m*.

Teachers of young learners of English need to know all about phonemes and be ready to teach phonemes to young learners. One needs to make sure the school reading program adopts a comprehensive, systematic, and integral phonological awareness agenda for young ones. Phonological awareness program should identify the phoneme to be focused on in a developmentally-appropriate manner. Practicing phonemes is not a drilling activity, it is, rather a multi-sensory engagement through arts and crafts, rhythm and percussion, songs and chants, story-reading and storytelling, and TPR. Following are ways to tap into phonemic awareness:

2.7.1. Phoneme isolation

Phoneme isolation can be practiced to help young learners isolate a sound of the target word. The instructor may say: “I am going to say a word. You will tell me the first sound in this word. Ready? ‘Van’ ‘van’. What is the first sound? Students sound it out and say /v/. Students can take turns and isolate different sounds consisting of the words; the second, the final or the medial sounds can be isolated through phoneme isolation activities.

2.7.2. Phoneme identification

This phonemic awareness activity aims at having young learners identify a common phoneme across different words. It can aim at identifying the different phoneme as well. The instructor asks: “What sound is the same in ‘fix’, ‘fall’ and ‘fun’? Students respond and say “It is /f”. What phoneme is different in ‘hop’ and ‘hip’? It is the middle phoneme. Phoneme identification can be completed with pictures for a visually enhanced experience. Young language learners can receive the visuals of three objects and are asked to identify the same sound.



Figure 4. Phoneme identification

Phoneme Identification Game Activity II: This is a competitive game, there are two players. They are given two options /b/, /p/ or /d/, /t/ and there are cue cards either with written or with pictures and written cue. It is played with fly catchers in the hands of the players ready to smash the right word. For young ones to play this game properly, they need to decode the phonemes and be able to differentiate them in writing. The visual cue will depict dog which starts with /d/ not /t/ so the one who hits the /d/ prompt laying on the floor or up on the blackboard will get the score. If competition does not suit the classroom environment, it can be played solo especially for assessment purposes to measure individual students' learning progress.



Figure 5. Phoneme identification with flycatchers

2.7.3. Phoneme categorization

Phoneme Categorization, a type of phoneme sorting, requires a group of words or pictures of items. The prompt is “Find all the objects that begin with /b/ sound” and the worksheet portrays the items starting with or without /b/. Young learners look at the pictures and say the words out loud. Each time the child comes across a word starting with /b/, those pictures will be circled out *bicycle* and *bat* pictures will be circled out but *tent* or *lamp* pictures do not get circled. Phoneme sorting entails having a phoneme in target and taking actions by sorting the words starting or ending with this phoneme. With older and more advanced young learners, confusing phonemes such as /p/, /b/ or /t/, /th/ can be categorized with the words starting or ending with either of these sounds.

2.7.4. Phoneme blending

Phoneme Blending is the opposite of phoneme segmentation. In this phonemic awareness processing, young learners are given separate phonemes and are asked to put them together. Teacher instruction is: “What word is ‘b’ ‘a’ ‘g’”? and the answer is ‘bag’. Phoneme blending can be practiced with short and long words. “Put these sounds together to make a word.” /f/ /l/ /i/ /p/ -- flip /s/ /t/ /r/ /ee/ /t/ -- street. Young learners should be gently reminded that this is sounds-based manipulation and it is not about letters. In the word, *street*, there are a total of six letters and the ‘ee’ is a diphthong equivalent of the /i/ sound. That is the reason why it consists of five phonemes.

Phoneme blending can be implemented in primary English classes with the use of manipulatives such as blocks, cloth pins. In the following visual, both finished products of phoneme blending activities can be seen in the following figure.



Figure 6. Phoneme blending with clothespins, building blocks

2.7.5. Phoneme segmentation

It is the phoneme manipulation that is the opposite of phoneme blending. Simply dissecting the words into smaller units called phonemes is phoneme segmentation. Imagine the sounds of this word, *fan*, /f/ /a/ /n/ would be an accurate phonemic segmentation. When segmenting, young learners can count the number of phonemes or simply slice the word into phonemes.

Phoneme Segmentation Game Activity I: A xylophone and flash cards are the materials for this activity. The instructor says a word out loud such as *mouse* and the students are expected to hit the xylophone three times one for /m/ one for /au/ which is a dipthong and is considered as a single phoneme, and /s/. Another idea for phoneme segmentation game with a xylophone is saying a target word out loud and asking learners hit the phonemes written on the xylophone. It is a demanding task for young ones to hear the phonemes, match them with the graphemes provided by hitting the right one. It can only be practiced with older and proficient young language learners. These are TPR-based phoneme segmentation activities which can be fun to play with young language learners.



Figure 7. Xylophone phoneme segmentation

2.7.6. Phoneme deletion

Phoneme deletion entails deleting a phoneme in a set of phonemes. The instructor says “Bat” and asks students to repeat. Instructor, then, says, “Say it without /b/” and students are expected to say “-at”. The deleted phoneme can be in the initial position, in the medial or final position. The instructor in the medial phoneme deletion task asks: “Say *scale*” and then she asks “Say it without /k/” and it is *sale*. The instructor can practice deleting the final phoneme say “Say *sport*” “Now say it without /r/” Students say *spot*.

2.7.7. Phoneme addition

It is the opposite of phoneme deletion task where a new phoneme is added to the initial, medial or final position of the target word. The instruction is “Say *star*” and then “Now add /t/ at the end”. *Start* should be the new word. Playing with phonemes like this, young learners, understand that with the change of a phoneme, the meaning can change completely. In another example, the instruction will go: “Say *pass*” and then “Now add a /t/ at the end” and it would be *past*.

2.7.8. Phoneme substitution

For substituting a phoneme, one needs to go through two additional stages: first segmenting word into individual phonemes and deleting the one or ones that need to be substituted. Taking out the phoneme, a substitution will replace the missing phoneme and this is the basics of phoneme substitution. Because it is multi-layered, it should be one of the last phonemic awareness activities to be practiced with the young ones. It is demanding and until young learners excel in identifying, sorting, blending, segmenting, adding and deleting phonemes, phoneme substitution should not be practiced.

In a phoneme substitution task, the instruction goes: “Say *nap*” and then “Now, instead of /n/ say /k/” The word turns into *cap*. “Let’s try one more time. Say *scoop* and now instead of /k/ say /w/”. The new word after phoneme substitution would be *swoop*.

3. Ways to Boost Phonological and Phonemic Awareness via Songs and Storybooks

Commonly practiced instructional tools to boost phonological and phonemic awareness are children’s songs, chants, and storybooks. In a technologically-enhanced manner, integration of computer software, applications can trigger phonological and phonemic awareness with quality of sound and visual input (i.e. animation).

3.1. Practicing Phonological and Phonemic Awareness with Children’s Songs

Naturally, children enjoy singing songs, they love dancing to the rhythm. Incorporating children’s songs and movement is one of the best to keep language classrooms lively. Along with songs, young ones can clap, stomp their feet, and shake their bodies, which are signs of active listening through bodily-kinesthetic involvement (Shin, 2014). In addition to psychomotor, emotional and social, and cognitive effects, music, songs, and rhythm facilitate the development of early literacy skills and awareness. In learning to read, young ones need to understand that words are made up of discrete sounds and these sounds are used for reading and writing. Children with phonological and phonemic awareness are more successful in reading and writing. Music, rhythm improves phonological awareness.

Linguistically speaking, songs prepare young ones for the language that they will come across in real life. As Shin (2017) mentions, songs are effective for improving phonemic awareness which is noticing and manipulating the individual spoken sounds called phonemes (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). The reports of scholars all over the world provide convincing results that songs, nursery rhymes, and rhythmic patterns are beneficial for “phonological awareness, word recognition, and invented spelling abilities” (Bolduc, 2008, p.1); the growth in reading skills (Hill-Clarke & Robinson, 2004), and strengthened syllabication, and comprehension (Shin, 2017). Children’s songs which are usually short and repetitive with processible tunes and melodies often rhyme. These are crucial emergent literacy skills for young ones to improve for success in later academic life. Gürsoy (2012) also emphasizes the use of music and puppets to teach English to young learners.

Songs can be used to practice and to reinforce consonants (Paquette and Rieg (2008). Alliteration, appearing in *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (repetitive /l/) or *Row Row Row Your Boat* (/r/) provides young ones a chance to practice certain sounds. Songs can be used to assist learners understand some words that do not look alike may sound the same which is called homophones. For instance, in *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* are *are* and *star* or *high* and *sky* which look differently but they eventually rhyme. For young language learners coming from different L1 backgrounds, incorporating songs in their respective L1s also helps.

The use of rhymes in early-years language and literacy instruction is quite common. Nursery rhymes are one of the first tools of phonological awareness that enter the lives of young ones. “Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are” is one of the first songs young ones hear and practice phonological awareness. Many children’s songs contain lyrics ending with rhymes. Nursery rhymes are strongly related to phonological skills development and young ones’ attention should be directed to those rhyming parts.

Children’s songs are great resources of rhythm, rhymes, and alliteration. Having young ones notice such linguistic elements and practice those triggers functional early literacy skills and knowledge. There are rhyming words at the end of each verse: “one *two*, buckle my *shoe*”. Rhyming words have the same pattern at the end: *wall* and *fall*, *men-again* in Humpty Dumpty; *dock-clock* and *one-down* in Hickory Dickory Duck are some examples. Children, by working on rhymes, grasp the fact that there are word families because rhyming words differ from one another with one sound. Knowing about word families is helpful as children, once figuring them out, do not need to sound out every letter in words as they read. Tapping into rhymes, young learners gain automaticity and accuracy in decoding and spelling. Some nursery rhymes for young ones to practice rhyme are Hickory Dickory Duck, Humpty Dumpty, Itsy Bitsy Spider, Ba Ba Black Sheep, Row Row Row Your Boat, Hey Diddle Diddle, Jack and Jill Went Down the Hill, One Two Buckle My Shoe, I am a Little Teacup, Pat-a Cake, Skip to My Lou, If You’re Happy and You Know, Three Little Kittens, Head Shoulders, 1 2 3 4 5 Once I Caught A Fish Alive, Miss Polly Had a Dolly, and Down by the Bay.

Songs are great resources for phonemic awareness as well. A world-wide-known song B-I-N-G-O is a perfect activity for practicing phoneme segmentation, deletion, and substitution due to the nature of it.

There was a farmer who had a dog

And BINGO was his name o-

B – I – N – G – O (x 3 times)

And BINGO was his name –o

Here in this first line, young ones actually start phoneme segmentation as they go over each phoneme of the name *BINGO*. The instruction goes “Clap your hands for /B/” and the song goes

There was a farmer who had a dog

And BINGO was his name o-

(CLAP) – I – N – G – O (x 3 times)... in the second part and *(CLAP) (CLAP) – N – G – O*, *(CLAP) (CLAP) (CLAP) – G – O*, *(CLAP) (CLAP) (CLAP) (CLAP) – O* in the consecutive ones until all of the phonemes of the name *BINGO* are deleted one by one. Here it is phoneme deletion and phoneme substitution occurring simultaneously as the phonemes of the name *BINGO* are deleted verse by verse and clapper or another substitution (e.g. stomping) replaces the deleted phoneme.

The song also introduces the letter names, part of early literacy instruction. There is a criticism on the song as it offers letter names, not the phonemes of the name *BINGO*. It is recommended that young ones do not practice letter names until after they decipher phonemes. This can confuse young learners’ minds as letter names and phonemes can be confused. *BINGO* song is good for a phonemically-oriented twist, if one sings the song with phonemes not the names of the letters like in the original version.

3.2. Practicing Phonological and Phonemic Awareness with Children's Storybooks

Peregoy and Boyle (2017) claim reading stories to children is one way teachers and parents can enhance literacy development. Why is literature integrated to the primary English language classrooms? Ghosn (2002) listed four important reasons of integrating authentic children's storybooks to primary literacy instruction. The repeated grammar structures, predictable patterns are the two most beneficial aspects of stories for literacy intake. The traditionally-prepared English coursebooks and communication-oriented demands of primary English curricula may not sufficiently support the demands of early English language classes. An early literacy program that integrates children's stories is more authentic and motivating to foster English literacy development. Ghosn (2002) recommends utilizing children's literature as an alternative to the traditional bottom-up approach to English instruction. Children's literature is general term which may include different types of materials including basal reader series. However authentic children's literature comprises storybooks originally written for young ones. The Very Hungry Caterpillar was originally written very young children at the ages of newborn to three. In EFL educational settings, the same storybook can be enjoyed by a group of 12 year olds (Machura, 1991) and four year-olds in Lebanon in an extended period of time (4 weeks) (Ghosn, 1997). There is a major gap in integrating children's literature into early English instruction in Turkey. Haznedar (2010) discusses despite their potential as a motivational and instructional tool, stories are not part of early English instruction in Turkey. A systematic use of stories could enhance language development of young language learners including tapping into early literacy skills in Turkish context.

Grabe (2014) mentions the need for storybook reading in L1 to be a good reader in L2. However, in developing nations children deprive access to print and thus storybooks. The power of storybooks is that they are rich sources of linguistic elements: new vocabulary words, phrases and other expressions and grammar. Most importantly, for emergent literacy development of young ones, storybooks can be rich sources of alliteration, rhymes, word families and other concepts of literacy. These are fundamentals of early literacy development.

Rhyming books is another rich resource to tap into rhyme awareness of young ones. Children's literature is rich already and another layer of learning for young minds would be picking up on the rhyme in certain words. World-wide known authors such as Dr. Seuss and Julia Donaldson are known for their books that rhyme almost throughout the story. Dr. Seuss's *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* is known for word families such as *cat, hat, sat*, Donaldson's *Gruffalo* has lots of rhyming words such as *claws-jaws*, and *rocks-fox* throughout the storyline. Please check out the recommended books list (See Appendix I) to practice rhyme with your young ones.

Eric Carle's world-renowned book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* has alliteration in the beginning part with repeated /b/ sound. The rest of the story could be modified for alliteration purposes and the rest of the story could unfold as in the following: "**R**ed rhino red rhino, what do you see? I see a **b**lue **b**aboon looking at me". The original story is not written this way and the original form of this storybook could be used as a baseline to re-tell the story for a phonological twist, alliteration. Alliteration and rhyme are abundant in traditional children's literature. Storybooks such as Jack and the Beanstalk has a part where the giant shouts "*Fi Fo Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman*" and in these lines the repetitive /f/ sound and the *fum* and *man* parts sound almost alike. Please see Appendix I for more information on the storybooks.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Phonemic awareness establishes the core of phonics. While phonemic awareness is oral and auditory, phonics is both visual and auditory. With an explicit phonics instruction, students are taught letters and letter combinations to represent 44 phonemes of English language. There are criticisms on explicit phonics instruction that it would not be sufficient to cover unpredictable patterns of English language. Unpredictable patterns exist in English; however, there are significant consistencies in letter-to-sound and sound-to-letter correspondences as well.

Reading is an artificial skill which does not develop the way speaking does. It is vital to explicitly teach learners how sounds constructing words appear in print which is the essence of phonics. Phonological and phonemic awareness do not replace phonics instead they serve as the prerequisites of phonics instruction. A strong phonemic awareness training serves as the foundation of phonics as young learners need robust phonemic awareness training for phonics to be effective.

Phonics and phonemic awareness share a common ground: understanding sounds. A 10 to 12 minute-literacy block can strengthen phonological awareness. Another portion of the literacy block should focus on how to apply phonemic awareness to print, focusing on phoneme to grapheme correspondences. Spelling can segment whole words into individual sounds to have students feel the sounds in words. Ehri (2014) supports repeated exposure to grapheme-phoneme correspondences is for orthographic mapping which uses sound to letter relationships to anchor phonemes in a word's pronunciation to letters in print.

Phonemic awareness and phonics practiced here and there will not make a significant impact, only phonemic awareness and phonics instruction that is systematic, explicit, and consistent will result in effective outcomes. Phonological and phonemic awareness with phonics instruction are means to an end and they are not the sole literacy instruction to create fluent and proficient readers. Yet it is not optional to improve these skills as they establish the core of early literacy development. A **systematic, research-based** supplemental intervention program that uses multi-sensory materials, manipulatives, that incorporate the fun factor with games, songs and children's literature, arts and crafts, and that offers learning opportunities appropriate to the **needs and the developmental stages of the target** learner profile is the needed early literacy development program for young English learners in developing nations.

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Appendix I***Recommended Children's Literature for Early Literacy Skills Development for Grades 2-4 in EFL***

Book title	Author	Recommended EFL Grades	Literacy Function
Goodnight Moon	Margaret W. Brown	Grade 2 or earlier	Homophones, rhyme
One Fish Two Fish, Red Fish Blue Fish	Dr. Seuss	Grades 2, 3 or 4	Word families, rhyme
The Cat in the Hat			
Oh, the Places You'll Go!			
Fox in Socks			
Llama Llama Red Pajama	Anna Dewdney	Grades 2, 3 or 4	Alliteration, rhyme
Gruffalo	Julia Donaldson	Grades 3 or 4	Rhyme
The Smartest Giant in Town			
The Gingerbread Man	-	Grades 2, 3	Rhyme
Chicka Chicka Boom Boom	Bill Martin	Grades 2 and 3	Rhyme, letters of the alphabet
Many Marvelous Monsters	Ed Heck	Grades 2 and 3	Alliteration
The Word Collector	Peter H. Reynolds	Grades 3, 4 and older	Syllables, words
Runny Babbit	Shel Silverstein	Grades 2, 3, and 4	Phoneme manipulation
Is Your Mama A Llama?	Deborah Guarino	Grades 2 and 3	Rhyme
Don't Be Silly, Mrs. Millie	Judy Cox	Grades 2, 3, and 4	Rhyme, phonemic awareness