



Fun With Phonological Awareness

By Ashley Hilliker

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Abstract: In today's primary grades, school districts are focused on having students reading on grade level by the end of the school year. To help support this goal, there are a range of strategies school districts use to attempt to meet this goal. These strategies may not promote joy in reading instruction. Primary grade teachers want students to fall in love with reading. Students can fall in love with reading and make academic advances when the instruction provided is both fun and engaging. Students will never be bored in school or fall behind if they have opportunities to participate in highly engaging lessons that promote reading skills and their playful mindset. Phonological awareness is one of the earliest reading skills students develop. There are a range of ways to make the six subcategories of phonological awareness fun and engaging to young learners. This article explores a second-year teacher's experience teaching phonological awareness and strategies to promote reading skills, engagement, and joy in primary classrooms.

Keywords: phonological awareness, engagement, reading, foundation, early literacy

A teacher is standing in front of 22 pre-kindergarten students on the carpet. She points to a body part like her hand, and the students begin to laugh hysterically. As you listen closer, the teacher is naming body parts by the wrong name. Her head is her bed, her hair is a bear, and her arm is a farm. The students are laughing so hard that they are holding their bellies as they yell the correct body part to their teacher. The students are participating in a Neuhaus Education Center's rhyming activity called "Oops! Wrong Rhyme!" (Carreker, 2002). The students are participating in an engaging phonological awareness activity and are truly enjoying themselves.

Every school year I have two goals as an early learning teacher. The first goal is to help my students create a love of learning by promoting joy in my classroom. Pre-kindergarten teachers provide the first educational experience for most of their students. Therefore, it is our job to help students create a love of learning and help them want to come to school every day. Helping students create a love of learning can be fostered by creating positive and joyful experiences for students every day. The second goal is to provide a strong reading foundation by teaching phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is one of the earliest reading skills. For nonreaders and emergent readers, phonological awareness is the main focus of their reading instruction besides letter recognition. Without a strong foundation in phonological awareness, students often struggle with reading beyond third grade, where the focus is reading to learn, not learning to read (Cassar et al., 2005). When my two goals are put together, I want to provide fun and joyful phonological awareness lessons to my students. Like most things in education and life, things take time. It takes time for students to grasp all six subcategories of phonological awareness, and this is expected. Students need to be given the appropriate resources and time to be successful in school. If my students are making progress and are enjoying learning, that is all I can hope for as a teacher.

What Is Phonological Awareness?

“Phonological awareness is an overarching umbrella term that includes identifying and manipulating the larger parts of spoken language such as sentences, phrases, and individual words” (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019). In addition to breaking down the larger parts of speech, phonological awareness is about breaking down the individual sounds in words. One of the earliest reading skills students learn and has a strong correlation to how successful a student will be is phonological awareness. As a primary grade teacher, phonological awareness is one of my favorite subjects to teach. I have found that students enjoy phonological awareness lessons just as much as I enjoy teaching them. When lessons promote joy, all who are involved get to enjoy themselves.

Every subskill under phonological awareness can be taught with the students’ eyes closed. Phonological awareness is all about hearing sounds, opposed to phonics which is about written language. There are six skills students need to learn within phonological awareness. The six skills are rhyming, alliteration, sentence segmenting, syllables, onset-rime, and phonemes. The easiest skill for students to learn and master is rhyming. Most students are able to differentiate between two words that rhyme and two words that do not rhyme. Later in a student’s development, they are able to supply rhyming words. Alliteration is the second skill students begin to master, followed by sentence segmentation, syllables, onset-rime, and finally phonemes. Table 1 defines and gives examples of each of the six skills of phonological awareness.

Resources to Assist With Phonological Awareness Instruction

There are so many resources and curriculums to help teachers create phonological awareness lessons. Schools across the country use a variety of sources to help guide teachers to create effective phonological awareness lessons. Based on my experience, some school districts, individual schools, and even grade levels have different curriculums and resources provided. Some curriculums are stricter in protocol than others, some may provide scripts, and

others give a few sample activities. Even when the curriculum is on the stricter side, there is always room for teachers to create their own fun activities or alter the provided activities to help promote both joy and learning. At the school where I have taught for the past two years, the primary grades use *Neuhaus Education Center’s Reading Readiness Skills* curriculum for phonological awareness. In addition to phonological awareness, this curriculum helps students learn all the early reading skills they need to be successful: letter recognition, oral language skills, and handwriting (Carreker, 2002). I believe Neuhaus has several great phonological awareness activities that help students gain the skills they need in fun ways.

There are several resources I use to help guide my phonological awareness instruction, in addition to the Neuhaus curriculum. The Florida Center for Reading Research (n.d.) has many resources for all reading skills students need to learn to be successful readers. On their teacher resource guide, there are several hands-on activities that my students love. The activities are great for small group and center activities. Some activities can even be used by the whole group.

There are several informal resources I use every day in my classroom. Songs, nursery rhymes, big books, and tongue twisters can all be used to teach phonological awareness skills. Songs, nursery rhymes, and books are often great for rhyming activities. After the students listen to or sing the song, they can point to the rhyming words. With nursery rhymes and books, the teacher can read the entire story, and then go back and read each page again and allow students to find the rhyming words. Tongue twisters can help students learn alliterations and sentence segmentation.

Making It Fun

Making phonological awareness lessons fun does not take a lot of extra work, especially for the primary grades. In my classroom, I was able to make a pretty mundane activity of determining if two words rhyme into a fun listening and movement activity. In the activity, as explained by the curriculum, the teacher says two words such as “pig” and “wig.” The students are then supposed to

Phonological Awareness Skill	Definition	Examples	Example Explanation
Rhyme	Words that have the same last sound.	hat/cat	Both hat and cat end with the /at/ sound.
Alliteration	Words that have the same initial sound.	Monkeys make milkshakes.	All words start with the /m/ sound.
Sentence Segmentation	Identifying the individual words in a sentence.	I like turtles.	This sentence is made up of three words.
Syllables	“A spoken syllable is a unit of speech involving a vowel and another sound” (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).	Monkey Mon-key	Monkey has two syllables: /mon/ and /key/.
Onset-Rime	“In a single-syllable word, a rime is the vowel in the syllable and the other letter(s) that go with it. An onset is the consonant sound that comes be-fore the rime” (Reutzel & Cooter, 2019).	Word: Hug	Onset: /h/ Rime: /ug/ The sounds blended together make the word <i>hug</i> .
Phonemes	Phonemes are the smallest part of speech that the English language can be broken into.	Word: Fish	The word <i>fish</i> has three phonemes, even though there are four letters. The three phonemes are /f/, /i/, and /sh/.

Table 1: Phonological Awareness Definitions and Examples



repeat the two words and raise their hand to tell the teacher and their peers if the two words rhyme. I have taught this lesson as prescribed, but the teacher gets to hear only one student's thoughts, and to be honest, it is a little boring for the students. A slightly better method for this activity is to have the students repeat the words, then give a thumbs up if the words rhyme or a thumbs down if they do not rhyme. This method is better because every student has to pay attention and participate, and the teacher can quickly notice who understands rhyming and who does not. This option, though, is still not that unique since many teachers use thumbs up and thumbs down for a variety of activities. In my first year of teaching, I used this method a lot, so due to the overuse, it was no longer helping with participation and bringing joy to my classroom. As a second-year teacher, I have now found a fun and engaging way for my little learners to participate in this basic activity. For this activity, my students tell me if the two words rhyme by making moose antlers with their hands and chicken wings with their arms. After doing this activity a number of times, my students now know that they make moose antlers when they hear two words rhyme and to make chicken wings and pretend to fly away when two words do not rhyme. At the beginning of the school year, I was trying out a few different movements to go with this particular rhyming activity. When I was trying out different movements, I noticed my students getting confused due to the lack of consistency. For example, one day moose antlers represented rhyming and another day moose antlers represented words not rhyming. Once I made this observation, I decided to keep the same movements every time we do this activity. Even though we do the same movement every time we do this activity, I see as much joy in my students as I did the first time. I believe the best thing that came out of structuring this activity is that now when my students hear two words that rhyme in a song, story, or in my speech, they put up their moose antlers. This has been great as a teacher to see that my students have really mastered this skill and are able to apply what they have learned even when the lesson does not focus on rhyme.

Engaging Phonological Awareness Activities

Rhyme: Oops! Wrong Rhyme!

This activity comes from the *Neuhaus Education Center's Reading Readiness Skills* book. The teacher guides the activity using a list of incorrect statements provided in the book and allowing students to correct false statements. For example, the teacher says "this is my rose" but points to her nose. Then the teacher says "Oops! Wrong Rhyme! I mean this is my . . ." and all the students are supposed to reply with "nose" (Carreker, 2002). There is also a list of statements that rhyme with a body part that the teacher can point to and the students can reply to. In addition, teachers can create their own wrong rhymes with objects in the classroom.

Syllables: Clap It Out

The teacher says a word, then the students repeat the word. The students clap out the syllables while saying the word. The students show the number of syllables on their fingers. To make this activity more engaging, have a theme to all the words like jungle animals, colors, superheroes, etc.

Alliteration: Tongue Twisters

The teacher chooses a couple of tongue twisters to teach her students. The teacher says the first tongue twister and then helps the students repeat the tongue twister. Once the students are able to accurately say the tongue twister, the students raise their hands or shout out the sound that is the same in all the words of the tongue twister.

Sentence Segmentation: Silly Sentences

The teacher creates a list of silly sentences with different numbers of words in each sentence. The teacher states the first sentence to the students and the students repeat the sentence. The teacher then

states the sentence slowly, giving the students time to count the number of words in the sentence. The students show the number of words in the sentence on their fingers. Then, to help students who may not have mastered the skill yet, the teacher calls up students to represent the different words in the sentence. The teacher gives each student a word in the sentence. The teacher points to each student in front of the class one at a time to say their assigned word, thus restating the sentence. Students then count the number of students to determine how many words are in the sentence.

Onset-Rime

The teacher creates a list of consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words. The teacher says the onset of the word and puts their right hand out to the side. Then, the teacher says the rime while putting the left hand out to the side. The students repeat the sounds and movement. The students and teacher clap as they blend the sounds together creating the CVC word. For example, for the CVC word “cat,” the teacher says the /c/ sound while putting their right hand out, then /at/ while putting their left hand out. The students repeat. Together the teacher and students clap while saying the word “cat.” Depending on the age and ability of the students, the teacher may need to help students practice the steps with familiar words.

Phonemes: Say-It-Move-It

This is an activity I learned from the Neuhaus Reading Readiness resource (Carreker, 2002). In this activity, the teacher has a paper with a circle on it and a line below. The teacher starts by placing bingo chips in the middle of the circle. The teacher then says a word and the students repeat the word. Together the teacher and students say the word slower to determine what phonemes are in the word and how many there are. For each phoneme heard, the teacher

moves a chip from the circle to the line. The teacher and students then blend the word back together by pointing to each chip that represents each phoneme. After doing this activity a few times as a class, the students can then use their own Say-It-Move-It boards and work as a class and independently, depending on the level of the students.

Conclusion

Students will never be bored in reading if we as teachers keep phonological awareness instruction and all reading instruction engaging and fun. Teachers who strive to create learning opportunities for students that are highly engaging will promote their reading skills as well as their playful mindset. Any phonological awareness skill can be taught in a way that sparks joy for students, thus enhancing their skill set but also creating a love of learning.

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