

## Phonemic Awareness, Grade K

### Introduction

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Phonemic awareness is the insight that words are made up of individual sounds. We also use the term *phonological awareness* in the kindergarten lessons. This is the umbrella term. It is more comprehensive since it includes understanding of words in sentences, rhyme, syllables, and so on.

The understanding of spoken language and how individual sounds work together to make words, or *phonemic awareness*, is the foundation of phonics, word recognition, fluency, and spelling. The reason is clear: to become successful readers, children need to be able to apply the *alphabetic principle*. That is, they must be able to map the sounds of spoken language to the letters of written language. Research indicates that if children are not aware of how spoken language works—if they cannot hear, identify, and manipulate the sounds of spoken language—they generally have a very difficult time mapping spoken sounds to written letters.

In this course, you will visit the classroom of kindergarten teacher Donna Pyburn. Ms. Pyburn teaches her students through brief but focused lessons in phonological/phonemic awareness that will prepare them for understanding the alphabetic principle and so lead to their reading success.

Phonological and phonemic awareness instruction in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* follows a sequence that has been shown by research to be the most effective. This sequence recognizes that before children can work with individual sounds, or *phonemes*, they first need to gain *phonological awareness*—that is, awareness of the larger units of spoken language and the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in these units.

In this course, Ms. Pyburn demonstrates instructional practices that are most effective for teaching each phase of phonological and phonemic awareness—from recurring game and activity formats used for teaching rhyming, to the instructional routines used for teaching oral blending and segmentation. By using familiar formats and routines, Ms. Pyburn's students are able to concentrate fully on new learning rather than on learning the structures of new activities.

#### Teaching Example 1

In Teaching Example 1, Ms. Pyburn uses a variety of rhyming games and songs as a way to reinforce the idea that rhymes are words that sound the same at the end and to involve the students in thinking about and making their own rhymes. Through these activities, Ms. Pyburn increases her students' awareness of spoken language—by both speaking and listening—and the way it works.

#### Rhyming

Research indicates that phoneme awareness instruction, combined with instruction connecting the phonemic segments to alphabet letters, significantly improves the early reading and spelling skills (Ball and Blackman, 1991). For many children, however, phonemic awareness does not develop naturally. This instruction must be taught, and it must be systematic and explicit.

Almost every beginning kindergarten student can benefit from systematic, explicit phonological and phonemic awareness instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). In Teaching Example 1, Ms. Pyburn demonstrates how this instruction should proceed.

Using rhyming activities is one way to draw children's attention to the sounds of speech (Bryant et al., 1990). Because rhyming activities focus attention on the sounds in words, they are an engaging and valuable way to start familiarizing beginning kindergarten students with the structure of spoken language. Children love rhymes. Through such

activities, most students quickly learn to recognize simple sound patterns and to detect similarities and differences in sounds. Furthermore, after repeated exposure to rhymes, most students are able to make their own rhymes.

### **Teaching Example 2**

In Teaching Example 2, Ms. Pyburn works with her students to focus on sentences and words. Sentences and words are taught before smaller units of sound, such as syllables and phonemes, for this simple reason: it is easier for students to hear and identify larger units of language than smaller ones.

### **Focusing on Words and Sentences**

Learning to read and write depends on having an understanding of what is and is not a word. However, most young children have only a limited understanding of the concept of word. Furthermore, it is difficult for them to hear a spoken sentence as a stream of separate words. Rather, they hear it as one unit of meaning (Adams, 1990).

In this teaching example, Ms. Pyburn demonstrates a variety of ways to help her students hear, identify, and use complete sentences and learn several important features of spoken words.

### **Teaching Example 3**

*Oral blending* and *segmentation* are the two most powerful formats for teaching phonemic awareness. In this teaching example, you will see Ms. Pyburn demonstrate oral blending of large word parts. Remember that the goal of phonemic awareness is having students manipulate the parts of words and not on determining the meaning of the words. In fact, the ability of students to manipulate word parts and sounds without knowing the word's meaning is a true measure of their phonemic awareness.

### **Oral Blending: Large Word Parts**

Working with sentences introduces students to the concept that a stream of language, a sentence, consists of smaller units, words. In turn, working with large word parts (including compound words and syllables) allows students to gain the important insight that even words can be broken into smaller parts. It is not until students are able to manipulate the smallest part of spoken language, phonemes, that they are ready to map sounds to spellings—that is, ready to learn the alphabetic principle.

In Teaching Example 3, Ms. Pyburn introduces her students to *oral blending*. *Oral blending* refers to combining parts of words and ultimately the individual sounds that make up words. Instruction in oral blending provides students with the scaffolding necessary to develop the insight that words are made of individual sounds. This lays the foundation for eventually blending individual sounds and spellings into words in reading.

### **Teaching Example 4**

In Teaching Example 4, the students are introduced to phonemes. The activities used in the example are designed to help students become aware that words are made of individual sounds; these activities also help students learn to identify, hear, and say these sounds, both as parts of words and in isolation.

Ms. Pyburn's phonemic awareness lessons focus first on identifying and saying initial and final consonant sounds. She then moves her students to the more difficult task of hearing and isolating sounds in various positions in words.

Helping students become aware of phonemes requires explicit instruction through a variety of activities. Ms. Pyburn demonstrates both in this example.

### **Oral Blending: Individual Phonemes**

Working with phonemes is difficult for children because in natural speech these individual sounds are almost impossible to discriminate. In addition, the sounds have no meaning when they are spoken in isolation.

Research suggests that it is easier for kindergarten children to pronounce phonemes than to hear them. Therefore, ***Open Court Reading*** and ***SRA Imagine It!*** phoneme instruction begins by having children say sounds and then listen for them in numerous words.

### **Teaching Example 5**

Teaching Example 5 continues the work with phonemes in words. Several of the activities in this example—those that involve phoneme replacement—are considered to be more demanding, and so require extra effort from both the teacher and the students.

### **Oral Blending**

Recognizing the difficulty of these tasks, Ms. Pyburn employs both gamelike activities and established instructional routines to help keep the students interested in and focused on the learning rather than the procedures. When her students stumble with an activity, she is ready with an alternative plan.

### **Teaching Example 6**

Teaching Example 6 focuses on *segmentation*, specifically, breaking words into individual phonemes. Oral blending and segmentation are complementary processes in learning to read and write. Oral blending of sounds to make words is essential to learning to read; learning to break words into their separate sounds—segmentation—is essential to learning to spell. Students who can easily blend and segment words have the necessary foundation for understanding the alphabetic principle.

### **Segmentation**

The ease with which students learn to perform segmentation activities can be an indication of how well they are progressing in overall phonemic awareness. You should be alert for students who find such activities especially difficult and make time to work with those students either individually or in small groups during Workshop.