

Reading Foundations: The Importance of Phonemic Awareness

The term “**phonemic awareness**” has been a buzzword in reading research and education for quite some time now. But what exactly is phonemic awareness? And why should we pay any attention to it?

What is phonemic awareness?

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), phonemic awareness refers to the **ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken words**. These sounds are called **phonemes**, which are the most basic units of sound. (For example, the phonemes in the word “cat” are /c/, /a/, /t/.) The National Reading Panel stated that the English language has about 41 phonemes, though other estimates have varied between 36 and 44 (Juel, 2006).

Why is phonemic awareness so important?

Although phonemic awareness does not involve decoding or reading any words, phonemic awareness has been found to be a strong predictor of reading achievement during a child’s first years in school. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), instruction in phonemic awareness helps children read words and pseudo-words (e.g., bax, mib). Thus, phonemic awareness helps children to learn how to recognize familiar words and decode words they have never seen before.

Phonemic awareness instruction teaches students to pay attention to and manipulate sounds in spoken words. The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that it helps develop students’ skills in spelling. In addition, phonemic awareness instruction has helped to improve normally developing readers, students who have been identified for

being at risk for reading problems, and students with reading disabilities.

What are some ways I can improve students' phonemic awareness?

There are many strategies that parents and teachers can do with children to strengthen their phonemic awareness.

Phonemic isolation, for example, can be taught by asking your child to identify the initial, middle, or last sound of a word.

With this particular strategy, it is best to practice with the initial sounds first, then last sounds, then middle sounds.

Other strategies are listed below, as suggested by the Florida Center of Reading Research:

- **Identifying different phonemes** – Say three words (e.g., “cat”, “cup”, “pen”), then have the child identify which word begins (or ends) with a different sound.
- **Finding common phonemes** – Ask the child to recognize which sound is the same in two words.
- **Blending** – Say the phonemes of a word (e.g., “/p/ /a/ /t/”) and have the child blend the phonemes to make the word (“pat”).
- **Segmenting** – This is the reverse of Blending. Say a word, then ask the child to identify all the phonemes in the word.
- **Deletion** – Ask the child to say what’s word is left after deleting a sound. For example, “Take away the /s/ sound from ‘sat’. What is the new word?” (“at”).
- **Substituting** – Ask the child to change a sound in a word to

a different sound. For instance, “Change the /c/ in “cat” to /p/. What is the new word?” (‘pat)’.

It must be noted that strategies involving the manipulation of phonemes (e.g., Substituting and Deletion) have been found to be the most effective in instructing students on phonemic awareness (National Reading Panel, 2000); however, it is best to start with basic strategies like Identification, Blending, and Segmenting for very young students and children who are struggling with phonemic awareness.

References

Juel, C. (2006). The impact of early school experiences on initial reading. *Handbook of early literacy research*, 2, 410-426.

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