# Phonemic Awareness: Small Sounds That Matter The Most

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Abstract

Phonemic awareness involves a child's basic understanding that speech is composed of a series of individual sounds, which provides the foundation for phonics and spelling, which creates the basis of building good phonics, spelling, and writing. For students to develop an understanding of phonemic awareness, teachers need to implement direct and explicit instruction to increase the students' success. Some of the different methods that teachers can utilize are identifying sounds in words, categorizing sounds in words, substituting sounds to make new words, and segmenting a word into sounds. Scaffolding begins to show great strengths in having the students develop into better readers. Phonemic awareness is something that needs to be stressed as early as first grade, to create strong readers and writers.

Growing up as little ones, many people often remember when their parents babbled around them using nonsense that may seem to not make any sense to the people watching this. Many parents do not realize the positive effect babbling has when they use it around their children. Babbling provides that child a jump-start into a process called phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness by definition is a child's basic understanding that speech is composed of a series of individual sounds, which provides the foundation for phonics and spelling (Tompkins 2010 pg. 146). Learning to understand phonemic awareness also deals with establishing a basis of building good phonics, spelling, and writing. More often than not, the longer a student goes through their education without understanding phonemic awareness, the harder it will become for them to develop into a successful reader or writer. Often, phonemic awareness seems to be somewhat overlooked by teachers when it should be emphasized greatly from preschool to first grade. In order to create better readers later in life, teachers must establish a good foundation of phonemic awareness, using a variety of effective teaching methods.

Phonemic awareness consists of building upon a child's understanding that speech is made up of individual sounds that provides the foundation for phonics and spelling. Phonemes are the smallest units of speech that can be written as graphemes or letters of the alphabet. With phonemes, they do not carry any true meaning, and children come up with words according to their personal meanings, not their linguistic characteristics. For example, when children think about ducks, they think of feathered animals that can fly. They do not think of the word "duck" as a word with three phonemes or four graphemes (Tompkins 2010 pg. 147). Phonemic awareness can be broken into two different areas with a child's awareness of spoken words and their ability to analyze/blend speech sounds in spoken words, and then links these with letters (Walsh 2009 pg. 214). Castiglioni-Spalten and Ehri (2003) pointed out that most children who

enter kindergarten, as pre-readers do not have an appreciation that spoken words consist of individual sounds. During this time children have trouble separating words from their different sounds in each word. Examining a child's profile in the before reading stage can provide early indication of clues in the nature of development or if any setbacks are expected (Walsh 2009 pg. 219). Phonemic awareness becomes a crucial concept for students to learn because of how it greatly impacts the outcome of a child's success or failure in school. Through learning the idea of phonemic awareness, it will greatly increase the child's reading and writing achievement scores (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler 1998). To enhance the students' understanding of how words are made up with specific sounds, there are five strategies a teacher can implement into his or her lesson plan.

When teaching phonemic awareness, teachers have five predominant strategies to follow to effectively help the students learn. The first method is identifying sounds in words and this deals with how the student learns to identify a word that begins or ends with a particular sound (Tompkins 2010 pg. 147). For example, a teacher can use letter tiles to switch letters around to form different words to show the child how words begin or end with different sounds. For the second method, categorizing sounds in words, allows the students to recognize the word that should not be in the set provided to the student. An activity for this would involve using word families. Here the instructor can provide the student with a set of words like hat, cat, and dad. From this the student can pick out the word that does not fit in the list provided. Within these first two stages, teachers who scaffold a student's understanding of phonemic awareness at a young age can greatly increase their success at breaking words apart into their specific sounds. Scaffolding, the intentional, strategic support that teachers provide which allows children to complete a task they could not accomplish independently, includes minimum, moderate and

intense scaffolding (McGee & Ukrainetz 2009 pg. 600). In the minimum stage, the teacher stresses the first sound while saying a word. After learning how to isolate the beginning sounds of words, students become ready to move onto the moderate stage of scaffolding. In the moderate stage, the teacher isolates and emphasizes the first sound of a word by bouncing or elongating the sound in isolation without distorting the sound within the word (McGee & Ukrainetz 2009 pg. 600). In the last stage, intense scaffolding, teachers isolate and emphasize the beginning phoneme in isolation and say the word with the phoneme exaggerated. The teacher needs to make sure that the sound of the word does not become distorted and that the student watches the mouth of the teacher very carefully when learning the word. Quality instruction can also help the student understand how to separate the first sounds of words before they enter kindergarten. In each of these stages of scaffolding, the teacher needs to provide support to the children, but eventually wean the students to work more independently. The third method is substituting sounds to make new words and this is where the student begins to learn how to remove a sound from a word. Once they do that they substitute a different sound for it. Blending sounds to form words makes up the fourth stage, where students learn to blend two to four individual sounds to form a word.

The last stage being segmenting a word into sounds becomes the part where the student will learn to break a word into its beginning, middle, and ending sounds (Tompkins 2010 pg. 147). These five methods have increasingly become more effective in helping students decoding and spelling words. When teachers begin to teach phonemic awareness, there are a few procedures they can utilize in order to make it work best for the student. Children who lack phoneme segmentation and blending skills upon entering first grade become more likely to be poor readers in fourth grade and sixth grade (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler 1998).

Furthermore, phoneme segmentation becomes a useful source in the prediction of early progress in learning to read than rhyming skill (Yeh 2008 pg. 243). Evidence has proven from experimental studies the positive effects of teaching segmentation and blending skills generalize to reading comprehension. Through a series of tests that was presented to four and five year olds, it has been proven that systematic instruction emphasizing phoneme segmentation and blending is more effective than either rhyming or vocabulary. More results from this testing indicate that children of four years old who are mainly Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged can be taught phoneme segmentation to better their phonemic awareness just as well as any other child. In order to learn phonemic awareness, teachers need to develop direct and explicit directions when explaining this topic to students.

Teachers should use a variety of instruction through direct and explicit directions to help the child have a more concrete understanding of what the educator wants. First the teacher needs to be direct with what they teach the student and explicit with their directions. Being explicit provides precise details on why certain words make a specific sound. Research shows that phonemic awareness without direct instructional support eludes twenty-five percent of middle-class first graders, and substantially more of those who come from less literacy rich backgrounds (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler 1998 pg. 1). For example, a child growing up not receiving adequate practice in reading and writing, due to the parents lacking in their own reading and writing skills. Instruction that a teacher provides should meet the following three criteria. Those being, age appropriate, the instruction is planned and purposeful, and the activities should interlink with other components of a balances literacy program (Tompkins 2010 pg. 148). Teachers need to create a language rich environment in the classroom where the students feel comfortable and it nurtures their phonemic awareness. Teachers can provide

opportunities to the students by singing songs, chanting rhymes, and read aloud word-play books to allow them to orally match, blend, and segment words into sounds (Tompkins 2010 pg. 147). Through different ideas of how to effectively teach phonemic awareness one method involves using sound boxes.

While using sound boxes, the main goal for the teacher deals with teaching the process of hearing sounds in words and exposure to a variety of words makes it more effective than repeated practice on the same words (McCarthy 2009 pg. 347). When the teacher chooses words for the sound boxes there are certain guidelines they need to follow. They need to make sure they use only one-syllable words, choose words that are conceptually familiar to young children, and choose words that are phonemically regular so that all the stretched words can be heard properly. While utilizing the sound boxes, teachers can choose between three levels of difficulty to set for their students. It varies from level one which consists words that have three phonemes and a continuous consonant sound to where level three involves being able to separate words into their phonemes with blends at the beginning and end (McCarthy 2009 pg. 347). One of the main emphasis when using the sound boxes deals with stretching the words a much as possible to hear the different phonemes that make it up. Make sure that when modeling the process the student goes through it again and articulates the word phoneme by phoneme. When the students can prove that they can stretch and push the words with markers, have them independently do the process to demonstrate both detection and segmentation of the words phonemes. Once the student becomes more and more comfortable, the sound boxes will begin to diminish and they will be able to utilize this process they have learned by memory. Sound boxes, a new and encouraging strategy, can help teachers with building growth in their students.

Two types of advancements that have been created to enrich students understanding of phonemic awareness are the Hidden Markov Model (HMM) and the MEL system (Yen-Shou 2009 pg. 267). When students talk into the machine it automatically ranks that student's phonemes and allows the teacher to alter their lesson plans for that specific student. Another system called the MEL, works greatly with the Hidden Markov Model. With the MEL system, it analyzes the speech signal and detects the student's correction of pronunciation (Yen-Shou 2009 pg. 274). This system can provide a relation of shape-phoneme to enhance the pronunciation. A research test presented to a hundred and twenty third graders, sixty-seven of those were females and fifty-three were males. Students selected for this test were recruited by researches and randomly assigned to a control group or an experimental group. Testing lasted twelve weeks in their normal classrooms, with two forty minute class periods per week. Before teaching the students, they were required to take a phonemic awareness test that helped compare pretest scores with posttest scores. This test was created to make most of the students master the learning contents. The findings reflected that the MEL system improved the mastery learning and helped them obtain more achievement for English pronunciation learners (Yen-Shou 2009 pg. 279). Through the use of this system, it has become more encouraging to many people because it can be incorporated into different learning environments quickly and it provides students with an opportunity to practice their pronunciation anywhere at anytime.

Because phonemic awareness makes such a heavy impact on the success or failure of a student, teachers need to understand how to effectively teach it to their students. The different methods a teacher can use include, sound boxes and scaffolding their knowledge. In order to make a positive outcome, teachers need to use direct and explicit instruction when they teach their students on the concepts of how words have different phonemes that make up the sounds.

Through valuable and concrete evidence that has been presented, educators need to think about what they can do in the classroom to help develop a student's understanding of phonemic awareness better. Everyone will come across a student where they simply cannot digest the meaning of words and how they make different sounds. Using the different methods stated above, they have been proven to be extremely effective, but it is on the shoulders of the teacher to take the extra time to make one student's future change. Teachers need to ask themselves, why would it not be worth making the change in the life one child, even if it meant putting in an extra five hours on top of everything else they have? Teachers signed up for a job where they knew it would be a rough ride to help better a child's life, but everyone needs to have the mentality like the Nike saying, "Just Do It"! It will all worth it in the end; even if it means that teacher only impacted the life of one student because that one student will be thanking them for a lifetime.

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