

Phonological Awareness Q&A

Below are answers to some anticipated questions that educators may have about phonological awareness.

Q: *What is phonological awareness?*

A: Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize (hear) and manipulate (speak) the sound structures of a language. Hearing rhyming words, breaking words into syllables, and comparing the beginning or ending sounds of a word are all examples of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is essential for developing reading and writing skills.

(Coelho, 2016)

Q: *Why is phonological awareness important for literacy development?*

A: Being able to recognize and manipulate the sounds of a spoken language is foundational for learning to read and write. A student with strong phonological awareness skills understands that words are composed of smaller sound units (phonemes), allowing them to decode words while reading and spelling more easily.

(Moats & Tolman, n.d.)

Q: *What are the key components of phonological awareness?*

A: 5 skills are needed to recognize and manipulate the spoken parts of sentences and words. They are:

1. *Word awareness:* recognizing the number of words that make up a spoken sentence and tracking those words within the sentence.
2. *Responsiveness to rhyme:* listening and repeating words that rhyme.
3. *Syllable awareness:* breaking up words into syllables.
4. *Onset-rime manipulation:* producing rhyming words.
5. *Phonemic awareness:* hearing and manipulating individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words.

(Starr, 2014)

Q: *At what age do children start developing phonological awareness?*

A: *KidSense Child Development* has created a [chart](#) highlighting specific phonological awareness milestones for children by age. From ages 2-3, they claim that children develop a capacity for responsiveness to rhyme. From then on, their ability to acquire phonological awareness skills increases.

(KidSense Child Development, 2016)

Q: *Are there any recommended programs or curriculums for teaching phonological awareness?*

A: While looking into phonological awareness programs or curriculums for your classroom, check to see if your school district has purchased a license for a specific one. Some popular ones include:

1. [Heggerty](#)
2. [UFLI](#)

Q: *What are some easy activities for teaching phonological awareness in the classroom?*

A: #1 - *Syllable Clap*

Use a percussion instrument (rhythm sticks, shakers), or just kids' hands. Go around the classroom, and say each child's name one syllable at a time with a shake of the instrument or a clap. Other ideas include using the names of story book characters, or unit-specific vocabulary.

(Barrett, 2023)

#2 - *"I Spy" Beginning Sounds*

Look for items around the classroom and give clues based on their beginning sound. For example, for "book," you might say "I spy something that starts with /b/" or "I spy something that starts like /boat/." With practice, you could adapt this game to include ending sounds.

(Barrett, 2023)

#3 - *Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down Rhymes*

Say two words, and have your class repeat them. Prompt students to give a thumbs up if the words rhyme, or a thumbs down if the words do not rhyme. For example,

Teacher: hop, mop

Student: hop, mop – thumbs up (these words rhyme because we hear -op in both words).

Teacher: sat, pin

Student: sat, pin – thumbs down (these words don't rhyme because we hear -at in sat and -in in pin, and these are not the same middle and final sounds).

(Heggerty, 2024)

Q: *How can I evaluate a child's phonological awareness skills?*

A: Phonological awareness can be evaluated through formative assessments and observations that measure the 5 key skills individually, like word awareness or responsiveness to rhyme. An assessment can be as simple as asking a student a series of questions. For example,

To assess word awareness:

Teacher: How many words are in this sentence? "I am sad." (Correct response: 3)

To assess responsiveness to rhyme:

Teacher: Do these words rhyme? "Big, Fig" (Correct response: Yes)

(Reading Rockets, n.d.)

Q: *What are some challenges that students might face related to phonological awareness? How can I address them?*

A: Too often teachers see a student develop a negative attitude towards literacy at school. This is likely because, for that student, literacy is a daunting subject area where they have not experienced much success. To turn situations such as these around, a teacher should go back to the basics and complete an assessment to determine what key phonological awareness skill the student is struggling with. They can then target this skill with games or activities to fill in the student's gaps of knowledge. A teacher should also refer to their school-based team to access external supports like literacy-intervention small groups.

Examples of areas of struggle and practice activities:

1. Recognizing and producing rhymes:
 - a. Use rhyming games and activities, such as reading rhyming books, singing songs with rhyming words, and playing rhyming matching games.
2. Syllable segmentation:
 - a. Practice clapping out syllables in words or using visual aids like blocks to represent each syllable. Gradually increase the complexity of the words as students become more comfortable.
3. Phoneme isolation:
 - a. Start with simple tasks, like identifying the first sound in a word, before moving on to more complex tasks such as identifying middle and final sounds. Use picture cards and sorting activities to reinforce the sounds.

(Reading Rockets, n.d.)

Q: *What should I consider when teaching phonological awareness to English Language Learners (ELLs)?*

A: Not all students will end up sounding like native speakers of English, and that is more than okay. For all students, however, the goal should be to speak English intelligibly and communicate accurately. This means that when teaching ELL students, one needs to know when they should intervene and when they should not.

Don't:

- Interrupt or correct a student's speech in front of the class. If their speech is so unclear that it is hard to understand, repeat or paraphrase without drawing attention to the problem. Instead, make a note of the problem so that you can provide focused instruction individually at a more appropriate time.

Do:

- Model correct pronunciation and intonation while speaking and reading.
- Provide opportunities for the practice of spoken English through choral reading, or activities that generate dialogue in the classroom.

(Coelho, 2016)

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