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Understanding Phonological Awareness vs.2

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonology is the part of language which concerns the sounds of words, rather than their meanings or grammatical structures.

It does not involve any visual knowledge of letters or the printed word.

Unit of sound include: words/nonwords, syllables, onset and rime, and phonemes (speech sounds) such as /a/ or /ch/ or /igh/ for example.

Phonological awareness is an ability to mentally process these units of sound:

- isolate words in a sentence – know where the gaps between words are
- isolate syllables in a word – say the beats in a word
- split the word in to its beginning and end – such as /tr/ / ain/
- blend phonemes to make words or non-words
- segment words or nonwords in to phonemes
- isolate a sound with in a word and manipulate these isolated sounds

Phonological awareness is by no means the only factor in acquiring literacy. However, it can be critically important in the process.

Developmental Stages of Acquiring Phonological Awareness

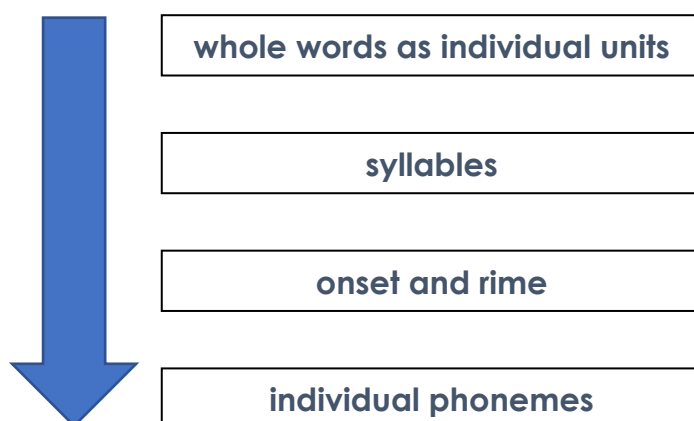
There is no neat linear progression, variations can be expected. But it does not begin with identifying individual phonemes in words.

It begins with distinguishing whole words as units of sound.

Think of a foreign language, completely unknown to you. Would you be able to detect where the word breaks fall when listening to someone speaking?

Some children have the same difficulty despite being familiar with the language.

The progression of development moves generally from largest to smallest components:



Are Phonological Awareness and Phonics the same thing?

No.

Phonics is when letters (graphemes) that represent the phonemes are introduced.

[The structure for producing a symbol or combination of symbols to represent the sound system of the language – in other words, the alphabetic letter system].

Phonological awareness underpins the application of phonic knowledge to reading and spelling.

The two terms, 'phonological awareness' and 'phonics' should not be confused.

Is Phonological Awareness only important in the Early Stages of Learning to Read and Spell?

No.

Phonological awareness is likely to continue growing until around the age of nine in normally developing children.

Some people may always struggle to demonstrate and apply the skills involved in phonological awareness.

For some, it is not a delay in development, but a deficit.

- They will very likely have had a long hard struggle to acquire literacy skills.
- Reading may have been mastered reasonably well eventually, but spelling is very likely to be a more persistent and entrenched difficulty.
- Despite their age, they may be lacking elements of the 'attributes of phonological awareness' or process them inefficiently.

- In extreme cases, phonological awareness may be so poor that there are difficulties with identifying and supplying a medial vowel phoneme in an orally presented 3 phoneme word consistently and reliably.
- Long vowel phonemes may be even trickier.
- Vowel digraph phonemes such as /ou/ /oi/ /ar/ may be equally or more difficult.

Implications for Teaching

- Phonological awareness cannot be developed through worksheets/workbooks.
- Phoneme components may not be at all obvious to the child at the early stages of literacy, where speech appears to be quite a continuous flow.
- The ability to breakdown speech artificially into units may not necessarily 'just happen' for some children.
- For some children, the introduction of phonics and the associated link with letters comes too early and/or delivered too rapidly.
- These children may need considerably more directed input at the level of purely 'by ear' experience, without the additional complication of letter symbols.
- You may be talking about a 'phoneme' when your reference is actually a *grapheme* (the way the phoneme is written.)
- Children whose early spelling skills are good, are likely to be drawing on their *phonological* resources to map graphemes to their identified phonemes.
- Having a full awareness of syllable beats and the ability to spontaneously sub-divide each syllable into phonemes, may make the attempt to write longer multi-syllabic words easier (even if their attempt remains a phonetic version of the real spelling).

So, it may be necessary to consider if the difficulty in acquiring literacy is due to poor phonological awareness. The age of a student is no exception to this possibility. It may be necessary to back-track to very early developmental stages.

Lack of ability to identify certain phonemes might perhaps explain why some people never seem to master, for example, the split digraph (silent e) rule. They simply do not recognise when they encounter a 'vowel that says its name' in a word, so they cannot apply the rule - even if intellectually they understand it.

Attributes of Phonological Awareness

This list is not necessarily presented as exhaustive, but may help you to identify important skills, a lack of which may be contributing to a pupil's difficulties. Refer to LST Phonological Awareness Assessment if preferred.

For children who are really struggling to pick up early skills of awareness of sound - refer to Phase One of Letters and Sounds – Aspects 1-7 which breaks down these skills in more detail.

Listen and attend	Comment
Understand what you mean by a sound (environmental)	
Understand what you mean by a 'sound' (phoneme) with reference to the spoken word.	
Discriminate phonemes which are similar and different	
Detect rhyme	
Offer rhyme	
Detect syllable beats in spoken words	
Detect onset and rime	
Be able to split words into onset and rime for self	
Appreciate alliteration	
Offer alliteration	
Understand what you mean by beginning, middle and end, in relation to a spoken word	
Detect position and sequence of phonemes in relation to spoken words	
Detect and isolate a range of phonemes in spoken words:	
• Short vowels	
• Long vowels	
• Consonant digraphs	
• Adjacent consonants	
• Vowel digraphs	