

The development of phonological awareness in children

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Abstract

The development of phonological awareness in children is essential if they are to substantially increase their chances of later achievement reading success. This ability encompasses a series of skills which a child must progressively master. It is therefore important for teachers to place emphasis on these skills in their classroom instruction and assessment, providing children with appropriate and diverse experiences. This article provides a basic overview of the phonological awareness development process.

Keywords: phonological awareness, teaching, reading

Título: El desarrollo de la conciencia fonológica en los niños.

Resumen

El desarrollo de la conciencia fonológica en los niños es fundamental para que se enfrenten de manera exitosa a la adquisición de lectura. Esta capacidad engloba una serie de destrezas que el niño debe progresivamente dominar. Se debe dar énfasis en la práctica docente a la enseñanza y a la evaluación de estas destrezas, proporcionando a los niños experiencias apropiadas y diversas. Este artículo ofrece una perspectiva general básica del desarrollo de la conciencia fonológica.

Palabras clave: conciencia fonológica, enseñanza, lectura.

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PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Phonological awareness is an oral language ability which provides the foundation for learning to apply phonics knowledge to reading as well as to spelling and writing skills. It is an increasingly sophisticated capability that is highly predictive and causally related to children's later ability to read (Wendling and Mather, 2009). The importance of this concept for teachers cannot be underestimated, as in the words of Torgesen and Mathes (1998:1) *"unless we thoroughly understand the concept and its role in reading development, we may easily teach it in ways that produce no real benefits."* However, many researchers have concluded that *"many early childhood educators, particularly those providing child care and preschool education, are lacking in a sophisticated understanding of phonological awareness and of how to appropriately promote its development in young children"* (Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan, 2008:3).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

There is an increasing consensus among researchers that the normal development of phonological awareness is along a continuum from large to successively smaller units of sound (Carroll, Snowling, Hulme and Steveson, 2003; Stanovich as cited by Pufpaff, 2009; Phillips et al., 2008; Stewart, 2004; Yopp and Yopp, 2009). A model proposed by Phillips et al. (2008) (see figure 1) shows the development of this concept through the acquisition of four main skills. It is not stage model as development of phonological awareness is not lockstep and children need not master one level before being exposed to the other levels. In reality, there is an overlap between the different levels, hence children's skills develop at multiple levels at the same time (Anthony, Lonigan, Burgess, Driscoll and Cantor, 2002). As a child's phonological awareness develops i.e. their ability to detect smaller units of sound increases, the linguistic complexity and cognitive operations employed also increase.

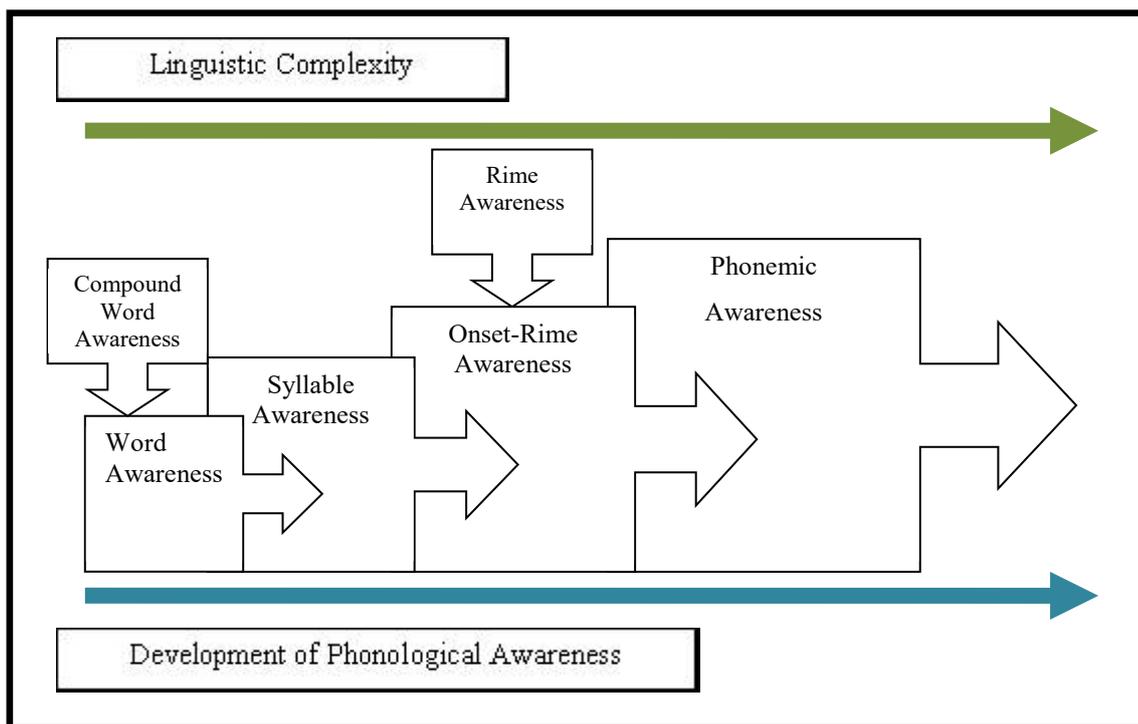


Figure 1. Author's own graphical representation of the different stages in the development of phonological awareness based on the model proposed by Phillips et al. (2008).

The aforementioned four skills involved in phonological awareness development are as follows:

1. Word Awareness

This is the ability to isolate individual words from the speech flow. It *"is the understanding that words can be understood and talked about independently of their meaning"* (Barratt-Pugh and Rohl, 2000:69).

2. Syllable Awareness

It is *"the ability to discern syllables (that the word 'friend' has one syllable, 'cubby' has two, 'tricycle' has three, and so on)"* (Yopp and Yopp, 2009:2). The recognition of syllables is one of the first ways in which children demonstrate that they are phonologically aware.

3. Onset-rime Awareness

It involves splitting syllables into onsets and rimes, hence it is considered to be a more complex skill to master. Onsets *"are the consonant sounds that precede a vowel in a syllable. For instance, the sound 'c' is the onset in the one-syllable word cat; 'fr' is the onset in 'frog'...Some syllables have no onsets. 'An', for instance, has no onset; no sound precedes the vowel. All syllables have a rime unit. Rimes consist of the vowel and any sounds that follow it in the syllable. For example, the rimes in 'cat' and 'frog' are 'at' and 'og', respectively"* (Yopp and Yopp, 2009:2).

4. Phonemic Awareness

This is the most complex skill in the phonological continuum, and is typically the last skill children acquire. It is the ability to be aware of phonemes and be able to manipulate them. According to Fowler (1991:54) phonemic awareness is *"not a necessary outcome of learning to speak a language: [it] will not ordinarily develop without specific tuition and even then rarely before five or six years of age."* Languages such as English and Spanish have an alphabetic orthography which involve mapping speech to print at the phoneme level; thus, it is critical for any reader to understand this mapping. *"Without this insight - without phoneme awareness - the symbol system is arbitrary. The task of dealing with the symbol system, then, can quickly become overwhelming. It is, in short, to one's advantage to be aware of the level of sounds that the written system encodes"* (Yopp and Yopp, 2000:131).

RHYME AWARENESS

Rhyme awareness also forms part of this construct, however, Phillips et al. (2008) argue that it would be better to teach this skill in the context of explicit onset-rime instruction rather than as a stand-alone activity because of the metalinguistic skills involved. Rhyming tasks are based on the fact that words rhyme because they share a common rime. According to the authors, the competence needed to successfully undertake rhyme matching, oddity and production tasks *"arrives on average at an older age than does the capability to manipulate segments of compound words, syllables, and perhaps, even some phoneme-level skills"* (Phillips et al., 2008:7) thus it appears further along the continuum than some teachers may expect, and as a sub-skill of the onset-rime capacity

However, the stage at which rhyme awareness should be addressed in the phonological awareness development process is debatable. As quoted by Phillips et al. (2008:7) authors such as Culatta, Kovarsky, Theoadore, Franklin and Timler, 2003; Majsterek, Shorr and Erion, 2000; and Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1999 believe that the *"assumption that rhyming falls under the umbrella of phonological awareness abilities has led many educators either to assume that the rhyming activities already present within their curriculum were sufficient for building skills, or to expect that rhyming is among the easiest of the phonological awareness capabilities and that it should be the central focus of early literacy activities."* Goswami (2007:140) argues in favour of the importance of rhyming as *"the English orthography is very inconsistent... [and] there are important spelling consistencies at the level of onsets and rimes. Further, words like yacht need to be learned as holistic patterns."*

Phillips et al. (2008) are not against exposing children to rhyme, rather they strongly believe that educational practitioners need to be aware of the tasks involved in rhyme manipulations. *"Suppose a child is confronted with three pictures: of a cat, a bat and a pig. To correctly identify pig as the odd one out, the child must first know what it means to rhyme - that words share the same ending sounds. The child must then attend to the sound structure in all three words and mentally segment the /at/ and /ig/ sounds from the onsets of /c/ and /p/. He or she then has to compare these ending vowel-consonant rime sounds across the three words. Finally, the child needs to conclude that 'cat' and 'bat' share a rime, whereas 'pig' has a different rime"* (Phillips et al., 2008:7). Through this task analysis description of rhyme, it is easier to appreciate the difficulties young children may have, especially if English is their second language.

Phillips et al. (2008) suggest if teachers wish to introduce children to it, they will have more success if they explicitly teach what is meant by rhyme, provide repeated exposure to it and a high degree of scaffolding, such as modelling as well as teaching it in the context of direct onset-rime instruction. Whereas Anthony et al. (2002:87) are more general in their approach to rhyme sensitivity. These authors accept that *"it may be that rhyme sensitivity adds a slight advantage to reading by analogy and that phoneme sensitivity adds a slight advantage to reading by sound-letter correspondence...Rhyme sensitivity and phoneme sensitivity do not have unique relations with reading because they do not reflect different abilities. It appears that the debate over whether it is sensitivity to rhyme or sensitivity to phonemes that is the most important for reading and spelling acquisition had led researchers and theorists astray in their conceptualization of phonological sensitivity by the explicit or implicit assumption of meaningfully different types of phonological sensitivity. Instead, it appears to be children's general sensitivity to the sound structure of language that is important for learning to read and write in an alphabetic system."*

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no doubt that the acquisition of phonological awareness leads to later achievement in reading. Teachers must therefore understand the developmental continuum involved in its acquisition, and, more importantly, be able to translate it into their classroom instruction and assessment. Research indicates a sequential approach to be taken (word-syllable-onset/rime-phoneme) so children acquire the necessary lower-level phonological skills first before they go on to master the higher-level phonemic awareness ones.

Although research has contributed positively to the area of phonological awareness, there are still aspects where further investigation is required, for example, with regards to rhyme or how best to address overlap between different phonological skills. These issues cannot be ignored; rather, teachers must provide the impetus to ensure they are addressed in the short-term by sharing experiences, and in the long-term by collaborating in research projects.

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