

Q&As About Phonological Awareness in the Classroom

As an educator, you may have some questions about phonological awareness, such as what it is and how to implement it. In the table below, these questions are explored and clarified.

Phonology Concepts	What is phonology?	Phonology is the organization of sounds in a language. It is one of five language domains that make up each individual language: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.
	What is phonological awareness?	It is the understanding of how oral language can be broken up into smaller sound parts. Phonological awareness also means understanding how to manipulate sounds by adding, deleting, and substituting syllables or sounds. This applies to syllables, words, and sentences. Having an understanding of the different parts at these levels means being phonologically aware. Phonological awareness is the umbrella term for a range of skills, including phonemic awareness. (Chard, n.d.)
	Why is phonological awareness so important?	In order to understand the alphabetic principle, the connection between sounds and letters, children need to understand how to divide and blend sounds and be able to differentiate between the sounds they hear in spoken language, particularly of the internal structure of words. Early phonological awareness is a strong predictor of reading abilities later on. (Chard, n.d.)
	What is a phoneme?	A phoneme is a distinct unit of sound that contributes to a unique word. For example, minimal pairs are two words that differ by only one phoneme, like /bat/ and /pat/.
	What is phonics?	Phonics is the relationship between sounds and their corresponding letters or letter combinations. Knowledge of phonics is required for decoding words.
Phonology in the Classroom	How can phonological awareness be taught?	Phonological awareness must be explicitly taught. Although oral language is a biologically primary ability, the connection to letters must be taught, beginning with the sound-letter correspondence once children have learned to differentiate between the sounds they hear in spoken language. There are many programs for phonological awareness, such as Heggerty and UFLI, but there are also individual activities that can be done routinely to work on phonological awareness. It can be taught through age-appropriate activities before children are ready to read. (Chard, n.d.)

Phonology in the Classroom	What is phoneme segmentation?	Phoneme segmentation is breaking down words into their phonemes, or individual sounds. For example, “bat” can be segmented into /b/, /æ/, and /t/. The ultimate purpose of working on phoneme segmentation is to increase the understanding of how letters represent sounds.
	What is phoneme blending?	Phoneme blending is the opposite of phoneme segmentation. Rather than breaking a word up into phonemes, the individual phonemes are said to the child in the order they are in the applicable word. The child then blends the phonemes into a word. For example, if a child hears the sounds /k/, /æ/, and /t/, the student should be able to blend them into the word “cat.”
	Does rhyming support phonological awareness?	Although there are some resources that encourage rhyming for developing phonological awareness, Dr. Susan Brady doesn’t agree. Instead, she states that rhyming and phoneme awareness are not related. Rhyming is fun and enjoyable in nursery rhymes and important for writing poetry, but there isn’t enough evidence to suggest it fosters phonological awareness. There isn’t a neat coordination with letter knowledge for rhyming. It’s better to start with phoneme awareness and focus on the sound-letter relationships. (Geiger, 2023)
	What if my students don’t understand syllables yet?	It’s okay if students don’t understand syllables before the start working at the phoneme level. In fact, according to Dr. Susan Brady, work on syllables before phonemes can create some confuse for children as both require bringing down the words, but into different sized parts. (Geiger, 2023)
	How can phonological awareness be assessed?	A variety of screening measures can be used, including ones that measure automatized rapid naming of letters and sounds and assessing through segmenting phonemes of words. It’s important to assess phonological awareness in the early grades in order to ensure successful reading abilities later. (Chard, n.d.)
	Why can phonological awareness be challenging for English Language Learners (ELLs)?	As children acquire their first language (L1), they become accustomed to hearing and making the sounds associated with their L1. Beginning with babbling as a baby, the sounds they make have been trimmed to match the sounds of their L1. When learning a second language (L2), the phonemes from their L1 can create interference in their learning of an L2. If the languages

		have different phonemes, they won't have the same abilities to differentiate between the sounds of their L2 as a native speaker of that language would. This means it's important for teachers to work with English Language Learners (ELLs) on phonological awareness and slowly develop the letter-sound correspondences of English. Frequent and explicit instruction is required to develop phonological awareness in a L2. (Coelho, 2016)
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Resources

- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (n.d.). *Language In Brief*. American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. <https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/spoken-language-disorders/language-in-brief/>
- Chard, D. J., & Dickson, S. V. (n.d.). *Phonological Awareness: Instructional and Assessment Guidelines*. Reading Rockets. <https://www.readingrockets.org/topics/phonological-and-phonemic-awareness/articles/phonological-awareness-instructional-and>
- Coelho, E. (2016). "Chapter 8: Understanding Second Language Acquisition" in *Adding English: A Guide to Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms*. University of Toronto Press.
- Geiger, A. (2023, April 3). *What we know about phoneme awareness - with Dr. Susan Brady*. Triple R Teaching Podcast. Spotify. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/7eBVdLIzpSB4b3O2IkC5Tp?si=uwB5E4V8S7aHrP9pyXQQ8g>