

Phonemic Awareness and Inventive Writing

by
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Phonemic awareness and its relationship to reading success and spelling success has been researched and well documented for nearly two decades. However, there is much less research focusing on the relationship between phonemic awareness and the invented spellings of prereading children. Even less research focuses on the role of phonemic awareness training and its impact on the writing development of young children (Tangel & Blachman, 1992).

In basic terms, phonemic awareness implies a knowledge of sound patterns of words, including rhyming patterns and alliteration. On a more involved level, phonemic awareness is the ability to manipulate sounds in words--segmenting, blending, deleting, and inserting phonemes in words (Castle, Riach & Nicholson, 1994). When young children begin to use inventive spelling in their writing, it is an indication that they are aware of the internal structure of words. At this point, they are representing phonemic segments of words using their knowledge of the alphabetic principle (Tangel & Blachman, 1992). Inventive spelling or transitional spelling, as it is sometimes called, approximates the sounds heard in speech through writing.

Phonemic awareness develops both inventive writing and an understanding of the alphabetic principle, because it focuses on the individual sounds of words (Griffith, 1991). Children must be able to hear phonemes in words in order to spell words by sound analysis, and they need to have some letter sound association under control in order to do this. We can gain information about a child's level of phonemic awareness by examining his inventive spellings. This is not feasible with conventional spelling, because it's impossible to know whether the spelling was copied, or

memorized, or whether help was given. We should be encouraging inventive spelling and independent writing from an early age in order to develop phonemic awareness (Chapman, 1996). In Partridge's (1991) study, the research showed that children who wrote daily scored higher in their inventive spelling ability than children who wrote only once a week. Even developmentally young children scored better than the control group when they wrote daily. This particular study used language experience activities, and daily writing, to develop phonemic awareness in children's inventive writing.

There is a direct relationship between phonemic awareness and spelling in that each enhances the other. Writing is especially beneficial in developing phonemic awareness because it provides opportunity to segment sounds and convert them into written language (Griffith, 1991). "While writing, young children directly confront the problem of representing spoken language with written language, and must out of necessity develop the ability to segment phonemes" (Griffith, 1991, p.231). A child's ability to encode words is a very good indicator of his awareness of phonemes.

Phonemic awareness can be taught to children, and studies show that because it is an indicator of reading and writing success, it should indeed be included in reading/writing programs at early elementary levels (Ball & Blachman, 1991; French & Feng, 1992; Yopp, 1995; Partridge et al., 1991). But there is much current debate among researchers and practitioners regarding the issue of formal training in phonemic awareness for young children versus a more holistic, informal acquisition of phonemic awareness. Although some research supports the premise that phonemic

awareness must be taught systematically and formally (Adams, 1990; Ball & Blachman, 1991; Eldredge & Baird, 1996), other studies refute this belief, maintaining that phonemic awareness should be incorporated into language rich, meaningful activities (Chapman, 1996; Yopp, 1995).

Many children, especially those who come from environments where literacy experiences are fostered, acquire phonemic awareness without formal instruction. There is opposition from groups such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1988) and the International Reading Association (1986) for the teaching of isolated skills of phonemic awareness. These groups maintain that skills taught in isolation are not developmentally appropriate. Rather, it is felt that phonemic awareness can be taught in context through language centered, developmentally appropriate activities.

In her case study examining literacy teaching and learning in a first grade program with a holistic language basis, Chapman (1996) described how phonemic awareness was taught through rich literacy experiences within the context of genuine, purposeful reading and writing activities. She affirms there is ample opportunity to teach phonemic awareness in this way instead of as an isolated skill. Chapman (1996) is quick to point out, however, that children can not be left to attain phonemic awareness independently. She contends that informed teacher guidance is a necessary piece in the informal acquisition of phonemic awareness. "Brandon was not left to his own devices to discover how written language works. Rather, his teacher used his writing to direct his attention to the sounds in words and to apply his knowledge of letter-sound relationships in increasingly demanding ways as appropriate to his stage of development" (Chapman, 1996, p.37).

Yopp (1995) suggests that teachers assess young children's ability to segment words into phonemes. She has developed an assessment tool, namely, the Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation. The factor analysis

calculations on this particular test showed a reliability score of .95. Yopp believes that phonemic awareness should be a part of a literacy program, and that it can be incorporated into holistic activities, which focus on sounds in language, such as stories, songs, rhymes, and games.

There is research (Castle, Riach, & Nicholson, 1994) indicating that although many children will acquire phonemic awareness in holistic language settings, children who demonstrate a weakness in phonemic awareness upon entry into school may benefit from supplementary instruction in phonemic awareness. This study also suggests that if these children do not receive additional training in phonemic awareness, they are more likely to require Reading Recovery services by first grade. "Put more positively, [research] suggests that the provision of extra phonemic training for children with low levels of such skill may give them a better prognosis" (Castle et al, 1994, p.357).

Other research shows that children without rich preschool experiences, require more direct, systematic training in phonemic awareness (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Adams, 1990). French & Feng (1992) indicate the need for phonemic awareness being included in the screening process for kindergarten entrance and older students who are failing or at risk in literacy. If children don't hear sounds in words, they will probably be at risk for learning to read and write. Phonemic awareness training might prove to be a preventative program instead of resorting to remedial reading programs once failure is established. This intervention needs to be implemented in the early years if it is to be effective (French, Feng, 1992). There have been studies done (Castle, et al, 1994; Eldredge & Baird, 1996) showing that early training in phonemic awareness has a significant and lasting effect of reading/writing growth. French & Feng (1992) describe a phonemic awareness training program that is developmentally appropriate and geared toward a whole language classroom. Their

study showed positive effects of training on at-risk kindergarten children.

Ball & Blachman (1991) compiled data indicating that children receiving phonemic awareness training, particularly, word segmentation, outperformed children that received only holistic language activity instruction. "These data indicate that the phoneme segmentation instruction provided in this study was effective in teaching groups of kindergarten children to segment words into phonemes, and that the children who received this instruction were able to generalize the segmentation training to novel items" (Ball & Blachman, 1991, p.62). They also found that the teaching of letter-sound knowledge alone was not effective in helping children master segmentation skills, and that it did not impact the early reading or spelling performance of children. But they caution that there is no need to wait for letter-sound association to be mastered before beginning phonemic awareness training.

While phonemic awareness is not common among all kindergarten children, by the end of first grade the majority of children have acquired an awareness of phonemes in words (Yopp, 1995). Attention needs to be given to children that have not developed phonemic awareness by this time.

Even if a classroom is rich in language, and involves children in letter/sound association activities, children will not progress in pre-reading behaviors if phonemic awareness is not in place first, or does not occur early in their exposure to print (Windsor & Pearson, 1992). A child's ability to encode words is the best indicator of his level of phonemic awareness, but Windsor and Pearson's (1992) research also demonstrated that some children who had phonemic awareness did not read at grade level. Hence, phonemic awareness is necessary but not sufficient for reading and writing success.

In their research with kindergarten children, Ball & Blachman (1991), found that the quality of children's writing could be improved by

providing a structured program in phonemic awareness. In their study, the inventive spellings of the children receiving phonemic awareness training contained more sound segments in words than those children that received no phonemic awareness training.

Holistic writing programs can benefit from inclusion of phonemic awareness instruction, as well. This training should include specific instruction in segmenting sounds of words, and representing these sounds with letters (Eldredge & Baird, 1996). The data indicates that children in a holistic program with structured phonemic awareness training "wrote more words, different words, difficult words, and composition units, spelled more words and different words correctly, and wrote better overall compositions" (Eldredge & Baird, 1996, p.193) than children in the holistic program without a structured phonemic awareness training.

The reciprocal relationship between writing and phonemic awareness warrants close attention in early childhood education. Much of the research supports the inclusion of phonemic awareness training in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Yet we need to strike a balance in which language instruction remains holistic, but not independent of informed teaching practice.

What Is Appropriate Phonemic Awareness Training In The Early Grades?

The word "training," in relation to phonemic awareness, makes it seem artificial, and perhaps this terminology alienates proponents of holistic language learning. But there is ample opportunity to incorporate phonemic awareness activities into language-rich reading and writing programs.

We need to help children become more aware of the way oral language works, and allow them to manipulate sounds in oral language, so that they will be able to understand how written language works. Even simple activities such as read alouds, provide opportunities for

children to discover language. After reading a familiar nursery rhyme, the following conversation could foster phonemic awareness in the young listeners.

Teacher: *Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle.*
What about those two words: diddle, fiddle?

Student: They rhyme.

Teacher: That's right. Now listen again and let's see if we can find any other words that rhyme.

Another activity that is easily incorporated into the language program involves children in a game of substituting initial consonants for their names at circle time. The following vignette exemplifies how this activity might proceed.

Teacher: David is our leader today. Who can tell us what sound is heard at the start of "David"?

Student: I hear a "d" (child gives the sound of "d", not the letter name).

Teacher: Yes, now let's all say David and hear the "d" sound. (children say "David" and listen for the initial sound.)

We're going to take turns trying out a "d" sound at the beginning of our names. First say your name the right way, and then try saying your name with a "d" sound. John, why don't you begin.

John: My name is John Don.

Kate: My name is Kate Date.

This activity continues until all the children have had an opportunity to try out their names with the new sound. It takes only minutes, yet it gives children a chance to play with sounds in a non-threatening way.

Daily writing is a necessity, if children are to make connections and discover the workings of the alphabetic principle. The ability to segment sounds in words is a major component of phonemic awareness, and it can easily be worked into the daily writing program. With teacher guidance, children can begin to isolate sounds in their writing. In the following interaction, the teacher encourages independence for the child, yet she also provides needed support, so that the child attempts the hearing and recording of more complex words.

Teacher: Say "turkey" again. Are you hearing any sounds?

Student: I think I hear a "t" at the beginning.

Teacher: Yes, good listening! Write that down. (child writes T)
Say "turkey" again, Ashley. What else do you hear?

Student: T-ur-k-ey. I hear an R! (child writes R)

Teacher: Any other sounds?

Student: T-ur-k-ey. I don't know.

Teacher: Listen Ashley, while I say it slowly.
T-ur-K-ey (teacher emphasizes the "K" sound).

Student: Oh, I hear a "c".

Teacher: Yes, it could be a "c", but this time it's the other letter that makes a "c" sound.

Student: Oh, I know, it's "k". (child writes "k").

Teacher: There's one more sound at the end, Ashley.
Say "turkey" and see if you can hear it.

Student: "t-ur-k-ey". Oh, I know! It's "e".
(child writes "e")

Teacher: Good for you, Ashley! Great listening!

Most children develop phonemic awareness very naturally. But there are some children who require more formalized programs to develop phonemic awareness, just as there are children who do not learn to read as easily as others. It would be wise to identify those children considered to be at risk, and provide them with additional support in phonemic awareness acquisition.

As we learn more about literacy acquisition, educators need to keep informed and modify teaching to reflect these changes. Phonemic awareness is an area in which much research has been done, and early literacy programs would benefit from its inclusion through inventive writing and other language activities.

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