Why Phonological Awareness Is Important for Reading and Spelling

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Phonological awareness is critical for learning to read any alphabetic writing system. And research shows that difficulty with phoneme awareness and other phonological skills is a predictor of poor reading and spelling development.

The phonological processor usually works unconsciously when we listen and speak. It is designed to extract the meaning of what is said, not to notice the speech sounds in the words. It is designed to do its job *automatically* in the service of efficient communication. But reading and spelling require a level of metalinguistic speech that is not natural or easily acquired.

On the other hand, phonological skill is not strongly related to intelligence. Some very intelligent people have limitations of linguistic awareness, especially at the phonological level. Take heart. If you find phonological tasks challenging, you are competent in many other ways!

This fact is well proven: Phonological awareness is critical for learning to read any alphabetic writing system (Ehri, 2004; Rath, 2001; Troia, 2004). Phonological awareness is even important for reading other kinds of writing systems, such as Chinese and Japanese. There are several well-established lines of argument for the importance of phonological skills to reading and spelling.

Phoneme awareness is necessary for learning and using the alphabetic code

English uses an alphabetic writing system in which the letters, singly and in combination, represent single speech sounds. People who can take apart words into sounds, recognize their identity, and put them together again have the foundation skill for using the alphabetic principle (Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989; Troia, 2004). Without phoneme awareness, students may be mystified by the print system and how it represents the spoken word.

Students who lack phoneme awareness may not even know what is meant by the term sound. They can usually hear well and may even name the alphabet letters, but they have little or no idea what letters represent. If asked to give the first sound in the word **dog**, they are likely to say "Woof-woof!" Students must be able to identify /d/ in the words **dog, dish,** and **mad** and separate the phoneme from others before they can understand what the letter **d** represents in those words.

Phoneme awareness predicts later outcomes in reading and spelling

Phoneme awareness facilitates growth in printed word recognition. Even before a student learns to read, we can predict with a high level of accuracy whether that student will be a good reader or a poor reader by the end of third grade and beyond (Good, Simmons, and Kame'enui, 2001; Torgesen, 1998, 2004). Prediction is possible with simple tests that measure awareness of speech sounds in words, knowledge of letter names, knowledge of sound-symbol correspondence, and vocabulary.

The majority of poor readers have relative difficulty with phoneme awareness and other phonological skills

Research cited in Module 1 has repeatedly shown that poor readers as a group do relatively less well on phoneme awareness tasks than on other cognitive tasks. In addition, at least 80 percent of all poor readers are estimated to demonstrate a weakness in phonological awareness and/or phonological memory. Readers with phonological processing weaknesses also tend to be the poorest spellers (Cassar, Treiman, Moats, Pollo, & Kessler, 2005).

Instruction in phoneme awareness is beneficial for novice readers and spellers

Instruction in speech-sound awareness reduces and alleviates reading and spelling difficulties (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998; Gillon, 2004; NICHD, 2000; Rath, 2001). Teaching speech sounds explicitly and directly also accelerates learning of the alphabetic code. Therefore, classroom instruction for beginning readers should include phoneme awareness activities.

Phonological awareness interacts with and facilitates the development of vocabulary and word consciousness

This argument is made much less commonly than the first four points. Phonological awareness and memory are involved in these activities of word learning:

* Attending to unfamiliar words and comparing them with known words
* Repeating and pronouncing words correctly
* Remembering (encoding) words accurately so that they can be retrieved and used
* Differentiating words that sound similar so their meanings can be contrasted

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