

Phonological Awareness Training through the Primary School.

Developing Phonological Awareness in the Infant Classes

Introduction

Three levels of Phonological Awareness are attended to below: syllabic awareness; onset-rime awareness; phonemic awareness. Within each section, activities are presented more or less in sequential order for teaching. While it is possible to commence work on all levels at the same time it is probably more sensible to start work on syllables and onsets-rimes and then introduce phonemic awareness exercises as children seem to be able for them.

A. Activities to develop Syllabic Awareness

1. Emphasising stressed syllables through clapping or other physical movement.

Children can clap out the stressed syllables of any rhyme. The rhymes of traditional games which involve clapping or movement of some sort are a good starting place for phonological awareness training in children.

'*Phonemic Awareness in young Children: A Classroom Curriculum*' (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg and Beeler, p32) has an activity with the rhyme

*"One potato, two potato, three potato, four
Five potato, six potato, seven potato, more"*.

Children sit in a circle with both fists before them. They chant the rhyme and the child who is 'on' moves around inside the circle and gently pounds out the stressed syllables on each fist. The fist that gets pounded on for the last syllable in each line must be withdrawn and so on until only one fist is left! The same game can be played with lots of rhymes, e.g. 'Eeny, Meeny, Miney, Mo'; 'Please Porridge Hot'.

2. Syllable Segmentation with Kinaesthetic Reinforcement

Kinaesthetic reinforcement helps children segment syllables.

(i) A body place for each syllable!

One way of providing kinaesthetic reinforcement is to get the children to use their two hands and to touch their heads for the first syllable, their shoulders for the second syllable, their hips for the third, knees for the fourth, toes for the fifth and heels if there is a sixth syllable! Children love this and they naturally experiment with any new words they hear. Such exercises also give children an awareness of word length.

All words which interest the children can be used for segmentation in this way. It's always a good idea to start with children's names.

(ii) 'If You're Happy And You Know It...'

The '*Sounds Abound Programme*' (Lenchner & Podhajski, see p.53 of Manual) uses the well-known song '*If you're happy and you know it*' to practise syllable segmentation. Show a picture of a multisyllable word, e.g. 'television'. Now sing the song:

*"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands
(all now clap out the syllables of 'tel-e-vi-sion')
If you're happy and you now it, clap your hands*

(repeat actions).

If you're happy and you know it then you really ought to show it,

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands

(repeat clapping of 'tel-e-vi-sion' as above)".

Continue with other verses using different action directions, e.g. 'stamp your feet' (stamping alternate feet for each syllable of 'tel-e-vi-sion'); 'tap your knees' (tapping alternate knees for each syllable); raise your hands (raising alternate hands for each syllable), etc.

(iii) 'Duck, Duck, Goose' (adapted)

This game is taken from *The Sounds Abound Program* (Lenchner & Podhajski, see p. 56 of Manual) and it is an adaptation of the traditional children's game 'Duck, Duck, Goose'. Children sit in a circle. A picture card of a multisyllabic word can be shown to the group (e.g. 'butterfly') but a picture isn't absolutely necessary. One child is selected (we say this child is 'on') and (s)he goes around the outside of the circle of children, saying the word 'but-ter-fly' and tapping each child lightly on the back (once), one tap for each syllable of the word. Having repeated the segmentation and tapping in this way a number of times, the child says the full word 'butterfly' (at normal pace) as (s)he taps a child of his/her own choosing. This chosen child then stands up quickly and tries to catch the child who is 'on' before the latter runs a complete circle etc. The game continues with other multisyllabic words. It will take children at Junior Infant level some time to get the one-to-one correspondence right i.e. one child, one tap, one syllable.

3. Syllable Counting with Fingers

A very effective way of counting syllables in words is to have children put up one finger for each syllable (starting with the thumb for the first syllable) and let the fingers displayed until counting is completed.

An activity children like to do is to group themselves according to the number of syllables in their first name and to discover which group is the biggest, etc.

Syllable counting exercises can be based on whatever topic is being done. For example, animals - see who can think of an animal with lots of syllables in its name! (They all love the 'hippo-pot-a-mus'!) Limit their choice by asking them to supply two-syllable words or three-syllable words only, etc. *'Sound Wizard Strategy Building Games for Phonological Awareness'* (Lenchner) has several small picture cards for playing syllable games e.g. each child chooses a picture card, counts the syllables and whoever has the picture card with the most syllables wins the round etc.

4. Syllable Isolation

A good place to start syllable isolation is to use two-syllable words that also happen to be compound words, e.g. postman, playground, blutack, blackbird. Segment into its syllables and then ask the child to say the first part on its own, then the second part on its own. It helps to put two paper 'post-its' side by side to represent the two syllables and to remove one as you want the children to omit the corresponding syllable.

A way of dealing with multisyllable words which are not compound words is to present, for example, a real carrot and cut it into two parts. Have the child touch each part as (s)he says the corresponding syllable. Point to one part of the cut carrot and ask them to say this part on its own. Other possibilities are 'spa-ghe-tti', 'ba-na-na', 'po-ta-to'. Pictures of words can be cut up if you can't have the real object. Eventually, you should be able to present a multisyllable word and ask for its first, second, third, syllable etc.

5. Syllable Blending

This involves the teacher saying words, leaving a one-second gap between each syllable. Children tell what word the teacher is saying. There are many possibilities for making a game out of this e.g. Helping Robbie Robot (who can only say words with an interval between syllables) to say words properly. You can confine possibilities to a particular theme especially at the beginning e.g. children's names, months of the year, foods etc.

Notes

(i) Oral work on syllable segmentation anticipates the breaking up of words that children will have to do later when they are learning to read words. Too often teachers expect children to be able to visually break up words into syllables for decoding without having had any aural or oral experience of doing this with spoken words.

(ii) Furthermore, such exercises help children to see how frequently some syllables occur. For example, suffixes such as 'ing' and 'er' can be well known to children at an aural and oral level before they encounter them in print.

(iii) You may wish to use the term 'part' of a word instead of 'syllable' at the beginning but once children have the concept, the word 'syllable' can be introduced and used from then on.

B. Onset-Rime Awareness (Rhyming)

There has been a renewed emphasis on nursery rhymes, rhyming stories, rhyming jingles etc serving not only language enrichment but also helping children to come to terms with the phonological features of the language. This emphasis has been reflected in the literacy materials available for children and such materials will play an important part in phonological awareness training.

1. Rhyme Recognition Exercises

(i) *'I'm thinking of a name that rhymes with...'* is a circle game from *'The Sounds Around Program'* (Lenchner and Podhajski, see p.23 of Manual) that aims to develop rhyme recognition. Children are in a circle and an empty chair is in the middle. The teacher sings (to the tune of 'Here we go around the Mulberry Bush')

*"I'm thinking of a name that rhymes with e.g. 'plate' (a word that rhymes with a child's name rhymes with 'plate', rhymes with 'plate'
I'm thinking of a name that rhymes with 'plate'
And _____ 'Kate' is the name!"*

Kate sits on the chair in the middle and the teacher proceeds with the next verse, saying, as before, a rhyming word for a name in the class. The children should be able to join in in the last line of the verse.

Several adaptations of this game are possible depending on the topic you wish to explore. For example, if studying the topic 'food', various food items can be given out to children and the verse can be adapted as follow:

"I'm thinking of a food that rhymes with 'head'..... (bread)"

(ii) Activities with pictures that ‘rhyme’

A set of pictures of rhyming words is an invaluable resource for developing phonological awareness. Children can be given the following kinds of activities:

- Matching ‘rhyming’ pictures from a set of picture cards (begin with a small number of cards and increase the number according to ability).
- Picking out the odd-one-out (picture that doesn’t ‘rhyme’) from a set of pictures. Pictures provide a concrete focus for rhyme discrimination work and having the picture in front of them while they think about the sounds reduces the auditory memory load for children compared to the task of discriminating between orally presented words.

The Oxford Reading Tree *‘Rhyme and Analogy’* Card Games have 64 rhyme picture cards (4 in each of 16 rhyming families) and a whole series of games to develop rhyming, e.g. Snap, Pelmanism, Odd-one-out, etc. These are particularly useful for working with small groups. There are also 64 word cards to match each picture. Some children will be able to read these. For example, when matching rhyming pictures, on being shown the word ‘cat’, some children will use their analogy skills to find the other three rhyming words in the set (rat, hat, bat). Those who do so are very phonologically aware and are already seeking out similar spelling patterns for similar sounds. *‘Sounds Abound’* (Catts and Vartiainen) has plenty photocopyable rhyme discrimination (picture) exercises.

2. Rhyme Completion Exercises**(i) ‘A Hunting We Will Go’**

This is from *‘The Sounds Abound Programme’* (Lenchner & Podhajski, see p. 31 of Manual) and is based on an old English hunting song:

*“A-hunting we will go, a-hunting we will go.
We’ll catch a fox and put him in a ...? (box)
And never let him go”.*

The verse is repeated with other animals and in each case the children supply a suitable rhyming ending (e.g. bat, hat; bear, chair; dragon, wagon; duck, truck). Included are A4 size pictures of each creature and its rhyming word. *‘Sounds Abound’* (Catts and Vartiainen) and *‘Sound Linkage’* have lots of rhyme supply exercises.

(ii) ‘Did You Ever See A ___ In A ___?’

‘Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum’ (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg and Beeler, p35) has an activity in which the tune of *‘If you’re happy and you know it’* is used to create rhyme-completion exercises:

*“Did you ever see a bear in a (chair)?
Did you ever see a bear in a chair?
No, I never, no, I never, no, I never, no, I never
No, I never saw a bear in a chair”.*

Children can create their own examples. For example at Halloween, they can find rhyming words to complete such verses as above on such words as *ghost, cat, witch, bat, broom, spider...*

3. Rhyme Production Exercises

(i) Rhyme Box: Various objects can be put in the Rhyme Box and used for eliciting rhyme. Suitable objects: hat, mug, bell, strap, pop, (toy) car, (toy) gun, (chewing) gum, etc. Pupils can dip into the box, pick out an object and see if they can supply three rhyming words,

etc.

Several adaptations are possible. A box of coloured counters can be passed around and each child is required to think of a word to rhyme with the colour of the counter (s)he picked out. Nonsense words can also be used as rhyming words. Similarly, numbers can be used and the child thinks of a word that rhymes with the number picked out.

(ii) ‘Rhyme Time Game’ (supplying rhyming words to a given picture stimulus)

This game goes further than Phonological Awareness in that it involves the teacher writing the rhyming words on the blackboard and drawing attention to the shared spelling patterns (i.e. analogy training).

Materials Required: Picture as a rhyming stimulus, cards with words that rhyme with the stimulus (see lists below).

Steps: (a) Show the picture, e.g. picture of a cat and ask for rhyming words.

(b) List pupils’ (correct) responses on blackboard. List real words only but let pupils suggest nonsense words if they wish. Explain the difference between real and nonsense words. At this stage some children will be able to spell all the rhyming words (using analogy), others will have no idea ...

(c) When the pupils finish guessing, show each of your word cards. Some will be able to read them. If the group had guessed the word on the card, they ‘keep’ it, if the word on the card was not guessed by them, the teacher ‘keeps’ it.

(d) At this stage ask what sounds all these words have that are the same. **Then** ask what letters they all have in common. It is important that the above questions are considered in this order so that pupils begin to think in terms of common sound categories **first** and then see how these usually have common spellings. This is training in analogy which is the objective of onset-rhyme awareness work. At Senior Infant level it will only make sense to some, others might see similar letters but will have no idea at this stage of the link between similar symbols and similar sounds.

Sometimes rhyming words have different spelling patterns. If this happens in this game it can be a good opportunity to see that this is indeed sometimes the case and the frequency of its occurrence will become clear to them as more ‘Rhyme Time’ games are played. With small groups it helps if children finish such a game by using letter cards to make the stimulus word and then change the initial letter to make a different rhyming word.

The following are some rhyming lists . You can pick out words that you think are within the guessing range of your group (or expand the list if necessary).

HAT: mat, fat, cat, sat, bat, rat, pat, at, that, brat, flat, tat...

MAN: pan, tan, fan, Dan, can, ran, ban, van, an, plan, Jan, ...

TAP: map, nap, snap, lap, trap, slap, clap, gap, rap...

CAR: jar, bar, tar, far, star...

SAD: had, lad, mad, glad, Dad, bad...

BAG: flag, tag, rag, wag...

BALL: fall, tall, wall, call, hall, small, all...

BLACK: rack, back, sack, Jack, pack, track, snack...

HILL: ill, fill, will, sill, still, pill, kill, till, spill, mill, Jill, bill...

SIT: lit, knit, bit, fit, pit, hit, spit, it, kit, ...

TIN: bin, fin, chin, in, thin, grin, win, pin, skin, spin...

SWIM: dim, Tim, Jim, slim, Kim, him...

BELL: shell, smell, well, tell, sell, sell, hell, spell, fell...

NET: yet, let, wet, get, set, pet, met, jet, vet...

DOT: spot, shot, tot, cot, not, hot, got, rot, lot, trot, pot...

POP: shop, hop, bop, mop, stop, top, drop...

FROG: bog, jog, log, dog, fog...

MUG: tug, hug, rug, jug, plug, bug, slug, dug...

SUM: drum, hum, yum, plum, Mum...

See p 59 of *Primary School Curriculum., English Language, Teacher Guidelines for a list of 37 rimes that give 500 primary level words.*

C. Phonemic Awareness

1. Phoneme Blending

It is better to begin with short words (2 or 3 phonemes). It is also a good idea to limit the number at the start and have the children 'win' a counter for each correct answer. For each new round you can change to a different topic as follows:

(a) Ask children to guess which things in the classroom you are saying in a funny way (e.g. d-oo-r; b-a-g; b-oo-k; ch-a-lk; ch-ai-r).

(b) Maybe gather a collection of suitable items/toys and only reveal them as the children guess what words you are saying (e.g. m-u-g; p-e-n; b-a-g; p-e-g; d-o-ll; t-o-p; ph-o-ne).

(c) Ask them to guess the names of your friends (e.g. T-i-m; P-a-t; P-au-l; J-oh-n; R-o-b; B-e-n; T-o-m; J-i-m; B-o-b).

Other suitable categories are food and action words. If children find phoneme blending too difficult you can go back to onset-rime blending until they build up their blending skills.

2. Phoneme Comparison

(i) Initial Sounds

There's no need to wait for phonics lessons to get children listening to and thinking about initial sounds. Right from the beginning, it is helpful to highlight the initial sounds of the children's names and to draw children's attention to them e.g. "Who am I thinking about? Her name begins with the sound /n/..." (Children guess 'Nicola'). Words beginning with this sound can be explicitly associated with Nicola. Others names can be tested to see if they belong to 'Nicola's group'. In any class there will be a wide variation in children's ability to identify and categorize initial sounds in this aural/oral way. It is a good early test of how phonologically aware

Junior Infants are. Attention can also be drawn to the shape of the speech organs when making various sounds. Some children will already be using the letter ‘n’ as a reference point for this sound. By all means use the letter to identify the sound but remember the first task is *hearing* sounds in words, linking those that are the same etc.

‘I spy’ games can be used here. A set of initial sound pictures and corresponding letters are of course very useful - the Oxford Reading Tree *‘Rhyme and Analogy’* Card Games have sets of four pictures and four matching letters for each initial sound with several examples of games.

(ii) End Sounds

- **‘A Tisket, A Tasket, A Green and Yellow Basket’ (Identifying the Final Sound).**

‘Just for Me! Phonological Awareness’ (Warner, p 93-94) has an activity in which children have to cut out twelve given pictures, then pick out the ones that end in final sound /t/ and put them into a paper basket (this can also be made with the template supplied).

“A tisket, a tasket, I’ll put a hat into the basket”.

Using this idea, you can supply a basket which will become a ‘home’ for all words encountered that end in /t/. This is a simple activity but very effective in that you find children testing words to see if they would qualify for entry into the basket (e.g. testing which children in the class will ‘go’ into the basket). Words ending with the sound /t/ can be written on cards and put into the basket. Children will see they end (in most cases) with the letter ‘t’. Even though this exercise focuses on /t/ as an end sound, children will tell you what end sounds they hear in other words.

- **‘Can You Say the Last Sound?’**

This is from *‘Phonemic Awareness Activities’* (Wiley Blevins, p40). This verse is sung to the tune of *‘Happy Birthday to You’*.

*“Can you say the last sound?
Can you say the last sound?
It’s the last sound in RABBIT.
Can you say the last sound?”*

Children isolate and say the final sound. See if they can think of another word with the same final sound. A search around the classroom for ideas or children’s own names can help.

3. Phoneme Deletion

(i) Children’s names without first sound

The best place to start deleting an initial sound is with children’s own names. Call out the children’s names without the first sound and see if they will respond to the call (e.g. *–icola* for *Nicola*; *–arry* for *Barry* etc.) Ask them to explain what you did to their name. It is helpful if the children get cards with their names on them and fold back the letter(s) of the initial sound. They can then practise saying their name with and without the initial sound, folding the name card as required.

Children love games of identifying words without initial sounds especially if you confine it to a category (e.g. foods, drinks, names, school words, etc.). Most children will be able to identify the words but a good way of seeing who has well-developed phonological awareness is to see who can actually do the deleting themselves. It will take some children a long time.

(ii) Sally Sound Snatcher (Making new words by deleting initial phonemes)

Introduce an imaginary Sally Sound Snatcher! or supply a puppet. She snatches sounds from words! Once she took the word ‘fox’ and snatched the first sound away to make ‘ox’! What sound did she snatch? (/f/) Give other examples. Now ask what sound she took away from ‘farm’ to make ‘arm’. (Other examples: (t)able, (h)at, (l)ate, (p)each, (c)up, (c)at, (m)eat, (s)ink, (m)eat, (s)eat, (j)am, etc.). It may help to have a blank strip of card to represent the word and to fold back the initial part each time you want the children to delete the initial phoneme.

It is better to avoid consonant blends at the initial stages of such exercises because subtle sound changes occur as a result of the co-articulation of the consonants in the blend.

Children’s Names: When Sally Sound Snatcher took away the first sounds from these words she was left with the names of boys and girls! What are they?

Pan (Ann) Teddy (Eddie) Wellie (Ellie) Handy (Andy)
Gemma (Emma) Crows (Rose) Spat (Pat) Skate (Kate)

4. Segmenting words into phonemes and reblending**Elkonin Boxes**

Children at Infant level can be helped to ‘see’ phonemes in words by having one box drawn for each phoneme underneath the picture (Elkonin boxes). You can demonstrate the segmenting of a VC word (e.g. at) or a CVC word (e.g. cat) into phonemes using such Elkonin pictures as follows:

- Say the word first at normal pace.
- Ask them to watch you closely as you say the word very slowly and move a cube into each box as you say each phoneme
- Finally repeat the word at a normal rate. During this repetition, while blending the sounds together, join the cubes together and run your finger (left to right) under the cubes to provide a visual representation of the blending process.

This ability to ‘say-it-and-move-it’ is crucial to phonemic awareness. Lots of work with Elkonin boxes helps. *‘The Phonological Awareness Kit’* (Robertson and Salter) has several A4 size pictures (with Elkonin boxes to represent the phonemes) for this kind of segmentation work. *‘Road to the Code’* (Blachman, Wynne Ball, Black and Tangel) has a ‘say-it-and-move-it’ component like this in every lesson and also has several photocopyable Elkonin cards.

This exercise can be taken further. You can point to the first cube and ask the children what sound it stands for, then ask about the second cube etc. As children get to know the letters corresponding to these sounds they can put out letter cards instead of cubes.

5. Adding and subtracting phonemes; swapping phonemes**(i) Adding a phoneme to the beginning of a two-phoneme word**

Demonstrate how to represent the phonemes in a two-phoneme word, e.g. ‘at’ (as shown above) using two different coloured cubes. Now tell them that you are going to add a sound to ‘at’, saying ‘cat’. Show them how to add a different colour cube to the front of the two already out.

Practice can be done with the following VC words: *ice-mice (or nice, rice); up-cup (or pup); it-bit (or sit, fit, hit, kit etc); in-pin (or win, chin, fin etc.); ill-pill (or Bill, chill, fill etc.); ash-dash (or mash, rash etc); am-ham (or jam, Sam, etc)*. Ask the children to remove the initial cube and say the original word.

Now tell them that you are going to change the word ‘cat’ to ‘fat’ and show them how to change the first cube to a cube of a different colour.

(ii) Adding a phoneme to the beginning of a two-phoneme word to create a blend

Such exercises can be done where adding a phoneme at the beginning creates a blend. Examples: no-snow; row-grow (or crow, grow); pie-spy; lie-fly (or sly etc). Again ask children to remove the added cube and give you back the original word.

(iii) Adding an internal phoneme

Similarly, you can start with a two phoneme word like ‘so’ and ask children to add third cube to make ‘slow’ (or snow, stow). Other suitable words are go-grow (or glow); bow-blow; die-dry etc. Depending on the ability of children, you can start with a three phoneme word and add a fourth phoneme, e.g. ‘flat’ and see if they can tell you where the new cube will be added. You can add further tasks by asking them to take away a counter to make ‘fat’ again, then ‘at’ etc. *‘Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum’* (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg and Beeler, chapter 8) has probably the most comprehensive lists for such phoneme addition and subtraction exercises as well as very carefully structured activities. *‘The Phonological Awareness Kit’* (Robertson and Salter, pp50-57) has also several suggestions for these kinds of exercises first with cubes and then with letters. *‘Sound Wizard: Strategy building games for Phonological Awareness’* (Lenchner) has phoneme deletion puzzles which involve small picture cards with Elkonin boxes. One box is coloured black. The word must be said without the ‘blackened’ phoneme. For example, there is a picture of a ‘leg’ with its three boxes to represent sounds. And the first box is coloured in. The child must work out that ‘egg’ is the answer to the deletion puzzle (deleting the first phoneme /l/). At the back of the card there is a picture of an egg for purposes of self-correcting.

Ultimately, children will do these kinds of exercises with letters. You can change from cubes to letter cards as soon as children have the phonic ability to do so. Digraphs (e.g. ‘ow’) should of course be on one card.

(iv) ‘Change your name’ (Initial Sound Substitution)

Children sit in a circle. Teacher demonstrates by skipping around the circle while all sing the following to the tune of ‘London Bridge’.

*“Change the first sound in your name, in your name, in your name,
Change the first sound in your name, what’s your new name?”*

When the verse is over, ‘swap’ the initial sound of the name of the child behind whom you are now standing and say your new name (e.g. Katie and Margaret swap initial sounds and become Kargaret and Matie).

Note:

The author has tried to ensure that all work is acknowledged. If omissions are made please contact the author directly to ensure acknowledgments are correct.

