

Maximizing Learning: Embedding Phonological Awareness Throughout the Day

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Abstract

Phonological awareness encompasses three main subsets of skills: awareness of words, syllables, and sounds. These three skills work in concert to support students' reading development. By purposefully utilizing time in the classroom, teachers can embed phonological awareness activities during common transitions, thus maximizing students' exposure to early literacy skills. Through these deliberately planned activities, teachers can not only provide effective instruction, but they can ensure that throughout the school day, transitions run smoothly with fewer disruptions and off-task behaviors.

As Ms. Simpson (all names are pseudonyms) completed her read-aloud, she glanced at the clock and took note of the time. She clapped her hands in the first part of a well-known rhythmic pattern. Her 4K students, finishing the pattern, knew it was time to get quiet and line up to wash hands so that they could head to the cafeteria for lunch.

As students washed their hands and Mrs. Simpson ushered them to the line, several children were having their own conversations.

"I have an apple for lunch," Jade whispered to Kendra at the sink.

"Ewww! I hate apples!" Kendra shouted.

As Jade's face started to morph into what surely indicated an imminent tantrum, Ms. Simpson came up behind them and attempted to diffuse the situation. "Apples are delicious! I wonder if you can guess my

favorite fruit. I'm going to say the sounds slowly and I want you to put them together. Listen as I stretch the sounds, and then you will blend the sounds together to figure out what my favorite fruit is... Ready?"

The girls both looked at Mrs. Simpson and nodded. They were ready.

"Ok, my favorite fruit is a /p/ /l/ /u/ /m/."

"Oooh, plum!" Kendra quickly blended the sounds and smiled at her teacher.

As Kendra and Jade headed toward the line at the door, an idea came to Mrs. Simpson. She knew that due to transitions between activities, she was wasting at least five to ten minutes daily and needed every bit of instructional time that she could get. In this case not only was she able to distract these students from their squabble, she also provided them with phonemic awareness practice.

Preparing for lunch is one of many transitions that occur daily in early childhood settings. Put simply, transitions are the periods of time spent moving from one place or activity to another (Price & Nelson, 2011). Common transition times include restroom breaks, snack time, group time, recess, special area classes, arrival and dismissal. Some transitions occur quickly and frequently (e.g., lining up at the classroom door), while others take longer (e.g., restroom breaks). Taken together over the course of the day, this time adds up. Poorly managed transitions can result in the loss of instructional time and may also lead to unwanted student behaviors.

Within the recent past, there has been an increased emphasis on academic achievement. This has resulted in teachers being required to teach more, and students being required to process larger amounts of information (Lee, 2006). In order for students to successfully meet the academic demands of an ever growing curriculum, there must be sufficient time for learning (Amadio, 2004). Teachers must make deliberate efforts to increase students' engaged time, or their time-on-task. Engaged time is the amount of time that students spend directly involved in learning activities (Greenwood, 2002). When teachers effectively engage students in academic tasks, there is an increased likelihood that greater student learning will take place, which ultimately leads to higher levels of student achievement (Fisher et al., 2015; Johns, Crowley & Guetzloe, 2008). Research conducted on 30 schools nationwide that have demonstrated student growth have "made every minute count" by maximizing time on task (Sparks, 2011). There are many occurrences throughout the day that interfere with the amount of time that students can be fully engaged in learning activities. These can range from a 10-second intercom call to a 5-minute transition between classroom activities. According to Mastropieri and Scruggs (1994), transitions constitute one of the major sources of off-task behaviors. Transitions occur when students move from one activity to the next or from one location to the other. Throughout the school day, students are involved in multiple transition points, and these moments of off-task activities can have a compounding effect, leaving students with little time to be engaged in sustained learning (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2008; Lee, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to encourage teachers to consider common transitions in their classroom schedule and begin viewing those periods of time as opportunities for learning. With thoughtful and purposeful planning, transitional time can serve to not only improve classroom management, but also as an opportunity to embed extra skill instruction in the school day. Specifically, we focus on a foundational reading skill, phonological awareness. We provide ideas for embedding phonological awareness instruction during transitions and offer considerations for practice.

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is an umbrella term that refers to the broad awareness of sounds within spoken language; under this umbrella are three subsets of skills: word awareness, syllable awareness, and phonemic awareness (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2001). Word awareness and syllable awareness skills involve larger units of sounds, and

are considered easier to master than skills involving smaller units of sound. As phonemic awareness involves the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken words, it is considered the more challenging for students to achieve (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Table 1 includes a description of individual phonological awareness skills arranged in order of increasing complexity (see Appendix A).

Why is it Important?

Teaching young children to read is a major goal for primary grade teachers (Pfof, Hattie, Dorfler & Artelt, 2014). Before children learn to read print, they must understand how the smallest components of words work, and how these units impact a word's meaning (Adams, 1990; Zeece, 2006). While phonological and phonemic awareness are essential language skills that support young children's reading development, the acquisition of phonemic awareness is especially critical because it has been found to be a strong predictor of reading achievement (Foorman et al., 2016; Machado, 2013; Manning & Kato, 2006; Murray, 2012; NICHD, 2000). Further, children who receive phonemic awareness instruction around the time when they begin to learn to read demonstrate more skillful abilities than children without this instruction (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn, & Adler, 2009; Uhry, 2011). Reciprocally, children with reading challenges often exhibit poor phonemic awareness skills (Abbott, Walton, & Greenwood, 2002; Manning & Kato, 2006). Phonemic awareness can contribute to later success in reading (Machado, 2013; Murray, 2012; NICHD, 2000) and as such, teachers have a responsibility to ensure that each student has a strong foundation in phonemic awareness.

Embedding Phonological Awareness During Transitions

Opportunities to embed phonological awareness throughout the day abound. Below we consider the three subsets of phonological awareness: word awareness, syllable awareness, and phonemic awareness and provide examples for how teachers can easily integrate phonological awareness instruction during quick transitions (1-2 minutes) and longer transitions (3-5 minutes). Each activity is flexible and could be done at any convenient time during the day.

Subset: Word Awareness, Skill: Rhyming

Quick transitional activity. As the teacher calls students to line up individually, he/she provides a word (e.g., sat) and points to students individually to generate words that rhyme with the target word (e.g., mat, cat, bat). When the student provides a correct rhyme, the teacher provides positive feedback and the student moves to line up. When the students run out of rhymes, the teacher selects a new target word and

continues until all students are lined up.

Longer transitional activity. The teacher gives each student a card with a different picture. The students have to identify the picture on their card and then find a classmate (or classmates) who have pictures that rhyme with their picture. For example, if a student has a card with a picture of a dog, they would identify that it was a dog and then find classmates who have pictures that rhyme (e.g., frog, log, hog).

When the students are in groups, the teacher leads the class in checking whether everyone is in the right place. If extra time remains, the teacher can challenge students to come up with more words that would fit in the group. At the culmination of the activity, the teacher calls each group to line up- collecting their picture cards as they move into line.

Subset: Syllable Awareness, Skill: Syllable Identification

Quick transitional activity. The teacher identifies objects around the room and gives students opportunities to count the number of syllables in the word. He/she points to the object, names it (e.g., calendar), and asks students to repeat the word. Then students clap the number of syllables in the word (/cal/ /en/ /dar/) and then, on the teacher's signal, hold up the fingers to show the number of syllables in the word. For example, the students would hold up three fingers for calendar. The teacher can then provide feedback on the responses. The activity can continue for as long as the transition lasts. As the students become proficient with this game, the teacher can select larger words with more syllables, give students the opportunity to "be the teacher", and/or provide a number and ask students to identify objects around the room that have that many syllables.

Longer transitional activity. The teacher leads students in an activity focused on identifying and counting syllables. The teacher has a bag filled with small objects (e.g., eraser, pencil, crayon, block) and selects a student to close his or her eyes and select an object from the bag. The student has to feel the object, determine what it is, and then open his or her eyes. The teacher will provide feedback on their response, and ask the whole class to say the name of the object together. Then, the children will clap each syllable in the word and hold up their fingers to show the number of syllables in the word. If additional time remains after all the items have been selected from the bag, the teacher can lead the class in arranging the items from the least to the greatest number of syllables.

Subset: Phonemic Awareness, Skills: Phoneme Blending and Segmenting

Quick transitional activity. The teacher will use a big book for this activity. For example, the teacher could have *Silly Sally* (Wood, 1994) open to the page where Silly Sally and the pig are dancing. The teacher will say, "I see something on this page. Can you guess what I see? I want you to listen to these sounds and blend them together quickly to say the word. I see a /p/ /i/ /g/. What do I see?" The teacher provides a signal and then the group responds together, "pig". If the group gets the word correct, they can line up. The teacher will continue until all groups have had a turn.

This activity works in the inverse as well. The teacher could tell students, as she points to the pig, "I'm going to name something I see and then you tell me all the sounds you hear in that word. I see a pig. What sounds do you hear in pig?"

Longer transitional activity. The teacher will provide each student with five counters for this segmenting activity. If it's not feasible to use counters, students can use their fingers to tap each sound they hear. The teacher will provide each student with five counters for this segmenting activity. The teacher can again refer to the images in a big book and after choosing one will say, "I want you to move one counter for every sound you hear in the word "desk." The student will move a counter for each sound that is heard. Once each student has their counters in place, the teacher can lead the class in segmenting the word, emphasizing each sound while touching each corresponding counter. Students would then blend the sounds together quickly to say the word while sweeping their finger from left to right under the counters. The teacher should begin with shorter words and increase in complexity as students get more familiar with the task.

Instructional Considerations

All of the examples provided above can be adapted by teachers to fit their classroom schedule, teaching style, and needs of students. Table 2 includes additional resources related to phonological awareness, including more activities that can be incorporated into classroom transitions. Below we offer a few considerations for implementing phonological awareness practice and supporting the needs of all learners.

Error Correction

In order to keep these transitional activities efficient, it's important to have clear error correction procedures in place. If an incorrect answer is provided, the teacher should model the proper response. For example, if a teacher is asking students to segment the sounds in the word pit and a student responds /pi/ /t/, the teacher would provide corrective feedback by first modeling the skill. For example, the teacher would respond, "Listen.

The sounds in pit are /p/ /i/ /t/.” The teacher would then encourage the student’s participation, “Let’s do it together. The sounds in /pit/ are: /p/ /i/ /t/.” The next step requires having the student complete the task independently, “Now it’s your turn. What sounds do you hear in the word pit?” The teacher could also decide to make error correction a whole group activity, instead of stating the correct answer singularly, the teacher could have the class respond in a choral manner. This could serve as a way to increase on-task behavior of the group and take pressure off students who make errors.

Using Pictures

Picture cards are useful tools for phonemic awareness practice. It is important to select pictures that are age appropriate, interesting, and clearly represent the target word. In some instances, the teacher may need to ensure the students know what is on their cards prior to the start of the activity. For example, there are some pictures students could name differently: plate/dish, rabbit/bunny, shoe/boot. Further, we do not recommend including labels with the pictures. Doing so could cause students to be right for the wrong reason. Specifically, a student may sort cards by beginning sound simply by looking at the first letter of the words, rather than saying the word and isolating the initial sound orally. Teachers can provide a preview of the words represented on the picture cards by quickly flipping through each picture card saying, “This is a _____.” After the teacher names the image, the students will repeat the name of the image, and then the cards are distributed before the activity begins.

Easy to More Difficult

When delivering phonemic awareness practice, teachers should move from easy to more difficult skills and should target one to two skills per instructional session. These decisions should be made based on students’ instructional needs. This guiding principle of easy to more difficult also applies to how teachers should select examples for students as they practice. Specifically, when working with syllable identification, blending, and segmenting, teachers should begin with compound words that can more easily be separated auditorily (e.g., /sun/ /shine/) then move to other types of words (e.g., /pen/ /cil/). When working with phoneme segmenting and blending, teachers should start with words that have a few sounds (e.g., vowel-consonant (VC) and consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) word types) and then move to more complex words as students demonstrate mastery.

Providing Support

There are several ways teachers can support students as they practice (McGee & Ukrainetz, 2009). To begin, teachers should model skills for students

prior to independent practice. This may involve physical movement like stomping, clapping, jumping, finger tapping as well as the use of manipulatives like pictures and counters. These supports can be beneficial because they provide students concrete representations during practice. For example, when counting the number of sounds in a spoken word (e.g., /map/) students can use their fingers to tap each sound (/m/ pointer finger taps thumb, /a/ middle finger taps thumb, /p/ ring finger taps thumb). Tapping in this way can help students segment each sound and then they can look to their fingers to see how many sounds were represented in the word. Finally, consistent corrective feedback, like the procedure described above, provides continuous support for students as they develop proficiency.

Linking to Letters

While phonological awareness and phonemic awareness are auditory skills, research has indicated that phonemic awareness training can be enhanced in a developmentally appropriate manner by linking to letters (Ehri, 2013; NICHD, 2000). Letters are the visual symbols that bridge the gap between oral and written language. When students understand that letters are the written representation of the sounds that they speak as they practice their phonological awareness activities, it enables them to put familiar sequences together to make words. For example, if a teacher engages students in blending onset-rime words, he could say the word /b-/in/, ask students to indicate what word he said, and then show them the letter sequence with the onset letter on one flash card and the rime letter cluster on another flash card. The teacher would put the two cards together to show students how they work to make a word. As the teacher segues into linking letters to sounds, the use of environmental print and students’ names can also be effective as students are able to make personal associations with these words (Tompkins, 2015). This activity could be especially beneficial for students who are transitioning to formal reading instruction (see Appendix B).

Conclusion

With increased accountability measures and pressure to prepare more students with fewer resources and less time, teachers today can feel rushed to get through the curriculum. Therefore, providing students with opportunities to practice skills in a fun and inviting way requires taking advantage of every minute in the classroom. Phonemic awareness activities can be an effective use of time (Johnson & Keier, 2010) and can easily be integrated into transition times throughout the day. The practice of embedding phonological awareness activities in common transitions keeps students engaged, leads to improvements in

student behavior, and increases students' learning opportunities. Fisher et al. (2015) states that for learning to occur, students must, in some way, be paying attention, and each of these transitional activities enable teachers to maximize the amount of on-task experiences that students have throughout the day. Each of the activities provided are also straightforward, inexpensive, effective, and engaging. While the ideas and examples discussed above are by no means exhaustive, we offer them as a way to provide teachers with a starting point for examining and expanding their current practices, specifically as it relates to maximizing students' opportunities to learn.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1. Phonological Awareness Skills Arranged from Easier to More Complex

Phonological Awareness	Skill	The ability to...
Word Awareness	Word comparison	Identify specific characteristics of words “Listen to the following words: <i>met, happy</i> . Which word is longer?”
	Rhyming	Identify and create oral rhymes “Listen to the following words: <i>glad, sad</i> . Does <i>glad</i> rhyme with <i>sad</i> ?” -or- “Listen to the following word: <i>boy</i> . Can you think of two other words that rhyme with <i>boy</i> ?”
	Sentence segmentation	Identify specific words in spoken sentences “Listen to the following sentence: <i>Today, we had pizza for lunch. I will say the sentence again. This time I want you to use your counters. Move one counter for each word that you hear.</i> ”
Syllable Awareness	Syllable blending	Identify and blend units of sound in spoken language “Listen to this name that has more than one syllable: /A/-/lan/. Whose name did I say?”
	Syllable segmenting	Identify and segment units of sound in spoken language “This object in our classroom has more than one syllable: <i>table</i> . Can you tell me how many beats it has? Can you stretch the word so that I can hear the beats?”
	Syllable identification	Identify units of sound in spoken words “I am going to say a word: <i>closet</i> . Can you clap the number of syllables that you hear?”
	Syllable deletion	Delete units of sound in spoken words “Listen to the following word: <i>birthday</i> . If I take away the <i>birth</i> , what do I have left?”
	Onset-rime blending	Combine the beginning and ending parts in spoken words “Listen. If I say the word: /s/-/it/, what word did I say?”
	Onset-rime segmentation	Stretch spoken words to hear its beginning and ending sounds “Listen to the following word: <i>broom</i> . I will say the beginning of the word, <i>br-</i> . Can you say the ending?”
Phonemic Awareness	Phoneme blending	Hear the individual sounds of the word sounded out slowly and then combine the sounds together to say the word aloud

Phonological Awareness	Skill	The ability to...
		“Listen to the following sounds, /d/-/e/-/sk/. What word do these sounds make?”
	Phoneme segmentation	Hear a whole word pronounced and isolate its individual sounds “Listen to the word, book. Say the word slowly and take a breath between each sound.”
	Phoneme identification	Identify the individual sounds in spoken words. “Look at the picture of this trashcan. What is the first sound that you hear in can?”
	Phoneme deletion	Delete individual sounds in spoken words “Listen to the word, box. Can you say box without the /b/?”
	Phoneme manipulation	Identify and work with individual sounds in spoken words “Listen to the word, pen. Can you change the /p/ in pen to /h/?” “Listen to the word, pen. Can you change the /e/ in pen to /a/?” “Listen to the word, pen. Can you change the /n/ in pen to /t/?”

APPENDIX B

Table 2. Additional Resources Related to Phonological Awareness

What phonological difficulties might look like from the perspective of the parent, student, and teacher:	http://www.readingrockets.org/helping/target/phonologicalphonemic
Phonological activities from the Florida Center for Reading Research:	http://www.fcrr.org/curriculum/pdf/GK-1/PA_Final_Part3.pdf
Internet-based phonological awareness games, created by Paws Inc and Ball State University:	http://www.professorgarfield.org/Phonemics/farmIntro2.html
Phonological awareness mini lessons that target specific skills:	https://www.readinga-z.com/phonological-awareness/phonological-awareness-lessons/
Phonological awareness activities across multiple skill areas:	http://www.phonologicalawareness.org/