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This excerpt from *How to Prevent Reading Difficulties, Grades PreK-3* by Mark Weakland defines phonological, phonemic, and phonics.

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Phonological, Phonemic, and Phonics

Before we discuss why being phonemically aware is so important to young readers, let's define three words that are sometimes confused with one another: phonological, phonemic, and phonics.

The terms *phonological* and *phonemic* refer to sound only. To discriminate between sounds and produce them, you don't need to see anything and so phonological and phonemic activities can be done in the dark. In a purely phonological activity, no text is involved.

Phonological and phonemic activities, however, are not synonymous. Rather, phonological is the more encompassing term. Think of it as a big bookshelf labeled "general awareness of the sound structures of speech." This long shelf is divided into sections that include, moving from the largest units of speech to the smallest, whole words (*sunset*), syllables (*sun* and *set*), onsets and rimes (*s-un* and *s-et*), and phonemes (*s-u-n-s-e-t*). If children are phonologically aware, they can hear and count the number of words in a sentence, as well as the number of syllables in a word. They can also understand and produce rhymes and alliterations, such as Henny Penny and Peter Piper, and segment words into their onsets and rimes.

Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness; it occupies a small but very important space on the big bookshelf of phonology. If children are advanced in their phonological awareness, they are phonemically aware. This means they not only understand that words are an amalgamation of discrete sounds, but they can hear the individual sounds within words, segment them from a whole word, blend them together to create a spoken word, and even create a new word by manipulating, subtracting, or adding sounds, as the little girl did when she said "shflipflops." The term *phonemic* refers to phonemes, the smallest sound units of words. Some languages are made up of over 100 discrete phonemes. Others, like Hawaiian, have fewer than 15. The English language has 44.

While phonological and phonemic refer to sound, *phonics* refers to print. Upon seeing an unfamiliar printed word, a beginning reader applies letter-sound associations to decode the word. From the

stimulus of printed letters, sound arises. Knowing the meaning of the word is not strictly necessary.

You could say phonics grows out of phonemic awareness because the skill of phonic decoding begins when a child learns letter–sound relationships, such as the /m/ sound is represented by the letter *m*. Young children apply rudimentary knowledge of phonics when they see the word *pit*, saying the sound associated with each letter, /p/-/i/-/t/, and then blending the sounds together to make a single, coarticulated word—*pit!* Later, chunks or phonic patterns (phonograms) are recognized and decoded (*pit-y* and *pul-pit*), and all types of meaning knowledge, from topical to background to vocabulary, are activated. In time, long sequences of letters are instantly recognized and known (*pitfall*, *piteous*, *pittance*), resulting in hundreds of whole words being read out loud on sight. At this point, the spelling–meaning–sound triangle is completely engaged, resulting in fluent reading.

As a wrap-up, let’s connect all of this to the Simple View of Reading, as well as reading difficulties, which we now understand as problems caused by specific skill deficits. In terms of the Simple View, phonic reading develops from a synthesis of phonemic awareness, letter identification, letter–sound associations, pattern and word recognition, and decoding. As for reading difficulties defined as skill deficits, if through observation and assessment we know a student cannot hear that the words *lake* and *rake* rhyme, cannot strip the syllable *car-* off the spoken word *carnation* to come up with *nation*, and cannot accurately segment the word *flap* into /f/, /l/, /a/, and /p/, then we know this student lacks phonological and phonemic awareness skills. If, on the other hand, we know a student can do these sound tasks but cannot accurately read simple words—saying *bake* for *lake* and *rack* for *rake*—or accurately sound out word patterns—such as *car-*, *-na*, and *-tion*—then we know this student lacks phonic skills.

Advanced Phonological Awareness Is Important

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The educational community has known for decades how important phonemic awareness is. Although many researchers had pointed it out prior to 2000 (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Ehri, 1998;

Stanovich & Siegel, 1994), it really moved front and center when the National Reading Panel report named it as one of the Five Big Ideas of Reading, along with phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The Panel (part of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NIH]) said that teaching phonemic awareness not only helped preschoolers, kindergartners, and first graders learn to read, but it also helped older readers with reading problems (NIH, 2000).

Since that time, the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) and reading researchers like Sally Shaywitz (2003), Maryanne Wolf (2008), David Share (2011), Louisa Moats (Moats et al., 2012), and Mark Seidenberg (2017) have all highlighted the importance of both phonological and phonemic awareness to beginning reading. As Moats says, “Phonemic awareness instruction, when linked to systematic decoding and spelling instruction, is a key to preventing reading failure in children who come to school without these prerequisite skills” (2020, p. 20). And here’s Seidenberg talking about it in his book, *Language at the Speed of Sight*: “For reading scientists the evidence that the phonological pathway is used in reading and especially important in beginning reading is about as close to conclusive as research on complex human behavior can get” (2017, p. 124).

David Kilpatrick (2015) highlighted the importance of phonological and phonemic awareness within intervention programs, saying that the ones that are especially effective “aggressively address and correct students’ phonological awareness difficulties and teach phonological awareness to an advanced level” and mentioned a study that showed how “training in phonological awareness and letter-sound skills reduced the number of struggling readers by 75%” [Shapiro & Solity, 2008].

IMPORTANT POINT

Even when using direct, explicit, multisensory teaching, moving students with reading difficulties to advanced levels of phonemic awareness may take many repetitions of skill practice over many months (Kilpatrick, 2015).

But why wait until students are struggling to teach phonological awareness to an advanced level? To prevent reading difficulties,

let's teach sound skills in Tier 1. In the following sections, we discuss classroom activities that move children of many ages toward advanced phonological and phonemic awareness. We will start with large chunks of sound (single-syllable words, the rime of those words, and multiple syllables in longer words) and then progress to phonemes. As you consider each, I encourage you to make connections to the general teaching techniques we discussed in Chapter 3. We can help students become phonologically and phonemically aware if we teach directly and explicitly, model everything we want students to do, give lots of repetition, distribute that repetition across days and weeks, and keep students engaged (and promote more robust brain wiring) with multisensory instruction and materials.

IMPORTANT POINT

Second- and third-grade students who exhibit reading difficulties may lack advanced phonemic awareness. If you have assessment data that shows certain students are unable to analyze and manipulate phonemes (hear, segment, blend, subtract, add), it pays to work phonemic awareness activities into their guided-reading group, as well as quickly tie this sound-based practice to encoding and decoding practice (spelling and phonics).

