

# Theme Editor's Introduction

## PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND LEARNING TO READ

by Linda S. Siegel

Phonological awareness is the ability to be consciously aware of individual syllables and sounds within words and to isolate and manipulate them. For example, if we ask a child “Can you say *pink* without the *p* sound?” and he or she says “ink,” it shows that he or she can hear the initial sound in the word *pink* and recognize what happens when one of the sounds is taken away. Although this task seems very simple, it is remarkably difficult for some children, compared to other children of the same age, because they cannot identify distinct sounds within words—a critical skill for reading. More difficult tasks involve *segmentation*, that is, saying each sound within a word that they hear or *blending*, that is, hearing the individual sounds within a word and blending them together to make the word. These abilities are critical because in an alphabetic writing system one must associate sounds with letters or groups of letters.

Because phonological awareness is one of the most important foundational skills in learning to read, we have dedicated this issue to exploring the relation between phonological awareness and the acquisition and development of reading skills in a variety of contexts and languages.

The issue begins with Joanna Uhry's article, “The Role of Phonemic Awareness in Learning to Read and Spell Successfully.” Johanna Uhry presents evidence to show that children who struggle with reading have difficulty with phonemic awareness. *Phonemic awareness* is the part of phonological awareness that involves the ability to hear individual sounds within words. She also makes an important distinction between *phonemic awareness* and *phonics*—terms that are often confused. *Phonemic awareness* is an oral skill but *phonics* refers specifically to knowing the sounds of printed letters. Phonemic awareness is one of the most important skills that must be in place before learning phonics. Of course, phonemic awareness also develops as children learn more and more about print.

In addition to describing the role of phonemic awareness in learning to read and spell and how to assess it, Joanna Uhry also explains why phonemic awareness can be so difficult for some children who, for example, experience difficulties in speech perception and production. Her article includes a number of suggestions for techniques to help develop phonemic awareness skills in young children.

Susie Russak, in her article “The Contribution of Phonological Awareness to Literacy Acquisition in English as a Foreign Language: Cross-Linguistic Implications,” discusses the role of phonological awareness for children learning English as a second or foreign language, now called English Language Learners (ELLs). Skill in phonological awareness is a good predictor of reading skills in all languages that have been studied, including non-alphabetic systems. Although there is some transfer of phonological awareness skills between languages

for students learning a foreign language, sometimes this transfer does not occur if the foreign language has sounds that are not in the first language. For example, *th* occurs in English but in few other languages. Therefore, when we teach a foreign language, stressing those sounds is an important part of teaching phonological awareness skills.

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Susie Russak also provides some suggestions for activities for increasing phonological awareness. These activities help children become aware of the phonemes and syllables within words, recognize rhyme, learn the sounds of the letters, and develop skills to aid in their comprehension of text.

In “Reading Acquisition and Dyslexia in Languages Varying in Orthographic Depth: From Behavior to Brain,” Liliane Sprenger-Charolles and I discuss some of the mechanisms involved in the development of phonological awareness skills. One of the crucial mechanisms is the ability to understand the sounds in speech, which for some children can be a challenging task. The other mechanism is the ability to make generalizations from the perceived correspondences between letters or groups of letters (graphemes) and their sounds (phonemes). The regularity and predictability of these correspondences influences the rate at which children make these connections. The irregularity and unpredictability of the English language makes learning the grapheme-phoneme correspondences much more challenging. Consider words such as *have* and *said* that defy the rules. The sound *ow* in *low* and *cow* even has a third pronunciation, such as in the word *knowledge*. Another example is the pronunciation of the letter *y* in *cry*, *baby*, or *myth*.

Teaching phonological awareness skills is critical to reading development, but to truly understand these nuances in the language, the association between letters and sounds must be taught systematically.

The two remaining articles in this issue were included to add a cross-linguistic perspective to this discussion of phonological awareness. Chinese, English, and Spanish and their dialects are the most commonly spoken languages in the world, so all three are represented in this issue.

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“Learning to Read Chinese: The Importance of Reading Skills in a Non-Alphabetic Language” by Richard Wong explores the issues involved in learning a language with visually complex characters. It would seem, at first, that the topic of phonological awareness and reading might be irrelevant to a non-alphabetic language. Richard Wong explains the characteristics of the Chinese language and how it has an important phonetic component, even though it does not have an alphabet. Many Chinese words have a phonetic component in them, which provides a clue to their pronunciation.

Learning this phonetic component in Chinese does present some difficulty for individuals with dyslexia. In addition, each syllable in the Chinese language can be said in multiple pitches (called tones) with each having a different meaning. Recognizing these tones is a type of phonological awareness and some children with reading difficulties have trouble accurately perceiving them. In fact, dyslexia is characterized by difficulties such as these with phonological awareness. It occurs in all languages that have been studied so far, even the non-alphabetic ones, such as Chinese.

The other article with a cross-linguistic perspective is “Can Video Games Improve Phonological Awareness and Reading Skills? One Experience with Spanish-Speaking Children with Dyslexia” by Juan Jiménez. Phonemic awareness, in particular, is a problem for Spanish speaking children who are dyslexic. Juan describes a study showing that computer games can be an effective way to teach phonemic awareness to Spanish-speaking

children. A computer can provide vivid visual images and instant feedback, making it an ideal vehicle for training.

No matter what their focus or area of expertise, all of the authors in this issue articulate the important role of phonological awareness, both at the syllable and phoneme level, in developing reading skills. Phonological awareness skills develop in the early stages of language development, but sometimes reading instruction begins before these skills are fully developed. By raising awareness of the critical role of phonological awareness skills in learning to read and comprehend print, we hope to improve reading instruction and make the process easier and smoother for all. We offer these articles to provide insights into the nature of these skills in hopes that practitioners, teachers, and parents will find them useful as they work with students and children learning to read.

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