
Supporting Phonological Awareness in Pre-Primary and Primary Classrooms

Five-year-old Sanjana is sitting at the table composing a note about her sister. She is just learning to read and write, but enjoys writing notes to her mother.

“Anjali isnistome thetisy she is my besfren,” she writes. Her mother squints at the note, smiles, and then reads with comprehension, “Anjali is nice to me. That is why she is my best friend.”

“What a nice note,” she tells Sanjana. “Would you like to draw a picture of Anjali here?”

Sanjana has not yet learned to spell words like more mature writers do. It is also interesting to see that Sanjana is squishing many words together. “isnistome”, “thetisy”, and “besfren”. Why does she do that?

We write in words, but we speak in phrases, in uninterrupted “speech streams”, in which words get squished together as we speak. Let’s say the sentences, “Anjali is nice to me. That is why she is my best friend,” out loud. Where do we pause, and where do we let the words run into one another?

Here’s another one.

Try saying “मुझे घर नहीं जाना है” as you would in conversation.

How might a child hear it?

Chances are that a child hears “मुझे घरनइजानाए”

When young children learn the language spoken around them, they may not be aware that speech is made up of smaller units of sound. Phonological Awareness (PA) is the awareness that spoken language can be broken down into smaller units, and that these smaller units can be manipulated and combined to make words and sentences (Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

Reading and writing rely on the ability to make connections between sounds and symbols. Even before children learn to read symbols representing different sounds, it is important that they become aware of how sounds work in spoken language: sentences consist of words, and words consist of smaller sub-units of sounds. Hence, PA is foundational in learning to read.

We would like to reiterate here that PA refers to the ability to *hear* the sounds of spoken language; it is not necessary to be able to read and write before developing PA. Even preschool-aged children can develop a certain level of PA.

Research on alphabetic scripts like that used by English has shown that children develop PA along a continuum, from larger to smaller units of sound as shown in Figure 1 (Ellery, 2014).

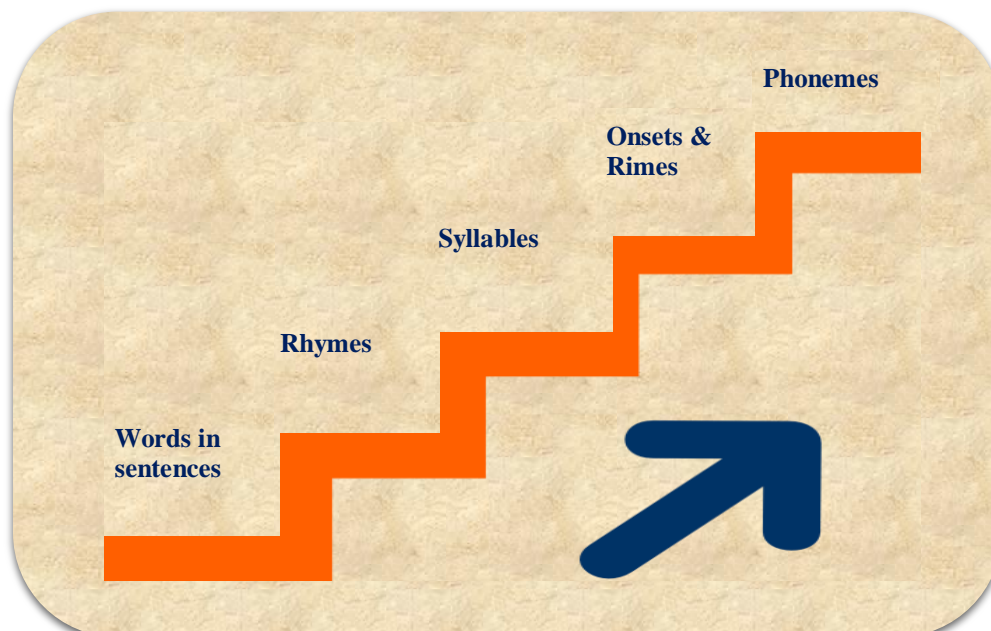


Figure 1. How phonological awareness develops in children.

The first task that young children face is to distinguish individual words in spoken sentences. We speak in phrases with words all squished together, as shown in the example at the beginning of this handout. “It is raining, thatiswhy we need an umbrella”, or “She was sittingona chair”. Young children first need to learn that the speech stream is composed of distinct units called **words**. Soon after, they begin to discern that some words sound like other words. For example, “hat” and “cat” sound alike – they **rhyme**. Many early childhood programmes tap into this developing phonological sensitivity by using rhymes in the classroom.

However, phonological development is far from complete at this point. With help, children realise that words can further be sub-divided into smaller sounds. For example, “caterpillar” can be broken down into, “cat-er-pill-ar”. These sub-units are **syllables**, and while young children may not know this term, it is important that they are able to break words down into these parts to learn to read and write. They begin to be aware that “Ruchika” (Ru-chi-ka) has more parts than “Deepak” (Dee-pak), which has more parts than “Sai” (Sai).

Then, with help, the child discovers that those parts can be broken down into even smaller parts. It is not possible to write down “Ru”, in English without further breaking it down into the individual sounds, the **phonemes** /r/ and /u/. Even with many Indian scripts, being able to distinguish between these sounds will help with learning to read and write.



Figure 2. Word building using onsets and rimes.

In learning to read and write the English script, one intermediate level of PA is useful – being able to distinguish between “**onsets**” and “**rimes**”. What are onsets and rimes? Within a syllable, the vocalic sound (*swara*) and all that follows it is the “rime”, while what comes before the vocalic sound is the “onset”. Let’s take a few examples to understand this better. In the one syllable word “cat”, /a/ is the vocalic sound. Therefore, “at” is the rime (vocalic sound and what follows it within the syllable), while /k/ is the onset (what comes before the vocalic sound). In the name “Deepak”, there are two syllables, “Dee” and “pak”. In Dee, “ee” is the rime, while /d/ is the onset; while in pak, “ak” is the rime, while /p/ is the onset.

Why is it helpful for children to learn rimes? Knowing the rime “at” for example, permits children to read other words with the same rime in it: “hat”, “mat”, “attack”, “caterpillar”, and so on. This level of awareness may not be necessary for learning to read Indian scripts, since our scripts do not represent sounds in this manner. In many Indian scripts, “cat” would be broken down into “ka” + /t/, rather than as /k/ + at.

Therefore, the nature of the scripts that children learn to read and write might influence the later stages of PA that they need to develop. At the same time, it is clear from decades of research conducted on a wide variety of languages that many levels of PA described here are necessary for all children to learn to read and write fluently.

This handout will present ways of building phonological awareness across this developmental continuum¹. Activities presented here are appropriate for children in the age range of 3 to 8 years, although certain activities might be more or less useful for children of a certain age.

Activities to Build Phonological Awareness in the Classroom

The activities we present in this section should allow enough time for teacher modelling and guidance, before you can expect children to do it on their own. Please repeat the activity enough number of times so that children can become familiar with what you expect them to do, and go on to do it on their own.

¹ Onsets and Rimes will not be covered in this handout, as they are most relevant to English, and not Indian scripts.

Building Awareness of Words (Ages 3-4 years)

- **Word Claps.** Say a sentence slowly and have the children clap for each word. To catch their attention, slip in the children's names or use interesting sentences (e.g. चंदू के चाचा ने चांदी की चम्मच से चटनी चटाई/ Mira has a lovely smile / ರಾಮ ನಮ್ಮ ಮನೆಗೆ ಬಂದ). Later, ask children to come up with sentences of their own, and the class can clap for each word of the sentence they say. You can also get the children to hop for each word they hear.
- **Add a Word / Switch a Word.** Each child says a word; and the next child adds one word to make a sentence. For example, a child says 'I', the next child adds another word, 'went', followed by 'to' from another child, and so on to make a sentence such as "I went to the park yesterday".
In Kannada, for example, a child gives the word, 'ನಾನು' and the next one says, 'ನಾಳೆ' the third child gives the word, 'ಸಂತೆಗೆ' and the fourth child completes the sentence by adding, 'ಹೋಗುತ್ತೆನೆ', making the sentence, "ನಾನು ನಾಳೆ ಸಂತೆಗೆ ಹೋಗುತ್ತೆನೆ".
Alternatively, you could start the group off with a sentence ("मेरी हरी छतरी हाट में खो गयी"/ I found a lovely flower in the garden / ನಾನು ಸಂತೆಗೆ ಹೋಗುತ್ತೆನೆ). Children take turns switching one word in the sentence each time (e.g. "मेरी हरी छतरी स्कूल में खो गयी"/ I found a lovely rabbit in the garden / ನಾನು ಶಾಲೆಗೆ ಹೋಗುತ್ತೆನೆ).
- **Word Envelope.** Have strips with simple sentences written on them. Hand each child an envelope and a few tokens (bottle caps, small pebbles, or coins). As you read a sentence slowly, ensuring you leave a gap between each word, ask the children to drop a token into the envelope for each word you say. For example, ask them, "How many words do you hear in the sentence, 'I am eating'?" You could demonstrate how you pick and drop one token for each word you speak.
- **Jumping Jingles.** Divide children into groups. Draw circles on the ground (at least as many as children in the group). Each child stands on one circle. Ask the children to jump from one circle to the next for every word they hear in a popular jingle, rhyme or poem you sing or play to them.

Building Awareness of Rhymes (Age 3-5 years)

These activities help develop an awareness of sounds and a sense that some words end in ways that sound similar.

- **Rhyme Claps.** Before playing a rhyme or poem (or singing it), call out a word. For example, ‘नानी’ for the poem ‘मछली जल की रानी है’. Ask the children to jump; touch their feet; or clap their hands when they hear a word in the poem that rhymes with “नानी” (रानी, पानी etc.).

For English, you Old MacDonald Had a Farm, you could choose words like cold, rolled, fold that rhyme with the word old; or bucks, trucks, chucks that rhyme with ducks. For the rhyme ತೋಟಕೆ ಹೋಗೋ ತಿಮ್ಮ, you could choose, ತಮ್ಮ, ದಮ್ಮ for ಅಮ್ಮ; or ಗುರಿ, ತುರಿ for ಉರಿ.

- **Rhyme Police.** Teacher reads out a list of 3 or 4 words. Children have to identify which one does not rhyme with the others (e.g. आता, जाता, रोया, खाता / eat, meet, get, greet / ಹಾಲು, ಭಾಲ, ಹೋಗು, ಚಾಲ).
- **Pair Match.** Select as many pairs of rhyming words as the children in the class. Pick from a recent poem or text if the group is new to rhyming words. Make picture cards for these words and give one to each child. Ask them to run around the class and find their rhyme partner. Then ask children how they found their partner, how the words are similar and to come up with more words that rhyme the pair of rhyming words. For older children (6-8 years), use words printed on large card-sheets, instead of pictures.
- **Picture Sort.** Have picture cards of objects that represent rhyming words, for example, *cat* and *bat*; *cap* and *tap*; *pin* and *bin*; and *mop* and *top*. Have children work in pairs, where they sort these picture cards, pairing rhyming words. Alternatively, put these cards in a bag, and as you move around the class, have each child pick a card. Ask them to find their partner, the person who has a card with the picture that represents the word rhyming with the word the picture on the card they have. You could use this activity for words in Indian languages as well. Examples for rhyming words in Kannada could be ಅಜ್ಜಿ, ಬಜ್ಜಿ; ಹೆಜ್ಜೆ, ಗೆಜ್ಜೆ; ಹಣ್ಣು, and ಕಣ್ಣು.

- **Word Bird.** Children stand in a circle and you toss a cushion to a child calling out a word (“boat”). The child tosses it back saying a word that rhymes with it (“goat”). It is okay if children come up with nonsense words, but encourage them to identify them as such.
- **Rhyming Around the Room.** Pick up an object in the room, and ask children to give you a word that rhymes with the word it represents. Move around the room, picking objects and generating rhyming words. Children can play this in groups, with one group choosing an object for the other to generate a rhyming word.
- **Rhyming Jar.** On strips of paper, write two (or more) sentences that end with rhyming words but leave the space for the second rhyme word blank. Read out the first sentence and highlight the word that students have to come up with a rhyming word for. Then read the second sentence and let them suggest a rhyming word. Here are a few examples:

I have a pet cat. He is under the ____ (mat).

I climbed a tree. I got stung by a ____ (bee)

में गयी रावलपिंडी, वहां से लायी हरे-हरे _____ (भिंडी)

साइकिल लेकर निकली पम्मी, बीच में मिल गयी उसको _____ (मम्मी)

To help children understand the activity, you could use a couple of sentences from popular poems, balgeet or rhymes and draw their attention to rhyming words that they already know of. Ask them how these sounds are similar.

पैसा पास होता तो चार चने लाते

चार में से एक चना चूहे को ____ (खिलाते)

चूहे को खिलाते तो दांत टूट जाता

दांत टूट जाता तो बड़ा मजा ____ (आता)

Building Awareness of Syllables and Phonemes (Ages 5-8 years)

In many Indian languages, an *akshara* often represents a syllable, because it has a consonant (*vyanjan*) and a vocalic sound (*swara*) attached to it. For example, in the word ‘Kamal’, written as ಕಮಲ್ (Kannada) or कमल (Hindi), the *akshara* ಕ/क represents a syllable. This is because it can be broken down into smaller units ಕ್ + ಅ / क् + अ. Similarly, ಮ / म is also a syllable. But ಳ / ल is a phoneme because there is no *swara* attached to it. This is why, Indian scripts are called **alphasyllabic**, because the *akshara* sometimes represents syllables, while sometimes they represent phonemes. In contrast, in languages like English, which use **alphabetic scripts**, each letter represents a phoneme, that is why, we need two letters to represent the sound ‘ka’ which in Kannada and Hindi require only a single letter.

Developing an awareness of syllables can help children later learn to read and write Indian scripts. In this section, we present activities to help build awareness of syllables. The same activities can be adapted to teach children to recognise phonemes which are very important for learning to read and write in English.

Supporting Awareness of Syllables. Teach children to count syllables by putting their hands under their chins. Every time their chin drops, it is one syllable. For example, Ru-chi-ka – the child’s chin will move three times. Once the children understand the idea of a syllable, try some of these activities. They help develop an awareness of syllables or “beats” in a word.

- **What’s In a Name?** Say a student’s name and ask how many “beats” it has. The children clap for every beat. Priyanka has three beats (syllables): Pri-yan-ka – so they clap thrice. Once children understand this, it could become a fun way to organise them: they can make a line to go for lunch, games or milk by the number of syllables in their name – clap once and children with single syllable names line up; clap twice, children with two syllables in their names line-up.
- **Puppet Play.** Say your puppet speaks one part of a word at a time, and needs help stringing syllables together. For example, you say, “The puppet calls out one of your friend’s — /An/ /an/ /tha/ — could you call out his name?”
“Anantha, yes!”.

“The puppet wants to call out an animal — /Rab/ /bit/. Which one is this?”

“Rabbit, yes!”

This activity can also be adapted for teaching phonemes. For example, Rabbit would be broken down into: /r/ /a/ /b/ /i/ /t/

Identifying and Isolating Sounds

It is important for children to pay attention to and identify the separate *akshara* sounds in words. In these activities, direct the child’s attention first on the beginning sound of a word, then the ending sound word, and finally, the middle sound.

- **Sound Connect.** Keep a few pictures or objects ready. Show a picture and ask, “What do you see?” – say it is a ‘**पेन**’. Then ask the children, what the beginning sound of the word is – ‘**प**’. Model the sounds for children first. Ask them to look around their classroom to call out names of other objects that start with ‘**प**’ – **पेपर, पानी,** and **पुस्तक**. Repeat this activity for different sounds over time.

Examples for Kannada: A picture card with a kite (ಗಾಳಿಪಟ). The first sound is ಗೆ. The children have to name objects that start with ಗೆ – ಗಡಿಯಾರ, ಗಂಟೆ etc.

- **Antakshari.** Make students pay attention to the beginning and final sounds of words through Antakshari. When one person says a word, the next person needs to say a word beginning with the sound that the previous word ends with. For example, **कमल** → **लड़का** → **आम** → **मटका** etc. Examples for Kannada: **ಮರಾ, ರಾಮ, ಮಲ್ಲಿಗೆ, ಗೆಳೆಯ** etc.
- **Picture Sort:** Give children picture cards with everyday objects and ask them to sort words with the same beginning sounds (or ending or middle sound). To help them, give some hint cards that signify a different sound under which children will have to sort the cards in their set. Later on, give children a select set of cards and ask them to search for ways in which the cards sound alike or different.
- **Alliteration Activation.** Place a few objects in a bag. Students take turns choosing an object. They name it and supply an associated word that begins with the same sound

as the term for the object does. For example, ‘पतली पेंसिल’/ silly scale; angry apple; big ball. For older children, you can record responses on a chart.

Blending Sounds

Blending involves the ability to listen to a sequence of separate speech sounds and combine the sounds to form a whole, meaningful word.

- **Body Blending.** Draw circles close enough for children to stand in and hold hands. Draw as many circles as there are sounds in the chosen word. Ask those many children to come forward, and tell them they each have to be a sound in the word and stand in the correct circle. Have the first child say the first sound as she holds hands with the next student, and the next student says the second sound and so on. Once all the children are done, all the children step forward into a bigger circle and say the word together. For example, the word “cat” can have three circles drawn for each sound: /k/ /a/ /t/, and each child could say the respective sound and “blend” them together until it sounds like a single word.
- **Puppet Play.** Explain that your puppet speaks one part of a word at a time, and needs help with blending the sounds together. The puppet could say /h/-/o/-/m/ and the children could say “home”.
- **Read My Mind.** Children have to solve clues that you supply, to find the correct word. For example. “I know a word. It ends with ‘नी’ and starts with ‘पा’/ It ends with a /ळ/ and starts with a /त्र/. What word is it?” You could prompt by putting the sounds in correct order and asking students to blend the sounds together. You can also keep changing one sound at a time in the word blend.
- **Sound Gifting.** Put a pebble or coin in a metal or plastic box. If possible, gift wrap it. Take this ‘gift’ to a student and say, “I will give you clues to help you guess what is inside the box.” Pronounce the name of an object sound by sound as you shake the box. Ask the child to blend the sounds and guess the gift. If the guess is correct, the child now takes the ‘gift’ to another child and repeats the game. For example, the teacher says, /p/-/e/-/n/-/s/-/i/-/l/. What is it? The child says “pencil”. The child then takes the “gift” to another child, chooses another word to represent the “gift” and says, for example, “/t/-/o/-/f/-/ee/” and the next child says “toffee”, and so on.

Segmenting Sounds

Segmenting involves hearing a word and then breaking it into its constituent parts. This contributes to children's ability to decode and spell correctly.

- Sound Envelopes.** Select some words, starting with ones that children are familiar with. Hand each child tokens (bottle cap, pebble or coin) and an empty newspaper envelope. Say a word aloud, starting with small easy ones. Ask them to put inside the envelope as many tokens as the number of sounds they hear in the word. Give them a few examples, so they know how finely to break the sounds (either as syllables or phonemes). Finally ask them, "How many sounds do you hear in the word ___?" You can ask some children to demonstrate how they got the number they did (they point to a different token with each sound). For example, the word ಗಮನಿಸು, has four sounds: ಗ-ಮ-ನಿ-ಸು, so the students put in four tokens into the envelope; the word मकान has three sounds, म-क-न, so the students put in three tokens. Then ask children to put all the tokens together and say the whole word (blending). *The activity could be modified to teach children to segment words phoneme by phoneme.*
- Sound Off.** Twenty picture cards are given to pairs of children; both expose one card at a time, and the person with the most number of sounds on their card takes the pair. You may have to help children identify the number of sounds initially, but they will learn quickly. The person with the most number of cards at the end wins. *The game could be used to teach counting syllables or phonemes.*
- Picture Sort.** Pairs of children sort a set of picture cards into groups with different number of sounds. For example, "sun" has three phonemes, /s/, /u/, /n/, while "table" has four, /t/, /a/, /b/, /l/. Alternatively, put the cards in a bag, have each child select one as you move around the class. At the end, the children form groups with others whose cards have same number of *aksharas*.

Manipulating Sounds

Manipulation involves children adding, deleting and substituting sounds to make new words. It requires children to be sensitive and strategic in their analysis.

- Say It Again.** Choose words from a text you have just read together. Say a word and ask the students to add, delete or substitute syllables or phonemes to create new words (it is fine if the result is a nonsense word). Some examples:

Substituting: Take the word चाय. Ask them to change the /चा/ to /गा/ and say the word. Or ask them to substitute the /य/ with /ट/. In Kannada, you could take the word ‘ಮಳೆ’ and ask them to replace /ಳೆ/ with /ನೆ/. Similarly, /ಮೆ/ could be replaced with /ಬ/. In English, the middle sound in “cat” could be substituted to make “cet”, “cot”, “cut” and so on.

Adding: Ask children to add the *akshara* /र/ at the end of ‘कम’ and say the word. Ask them to add /ದ/ at the end of ‘ಮರೆ’ and say the word.

Deleting: Say the word ‘कमल’, and ask children to say the word formed removing the /ल/ or the /म/. Ask them to remove the sound /ಹ/ from ‘ಬರಹ’ and ask them to say the new word.

For older children, record newly created words on a chart so they see how they manipulated the sounds in the words.

Principles of Phonological Awareness Instruction

In using the activities described in the handout and in designing one’s own, teachers should keep the following principles in mind (Yopp and Yopp, 2000):

1. Phonological awareness (PA) instruction should focus on identifying and manipulating bigger units of sound before moving to the smaller units.
2. The majority of the PA activities for very young children should have cues that would use sight, bodily movements and sounds such as clapping, jumping, counting with coins, blocks and so on to identify and differentiate speech sounds.
3. For older children (6-8 years), some activities can incorporate the use of letters (or *aksharas*) as children manipulate speech sounds. This targets both PA and phonics, helping more directly in learning to decode the script and read.
4. PA activities should be fun and quick, done a couple of times a day as part of the classroom routine and need not take longer than 15 to 20 minutes in total.

In this handout, we have only shared sample activities for building different aspects of phonological awareness. Keeping instructional principles in mind, teachers can generate more activities to strengthen different aspects of PA in their students. To be successful, PA activities should be quick, fun, engaging and – most importantly - be surrounded by a variety of other reading and writing activities!

References

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