Behind the design of the new 95 Phonemic Awareness Suite

Phonemic awareness is an essential skill in reading development and a strong predictor of reading success. 95 Percent Group's new product suite, 95 Phonemic Awareness Suite™, provides educators with the full array of evidence-aligned tools they need to help every student in each tier master these critical skills. This paper is designed to summarize key findings in phoneme awareness instruction that informed the design of the new product suite.

General Terms

Phonological awareness refers to an awareness of sounds in spoken words (e.g., syllables, rhyming patterns, or phonemes). Phoneme awareness is a subset of phonological awareness and refers to the ability to identify and sequence the individual sounds in spoken words. For example, "cat" has three phonemes (/k/ /a/ /t/) and "shoe" has two (/sh/ /oo/). Phonological processing refers to the automatic mental processing of speech codes that occurs during speaking, listening, reading, and spelling (1).

QUESTION

Is it important to teach phoneme awareness separately from phonics?

ANSWER

Based on more than 50 peer-reviewed papers, the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) recommends that all children in K-1 should receive instruction in phonemic awareness in addition to phonics. The research indicates that these two aspects of instruction are distinct, and both are crucial for learning to read. Phonemic awareness instruction helps readers perceive the sound sequences in words accurately, which is necessary for learning the letter–sound patterns in phonics and for remembering decoded words. Comparisons of research indicate larger reading gains for students when lessons include phonemic awareness as well as phonics. (1; page 3)

Is it necessary to teach larger units like syllable segmentation and rhyming as prerequisites to phoneme awareness instruction?

ANSWER

Children typically follow a developmental sequence in which they notice and manipulate larger units before developing awareness and manipulation of phonemes. However, there doesn't appear to be clear evidence that these larger units must be taught or mastered before phoneme-level skills in order to learn to read and spell. There is evidence, however, that phoneme-level awareness and manipulation are strongly connected to reading and spelling development.

With that being said, for students who struggle at the phoneme level, there is likely benefit to working at a larger-unit level; for example, isolating the first sound (onset) from the rime is essentially a phoneme isolation exercise but is only asking a student to isolate the beginning phoneme in the word, which is easier to discern than parsing out each individual phoneme. Some older readers who struggle may benefit from blending and segmenting large units like syllables in order to understand the concepts of blending and segmenting. Also, there is value to pre-K and early Ks to engage in word play in which they clap syllables, sing songs with rhyming patterns, play with poetry, etc. There simply is no evidence that mastery of those larger units is required to be able to work with phonemes. As soon as possible, it is recommended that teachers focus on individual phonemes.

QUESTION

What does the evidence say about phoneme-level instruction and what is essential to reading and spelling?

ANSWER

The evidence is clear that teaching phoneme blending and segmentation is the key. When you decode a word, you have to blend the sounds together. When you encode a word, you have to segment the sounds.

QUESTION

Should phoneme awareness instruction use tokens? What about letters?

ANSWER

Both phoneme awareness and letter knowledge need to be taught, starting in kindergarten. Teaching phoneme awareness usually begins without letters in order to focus children on the phoneme sequences in spoken words. Using blank tokens may help children remember the sounds that they are working with, so many teachers find it helpful to use tokens with early readers and readers who struggle. Typically, linking letter knowledge and phonemes to read and spell words can begin soon thereafter, depending on the students' proficiency with phonemes; however, phonemic awareness skills should continue to be taught in K-1 (and for older students as indicated) as a distinct strand of the lesson that parallels phonics instruction.

Is it necessary to teach advanced phonemic awareness skills like oral deletion and substitution?

ANSWER

There appears to be a correlation between advanced skills and reading; people who can orally delete and substitute phonemes are typically better readers. The evidence is not clear that teaching phoneme deletion and substitution is causal to reading and spelling. There is some evidence found that students who perform deletion tasks well can do this because they are already reading. (For example, when you ask a student to change LIPS to SLIP, they are likely visualizing the spellings.)

QUESTION

Is it EVER helpful to provide phoneme substitution and deletion instruction/practice?

ANSWER

Practicing deletion and substitution with letters can be helpful to reading and spelling. For example, when a student engages in creating word chains, changing LIP to SLIP to SLAP to FLAP, they are thinking about the phoneme–grapheme correspondence and the sequence of sounds and letters. This is helpful in developing and securing decoding and encoding.

Also, several notable experts in the field have found that phoneme deletion and substitution tasks are likely to help readers who struggle in grade 2 and beyond. (1; page 13)

lip
slip
slap
flap

QUESTION

What do we know about scripted phonemic awareness programs?

ANSWER

A core, scripted program for PA development should:

- Focus on K–1
- Take up 5-10 minutes a day
- Be carefully sequenced (not jump around with a variety of tasks)
- Focus on blending and segmenting
- Include connections to letters while still maintaining auditory tasks first
- Be organized to teach concepts for accuracy and provide practice for automaticity
- Include pronunciation support so teachers and students are "clipping" sounds distinctly
- Have an assessment component to identify students who may need intervention

REFERENCES

(1) Ashby, J., McBride, M., Naftel, S., O'Brien, E., Paulson, L. H., Kilpatrick, D. A, & Moats, L. C. (2023). Teaching Phoneme Awareness in 2023: A Guide for Educators. https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tPwupou7EqctDO50XtfvMGxfJAx7xPk9?usp=share_link

About 95 Percent Group

95 Percent Group is an education company whose mission is to build on science to empower teachers—supplying the knowledge, resources, and support they need—to develop strong readers. Using an approach that is based in structured literacy, the company's One95™ Literacy Ecosystem™ integrates professional learning and evidence-based literacy products into one cohesive system that supports consistent instructional routines across tiers and is proven and trusted to help students close skill gaps and read fluently. 95 Percent Group is also committed to advancing research, best practices, and thought leadership on the science of reading more broadly.

For additional information on 95 Percent Group, visit: www.95percentgroup.com.

95 Percent Group™