

Phonological awareness: The importance of rhymes and alphabet books

A professional learning course for early childhood teachers

'A preschooler's knowledge of nursery rhymes is one of the best predictors of their future reading ability' (Danielson, 2000 cited by Redig, 2018).

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About the author

Catherine Duffett has over twenty years' experience as a teacher in Australia. She has worked in Hobart, Darwin and Alice Springs in both public and private schools from different cultural backgrounds. She has over ten years' experience as a teacher librarian in both primary and high schools and currently works as a primary school teacher librarian. In 2013 she was awarded Tasmanian Teacher Librarian of the Year. Catherine has also taught Science and Maths to high school students. She is a qualified reading educator.

Catherine is passionate about using high impact evidence-based strategies to improve the educational opportunities for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and sharing her knowledge with others.

Catherine works part time on a pro-bono basis as an educational consultant with NGOs in developing countries to improve the educational outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Her business name, *Mshauri Education* was given to her by her Tanzanian colleagues and *mshauri* is a Swahili word meaning *advisor* or *consultant*.

How to use this course

While this course can be used by educators undertaking solo professional learning, it is recommended that, where possible, educators work collaboratively through it, to enable deep discussion and reflection regarding the research described. To facilitate this, the course is divided up into a number of units that provide discussion questions for teachers to reflect on.

The Final Word protocol (Faddis, n.d.) is a good approach to this type of professional learning, as it fosters collaboration and deeper thinking about the text. This works as follows:

1. Teachers are organised into groups of four and each teacher in a group is assigned A, B, C or D. (This will also work in groups of 3.)
2. The teachers have an opportunity to read the text or a section of it, select a piece of text or quote that resonates with them, and record their selected quote on a sticky note.
3. Teacher A reads aloud their statement or quote to their group and has 3 minutes to explain to their group the reason behind their choice.
4. Teachers B, C & D then have one minute to respond to their teacher A during which time they might express their own perspective, clarify Teacher A's comment or even question Teacher A's assumptions.
5. Teacher A summarises what has been said and also makes a comment about whether they have changed their own thoughts about the topic.
6. Teacher B discusses their selected quote or section that they found pertinent, including whether the discussion of teacher A's quote has affected their own views on their own sticky note and the whole process is repeated with teachers A, C and D responding to Teacher B's ideas.
7. Finally, Teachers C and D have their turns at sharing the section of the text that resonates with them.
8. The different groups then come together to share their ideas with each other.
9. To further consolidate the learning, time is allocated for teachers to either reflect with a partner, journal their new understandings or plan some action they will take using their newly acquired knowledge.

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This unit includes:

- the importance of young children learning how to read
- a rationale for using alphabet books and books that contain rhymes and alliteration with young children.

In a society based on writing, learning to read is one of the most significant influences on a child's life, as it is through reading that members of such a society mainly acquire knowledge. (Cox et al., 2019) The reading attainment of a child is then a significant determinant of their educational success and influences the degree to which they can participate in such a society and lead a fulfilling life.

Early childhood educators have the important role of developing children's early literacy skills in preparation for them becoming readers. Shared reading, where the teacher reads aloud to children and engages them in a discussion about the text, is both engaging for children and a highly effective strategy for improving children's literacy outcomes.

This course focuses on the evidence-based research that supports the regular reading aloud of alphabet books and those that contain rhymes and alliteration.

The importance of rhymes, alliteration and alphabet books

A preschooler's knowledge of rhymes (including nursery rhymes) is one of the best predictors of their future reading ability (Danielson, 2000 cited by Redig, 2018). Rhymes help develop children's early literacy skills. Aside from being entertaining, rhyming books (including nursery rhymes) are a means through which young children learn about the basic structure of a narrative, promote social skills and develop an understanding of simple sentences and phrases (Sayakhan & Bradley 2019).

In particular, rhymes play an important role in developing children's phonological awareness (the ability to manipulate sounds in words) which is an essential skill for proficient word recognition.

Alphabet books are also an important tool, as these can support the learning of letter names and the sounds that the letters represent.

The research discussed in this course is relevant to any written language

Reflect and Discuss

1. How often do you currently incorporate the use of rhymes and alliteration into your early childhood program?
2. Which rhyming stories (including nursery rhymes) do you incorporate into your program?
3. What is your current understanding of how rhymes, alliteration and learning the alphabet support the development of early literacy skills?

This unit:

- identifies the 4 phases of reading.
- discusses the 2 phases of reading relevant to early childhood education.

Developmental Phases of Reading

Linnea Ehri recognised that all readers move through four phases of reading as they become increasingly proficient readers (Cook Moats, 2020). When planning learning tasks to improve children's early literacy skills (including shared reading), it helps to consider reading development in terms of these phases when designing developmentally appropriate reading tasks.

The Pre-Alphabetic Phase (Ehri's 1st phase)

Children operate in this phase till about age 4. Typical features of this phase are as follows:

Letter Sound Knowledge

In the pre-alphabetic phase, children typically don't have sufficient knowledge of the sounds and the letters they represent to remember words permanently. Instead, they use visual clues or rote learning to help them store words in their memory. (Cook Moats, 2020). For example, Kilpatrick (2016) indicates that with the word *look*, children may remember this word by noting that the double 'o' appears to look like two eyes, which is an ineffective strategy for learning new words as it is encouraging children to memorise words based on visual clues rather than using their letter sound knowledge. Children in this phase have no understanding of the *alphabetic principle* - that letters can be represented by sounds in words. The children may be able to recognise letters but lack the understanding of what they represent (Cook Moats,

2020).

Concepts of Print

Children in the pre-alphabetic phase are developing the understanding that a book is read from left to right and top to bottom and that printed words are separated by spaces, etc. (Cook Moats, 2020). This knowledge is referred to as *concepts of print*.

Partial Alphabetic Phase (Ehri's 2nd phase)

The partial alphabetic phase is apparent when a child begins to use some letter-sound knowledge to store words in their memory. Commonly, they can match the initial sound or two with the first letter of a word, although they may only be able to match a very limited number of other sounds with their letters. Kilpatrick (2016) gives the example of the word *stand*. Children in the partial alphabetic phase may have mapped the first and last letters to their memory, helping them to recall the word at a later time. However, if they see a similar word, such as *sand*, they may confuse that word for *stand* due to only having part of the word mapped.

Reflect and Discuss

Reflecting on the pre- and partial alphabetic phases, what learning experiences do you currently use to support children's early literacy skills?

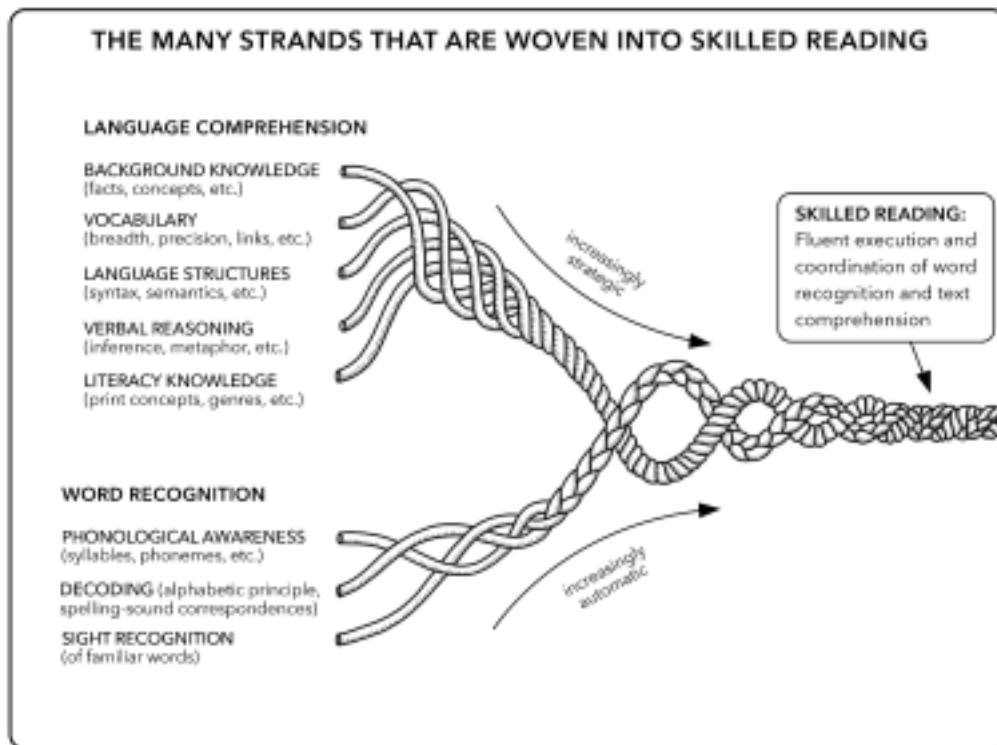


Figure 1: Scarborough’s Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001 cited by Lewis Hennessy, 2021)

This unit includes:

- an outline of Scarborough’s Reading Rope.
- how rhymes can support the teaching of certain literacy skills.

Scarborough’s Reading Rope

Research has demonstrated that both the ability to decode and comprehend language depends upon several components which are illustrated by Scarborough’s Reading Rope. This model is a powerful tool both for informing instructional practice and identifying any problems occurring for struggling readers (Lewis Hennessy, 2021).

The model demonstrates that:

- there are two major components of skilled reading: word recognition and

language comprehension.

- successful word recognition and language comprehension are dependent on a number of specific skills and proficiency in each of these is essential for an individual to be a competent reader (Lewis Hennessy, 2021).

This course focuses primarily on phonological awareness, a skill essential for word recognition.

Reflect and Discuss

1. How much do you currently know about each aspect of Scarborough’s Reading Rope?
2. How could you use this model to help inform your planning of learning tasks?

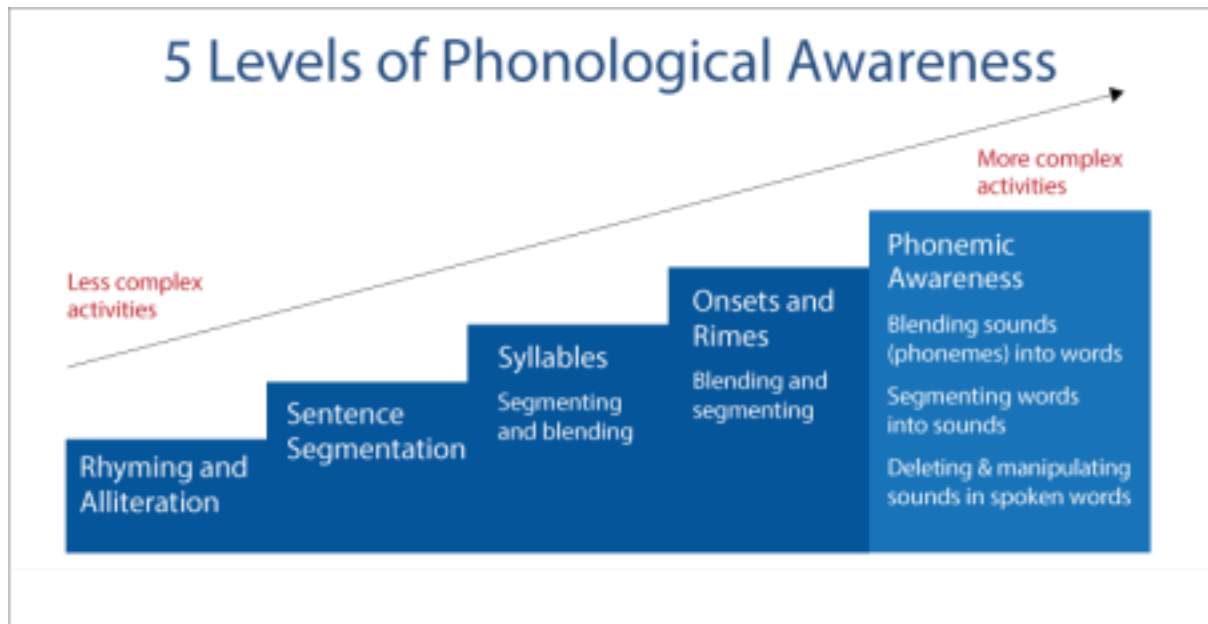


Figure 2: The 5 levels of phonological awareness (*Basics: Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: Reading Rockets, 2023*)

This unit includes

- an explanation of phonological awareness
- how phonological awareness develops and
- the implications this has for teaching and learning

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness refers to the recognition that the sounds in spoken language can be manipulated (Doughterty Stahl, 2020). As Scarborough's Reading Rope illustrates, phonological awareness is an important contributor to recognising words. As illustrated above, phonological awareness can be broken down into:

- phonological sensitivity, and
- phonemic awareness

Phonological Sensitivity

Phonological sensitivity refers to the awareness of the larger sound units including:

Rhyming and alliteration - the ability to identify if a text rhymes or alliterates.

Sentence segmentation - the ability to distinguish individual words in sentences.

Syllables – the ability to isolate the syllables in words. For example, the syllables in the word *cucumber* could be represented by clapping and a child who is able to segment syllables could identify that there are 3 syllables in the word (*cu-cum-ber*). The reverse is also true. A child could be provided with the syllables *blan-ket* and the child would then be required to blend these to create the word *blanket* (Kilpatrick, 2016).

Onset and Rime - the *onset* of a syllable refers to the consonant sound that comes before the vowel in the syllable. For example, in the word *sat* the onset is the sound represented by the letter *s*. The *rime* (not *rhyme*) refers

to the part of the word that includes the vowel sound and any consonant sounds that follow the vowel sound. For example, the *rime* unit in the word *sat* is the sound represented by the letters *at* (Kilpatrick, 2016).

Phonemic awareness - the ability to recognise and manipulate individual phonemes (sounds) in spoken words (Kilpatrick, 2016). In other words, it only refers to the sounds in words and not the printed letters. Children who have a good phonemic awareness are usually good readers and good spellers (Cook Moats, 2020). The reverse is also true. Children who have a weak phonemic awareness are slower to learn new words and easily forget them (Kilpatrick, 2016).

Development of Phonological Awareness

During the pre-alphabetic phase, children are developing the early phonological skills. Typically, by four years of age, children are able to rhyme and create alliteration and also distinguish the syllables within words. The 5 year olds should be able to blend simple words when provided with the individual syllables (Cook Moats, 2020).

What is a Phoneme?

The word *phoneme* is derived from the Greek word *phonos*, which means *sound* or *voice*. It refers to the smallest unit of sound in spoken words. For example, the word *pat* contains the three phonemes /p/a/t/ (where the slash marks indicate that the sounds represented by the letter is being represented and not the letter itself. The word *pluck* contains five letters, but contains four phonemes - /p/l/u/ck/.

English Language Learners

The research described in this course is applicable to learning any language. Ideally, if the end goal is to be proficient in both English and another language, then young children should be developing phonological awareness skills in both languages simultaneously (Stewart, 2004).

Using the Research to Inform Instructional Practices

When children participate in word play such as rhyming and alliteration, it causes children to focus on the sounds of words rather than their meaning (Kilpatrick, 2016).

To provide explicit phonological awareness instruction, teachers might direct children to focus on certain sounds in the rhymes. For example, a teacher might use this nursery rhyme with students:

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water,

*Jack fell down and broke his crown,
And Jill came tumbling after.*

Children could be asked what rhymes with the word *Jill*. If they are asked to identify the words that start with the same sound as *Jack*, that would support their onset phonological awareness. If they were asked whether *Jack* rhymes with *Jill*, that would support their rime phonological awareness.

The Role of Books in Developing Phonological Awareness

Not only are rhymes, including nursery rhymes, entertaining to young children, but a preschooler's knowledge of them is also one of the best predictors of their future reading ability (Danielson, 200 cited by Redig, 2018). This is because a good knowledge of nursery and other rhymes is indicative of good phonological skills. Therefore, books that incorporate rhyming and alliteration are an important tool for developing children's phonological awareness.

Rhymes are also means through which young children learn about the basic structure of a narrative, promote social skills and develop an understanding of simple sentences and phrases. (Sayakhan & Bradley 2019)

English Language Learners

For children learning English as an additional language, Sayakhan and Bradley (2019) argue that the repeated reading and singing of English nursery rhymes helps English language learners develop their oral language by hearing the rhymes in English and reciting them.

The Alphabetic Principle

Decoding is the process by which printed words are converted to spoken words.

The *alphabetic principle* - the understanding that the letters represent individual speech sounds or phonemes is essential for successful decoding. This is illustrated in Scarborough's Reading Rope (see Unit 1). The English alphabet has 26 letters and 44 or more phonemes (Arthur and Hertzberg, 2018).

According to Dougherty Stahl et al, (2020), learning experiences for children in the pre-alphabetic phase should include activities that build their knowledge of the alphabet, specifically letter names, sounds and formation. Alphabet books are ideally suited for this, and Stein (2015) recommends using the *Four S strategy* when reading aloud alphabet books to children to maximise the effectiveness of the learning.

The Four S's strategy:

This strategy uses the following steps:

1. **Show** - the teacher points to the letter.
2. **Say** - the teacher says the name of the letter).
3. **Sound** - the teacher makes the sound that the letter represents. For example, the teacher might say /a/ as *in apple*.
4. **Stress** - the teacher stresses the sound. For example, *a-a-a apple* or *mmmmm - mouse*

Reflect and Discuss

1. Why should developing children's phonological awareness be an important part of early childhood education programs?
2. How can reading rhymes to children help them develop their phonological skills?
3. Plan an upcoming learning experience that incorporates rhymes and songs.
4. What other experiences could you incorporate to further develop children's phonological awareness?
5. Plan for a learning experience where the Four S's strategy is used with an alphabet book.

Conclusion

Alphabet books and those that contain rhymes and alliteration are an engaging and highly effective way of developing children's understanding of the alphabetic principle and develop their phonological awareness. These early literacy skills are crucial for children's later success in reading English and any other alphabet-based language

Glossary

Alliteration: Alliteration is a literary device used in writing and poetry, where a series of words in a sentence or phrase begin with the same consonant sound. For example, "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" is a famous alliterative phrase.

Alphabetic Principle: The alphabetic principle refers to the understanding that letters in the alphabet represent individual speech sounds or *phonemes*. In other words, it is the understanding that the letters in written language correspond to specific sounds in spoken language. This knowledge is essential for learning to read and write in alphabetic scripts.

Decoding: Decoding is the process of converting written language (text) into spoken language (speech). In the context of literacy and reading, it involves using knowledge of letter-sound relationships (phonics) and the *alphabetic principle* to sound out words and recognize their meanings.

Language Comprehension: Language comprehension refers to the ability to understand and make meaning from spoken or written language. It involves interpreting words, sentences, and paragraphs, as well as grasping the overall meaning and context of a communication.

Onset: The onset refers to the initial consonant sound(s) of a syllable. It is the part of the syllable that comes before the vowel. In the word *sun*, the onset is /s/ and in the word *stop* the onset is /st/.

Phoneme: A phoneme is the basic building block of spoken language. For example, the word "cat" consists of three phonemes: /k/ - /æ/ - /t/. Changing any one of these phonemes to another sound (e.g., /b/ - /æ/ - /t/ for "bat") creates a different word with a distinct meaning. Phonemes are essential in phonics-based approaches to reading, where understanding the relationships between letters and phonemes helps readers decode and recognize words accurately.

Phonological Awareness: Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound structures of spoken language. It includes a range of skills, such as identifying and segmenting individual words, syllables, and phonemes. Phonological awareness is a vital precursor to learning to read because it helps individuals understand the sound structure of words, making it easier to decode and recognise words when reading.

Rime: The rime is the part of a syllable that includes the vowel sound and any following consonant sounds. It is the part of the syllable that comes after the onset. In the word *cat*, the rime is *at*, and in the word *play* the rime is *ay*.

Phonological awareness: The why and how

Shared reading: A collaborative and interactive literacy activity that involves children and the teacher reading a text together. During shared reading, the teacher reads aloud a text, such as a picture book or a short story, while encouraging active

participation, discussion, and interaction from the children.

Syllable - A syllable is a unit of spoken language that typically consists of one vowel sound (or a vowel sound with accompanying consonant sounds). Syllables form the building blocks of words and help determine their pronunciation. For example, the word "but-ter-fly" has three syllables.

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