

Clarifying the Meanings of PHON Words

Phon is a morpheme of Greek origin referring to voice or sound – as in the words telephone, microphone – and phoneme.

I. Phonology refers to the speech sounds in a spoken language and the rules of combination (that is, how one is allowed to combine the phonemes in a particular language.)

Each language utilizes a subset of the speech sounds (phonemes) the human vocal tract can produce – ranging from 17 phonemes in Hawaiian to well over 100 phonemes in the African language, Khoisan.

The rules of combination for a language specify where in a word particular speech sounds can occur. For example, in the Ngobe language (the Ngobe are an indigenous people in Central America) the /ng/ phoneme can occur at the beginning of words, in the English phonology it cannot.

Caution: The term ‘phonology’ is frequently misused which doesn’t help educators distinguish between different constructs.

Phonology ≠ Phoneme Awareness, Phonological Awareness, or Phonological Sensitivity

Phonology ≠ Phonological Processing

Phonology ≠ Phonological Recoding (decoding).

Implication of a child’s phonology for instruction: From an American educator’s perspective, the phonology of a child’s native language is relevant for children whose native language is not English. A teacher can investigate which speech sounds in English are not in the student’s native language (e.g., the Spanish phonology does not include the phoneme /sh/, commonly leading to challenges with this phoneme in English for a Latino/a student and to confusion with the similar phoneme /ch/ that is in both Spanish and English). A teacher can focus on activities to help a student with those speech sounds (e.g., saying and sorting pictures of items that have /sh/ or /ch/ in their names). Likewise, if a student speaks a dialect of English in which phonemes are pronounced differently from text spellings, focus on those phonemes/graphemes is helpful.

II. Phonological Awareness Terms

A. Phonological Awareness: A broad term referring to the ability to think about/be consciously aware of the sound structures in spoken words. These range from larger, more salient structures (syllables, rhymes, onsets, rimes) to individual phonemes.

Because this label covers all of the sound structures in words, ‘phonological awareness’ is potentially misleading to a speaker and/or listener about which type of sound unit is meant. **It is important to recognize that phonological awareness encompasses phoneme awareness but is not a synonym for phoneme awareness.**

In most cases, it is much better to use the following two specific terms for in order to avoid misunderstandings.

B. Phonological Sensitivity: Awareness of the larger/more salient sound structures in spoken words including rhymes, syllables, onsets and rimes.

Phonological Sensitivity ≠ Phoneme Awareness

C. Phoneme Awareness: Ability to be aware of and think about the individual speech sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. It is this type of awareness that is key for reading development. Phoneme awareness generally progresses from awareness of:

- a) The external phonemes in spoken words (i.e., the initial phoneme, the final phoneme); to
- b) Awareness of the medial vowel in words with simple syllables (consonant-vowel-consonant) such as in the three phoneme words *meat, boot, cape, or bed* (note the focus is on the speech sounds, not on the spelling); to
- c) Awareness of the internal consonants in one syllable words with consonant blends (e.g., CCVC (snap); CVCC (pink); CCVCC (stamp); CCCVC (stripe)).

Phoneme Awareness ≠ Phonics

Phoneme Awareness ≠ Decoding

Implication: A learner needs to acquire awareness of the individual phonemes in spoken words for reading and spelling mastery. Students need to master all of the levels of phoneme awareness delineated above in a, b, and c.

Caution: Phoneme Awareness ≠ *hearing* the speech sounds in spoken words.

Long before children become aware of the phonemes in spoken words, they have the ability to hear those phonemes: they perceive them in spoken words and except when speech production problems occur, they also can produce them when they speak.

Implication: Be careful not to describe phoneme awareness as hearing the phonemes. Everyone slips now and again; just try to catch yourself and switch to more accurate wording.

Caution: Watch out for statements that a reading program is based on ‘the science of reading’ because it is teaching ‘phonological awareness’ (broad term), when the focus is primarily on phonological sensitivity, and does not adequately cover the levels of phoneme awareness.

III. Phonological Processing: Underlying processes below conscious awareness that pertain to speech sounds in mental tasks such as perceiving spoken words, memory for words and sentences, or retrieval of words for comprehension or speaking.

Phonological Processing ≠ Phoneme Awareness

Extra: Different kinds of representations in the brain for words:

Phonological representation: information about how a word is pronounced.

Semantic representation: information about the meaning or meanings of a word.

Orthographic representation: information about the spelling of a word.

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