

Assessment Specifications and Research Background

Introduction

According to Ruddell (1998), by the time children are between three and four years old, they have learned most of the approximately 40 phonemes (discrete sounds in words) which comprise the English language. The ability to hear and manipulate these discrete sounds in spoken words is referred to as “phonemic awareness.” Children demonstrate their phonemic awareness by segmenting words into individual sounds (i.e., /fish/ into /f-/ /i-/ /sh/), deleting sounds in words, blending sounds, adding sounds, or substituting sounds within a word to make a new word.

Phonemic awareness is an oral ability which pertains to “hearing” sounds in words. It is NOT the same as phonics, which is the ability to decode and represent sounds with appropriate letters. Phonemic awareness is also NOT phonological awareness, though they are sometimes (incorrectly) used interchangeably. Phonological awareness is a broader category of linguistic awareness which includes phonemic awareness, but also encompasses awareness and manipulation of syllables, work with onset and rimes, creating rhyming words, and word work employing larger chunks of sounds (Armbruster, B., & Osborne, J., 2001).

Children often develop an awareness of phonemes by first recognizing that spoken language is made up of individual words, then developing an understanding within words, and finally becoming aware that phonemes make up individual syllables. Good phonemic awareness enables children to relate individual sounds to words and the letters that represent them. Hence, children who have good phonemic awareness can often recognize/decode words and spell/write better than others. Some researchers have indicated that phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of reading success (Stanovich, 1993-994). Others further argue that phonemic awareness is both the prerequisite and the consequence of learning to read (Yopp, 1992). As such, it is especially important to determine children's level of phonemic awareness in the primary grades to ensure that they get any necessary phonemic awareness intervention as early readers, lest they struggle with reading as young adults.

Different educators have different opinions about children's levels of phonemic awareness at a given age, especially in Kindergarten where children's developmental levels tend to be more diverse than in later grades. Some educators believe that by Kindergarten, children at the very least should be able to tell which words, in a group of single-syllable words, have the same beginning sounds and segment and blend simple two and three phoneme words like "in" and "cat." By the end of first grade, however, many teachers agree that children should have enough phonemic awareness abilities to successfully segment and blend three to four phoneme words in addition to being able to manipulate sounds via phoneme deletion, addition, and substitution tasks. It is of little

utility for students to simply learn the items on phonemic awareness tests. Instead, it's of more use to children to learn phonemic awareness activities through one or two kinds of tasks that enhance their facility to identify and manipulate sounds in words.

Let's Go Learn's Phonemic Awareness Assessment was designed to give teachers and parents an indication of which students struggle with distinguishing and manipulating phonemes in words, show proficiency with phonemic awareness tasks, or exhibit extraordinary facility with phonemes. This assessment can be used to screen or diagnose students who need further work with phonemic awareness tasks and students who may be at risk for reading difficulties so early intervention with those particular students can be efficiently implemented.

Phonemic Awareness Stand-alone Assessment: Specifications

This assessment is comprised of items which assess a range of lower level early phonological awareness skills to more complex phonemic awareness skills. Early phonological awareness skills include: 1) Word Number – identifying the number of words in a spoken sentence, 2) Rhyming – identifying words that rhyme, and 3) Identity – identifying which sounds are the same in a group of words (i.e., fall, fun, fix). Higher level phonemic awareness items include: a) segmentation and b) manipulation and auditory analysis tasks (MAAT) – which include making words by blending, adding, deleting, and substituting sounds. Depending on a student's age and grade level, he/she may be presented with as few as 30 or as many as 45 items that test skills as simple as counting words in a sentence or as complex as substituting sounds in words to make new

words. Items in this assessment become more complex as the number of phonemes in a word increases and the type or task (i.e., phoneme addition vs. substitution) and the location of the target phoneme (i.e., beginning sound vs. medial sound) become more challenging. The categories of items developed for this assessment were adapted from recommendations by the National Reading Panel as laid out in the paper *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks of Reading Instruction* (2003), other literature on reading instruction and assessment (see references below), and input from reading teachers.

After a student completes Let's Go Learn's Phonemic Awareness Assessment, a summary report or a detailed report for parents and/or teachers can be generated. In this report, in addition to a quantitative summary of the student's results, a general narrative summary of his/her phonemic awareness skills provides a profile of the student's phonemic awareness abilities relative to his/her age and grade level. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of the student's responses allows a more specific look into the kinds of phonemes and tasks that he/she attends to.

References

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