

LEARNING READING THROUGH PHONEMIC AWARENESS

by:

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Our country with a rich cultural heritage and diverse linguistic landscape, has been focusing on improving its education system, particularly in the area of reading instruction. One of the key strategies employed to enhance reading skills among early learners is phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) within words (Kilpatrick, 2015). This skill is the key for the progress of reading and spelling. In the context in our country, where English is one of the official languages and a primary medium of instruction, fostering phonemic awareness in Grade 1 students is seen as a foundational step towards literacy. Phonemic awareness is recognized globally as a critical component of reading instruction. Studies indicate that phonemic awareness is a significant predictor of reading achievement (National Reading Panel, 2000). In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has emphasized the importance of early literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, in its curriculum frameworks. The DepEd's "Every Child a Reader Program" aims to ensure that every child becomes a proficient reader by the end of Grade 1 (DepEd, 2016). Phonemic awareness activities are integral to this program, helping students decode and understand written text. Integrating phonemic awareness into early reading teaching enables educators to establish a strong base for later reading abilities.

Several strategies can be employed to teach phonemic awareness to Grade 1 students in the Philippines. These include phoneme isolation, which involves identifying the individual sounds within a word; phoneme blending, where students are taught to blend individual sounds together to form a word; phoneme segmentation, the opposite of

blending, where students break down a word into its individual sounds; and phoneme manipulation, where students are asked to change or manipulate sounds within words (Kilpatrick, 2015; Torgesen et al., 2001). For example, isolating the sound /k/ in "cat" or blending /c/ /a/ /t/ to form "cat" are effective ways to develop phonemic awareness. These activities can be made engaging through games, rhyming songs, and storytelling that emphasize sound manipulation and awareness.

To effectively implement phonemic awareness strategies in Grade 1 classrooms, teachers can incorporate a variety of engaging activities. The use of technology, such as educational apps and online resources, can also enhance phonemic awareness instruction (Hitchcock, 2017)]. Furthermore, teachers can adapt these strategies to suit the linguistic diversity in our country by incorporating local languages and dialects into phonemic awareness activities. This not only makes learning more relevant and engaging for pupils but also helps in developing their linguistic skills across different languages.

Despite the potential benefits of phonemic awareness instruction, there are challenges to its implementation in the Philippines. These include limited teacher training, inadequate resources, and the linguistic diversity of the student population (Dela Cruz, 2019). To address these challenges, the DepEd and other stakeholders must invest in teacher professional development and the development of culturally and linguistically relevant instructional materials. Recent strategies (as of 2023) for enhancing phonemic awareness include the integration of technology-enhanced learning tools and the development of more nuanced assessments to identify students who may need additional support (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). These approaches are designed to be more inclusive and effective, catering to the diverse needs of Grade 1 pupils in the country.

The integration of technology-enhanced learning tools represents a significant advancement in phonemic awareness instruction. Educational apps and online platforms can provide interactive and personalized learning experiences for students. These tools can offer real-time feedback and assessment, helping teachers tailor their instruction to

meet individual student needs. Moreover, technology can help bridge the resource gap in underserved areas by providing access to high-quality instructional materials.

Phonemic awareness is a foundational skill for reading and literacy development among Grade 1 students in the Philippines. By employing a range of teaching strategies and adapting to the local context, educators can foster phonemic awareness and contribute to the overall goal of making every child a proficient reader. As the education sector continues to evolve, it is crucial that stakeholders remain committed to addressing the challenges associated with implementing phonemic awareness instruction. Through sustained efforts and innovation, such as those outlined in recent strategies (Al Otaiba et al., 2023), the Philippines can make significant strides in improving early literacy outcomes.

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