

Best Practices in Literacy Instruction: A Literature Review on Phonemic Awareness

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Abstract: Phonemic awareness is widely recognized as a foundational component of early literacy development and a critical predictor of reading success. This literature review synthesizes seminal and contemporary research on phonemic awareness, emphasizing its role in decoding, fluency, and long-term reading achievement. The review critically examines evidence-based instructional practices, including explicit, systematic, and multisensory approaches, while also exploring emerging trends such as technology integration, culturally responsive pedagogy, and family engagement. Although the research base strongly supports phonemic awareness instruction, persistent challenges, including inconsistent implementation, insufficient teacher preparation, and inequitable access to resources, continue to limit its effectiveness across diverse educational contexts. This paper advances the literature by integrating findings across studies, identifying gaps between theory and practice, and offering a critical analysis of current instructional approaches. Implications for practice and future research are discussed, with an emphasis on promoting equitable, high-quality literacy instruction for all learners.

Keywords: *Phonemic Awareness; Literacy Instruction; Early Reading Development; Evidence-Based Practices; Reading Achievement; Educational Equity; Teacher Preparation; Multisensory Instruction.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Phonemic awareness, the ability to identify and manipulate individual sounds within spoken words, serves as a cornerstone of early literacy development. Decades of research consistently identify phonemic awareness as one of the strongest predictors of reading success, particularly in the development of decoding and word recognition skills (Morrow et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2024). As students progress from oral language to written text, phonemic awareness facilitates the mapping of sounds onto letters, thereby enabling efficient reading and spelling acquisition.

The significance of phonemic awareness is firmly established in foundational literacy frameworks. The National Reading Panel (2000) identified it as one of five essential components of effective reading instruction, while Kilpatrick (2020) emphasized its role in preventing reading difficulties, including dyslexia. Additionally, theoretical models such as the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) highlight the interdependence of decoding and linguistic comprehension, positioning phonemic awareness as a critical contributor to reading proficiency.

Despite its well-documented importance, translating research into practice remains a challenge. Variability in instructional quality, disparities in teacher preparation, and

inequities in access to resources continue to affect the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction across educational settings. Furthermore, evolving educational contexts—including increased technological integration and growing linguistic diversity—necessitate a more nuanced understanding of how phonemic awareness can be effectively taught.

This literature review examines best practices in phonemic awareness instruction by synthesizing current research, evaluating the effectiveness of instructional approaches, and critically analyzing ongoing challenges. Through this synthesis, the paper aims to bridge the gap between research and practice, providing actionable insights for educators and policymakers committed to improving literacy outcomes.

II. ROLE OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS IN READING INSTRUCTION

Phonemic awareness plays a central role in early reading development, particularly in facilitating decoding and word recognition. Explicit instruction in phoneme segmentation, blending, and manipulation has been shown to significantly improve students' ability to decode unfamiliar words (Morrow et al., 2023). These foundational skills enable learners to establish connections between spoken language

and written text, thereby supporting reading fluency and comprehension.

Ehri (2020) further extends this understanding through the concept of orthographic mapping, a cognitive process that allows readers to store words in long-term memory for automatic retrieval. Strong phonemic awareness is essential for this process, as it enables learners to form stable connections between phonemes and graphemes. Without this foundation, students may struggle with word recognition, limiting their overall reading development.

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) reinforces the importance of phonemic awareness by emphasizing the role of decoding as a fundamental component of reading comprehension. While linguistic comprehension contributes to meaning-making, decoding skills—rooted in phonemic awareness—are necessary for accessing written language. Thus, phonemic awareness is not merely an isolated skill but a critical component of a broader literacy framework.

III. EVIDENCE-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Research strongly supports explicit, systematic instruction as the most effective approach to developing phonemic awareness. Rice et al. (2024) highlight that structured instruction targeting phoneme segmentation, blending, and manipulation leads to significant improvements in reading outcomes, particularly for students at risk of reading difficulties. These findings align with earlier work by the National Reading Panel (2000), which emphasized the effectiveness of direct and focused phonemic awareness instruction.

Multisensory instructional approaches further enhance learning by engaging multiple modalities, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic pathways. Activities involving manipulatives, movement, and auditory repetition have been shown to reinforce phonemic awareness skills and improve retention (Rice et al., 2024). These approaches are particularly beneficial for diverse learners, including those with learning disabilities.

Recent research also highlights the growing role of technology in phonemic awareness instruction. Digital tools and computer-assisted programs provide individualized and interactive learning experiences, allowing students to practice skills at their own pace (Cheung & Slavin, 2013). However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on their alignment with evidence-based instructional principles, as technology alone does not guarantee improved outcomes.

Parental involvement represents another critical component of effective phonemic awareness instruction. Studies indicate that home literacy environments and caregiver engagement significantly contribute to early literacy development (Sénéchal & Young, 2008; Niklas & Schneider, 2020). When parents are equipped with strategies

to support phonemic awareness, students benefit from consistent reinforcement across learning contexts.

IV. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

As classrooms become increasingly diverse, culturally responsive approaches to phonemic awareness instruction have gained attention. Research suggests that incorporating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into instruction enhances engagement and facilitates skill transfer (Castro et al., 2021). For example, using culturally relevant texts, songs, and oral language practices can make phonemic awareness instruction more meaningful and accessible.

However, the literature reveals a gap in the consistent application of culturally responsive practices. While many studies acknowledge the importance of cultural relevance, fewer provide concrete strategies for implementation. This gap highlights the need for further research and professional development focused on integrating cultural responsiveness into phonemic awareness instruction effectively.

V. CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Despite strong empirical support, several challenges continue to hinder the effective implementation of phonemic awareness instruction. One of the most significant issues is the inconsistency in instructional quality across classrooms and schools. Rice et al. (2024) note that variations in instructional fidelity can lead to unequal student outcomes, particularly for those at risk of reading difficulties.

Teacher preparation represents another critical concern. Moats (2020) argues that many educators lack sufficient training in evidence-based literacy practices, including phonemic awareness instruction. This gap is further supported by Buckingham and Meeks (2021), who emphasize the need for comprehensive and ongoing professional development to ensure instructional effectiveness.

Equity issues also persist, particularly in relation to access to technology and instructional resources. The digital divide remains a significant barrier, disproportionately affecting students from low-income backgrounds (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these disparities, as unequal access to digital learning tools contributed to widening achievement gaps (Dolan, 2021).

Critically, much of the existing research focuses on the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction under controlled conditions, with less attention given to real-world implementation challenges. This disconnect between research and practice underscores the need for studies that examine how evidence-based practices can be adapted to diverse and resource-constrained educational settings.

VI. DISCUSSION AND SYNTHESIS

The collective body of research clearly demonstrates that phonemic awareness is essential for early literacy development. However, the effectiveness of instruction depends not only on the strategies employed but also on the context in which they are implemented. Explicit and systematic instruction, while effective, must be supported by well-trained educators, equitable access to resources, and culturally responsive practices.

A key theme emerging from this review is the need for integration. Effective phonemic awareness instruction does not occur in isolation but must be embedded within a comprehensive literacy framework that includes vocabulary development, comprehension, and writing. Models such as Scarborough's Reading Rope (2021) illustrate the interconnected nature of these components, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to literacy instruction.

Furthermore, the review highlights a persistent gap between research and practice. While evidence-based strategies are well-established, their implementation remains uneven. Addressing this gap requires systemic changes, including improved teacher preparation programs, increased investment in professional development, and policies that promote equitable access to high-quality instruction.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Educators should prioritize explicit, systematic, and multisensory approaches to phonemic awareness instruction, ensuring that these practices are implemented with fidelity. Professional development programs must be strengthened to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver effective instruction.

Future research should focus on:

- Longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of phonemic awareness instruction
- Implementation research in diverse and under-resourced settings
- The integration of culturally responsive practices into literacy instruction
- The effectiveness of emerging digital tools in real-world classrooms

VIII. CONCLUSION

Phonemic awareness remains a foundational element of literacy instruction, with extensive research supporting its role in reading development. However, achieving consistent and equitable outcomes requires addressing persistent challenges related to implementation, teacher preparation, and resource access. By bridging the gap between research and practice and adopting a comprehensive, inclusive approach to instruction, educators can ensure that all students develop the foundational skills necessary for literacy success.

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