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## Implementing Phonological Awareness in Saudi Arabia Kindergartens

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### Abstract

Phonological awareness (PA) is a word that has recently gained currency in the field of early literacy instruction. There is a large corpus of research on how to teach PA to young language learners. In spite of these relevant data, there is a dearth of literacy information on PA in Arabic, especially targeting Saudi students. The focus of this discussion is to describe how to introduce phonological awareness activities into the curriculum to benefit kindergarten-aged Arabic speakers in Saudi Arabia. In addition, this research review describes PA abilities and the significance of rhymes, rhythms, and syllables. Finally, this paper will also provide examples illustrating how Saudi teachers may use the holistic language theory (i.e., whole language approach) to implement PA through the use of games, songs, and storyboards comprised of rhymes, rhythms, and syllables. The implications suggest PA is essential for young Saudi learners' mastery of reading, speaking, and learning Arabic.

Keywords: Arabic phonological awareness, rhythm, syllables, rhymes, kindergarten students, Whole Language Theory, Saudi Arabia literacy skills.

### Background

A strong oral tradition serves as the foundation of children's reading and writing abilities (Almehrizi et al., 2020). Phonological awareness (PA) promotes oral heritage and emphasizes the need of providing children with powerful oral experiences. A strong PA foundation is especially significant in the early years of schooling and this importance cannot be overstated. PA is crucial because it equips students with the linguistic foundation essential to read and write fluently. A child's phonological awareness is a basic skill for learning to read. As a result, fostering phonological awareness in young children can help with developing reading proficiency. Literacy development requires a solid understanding of phonology since written

words are identical to their spoken equivalents. The capacities to read or to transform spoken words into written ones depend on the reader's familiarity with the spoken sounds represented by individual letters and by letter combinations (spelling). For long-term retention, listening to speech is essential for learning letter-sound relationships, combining sounds to interpret words, and "mapping" words onto a visual lexicon.

The four stages in the growth of phonological awareness include: phoneme, onset-rime, syllable, and word recognition (Ehri, 2022). Understanding the importance of phonological awareness is congruent with the goals of education; the focus is on improving upon students' linguistic proficiency by developing their phonological awareness. Research into enhancing students' phonological awareness is particularly useful in ensuring positive growth among primary school students (Antonio & Santillan, 2020; Peng et al., 2022). Not only is literacy development supported by phonemic awareness, but according to Antonio and Santillan (2020), a stronger sense of self-worth results from children's ability to talk, read, and write which phonological awareness facilitates.

Throughout the Arab world, the reading skills of Arabic students become a matter of concern for educators and parents (Shendy, 2019). In order to impact their students' reading levels, teachers understand the potential of phonological awareness through the delivery of high-quality reading instruction, which includes the use of PA. Current research focuses on the importance of developing phonological awareness and phoneme separation in young Arabic speakers (Almehrizi et al., 2020; Asadi & Abu-Rabia, 2019; Layes et al., 2019).

Some of the Arabic findings describe how detecting the beginning sound of a word and spotting rhyme oddity were significantly simpler for youngsters to do than phoneme segmentation and deletion of syllables in Arabic words. The results from Arabic studies are corroborated by those from data of the English language, showing that longer syllables remain easier to learn compared to shorter ones. For example, the word 'BANANA' is relatively easier for children to learn as compared to 'VERY' even though it has a longer number of syllables.

Issues surrounding PA become even more difficult for Arabic speaking kindergarten children in Saudi Arabia. According to (Shendy, 2019), Arabic is a dialect that is defined by diglossia, which renders a challenge for beginning readers. The term "diglossia" describes a situation in which two distinct forms of the same dialect coexist within a given speech community. Typically, one variety is the prestigious form of the literary language, while the other is the everyday language used by the majority of the people. There is a significant linguistic difference between the two forms of the language. This disparity makes it difficult for new learners to grasp certain components of the language such as writing, reading, vocabulary and most importantly, PA (Shendy, 2019). As a consequence of diglossia, implementing phonological awareness among kindergarten students in Saudi Arabia remains a challenge.

Thus, this discussion explores the importance of phonological awareness and how to teach PA through the use of rhythm, rhyme, and syllables in Saudi Arabia. According to holistic language theory, classrooms represent places where each student is regarded as a unique individual; teachers and students both actively participate in the learning process (Clay, 2015; Doyle, 2018; Morrow, 2011; Piaget, 1950; Sriastuti & Masing, 2022). Many advocates of holistic

language learning argue fluency in a dialect develops organically in the course of daily life. The use of rhythm, rhymes and syllables provide this natural learning context (Sayakhan & Bradley, 2019). The Whole Language approach also supports the use of rhythm, rhymes and syllables in implementing phonological awareness and is an example of holistic language and literacy learning (Geekie et al., 1999; Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998).

### **Targeted questions**

The following questions constitute the particular inquiry to which this discussion responds. These questions remain crucial to a systematic review of the literature and aid in providing kindergarten teachers with strategies for best PA classroom practices.

- What is phonological awareness?
- How can one use phonological awareness in Saudi kindergarten classrooms, specifically in the Arabic language?
- What are phonological awareness skills?

### **Rationale**

This discussion supports the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education and Saudi Arabian teachers in implementing phonological awareness in kindergarten. Despite the abundance of instruments testing phonological awareness in other languages, there remains a paucity of research concerning how to implement PA in Arabic, the native language of almost 401 million people. Teaching how to speak a language begins with building, growing, and strengthening the learner's sound system before introducing other aspects of the language such as letters. Consequently, the primary objective of teachers working with young children in the early stages of language development is to enable students to actively manage the various sounds of the language by rhyming, merging, segmenting, inserting, and removing syllables. Successful teachers of Arabic with young children in Saudi demonstrate the ability to effectively employ phonetic awareness strategies to support children's emerging reading and spelling proficiency.

### **What is Phonological Awareness?**

Many people believe that decoding phonemes is the first step in the reading process. However, children become reading-ready well before they have a firm grasp on the idea that letters represent sounds. Learning phonological awareness is the first step in developing a fluent lexicon or word list (Ciesielski & Creaghead, 2020). The capacity to detect and alter the spoken components of words and phrases is what we refer to as phonological awareness. Some examples of such abilities include recognizing rhyming words, playing with alliteration, breaking down a phrase into component parts, distinguishing syllables, and mixing and splitting onset-rimes. Phonemic awareness is the highest level, yet it is also the one that takes the longest to develop. Phonemic awareness is the capacity to recognize, consider, and manipulate independent sounds (phonemes) of spoken words (Ehri, 2022). This includes activities such as fusing sounds together to form new words, breaking down words into their component sounds, and omitting and rearranging linguistic elements.

Phonological awareness (PA) is a sequence of abilities that progress across time and remain essential for both spelling and reading proficiency given that they are fundamental for learning to interpret and pronounce written words (Antonio & Santillan, 2020). Phonological Awareness (PA) becomes extremely important during the first few years of school, particularly in kindergarten. This method of language acquisition, along with other forms of linguistic development such as stories, rhymes, and songs, is typically incorporated into the curriculum of early childhood settings on a daily basis. Children will eventually develop the ability to generate rhythms on their own. Additionally, they learn to break phrases into their component sounds, and then, into their syllables. PA is an understanding that can be quickly and easily attained by the majority of children.

Before starting kindergarten, approximately 75% of children have already developed strong pre-reading and pre-writing skills (Dimova et al., 2020). However, the 25% of children across all demographics who demonstrate difficulty mastering these skills require explicit instruction in order to improve their ability to do so. Students who demonstrate a strong understanding of phonology are significantly more likely to develop into proficient readers, whereas students who do not evidence this level of understanding indicate greater difficulty with the reading process (Dimova et al., 2020).

Literacy outcomes may be predicted with greater accuracy with PA than with other factors such as intelligence, socioeconomic background, and vocabulary awareness (Ciesielski & Creaghead, 2020). Children who struggle with PA may have a reading disability such as dyslexia. Children who have dyslexia may benefit from specialized instruction in phonemic awareness and word-building (Dimova et al., 2020). Many children who struggle to read later in life might benefit greatly from more explicit instruction in PA during these developmental years. PA training assists with problematic decoders of any grade, particularly those who show signs of difficulty mixing or segregating phonemes (Dimova et al., 2020).

### **How Can One Use Phonological Awareness in Saudi Kindergarten Classrooms, specifically in the Arabic Language?**

Several ways exist to use or implement phonological awareness in Arabic speaking Saudi kindergartens. The holistic learning theory (Geekie et al., 1997; Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998) is recommended to Saudi teachers when implementing PA while teaching the language of Arabic to kindergarteners. In the whole language approach (Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998), language is not learned by rehearsing its individual elements; rather, real-life and relevant use and application are recommended (Riyanton et al., 2021). Many who advocate for the whole language approach to learning PA stress the importance of the term "natural" in regard to delivering the concept (Geekie et al., 1997; Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998). Literacy, in their view, is learned in a similar way as spoken language (Geekie et al., 1997; Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998). Those who support the use of holistic learning theory believe it is most effective when classroom instruction reinforces organic interactions and mastery of the native tongue. Educators highlight students' achievements while, at the same time, document students' expanding progress in literacy skills. Holistic language educators believe learning is a communal activity from which all children may

benefit (Riyanton et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers consider themselves similar to their students as they also continue to learn.

Borrowing from the theoretical frameworks of whole language theory (Geekie et al., 1997; Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998), PA can be used in Saudi kindergarten classrooms through the use of natural concepts relatable to the children. Examples include the use of storyboards, rhythms, and rhymes (Ehri, 2022). For example, young readers learn best through images and other visuals. Storyboards are a group of pictures that tell a short story. Storyboards promote children's PA development as educators devise a wide range of visually engaging pictures. Rhyming songs such as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" or "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep" help children identify syllabic patterns in words (Morrow, 2011). Poetry, such as "Humpty Dumpty," introduces children not only to language but also to rhyme as well.

Holistic learning affords flexibility and creativity in the classroom. Teachers can create rhyming songs and poetry. It is important the songs be sung in Arabic and also be fun and rich with Saudi culture. When the kindergarten children recite these songs, they naturally construct phonological awareness as the whole language theory describes (Geekie et al., 1997; Goodman, 1997, 2014). When teaching youngsters Arabic in Saudi Arabia, games involving clapping along with the "rhythm" helps with syllable identification. Encouraging children to jump or bounce on each syllable also invites participation.

### **What Are Phonological Awareness Skills?**

Phonological awareness refers to a wide range of skills and understandings about the building blocks of language and the phonetic symbols that comprise words (Almehrizi et al., 2020). It seems sensible to start with phonological awareness practices and conclude with phonemic awareness. Phonemic aware students can separate out particular sounds in speech, mix and combine them, and manipulate them in various ways. Phonological awareness is honed and refined to become phonemic awareness. It is simpler to retain new information if it can be related to what the student already knows. In order to develop phonological awareness, it is important for students to focus on the relationship between written letters and their corresponding phonemes. When children become able to "sound out" each word using only the letters they see, they are well on their way to becoming proficient readers. If a particular student attains this understanding of self-awareness, they indicate a solid starting point for developing their reading and vocabulary comprehension. The primary skills within an understanding of phonological awareness include: syllabification, onset-rime, rhymes, and alliteration, and phonemic awareness.

#### **i. Onset-rime**

There are two elements to an onset rime. An onset is the first audible sound in a word that is made when a word is spoken out loud. When the beginning is taken out of a word, what's left is called the rime. Onset-rime segmentation refers to the process of dividing the phrase into its constituent parts. The letter "A" in the word "Akbar" serves as the onset, while the letters "bar" serves as the rime. Understanding word families through onset and rime instruction provides a solid groundwork for beginning readers. It is critical for students to comprehend onset and rime

as they read in order to effectively decode words. If children can learn to read with the aid of chunking and blending, comprehending what they read will become easier if it is also embedded within the context of using “meaning” to guide their reading endeavors; reading is the act of “making meaning” not simply the act of decoding words (Geekie et al.,1997; Goodman, 1997, 2014; Turbill & Cambourne, 1998).

## ii. Syllabification

The ability to syllabify means that one is able to count the number of syllables contained in a word while spoken aloud. In order to assist students in remembering the syllables that make the word, teachers instruct children to "clap out" after each syllable of a word as it is spoken aloud. Combining syllables, as well as adding, removing, and replacing them, are all part of the process of syllabification. This is in addition to the process of breaking down words into their individual syllables. Reading fluency and spelling accuracy are both impacted by students' ability to decipher words quickly, which can be facilitated by teaching students how to break words down into syllables. Teaching students how to break words down into syllables can help students improve their reading fluency and spelling accuracy (Wells, 2019).

## iii. Rhymes and Alliteration

In order to develop phonological awareness, the first and most important step is to learn to recognize phonological patterns. Some examples of these patterns include word combinations that rhyme or share an ending. Alliteration, on the other hand, is the term used to describe a situation in which two or more words share the same beginning sound. Take, for instance, the words 'CAT,' 'CART,' and 'KHAT.' Reading to children and listening to them recite well-known nursery rhymes and fairytales is an excellent way to demonstrate the efficacy of the strategy of using repetition of simple sounds to help develop phonological awareness in children (Sayakhan & Bradley, 2019).

## iv. Phonemic Awareness

The two concepts, phonemic awareness and phonological awareness, frequently become confused. Understanding phonemes, the smallest component of speech (Duncan, 2018), is the focus of phonemic awareness. Understanding the phonetics of language is a process that occurs in several steps. It all begins with the child learning to identify one sound among all the others in a word. After this initial step, children begin combining distinct phonemes into a unified whole. Assuming mastery of the prerequisite skills, the student will be able to alter phonemes. Students can create new words by modifying existing ones by adding, removing, or exchanging their sounds. Typically, the first two years of school are devoted to teaching students skills for phonemic awareness (mostly first grade and kindergarten). Rhyming, sound matching, and word mixing are some of the common types of simple oral activities in which kindergarteners participate. During the first grade, students participate in activities that require a higher level of phonemic awareness. These activities place an emphasis on the blending of sounds, such as mixing sounds like "bbb-aaaa-dddd," or separating the sounds contained within a word. It also involves rearranging phonemes, such as changing the sound that comes at the beginning of a word to another. All of these are instances of manipulating phonemes. For example, in the word

'BANANA,' children can isolate the first sound /B/ and add sounds /A/ and /D/ to it to come up with the word 'BAD.'

### **Conclusion**

This discussion describes implications for future research and practice as it sheds light on the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of Arabic language kindergarten school teachers with respect to PA. Contributing to the expanding body of literature analyzing the implementation of PA on Saudi kindergarten readers' proficiency in Arabic, this discussion provides significant and practical relevance for fostering the necessary PA skills in order for teachers to support students' literacy levels in Arabic. In particular, the content stresses the need to continuously educate and train Arabic language instructors in the field of PA.

Additionally, this review highlights the need for Arabic education to prioritize providing teachers with the time and flexibility to individualize students' unique learning styles by including more holistic learning experiences that build students' competency in PA abilities. Finally, it is important to create Arabic-language PA assessment tools through an understanding of holistic learning theory; then, teachers can monitor and support each child's PA development. Assessments include observations, individual conferences, anecdotal notes, and portfolios. In contrast with traditional forms, these assessments serve to collect a range of individual and relevant data to support children's ongoing literacy development. In congruence with the natural context of PA within holistic learning theory, it is critical assessments as well be relevant, natural, and holistic.

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