What You Need to Know: Phonemic Awareness

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What Is Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic Awareness is a strong predictor of a child's ability to read well. Children with strong phonemic awareness skills are more likely to read on grade level than children without this necessary skill. Phonemic awareness is, in great part, a necessary precursor to phonics, print vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. So what is it, exactly?

Definition

The ability to identify sounds within spoken words and to manipulate those sounds to make other words.

For example, you are using phonemic awareness skills if you can

- say the individual sounds in "carbonate"
- identify the difference between "carbonate" and "carbonation"
- pick out the similar sounds in "carbonate" and "incarcerate"
- find the two stressed syllables in "carbonate"
- replace the "ate" sound in "carbonate" with "ize"

Later, I will discuss the various sub-skills in phonemic awareness, as well as instructional strategies. In the meantime, if you can perform these simple tasks, you are demonstrating phonemic awareness.

Phonemic awareness is not phonics. With phonics, you convert text into speech, but with phonemic awareness, you only focus on the sounds.

> Phonics = sounding out printed words.
> Phonemic awareness = listening to spoken sounds.

They are closely linked, but they are not the same.

Although it may seem obvious to us as adults, the idea that words are not single units but collections of sounds requires a cognitive leap for most children. After all, we speak in complete words, and whole words have specific meanings. Children grasp whole words easily, but then we ask them to pick out the parts within words, which probably don't have any meaning of their own. It is an "a ha" moment for children when they realize this concept. All of phonemic awareness stems from that conceptual understanding.

Phonemic Awareness for All Students

Instruction in phonemic awareness can begin when children are quite young, certainly before they enter kindergarten. If students miss, or fall behind, in this critical skill, they will struggle to read. They will already be behind in learning the foundational skills that lead to grade-level reading. And they will fall farther and farther behind in reading as they get older. Based on our student data, I believe that much of the later reading difficulties can be explained by students' poor phonemic awareness.

We required our tutors to address phonemic awareness at all grade levels, even with students in middle and high school. Students certainly can have, and should have, strong phonemic awareness skills by that age. However, if students in upper grades are struggling to read, there is

a strong possibility that they have poor foundational skills, particularly phonemic awareness.

With our requirement that all teachers provide phonemic awareness instruction, we saw students in middle and high school making 2, 3, and even 4 grade-level jumps in their reading ability. We saw many students in elementary school making greater than a grade-level gain during a single semester. **Simply put, students need the foundational skills so they can learn the more advanced skills.**

Many teachers have misconceptions regarding phonemic awareness:

1. Children will grasp phonemic awareness naturally, such as through nursery rhymes and songs;

2. Children past a certain grade, such as first or second grade, will have mastered phonemic awareness and do not require any additional instruction; and

3. Phonemic awareness skills, in general, do not progress beyond a first or second grade level, i.e., there is no more to learn.

The first two assumptions are mistakes because, obviously, students are not mastering phonemic awareness skills. Their reading difficulties indicate that they are not grasping phonemic awareness, and later instruction in phonemic awareness produces measurable reading improvement.

Common reading assessments may indicate that a student has "mastered" phonemic awareness, but assessments may not measure phonemic awareness skills past second grade or third grade. The assessments we used for our reading programs had this problem. The pre-test results would indicate that students had achieved mastery, leading tutors to believe that they did not need to provide any instruction in this reading skill (in spite of our requirements). We had to teach them what "mastery" meant: "mastery" meant only that the student had achieved second grade level. For a student in second grade, that was fine; for a student in third grade or higher, not so much.

The third assumption is a mistake because, frankly, phonemic awareness skills become more sophisticated than the level taught in the lowest elementary grades. **Phonemic awareness progresses from individual sounds to patterns, enunciation, accents, meters, and rhythms.** For example, teachers generally introduce the concept of poetic meters around the fourth or fifth grade. The ability to identify meter, with a regular pattern and number of accented and unaccented syllables, is a phonemic awareness skill.

The bottom line: Most students struggling to read will benefit from explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, and all students benefit from instruction in increasingly sophisticated phonemic awareness skills.

Breaking Down Phonemic Awareness Skills

Phonemic Awareness is more than listening for sounds in words. Rather, it is one primary skill that is reinforced and demonstrated through 8 sub-skills.

Primary Skill: Identification

Identification is the ability to break words into individual sounds.
Example: What three sounds do you hear in the word “cheese”?

If a student can accurately and consistently identify the sounds within words, then he or she can likely do (or learn to do) all the rest of the sub-skills.

Phonemic Awareness Sub-skills

In alphabetical order, the 8 sub-skills to phonemic awareness are as follows.

Blending: connecting individual sounds to make a word, the opposite of identification.
Example: What word do you get when you combine the sounds “ch,” “ee,” and “z”?

Completion: predicting the next sound in a partial word.
Example: What sound can follow “chee”?

Deletion: removing specific sounds from a word.
Example: What word do you get if you remove the “ch” sound from “cheese”?

Differentiation: recognizing that two sounds are different or that sounds in words are different.
Example: Are these words the same or different: “cheese” “these”?

Isolation: identifying specific sounds within words.
Example: What is the final sound in the word “cheese”?

Manipulation: replacing or changing sounds within words.
Example: Change the “ch” sound in “cheese” with a “th” sound.

Matching: finding words that have the same sounds in a specific place in a word.
Example: What word has the same second sound as “cheese”?
Example: What word has the same final sound as “cheese”?

Reversal: switching the order of two sounds in a word.
Example (non-cheese example): What word do you get if you switch the “d” and “f” sounds in “Defer”?

I will add one more skill to this list: *Emphatics*. Emphatics is recognizing accents in words and stress (emphasis) given to spoken words. For example, a person who says “I don’t *want* cheese; I *need* cheese” is emphasizing the difference between want and need. Emphatics is not typically included as a phonemic awareness skill, but it is a phonological skill. (Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness, an understanding of sound within language.) I include emphatics here because it relates to the ability to analyze sounds within words and passages. It leads to understanding meter, rhythm, and similar auditory characteristics of speech.

Emphatics is also a cross-over skill with oral language development because it relates to

changing spoken sounds to communicate a message, i.e., how a speaker emphasizes certain words or sounds. For example, if a person says “I am STILL waiting,” he is communicating frustration by emphasizing the word “still.”)

Integrated approach to phonemic awareness skills

Students don’t have to master one skill before learning another skill. They are not sequential, other than the focus on the primary skill, which should be introduced first and continue to be reinforced as you help students perform the sub-skills.

For example, the student doesn’t need to focus only on identification before tackling matching. In fact, a good lesson in phonemic awareness will combine several sub-skills. Not only will this make the learning activity more interesting but also it will help students think about the sounds in multiple ways, further reinforcing their ability to perform the primary skill: identify sounds within words.

On the other hand, some sub-skills are more challenging than others because they take greater cognitive processing and analysis. Very generally, blending, completion, differentiation, and isolation are less sophisticated than deletion, emphatics, manipulation, matching, and reversal.

If you are working with young children, say around ages 3–4, I recommend that you stick to the simplest sub-skills. Once students are pretty good at finding the individual sounds within words and a few of the simpler sub-skills, they will be able to pick up the other sub-skills more easily as their cognitive development progresses. With these young children, you are helping them make that cognitive leap from whole words to sounds within words. If you are working with older children, try presenting activities that address the more challenging sub-skills.

Principles for Phonemic Awareness Instruction

The research is quite clear about principles for phonemic awareness instruction. We will look at instructional strategies next, but all effective strategies and instructional activities are based on the same 3 principles, as follows.

1. Instruction needs to be explicit and systematic.
2. Instruction should focus on only 1 or 2 phonemes at a time.
3. Instruction follows a "continuum of complexity."

Explicit and Systematic

"Explicit" means the instruction will clearly focus on specific sounds. As you plan instruction in phonemic awareness, complete this sentence: "Students will focus on the [fill in the blank] sound." With explicit instruction, pre-determine which sounds students will use as they learn the various phonemic awareness sub-skills. The opposite of explicit instruction is "implicit" instruction, in which case you hope students will naturally figure out how sounds work in words through a lot of exposure. What the research says: **Explicit instruction works well; implicit instruction doesn't.**

"Systematic" means having a plan for what you will do first, second, third, etc. It means knowing what sounds students will study and the order in which they will study them.

For example, with youngest children, you will spend a lot of time on rhyming words. Once students understand what "rhyming" means, you might concentrate on words that end with the "-ack" sound, then move to the "-ish" sound, and then study words with the "-eek" sound. Later, you might move to words with the same starting sounds. You might focus on words that begin with "b", then move to "c" and then to "l".

The point of systematic instruction is to plan ahead what you will teach and when. The opposite of systematic instruction is random instruction, which I call chaotic instruction. Chaotic instruction does not work for phonemic awareness. Systematic instruction is necessary to help students build mental patterns for sounds within words.

Focus on 1 or 2 Phonemes

Even as adults, if you get too much information at once, your ability to understand, retain, and use the information drops off pretty quickly. This consideration is even more pronounced in children. They simply cannot process and build mental patterns on many concepts at once.

Think about learning to touch type. You have all the keys in front of you, so you should be able to type every word correctly on day one, right? Of course not. Instead, you begin learning a few simple patterns, perhaps with common words, and you practice them until you can type them correctly without thinking. Later, you practice a few new patterns. Eventually, you are pretty good with the entire keyboard and you have fairly good accuracy. This works because our brains are exceptional at creating patterns.

A large part of teaching students to read is helping them develop mental patterns and

understanding how language works. If they try to focus on too many concepts or too much information at once, they won't develop those patterns. The brain simply cannot do it. Conversely, if they begin to develop mental patterns based on a limited set of information, they will be able to apply that understanding and use those mental patterns to grasp new information later.

This is true with instruction in phonemic awareness. What the research says, and what we told out tutors to follow, is to focus only on 1 or 2 phonemes at a time. Once students can consistently find them, use them, change them, etc., then—and only then—do we go on to another set of phonemes. With a concentrated focus on only 1 or 2 phonemes, students brains will actually develop the strong neurological connections needed to gain phonemic awareness.

With phonemic awareness instruction, we are not trying to teach everything there is to know and do, at least not all at once. Instead, we are helping students understand how sounds work within words, how they can find them, and how those sounds can be changed.

Bottom line: **focus on 1 or 2 phonemes until students can consistently demonstrate their understanding of those sounds**. Then move on to the next 1 or 2.

Continuum of Complexity

Some sounds are easier to identify than others. Some sub-skills are easier to perform than others. For both sounds and skills, there is a continuum of complexity, from least complex to most complex and from the simplest to the most difficult. Everyone starts at the lowest level of these continua.

Continuum of Complexity: Sound Types

Based on the continuum of skill types (see below), students can perform a variety of actions before they advance to phonemic awareness, including finding rhymes, recognizing different sounding words, and counting syllables within words. Once students begin to understand that words are collections of unique sounds, you can begin to address phonemic awareness skills.

Start with easy sounds first, and then advance to more challenging sounds. Easy sounds are hard and soft consonants, and long and short vowel sounds, particularly those produced by individual letters. Easy sound are those sounds that do not require you to move your mouth when you make them. These sounds are fairly easy to identify with a little practice.

Farther up the continuum of sound complexity are diphthongs, which are vowel sounds that make the mouth and tongue move when producing them. These are harder to pick up because they are made of several sounds at once. As students develop their phonemic awareness, they learn to pick out the individual parts of sounds. For example, the word "way" has 3 separate sounds. The "w" sound and the two sounds within the "ay".

Along with diphthongs are blends and digraphs. Blends are created when you combine two consonants but can hear two sounds. Digraphs are created when you combine two consonants and you can only hear one sound. These are a little more challenging to recognize. Many children who struggle to read have a hard time identifying what sound, or sounds, they are hearing in blends and digraphs.

Eventually, with effective instruction, students advance to the point where they can identify vocalized and non-vocalized sounds (those that make the vocal chords vibrate or not), aspirated and non-aspirated sounds (those followed by a puff of air or not), and the schwa sound (the "uh"

sound that unaccented single vowels make).

The teacher's role is find out what types of sounds the student can consistently identify, and then select the next step in the continuum of complexity for sounds. If you introduce sounds types that are too complex, the student will not be able to perform the phonemic awareness skills with those sounds.

My best advice: Assume the student is at the bottom of the continuum and have the student demonstrate sub-skills with easy sounds. Then, quickly move up to more complex sounds until the student begins to make mistakes. That point is where your instruction will begin.

Continuum of Complexity: Skill Types

Children do not have an inborn understanding of sounds within words. As mentioned previously, most students can naturally grasp an understanding of whole words and the concept that words have meaning, but it is quite a leap from whole words to parts of words.

In fact, most students can perform a host a skills before they begin analyzing and manipulating sounds within words. The following skill continuum describes the skills according to the approximate age students can perform them with instruction and practice.

Continuum of Phonemic Awareness Skills

Age Range	Skills
Before age 5	Imitate simple rhymes Recognize what words do not rhyme
Within age 5	Recognize when word sounds have been changed Count out (such as clap) syllables within words Blending initial sounds of words with the remainder of the word (example: l – og) Find rhyming words (example: What rhymes with “log”?) Identify initial sounds (example: What is the first sound in “log”?)
Within age 6	Remove part of a compound word (example: Say “watermelon” but without “water.” What do you get?) Remove a syllable (example: Say “melon” but without “mel.” What word do you get?) Blend 2-, 3-, and 4-phoneme, 1-syllable words, with and without blends (example: What word do you get from c – a – t?) Substitute phonemes to make a new 1-syllable words (example: What word do you get if you change the “h” in “hat” to a “k” sound?)
Within age 7	Remove the first or last non-blended sounds of 1-syllable words (example: Say “door” but leave out the “d” sound. What word do you get?)
Within age 8	Remove the first sound of a word that begins with a blended sound (example: What word do you get if you remove the “k” sound from “clean”?)
Within age 9	Remove inner or ending sounds of words with blended sounds

	(example: Can you say “blend” without the “b” sound? example: If you remove the “s” sound from “dusk,” what word do you get?

(adapted from Moats and Tolman’s article “The Development of Phonological Skills”)

The most important thing to notice from this continuum is that it is, actually, a continuum. Not only do the skills get more challenging over time but also the later skills are more advanced versions of early skills.

What does this mean? This means that students need to learn the simpler skills to get ready to learn the more difficult skills. **Students will only learn the more challenging skills if they have learned the simpler skills first.**

As with the continuum of sound types, we cannot assume that students have learned the earlier skills when we first start working with them. Instead, if we are going to find the appropriate next step in learning, we try out those early skills with students, see if they can do them consistently, and then move up the continuum until the student starts to struggle. In this way, we find out what students already know and what they are able to learn next.

One last thing about this continuum of skill complexity: it does not end at age 9, as suggested in the chart. There is a lot more to learn! But this is where it gets more challenging for you, as well. Based on observations of students and an examination of their assessment results, here is a general continuum of even more challenging skills.

What Works for Phonemic Awareness Instruction

As long as you follow the principles of phonemic awareness instruction, you can devise and implement many different strategies that will help students develop their phonemic awareness skills. In fact, you will want to use many different strategies. When you use multiple strategies while focusing on the same phonemes or sub-skills, your students will develop strong skills that they can eventually use easily and naturally.

The following list of strategies is a partial list. These are a few strategies that we know will work, but you may find or use others. The only caveat is this: any strategies you use must follow the instructional principles described previously.

Six Sample Strategies for Teaching Phonemic Awareness

- Modeling
- Question and answer / Oral response
- Sound searching and identification
- Rhyming poetry and songs
- Repetition and restructuring
- Phoneme / Sound counting

Modeling: To help students learn that words are made of discrete sounds and to help them identify those sounds, you have to pronounce all the words in sounds, and you have to pronounce them correctly. Along with this, you want to avoid adding extra sounds. Your enunciation must be clear and correct.

Much of phonemic awareness stems from the ability to say the sounds in words. Students who can accurately pronounce words will have an easier time learning this skill. On the other hand, students learn to say new words based on what they hear. If they hear the correct pronunciation, they learn to use correct pronunciation, and that translates into correctly finding the sounds within words.

Many words sound similar, except for one or two sounds. For example, “lightning” and “lightening” are only different by one sound. Unless students hear each word correctly, they may have difficulty distinguishing one from the other. Other words differ only based on emphasis, such as deCREASE (the noun) and DEcrease (the verb). The list of commonly mispronounced words is long, including “arctic” (not “artic”), “supposedly” (not “supposably”), “height” (not “heighth”), “correct” (not “correck”), and “jewelry” (not “jewlery”).

Your enunciation will become especially important as students begin to move from phonemic awareness to phonics, as they try to match up sounds with symbols (letters), which is necessary for learning to read. Phonics and word recognition will be simpler if the letters correspond to the sounds students are accustomed to hearing. Correct pronunciation will also contribute to correct spelling. You are the model.

Unlike the other strategies described below, modeling is not the basis for learning activities. It is

what you do all the time.

Q and A / Oral Response: With this strategy, you ask students questions about sounds and they respond orally. Once you have selected the phonemes to study, you ask questions that require students to perform various sub-skills with those sounds.

For example, let's say you are teaching the "ow" sounds and the blending sub-skill. You can instruct students to say "ow" following your prompt, and then to combine your prompt with the "ow" sound. You say "c", the students say "ow", and together you say "cow." You say "h", the students say "ow", and together you say "how."

As another example, you can ask students to say the first sound in "how," and then ask what word they get if they change the "h" sound for a "k" sound: "cow."

For a more challenging example, you can have students provide examples of words with the "ow" sound, e.g., "clown," "plow," "ouch."

Section "Continuum of Complexity: Skill Types" above has many similar examples of using this strategy. The point of this strategy is to provide students some type of direction or question that requires them to use one or more sub-skills to provide a response.

My recommendation is to have students work in small groups to first determine their answer and then to provide their response together.

Sound searching and identification: As students get older, they learn the names of more things. With younger children, you can ask them to find an object in the room that has a particular sound. With older children, you can ask them to find words that contain specific sounds in specific locations within the word. What they are doing is *searching* for examples of the sound and *identifying* where those sound are used. This strategy is also useful for expanding students' vocabulary.

A common (and fun!) activity for this strategy is the game I-Spy. When you are playing I-Spy to help students develop phonemic awareness, you need to ask most of the questions. You can let students ask some of the I-Spy questions, but by asking most of them yourself, you ensure that students get practice with the 1 or 2 target phonemes. For example, if you are focusing on the long "o" sound (as in "flow"), you can ask, "I spy something clear with the "o" sound" (window). As students make guesses, you can have them identify and count out the phonemes in the words to determine whether or not the word actually has the right sound. Then you might ask, "I spy something tall and brown that has the "o" sound" (door).

Rhyming Poetry and Songs: Young children like to sing, and they like hearing and repeating rhymes. Older students, too, enjoy rhyming poetry, especially as they learn more about rhythm and meter, although getting them to sing can be a challenge. Because children naturally enjoy rhyming poetry and songs, you can use them to practice a variety of phonemic awareness skills.

Rhyming poetry and songs help students to develop a sense of word sounds, matching sounds, emphasis, syllables, word groups, sentence structure, and pacing—all of which contribute to developing phonemic awareness skills.

They also form the basis for many fun instructional activities. For example, students can "high-five" each other for every rhyming word and they can hop forward towards a goal line for every syllable. You can have students create their own rhyming couplets using a word list of pairs of rhyming words.

Repetition and Restructuring

"Repetition" means studying the same sounds many times over time. Once students demonstrate their ability to find certain sounds within words, you will move on to other sounds. However, from time to time, come back to those same sounds to ensure students retain their grasp of them. Not only will this reinforce their ability to identify those sounds but also it will provide students with a sense of accomplishment and progress that will encourage them to keep learning.

"Restructuring" means studying the same sounds through a variety of phonemic awareness skills. For example, you might be focusing on the "-ite" sound at the ends of words. Students can also study that sounds within words, swap other sounds for the "-ite" sounds, and find out what happens to words when you remove that sound. The point is to explore sounds in a variety of ways. When you incorporate this strategy into your learning activities, students will improve their ability to break words apart into component sounds, put sounds together to make words, and perform the entire range of phonemic awareness skills.

We will visit repetition and restructuring again as we discuss strategies for learning vocabulary. As you will see, the concepts behind repetition and restructuring apply to both components of reading.

Phoneme / Sound Counting: To help students make that mental leap from whole words to sounds within words, have them count all the sounds they hear. They can do this by clapping their hands, making marks on a paper, or placing objects on a grid for every sound they hear. With more advanced students, you can have them circle letter combinations that produce individual sounds or that have beats in a rhythm. Regardless of how students do it, the act of counting sounds they hear forces them to think critically about the phonemes within words. Then, as they improve their ability to identify individual sounds, they can begin learning more advanced phonemic awareness skills.

Sample Activities for Phonemic Awareness

Strategy	**Sample Activity Types**	**Phonemic Awareness Sub-skills**
Modeling	Continuous exposure by the teacher or other adults.	Identification Blending Differentiation Isolation
Question and Answer / Oral Response	Short-answer questions Explicit instruction Call-and-response	All

	Finding rhymes	
	Pair response to questions	
	Pair blending	
	Fill in missing words (based on a rhyme)	
	Teacher-led oral practice	
Sound Searching and Identification	Sounding out words	Identification
	I-Spy	Completion
	Identifying words by sounds	Differentiation
	Creating rhymes	Matching
	Word-grouping	
	Matching pictures to words	
Rhyming Poetry and Songs	Sing-along	Identification
	Fill in the missing words / line	Completion
	Hand clapping	Manipulation
	Word swapping	Matching
	Exaggerated recitation	
	Sound marking	
	Alphabet song	
Repetition and Restructuring	Any instructional strategies as you teach and reinforce the sub-skills	All
Phoneme / Sound Counting	Sound boards	Identification
	Sound removal	Completion
	Marking written poetry	Deletion
	Clapping sounds / syllables	Isolation
	Word grouping by sound	

	counts	Matching
	Matching words by sounds	Reversal
	Metered poetry	
	Letter bingo	
	Sound picture charts	

What Does Not Work for Phonemic Awareness Instruction

With so many sub-skills and potentially effective strategies, it might seem that just about anything you do will help students develop their phonemic awareness skills. This is not true. Some strategies, and associated activities, either do not contribute to phonemic awareness or are only minimally effective.

Strategy	**Reason Why It Does Not Work**
Flash Cards	When using flash cards, the emphasis is on decoding the words and word recognition. This is phonics, not phonemic awareness, and does not require identification and modification of the sounds within words.
Reading Drills	For the same reason as flash cards, reading drills do not require the use of phonemic awareness skills. Instead, the focus is on accurate decoding.
Sustained Silent Reading (SSR)	Phonemic awareness is about sound. SSR is silent. Students do not have to use any phonemic awareness skills when doing SSR.
Computerized Instruction	Very few computerized instructional programs recognize and analyze speech patterns. (Rosetta Stone comes to mind.) As a result, most programs cannot determine whether or not students are accurately identifying sounds or using phonemic awareness sub-skills. Some programs ask students to find a picture of an object with a particular sound in its name, similar to an I-Spy game. What they lack, however, is follow-up correction and instruction. These types of computerized instruction cannot be as effective as a teacher's instruction.
Worksheets	Worksheets might be used for assessment purposes if students are indicating letter groups, words, or pictures that have particular sounds. Of course, this assumes that students are already reading or already know the names of the items in the pictures, as well as the

	sounds within the words or names. For instructional purposes, however, they are ineffective or, at the most, minimally effective. Worksheets are a very poor way to teach sounds or the phonemic awareness sub-skills.
Individual Oral Reading	Here, individual oral reading refers to a student reading aloud a passage without teacher intervention, except, possibly, teacher help with some of the words. Generally, with oral reading the focus is on phonics and fluency. It may be a decent strategy for assessing these two reading components, but simply reading words aloud does not help students learn to identify sounds within words or to modify them. Guided oral reading (and other out-loud reading activities with correction, instruction, and repeated reading), on the other hand, will give the teacher the opportunity to explore the sounds within specific words. Guided oral reading by itself does not provide instruction in phonemic awareness, but it can provide opportunities for phonemic awareness instruction.

Companion Reading Components

Phonemic Awareness skills are best taught when combined with instruction in the following three reading components. As you are helping students learn phonemic awareness skills, also provide instruction in these components.

Phonics: Phonemic Awareness skills contribute to phonics skills. They both relate to the sounds of, and within, words. Whereas phonemic awareness only addresses the sounds of words, phonics addresses the process of translating letters into sounds. Once students begin understanding letter sounds, probably around age 4, you can begin teaching phonics. At that point, you can begin connecting the sounds within words to the sounds represented by letters. From that point on, help students understand the connection between the sounds they hear and the letters that represent them.

Vocabulary: Knowing how to pronounce words, and knowing the sounds within words, is not enough. Students also need to know what those words mean and how they are used. That's vocabulary. By including vocabulary development into your phonemic awareness lessons, you give students an overall better ability to understand what they hear and read.

Oral Language Development: To find sounds within words, to find words with similar sounds, and for all the phonemic awareness sub-skills, students need to know how words are pronounced! Pronunciation depends on context, setting, and culture—which means oral language development. Often, words are not pronounced according to their spelling, or even according to the standard pronunciation. For example, do you say "buddah" or "budder" or "butter"? As students begin transferring phonemic awareness skills to vocabulary and phonics, they need to understand that words can be pronounced in different ways, although there is a standard way. This is the realm of oral language development. Phonemic awareness skills will make more sense if you provide corresponding instruction in oral language skills.