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(continued after chapter 9)

Diane J. Sawyer
Barbara J. Fox
Editors

Phonological Awareness
in Reading
The Evolution of
Current Perspectives

With 12 illustrations



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Preface

Rarely does a researcher have the opportunity to reflect on a program of research conducted over time. Typically, individual reports of studies are carefully shaped, through the review of the literature, to state only the specific question to be addressed. Such a report does not reflect the researcher's depth of understanding of the relationships that have served the development of a single study.

In the field of research on phonological awareness, many prominent scholars have been engaged in long-term programs of inquiry. The editors of this volume believe that a forum is needed in which these researchers are encouraged to take the necessary perspective and space to make explicit the principle insights gained from the tiering effect of conceptually sequenced studies. Such a forum allows for the presentation of the perspectives of researchers from widely different cultural and linguistic settings. The value of this volume, then, lies within its unique character—serving both as a vehicle for the presentation of insights gleaned from personal involvement in well-defined avenues of inquiry and for debating the relative significance of possible future research directions.

Growing out of an early interest in the development of metalinguistic awareness, Tunmer and Rohl (Chapter 1) describe the evolution of their inquiry into the nature of phonological awareness. Their work, and that of their colleagues, addresses five basic questions: What is phonological awareness? How can it be measured? What is its relation to reading acquisition? Why do some children encounter difficulty acquiring phonological awareness? What are the implications of research in this skill for educational practice? Their discussion elaborates on progress made toward answering these questions, as well as views regarding issues as yet unresolved. Included among these issues is the need to define phonological awareness as the ability to identify phonemic (not syllable or onset–rime)

units. Also included is the belief that measures of phonological awareness must be selected so as to be appropriate to the capabilities of preliterates.

Morais (Chapter 2) explores what he considers to be the two main issues now facing researchers—how phonological awareness relates to literacy and how it relates to language. He proposes that research address the specification of interactions between phonological processing and literacy, calling for investigations into their microgenesis. Similarly, he calls for specification of the linkages between conscious representations of the phonological units of speech and the processes of speech perception. Morais describes his inquiries into the forms of phonological awareness, as well as the relationship between segmental awareness and literacy in an alphabetic system. Finally, he discusses what is known about the relationship between segmental awareness and language.

Lundberg and Høien (Chapter 3) choose to consider the initial enabling knowledge and skills in reading acquisition. Throughout their chapter, they maintain that the metalinguistic domain can be divided into two basic factors: print awareness and phonological awareness. Although they consider print awareness to be related primarily to reading comprehension, they suggest that phonological awareness is related primarily to phonological recoding. They review a series of longitudinal and experimental studies conducted in Scandinavia. They conclude that, collectively, these studies indicate that phonemic awareness is available to some preliterate children and can be successfully taught outside the context of formal reading instruction in school. Further, transfer of this training is specific to reading and is long lasting. These authors call for more integrative, theoretical, and cross-disciplinary efforts to enable a deeper understanding of the process of literacy development.

Sawyer (Chapter 4) describes her search to understand the relatedness between metalinguistic abilities, including awareness of words, syllables, and phonemes, and success in reading acquisition. Arising from her work in a reading clinic, her search began with the development of a measurement tool and proceeded toward a description of the differences in competencies among good and poor readers. Subsequent studies examined the effects of training in word, syllable, and phoneme awareness on later achievement. Discovery that training, in and of itself, did not eliminate the so-called Matthew effect led her to examine the interrelatedness between metalinguistic abilities and method of instruction. She presents a model of reading acquisition, generated in the conduct of three longitudinal studies. This model explains the relationship between early language-processing abilities, including metalinguistic abilities, and subsequent achievement in word recognition and comprehension throughout the primary grades.

Arising from inquiry into the progress toward phonological awareness, Fox (Chapter 5) became interested in delineating the factors that might explain the relative importance of phonological awareness in recoding. She

presents a model in which textual reading bears an interactive relationship with phonological recoding. This model is rooted in the belief that the process of learning to recode first involves learning highly detailed information related to the visual and verbal units of language, including phonological awareness. She describes this period as requiring extensive elaboration of the knowledge base regarding letters, phonemes, and the rules that govern their transcription. This is followed by a period of time during which these details are refined and integrated into processes that permit efficient application of the alphabetic principle. She discusses the implications of this model for research and pedagogy.

Treiman (Chapter 6) develops the premise that phonological awareness is not a unitary skill. Rather, it includes awareness of syllables and intrasyllable units (onset–rime), as well as phonemic units. She discusses the relationship between phonological awareness and learning to read and spell. From her studies, she concludes that nonreaders with low phonological awareness skills treat reading as a paired associate task. With even minimal training, however, preschool nonreaders can be helped to drop that strategy in favor of a more analytic approach to reading. Further, Treiman postulates that experience with standard spelling helps children learn to attend to the phonemic level and that this level is critical for establishing accurate spelling.

In reviewing her own work in the area of phonological awareness, Mann (Chapter 7) cites the contributions made by Isabelle Liberman and other members of the Haskins Group, and elaborates on her own inquiries into the relationship between phonological awareness and the ability to read an alphabet. She describes three approaches that might aid in resolving the issues of the interrelatedness of phonological awareness and reading acquisition: longitudinal research, cross-linguistic studies, and investigations of children and adults who speak secret languages. Mann concludes that phonological awareness can presage reading and that children may become aware of phonemes before they are taught to read an alphabet. She proposes that age might be a significant factor in the acquisition of phonological awareness and suggests the need to develop instructional programs to enhance children's awareness of the phonemic structure of speech.

Leong (Chapter 8) reviews the literature pertaining to phonological awareness with particular attention to the early work of Elkonin. He credits Elkonin, as well as Chomsky and Halle, with having laid the cognitive linguistic foundation for the whole field of inquiry into phonological awareness. In his discussion of training programs, Leong describes the contributions of a variety of research projects that have been conducted internationally, concluding that there is a consensus regarding the importance of phonemic awareness early in reading. He calls for further research to specify the nature of phonological awareness tasks, including their differential contribution to reading as a cognitive process. He contends that difficulty

in performing a given task may result from the lack of specificity in the task rather than a deficiency in control over linguistic processes. Although some tasks require the classification of speech into a sequence of units, others require the identification of boundaries between speech units. Confusion regarding precisely what a given task is measuring can lead to misinterpretations of the behaviors observed. He calls for a clearer delineation of the units of speech perception, as well as agreed-upon definitions of the specific units of focus.

The perspectives presented by the contributors to this text draw on extensive programs of research, reflecting the evolution of current views and delineating projections for future elaboration of these views. Although significant convergence of findings is evident, and agreement regarding certain key issues is apparent, the reader of this volume will find sufficient diversity of perspective and interpretation to stimulate thought and challenge assumptions. The field of phonological awareness has grown significantly over the past 20 years. The foundation on which future growth may be based is revealed in this text.

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