

# Phonological Awareness Is Child's Play!



Hallie Kay Yopp and Ruth Helen Yopp

"MISS BINDER! MISS BINDER! I HAVE ANOTHER WAY! LISTEN! 'Old MacDonald had a farm, Me Mi Me Mi Mo!'" Four-year-old Josh and his peers burst into giggles as he sings his version of "Old MacDonald's Farm." Then Therese offers "Le Li Le Li Lo," and the group boisterously sings the modified song yet again. Miss Binder smiles and encourages other children to create their own versions.

In the room next door, children enthusiastically participate as their teacher reads aloud *The Hungry Thing* by Jan Slepian and Ann Seidler (1967). When Ms. Mahalingam reads the Hungry Thing's request for "featloaf," the children chorus, "Meatloaf! Meatloaf! The Hungry Thing wants meatloaf!" When she reads that the Hungry Thing wants to be served "Gollipops," the children interrupt the reading to cry, "Lollipop!" Ms. Mahalingam follows the book experiences by helping the children notice that the Hungry Thing replaces initial sounds in words with different sounds, and she extends their learning by inviting them to experiment with substituting the initial sounds in other words.

**B**oth Miss Binder and Ms. Mahalingam had thoughtfully planned these experiences to engage the children in activities that stimulate interest in and experimentation with the sounds of language. They are supporting phonological awareness, a crucial part of reading development.

## What is phonological awareness?

Phonological awareness is sensitivity to the sound structure of language. It demands the ability to turn one's attention to sounds in spoken language while temporarily shifting away from its meaning. When asked if the word *caterpillar* is longer than the word *train*, a child who answers that the word *caterpillar* is longer is demonstrating the ability to separate words from their meanings. A child who says the word *train* is longer has not separated the two; a train is obviously much longer than a caterpillar!

Children who can detect and manipulate sounds in speech are phonologically aware. The children who added a sound to E-I-E-I-O demonstrated some phonologi-

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cal awareness, as did the children who substituted one sound for another when listening to *The Hungry Thing*. While several children were unable to detect and engage in these sound manipulations, they were delighted with the activities nonetheless and benefited from exposure to such language play.

Phonological awareness has two dimensions and progresses from holistic and simple forms of awareness to more complex forms (Treiman & Zukowski 1991; Cisero & Royer 1995; Anthony et al. 2003). One dimension is the *size* of the sound unit being attended to and manipulated. From larger to smaller, the sound units include syllables, onset-rime units, and phonemes. These are described in the sections that follow.

The second dimension is the *type of manipulation* of the sound units and the child's ability not just to recognize the manipulation but also to perform it. Manipulations may include substituting one sound for another in a word (for example, *tookies* for *cookies*), adding or removing sounds from words, blending sounds together to make words, and segmenting words into smaller sound units. (See "Important Understandings about Phonological Awareness.")



### Syllable awareness

The ability to discern syllables (that the word *friend* has one syllable, *cubby* has two, *tricycle* has three, and so on) occurs early in the developmental progression of phonological awareness. When our own children were 4, they enjoyed playing word games in which they identified the word that would result if syllables were combined. Driving down the street, one of us might say, "I see a mar—ket," and our children would be delighted to respond, "Market! You see a market! More, Mommy!" "OK. I see a lan—tern." "Lantern, Mom!" Blending the syllables together to form words seemed relatively easy for them; they caught on to the game quickly.

Our children found it more difficult to break words apart to provide the syllable clues. Their ability to segment words into syllables took longer to develop. "Mom, I want to try it. I want to give the broken word. Ready? I see an . . . apple!" they might say, attempting to give the clue but instead blurting out the entire word. They recognized that they had not done something quite right, but they were not sure what it was or what to do about it. Eventually, however, our 4-year-olds could segment words into syllables, and they enjoyed trying to stump us with multisyllabic words: "Guess what I am saying: *Dal—ma—tian*; *mo—tor—cy—cle*; *hel—i—cop—ter*." We called this play with syllables the broken word game.

**From larger to smaller, the sound units include syllables, onset-rime units, and phonemes.**

### Onset-rime awareness

Reflecting on onsets and rimes—smaller units within syllables—is a more complex skill. Onsets are the consonant sounds that precede a vowel in a syllable. For instance, the sound *c* is the onset in the one-syllable word *cat*; *fr* is the onset in *frog*. In the two-syllable word *window*, *w* is the onset in the first syllable (*win*), and *d* is the onset in the second syllable (*dow*). Some syllables have no onsets. *An*, for instance, has no onset; no sound precedes the vowel.

## Important Understandings about Phonological Awareness

- Phonological awareness is the ability to attend to and manipulate units of sound in speech (syllables, onsets and rimes, and phonemes) independent of meaning.
- Phonemic awareness is one aspect (and the most difficult) of phonological awareness. It is the ability to attend to and manipulate phonemes, the smallest sounds in speech.
- Phonological awareness includes matching, synthesis (for example, blending, adding), and analysis (for example, counting, segmenting, deleting) of spoken sounds. Analysis tasks are generally more challenging; production is typically more difficult than recognition.
- Phonological awareness and phonemic awareness are different from phonics. Phonics is a means of teaching reading in which the associations between letters and sounds are emphasized.
- Phonological awareness is highly related to later success in reading and spelling.
- Phonological awareness can be taught. Instruction should be child-appropriate and intentional.
- Although instruction should generally progress from larger to smaller units of sound, phonological awareness development is not lockstep and children need not master one level before being exposed to other levels of phonological awareness.
- Concrete representations of sound units (such as chips and blocks) may help make mental manipulations of sounds easier for some children. Pictures and objects may help reduce memory load.

All syllables have a rime unit. Rimes consist of the vowel and any sounds that follow it in the syllable. For example, the rimes in *cat* and *frog* are *at* and *og*, respectively. The rime in the first syllable of *window* is *in*, and the rime in the second syllable of *window* is *ow*. A rime may consist only of the vowel if no consonant follows. Children who identify the onset-rime level of speech can, among other manipulations, blend *mmm—an* together to form the spoken word *man* and separate the *r* from the rime *ipe* to say *rrr—ipe*.

### Phoneme awareness

Smaller still—in fact, the smallest unit of speech that makes a difference in communication—are phonemes. These are the individual sounds of spoken language. The number of sounds in speech varies greatly among languages, from as few as about 10 phonemes in Múra-Pirahã (spoken in a region of Brazil) to more than 140 phonemes in !Xu (spoken in a region of Africa). English speakers use

In the remainder of this article, sounds are represented by letters between slash marks; for example, /s/ represents the sound at the beginning of the word *soap*. Letter names are represented by capitals.

### Why is phonological awareness important in reading development?

In English—and many other languages—the written language is predominantly a record of the sounds of the spoken language. With a few exceptions, the English language is written out sound by sound. (Exceptions include but are not limited to symbols such as \$, %, #, and &, which represent ideas rather than the sounds of speech; you can't sound out these symbols!) For example, to write the word *cat*, we listen to the individual sounds in the word (the phonemes) and then use the symbols that represent those sounds:

C-A-T. Sometimes sounds are represented by letter combinations rather than a single letter. The three sounds in *fish* (/f/-/i/-/sh/) are written with four letters: F-I-S-H; the combination of S and H represents the single sound /sh/.

We must be able to notice and have a firm grasp of the sounds of our speech if we are to understand how to use a written

### Phonological Units

What are the phonological units in the word *chimneys*?

Word	Chimneys					
Syllables	chim			neys		
Onsets and Rimes	Ch	im		n	eys	
Phonemes	Ch	i	m	n	ey	s

about 44 sounds. Spanish speakers use about 24. Thinking about and manipulating these smallest sounds of speech is the most complex of the phonological awareness skills and is referred to as *phoneme awareness* or *phonemic awareness*. Typically it is the last and deepest understanding of speech that children acquire (Stahl & Murray 1994). It involves knowing that the spoken word *light* consists of three sounds (*l-igh-t*) and the spoken word *black* consists of four (*b-l-a-ck*). (See "Phonological Units" for a breakdown showing the syllables, onsets, rimes, and phonemes in the spoken word *chimneys*.)



**Noticing and being able to manipulate the sounds of spoken language—phonological awareness—is highly related to later success in reading and spelling.**

system that records sounds. Individuals who are unaware that speech is made up of small sounds—those who don't notice and cannot mentally grab hold of and manipulate them—have difficulty learning to read a written system based on sounds. A child's ability to reflect on language itself, specifically the sounds of language and especially the phonemes, supports the child's understanding of the logic of the written code. That we use symbols to represent small sounds *makes sense* because the English language consists of small sounds. Indeed, in the last several decades a preponderance of evidence has revealed that noticing and being able to manipulate the sounds of spoken language—phonological awareness—is highly related to later success in reading and spelling (see Adams 1990 and Ehri et al. 2001 for reviews). The developmental origins of this awareness can be traced to the preschool period (Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony 2000; Ehri & Roberts 2006; Lonigan 2006; Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti, & Lonigan 2008).

### How can preschool teachers support phonological awareness development?

Young children have a natural propensity to play with language, and the early years are an optimal time to foster and extend their explorations. For instance, in Ms. Garcia's room, the children learned the Spanish chant "*Bate, Bate Chocolate*," which helps children break down syllables: "Uno, dos, tres, CHO! Uno, dos, tres, CO! Uno, dos, tres, LA! Uno, dos, tres, TE!" Four-year-old Franco later adapted this chant as he played with and named animal figurines, spontaneously chanting, "*Uno, dos, tres, O! Uno, dos, tres, SO!*" and "*Uno, dos, tres, BU! Uno, dos, tres, RRO!*" In Mr. Hernandez's room, 3-year-old Jessie pounded a few blocks together and vocalized, "Boom boom bam bam boom boom bim!" Another time, Mr. Hernandez heard Molly singing quietly, "Molly, dolly, polly, jolly, Molly, dolly, polly, jolly." Insightful preschool teachers notice children's spontaneous play with the sounds of language, respond to it, and encourage it, often joining in themselves. Mr. Hernandez, for example, joined Jessie, tapped two blocks together, and chanted, "Zoom zoom zam zam zoom zoom zim! Have you got another way?" He extended Jessie's play with sounds.

In addition to watching for these spontaneous teachable moments, Mr. Hernandez deliberately establishes a phonologically rich environment (Torgesen & Mathes 1998) simi-

lar to a print-rich environment. Children learn about print when they see it used in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes. So too can children benefit from being surrounded by the sounds of language—as they sing, chant, listen to books, and play games that focus on sound manipulation.

Furthermore, Mr. Hernandez deliberately engages children in activities that target different levels of phonological awareness, planning experiences that move from targeting larger sound units to smaller ones. He models sound manipulations, later guiding the older children to perform them. He considers the type of manipulation, recognizing that blending is typically easier than segmenting. He shows pictures of animals and, after ensuring that the children can identify them, has them point to the one he means when he says /ze/-/bra/. In small groups, children play the coin sound game, in which they represent sounds by moving coins or chips, or they play with interlocking blocks, pulling them apart as they segment words into sound chunks.

Below we share five suggestions that preschool teachers can easily implement as they support young children's development of phonological awareness.

### Read aloud books that play with sounds



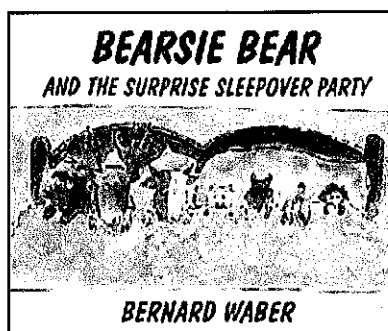
Preschool teachers can read aloud books that draw attention to sounds (Yopp 1995; Yopp & Yopp 2000). For example, *Los Niños Alfabéticos*, by Lourdes Ayala and Margarita Isona-Rodríguez, uses alliteration and rhyme throughout. Sound

substitution is the focus of *Cock-a-doodle-MOO!* by Bernard Most, which describes a rooster's dismay when he loses his voice. The rooster enlists the aid of a cow to awaken the farm residents. Unable to say "cock-a-doodle-doo," the cow says, "mock-a-moodle-moo," "sock-a-noodle-moo," and other mixed-up versions of the morning greeting.

Reading aloud books like these helps draw even very young children's attention to the sounds of language. Teachers of older preschoolers—ages 4 and 5—may extend the learning by deliberately focusing on the phonological features. For instance, teachers can encourage children to predict rhyming words or alliterations and to repeat and add to the silly sound manipulations: "The cow said 'Mock-a-moodle-moo!' How silly! We can do this, too. How about 'dock-a-doodle-doo' or 'pock-a-poodle-poo'? Who has another way?"

After reading aloud Bernard Waber's *Bearsie Bear and the Surprise Sleepover Party*, Ms. Hansen chuckled with the children in her class about the names of the animals in the story—Moosie Moose, Foxie Fox, Goosie Goose, and others. She repeated the names a few times, then shared a collection of small stuffed animals and encouraged the children to name them. Ms. Hansen placed the animals in a play center, along with the book and a box with blankets. For days, children reenacted the story, created their own versions, and—most important—repeated and continued to play with the sounds in the animals' names.

Alphabet books are another valuable resource for promoting phonological awareness. Teachers and children talk about sounds (in addition to letters) as they look at and read alphabet books.



(For more books—in English and Spanish—see “Read-Aloud Books That Play with Language.”)

When using any book to stimulate phonological awareness in 4- and 5-year-olds, do the following:

- Select a book that makes obvious use of sound play. Read it yourself before reading it to children. This will ensure smooth reading and prepare you to comment on, highlight, explain, and extend the book's language play.
- Comment on the book's language play. Invite children to share their observations about the language and to add their own play with sounds. Appreciate and visibly enjoy children's efforts.
- Read the book several times in a period of a few weeks. Encourage children to participate by chanting along or predicting the sound manipulations as you read.

## Read-Aloud Books That Play with Language

### Books in English

*Altoona Baboona*, by J. Bynum. 1999. San Diego: Harcourt.  
*Altoona Up North*, by J. Bynum. 2001. San Diego: Harcourt.  
*Bearsie Bear and the Surprise Sleepover Party*, by B. Waber. 1997. New York: Houghton Mifflin.  
*Chugga Chugga Choo Choo*, by K. Lewis. 1999. New York: Hyperion.  
*Cock-a-doodle-Moo!* by B. Most. 1996. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.  
*The Happy Hippopotami*. by B. Martin Jr. 1970. San Diego: Voyager.  
*Here's a Little Poem: A Very First Book of Poetry*, by J. Yolen. 2007. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.  
*The Hungry Thing*, by J.A. Slepian & A. Seidler. 1967. New York: Scholastic.  
*Jamberry*, by B. Degen. 2000. 25th ann. ed. New York: HarperCollins.  
*Llama llama mad at Mama*, by A. Dewdney. 2007. New York: Viking.  
*Llama Llama Red Pajama*, by A. Dewdney. 2005. New York: Viking.  
*The Piggy in the Puddle*, by C. Pomerantz. 1974. New York: Simon & Schuster.  
*Runny Babbit*, by S. Silverstein. 2005. New York: HarperCollins.

*Tanka Tanka Skunk*, by S. Webb. 2004. New York: Orchard.  
*There's a Wocket in My Pocket*, by Dr. Seuss. 1974. New York: Random House  
*What Will You Wear, Jenny Jenkins?* by J. Garcia & D. Grisman. 2000. New York: HarperCollins.

### Books in Spanish

*Albertina anda arriba: El abecedario*, by N.M.G. Tabor. 1992. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.  
*Arrorró mi niño: Latino Lullabies and Gentle Games*, by L. Delacre. 2004. New York: Lee & Low.  
*Aserrín, Aserrán: Las canciones de la abuela* (Grandmother's songs), by A. Longo. 2004. New York: Scholastic.  
*Destralenguerías para trabalengueiros*, by H.G. Delgado. 2002. Bogotá, Columbia: Intermedio.  
*¡Hay un molillo en mi bolsillo!* by Dr. Seuss. Tran. Y. Canetti. 2007. New York: Lectorum.  
*La mansión misteriosa*, by C. Gil. 2007. Barcelona: Combel.

*Mother Goose on the Rio Grande*, by F. Alexander. 1997. Lincolnwood, IL: Passport.

*Las nanas de abuelita: Canciones de cuna, trabalenguas y adivinanzas de Suramérica*, by N.P. Jaramillo. 1994. New York: Henry Holt.

*Los niños alfabéticos*, by L. Ayala & M. Isona-Rodriguez. 1995. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.

*Números tragaldabas*, by M. Robleda. 2003. Mexico: Ediciones Destino.

*¡Pío Peep! Rimas tradicionales en español. Edición especial*, by A.F. Ada & F.I. Campoy. 2003. New York: HarperCollins.

*Los pollitos dicen: Juegos, rimas y canciones infantiles de países de habla hispana*, by N.A. Hall & J. Syverson-Stork. 1999. Boston: Little, Brown.

*El sapo distraído*, by J. Rondon. 1988. Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones Ekare.

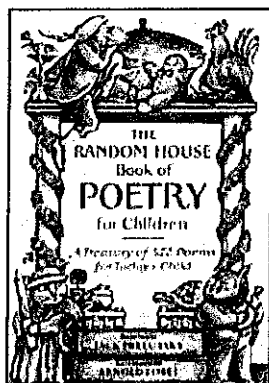
*Los sonidos a mi alrededor*, by P. Showers. 1996. Harper Arco Iris.

*El toro pinto and Other Songs in Spanish*, by A. Rockwell. 1995. New York: Aladdin.

*Tortillitas para Mama*, by M.C. Griego, B.L. Bucks, S.S. Gilbert, & L.H. Kimball. 1981. New York: Henry Holt.

- Place the book in a readily accessible location for several weeks or longer, and encourage children to revisit the book on their own.
- Share book-related objects that encourage further interaction with the story and that might stimulate additional story-related language play. Model the use of the objects, but appreciate children's creativity.
- Reread the book on subsequent occasions, exploring the language play again.

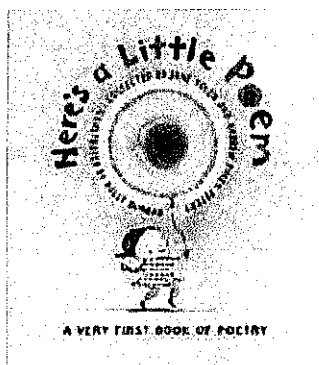
### Share poetry that plays with sounds



Teachers may share poetry with children and encourage older preschoolers to recite the poems and add to them. For example, after children have heard and chanted "Hickory Dickory Dock" several times, suggest they create a poem titled "Hickory Dickory Dare." Ask the children where the mouse might go. Some children might appropriately substitute the onset by saying "The mouse

ran to the fair" or "The mouse ran through the hair." Other children might offer responses such as, "The mouse ran to the store." Chuckle and appreciate this response for its image, but gently guide the child to offer a word that fits the sound pattern. Provide feedback, such as "Good idea! I can picture in my head a mouse running to a store! Let's see if we can use a word that rhymes with *dare*: 'Hickory Dickory *Dare*, the mouse ran to the *bear*.' What else rhymes with *dare*? *Care*? *Share*? Let's try!" Invite enthusiastic children to offer other variations of the poem: "Hickory Dickory Doo," "Hickory Dickory Dub," "Hickity Dicky Diddle."

Poetry anthologies for young listeners often include poems that play with sounds. Shel Silverstein's collections have many such poems, including one of our favorites, *Falling Up*. Silverstein retells the story of Pinocchio, referring to him as the wooden bloke-io, whose nose grew as he spoke-io, thought life was a joke-io (and got in trouble), but by the end of the two-page poem everything was okey-



Teachers can encourage children to predict rhyming words or alliterations and to repeat and add to the silly sound manipulations.

dokey-o. *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children*, compiled by Jack Prelutsky, and *Here's a Little Poem: A Very*

*First Book of Poetry*,

selected by Jane Yolen and Andrew Fusek Peters, are also good resources for English speakers. *Los Pollitos Dicen/ The Baby Chicks Sing*, by Nancy Abraham Hall and Jill Syverson-Stork,

and *Mother Goose on the Rio Grande*, by Frances Alexander, are appropriate for Spanish speakers.

When sharing poetry (or songs) to stimulate phonological awareness in 4- and 5-year-olds, do the following:

- Select a poem that has sound play as a dominant feature.
- Read the poem to the children several times. Be sure to enjoy the poem as you recite it. Keep the sharing oral so the focus is on listening. Display the printed poem later if you wish.
- Encourage children to learn short poems well enough to say them with you. This may take several days and multiple repetitions. With long poems, encourage children to learn a few lines or phrases that they can chant.
- Comment on the language play, drawing attention to obvious alliterations and other sound manipulations (such as the "io" in Silverstein's "Pinocchio"). Invite children's responses.
- Encourage, but do not require, the children to be creative with the poem, making their own versions or extensions. Provide prompts, as in the case of "Hickory Dickory Dock." Write children's creations on posters, and display them in the room for further sharing. Consider compiling a classroom poetry book. Keep a copy in the library corner, and make copies to send home.
- Revisit poems periodically during the year.

### Share songs that play with sounds

Many children's songs include sound play. "Willoughby Wallaby Woo," for instance, prompts children to sing their own names, substituting /w/ for the initial sound (the onset) in the first syllable:

Willoughby Wallaby Woo,  
An elephant sat on you.

Willoughby Wallaby Wee,  
An elephant sat on me!

Willoughby Wallaby Weter,  
An elephant sat on Peter.

Willoughby Wallaby Willy,  
An elephant sat on Billy.

In "Down by the Bay," a moose kisses a goose, llamas wear pajamas, and a whale has a polka dot tail. In "The Bee and the Pup," children sing about a bee-i-ee-i-ee who sat on a wall-i-all-i-all and went buzz-i-uzz-i-uzz. In "Oo-pples and Boo-noo-noos," children substitute vowel sounds to sing about apples and bananas in silly ways. Children become enthusiastic participants in these playful songs and often improvise original lyrics. Some songs are particularly well suited for this type of play (Yopp 1992; Yopp & Yopp 2002). The recommendations for poetry use apply to the use of songs as well.

### Play games that draw attention to sounds

One frequently requested game Miss Son plays with 4- and 5-year-olds is the guessing game "I Spy." She says, "I spy with my little eye something all of you are wearing that begins like this: /sh/." The children look at one another, and several exclaim, "Shoe!" "Yes. Shoe begins with /sh/. Listen: shhhhhhoe," she draws out. Next she says, "I spy with my little eye something on the wall that begins like this: /m/." Guesses from the children include "mirror" and "map." Tommy, noting that Miss Son appears to be looking in the direction of the book corner, says, "Books." Miss Son gently reinforces the correct responses by exaggerating the initial sound, and she comments that Tommy thought of an object that begins with the sound /b/.

On another day, Miss Son introduces the puppet Ziggy Zebra. She says that Ziggy is silly because he always pronounces names by substituting /z/ at the beginning. Ziggy pronounces Miss Son's name, Miss Zon, and Tommy is called Zommy. Over the next few days, she introduces other puppets: Benny Beetle, who says everyone's name with a /b/ sound at the beginning; Lizzy Ladybug, who says everyone's name with an initial /l/ sound; and so forth. Later, Miss Son will use the puppets to model segmentation of phonemes. A puppet will tell the children it can run /t/-/a/-/s/-/t/ and ask if the children know what it said. It will say that it likes to eat /p/-/ea/-/s/. The children participate enthusiastically and then use the puppets on their own.

Teachers can create many games that play with sounds (see "Games for Phonological Awareness" for additional examples). In doing so, they should consider the following:

- Select games that stimulate language play among participants.

## Modifications of Familiar Songs

Here are a number of songs that lend themselves to children's word play—changing the onset (the opening consonant sound of a syllable) or the rime (the vowel sound and following consonants in a syllable). If you are not familiar with the tunes, you might find them online on YouTube.

### Old MacDonald's Farm

Old MacDonald had a farm  
He-hi-he-hi-ho!  
And on that farm he had a pig  
He-hi-he-hi-ho!  
With a hoink hoink here  
And a hoink hoink there,  
Here a hoink,  
There a hoink,  
Everywhere a hoink hoink,  
Old MacDonald had a farm  
He-hi-he-hi-ho!

### Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes

Nead and noulders, nees and noes, nees and noes,  
Nead and noulders, nees and noes, nees and noes,  
And neyes and nears and nouth and nose,  
Nead and noulders, nees and noes, nees and noes!

### John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt

Pohn Pacob Pingleheimer Schmidt,  
His name is my name too.  
Whenever we go out,  
The people always shout,  
There goes Pohn Pacob Pingleheimer Schmidt.

### I've Been Working on the Railroad

Ke-ki-kiddly-i-o  
Ke-ki-kiddly-i-o-o-o-o  
Ke-ki-kiddly-i-oooo  
Ke-ki-kiddly-i-o!

### The Farmer in the Dell

The farmer in the dell,  
The farmer in the dell,  
Mi-mo the merry-o,  
The farmer in the dell.

### This Old Man

This old man, he played one,  
He played bick-back on his thumb,  
With a bick-back, paddy wack, give a dog a bone,  
This old man came rolling home.

- Ensure that games are enjoyable (even silly) and stress-free for participants.
- Encourage, but do not require, children to participate. Some will contribute and others will listen.
- Participate in the game and model an interest in and excitement about language.
- Respond positively and enthusiastically to children's attempts to manipulate the sounds of their language.

### Involve families

The home, too, provides fertile ground for sound play (Bishop, Yopp, & Yopp 2000). Teachers can share books, poems, songs, and games with families to enjoy with their children at home. This practice communicates to families the value of engaging in what might seem to be silly, non-sensical sound play with their children. Encourage families who speak a language other than English to use their home language to engage in language activities that manipulate sounds (Dickinson et al. 2004; Yopp & Stapleton 2008). Many cultures have traditional rhymes, chants, and songs that use sound play. Families who share these with their children are supporting their literacy development in many ways, one of which is by stimulating a sensitivity to sounds in spoken language. Research suggests that phonological awareness transfers from one language to another (Durgunoglu & Oney 2000). When children have opportunities to explore speech sounds of any language, they build insight about the nature of speech and carry that insight to a second language.

When encouraging family involvement, teachers can do the following:

- Share the value of language play in the home language at drop-off and pickup times, during conferences, and through newsletters and other communications.
- Invite family members to visit and observe phonological awareness activities in the classroom.
- Read aloud books and poems, sing songs, and demonstrate games at family meetings to model appropriate language play with young children. Ensure that family members view these as joyful and important experiences.
- Send home lists of highly recommended read-aloud books. Provide a handout with poems and song lyrics to share with children at home.
- Ask bilingual/multilingual family members, colleagues, and community members to be classroom resources. Ask them to share with you books, traditional poems, and songs in their home language that play with sounds. Pass these along to other families who speak the same language.

### Conclusion

We titled this article "Phonological Awareness Is Child's Play!" because we believe that, for young children, developmentally appropriate phonological awareness activities are a form of play. Riddles, games, singing, and dramatization will bring on laughter, silliness, and experimentation.

## Games for Phonological Awareness

### Clapping Syllables

- Explain to children that the game is to clap the beats (or chunks) of the words they speak.
- Begin with clapping the syllables in children's names. For instance, clap three times as you slowly chant "Erica." Clap two times as you say "Kareem." Clap one time as you say "Dan."
- Clap every child's name during a group activity. It is important to slow down and emphasize each syllable.
- Clap all the syllables in other words. Try *table, chair, carpet, bookcase, lunch, paper, playground, basketball*. Clap on a variety of occasions. For instance, clap the names of foods you

are eating for lunch. Let children offer words to clap.

- Say a sentence slowly, and then invite children to repeat the sentence with you while you all clap the syllables ("The children went outdoors" will have six claps).

### Guess Which Object

- Hold up two objects. (Photographs or picture cards will also work.) Be sure that the objects begin with different sounds, such as a leaf and a marker. Identify each object with the children to ensure that you all are using the same label.
- Tell the children that the object of the game is for them to guess which of the objects you are thinking of. Let them know that you will give them a clue.

- Tell children the first sound in the word you are thinking of (/l/ if you are thinking of the leaf). Or tell children all the individual sounds of the word ("I'm going to say what I'm thinking of in a funny way. I'm thinking of the /l/-leal-/fi/"). Or remove the initial sound of the word ("I'm going to leave off part of the word. Do you know what I'm thinking of? It's the eaf").
- Congratulate children for correct responses. Chuckle with them if you were able to "trick" them.
- Repeat with other objects.
- Offer children the opportunity to be the person who is thinking of the object and provides the clue.



**When children have opportunities to explore speech sounds of any language, they build insight about the nature of speech and carry that insight to a second language.**

However, knowledgeable educators know that phonological awareness is much more than play. It is also serious business. These educators recognize that they play a key role in promoting phonological awareness. They know that its development will contribute to a child's successful launch into literacy and deserves thoughtful and careful attention.

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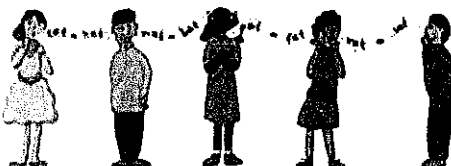
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## Resources for Teaching and Learning about Literacy

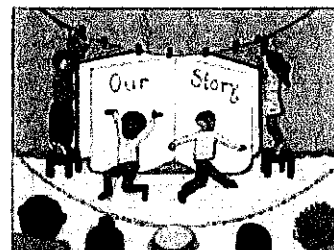
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## Journals and Web resources

**Barahona Center**—Written in English and Spanish, the site lists recommended children's books, professional resources, and links to other similar resources. [www2.csusm.edu/csb](http://www2.csusm.edu/csb)

**BookPALS**—A program of the Screen Actors Guild Foundation, BookPALS gets actors to read stories to young children, letting books come alive through acting. There are 12 chapters throughout the United States, and there is a 24-hour hotline that children can call to listen to an actor read a book. [www.bookpals.net](http://www.bookpals.net) and [www.storylineonline.net/index2.html](http://www.storylineonline.net/index2.html)

**Colorín Colorado!**—A bilingual site for families and educators of English-language learners, this Web site has guides, tool kits, resource lists, podcasts, video, and e-newsletters. [www.colorincolorado.org](http://www.colorincolorado.org)

**The International Reading Association**—This organization serves educators who teach reading to all ages. It offers online resources and special interest groups on a variety of topics concerning learning to read and to write. The association publishes *The Reading Teacher*, a monthly journal from September to May, for educators who work with children up to age 12. [www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org)

**Journal of Early Childhood Literacy**—Published three times a year, the JECL emphasizes papers researching the nature, function, and use of literacy in early childhood. The journal offers a forum for discussion as well as a resource for those in the field. <http://ecl.sagepub.com>

**Just One More Book!**—Three times a week the Just One More Book! podcast celebrates and promotes children's books. Episodes can be played on the Web site or downloaded to an audio device. The site features listener-submitted book reviews and interviews with authors, illustrators, and literacy experts. Recommended by the American Library Association as a great resource for children, the site is run by Andrea Ross and Mark Blevis, two Canadian parents who are passionate about children's literature. [www.justonemorebook.com](http://www.justonemorebook.com)

**The Literacy Project**—With resources on children's writing for teachers, literacy organizations, and anyone interested in reading and education, The Literacy Project is a collaboration between LitCam, Google, and UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning. [www.google.com/literacy](http://www.google.com/literacy)

**Reading Is Fundamental (RIF)**—The country's largest children's literacy organization offers a variety of programs and resources focused on assisting children in learning to read and write. Programs on the Web site include community-based and family literacy programs, strategies and advice for educators and parents, and activities for children. [www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org)

**Reading rockets**—This Web site gives information and activities to families, teachers, and other educators who help young children learn to read. This includes the research-based "Strategies to Help Kids Who Struggle," "Techniques for Teaching Effectively," and resources about boosting reading comprehension. [www.readingrockets.org](http://www.readingrockets.org)

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# Storybook Reading for Young Dual Language Learners

Cristina Gillanders and  
Dina C. Castro



In a community of practice meeting, teachers discuss their experiences reading aloud to dual language learners.

Susan: When I am reading a story, the Latino children in my class just sit there. They look at me, but you can tell that they are not engaged in the story.

Lisa: That happens in my class too. The little girls play with their hair, and the boys play with their shoes.

Beverly: And when you ask questions about the story, children who speak English take over and you can't get an answer from the Latino children.

Facilitator: What do you think is happening here?

Lisa: I think they just don't understand what the story is about.

Facilitator: How can we help them understand the story so they can participate?

**RESEARCHERS WIDELY RECOMMEND** storybook reading for promoting the early language and literacy of young children. By listening to stories, children learn about written syntax and vocabulary and develop phonological awareness and concepts of print, all of which are closely linked to learning to read and write (National Early Literacy Panel 2008). Teachers usually know a read-aloud experience has been effective because they see the children maintain their interest in the story, relate different aspects of the story to their own experiences, describe the illustrations, and ask questions about the characters and plot.

However, listening to a story read aloud can be a very different experience for children who speak a language other than English. What

happens when the children are read to in a language they are just beginning to learn? What happens when an English-speaking teacher reads a story to a group of children who are learning English as a second language?

As illustrated in the vignette at the beginning of this article, teachers often describe young dual language learners in their class as distracted and unengaged during read-aloud sessions in English. In this article, we describe teaching strategies that English-speaking teachers can use when reading aloud to young dual language learners. These strategies are part of the Nuestros Niños Early Language and Literacy Program, a professional development intervention designed to improve the quality of teaching practices in prekindergarten classrooms to support Spanish-speaking dual language learners (Castro et al. 2006). The intervention was developed and evaluated in a study funded by the US Department of Education. Teachers from the North Carolina More at Four Pre-Kindergarten

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Photos courtesy of the authors.

A study guide for this article will be available in mid-January online at [www.naeyc.org/yc](http://www.naeyc.org/yc).

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**By listening to stories, children learn about written syntax and vocabulary and develop phonological awareness and concepts of print, all of which are closely linked to learning to read and write.**

Program (a state-funded program targeting 4-year-olds from economically disadvantaged families) participated in the intervention. The Nuestros Niños program responds to the immediate need to improve the practices that monolingual English-speaking early childhood teachers use when teaching young Latino dual language learners. Over the course of a full school year, the program included a three-day institute, twice-a-month classroom consultations, and community of practice (COP) meetings.

**The community of practice approach to professional development**

A community of practice allows teachers to meet over an extended period of time to reflect on their teaching with the goal of improving practice (Wesley & Buysse 2001). Some COPs use the lesson study model that originated in Japan (Lewis 2002). To implement the lesson study process, teachers collectively plan, observe, analyze, and refine actual classroom lessons.

In the Nuestros Niños program, during the initial COP meetings, the teachers defined their goals for the dual language learners in their classes and determined the theme (for example, insects, plants, and/or food) they would address with the storybook reading. Then they chose a picture book that had a Spanish version. They planned the storybook reading using the recommended strategies described later in this article. During this process, the authors of this article and Nuestros Niños facilitators worked with teachers to incorporate strategies that have been shown to be

effective when teaching dual language learners.

The COP group work produced a sample lesson plan. When the group had completed the lesson plan, one volunteer implemented it in her classroom while the other teachers observed the lesson or watched it on video. The COP then revised the lesson plan to incorporate feedback from the observers. After the final revision, the other members of the group used the lesson plan in their classrooms. This process helped the teachers reflect on their own teaching practices and resulted in a carefully planned approach to using storybook reading to support dual language learners.

**Reading storybooks to dual language learners**

One reason storybook reading is important for dual language learners is that it promotes vocabulary development. For most English-speaking children, vocabulary development in English occurs incidentally, that is, as a result of being exposed to new words when talking to family members, teachers, or friends, or when watching TV. For dual language learners, vocabulary development in English requires both incidental learning and direct teaching of words. Teachers can use storybook reading to combine direct teaching of new words with the use of the same words while reading aloud an engaging story.

Children who listen to stories in their own language can learn new words through active participation, such as answering questions related to the story. Dual language learners who have limited second language

proficiency are not able to actively participate when books are read to them in English. So reading aloud to young dual language learners needs to be done in a way that allows the children to join in even if they are in the early stages of learning English.

When reading stories aloud, teachers need to use strategies that maximize the opportunities for the children to understand the text, which will help them develop their vocabulary and listening comprehension. Storybook reading also promotes the development of other aspects of the language, such as the pronunciation of sounds of words (phonology), the correct construction of sentences (syntax), and the appropriate use of common phrases or expressions in English.

**Recommended strategies for storybook reading to young dual language learners**

English-speaking teachers need to adjust their approach to storybook reading when reading aloud to young dual language learners. By implementing the following strategies, early childhood educators can effectively reach these children. The sample lesson plan (see "An Example of a Storybook-Reading Lesson Plan," p. 94) uses the storybook *La Cucaracha Martina*, a Caribbean folktale, and implements the strategies outlined here.

**Reading aloud to young dual language learners needs to be done in a way that allows the children to join in even if they are in the early stages of learning English.**

**Choose a limited set of core words (three to five) and a repetitive phrase that are essential to understanding the story.** Provide explicit instruction for learning the core words prior to and during the storybook-reading session. Ask questions ("Where is \_\_\_\_?" "What is he/she doing?"), point to illustrations, show objects, use gestures, include opportunities for children to repeat the words aloud, and define the words in terms the children can understand (Collins 2005, 2010).

Before reading the story aloud, introduce the core words using a picture walk. A picture walk is when the teacher takes the children through the story, pointing to the illustrations without reading the text. Use the repetitive phrase throughout the day during different classroom activities.

**Use manipulatives, illustrations, gestures, and facial expressions to help children understand vocabulary** (Gersten & Geva 2003). Invite children to be actively engaged in the storybook reading by asking them to show objects or pictures to the group at the appropriate time in the story.

**Use the children's home language to facilitate story comprehension and English vocabulary acquisition.** If you are bilingual or have some knowledge of the children's home language, read the story first in the home language, and then on a subsequent occasion, read it in English (Lugo-Neris, Wood Jackson, & Goldstein 2010).

If you are not fluent in the home language, ask a parent or volunteer to read the story to the children in their home language. At the same time, ask your program to purchase several copies of this version of the book so you can send them home with children who are dual language learners, and their parents can read the story to them.

In addition, as described above, provide definitions of the core vocabulary words in Spanish (Lugo-Neris, Wood Jackson, & Goldstein 2010). This facilitates children's learning of new words in English. Teachers who are not fluent in the home language can find Spanish definitions of words in a dictionary or ask for help from Spanish-speaking parents or members of the community.

**Read the story several times during the week.** Listening to the story several times allows children to consolidate their learning and deepen their understanding of the words.

**Incorporate culturally relevant thematic units and books.** Children can use new vocabulary during familiar experiences as they play and learn in the classroom centers.

**Be aware that dual language learners participate in storybook reading in different ways, depending on their phase of second language acquisition.** If the children communicate only in their home language, expect that they might answer English-language questions in their home language. Teachers should learn some key words related to the story in the children's home language so that they can acknowledge children's efforts to communicate.

If the children who are dual language learners are not yet using oral language, it may mean that they are still in the phase of second language acquisition called the nonverbal period. During this period, dual language learners often participate by using gestures, pointing to illustrations, or showing objects.

Finally, if the children are beginning to use phrases in English, teachers can provide opportunities for them to complete a sentence or phrase and answer questions with a repetitive phrase.

**Encourage children to retell and/or to dramatize the story once they have heard it several times.** This helps children to practice using the vocabulary words and helps them gain a better understanding of the story.

**Expand the ideas in the book to other classroom centers.** Using the core vocabulary words in other classroom learning centers provides opportunities for the children to use these words in various contexts.



# Example of a Storybook-Reading Lesson Plan

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## **La Cucaracha Martina**, by Daniel Moretón

**Story synopsis:** While searching for the source of one beautiful sound, a pretty cockroach rejects marriage proposals from a collection of city animals who try to charm her with their noises.

### Teacher Preparation

#### Gather materials

**Props:** Noisemaker, cockroach, lipstick, dog, pig, rooster, bird, snake, frog, duck, cat, mouse, bull, fish, ring, bee, cricket, banjo

**Picture cards for retelling:** Cockroach, lipstick, dog, pig, rooster, bird, snake, frog, duck, cat, mouse, bull, fish, ring, bee, cricket, banjo

**Listening center:** English and Spanish recordings of the story

**Dramatic play area:** Veils, ties, and pictures of weddings

**Science center:** Books with realistic pictures of the animals in the story and a variety of plastic insects to sort

**Sand and water table:** Plastic insects and animals

**Music center:** A CD with loud noises and one with beautiful music, such as a piano solo

**Reading center:** Copies of *La Cucaracha Martina* in English and Spanish and animal puppets

**Art center:** A variety of art materials, including crayons, colored paper for collages, and markers

#### Identify core vocabulary

(**Bold** indicates words selected as the focus for the lesson.)

**Cockroach**/*cucaracha*, **noise**/*ruido*, **beautiful**/*hermoso*, **dog**/*perro*, **pig**/*puerco/cochinol/marranol/chanco*, **rooster**/*gallo*, **bird**/*pájaro*, **mouse**/*ratón*, **fish**/*pescadolpez*, **bull**/*toro*, **bee**/*abeja*, **cricket**/*grillo*, **flea**/*pulga*, **cat**/*gato*, **duck**/*pato*, **snake**/*culebra/víbora*, **frog**/*sapo*, **spider**/*araña*

#### Chose a repetitive phrase

**Will you marry me?** / *¿Te quieres casar conmigo?*

#### Plan ways to teach core vocabulary and the repetitive phrase before reading aloud

**Cockroach/Cucaracha:** Show realistic pictures or a real cockroach for *cucaracha*. Sing the song, "La cucaracha." Define the word. For example, a cockroach is an insect that is brown and flat.

**Noise/Ruido:** Play a recording of different noises, especially insect sounds. Use puppets or toys that make sounds. Define the word. For example, a noise is a sound that is unpleasant.

**Beautiful/Hermoso:** Describe the colors used in a child's painting and listen to music, such as a violin solo, versus random noises. Define the word. For example, something beautiful is very pretty.

**Cricket/Grillo:** Show realistic pictures of a cricket or observe crickets outside in the yard and describe them while repeating the word several times. Show toy or puppet crickets. Define the word. For example, a cricket is an insect that hops and chirps.

**Repetitive phrase:** *Will you marry me? / ¿Te quieres casar conmigo?* Show a wedding picture or album, reenact a wedding, do a wedding puppet show, watch a DVD of a wedding, or invite a parent to come and talk with the children about his/her wedding.

### Conclusion

Storybook reading can promote language and literacy development in young children, but teachers may need to adjust their practice when working with dual language learners. Teachers can use various strategies to support the children's comprehension of the text, which will in turn increase their participation in the lesson. This can help young dual language learners develop their vocabulary.

One important strategy is to introduce the text in the children's home language. Monolingual English-

speaking teachers may find the use of the home language challenging. They can seek help from other program staff, the families of the children who are dual language learners, or other community members.

Effective use of these strategies requires careful planning, especially when teachers are learning to address the needs of young dual language learners. Working with fellow teachers in communities of practice can provide support for the planning process as well as an opportunity for teachers to reflect on teaching, its challenges, and its opportunities for professional growth.

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## Daily Learning Experiences

### Day 1: Picture walk

Introduce the book, saying, "We are going to read a new book this week. The title is *La Cucaracha Martina*. Before we talk about it, let's look at some important words."

Present core words in print and provide a brief explanation of their meaning by showing the following props: a toy that makes an annoying sound, a cockroach, a cricket, and a beautiful ring.

Ask leading questions during the picture walk, such as, "What kind of noises do you think she hears?" "What is the cucaracha doing in this picture?" "What animal did the cucaracha meet?"

Send home a copy of the Spanish version of the book for families to read with their children. You can also send home the English version of the book for families who speak English.



### Day 2: Reading in Spanish

Invite a Spanish-speaking adult to read the book in Spanish to the whole group. Ask the reader to show the props while reading the story. Next, have the reader ask the children to name the animals that appear in the story and ask questions such as, "How do you think the cucaracha is feeling in this picture?" "What is the cucaracha doing in this picture?" Allow for answers in English and Spanish. If there are children in the class who do not speak Spanish, read aloud from the English version of the book.

### Day 3: Reading in English

Introduce the book in English: "Today we are going to read the story *La Cucaracha Martina* again. This time I will need your help. I will give everybody a prop. Listen very carefully, and when we are reading the part that mentions the prop you have, put it in the middle of the circle."

Pass out the props, and then read the story. While you are reading, invite the children to put the props in the middle of the circle at the appropriate times. During the reading, encourage the children to recite the phrase "Will you marry me?" which is repeated throughout the story. At the end of the reading, ask, "What animals asked the cucaracha to marry them?" "Why doesn't she want to marry all these animals?" "Which animal did she want to marry?" "Why is the flea holding a ring?"

### Day 4: Retelling

Encourage the children to use cards and a flannel board to retell the story, saying, "What is the name of the book we have read this week? Today we'll see what we remember and tell the story using picture cards on the flannel board." Pass out the cards with pictures of all the props used the previous day. Support the children as they retell the story and put the cards on the flannel board at the appropriate times.

### Day 5: Dramatization

Encourage children to act out the story over several days. Invite families and guests to attend a presentation of the play.

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