

Exploring the Relationship Between Phonological Awareness and Reading Ability: From Elementary Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The present study investigated the way elementary school teachers perceive the importance of phonological awareness in their classroom experiences. To achieve the aim, 75 elementary school teachers of both genders with diverse years of experience and qualifications from 25 elementary schools in Khorram Abad, Iran were selected. In order to obtain the data, the modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire designed and developed by Dahmer (2010) was used. The findings indicated that the teachers not only do recognize the importance of phonological awareness as a reading skill but they also consider it as a prevention strategy for reading acquisition which can play a vital role in elementary school students' reading ability. The data was useful in bringing about an awareness of how theoretical understandings linked to phonological awareness relevance and usage are actually occurring in the context of elementary classroom.

Keywords: Phonological Awareness, Elementary School Teachers, Reading Programs, Reading Ability.

1. Introduction

The reading skills acquired during elementary school period establish the essential foundations that are needed for later success in reading skills. During the early years, oral language skills form the developmental stones of reading ability. The National Institute for Literacy (NIR) defines reading as a complex system consists of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following requirements: (a) the skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes or speech sounds are connected to print; (b) the ability to decode unfamiliar words; (c) the ability to read fluently; (d) sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension; (e) the development of appropriate active strategies to create meaning from print; and (f) the development and maintenance of motivation to read.

As can be inferred, one of the crucial factors contributing to reading in early years is evidenced in the first part of the definition; that is, the skills and

knowledge to understand phonemes or speech sounds. Generally, phoneme understanding is defined in terms of phonological awareness. Gillon (2004) refers to phonological awareness as the awareness of the sound structure of words and the ability to manipulate sounds in words. Phonemic awareness is a specific component of phonological awareness. According to Torgesen (2004), phonemic awareness deals with the tasks requiring students to recognize or manipulate the phonemes in words that are presented orally. There are some components or sub-skills related to phonological awareness such as phoneme deletion, phoneme segmentation, phoneme categorization, syllabic awareness, rhyme awareness, and sound blending. Although it does not seem to exist a consistency in the terminology associated with each sub-skill, there is a general consensus over the actual role of each component in phoneme development. Young children show each of these components through their oral language. Children's receptive and expressive oral language development becomes progressively remarkable as they enter elementary school. Within the early years of a student's formal education, beginning reading skills will emerge from a phonological basis (van Bon & van Leeuwe, 2003).

Zhurova and Elkonin, two Russian psychologists, are known as the fathers of phonological awareness in the 1960s. Ball and Blachman (1991) noted that Zhurova and Elkonin's work uncovered that there is a close relationship between phoneme segmentation abilities and subsequent success in early reading. It was found that urging students to isolate sound parts can help them become more aware of the sounds heard in words. In the early 1970s, Mattingly added to the developing knowledge of phonological awareness in a book titled 'Language by Ear and by Eye'. Within the pages of this book, the author examined the function and structure of how information is processed, particularly, in relation to speech and print. In general, the importance and integration of speaking and listening skills to reading development were explored and demonstrated in his book.

In the 1980's, the linkage of phonological awareness and reading received more attention with Torgesen's (1990) work. In Torgesen's work, the role of phonological awareness as a vital component of acquisition of reading skills was highlighted. Several studies related to phonological awareness resulted from the impact of Torgesen's research (i.e., Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999, 2002). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Torgesen's enhanced understanding of phonological awareness influenced the field of education in relation to the significance of phonological awareness and its relationship to reading skills. It was demonstrated that phonological and phonemic awareness play an important role in the processes of learning to read and spell (Cassady, Smith, & Putman, 2008). Since the 1980s, as researchers recognized the importance of phonological awareness to reading development, many studies were conducted to examine how phonological awareness may influence reading ability. For example, Gillon (2004) in responding to the

developments that have taken place within the last two decades concluded that numerous studies have reported the relationship between phonological awareness and the acquisition of literacy. Additional research findings (Al Otaiba, Connor, Lane, Kosanovic, Schatschneider, Dyrland, & Wright, 2008; Cassady, Smith, & Putman, 2008) continue to add to a growing understanding of the significance of phonological awareness to reading.

However, in the literature, there have been limited studies dealing with phonological awareness in fostering reading ability among elementary students from the teachers' perspectives. To fill up the lacuna, the present study aimed to examine the linkage of phonological awareness and reading ability among elementary students from their teachers' vantage points. All in all, the study tried to answer the following research question:

1. Do elementary teachers consider phonological awareness skills as a significant factor in improving reading ability among elementary students in the Iranian context?

2. Method of the Study

The method exploited for the present research study was descriptive. This method allowed the elementary school teachers to reveal their insights concerning phonological awareness in an anonymous and nonthreatening manner.

2.1. Participants and Setting

In order to conduct the study, 75 elementary school teachers were selected in Khoram Abad, Iran in spring 2016. The participants included both male and female aged ranged from 20 to 50. They had diverse years of experience in teaching and different qualifications. The participants were asked to take part voluntarily in the study and they were informed about the final findings of the study.

2.2. Instrumentations and Procedures

In order to obtain the required data, a modified version of the Likert-type questionnaire designed and developed by Dahmer (2010) was given to the participants. The questionnaire includes 11 items relevant to the factors contributing to the significance of phonological awareness from teachers' perspectives. The questionnaire followed a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire items were translated into participants' native language (Persian) to avoid any possible misunderstandings and to increase the reliability and validity of responses. The participants were asked to indicate their responses to the items across the continuum and to prevent the participants from running through the questionnaire items they were given enough time. It is noteworthy to note that the reliability checks on the questionnaire based on a pilot study yielded an alpha estimate of 0.87 which was considered acceptable for the current study purposes.

2.3. Data Analysis

As noted earlier, a questionnaire was employed to directly measure elementary school teachers' perceptions of the phonological awareness. The obtained data were used to provide a descriptive profile of the perceptions related to use and significance of phonological awareness. The number of responses for each question and the corresponding percentages were tabulated. The frequency and percentage data were shown in frequency tables. The table helped illustrate a brief yet cogent summary of the categorical (nominal) data to record how often each value of the variable occurred.

3. Results

The present study was carried out to investigate whether elementary teachers perceive phonological awareness skills as a crucial factor in enhancing the reading ability among elementary students in the Iranian context. Table 3.1 shows the frequency and percentages of the teachers' responses in this regard.

Table 3.1 *Frequency and Percentage of Teachers' Perceptions of Phonological Awareness*

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Phonological Awareness (henceforth PA) is an essential reading skill in elementary school.	2	5(5)	8(8)	35(35)	50(50)
2. PA and phonics instruction teach the same reading strategies.	13(13)	51(51)	18(18)	10(10)	2(2)
3. Students need to know how sounds connect to letters to be able to read.	3	6(6)	3(3)	62(62)	26(26)
4. PA instruction should occur incidentally and informally in the elementary classroom.	2(2)	28(28)	10(10)	43(43)	17(17)
5. PA instruction focuses only on the sounds in words.	10(10)	52(52)	5(5)	21(21)	12(12)
6. PA and phonics should be taught together.	1(1)	11(11)	21(21)	65(65)	3(3)
7. Daily PA instruction and activities are necessary in elementary school.	3	6(6)	12(12)	60(60)	21(21)
8. PA should be explicitly taught with formal lessons.	2(2)	20(20)	22(22)	42(42)	14(14)
9. Phonics should be taught	7(7)	50(50)	18(18)	12(12)	13(13)

before PA.					
10. Beginning readers should be able to isolate sounds in words.	1(1)	18(18)	15(15)	59(59)	7(7)
11. Learning to read involves blending sounds to form words.	2(2)	5(5)	2(2)	75(75)	16(16)

As can be seen, each of the items tries to explore elementary teachers' perceptions of the significance of phonological awareness in reading ability. The items 1, 3, 7, 10 and 11 paralleled specially to the significance of phonological awareness as an early reading skill. Items 2, 5, 6 and 9 were related to the importance of phonological awareness in comparison to phonics. The statement in the items 4 and 8 related with the significance of phonological awareness through explicit instruction instead of informal instruction. The results of the item 1 indicated that 85% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that phonological awareness should be considered as a vital reading skill in elementary school education. Answers to item 5 revealed that 62% of the survey respondents, who specified an agree or strongly agree answer, perceived the significance of having learners recognize how sounds connect to letters in order to be capable of reading.

Likewise, 81% of the teachers for item 7 stated that they agreed or strongly agreed that day-to-day phonological awareness instruction and tasks are essential in elementary school education. The questionnaire items 10 and 11 concentrated on the significance of 2 certain phonological awareness skills. The obtained data for these 2 statements showed that the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statements given in these items - for item 10, the cumulative totals for the agreed and strongly agreed types was 66%, and for item 11 the cumulative totals for the agreed and strongly agreed categories was 91%. The given responses to items 1, 3, 7, 10 and 11 revealed favorable agreement with respect to the respondents' perceptions of the significance and importance of phonological awareness as an early reading skill. The questionnaire items 2, 5, 6 and 9 matched specially to views that elementary school teachers have connected to the significance of phonological awareness compared to phonics. Items 5 and 6 were intended to advocate favorable perceptions of the significance of phonological awareness.

The data obtained for item 7 disclosed that 61% of the participants agreed that phonological awareness should be taught along with phonics. Concerning item 5, the answers showed that 62% of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that phonological awareness zooms on sounds in words. When this percentage is added to the additional 5% who provided undecided responses, it seems that the majority of elementary teachers do not believed that phonological awareness focuses on sounds. The questionnaire items 2 and 9 contradicted the data supplied in items 5 and 6 and thereby, presented sentences which do not back up the

significance of phonological awareness in comparison to phonics. The majority of the participants indicated disagree answer for item 2 (64%) and item 9 (57%), thereby revealing their support in favor of the distinctive features of phonological awareness skills and phonics skills. The questionnaire item 8 and 4 belonged to the perceptions of elementary school teachers with respect to the significance of explicit phonological awareness instruction instead of informal instruction. The questionnaire item 8 pertained specially to the need to instruct phonological awareness through explicit formal lessons. Conversely, the item 7 related explicitly to the need to teach phonological awareness skills incidentally and informally in the elementary school classroom. The results for item 8 showed that 56% of the participants agreed with the importance of teaching phonological awareness explicitly.

The results for item 4 showed that 60% of the elementary teachers agreed that phonological awareness should take place through an incidental and informal manner in the elementary school classroom. In general, based on the collected data in relation to elementary school teachers' perceptions of the significance of phonological awareness, the descriptive profile indicated the following results: 1) the majority of elementary school teachers believed that phonological awareness should be considered as an necessary early reading skill; 2) incidental and informal instruction is considered as more significant than explicit and formal instruction; 3) daily phonological awareness instruction and activities are essential in elementary school; 4) and phonics and phonological awareness should be taught together. The responses by elementary school teachers regarding the focus of phonological awareness skills being related to sounds indicated that most elementary school teachers did not perceive this significance. The data obtained for the questionnaire items 1-11 given a description of elementary school teachers' perceptions related to the use and significance of phonological awareness skills in the elementary school classroom context.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The important role that phonological awareness to elementary students' present and future reading ability can play is well-documented in the literature. An elementary school teacher can play a key role in providing an effective reading program comprising the essential reading skills to a child acquiring the skills necessary to move from oral communication to reading ability. Phonological awareness skills establish a sort of relationship between oral communications and reading for young learners to better understand how language is used in oral and written forms, as well as, how teachers perceive the significance and use of phonological awareness can impact the behaviors showed in elementary school classrooms (Gillons, 2004). In this regard, in the Iranian context, the relationship of the perceptions of elementary school teachers and the significance and use of

phonological awareness has not been fully explored. In addition, an awareness of the actual behaviors in elementary school classrooms has remain unexplored. The descriptive data of the present study revealed perceptions of the use and importance of phonological awareness, and the frequencies of behaviors, related to phonological awareness, occurring in the elementary school classroom context of a sample of elementary school teachers in Iran. To put it simply, in the Iranian context, elementary teachers take the phonological awareness skills into account as an important factor which can play a key role to help students improve reading ability in their first language.

Results obtained in the current study were in line with Troia (2004) findings that the important factor to the development of the alphabetic principle, word recognition, and invented spelling is phonological awareness. Furthermore, he demonstrated that letter and word knowledge related to reading, and spelling knowledge associated with writing, hinges on an understanding of how sounds work in isolation and in combinations. This study lends support to Zielger and Goswami (2005) stating that phonological awareness comprised of the ability to think more consciously about the phonemic components symbolized by letters. The significance of phonological awareness as an early reading skill, in comparison to phonics, and through explicit instruction were considered in the current study. The perceptions that elementary school teachers have in related to these three significant areas can have a significant influence on the reading program developed and delivered to elementary school students.

Finally, the findings are accordance with Shaughnessy (2004) highlighting that it seems very crucial that early childhood teachers recognize the importance of oral language skills for literacy development and realize how to cater to young children's language development. The perceptions of the respondents for the current study, in relation to the importance of phonological awareness as an important reading skill, were favorable. In general, the majority of the elementary school teachers confirmed that they have recognized the importance of phonological awareness. It should be noted, however, the most survey respondents did not recognize that phonological awareness to be one of the most essential skills in elementary school reading program. This can be considered as an important finding due to the key role of phonological awareness on current and future reading abilities.

The descriptive data could provide a profile of the perceptions and behaviors of the elementary school teachers in the target population. However, the imposed limitations like the small number of the participants and not use of other data collection instruments may advise that it would be beneficial to replicate this study on additional elementary school teacher populations to extend the generalizability of the present findings. Furthermore, a mixed methods research

study may provide a much more comprehensive picture, more specially, by decreasing the amount of idealistic responses that may have been generated.

Although this study could shed further light on the importance of phonological awareness and its relationship with the degree of success in present and future reading abilities from the Iranian elementary school' perspectives, it is important to be mindful that the aim of the present study was not to establish a causal relationship between elementary school teachers' perceptions of the significance of phonological awareness and their behaviors which contribute to students' ultimate attainment. More studies are required to investigate these considerations in detail.

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