



# Oral language to support phonological awareness and phonics instruction

## Oral language and literacy development

Oral language is an important foundational skill for learning (Alexander, 2020). It is used to interact with others, express and develop ideas and support the development of reading and writing (Graham, 2020; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Oral language is closely tied to the development of components

identified as being central to literacy, including comprehension, vocabulary, phonological awareness and phonics (Konza, 2014). A significant link between oral language and word reading skills has been identified for students who speak English as their first language and students who speak English as an additional language (Oxley & de Cat, 2021; Tunmer & Chapman, 2012).

This paper relates to the following Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

### **Standard 1:**

**Know students and how they learn**

- 1.2 Understand how students learn
- 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities

### **Standard 2:**

**Know the content and how to teach it**

- 2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area
- 2.2 Content selection and organisation
- 2.3 Curriculum, assessment and reporting

2.5 Literacy and numeracies strategies

### **Standard 3:**

**Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning**

- 3.1 Establish challenging learning goals
- 3.2 Plan, structure and sequence learning programs
- 3.3 Use teaching strategies

### **Standard 5:**

**Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning**

- 5.1 Assess student learning



## Oral language, phonological awareness and phonemic awareness

Phonological awareness can be described as the ability to identify and manipulate the smallest sounds in spoken words. A component of phonological awareness is phonemic awareness, which is the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken words. For example, using phonological awareness skills, we can identify two syllables in the word 'sunset'. Phonemic awareness skills allow us to identify each phoneme in 'sunset' s/u/n/s/e/t. These skills, important for early reading and writing, notably involve oral language, as they involve listening to the spoken word. They can be developed in the context of oral language but should also be considered in the contexts of reading and writing.

Phonological awareness includes syllabification, rhyme, alliteration, onset/rime and phoneme segmenting, blending and manipulating. There is a hierarchy of phonological skill development, with young children generally learning to first manipulate larger units of sound, such as rhymes. However, research has shown that it is not necessary for teachers to wait for students to master larger sound

units before introducing tasks that help to develop phonemic awareness (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). Phonological awareness skills continue to develop as new skills are introduced. For example, students continue to develop their understanding of rhyme, as they develop their ability to segment initial and final sounds.

Phonological connections between speech and print are an essential element of early reading acquisition and early writing. Teachers who are aware of the relationship between oral language and phonological awareness can design learning tasks and focused instruction, which incorporate the development of phonological awareness in the context of oral language. Although phonemic awareness is an auditory process, that is a hearing and listening process, phonemic awareness is not only developed in oral language contexts and not only through activities involving reading and writing. A comprehensive language and literacy program in early years classrooms targets phonological and phonemic awareness across all modes of English. An integrated approach to literacy supports literacy development (Graham, 2020; Rowe, 2005; Seidenberg et al., 2020).



Examples of activities which promote the development of [phonological awareness in oral language](#) contexts, and draw on the printed word include language games and activities that:

- promote alliteration
- involve saying and reading texts that include rhymes, such as nursery rhymes, short poems, picture books
- identify the onset and rime of words
- involve saying, reading and creating tongue twisters
- dramatise parts of well-known stories that involve the rhyme and rhythm of language. For example, 'I'll huff and I'll puff'
- encourage discussion about authors' choices of characters' names, use of rhyme, vocabulary selection etc.
- blend and segment phonemes in words found in familiar texts
- require students to sort word cards and items, such as pictures or small toys, according to a given characteristic, for example, short medial vowel sounds.

## Oral language and phonics

In an alphabetic writing system, phonics refers to the association of letters (graphemes) with sounds (phonemes) (Brooks, 2022). Students learn central grapheme-phoneme relations and how to use them to decode and spell words through phonics instruction (Ehri, 2022). As they advance, children also discover how word pronunciations and spellings are influenced by morphology and word origin (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). This approach bridges oral and written elements of language. For instance, spoken pronunciation can enhance phonics knowledge, aiding in the identification of unknown printed words. Understanding the distinct sounds represented in words like 'find' and 'pink' by the letter 'i' illustrates this. Furthermore, phonics knowledge is essential when transcribing spoken pronunciations.

Piasta and Hudson (2022) argue that teachers who have explicit knowledge of phonology, orthography and morphology can provide a comprehensive range of phonics teaching, from teaching letter/sound correspondences to more complex orthographic patterns. Such depth of understanding enables them to make appropriate pedagogical choices that draw on various modes of English.



Additionally, this expertise allows teachers to tailor instructional practices based on students' current knowledge of phonics, to offer students adequate support within a [gradual release of responsibility model](#) (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Approaches for the teaching of phonics may include the teaching practices described below.

**Language Experience** is a supportive teaching practice that uses a shared experience to bring together oral language with the literate practices of reading and writing. It is highly scaffolded and supported. Through scaffolded discussion specific vocabulary can be focused on, grammatical patterns and aspects of phonological awareness modelled. The creation of texts and the re-reading of these texts encourages students to use their knowledge of phonics. The practice is appropriate for English as additional language learners, as it simultaneously supports the development of language and literacy.

**Modelled Reading** is a teaching practice where teachers read aloud to students, demonstrating proficient reading and decoding strategies. Situated at the more supportive end of the gradual release of responsibility model, this practice allows the students to hear the sounds of English in the context of texts. Teachers' careful

selection of text can ensure that areas of phonological awareness are targeted, such as alliteration or rhyme. Moreover, the teacher can make explicit how they are making meaning from the text and how the application of phonics helps to decode words.

**Think Alouds** can be used in the contexts of reading or writing instruction. In lessons where think alouds are used, the teacher uses oral language as a pedagogical tool. Think alouds are supportive practices which allow teachers to make explicit how they draw on phonological awareness or knowledge of phonics to decode words when reading or to spell words when writing. During think alouds, the phonological skill or phonetic knowledge is named, and students see how it can be applied.

**Modelled Writing** is situated at the most supportive end of the [gradual release of responsibility model](#) (Duke & Pearson, 2002). During modelled writing instruction, the teacher can demonstrate the relevance phonological awareness skills and the application of phonics knowledge has to the creation of a meaningful text.

**Interactive Writing** requires the student to put into practice phonological awareness skills and knowledge of phonics. This practice moves along the gradual release of responsibility model, as it involves



some teacher support and some independent practice. As this teaching practice is conducted in a small group, the teacher has the opportunity to see the application of skills in real time, address issues at the point of need and monitor students' progress. It also allows the teacher to provide the students with immediate feedback.

**Guided Writing** can support students' application of phonological awareness skills or knowledge of phonics, as they move towards the independent end of the gradual release of responsibility model. Collaborative discussion can make explicit how skills are used to write, and problems encountered can be addressed and rectified. Students receive immediate feedback.

**Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words** requires students to produce phoneme/grapheme relationships. The benefit of this small group or individual teaching practices is that the teacher can carefully select the sentence that students will write, to help them consolidate their understanding of the phoneme/grapheme correspondences that have been taught. This is a useful practice that can be used as a monitoring tool.

**Explicit instruction at the point of need** (see [sample phonics lessons](#)).

When planning, teachers create scaffolded lessons to support students' phonological awareness and knowledge of phonics. However, when teachers notice that students have not consolidated their understandings of the concepts taught, they may also intervene at the point of need to make explicit a concept. Moreover, teachers may use the information they gain when working with or observing students to plan further teaching.

**Talking texts** uses oral language as a pedagogical tool. This teaching practice can be used to discuss phonological aspects, such as the author's use of alliteration, the rhyme and rhythm of the text or to highlight aspects of phonics. Teachers can vary the degree of support depending on students' current abilities.

**Phonological awareness games** provide students with the opportunities to consolidate understandings of concepts that have been taught, through independent practice. Phonological awareness and phonics need to be practised and phonological awareness games provide ways of practising concepts in collaborative and engaging ways.



## **Oral language, phonological awareness, phonics and English as an additional language (EAL) learners**

Students who come to school with little or no English simultaneously learn to speak, read and write fundamental functional English. These students may not have had the benefit of prolonged interaction with the English language before they commenced school. Therefore, matching the sounding out of a written word to the oral word can be difficult, as they may not yet know the oral word (Woore, 2022). This poses challenges for teaching, particularly when using commercial phonics programs that might include vocabulary unfamiliar to EAL students and in decontextualised situations. When planning vocabulary instruction, teachers using commercial programs should consider the additional supports EAL students may require. For example, a program may include a focus on consonant/vowel/consonant words such as mug or van, but students may know these words as cup and truck, creating confusion with word meanings.

Although research in the field of EAL and phonics is limited, there is some evidence that suggests phonics supports vocabulary learning in the second language (Woore, 2022). Additionally, using phonics to sound out an unknown word may assist EAL students recognise the pronunciation of the word, providing they can orthographically map the word (Woore, 2022). The focus on phonological awareness and phonics should be contextualised in a rich oral language environment. Yeung and Savage's (2020) study of English as second language learners supports linking the phoneme/grapheme correspondences taught on the day to texts that richly represent the taught correspondences. Additionally, their study provides empirical data that supports the teaching of phoneme/grapheme correspondence within the context of authentic texts. Practices that can integrate phonological awareness, phonics, and the modes of English, such as Language Experience can be used to support EAL students.





## Suggestions for further discussion



1. Are oral language, phonological awareness and phonics essential elements of our early years literacy program, along with comprehension vocabulary and fluency?



2. How do we monitor our students' development in oral language, phonological awareness and phonics?



3. What extra supports can we put in place for our EAL students to develop phonological awareness, knowledge of phonics and oral language?



4. How can we support parents and carers to understand the importance of phonics, phonological awareness and oral language in learning to read?



5. What is our data telling us about our students' understanding of phonological awareness, phonics and oral language?



6. What professional learning might be needed to support teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in phonics, phonological awareness and oral language as essential elements in early literacy?



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