

Phonological Awareness Skills: Building Blocks for Reading

This section discusses some of the building blocks for reading relating to the manipulation of sound units within words (known as sublexical units). These skills are often known as phonological awareness skills, when we look at them closely, we can begin to appreciate just how complex holding and manipulating sound (phoneme)- related information in memory is. It is important to understand these skills when we teach reading to learners of all ages, but when working with adults or older teenagers with reading difficulties we must not necessarily assume that going back to basics is necessarily the right thing to do in all cases. For older learners, working with other units within words – units of meaning (morphemes) is an important input.

When we start to look at sublexical units we can see:

- How some aspects about language are just acquired in the learning of the language, whilst others are not
- That some learners have particular problems with specific types of sublexical units (the components of words).

The difficulties learners can face can vary from one learner to another, so we need to be sensitive to the ways in which learners can struggle to retain and manipulate these sublexical units. Having a finer understanding of the exact nature of the difficulty means that we can then provide the necessary practice exercises to support the learner to overcome those difficulties. This is not to say that practice alone can always circumvent issues, some learners might have such working memory difficulties that fully segmenting and blending phoneme by phoneme is too taxing, at least initially. In such cases resorting to analysis by onset and rime can provide a breakthrough, as it can act as a stepping stone to the more detailed type of analysis that the phoneme by phoneme approach (synthetic phonics) involves. Figure 1 demonstrates how the word 'crest' can be broken into different sorts of sublexical units based on an onset and rime split.

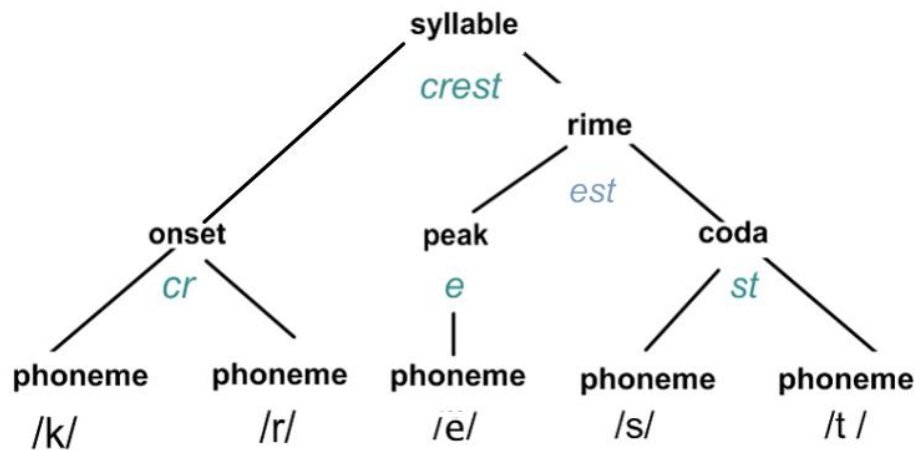
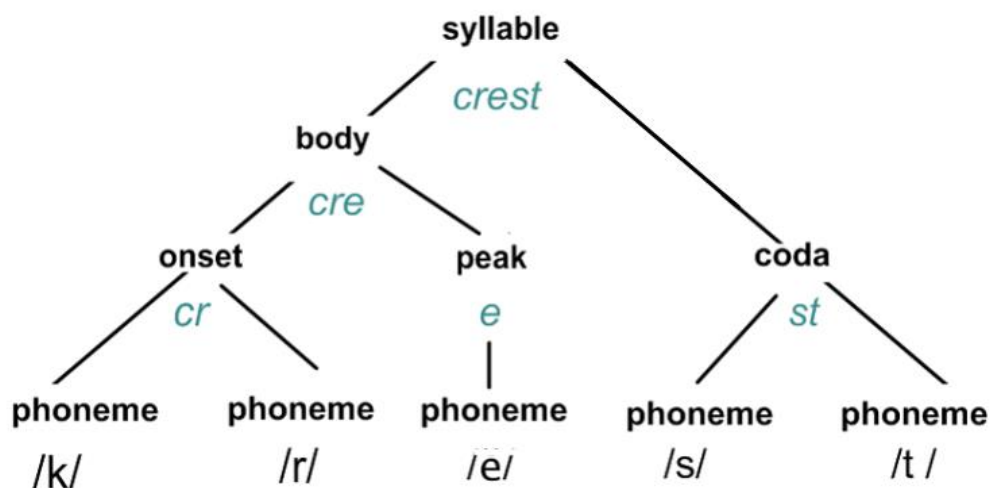
**Figure 1**

Figure 2 demonstrates how the word 'crest' can be broken into different sorts of sublexical units based on a body coda split. Rief and Stern (2010) discuss splitting and blending words in this way and it might be interesting for you to try both the onset-rime and the body-coda split with any learners who struggle to analyse longer one syllable words phoneme by phoneme. They say: "For some children, it is easier to do body-coda blending because there is less sound distortion when the body is read and then blended with the coda than when onset and rime are blended" (Rief & Stern¹, p.76, 2010)

**Figure 2**

What is Phonological Awareness?

Phonological awareness is our awareness of the sound units that make up the words in a language. This includes:

¹ Rief, S. F., & Stern, J. (2010). *The dyslexia checklist: A practical reference for parents and teachers* (Vol. 3). John Wiley & Sons.

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- i. An awareness that speech consists of words. (The person can spot the boundaries between words).
- ii. The ability to detect the number of syllables in a word. (The person can count the number of syllables in words).
- iii. The ability to detect rhyme. (The person can spot when two words rhyme, or spot which of three words is 'the odd one out').
- iv. The ability to generate rhyming words. (The person can supply another word that rhymes with a given word).
- v. The ability to segment words into sublexical units, such as onset and rime, phonemes etc. (The person can break the word 'spot' into 'sp....ot' or 'spo...t').
- vi. The ability to blend sublexical units such as onset and rime, phonemes etc. to build words. (The person can blend units like 'sp' and 'ot' to make the word 'spot', or blend the individual phonemes in 'spot' together to create the word).
- vii. The ability to substitute one phoneme for another within a word and state the new word formed. (The person when given the word 'tip' can swap out phonemes to make new words e.g. to 'nip' or 'tin').
- viii. The ability to delete phonemes and syllables from words and state the new word formed. (The person can take the word 'snap' and intentionally change it to 'sap' by missing out the phoneme /n/).
- ix. The ability to reverse the order of phonemes within a word to form a new word. (The person could take a word like 'tip' and change the order of the phonemes to make 'pit', or a word like 'peach' and change it to 'cheap').
- x. The ability to intentionally transpose the initial phonemes of words (as is done unintentionally in Spoonerisms – a 'shaving Roman' becomes a 'raving showman').

To summarise, we can say that phonological awareness is the ability to reflect upon and manipulate the speech sounds of a language. Phonemic awareness is the knowledge of and ability to manipulate speech sounds *at the level of the phoneme*. Phonemic awareness is a subset of phonological awareness. It is the leap to phonemic awareness that some learners with dyslexia can find a challenge without the right support for memory to help the consolidation and retrieval of information about phonemes and how they link to written symbols.

The way in which each type of task taxes verbal working memory needs to be carefully considered as often apparently "simple" tasks require holding information in memory and transforming/manipulating that information simultaneously. This requires switching attention away from some of the information, whilst other elements are swapped or altered – then new units need to be combined with information being held in memory.