

## The Place of Phonological Awareness in Algerian Middle School EFL Instruction

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### Abstract:

The present study explores the place of phonological awareness in middle school EFL instruction in Algeria. It also scrutinizes Algerian middle school EFL teachers' perceptions on phonological awareness instruction as well as its presence in fourth year English textbook. To this end, two research instruments were used: a document analysis and a questionnaire. The sample study consisted of (20) teachers from different middle schools in Medea province. The findings revealed the dearth in phonological awareness skills especially syllable and onset-rime skills at the level of the school manual. Besides, the majority of participants seemed not realizing the important role of phonological awareness in EFL teaching/learning. Thus, there is an urgent need for integrating more phonological awareness activities in Algerian middle school English textbooks, as well as a call for teacher training to introduce phonological awareness efficiently in classroom practices.

**Keywords:** Phonological awareness; middle school; English textbook; EFL teachers; EFL learners.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Teaching phonology is one of the most interesting subjects for EFL learners. A phonological aspect that is salient to learn is phonological awareness. The latter is a metalinguistic skill that refers to learners' knowledge of the phonological structure of spoken words, rather than their meanings or syntactic roles (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Research has shown that teaching phonological awareness promotes growth in reading and spelling among young learners (Cataldo and Ellis, 1988; Adams, 1990; Yopp and Yopp, 2009). Nonetheless, studies on Algerian EFL learners' phonological awareness instruction and its deep-rooted impacts are scarce. This article aims at examining the place of phonological awareness in middle school EFL instruction through describing the fourth year English textbook. It also demonstrates EFL teachers' attitudes towards the use of phonological awareness in Algerian middle schools. Accordingly, the present research is designed to answer the following questions:

1. *What is the place of phonological awareness in fourth year middle school English textbook?*
2. *What are Algerian EFL teachers' attitudes towards the use of phonological awareness in middle school English instruction?*

Ultimately, this study is hoped to shed light on EFL teachers' difficulties in teaching phonological awareness at middle school level, and to attract syllabus designers' attention towards this problem.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Phonological Awareness Defined**

Phonological awareness has various definitions. For instance, Nicholson (1997) refers to phonological awareness as "the ability to reflect on and manipulate the sound components of spoken words." (p.53). Furthermore, Chard and Dickson (1999) state that phonological awareness is "the understanding of different ways that oral language can be divided into smaller components and manipulated. Manipulating sounds includes deleting, adding syllables or sounds. Being phonologically aware means having a general understanding at all these levels." (p.262). In other words, it is the general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its meaning. It is students' understanding that speech is composed of words; words can be divided into syllables and onset-rimes; syllables and onset-rimes can be divided into individual sounds (phonemes) (Bayetto, 2014, p.1).

In brief, phonological awareness is the foundation upon which the other language skills such as reading and spelling are built. It is a casual and predictive precursor of children's later ability to read and spell (Storch and Whitehurst, 2002).

### **2.2 The Importance of Phonological Awareness**

The available experimental evidence demonstrates that phonological awareness is a crucial factor for literacy acquisition in the alphabetic system (Morais, 1991). In this context, Phillips et al., (2008) assume that children with strong phonological awareness understand that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds (alphabetic principle), for instance: “ee” “ea” and “ei” spelling patterns all can signify the long /e/ vowel sound, as in *need*, *team*, and *receive*. That is to say, children become aware of the regular ways that letters represent sounds in words. Furthermore, they can generate possibilities for words in context that are only partially sounded out (Torgesen and Mathes, 2002).

Besides, preschool training in phonological awareness can have a facilitating effect on subsequent reading and spelling acquisition since children who have been taught phonological awareness before beginning school are found to be better equipped for learning to read and spell than are children who have not (Lundberg, Frost, and Peterson, 1988; Phillips et al., 2008; Bentin, 1992; Bayetto, 2014). For instance, Muter and Snowling (1998) found that there are clear and consistent relationships between phonological skills and learning to read both in the short and long-term memory. Moreover, MacLean, Bryant, and Bradley (1987) discovered that there is a strong and highly specific relationship between children’s knowledge of nursery rhymes and their phonological skills.

In conclusion, a growing body of research has shown a general positive relationship between phonological awareness and other language skills such as reading and spelling. Indeed, children with strong phonological awareness can utilize sound-letter information successfully in enhancing their reading and writing skills.

### **2.3 Related Studies**

A huge bulk of research on the relationship between phonological awareness and literacy has been conducted on English children but not Arabic speaking children. As a result, there is a paucity of research on phonological awareness and its influence on Arab EFL learners (Al-Sulaim and Theo, 2017; Tibi, 2010). Recently, a number of studies have attempted to explore this issue.

Research has shown the effectiveness of explicit phonological awareness instruction on the development of word-reading ability for EFL first-graders in a Jordanian state school. It has proved that integrating a number of phonological awareness activities such as: segmentation, isolation, deletion, substitution and blending in Jordanian primary schools' curricula are expected to lessen EFL learners' pronunciation problems in subsequent academic stages (Al Tamimi, 2012; Al-tamimi and Rabab'ah, 2007). Besides, Al-Shaboul et al., (2014) sifted Arabic phonemic awareness among early readers of Arabic and its impact on Arab children’s reading ability. They examined whether phonological awareness in L1 facilitates learning to read in L2. Results indicated that Arab EFL learners seem to have difficulty with

pre-lexical word recognition processes leading to slower and perhaps even less accurate L2 word recognition skills. This confirmed cross-language transfer. Further, Barakah et al., (2015) conducted an investigation to detect phonological awareness deficits in Egyptian Arabic-speaking children. They concluded that the more knowledge children have about the constituent sounds of words, the better they tend to be at reading. Moreover, Alamrani and Zughabi (2015) illustrated some of the phonological and morphological shifts that confuse the reading process of Arab ESL learners. Their study also demonstrated how Arab ESL learners' knowledge of English phonology and morphology rules affects their reading process.

Algerian studies related to phonological awareness and its impact on EFL learning are very scarce. For instance, Ait Aissa (2010) inquired into the difficulties that Algerian Tamazight speakers encounter when learning and pronouncing English sounds. He focused on the phonological aspects of the native language (Tamazight) and the target language (English). He suggested that Algerian EFL students find hindrances in pronouncing some English consonant sounds like/ŋ/ and some English vowels such as diphthongs and triphthongs. He also stressed the importance of phonological awareness in acquiring both native and foreign language.

In a nutshell, researches about phonological awareness on Arabic speaking children and Arab EFL children are very sparse. In addition, investigations related to phonological awareness in Algerian monolingual and Algerian EFL contexts are very scanty if not void. From here comes the need to scrutinize the place of phonological awareness in Algerian middle school textbooks.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adheres to mixed methods approach which combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques to collect, analyze, and interpret the data at the same fundamental topic. The data is obtained through a document analysis and a questionnaire administered to twenty EFL teachers in Medea province, Algeria, during the academic year 2021-2022. This research approach helped to collect a valid data and obtain a better corroboration of the findings.

#### **3.1 Instruments**

Two research tools were used in this investigation. The first data collection tool is a document analysis. It aims at evaluating the way phonological awareness skills are dealt with in the manual: My Book of English Four (MBOE 4). The document analysis focused mainly on the sections and tasks that deal with phonological awareness skills. A self-constructed checklist was utilized to judge the worth of phonological awareness activities in the textbook.

The second data collection tool is a questionnaire administered to 20 middle school EFL teachers in Medea province, Algeria. It consists of three sections. The first section contains four questions about the participants'

gender, educational and teaching background. The second section contains eight questions and seeks to explore middle school EFL teachers' perceptions on phonological awareness and learners difficulties. The third section is designed on Likert Scale model and aims to scrutinize the place of phonological awareness in fourth year middle school textbook. The collected data was analyzed by SPSS Statistics Version 22. Finally, the findings are triangulated in a way to answer the research questions.

### **3.2 Informants**

This investigation included a sample of twenty (20) middle school EFL teachers from Medea province, Algeria. They were twelve (12) females and eight (08) males. They are full time teachers and their experiences in teaching English diverge from five (05) to twenty (20) years.

## **4. Results Description and Discussion**

### **4.1 Document Analysis: My Book of English Four**

In Algeria, the Ministry of Education initiated new reforms that resulted in the publication of new English textbooks for the four levels of middle school. The new textbooks feature an eclectic approach based on the current theories proposed by communicative trends. They are respectively, My Book of English One (MBOE 1) for first year, My Book of English two (MBOE 2) for second year, My Book of English Three (MBOE3) for third year, My Book of English for fourth year (MBOE4).

My Book of English Four addresses English as the two-way process of communication: getting to know others through various aspects of their life, and telling about oneself. The course-book tasks are aligned to international standards in order to prepare learners to participate with success in international exams such as *PISA* and *TIMSS*. It includes three sequences: *Me, universal landmarks and outstanding figures in history, literature and arts; Me, my personality and life experiences; Me, my community and citizenship*. Each sequence consists of the following rubrics: *I listen and do, I pronounce, My grammar tools, I practice, I read and do, I learn to integrate, I think and write, Now I can, I play and enjoy, I read for pleasure, I get ready for my BEM exam*.

The first section "*I listen and do*" is primarily meant for the identification and the practice of the target structure(s), the pronunciation of different sounds and lexical items in meaningful contexts of use. This rubric calls for writing as an extension to listening. In this 4th year course-book, the focus has slightly shifted from speaking to writing. Due to the high school entrance examination (the BEM), which is undertaken by learners in an exclusively written form, the course-book reserves a more significant function for writing.

The rubric "*I pronounce*", introduces consonant clusters, diphthongs and triphthongs. It intends to make learners capable of distinguishing consonants and vowels via the use of a variety of phonological devices such as minimal pairs, nursery rhymes, and tongue twisters. The reading texts are

designed to be read aloud by learners in class while the teacher monitors their pronunciation. The phonetic component in Book 4 is more like an ongoing process that repeats itself throughout the book – within each sequence, and from one sequence to another – aiming to hopefully achieve two objectives: take in charge targeted new sounds and recycle previous ones.

Under the subheading “***I read and do***”, referential study questions have been extended to inferential ones. In addition, this rubric aims at making learners familiarized with the different types of texts like descriptive, narrative, prescriptive, and argumentative texts.

“***I get ready for my BEM exam***” is a new section included in the MBOE4. It contains texts selected cover the exit profile of the curriculum. Some of the test items have been chosen according to international standards and they cover the linguistic and communicative objectives of the syllabus.

The first sequence is called “***Me, universal landmarks and outstanding figures in history, literature and arts***”. The learners approach the English diphthongs /ɪə/, /ʊə/, /eɪ/, /əʊ/, /aɪ/, /ea/, /aɪ/, /au/. Moreover, they are initiated to consonant clusters such as /pr/, /tr/, /ft/, and /ct/ (initial and final consonant clusters) (pp.26-28). Under the rubric “***I pronounce***”, learners are expected to find out the intruder diphthong in each list such as in /eɪ/: *take-stay-make-tray-try-sailor* (task1). This refers to as phonological categorization. Moreover, they are implored to identify the correct pronunciation of diphthongs after listening to a number of sentences in task 4 and 8 (phonological isolation). There are always self-assessment tasks where learners are asked to repeat and check the pronunciation of the learnt phonemes either individually or with a partner (task 5, 6 and 9) (pp.29-30). The same thing can be said about consonant clusters tasks. There is an isolation phoneme activity in which learners should recognize consonant clusters in different words (task 12). Another phonological awareness task that is used in this sequence is phoneme addition. Learners are requested to add the missing phonemes (consonant clusters) in each word between brackets (task16) (p. 30). In brief, it can be noticed that there is no change at the level of phonological awareness activities between MBOE 4 and the other three manuals. Since the same tasks are utilized in this book such as phoneme categorization, isolation and identification. The reading tasks herein focus on teaching reading comprehension as distinguished from teaching word recognition and reading accuracy such as in task 1 and 4 (pp.40 -41). Additionally, some excerpts are outside learners reading level as for example Shakespeare’s poem “This Royal Throne of Kings”. Under the rubric “***I get ready for my BEM exam***”, learners are trained to categorize the different realizations of the phoneme /ed/ (/id/, /d / and /t/) (p.52).

The second sequence is called “***Me, my personality and life experiences.***” The learners are taught English triphthongs /aɪə/, /eɪə/, /əʊə/, /aɪə/, /ɔɪə/. Further, they deal with weak and strong forms of the auxiliaries /have/, /has/. On top of that learners are shown the various pronunciations of /ed/ (pp.67-69). In the subheading “***I pronounce***”, learners are requested to

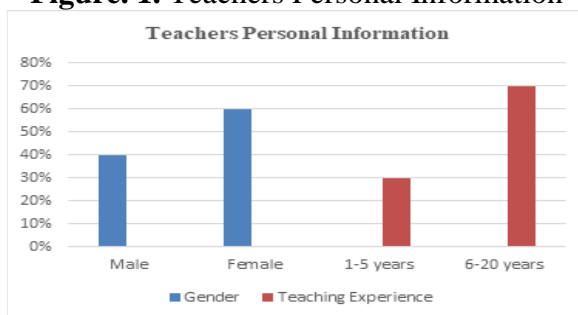
identify the correct pronunciation of triphthongs and /ed/ endings such as in task 1, 4, 7, 10, 14, and 18 (pp.70-72). All these tasks seek to foster EFL learners' phoneme categorization, identification, and isolation abilities, whereas some tasks seek to fix the correct forms in learners minds like task 2, 5, 6, 11, and 12 (pp.70-71). Thus, it can be said that no new phonological awareness activities are included in herein. As for reading sections, there seems to be more complexity at the level of texts. Indeed, these texts are designed for the sake of preparing students for BEM exam. Consequently, they are always accompanied with a variety of tasks that aim at enhancing learners' comprehension, lexical, and grammatical skills but not decoding and fluency skills (eg., task 5, p.82).

The third sequence is called "*Me, my community and citizenship.*" This time learners are engaged with silent letters: /k/, /w/, /l/, /b/, /n/. Besides, they are reintroduced to the different pronunciations of /s/ endings (pp.108-109). Learners are requested to spot the odd word such as in task 1 and task 10 (phoneme categorization). In addition, they are implored to isolate the correct pronunciations of /s/ endings suchlike in task 12. Other activities like activity 6 and 8 aim at consolidating the correct pronunciation of phonemes (pp.110-111). The reading passages along with the exercises included in the rubrics: *I read and do, I read for pleasure, I get ready for my BEM exam* are but preparatory tests (pp.118-128). They always simulate middle school final exam. Therefore, phonological awareness skills are discarded as students are required to write and not read in BEM exam. That is to say, the designed tasks focus solely on boosting students' grammar, vocabulary, and writing abilities.

## 4.2 Questionnaire Analysis

### 4.2.1 Section One: Participants' Information

**Figure. 1.** Teachers Personal Information



According to Figure 1, the teachers sample consists of 40% males and 60% females. This implies that the majority of middle school EFL teachers in Medea province are females. The results also revealed that all the teachers involved in this study have reasonable years of experience. The highest percentage of teachers' experience (70%) ranges between six to twenty years whilst (30%) varies between one to five years. This indicates that the participants' perceptions on the subject under investigation tend to be credible and reliable.

## 4.2.2 Section Two: Teachers' Perceptions towards Phonological Awareness

**Table 1.** Teachers' Perceptions towards Phonological Awareness

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percent
<b>Q 1: Which learning skill would you consider the most important to teach in the middle school English program?</b>			
	Pronunciation	3	15%
	Fluency	1	5%
	Phonological Awareness	4	20%
	Text Comprehension	7	35%
	Vocabulary	5	25%
<b>Q 2: Do you know what phonological awareness is?</b>			
	Yes	15	75%
	No	5	25%
<b>Q 3: Do you know all the levels of phonological awareness?</b>			
	Yes	12	60%
	No	8	40%
<b>Q 4: How often do you teach phonological awareness skills?</b>			
	Once a week	9	45%
	1-3 Times a Month	11	55%
	Never	00	00%
<b>Q 5: Would you use a phonological awareness assessment to predict your pupils' reading and spelling disabilities?</b>			
	Yes	6	30%
	No	13	65%
	Undecided	1	5%
<b>Q 6: Do you have learning centers* which focus only on phonological awareness skills? (*Learning centers: designated areas within the classroom that provide students with exciting and interesting experiences to practice, enrich, reteach, and enhance their learning).</b>			
	Yes	7	35%
	No	13	65%
<b>Q 7: What type of phonological awareness skills do you formally teach in your middle school classroom?</b>			
	Word Awareness Skills	8	40%
	Syllable Awareness Skills	5	25%
	Onset Rime Awareness Skills	3	15%
	Phoneme Awareness Skills	17	85%



	None of these activities	00	00%
<b>Q 8: What are some possible difficulties in teaching phonological awareness?</b>			
	Poor quality textbooks	7	35%
	Insufficient activities within the textbooks	10	50%
	Age inappropriate activities	3	15%

The statistics in Table 1 show that the participants consider text comprehension and vocabulary as the most important learning skills to teach in the middle school English program. (35%) of the respondents opted for text comprehension, and (25%) chose vocabulary. This indicates that teaching phonological awareness is not yet a priority for Algerian EFL teachers since only (20%) favoured phonological awareness over other learning skills. This result is corroborated by the fact that (65%) of the participants claimed that they have no learning centers which focus only on phonological awareness skills. Moreover, pupils are believed to have very few phonological awareness classes per week since (55%) of the informants claimed to teach phonological awareness 1-3 times a month, whereas, (45%) said that they teach it once a month. The findings also demonstrated that (65%) of the participants do not use phonological awareness assessment activities to predict their pupils' reading and spelling disabilities. This confirms that Algerian EFL teachers are not fully aware of the salient role of phonological awareness in improving these skills. Besides, the results indicated that (75%) of the informants are phonologically aware. Nevertheless, (60%) of them mentioned that they do not know all the levels of phonological awareness. This implies that they are not fully competent in phonological awareness due probably to the inappropriate or the lack of training. When asked about the type of phonological awareness skills do they formally teach in their middle school classroom, the majority of participants (85%) replied that they teach phoneme awareness skills. Word, syllable, onset and rime awareness skills receive little attention not because they are less important but it might be because they are not thoroughly presented in the middle school textbooks. Concerning the difficulties of teaching phonological awareness, (50%) of the informants asserted that the number of phonological awareness assessment activities is insufficient while (35%) posited that the current English textbooks have low quality. Only (15%) of them declared that the activities are age inappropriate. This is another piece of evidence that phonological awareness is an area of neglect in Algerian middle school English textbooks.

**4.2.3 Section Three: Teachers' Perceptions towards the Place of Phonological Awareness in Fourth Year Middle School English Textbook**

**Item 1:** Phonological awareness is properly presented in fourth year middle school English textbook.

**Item 2:** The relationship between PA and the other language skills such as reading is well explained in fourth year middle school English textbook.

**Item 3:** The activities used to assess pupils' phonological awareness skills are sufficient in the fourth year middle school English textbook.

**Item 4:** The activities used to assess pupils' phonological awareness skills are age appropriate.

**Item 5:** Some levels of phonological awareness are neglected in fourth year middle school English textbook.

**Item 6:** Phonological awareness skills are taught successively according to their level of difficulty in fourth year English manual.

**Item 7:** Phoneme awareness is well-explained in fourth year middle school English textbook.

**Item 8:** Syllable, onset, and rime awareness is well-explained in fourth year middle school English textbook.

**Table 2.** Likert Scale Survey Percentages of Teachers' Perceptions towards the Place of Phonological Awareness in Fourth Year Middle School English Textbook

	<b>Item 1</b>	<b>Item 2</b>	<b>Item 3</b>	<b>Item 4</b>	<b>Item 5</b>	<b>Item 6</b>	<b>Item 7</b>	<b>Item 8</b>
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	20%	00%	10%	00%	00%	25%	00%	05%
<b>Disagree</b>	60%	40%	50%	25%	10%	45%	05%	70%
<b>Undecided</b>	5%	20%	00%	15%	05%	30%	00%	00%
<b>Agree</b>	15%	30%	25%	60%	50%	00%	85%	20%
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	00%	10%	15%	00%	35%	00%	10%	05%
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<b>Mean</b>	2.15	3.10	2.85	3.35	4.10	3.95	4.00	2.50
<b>Std. Deviation</b>	0.93	1.07	1.34	0.87	0.91	0.75	0.56	1.05

The results of the descriptive analysis revealed that Algerian EFL teachers' attitudes towards the place of phonological awareness in fourth year middle school textbook was very low (Item 1:  $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=0.93$ ). (60%) of the participants disagreed with the idea that phonological awareness is properly presented in the textbook. This means that many Algerian middle school EFL teachers are not satisfied with the current phonological awareness teaching approaches or curricula. However, item 05 yielded a mean response of 4.10 and a standard of deviation 0.91 (Item 5:  $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ). This high score was for the statement that relates to the neglect of some levels of phonological awareness in fourth year middle school English textbook. Such

result confirms that some phonological awareness skills are not well elaborated in this manual, and this comes in accordance with the participants' firm beliefs that phoneme awareness is well explained in the textbook (Item 7:  $M=4.00$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ), unlike syllable, onset, and rime awareness (Item 8:  $M=2.50$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ). Besides, most participants thought that the activities used to assess pupils' phonological awareness skills are insufficient (Item 3:  $M=2.85$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ). This suggests that some phonological awareness skills such as syllable and onset-rime segmentation/blending are not given much attention by curriculum designers in Algeria. Another problem in fourth year middle school English textbook is the lack of tasks that promote the positive impact of phonological awareness (PA) on other language skills such as reading and spelling (Item 2:  $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ). In this respect, (40%) of the informants rejected and (10%) strongly rejected the claim of the revealed relationship between phonological awareness and the basic literacy skills, i.e. reading and writing. It can be also noticed that (60%) of the participants assume that the activities used to assess middle school pupils' phonological awareness skills are age appropriate. Interestingly, this item scored (Item 4:  $M=3.35$ ,  $SD=0.87$ ). Meanwhile, the other item that deserves attention is item 6 (Item 6:  $M=3.95$ ,  $SD=0.75$ ), where (45%) of the respondents disagreed and (25%) strongly disagreed on the fact that phonological awareness skills are taught successively according to their level of difficulty. This demonstrates that Algerian EFL curriculum designers may not be fully aware or convinced about the key role of phonological awareness in boosting EFL learners' reading and spelling skills.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The current article accounted for the place of phonological awareness in EFL middle school instruction. The results of the two research tools indicated that phonological awareness assessment tasks are almost totally absent in the fourth year middle school English textbook except with reference to phoneme isolation, categorization, and identification activities. Moreover, these tasks are only allocated to one level of phonological awareness that is phoneme awareness level. Other levels such as syllable awareness level and onset-rime awareness level are totally marginalized in the textbook. Besides, the available phonological awareness activities are set randomly. Hence, there is no linearity between a newly acquired phonological awareness skill and another. Even more important, there is no connection between the reading and writing sections and phonological awareness tasks provided in the different rubrics. Furthermore, the findings showed that the Algerian middle school EFL teachers are not fully aware of the fact that phonological awareness is the foundational skill for both reading and writing. Many EFL teachers claimed that they lack some phonological awareness skills and they just focus on teaching one of its levels that is phoneme awareness. Besides, they do not use phonological awareness assessment activities to evaluate their pupils' reading and writing ability. They assumed that the textbooks do not have

sufficient phonological awareness tasks. In addition, they do not designate any areas within the classroom to practise, enrich, and enhance their pupils' phonological awareness skills. Most importantly, they emphasized the teaching of pronunciation and meaning of texts at the expense of phonological awareness skills. This article has thus suggested the necessity to trigger both curriculum designers and middle school EFL teachers' attention to the importance of phonological awareness for literacy acquisition. There is a pressing need for enhancing Algerian middle school pupils' phonological awareness skills through explicit instruction. That can be achieved through the use of engaging and enjoyable activities to help children actively attend to the phonological structure of oral language. Moreover, the textbooks should cover all the levels of phonological awareness and contain sufficient activities. Above all, the designed lessons and tasks should take into account the fact that children's acquisition of phonological awareness develops along a continuum, with children's sensitivity to sounds progressing from larger units to smaller units, such as words and syllables, precedes awareness of phonemes. Finally, the relationship between phonological awareness reading and spelling should be well presented through the different rubrics and tasks in the textbooks.

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