

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in spoken language. A phoneme is a distinct unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another. For example, consider *bat*. If we change the /b/ to a /c/ or an /f/, we have a new word. The /b/, /c/, and /f/ are all phonemes. Phonemic awareness is a subcategory of phonological awareness, and refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the phonemes in spoken words. It is important to understand that phonemic awareness actually varies depending on the languages we speak (Antunez, 2002). We can only distinguish auditorily between sounds with which we have at least some familiarity (August & Shanahan, 2006). To help ELLs master the pronunciation of sounds not used in their native languages, they need to practice recognizing the sounds, then producing them. One way to do this is practice with *minimal pairs* (i.e., words that differ by one sound) to isolate the sound of interest, such as *pit/bit* and *pit/spit* (Kress, 2008). Table 2.2 provides examples of English sounds that are not used in other languages (Kress, 2008).

Table 2.2. English Sounds Not Used in Other Languages

Language	Sounds
Spanish	/dg/ /j/ /sh/ /th/ /z/
Chinese	/b/ /ch/ /d/ /dg/ /g/ /oa/ /sh/ /th/ /th/ /v/ /z/
French	/ch/ /ee/ /j/ /ng/ /oo/ /th/ /th/
Greek	/aw/ /ee/ /oo/ /e/
Italian	/a/ /th/ /ar/ /e/ /dg/ /h/ /ng/ /th/
Japanese	/dg/ /f/ /th/ /th/ /oo/ /v/