

## Phonological Awareness of Preschool Children: Constructing an Alphabet Book

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**Abstract:** The preschool children's practicing in the phonological awareness constitutes a very important case because it can affect their later reading skill. Means that can contribute to kid's phonological awareness, are alphabet book, texts with rhyme and alliteration but also texts that are enriched with activities and games. In this present announcement, the design and the construction of such a teaching subject it is attempted to be presented, and specifically the construction of an alphabet book for kids which includes all the things that were referred above.

**Key words:** phonological awareness, preschool children, alphabet book, design alphabet book, construct alphabet book

### 1. Introduction

As it is known the term phonological awareness or phonological cognizance refers to the ability of children to initially comprehend that oral speech and more specifically words, consist of phonological units, the sounds, which are represented with letters, and secondly to be able to discern those sounds and letters in the words (Γιαννικοπούλου, 1998; Gombert, 1992).

According to Goswami (2009) the development of phonological awareness of the children takes place in certain stages. It begins with the awareness of syllables; it continues with the awareness of rhyme (detecting pairs of words with the same suffix but of a different meaning, (cat – hat, dog – frog) and ends with the awareness of phonemes. According to a research which has taken place, it is argued that phonological awareness constitutes an indispensable ability so that the children move on to the learning of reading and writing (Tunmer & Bowey, 1984; Tunmer, Herriman & Nesdale, 1988; Adams, 1990; Lazo & Pumfrey, 1996; Laing & Hulme, 1999; Τάφα, 2001).

Whatever the contact of the children with the language, either that is oral or written, it contributes positively into their phonological awareness (Γιαννικοπούλου, 1998). Regarding the oral form of language, as Giannikopoulou characteristically states (Γιαννικοπούλου, 1998), what really helps and “takes off their knowledge” is their contact from even infancy, with poems, rhymes, children's songs, word games and activities. Thus, part of the whole of the skills of phonological awareness constitute the detecting of rhyme, the analysis of words in syllables as well as the synthesis of the syllables into words (Παντελιάδου, 2001). Passing to the written form of

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language, it is noted that every kind of children's book, literary or not, constitutes a medium which can enable the phonological awareness of children. In these books alphabet books are also included, as well as texts with rhyme and alliterations, and also texts enriched with activities and games which in turn urge the children to further experiment phonologically (Γιαννικοπούλου, 2003).

## **2. Alphabet Books and Literacy**

Alphabet books constitute books which bring the early readers into contact with reading and writing and engage them into exploring them. Regarding the mature readers who already know reading and writing, they give them the chance to examine them as a kind of literature (Roberts, 1990).

Regarding their structure, modern alphabet books constitute books which present the 24 letters of the alphabet in order, they contain 24 texts respectively, poems or proses, which accompany the presentation of the letters and they are illustrated (Ακριτόπουλος, 2014). Furthermore, the alphabet books are rich and comprehensive as they do not spend more than two pages in the presentation of a letter. They always present the capital and lowercase form of a letter and accompany it with a characteristic word, the illustration and the text. Their length starts from 24 pages, as many as the letters, making a simple presentation dedicating one page of every letter, and rarely goes beyond 60 pages (Chaney, 1993).

Common characteristics of the alphabet books constitute the specific number of texts which they have, (24, as many as the alphabet letters) and the elemental content, that is, the theme around which the knowledge is organized (e.g., nature, an alphabet book about nature) (Ακριτόπουλος, 2014). The alphabet books are distinguished in two categories: a) literary alphabets and b) those which were used as primers. Akritopoulos (Ακριτόπουλος, 2014) in a relevant research distinguishes the literary alphabet books base on the objectives of the writer and their poetic structure in: a) alphabet books for their linguistic and aesthetic refinement of speech, alphabet books which aim to linguistic and literary literacy, and b) alphabet books for aesthetically conquered special knowledge, alphabet books which aim to critical literacy.

Regarding the illustrative aspect of the alphabet books, they are accompanied by bold illustration, connected so well with the text, so as to transfer the message it wishes (Chaney, 1993). While the child does not yet know reading and is not familiarized with the letters, the pictures helps it to overcome certain points which it does not comprehend and gives it the key so as to clarify them. Later on, when the child already starts to spell and read, slowly the pictures change their function and meaning for the child, since they are only confined to keep the child's interest, excite its imagination and make reading more attractive (Κανταρτζή, 2002).

Finally an alphabet book is considered good when: a) is properly designed and illustrated so it corresponds to the needs of the children's age to which it addresses, b) there is a proper connection between the pictures and the context, c) there is balance between the known and unknown, and lastly when d) it presents an analogy between the pictures and words which the child knows or ignores. They help the child to expand its knowledge as well as its vocabulary (Κανταρτζή, 2002).

Further on, we will attempt to present the production of an alphabet book for preschool and primary school children, which aims to their phonological awareness. The specific alphabet book contains texts with rhymes and alliterations, activities and games for further practice of the readers and bears the title "Santa's sack".

### 3. Constructing an Alphabet Book: “Santa’s Sack”

After a small research in the Greek market a Christmas alphabet was designed and constructed, as it was found that there was no book of such content. This alphabet constitutes an extracurricular book of knowledge which has as its main objective the presentation of the alphabet letters and aims to the linguistic and literary literacy of preschool and first age school children, as well as to their phonological awareness. For the design of this alphabet book the principles of constructivism. According to them the children are actively involved in the process of learning, they build knowledge based on their enactments and personal experiences, while at the same time parents and teachers take the role of the guide-helper — animator (Τσακίρη & Καπετανίδου, 2007). Moreover, the alphabet book in the way it is designed sets the child in the epicenter and promotes its self action (Κόππης, 2009). Finally, regarding the topic, which was selected for the presentation of the alphabet to the children, is pleasant, timeless and is closely connected with their experiences (Κόππης, 2009) and everything they have heard about Santa Claus as it talks about his sack, and more specifically the gifts that the children ask from him for New Year’s Eve.

#### 3.1 Criteria Taken Into Account for the Design of the Alphabet Book

For the designing of the specific alphabet book all the main structural characteristics of the books of this kind were taken into account. Thus, the present alphabet book presents:

- 1) the letters of the Greek alphabet in turn, from A to Omega Ω,
- 2) it dedicates a two-page to each letter,
- 3) it presents each letter, its capital and lowercase form,
- 4) it connects each letter with one word, specifically a children’s toy-gift,
- 5) each letter is accompanied by a small and easy to understand text, in rhyme form,
- 6) each letter is accompanied by an illustration, which is in perfect connection with the rhyme text, and finally,
- 7) it has a theme, more specifically it is a Christmas-New Year one, and portrays Santa Claus preparing his sack.

Moreover, except for the common characteristics which it shares with all other alphabet books, it has certain singularities which differentiate it from the others and make it stand out. These singularities refer to:

- 1) the existence of letters which are not connected with a certain toy-gift, as it happens with the others. On the contrary, in these letters the activities and illustration ask from the child to get involved, to find on its own a game which begins with the specific letter and draw it in a properly designed space which is available in the illustration of the letter, completing it,
- 2) the presence of activities under each letter, which aim to the phonological awareness of the children, to the activation of their involvement as well as to their further engagement and practice with each letter,
- 3) the clear demarcation of the space dedicated to activities with different color,
- 4) the existence of a recapitulative chart in the form of a poster after the end of the letters presentation,
- 5) the existence of further recapitulative activities at the end of the book, which refer to all the letters and aim to the practice of the children after the completion of their acquaintance with the whole alphabet, and finally,
- 6) its particular theme, which is presented in such a way which invites, activates and urges the children

right from the start to participate, so that they help a cherished figure, Santa Claus, to fill his sack.

The specific alphabet book treats the children as active readers throughout its length, as it continually asks for their involvement, while at the same time it takes care to keep their interest undiminished, through the little surprises which are contained in the rhyme text which accompanies each letter.

Regarding the illustration of the alphabet book, it is simple, easy to understand for the age of the children which it addresses and care has been taken so as not to create stereotypes regarding “boys’ or girls’ toys”. Illustrations and texts are in accordance.

### **3.2 The Presentation of the Alphabet Book**

On the first page of the alphabet book (Figure 1) Santa Claus is depicted introducing the child- reader to the topic and ask for its help, so as to finish on time the filling of the last 24 gifts which are left and start his journey.

Next, follows the presentation of the letters (Figure 2). In every two-page a letter is presented first in its capital form and then in lowercase. For every two-page a different color has been selected for the presentation of the letter but also for the demarcation at the bottom of the pages, the space of the accompanying activities.

The activities (Figure 2) which are in the frame, at the bottom of the page where the letters are presented, follow a stable structure, as they are the same for every letter:

#### **Can you find more words beginning with A?**

In this first activity the child-reader is asked to find more words which begin with each phoneme and it helps the child to realize in this way that words consist of smaller parts, the syllables and the phonemes.

#### **Which other gift from the next page starts with an A and can be put into Santa’s sack?**

Here the reader is called to trace that toy which starts from each letter. It aims to the child realizing that the written speech constitutes the representation of oral speech, through the toys presentation which is done through illustrations and texts.

It is noted that the presentation of the letter as well as the activities which follow are always on the left side of the two-page, while the right page is dedicated to the illustration.

Moreover, under the presented letter, on the left side of the two-page, a rhyme text is found (Figure 2). The short rhyme texts aim to help the children to conquer speech sounds and phonemes of their language. There are many quite a few words which start with the presented letter in each two-page. In these words, the first letter is always marked with the color which has been selected for the presentation of the particular letter. The rhyme texts form rhymes and alliterations which help the children practice in the detection of phonemes.

However, there are also letters to which there is no corresponding toy and on the illustration frame free space is offered for self-expression and creativity. This method aims to the further involvement of the child – reader in its activation, so as to find on its own some toy which begins with the specific letter and draw it, completing in this way the illustration of the book.

After the completion of the letters presentation a recapitulative chart follows with all the letters from A to Omega  $\Omega$  (Figure 3). In this chart each letter is presented with the color the two-page also has inside the alphabet book where it is initially presented. Next of each letter lies the picture of the toy which the child had in mind which appears to the relevant letter and next to each picture the word of the toy is written.

Activities of a recapitulative form follow like:

- With which letter do the objects start?
- Let’s prepare the clothes of Santa

- The coveys
- Find the tic-tac-toes!
- The gifts of Santa
- The acrostic of New Year's Eve
- Recipe for the Christmas pudding
- Letter to Santa, and finally
- Certificate from the Santa's Helpers School.

Through these activities a further practice of the children is attempted on the understanding of the letters and the conquering of certain objectives, such as:

- the children realize the initial phoneme of the name of every object,
- they realize that every word consists of smaller segments, the phonemes, which must be found in a certain succession so that they make sense and denote the name of an object,
- they solve puzzles,
- they get to know the recipe, as a kind of text, and understand that by following the instructions given they reach the desired outcome, and
- they get acquainted with other kinds of texts, such as the letter and the certificate, and they relies that some of their personal data, such as their name, constitute indispensable elements in order to send a letter or get a certificate.



Figure 1 Santa Is Asking the Child-Reader's Help



Figure 2 Presentation of Letter A



Figure 3 Recapitulative Chart, Sample (Letters A – Z)

#### 4. Conclusion

Amazingly, the present alphabet book was designed obeying to: a) both pedagogical and didactic principals, b) the structural characteristics of the books of its kind, and c) everything that is stipulated by the analytical syllabus for preschool and primary school children regarding their linguistic development and phonological practice. It constitutes a child-centered alphabet book, as it places the child-reader to the epicenter taking into consideration at the same time its needs and interests (Κόπτης, 2009). It does not settle with just presenting information, but at the same time it attempts to include the reader in its story, constantly asking for his active participation, regarding him as an individual who thinks, acts and becomes creative (Κόπτης, 2009). It thus has an interactive character, as it gives the reader the possibility to interact and participate in the evolution of the story, leaving him free, sometimes, to choose on his own. Moreover, it is flexible and promotes the self-action of children, as they have the ability to control the order and speed with which they will read it, as well as to adapt it to their learning capacity. Finally, the alphabet book apart from the didactic objectives it was designed for, at the same time it constitutes a pleasant and fun material for the children whose age it is aimed to. It constitutes a material analogous to the children's interests as well as their cognitive abilities. (Κόπτης, 2009), aiming at the same time to their recreation, through the poems and pleasant activities it contains. In this point, it is worth noting that the present proposal was submitted to a respected publishing house in Greece, which moved on to publish the said alphabet book and its circulation in the Greek market with the same title, "Santa's sack".

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