

Meaningful Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Instruction

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Systematic and explicit are two words associated with phonics, the study of relationships between letters and the sounds that represent them. We have long known the importance of using phonics as an aid to word identification and that systematic phonics instruction coupled with reading connected texts and comprehension yields good readers (Snow, et al. 1998; NRP, 2001).

Instruction in phonics and phonological awareness needs to excite and stimulate language learning. Students need to experience the joy in being able to manipulate the sounds and letters of their language to create and read words. And children need instruction that helps them build meaningful associations so that they can make sense of how to best use phonics when reading.

Research-based guidelines for exemplary phonics programs (Stahl, 1992; Stahl, Duffy-Hester & Stahl, 1998) can be used as a framework to ensure the best possible phonics lessons. In short, exemplary phonics instruction . . .

- builds on what students already know about reading, such as how print functions, what stories are and how they work, and the purpose for reading.
- builds on a foundation of phonological awareness.
- is clear and direct. In other words, the explanations are meaningful to students and teachers use demonstrations to help students better understand how to apply what they are learning about phonics.
- is integrated into a total reading program. Explicit, formal instruction as well as many reading and writing opportunities to apply phonics knowledge are employed.
- focuses on reading words rather than learning rules. Students are taught how to look for patterns in words rather than memorizing an abstract set of rules.
- leads to automatic word identification. The purpose of phonics instruction is to help children acquire a large store of words so that they can read with greater ease.

Applying These Guidelines in a Reading Program

First, phonics instruction should be systematic and explicit. One way to provide systematic and explicit instruction is through a grade-level scope and sequence, which begins in kindergarten and ends in fifth grade. Right from the start, students begin to understand sounds and their visual representations. As students progress through the grades, phonics instruction becomes more sophisticated and students are taught how to use word parts to decode unknown words. A phonics scope and sequence also can be developmental when correlated to specific reading levels that comprise Small-Group Strategic Reading instruction. Students are provided with grade-level phonics skills during whole-group instruction. Then, during small-group time, they receive additional phonics instruction that is tailored specifically to their instructional reading level.

Second, phonics instruction should be integrated into other literacy experiences. For example, during Small-Group Strategic Reading instruction, children can be taught specific phonic elements and then given time to read books so that they can apply their newfound skill. They also may be expected to respond in writing to what they have read. This calls on students to apply their phonics knowledge by using it to write an understandable message.

Third, phonics lessons should be structured so that teachers first model how to use a specific skill and then gradually shift more of the responsibility for learning onto the students' shoulders. For example, when teaching children how to look for patterns in words (i.e., word families), the teacher can use letter and word family tiles to display and demonstrate how to find common elements within words. After demonstrating, the teacher then calls on children to manipulate the tiles to create and identify word patterns. Finally, the teacher helps children apply this skill to a written text—meaningful association at its best!

Fourth, phonological awareness in general and phonemic awareness in particular are a large part of instruction beginning in kindergarten. Lessons should be designed to help children develop a wide array of phonemic awareness skills such as sound matching, sound blending,

sound segmentation, and sound substitution. As with phonics instruction, meaningful association grounds all of these activities. Phonemic awareness activities should be connected to texts that children actually see, such as a poem. Students listen as the teacher reads the poem aloud and highlights selected words in order to build phonemic awareness. This helps students understand that the sounds they are exploring are related to reading itself.

Finally, in an ideal literacy program, children are constantly reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They are engaged learners who are constantly expected to apply what they are learning to new contexts. For example, after listening to a passage, they can be directed to respond either orally or in writing to a partner, a small group of individuals, or the entire class. The instructional materials should enable many different kinds of engagement.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is an integral part of any complete literacy program. But phonics instruction can be taken to an even higher level by helping children to build meaningful associations with text so that they are in a better position to use what they know to build comprehension—the ultimate goal of phonics instruction.

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Integrated

A Focus on Fluency

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Smooth, expressive, accurate, and rate are four words that define fluency. Adding the phrase *with good comprehension* to these descriptors rounds out the definition of fluency and reminds us that reading comprehension, rather than fluency, is the ultimate goal. Fluency is a vehicle for meaningful reading. Research shows that fluency appears to be one contributor to good comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). In other words, fluent readers tend to read with a high level of comprehension.

While some students have little difficulty with fluency, others do. Fortunately, there are several systematic and explicit teaching techniques we can use to teach these students how to read fluently thus better ensuring their reading comprehension. There are also specific guidelines for effective fluency instruction.

First and foremost, students must develop a “fluency consciousness.” They need to develop an ear for what fluent reading sounds like and have a desire to be fluent.

Second, students need time to practice reading any given text if they are to become fluent. Repeated reading of the same text allows students to become more fluent with that one text and supports improved comprehension on other unrehearsed texts (Samuels, 1979).

Third, children need support if they are to improve their reading fluency. Teacher modeling, reader’s theater, and choral reading are three ways to provide such support (Allington, 2006).

Fourth, children need text that they can read with ease so that they can devote their attention to reading with appropriate expression, phrasing, and reading rate. They also can devote their attention to communicating the author’s intended meaning to an interested audience.

These four guidelines form the foundation of the fluency activities and instruction in a literacy program. During whole-group instruction, fluency lessons can focus on specific fluency skills. Teacher modeling is a major part of this instruction. After the teacher models how to use a specific fluency skill such as reading with expression, students join in by reading along with the teacher. This allows students to practice the skill while simultaneously receiving teacher support.



Fluency instruction is a critical part of Small-Group Strategic Reading instruction as well. As with whole-group instruction, each lesson can focus on a particular fluency skill. Students read texts that provide little difficulty in terms of decoding so that they can devote their attention to practicing the fluency skill. An accompanying fluency rubric and both literal and inferential comprehension questions enable teachers to use this text to assess students’ fluency and comprehension. Independent reading is an excellent time for students to work on reading fluently. Texts that students can read with relative ease give students a chance to build fluency on their own.

Finally, fluency practice can be integrated into a variety of literacy activities. For example, after students write their own compositions, they can be provided time to read their own writing aloud others. Students also can be asked to respond to a text by writing down an idea to share. They can then share their idea by reading it aloud. At still other times, students may choral read selections as an entire class. All of these activities provide meaningful ways for students to practice reading fluently.

Fluency, once a neglected part of reading instruction, is now recognized as a critical component to a comprehensive literacy program. We must make every effort to provide systematic and explicit fluency instruction designed to heighten students’ reading comprehension. We want students who read well, which means that they can read fluently and with excellent comprehension.

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