

Beginning Reading Instruction

Teaching children to read may be the most important aspect of a primary grades teacher's job. Young children who learn to read fluently, confidently, and with good comprehension have a strong foundation for academic success. Those who struggle with reading, however, are likely to encounter significant difficulties in school. For schools, this translates into the need for additional services in order to move these children to grade level competency and problems for teachers as they attempt to ensure that all children in their classrooms are able to benefit from the instruction presented.

Although your state, school district, or school may prescribe a particular reading program or approach for use in all classrooms, individual teachers still have the opportunity to make many decisions about reading instruction for their students. You'll make better decisions if you understand how young children learn to read, how to provide a balanced reading program that addresses all essential reading skills, and how to provide early and effective intervention for students who experience difficulties.

How Do Children Learn to Read?

Reading is a complex task of deriving meaning from print. To engage in the act of reading, children must be able to perceive the sounds in spoken language (phonemes), and connect those sounds to letters. They must use their knowledge of letter-sound association to decode unfamiliar words. And they must use a range of interconnected strategies to construct meaning from the words and sentences they read (International Reading Association 1999).

Some children come to school more ready to read than others. You'll find a wide range of reading readiness in your students, depending on their background knowledge (the richness of the environment and the variety of learning experiences they've had in their early years), their general verbal abilities, their spoken vocabulary, their sensitivity to the sounds in spoken language, their knowledge about letters, and their familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading (reading from left to right and down the page; reading a book from back to front, and so on). Some children will struggle with reading because of difficulty processing print or other cognitive problems. The more strategies you

“Effective early reading instruction is crucial to all children. All children must learn to read so that they can read to learn” (Shellard and Protheroe 2001, 17).

know and can use to address your students' various strengths, weaknesses, and reading styles, the better prepared you will be to teach all of them to read successfully.

Research Supports Balanced Reading Instruction

You will certainly have heard about the debate between proponents of phonics instruction and those who advocate whole-language instruction for beginning readers. Phonics instruction usually means emphasizing structured, sequential, direct teaching of letters and letter combinations to enable children to decode text. The whole-language approach emphasizes reading for meaning; integrating the language arts (reading, speaking, and writing); and teaching skills in the context of real reading tasks. The argument over which method works best has been so intense in the past that it has been known as the “reading wars” (Lemann 1997).

Fortunately, you don't have to choose sides in this debate. Good teachers have always used a combination of methods to teach children to read. And recent research validates the idea that balanced instruction, individualized to meet each student's needs, is the most effective way to teach reading (Pressley et al. 1998; Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998).

Phonics-based instruction—when presented through enjoyable, hands-on activities or in the context of real reading—can help improve phonological awareness and decoding skills that are so critical to reading ability. Whole-language strategies are indispensable too, because they provide students with motivation and real purposes for reading and writing. By including the best of both phonics and whole language in your reading instruction, you'll meet the needs of a much wider

Learning to read is not a linear process—children do not need to learn how to decode words before they develop their comprehension skills. Ideally, decoding and comprehension develop at the same time from the earliest stages of reading. (Learning First Alliance, 1998).

range of learners. Here are some specific methods for integrating phonics and whole language to facilitate three basic components of reading skill: decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

Teaching Decoding Skills

The ability to decode text starts with phonemic awareness—an awareness of the units of sounds that make up words and the ability to consciously connect these sounds to build words and sentences. Children must develop phonemic awareness before they can understand phonics—the systematic relationship between sounds and symbols in the alphabetic writing system, which enables them to decode text. Emergent readers need plenty of opportunities to develop phonemic awareness. Researchers have found that informal activities involving word games, rhymes, riddles, songs, or storytelling can promote phonemic awareness and reading achievement (Yopp 1992). You can also teach phonemic awareness directly, through exercises such as:

- **Phoneme deletion:** What word would be left out if the /d/ sound were taken away from *dog*?
- **Word-to-word matching:** Do *bear* and *boy* begin with the same sound?
- **Blending:** What word would we have if these three sounds were put together: /c/, /a/, /t/?
- **Sound isolation:** What is the first sound in *seed*?
- **Phoneme segmentation:** What sounds do you hear in the word *tall*?
- **Phoneme counting:** How many sounds do you hear in the word *map*?

Instruction in sound-symbol correspondence (phonics) can be taught as children develop a strong phonemic awareness. When you use a balanced approach to reading instruction, you'll teach phonics in a meaningful context. One way of doing this is to draw students' attention to the sound-symbol relationships within a word they know—one that is from a book just read or a recent classroom conversation. You can also provide informal opportunities to develop word recognition—by placing alphabet books in the library corner, including manipulative letters in a writing corner, focusing attention on letters in environmental print and Big Books, and reading and spelling the words in the daily schedule (Chard and Osborne 1999; Lesiak 1997).

Here are some strategies for developing students' phonics skills (Kame'enui 1996; Lesiak 1997):

- Begin with a group of letters that can make several words, such as *m*, *s*, *a*, and *t* (to make *am*, *sam*, *sat*, and *mat*). Selecting letters that make several words that the children can understand will start them off reading words, rather than isolated sounds that have no meaning and are difficult to pronounce.
- Separate confusing letter-sound associations, such as *b* and *d* or *m* and *n*, or the vowel sounds.
- Present sounds that are easy to articulate first. Sounds such as /*m*/, /*s*/, and /*f*/ are called continuous sounds because they can be presented in isolation and continuously sounded without distortion. Sounds such as /*d*/ and /*g*/ (called stop sounds) are easily distorted and cannot be continuously sounded.
- Teach common sounds, such as /*a*/ and /*m*/, before less common sounds, such as /*x*/ and /*z*/.
- Teach words that are part of students' oral language before less-familiar words.
- Monitor progress, perhaps by keeping a list of letter-sound associations that have already been taught. Students should be asked to identify previously studied letters or sounds every two weeks. This will help determine whether certain letter-sound associations need further work.

Developing Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement 2001). When a reader develops fluency, decoding becomes so automatic that he or she can give most of his or her attention to comprehension (Mastropieri, Leinart, and Scruggs 1999).

In contrast, "readers who struggle with decoding . . . have fewer cognitive resources that are freed up for comprehension processes. Therefore, they lose track of meaning" (Wilson and Protheroe 2002, 44).

Promote fluency by providing practice with a wide variety of well-written and engaging texts at each student's comfortable reading level (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998). In addition, the following classroom activities will help students develop fluency.

- **Shared reading.** Show students an enlarged version of the text, read it aloud to them with expression, and then invite them to read along. Encourage all

efforts students make, without correcting mistakes. Keep the reading relaxed and social, focused on enjoyment and appreciation of the story, poem, or song. After the shared reading, give students the opportunity to reread the shared piece independently (Routman 1994).

- **Guided reading.** Give each child (in a small-group, whole-class, or one-on-one format) his or her own copy of the text. Have him or her read a selection silently or aloud in the group. Then have the child discuss the text and respond to it in personal ways (Routman 1994).
- **Classwide peer tutoring.** Have students work with buddies. One partner reads while the other partner actively monitors his or her performance. This method enables the largest number of students in a classroom to get reading practice at one time.
- **Computer-guided practice.** For example, the Hint and Hunt computer program includes a game-like activity that promotes reading speed (Mastropieri, Leinart, and Scruggs 1999).

A survey of U.S. elementary classroom teachers revealed that most teachers provide students with direct instruction in reading skills as well as immersion in literacy experiences (Baumann et al. 1998).

Developing Comprehension Skills

Researchers agree that reading instruction should focus on comprehension from the beginning. As G. Reid Lyon of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development writes:

If children are not provided early and consistent experiences that are explicitly designed to foster vocabulary development, background knowledge, the ability to detect and comprehend relationships among verbal concepts, and the ability to actively employ strategies to ensure understanding and retention of material, reading failure will occur no matter how robust word recognition skills are (1998, 11).

Basics of Effective Reading Instruction

Based on research, reading instruction in your classroom will be most effective if you:

- Provide both direct instruction in sound-symbol relationships and exposure to motivating, interesting reading materials.
- Focus on the relationships between letters and sounds and the process of obtaining meaning from print.
- Connect instruction to children's daily experiences and needs.
- Create a rich language and literacy environment.
- Provide high-quality instructional materials, including materials that students can read to themselves easily and more difficult texts that a child can learn to read with you.
- Familiarize students with the basic purposes and methods of reading and writing.
- Give students frequent and intensive opportunities to read both aloud and to themselves.
- Encourage students to talk about books and stories in ways that enrich their vocabularies.
- Give students practice recognizing and producing letters.
- Emphasize the sound structure of words.
- Provide or arrange additional instruction through supplementary reading programs for students who fall behind expected levels (U.S. Department of Education 2000).

Provide Plenty of Opportunities to Read

The most valuable activity for developing children's comprehension is reading itself. To a large extent, the amount of reading that children do predicts their growth in reading comprehension across the elementary school years.

Your daily language arts instruction should include time for independent reading, in which students read books

of their own choosing. Provide a wide selection of fiction and nonfiction materials in your classroom library. For many children, this may be the only regular time during which they read for pleasure. Even the youngest children can engage in this activity by looking at picture books or rereading familiar books.

Develop Students' Vocabulary

Vocabulary has a direct impact on reading comprehension. As students progress from simple text to more sophisticated text, their decoding skills will not be enough if they don't have the vocabulary to make sense of what they read.

You can help your students increase their vocabularies both indirectly, by reading aloud to them and encouraging them to read extensively on their own, and directly, by teaching them the meaning of individual words and by improving their word-learning strategies (for example, use of the dictionary and other reference aids, and use of context clues) (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement 2001).

Juel and colleagues' study of 200 early readers (2003) found that the method they termed anchored word instruction was effective in promoting the vocabulary skills of first-graders. Using this method, the teacher introduces new vocabulary words in the context of meaningful stories, and highlights the meaning, spelling, and sound of the new words together, rather than focusing only on decoding or on word meaning.

Build Students' Background Knowledge

Inadequate background knowledge impedes children from understanding what they have read. The explanation for the role of background knowledge in comprehension can be traced to the brain's system for storing and retrieving information. As learners develop more background knowledge about a subject, the knowledge is organized in the brain in such a way that it becomes more accessible. Related bits of knowledge connect to each other and form a network of relationships. As new bits are stored away, the connections become stronger and more elaborate. If a rich network of information and meaning already exists, new information can more easily fit into the network and be remembered (Beck and McKeown 1998).

One of the most important approaches for building young children's background knowledge is reading

aloud to them daily. When your students' decoding skills are still at a basic level, they will be able to understand much more complex concepts through listening than they will through reading themselves.

Other ways of building background knowledge about a topic include:

- spending extra time discussing concepts that are important to the main ideas in the text;
- taking field trips related to the topic;
- encouraging students to read informational books at the appropriate level of difficulty; and
- viewing videos on the topic (Gunning 1998).

Directly Teach Comprehension Strategies

To comprehend what they read, children need to use a variety of strategies. These include:

- setting a purpose and a goal for reading;
- previewing the text (looking at the cover, scanning the inside of the book);
- predicting (thinking about what you already know and making an educated guess about what the text will be about, perhaps based on the preview);
- summarizing (telling only the important details in a condensed form—this strategy enhances understanding and promotes retention);
- making inferences (making connections, judgments, or conclusions based on what you already know and the information that is included in the text);
- self-monitoring comprehension (checking to see whether what has been read has been understood); and
- rereading (to correct comprehension breakdowns) (Gunning 1998).

Research shows that direct instruction in these strategies helps to develop students' reading comprehension. Instruction in each of the strategies should include extensive teacher modeling—including think-alouds (in which you use the strategy while voicing the related thought processes)—as well as time for students to talk about the strategies they are using.

Other Important Considerations

Motivation

Underlying the entire reading process is the key element of motivation. Most children come to school eager to learn to read, but the experiences they encounter in the classroom help to determine whether they maintain that enthusiasm. Whatever instructional experiences you plan for children, remember to keep motivation in mind. By making reading enjoyable and tailoring instruction to children's interests, you will put your students well on their way to becoming lifelong readers.

The Reading-Writing Connection

As soon as children learn some letters, they should be encouraged to write them, to use them to begin writing words or parts of words, and to use words to begin

Some Ideas for Building Student Reading Motivation

- Invite a variety of people, such as teachers, authors, school administrators, parents, and older students, into the classroom to read to students frequently.
- Use reading inventories to assess children's reading interests.
- Build a classroom library with a wide choice of reading materials based on students' interests.
- Record high-interest books on tape and put them in the classroom library along with the printed copies.
- Provide cozy reading areas with high-interest books, soft furniture, rugs, and pillows.
- Provide students with time to independently read self-selected texts.
- Encourage students to create bulletin boards that show their reading interests.
- Provide time for students to read with friends.
- Provide opportunities for students to discuss their favorite books, characters, and events (Carbo 1997).

writing sentences. The Learning First Alliance asserts that “writing, in addition to being valuable in its own right, gives children opportunities to use their new reading competence” (1998, online). Incorporate writing regularly and frequently into reading instruction.

Invented Spelling

When children first begin writing, they should be encouraged to “guess” at the spelling of words and to write them freely without limiting their written products to words they can spell correctly. Some parents may question this practice because they fear that allowing children to use invented spelling will prevent them from learning conventional spelling. However, the two are not in conflict. Invented spelling promotes children’s early writing fluency, and their attempts to sound out words can be helpful in developing their understanding of speech sounds and sound-spelling relationships. Assure parents that conventionally correct spelling will be developed through focused instruction and practice, and that you will gradually expect students to spell already-learned words and spelling patterns correctly.

Assessment

Assessment is an essential component of an effective beginning reading program. By using carefully developed and selected assessments, you can:

- ensure that the instruction you provide meets the needs of your class on a continuing basis;
- identify students with reading-related difficulties and provide additional help before they fall too far behind; and
- inform parents about their child’s progress (Shepard, Kagan, and Wurtz 2001).

Assessment methods vary widely, and a mixture of formal and informal assessment methods will yield the most complete and accurate information about your students. Formal assessments mandated by your state or school district may be norm-referenced with scores reported in terms of percentiles or grade equivalents (such as the Stanford 9) or criterion-referenced and aligned with the state’s content standards, such as Virginia’s Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS).

Informal classroom assessments can provide more frequent feedback to enable you to tailor instruction to each child’s needs. These include running records, anecdotal records, informal reading inventories, and observation. Look at the activities you conduct every day and ask yourself: What do these tell me about the students in my class?

Provide Early Intervention For Students Who Struggle

Another area of agreement in the research is that early intervention is crucial in preventing reading failure for students who struggle with beginning reading. Your school may offer a schoolwide early intervention program such as Reading Recovery, Early Intervention in Reading, the Early Literacy Project, or Early Steps. However, no schoolwide program is sufficient for student success. You also need a wide repertoire of specific activities designed to meet the wide range of student needs in your classroom.

For an estimated 90-95 percent of at-risk children, prevention and early intervention programs that include well-delivered instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading comprehension strategies, and fluency development can increase reading skills to average levels (Lyon 1998). All of these important areas should be included in intervention services to at-risk children, just as they are in regular classroom instruction. Effective intervention approaches are not all that different from effective classroom instruction:

Children who are having difficulty learning to read do not, as a rule, require qualitatively different instruction from children who are “getting it.” Instead, they more often need application of the same principles by someone who can apply them expertly to individual children who are having difficulty for one reason or another (Snow, Burns, and Griffin 1998, 12).

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Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- Are there any elements of effective reading instruction discussed here about which you feel you need additional training or information? Are there areas where you feel that you could act as a resource for other teachers?
- Take another look at the box on page 5. Discuss some additional ideas to help build student reading motivation.
- Work with your colleagues to develop lists of books recommended for students' independent reading time. Keep in mind the range of reading abilities in your classes, student interests, and curricular goals. Compare these lists with fellow teachers.

The following ERS *Info-Files* are related resources available from ERS. These resources provide an overview of research and information to give you a general understanding of a particular topic or concern in K-12 education. Each *Info-File* contains 70-100 pages of articles from professional journals, summaries of research studies and related literature, and an annotated bibliography that includes an ERIC-CIJE search. Base cost-recovery price per title: \$40. Subscriber discounts are available.

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