

Building a Strong Foundation for Successful Reading

BY SHARON VAUGHN, Ph.D.

One thing we all know for sure is that reading for understanding, learning, and enjoyment are the ultimate goals of our literacy instruction. How can we ensure that all students are successful in achieving these goals? Success is ensured as early as Kindergarten when teachers help students with letter naming and then ultimately mapping sounds to print. Achieving comprehension literacy goals starts very early with building proficiency in the foundation skills, which include letter naming, sound recognition, and manipulating phonemes. Learning high-frequency words such as the, was, from, and for serves as the building blocks of successful reading since they account for many of the words students will repeatedly read.

FOUNDATION SKILLS OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS AND PHONICS

Students benefit from both explicit and integrated phonemic awareness instruction and phonics so that the patterns of our language are evident and can be applied to reading previously unknown words. However, teaching phonemic awareness and phonics effectively requires us to apply the “Goldilocks principle.” This means that we provide neither too much instruction nor too little instruction, but ideally the amount that is “just right” for the needs of the student. Some students require a great deal of support for acquiring proficiency in phonemic awareness and phonics, and other students either come to school with these proficiencies or acquire them quickly. For the most powerful aspects of phonemic awareness, which are “blending” and “segmenting,” many students will require considerable practice. Initially, students may have challenges when asked to take sounds that are separated, e.g., /m/, /u/, /s/, and /t/, and blend them into a word: *must*. After considerable practice, however, students catch on and soon are readily blending sounds into words, which serves as an important foundation for them to extend word reading through using rimes, e.g., using an to make many words such as *can*, *fan*, *man*, *pan*, *tan*, and *ran*.

One of the biggest challenges for beginning readers is vowels. The sounds of short vowels such as /i/, /e/, /o/, and /u/ are very similar, and distinguishing them is often challenging. For example, the words *pit*, *pet*, *pot*, and *put* sound



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very much alike, and many young readers are challenged to hear the differences. For some students, it is useful to allow them to write the letters and words that represent the sounds when they are saying them. This can be done with whiteboards or finger writing in the air or on a table. In addition to learning short vowels, another challenge for many students is “vowel teams.” Teams of vowels such as /ea/ may not consistently make the same sound, e.g., *heat* and *head*. Thus, students benefit when they are taught that many vowel teams have an expected sound as well as “outlaw” or unexpected sounds. Thus, we often have to turn our students into word detectives who think about the likely word that would make sense given what they know about the need to be flexible using phonics rules.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING PHONEMIC AWARENESS SKILLS

- Phonemic awareness is one of the funnest activities in early literacy for Kindergarten and first-grade teachers and their students. There are numerous games and activities and playful language opportunities.
- Blending is a powerful phonemic-awareness development. Students learn to say the extended sounds of letters quickly and blend them to make words. As teachers or students say the sounds, they can point to letters, blocks, or other manipulatives to move them together to represent the blending of sounds into a word.
- Segmenting is another important development and can be thought of as the opposite of blending. This is when students learn to take the sounds in a word and separate them. For example, students are initially provided simple words (e.g., three sounds) and they learn to segment them—*lap*, *son*, *pin*—and later they are provided more complex patterns such as four sounds, e.g., *sent*, *from*, *stop*.
- The third most critical component of phonemic awareness is learning to manipulate the sounds of a word through deleting sounds, adding sounds, and/or substituting sounds. When students delete sounds they listen to the word and then are asked to delete a sound at the beginning or end of the word. For example, delete the first sound in the following words: *run* (un), *pat* (at), *men* (en). Students also learn to add sounds, initially with relatively easy additions, e.g., adding s to the end of words, and then more difficult additions such as consonants. The most challenging

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- manipulation is when students are asked to move sounds from one position in a word to another position. For example, “Let’s take the first sound of the word *came* and put it into our pocket. What do we have left? Yes, that’s right, we have “ame” left. Now let’s add the /t/ sound to the beginning of “ame”, and now what do we have? That’s right, *tame*.”
- Be sure to provide a model for each task you want students to perform. Give students a chance to respond as a group, but also to turn to face a partner and practice with each other. Provide opportunities for students with challenges to have extra practice in a small group or individually.
 - Use manipulatives, body movements, or fingers to make the “oral” aspects of phonemic awareness more visible. For example, “Watch me, I will take a step sideways to represent each sound in the word.” Or a teacher might say, “Let’s hold up a finger to count each of the phonemes in the following words.”

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING PHONICS

- Vowel sounds are more difficult than consonant sounds and require additional practice.
- Teach consonant sounds prior to blends and digraphs.
- Teach students to be “flexible” decoders since the rules of our language do not operate consistently. Learning to be flexible means that if students learn to “sound out” a new word and it doesn’t make sense, they can be flexible about decoding the word.

- Use words that students know and are likely to encounter in their reading to practice their phonics knowledge.
- Teach high-frequency, irregular words so that when students encounter them, they can read them without their phonics skills, e.g., *you, was, the, what*.

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- Practice reading words in many forms, including in isolation, sentences, longer text, books, whiteboards, and so on. When students have difficulty reading a word, give them opportunities to write the word.

FOUNDATION SKILL OF ENHANCING VOCABULARY

The goal of phonemic awareness and phonics is to provide students with the knowledge and skills they need to read words. After all, students are unable to understand and learn from texts when they cannot overcome the barrier of word reading. Similarly, reading for understanding is not possible if students do not know what the words mean. Essential to successful comprehension is a well-developed vocabulary so that when students encounter words, they can both read each word and understand its meaning, which leads to improved understanding. While a complete description of vocabulary practices for young children is beyond this monograph, there are a few suggestions that are likely to yield valuable outcomes for students.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING VOCABULARY TO YOUNG CHILDREN

- Promote word learning throughout the day, not just as it relates to reading or to a particular text. Consider ways to notice and record new words encountered throughout all learning.
- Use new and unusual words and encourage students to do the same. When describing how you will transition from one activity to the next, ask students to move “gingerly” and then ask them what the word *gingerly* means. Change the way students are asked to move so that over time they acquire many new words.
- Encourage students to be “word collectors” and to listen and look for new words. Ask them to “bring” these new words to school and keep a word wall or book to collect these new words.
- Read widely to students and when they are able to do so, encourage them to read widely as well. Reading widely means that you provide students with a range

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of text genres that you read aloud, including information text, poetry, narrative texts, and texts that address a range of topics that will facilitate their background and word-meaning knowledge.

- Provide read-alouds to students on listening levels that are above their reading levels and that introduce them to a rich assortment of topics and words.

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Use read-aloud practices that include preteaching new words and their meanings, and ask students to use a gesture when they hear those words in the read-aloud.

GROUPING PRACTICES THAT PROMOTE DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

How to provide instruction to ensure that all children learn to read is a very challenging task. Good reading instruction considers how reading is taught. The “how” of reading instruction includes features such as pacing, monitoring student progress, and grouping for reading instruction. Grouping is one of the few alterable features of instruction that “can powerfully influence positively or negatively the levels of individual student engagement and hence academic progress” (Maheady, 1997, p. 325).

Student Pairs. Student pairing is a powerful way to provide students with opportunities to practice and is highly suited to students with reading difficulties. It is possible to pair better readers with students who have reading challenges and provide them with structured opportunities to practice. Also, pairs are good ways to do “turn and talks” during story read-alouds, e.g., giving students an opportunity to discuss word meanings or comprehension questions about character, setting, or main idea. Students can also effectively work in pairs using word, phrase, or sentence cards, which provides them with many opportunities to practice challenging words.

Small Groups. Teachers of Grade 1 through Grade 3 in the most-effective schools provided more than twice as much time using small-group reading instruction than did teachers in those same grades in less-effective schools (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). There are many possible benefits to small-group instruction, including giving students opportunities to read aloud

with feedback from the teacher, read silently and respond to questions, or read and answer questions. Small-group instruction also provides specific opportunities for teachers to build those skills that are most vulnerable, e.g., improve foundation skills for students who have inadequately developed skills. Small-group instruction can also provide for same-ability instruction or mixed-ability instruction depending upon the focus of the instruction.

PLANNING AND ORGANIZING ACTIVITIES EFFECTIVELY FOR PAIRS OR SMALL GROUPS

- Choose activities that help students understand, practice, and apply previously taught skills.
- Use materials and resources that are familiar yet require additional practice.
- Develop small-group centers throughout the classroom.
- Consider traffic flow, use of materials, and work space.
- Develop and teach easy-to-follow rules.
- Demonstrate the procedures and routines used in the activities at each center or group.
- Group students for specific purposes, using data from informal and formal reading assessments.
- Develop a classroom management system that incorporates the daily schedule and small-group management chart.
- Monitor and evaluate student progress, and regroup students for reading instruction as needed.
- Design a group rotation plan to indicate where groups go until they all have an opportunity to work with the teacher.
- Use a variety of writing, listening, reading, and game activities that engage students at each center.

IN CONCLUSION

Students in the early grades benefit considerably when teachers provide them with adequate opportunities to acquire foundation skills in reading and to practice and extend these foundation skills through small-group instruction.

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