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Teaching the Fundamentals: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Decoding, and Spelling

by Dr. Josefina Villamil Tinajero

Effective reading instruction must incorporate the most current, scientifically based reading research, such as that reviewed in the National Reading Panel report (2000), as well as other highly regarded reports and research analyses (e.g., Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007; Moats, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). These findings show clearly that for striving readers, the content of instruction must be rigorous and the presentation of that content must be direct, systematic and objective. These findings are reinforced by studies of effective reading teachers, which reveal that the classrooms of these teachers are “characterized by high academic engagement, excellent and positive classroom management, explicit teaching of skills, large amounts of reading and writing, and integration across the curriculum” (Cunningham, 2007, p. 176). In addition to these sources, the recommendations in this paper are based on reports of research-based best practices for students who are English learners (ELs) (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Teaching Fundamental Skills in Middle School

The National Reading Panel report and other research summaries emphasized the five essential components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. At the middle school grades, teachers often assume that their students have acquired the fundamental skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and spelling in the primary grades. However, some striving readers in middle school need to begin with foundational skills and learn the entire sequence of phonics and decoding skills. Others need support in only a few of the fundamental skill areas.

Teachers may be surprised to realize this—as indicated by these recent comments from experienced teachers in Texas:

“I always thought that teaching phonemic awareness and phonics was something that teachers in the early grades worried about—maybe K through 2nd grade—not 7th grade teachers like me! As I learned more about the kinds of things I could do to help my striving readers, my students

began to respond in positive ways. For the first time, I felt that they were making progress—and that I was making a difference.”

“By combining best practices for teaching phonemic awareness and phonics with those of second-language acquisition, for the first time in my 12-year career as a teacher, I began to see my striving readers thrive.”

Who are the students who need to begin at the beginning? Some students are new arrivals to our schools from countries that may have no written language or a non-Roman alphabet. Some have never been enrolled in school, and others have had interrupted schooling. Still others may have been in the U.S. school system, but have not yet learned basic blending and decoding skills or how to recognize words automatically.

If students are English learners, they need a complete language and literacy program that develops oral language, vocabulary, and the patterns and structures of English for use in oral and written communication as well as phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding. In fact, oral language is the foundation of reading proficiency (e.g.,

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Fitzgerald, 1995; Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998). Oral language is critical in the development of phonemic awareness because students who are able to recognize large numbers of spoken words can focus more easily on recognizing the individual sounds in those words (e.g., Goswami, 2003). In addition it provides support for students' acquisition of the alphabetic principle: When readers have a large store of words in their oral vocabularies, they are better able to sound out, read, and understand these words when they see them in print (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Not all middle school striving readers, however, will need intensive instruction in all of the fundamental skills. Many students in the middle grades have acquired basic decoding skills but read with difficulty because they struggle with word analysis skills (especially with multisyllabic words) and fluency.

Therefore, teachers of striving readers at these grades should carefully diagnose student needs and provide direct, explicit, and systematic instruction that fills the gaps students have in phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and spelling, including the delivery of a complete sequence of the fundamentals, if necessary.

What Skills Make Up the Fundamentals?

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds, or phonemes, in spoken words is known as *phonemic awareness*. *Phonics* refers to the understanding that a predictable relationship exists between phonemes and the spellings that represent those sounds in written language, or the *alphabetic principle* (National Reading Panel, 2000). Students' levels of phonemic awareness and phonics skills both predict initial reading success and relate strongly to their reading success throughout the school years (e.g., Calfee, Lindamood, & Lindamood, 1973; Ehri & Nunes, 2002; Snow et al., 1998).

The research reviewed by the National Reading Panel (2000) indicates that the best method to ensure that readers develop both phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge is to provide them with direct, explicit, and systematic instruction. The basis for effective direct, explicit, systematic instruction is a carefully articulated and sequential progression of skills that begins with the most basic tasks and moves with appropriate pacing to more difficult tasks. This curriculum is best presented through consistent teaching routines that let students know up front what they are expected to do and learn in specific activities. The teacher clearly models the skills and provides ample structured and guided practice with immediate corrective feedback when needed.

Decoding and Spelling An essential part of phonics and decoding instruction is blending, in which students are explicitly taught how to blend sounds to decode words. Decoding should begin with simple 2- or 3-letter words and then move gradually to more complex words.

As students learn to decode sound/spellings to blend words, they must also learn and practice spelling, or encoding—the process of hearing sounds in words, relating the sounds to their spellings, and writing those spellings to form written words. This encoding process is an essential part of learning the alphabetic system and becoming proficient in its use.

High Frequency Words These are words that occur frequently in running text and have at least one spelling that is not phonetically regular. Students need to recognize these words automatically for fluent reading.

What Is the Role of Decodable Texts?

Decodable texts are passages in which a high percentage of words can be blended by applying the sound/spellings students have been taught. In addition, up to 10%–15% of the words in these texts may be previously taught high frequency words.

As students learn each new sound/spelling, they need ample opportunities to decode words with the new spelling in decodable text. Using a research-based instructional routine for teaching the decodable text gives students multiple experiences reading the text to build fluency and allows teachers to provide immediate corrective feedback.

Applying the Research: *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*

Placement Proper placement into a program level is the first step in meeting students' needs. The program's Placement Test includes a Phonics Test and a Reading Level Lexile® test. Students first take the Phonics Test. If they do not show mastery of phonics and decoding skills, they are placed in either Level A or Level B of the program, depending on their performance. Here they will receive explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, spelling, and high frequency words throughout the instructional plan.

At these levels *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* teaches phonemic awareness and phonics skills in a carefully ordered scope and sequence that reflects scientific research findings. This sequence features a strong emphasis at the beginning on blending CVC words with short vowels, and then moves gradually to more difficult skills, including digraphs, long vowels, inflected endings, r-controlled vowels, and multisyllabic words. All essential phonics skills are covered.

If students answer 80% or more of the items on the Phonics Test correctly, they will take the Reading Level Lexile® test to place them into Level C, D, or E of the program according to reading level. Studying the item analysis for the student's performance on the Phonics Test,



The *Inside Phonics* kit covers all essential skills for use with students at Levels A and B who need sequential instruction in the fundamentals and for use with students at Levels C–E who have gaps to fill.

however, is still helpful in identifying gaps in decoding, which teachers can fill by selecting appropriate lessons from the *Inside Phonics* kit.

Instructional Routines *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* uses research-based reading routines to teach sound/spellings, blending, spelling, high frequency words, and the reading of decodable texts. These routines allow teachers to *scaffold* instruction, first making sure that students grasp the skill, and then gradually shifting and releasing responsibility for completing a task from themselves to students (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978).

For example, **Reading Routine 1: Introduce Sound Spellings** moves through four steps:

Step 1. Develop Phonemic Awareness

- The teacher models the target sound in a consistent word position (e.g. initial position); students produce the sound.
- The teacher models the sound in another (e.g. final) position; students produce the sound.
- Students listen and show hands to indicate whether they hear the sound and what position they hear it in.

Step 2. Introduce the Sound/Spelling

- The teacher introduces the sound with the Sound/Spelling Card; students repeat the sound.

- The teacher then uses the Sound/Spelling Card to introduce the spelling; students repeat the spelling.
- The teacher gives multiple examples of the sound/spelling in various positions as students say the sound and write the spelling in the air.

Step 3. Blend Sound-by-Sound

- The teacher writes the spelling of the first sound in a word and models the sound; students repeat. This is repeated for each sound up to the vowel.
- The teacher writes the vowel, and then models blending the sounds through the vowel; then students blend the sounds.
- The teacher repeats the process for any additional spellings in the word.
- The teacher models blending the complete word; students blend and read the word.

Step 4. Spell Sound-by-Sound

- The teacher says the word; students repeat it.
- The teacher guides students in segmenting the sounds in the word and matching each sound to its Sound/Spelling Card. Students say each spelling and then write it.
- The teacher writes the correct spelling on the board; students check their spelling and correct it if necessary.

Lesson 8A LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

R-Controlled Vowels /ar/, /or/

OBJECTIVES

- Develop Phonemic Awareness: isolate sounds
- Associate sounds and spellings: /ar/, /or/
- Blend sounds to decode words

Spelling

- Spell words with R-Controlled Vowels

TEACH AND PRACTICE

1. Complete Reading Routine 1 (PD44) to introduce /ar/.
2. Repeat the routine to introduce /or/.
3. If students need preteaching, use Reading Routine 2 (PD45).

Reading Routine 1: Introduce Sound/Spellings

	/ar/	/or/
Step 1: Develop Phonemic Awareness		
1. Tell students: These words have _____ at the end. Say the three words.	car, far, jar	cor, for, nor
2. Tell students: These words have _____ in the middle. Say the three words.	park, bark, mark	corn, porn, storm
3. Tell students: I will say a word. Listen for _____ if you hear it at the end, raise one hand. If you hear it in the middle, raise both hands. If you don't hear it at all, leave your hands down.	car, tall, star, start, far, bark, back, park	for, far, storm, nor, horn, fog, sport
Step 2: Introduce the Sound/Spelling		
1. Display the picture-only side of the Sound/Spelling Card. Say the name of the picture. Have students repeat.		
2. Say the target sound. Have students repeat.		
3. Turn the card over. Point to and name the spelling. Have students repeat.	ar, bark, star	or, porn, for
4. Give examples of words with the sound/spelling in various positions.		
5. Have students say the sound as they write the spelling in the air.		
Step 3: Blend Sound-by-Sound	star	horn
1. Write the spelling of the first sound. Point to it and say the sound. Have students say the sound. Repeat for each sound/spelling before the vowel.		
2. After you write the vowel spelling, blend the sounds through the vowel, sweeping your hand below the spellings. Have students blend the sounds.		
3. If there are additional spellings in the word, repeat the process.		
4. When the word is complete, sweep your hand below it. Have students read it.		
5. Repeat the procedure for other words.	car, bark, start	horn, horn, sport
Step 4: Spell Sound-by-Sound		
1. Say the word and use it in a sentence. Have students repeat the word.	fern: Comes live on a fern	card: Plug in the card
2. Guide students to segment the sounds in the word. Then ask: What's the first sound in the word? Guide students to match each sound to a Sound/Spelling Card and identify the spelling. Say: Check the card. What's the spelling? Students say the spelling and then write it. Repeat until the word is complete.	ar: car / or: or	ar: car / or: or
3. Write the word on the board. Ask students to check their spelling of the word.		
4. If a student misspelled the word, have him or her circle the word and write it correctly.		
5. Repeat the procedure for other words.	car	corn

Words with R-Controlled Vowels

Transparency 13: R-Controlled Vowels

Language Support

Talk through each picture to develop meaning for the words in the yellow boxes. Present the two different meanings of the words in boxes 1-3. For example, for box 1, say: Look. The purple fern, or really, is our tractor the star with a fern's horn (point to the second picture) a tractor meaning of fern. The green about their ferns, or both, of ar.

Check Understanding

Have students read the word lists at the end of the passage.

If students have difficulty decoding the text in the passage, review the steps of Reading Routine 1 (PD44). Have them practice reading individual words in the passage, and then have them reread the entire text.

ON YOUR OWN

When a student's reading indicates understanding, assign the following independent practice:

Practice Book, p. 30

Script 17 Procedure

1. Blend Whole Words

Model: Use the top panel of the transparency to model whole-word blending and structure.

- Point to the star and say: The word star has three sounds. Listen while I blend the sounds.
- Point to the s. Slide your hand below star as you say: I can blend the three sounds: /s/ /t/ /r/. Now, I'm going to say the whole word star.
- Repeat, having students blend the word with you. Then have them say the word naturally.
- Use the word in a sentence. Ask students to suggest other sentences with the word.
- Repeat for horn, pointing out that the letters or stand for /or/.

Practice: Guide students through items 1-5. Read the text, pausing before a word with ar or or so that students can blend the sounds or you point to each spelling. Then have students say the whole word as you sweep your hand under it. Read the phrase or sentence with the word.

2. Spell Words

- Say: Star. I am the first star in the sky. Star. Have students repeat the word.
- Have students say: /s/. Help them identify the matching Sound/Spelling Card and the spelling for the sound. Have students write the letter: s.
- Repeat for /t/ and /r/ as that students have spelled the entire word.
- Write the word, and have students compare it to their spelling. Have them circle it if they spelled it incorrectly and then write it correctly.
- Repeat the steps to spell the words at the right.

Words for Blending

far	fork
car	stare
start	sports
smart	harmet
garden	horse

Words for Spelling

part	corn
start	stare
yard	stark
march	north

Phonics and decoding phonics lessons follow consistent instructional routines based on principles of direct, explicit instruction.

This instructional routine includes the essentials of exemplary phonics instruction: direct, explicit teaching of sound-spellings and the application of this phonics knowledge to blend the sounds together (Shanahan, 2002).

Similarly, high frequency word instruction follows a consistent research-based routine including these steps:

Step 1. Review of previously taught words

Step 2. Introduce new words

- Look at the word
- Listen to the word
- Listen to the word in a sentence
- Say the word
- Spell the word
- Say the word again

Step 3. Practice reading the words

Step 4. Practice spelling the words

After they are taught using this routine, students read texts on their own to develop automaticity in recognizing these high frequency words. The words are then reviewed regularly throughout the instructional plan.

Applying Skills and Developing Automaticity Student books include decodable text selections that are designed to apply phonics, decoding, and high frequency word skills immediately after instruction. These texts are engaging and age appropriate for middle school readers. They are taught using a consistent routine in which students read the text four times, first using whisper reading, then partner reading, then group reading, and finally choral reading with the whole group. Teachers monitor during each reading and provide corrective feedback and other support, including discussion of hard words, teaching text features and genre, summarizing, and practice with phrasing. After several practice sessions, students do a timed reading of the text. The teacher notes misreads and calculates words correct per minute. Students graph their performance and set a personal goal for improvement in subsequent timed readings.

These repeated readings provide essential practice for students in applying phonics and high frequency word skills and in developing automaticity and fluency—a key step on the path to becoming proficient readers.

Conclusion

Some middle school students need intensive intervention in the complete sequence of decoding skills, and others have gaps in their knowledge that need to be filled. *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides, through careful placement, appropriate instruction for all students.

Lesson 18, continued
LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

OBJECTIVES
Learning to Read
• Choose Words
• Recognize High-Frequency Words
Reading Strategy
• Set a Purpose
Literary Analysis
• Use Text Features: Captions
Reading Fluency
• Read with Phrasing
• Read with Accuracy

FOCUS ON READING

1. Set a Purpose
Introduce the kids in the photos and view the map. Discuss what students know about the countries shown. Then read aloud the text in the orange box and use it to set a purpose for reading: *Read to find out how the kids in the pictures are helping other kids.*

ACTIVE READING

1. Read the Selection
Use the suggestions below to conduct four readings of "Kids Are Helping Kids."

Kind of Reading	Each
1. Whisper Reading	• Support students as they decode words. • Provide immediate corrective feedback to ensure accuracy.
2. Partner Reading	• Provide classroom feedback for the second reading. • Set up for the reading.
3. Group Reading	• Review genre and discuss text features. • Review progress for individual students.
4. Choral Reading	• Practice phrasing. • Check understanding.

Kids can help other kids in important ways. Nadja, Hafsat, and Craig show us how.

Nadja helped kids in Bosnia. When Nadja was a girl, ethnic groups in Bosnia started a war. Nadja was not safe, even in her house. Kids lived in fear. A lot of them were hurt. Nadja started a radio show. She sang on the air to give children courage. She also published two books. They tell how hard it is to live through a war. She hopes her books will help and fighting in the world.

Hafsat helps kids in Nigeria. She formed a group called KIDS. The group teaches children their rights. It helps kids know how to be leaders. KIDS also helps women and children get fair treatment.

Craig was 12 years old when he read that many kids were made to work in hard jobs for no pay. People treated them very badly. He felt that these kids should not be made to work. He formed a group called Free the Children. Since then, his group has worked in 45 countries.

Think about how American kids can help other kids now. What would you do?

FREE THE CHILDREN
Children helping children through education

First Read
Whisper Reading
Listen and Provide Feedback Have students read p. 50 aloud quietly. Monitor students as they read, and listen for misread words. Provide immediate feedback to correct the misread words, and ask students to reread the sentences. If necessary, pronounce these non-decodable selection words for students group, word, and sentence.

Second Read
Partner Reading
Read with a Partner If students struggled in the first read, have those students who need extra help read aloud with you.

Third Read
Group Reading
Review Genre Remind students that this is a biography that gives information and facts about real people and events.

Fourth Read
Choral Reading
Choral Read Listen while students read the selection.

Practice Phrasing Read the last two sentences in the selection, modeling appropriate phrasing. Have students chorally read the sentences, and listen to assess their phrasing.

Check Understanding Ask the following questions:

1. Why was Nadja unsafe in Bosnia? (There was a war going on.)
2. Whom does KIDS help? (It helps women and children.)
3. How can you help other people your age? (Answers will vary.)

Build Fluency

1. Develop Fluency
Phrasing Use the Practice Book to review phrases between phrases and sentences. Then have students listen to the phrasing of the model as they use the new vocabulary.

Fluency Models and Selection
Readings CD, track 2

Pair students to practice reading the selection with appropriate phrasing.

Accuracy and Rate After several practice sessions, arrange for a timed reading. Mark words the student misreads on a copy of the passage and note the last word read in one minute. Calculate the words read correct per minute. Have students graph their performance and set a goal for improving in subsequent timed readings.

Practice Book, p. 30

Students apply their skills in decodable passages and Read on Your Own selections. An instructional routine for four readings provides essential practice.