



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

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Effective reading instruction should 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 explicit and systematic. 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). So it is clear that instruction must be complete, systematic, integrated, and explicit, but what does that tell us about foundational skills? How much instructional time should teachers invest in building the basics? The answer depends on the particular skills and challenges each student faces. When it comes to the foundational skills of reading, it is especially important to assess and respond to student needs and consider the range of skills required for accurate, fluent reading.

### Developing Reading Fluency

Oral reading with speed, accuracy, and expression are indicators of the ability to decode. For students to comprehend what they read, however, they must possess more than well-developed decoding skills. Suppose, for example, that students are given the following paragraph to read:

The national debate over the impoverishment of inner-city populations and the presumed failure of New Deal initiatives such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and public housing have, for the most part, been structured by a group of theoretical perspectives and empirical assumptions emphasizing individual responsibility for a variety of social ills such as economic dependency, family disorder, and crime (Bennett, Smith, & Wright, 2006, p. 9).

Some students may be able to accurately decode each word of the paragraph, and with a speed that is characteristic of

a moderately fluent reader. However, these students may still be unfamiliar with the words impoverishment, initiatives, and empirical, and with concepts such as New Deal or inner city. Therefore, even though they read with speed and accuracy, these students do not read with comprehension. For comprehension to take place, readers must have sufficient vocabulary and background knowledge to access the information in the text.

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Effective fluency instruction recognizes that limited vocabulary and background knowledge are major barriers to comprehension, particularly for striving readers and English learners, and takes care to address both vocabulary and cognitive development (Pressley, Gaskins, & Fingeret, 2006).

For English learners (ELs), the English vocabulary and language structures in their content area reading materials pose a special challenge to fluency. As Palumbo and Willicutt (2006, p. 161) explain, even when these students determine the meaning of a new word in a text, they must “have a place to fit the meaning within a mental framework, or schema for representing that meaning with associated concepts . . . English words they decode may not yield meaning for them.”

Palumbo and Willicutt conclude that if instruction is to help ELs to decode and comprehend at a productive pace, it must increase both their store of English words and their familiarity with English story grammars, text structure, and, perhaps, new concepts. Research shows that ELs benefit when vocabulary support is incorporated into texts; when students are afforded opportunities to read multiple texts on the same subject; and when they receive explicit instruction about how to apply their own, culturally familiar experiences to achieve understanding. In addition to improving vocabulary and comprehension strategies, many striving readers also need practice routines to develop their reading fluency. They may need practice with intonation, phrasing, and expression. Striving readers often benefit from repeated readings of familiar text in which they gradually improve phrasing and intonation and also record improvements in reading rate measured in words correct per minute (WCPM).

## Effective Fluency Instruction

Scientifically based research findings converge on several practices that are essential for effective fluency instruction. These practices include the following:

- Selecting appropriate texts and providing students with opportunities to read from texts that are engaging and age-appropriate.
- Building vocabulary and background knowledge so students can access new and unfamiliar texts.
- Helping students become familiar with the syntax or language structures of different text genres.
- Teaching students specific comprehension strategies that allow them to read successfully and independently.
- Allowing students to sometimes choose materials to read that they find interesting.
- Teaching routines that combine teacher modeling with guided and independent student practice, along with constant encouragement and feedback.
- Practice routines to develop automaticity and fluency at the word level and in reading connected text.
- Encouraging students to monitor and improve their fluent reading rates.

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides robust support for fluency development, including all of the research-based practices cited above. The program also provides daily practice routines for developing reading accuracy, intonation, phrasing, expression, and rate. Fluency practice passages are included for each week of instruction, with teaching support that includes modeling of the target skill (for example, phrasing), and a five-day plan for improving the skill through choral reading, collaborative reading, recorded reading, reading and marking the text, and reading to assess. Assessment includes a timed reading of the passage and reading rate in words correct per minute (WCPM). Students are encouraged to graph their reading rate over time so they can monitor their improvement.

In Levels A-C, the Comprehension Coach interactive software provides a risk-free and private environment where striving readers and ELs can develop their reading power and fluency. Student literature selections are included with comprehension and vocabulary supports. Students can read silently or listen to a model of the selection being read fluently. They can also record and listen to their own reading of the selection. After a recording, the software automatically calculates and graphs their reading rate in WCPM.

## Teaching Foundational 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 encounter students who have not acquired the fundamental skills of phonemic awareness, phonics,



The Comprehension Coach gives students a risk-free environment for developing fluency through coached silent reading, listening to proficient models, and recording their own reading.

decoding, and spelling in the primary grades. It is well-documented that some striving readers in middle school need support in the fundamental skill areas to improve their ability to decode words

Still, some teachers are 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. Research shows that oral language is the foundation of reading proficiency (e.g., 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 and language learners need intensive instruction in all of the foundational 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. All students, regardless of their foundational skills knowledge and proficiency, need access to age-appropriate rich texts and literature that builds the complex metacognitive strategies and skills essential for extracting meaning.

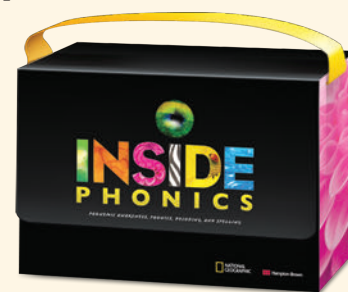
Therefore, teachers of striving readers and language learners at these grades should carefully assess student needs and provide direct, explicit, and systematic instruction that fills the gaps students have in phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, and spelling, if necessary. Additionally, students at all proficiency levels should be given opportunities to develop reading automaticity and fluency.

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* includes resources to measure students' foundational skills and guide placement and appropriate supports. For students who may have experienced years of frustration and disengagement, identifying the appropriate instructional and independent level for text is important for building confidence and reading abilities. The program's Placement Test includes a Phonics Test and a Reading Level Lexile® test. As noted in other monographs, text complexity can be measured in a variety of ways—quantitatively (as with Lexile), qualitatively, and by evaluating the reader and task. The quantitative measures gained from the Placement Test are useful measures and must be considered in the broader context of complexity when considering matching readers with curriculum levels.

If students do not show mastery of phonics and decoding skills, they are placed in the Fundamentals levels of the program. In Fundamentals levels, students receive explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, spelling, and high frequency words throughout the instructional plan. Vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and language development skills are thematically connected to foundational skill instruction to create a comprehensive literacy learning experience. Because it is essential that students at lower levels of proficiency have the most rapid and effective intervention, the Fundamentals level is broken into two separate volumes—volume 1 and volume 2. With two volumes, students can be placed more precisely according to their level of reading foundational skill development.

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* address 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 percent or more of the items on the Phonics Test correctly, they will take the Reading Level Lexile® test to place them into Level A, B, or C of the program according to reading level. Studying the item analysis for the student's performance on the Phonics Test, however, is still helpful in identifying gaps in decoding, which teachers can fill by selecting appropriate lessons from the *Inside Phonics* kit. The instructional plans and decodable texts included in *Inside Phonics* target specific skills and help all students develop reading accuracy and rate.



Inside Phonics Kit

## What are the Foundational Skills?

**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.

These foundational skills work together as readers decode words. In addition to learning these skills, students need an array of practice opportunities to develop automaticity. Foundational skills are not sufficient for developing strong readers. As the term suggests, they are just the foundation of a more complex array of variables that include vocabulary and background knowledge and comprehension and literary analysis skills. Together, the array of reading skills and knowledge supports the development of engaged and fluent readers.

### How Are Foundational Skills Taught?

*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).

Phonics and decoding phonics lessons follow consistent instructional routines based on principles of 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).

In addition to routines that build knowledge and skills, there must be frequent opportunities for students to apply skills in authentic contexts. In the case of foundational reading skills, application is best supported through the use 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 percent to 15 percent 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.

### Developing Automaticity

Improving reading fluency is one way to help striving middle school readers move through text the way that proficient readers do and so reduce the frustration that often leads them to give up on reading altogether. Indeed, research analyses identify reading fluency as one of the five key components of effective reading instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). More specifically, the research shows that increased reading fluency is related strongly and positively to increased reading comprehension (Samuels & Farstrup, 2006).

In addition to the rich, authentic trade literature, the Fundamentals levels 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

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides the full range of research-based support that striving readers and English learners need to become fluent, proficient, and confident readers. 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 provides, through careful placement, appropriate instruction for this full range of students to support acceleration and progress toward grade-level reading achievement.