

The Alphabetic Principle, Grade K

Phonemic Awareness and Phonics

What is phonics instruction and why is it important? It is often difficult to talk about phonics instruction because different people hold different beliefs about what it really means (Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Stahl, 1998). Simply put, *phonics instruction* is the term applied to teaching practices that help children develop an understanding of the alphabetic principle—the principle that the symbols they see on a page (letters, graphemes, letter patterns) represent the sounds of the language. The *alphabetic principle*, in turn, is a broad term that includes awareness of the sound structure of the language (*phonological and phonemic awareness*) and knowledge of the shapes and names of letters (*alphabetic knowledge*).

Understanding the alphabetic principle is crucial because it allows readers to translate words by mapping individual letters (or spellings) to their phonological counterparts. In other words, it helps children understand that printed symbols combine in an ordered fashion to form words, and that words convey the meaning of a text.

So why is phonics instruction important? Because skillful reading—reading with fluency and comprehension—depends in no small part on a reader's ability to quickly and accurately recognize a printed word and then link it with its meaning (Adams & Bruck, 1995; Stanovich, 1991).

Most people agree that real reading is *comprehension*, and that comprehension of a text depends not on the recognition of its individual words, but on the relationships among those words. Nonetheless, without the ability to read and get meaning from each word, readers will struggle to get the meaning of the entire text. According to Stanovich (1991), without fluent word recognition, "comprehension processes do not have the raw materials to operate efficiently and understanding of text will be impaired" (p. 443).

So comprehension depends on rapid word recognition, which depends on the ability to map speech sounds to spellings quickly and accurately. By encouraging children to examine every spelling of every new word they encounter, and by helping them link speech sounds to the spellings they see on a page, phonics instruction provides children with a powerful strategy to decode written language and to read or access unfamiliar words they encounter in text. The importance of providing students with this strategy cannot be overstated. How well young students develop the skills necessary to read with fluency and comprehension affects their entire lives profoundly. Indeed, there is an overwhelming probability that a child who is a poor reader at the end of grade 1 will remain a poor reader (Juel, 1988).

How should phonics be taught?

Effective phonics instruction builds progressively upon students' understanding and use of both spoken and written language. It helps them:

- Become aware of and manipulate the sounds of spoken English (phonological/phonemic awareness).
- Relate sounds to spellings (the alphabetic principle).
- Read each letter or combination of letters in a word to determine the word's meaning (word recognition/decoding).

Open Court Reading and ***SRA Imagine It!*** incorporate each of these research-supported features. The exemplary instruction demonstrated in these courses shows the translation of that research into classroom practice.

Phonological and phonemic awareness

Before children can proficiently map sounds to spellings, they must possess phonological awareness—an awareness of the workings of spoken language—and, in particular, of the individual sounds in spoken words: phonemic awareness.

The performance of kindergarteners on tests of phonological awareness is a strong predictor of their future reading achievements (Juel, 1991; Wagner et al., 1994). Students who are good readers can quickly, accurately, and automatically recognize phonemes and can quickly, accurately, and automatically put them together to make words and phrases. Students without this ability find it difficult to read single words, much less sentences, paragraphs, or entire texts (Juel, 1991; Stanovich, 1994).

Unfortunately, all children do not come naturally to this understanding about the sounds of language. In fact, about 25% of middle-class first graders do not possess phonemic awareness, while the number is higher for children who come to school from literacy-poor homes (Adams, 1990). The good news is that phonemic awareness can be taught (Yopp, 1992).

Effective phonological awareness instruction for kindergarten and first-grade students seems to follow a sequence that begins with larger linguistic units—words and syllables—and progresses through onsets (the initial consonant sound of a syllable) and rimes (the part of the syllable that contains the vowel and all that follows it) to the smallest linguistic unit—phonemes. Students can work on more than one unit at a time, and some of the units may overlap (Partnership for Reading, 2001a).

[Click here to view the chart](#)

A number of activities can be used to develop students' phonological and phonemic awareness and to help them identify and manipulate progressively more finite speech units. For example, listening games focus students' attention on sounds and on listening attentively. Playing with rhymes and matching sounds focuses their attention on the structure of spoken language. Other activities can introduce students to the concept that a stream of language—a sentence—consists of smaller units—words. In turn, work with syllables and onsets and rimes allows students to gain the important insight that even words can be broken into smaller parts.

It is when students are able to manipulate the smallest part of spoken language—phonemes—that they are ready to map sounds to spellings to learn the alphabetic principle. Instruction should progress from the manipulation of the larger phonological units (words and parts of words) to the more discrete phonemic units (individual sounds).

Students who are reading in second or third grade generally have developed the insight that words are made up of sounds; they do not need supplemental instruction in phonemic awareness. However, if a student is exhibiting difficulty in blending even the simplest word, the problem may be that he or she is simply not able to distinguish the sounds and assign the sounds to the spellings. In this case, intervention strategies should include instruction in phonemic awareness.

The *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* course "Phonemic Awareness and Phonics, Grade 1" contains examples of the types of activities that are extremely effective in helping students build phonemic awareness. Unless a student has a particularly severe reading problem, students of this age usually quickly develop phonemic awareness when given instruction. As noted earlier, there is nothing particularly natural about attending to individual phonemes. It is an insight that needs to be developed. Once the students learn to listen for individual phonemes, they generally catch on quickly.

The alphabetic principle

Understanding the alphabetic principle is a hallmark of successful reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Partnership for Reading, 2001b). On the other hand, poorly developed knowledge of the alphabetic principle is the most frequent, debilitating, and pervasive cause of reading difficulty (see, e.g., Bruck, 1990). If they cannot understand and apply the alphabetic principle, students find word recognition a struggle, which impedes their comprehension (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Instruction in the alphabetic principle may be categorized as *explicit* or *implicit*. In its simplest form, implicit instruction begins with whole words that students already know and helps them break the words into their component parts.

One problem with implicit instruction is that such instruction may presuppose what it is supposed to teach. Students' ability to analyze words into their separate sounds may depend upon their *already having learned* something about the sounds associated with letters (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). For example, a student presented with the word *mat*, and unaware that the letters in the word each have a distinct sound, may not be able to distinguish the /m/ sound from the /a/ and /t/ as the word is spoken. Consequently, he or she may be frustrated and confused with the teacher's explanation that "The letter *m* has the sound you hear in the beginning of *mat*." Another problem with implicit instruction is that it encourages students to use context to figure out a word. In contrast, skilled readers do not rely on context to recognize words as they read. Rather, they quickly process virtually all the letters in each word they encounter. In fact, a reliance on context is a hallmark of less-skilled readers (Stanovich, 1994).

Explicit instruction begins with letters or letter patterns (spellings) and helps students build words by blending the sounds of the letters or spellings. Which type of instruction is more effective? An extensive body of research suggests that for many students, an explicit, systematic approach to teaching sound/spelling correspondences is more effective than an implicit or indirect approach (e.g., Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Chall, 1967; Foorman, Francis, Novy, & Liberman, 1991). It appears that without explicit, systematic instruction, a great many students will never catch on to the alphabetic principle and become efficient readers.

What seems to work best in getting across the alphabetic principle is explicit, systematic, teacher-directed instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). A large-scale comparison of more- and less-explicit instructional approaches has found that the amount of word-reading skill of first- and second-grade students appears to be associated with the explicitness of the instructional approach. The more explicit the approach, the higher the achievement in word reading (Cunningham, 1990; Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998).

Word recognition

Once the alphabetic principle is established, and students are able to quickly and automatically translate the spelling patterns of written words into their phonological counterparts, they can begin to focus more attention on getting meaning from what they are reading. Without an efficient strategy for reading words, students tend to devote too much mental energy to figuring out words, leaving them with too little energy for comprehension (Stanovich, 1991). The goal of reading, as discussed earlier, is not to sound out words, but to read fluently and automatically in order to focus on the goal of reading, comprehension. The reason for helping students learn to sound out and read words is to give them a strategy for focusing all of their cognitive energies on understanding text. (Adams, 1990).

In addition, to develop word recognition, students require a great deal of practice in applying what they are learning about the sounds and spellings of English.

Research suggests that students can benefit from different practice opportunities to build word-recognition fluency. These opportunities include:

- Reading words in isolation.
- Reading words in decodable text.
- Repeated reading of text.
- Writing words from dictation.

Reading words in isolation

Although reading words in isolation should not be the primary means students use to practice applying their sound/spelling knowledge (or sound/letter knowledge in kindergarten), blending exercises are valuable to introduce and review the sound/spelling system. By examining words in isolation, students can focus on targeted spelling

patterns. The more practice students have reading words with a particular pattern, such as the various spellings for long vowels, the better they become at reading words with those patterns in context (Stahl et al., 1998).

The progression of blending instruction in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* provides a strong foundation for students as it moves from completely supported sound-by-sound blending activities to independent reading of words.

Sound-by-Sound Blending

V

Whole-Word Blending

V

Reading Words

Blending lessons provide the students with the strategies they need to confidently approach any unfamiliar word they meet in their reading.

Decodable texts

A program of word-recognition instruction, however, that is largely removed from opportunities to read words in text is likely to be ineffective (Juel, 1994). For this reason, *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* provide ample opportunities to practice newly acquired decoding skills with books containing decodable text.

Decodable texts provide reading practice with particular sound/spelling (or sound/letter) patterns. These are stories made up of a large number of words that contain specific sound/spellings that the students are learning, along with some high-utility, or high-frequency, words (*the, are, said, was, have,* and so on) that are not readily decodable but have been pre-taught. Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves children's ability to recognize words while reading (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Conclusion

As discussed earlier, the goal of reading is not to sound out words, but to read fluently and automatically in order to comprehend text. Students from kindergarten through second and third grade benefit from continued systematic phonics instruction. Research indicates that sounds and spellings should be taught in first grade and reviewed in second grade. In addition, word recognition beyond first grade should focus on word parts such as affixes and roots so students begin to identify morphemes, or units of words, as rapidly and automatically as they recognize sounds and spellings (Moats, 1998). Decoding is an effective strategy for achieving fluency; dictation reinforces the sound/spelling skills that enhance writing and integrate reading and writing. The consistent instruction contained in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* and demonstrated in these courses leads to fluency, improved comprehension, and correct spelling.