Effective Early Reading Instruction

A teacher's guide

Ontario

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This guide is intended to support teachers' ongoing efforts to build students' reading skills. It provides teachers with information on foundational early reading skills, an understanding of how these skills develop in young children, and examples of evidence-based systematic and explicit instructional strategies to support students in becoming proficient and fluent readers.

What are early reading skills and how are they developed?

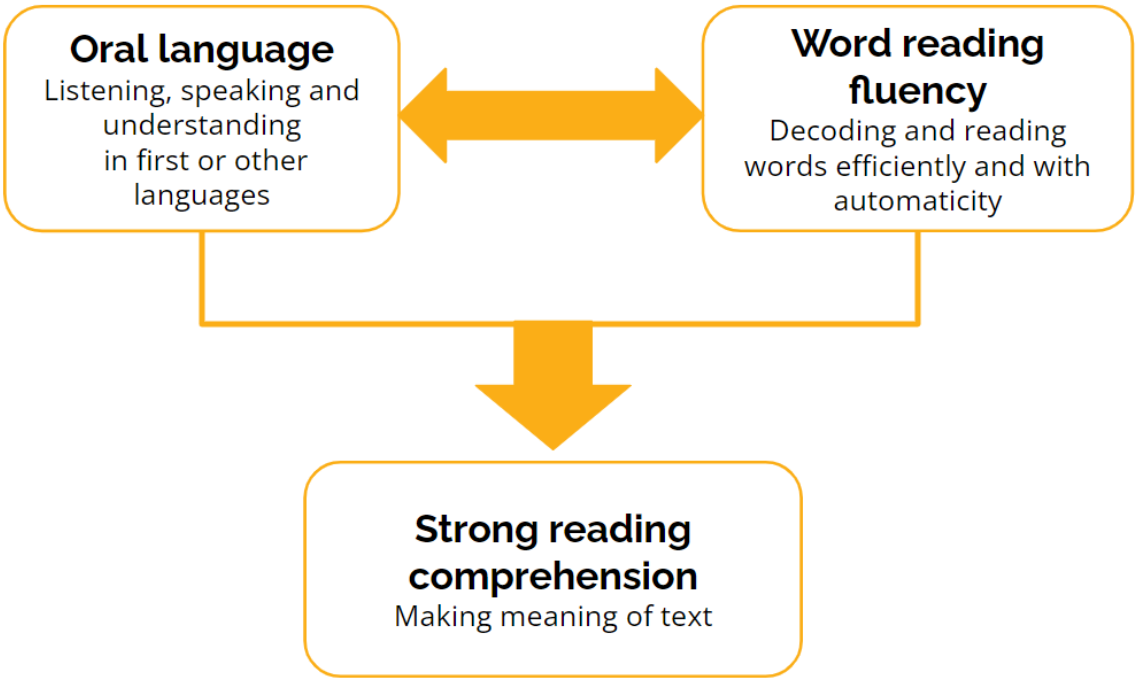
Reading is one of the most fundamental skills students can learn. It affects all academic achievement and is associated with social, emotional, economical and physical health. However, learning to read does not happen naturally. The ability to read is not innate. **Reading is a process involving specific skills that need to be taught and learned**. As these skills develop, the brain forms new connections known as neural pathways. These neural pathways for reading are built through systematic and explicit instruction and strengthened through repeated practice.

Students develop oral language proficiency by listening and speaking (including through experiences with other languages), which lays a solid foundation for reading. Strong reading comprehension occurs when students derive meaning from oral language and combine it with fluency in reading words and texts. Oral language continues to impact reading proficiency as students progress through school and build a growing vocabulary. The process of reading acquisition is different for students whose first or primary language is American Sign Language (ASL) or langue des signes quebecoise (LSQ). For these students, ASL/LSQ and English/French bilingual teaching methods are used for the development of biliteracy between ASL or LSQ and English or French as a second or additional language.

Knowing how language is structured is key to developing early reading skills. Students learn that words on the printed page represent language, that each word has meaning, and that words can be broken down into syllables, which are made of letters and letter combinations (graphemes) and represent sounds (phonemes).

The development of phonological skills includes being able to identify the number of words in a spoken sentence. Phonemic awareness involves identifying and manipulating the smallest sound units in language (phonemes), such as identifying where the /c/ sound is in “cat.” Alphabet knowledge, which refers to knowing the relationship between letters and the sounds they make (more precisely referred to as grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence), develops alongside phonological skills and phonemic awareness. Combined, these skills lead to proficiency in decoding words, learning to read words accurately and quickly, and language comprehension, eventually

building strong reading comprehension and spelling skills. Strong reading comprehension is only achieved through language comprehension and decoding, not one or the other in isolation.



When students make connections between the spelling and the pronunciation of words, they are engaged in a cognitive process known as "orthographic mapping." It requires an awareness of the graphemes (letters or letter clusters) in a printed word and their corresponding phonemes, and then applying these concepts to sound out or read words. As students decode words, the brain is linking the phoneme sequence in a known spoken word with the sequence of letters in the corresponding written word. After decoding a word and word parts sufficiently and often, the internal representation of the precise sequence of letters is stored in long-term memory and linked with the word's pronunciation and meaning. At this point, students can recognize the word automatically as a "sight word," without using a decoding strategy. Sight words are not stored as images, they are mapped orthographically. With repeated practice, young students build up an ever-growing bank of sight words and sight letter combinations. This automatic recognition of words leads to more fluent and proficient reading.

Considerations when planning the instruction of early reading

Early literacy programs should build on students' prior knowledge, culture and language experiences in their home and community. Instruction can offer students choice at times and encourage a sense of agency in learning to read. Effective instruction further motivates and engages students in reading and development of self-efficacy. For young students in particular, **self-efficacy is the largest motivator**. When children are good at something, they are motivated to do it. Instruction that develops students' word reading competence increases their motivation to read. In addition to this direct instruction to gain efficiency in foundational word reading skills, students should recognize themselves in early reading experiences, in the literacy environment in the classroom, and in their broader physical surroundings, while also having the opportunity to enjoy reading about diverse cultures and communities.

Starting with a belief that all students are capable of learning to read, educators should approach reading instruction with the intent to systematically teach foundational reading skills within a **purposeful and meaningful context**. Educators should use evidence-based resources that map out a scope and sequence of skills and associated phonological and strategy-based instruction to guide their planning and instruction of early reading. Educators should also recognize that students have various learning needs. To promote growth, the focus of activities in early reading programs should be adapted as students progress with their reading skills.

Differentiation can be particularly important for some students including English language learners and multilingual learners. While these students are learning the language of instruction and developing vocabulary, they should be encouraged to develop and/or maintain proficiency in their first and other languages. For most students, language skills (including phonological and phonics knowledge, and conceptual knowledge) are somewhat transferable from one language to another. Phonics and proficient writing skills in a first language are most likely to transfer between other alphabetic languages.

Systematic and explicit instructional strategies

Systematic and explicit instruction of early reading skills supports students' development of reading comprehension and fluency. Systematic instruction refers to concepts and materials that are taught

through a carefully planned scope and sequence, using decodable texts. It starts with basic concepts and progresses to more complex concepts broken down into small, manageable sections. Explicit instruction refers to teaching that is clear, direct and purposeful.

When planning and implementing systematic and explicit instruction, educators should consider that students come to school with different prior early reading experiences. Gathering timely and ongoing assessment data is crucial in identifying a student's progress in acquiring skills being taught. It can also help tailor classroom instruction to meet a student's learning needs, as well as support early identification of students who may require intervention beyond classroom instruction.

The following tables provide examples of systematic and explicit instructional strategies for each early reading skill. These strategies are applicable in Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms and beyond.

Phonological and phonemic awareness

Phonological awareness
Phonological awareness refers to the ability to reflect on the sound structure of spoken language. This includes the ability to identify and produce words that rhyme, to hear individual syllables within a word, and to break down a word into its onset and rime.
Examples of systematic explicit instructional strategies
The instructional focus is on segmenting and blending, two skills that will carry into phonemic awareness instruction: • Tap or clap out the words in a sentence of one-syllable words said by the teacher or a peer. • Tap or clap out the syllables in words; begin with two-syllable compound words (e.g., sun-shine, base-ball), and progress to multisyllabic words (e.g., ba-na-na, fam-i-ly, cal-en-dar). • Break them apart and then put them back together (e.g., sun-shine … sunshine) • Explicitly teach and generate rhyming words (e.g., top, hop, drop)

Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is a subcomponent of phonological awareness. It refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the smallest unit of sound in spoken words, called phonemes. Segmenting and blending phonemes are the two most important skills contributing directly to reading development.

Examples of systematic and explicit instructional strategies

- **Identify phonemes:**
  - What is the first sound in the word “big”? /b/
  - What is the last sound you hear in the word “big”? /g/
  - What is the middle or second sound in the word “big”? /i/
- **Segment words into phonemes:**
  - Use tokens or manipulatives as markers (e.g., coloured block) to represent each phoneme. Students push the markers together as they say each sound.
- **Blend phonemes:**
  - Students blend individual speech sounds together to make a word (e.g., b-iˇ-t = bit; l-aˇ-p= lap).
- **Delete and add/insert phonemes:**
  - When given a word, students isolate the sound at the beginning of the word and then delete that sound to make another word (e.g., “call” becomes “all”). This activity can also be used to focus on and delete the final sound in the word (e.g., “seam” becomes “sea”).
- **Substitute phonemes:**
  - Substitute or swap sounds within words to make new words. The sound of the initial or final consonant or the medial vowel can be substituted (e.g., initial sounds: fog, dog; final sounds: bit, bin; and medial sounds: sat, set)

Alphabet knowledge/phonics/word study

Alphabet knowledge

Alphabet knowledge refers to letter names and sounds. The alphabetic principle is the idea that letters and groups of letters represent the sounds of spoken words.

Examples of systematic and explicit instructional strategies

Provide opportunities to engage in structured play with letters, including interacting with or making a tactile alphabet book. Explicitly teach grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences. Have students:

- form letters using multimodalities (e.g., tracing letters in sand)
- learn some of the correspondences between graphemes and phonemes in very familiar words (e.g., their names, words they are trying to spell through approximated spelling)
- print letters

Also be sure to explicitly teach grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences.

Phonics

Phonics refers to the systematic and structured teaching of grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences and how to use these to decode/read and spell words.
Phonics instruction works with phonemic awareness skills and concepts about print as students learn the relationship between the letters of written language and the individual sounds of spoken language in English. Knowing these relationships and how to sound out words leads to words becoming sight words (i.e., recognized quickly without a deliberate decoding strategy applied).

Examples of systematic and explicit instructional strategies

When students have a grasp of several consonant and short-vowel grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences, blending and segmenting can be largely practiced in the context of reading and spelling words.

Instruction of these skills generally follows this sequence:

- identify grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences of individual consonants and short vowels
- use blending skills to sound out single-syllable words with simple word structures:
    - VC (e.g., at); CVC (e.g., cap)
- use blending skills to sound out single-syllable words with more complex word structures:
    - CCVC (e.g., step); CVCC (e.g., jump); CCVCC (e.g., blend); CCCVC (e.g., street).
- identify and use more complex graphemes to decode words:
    - consonant digraphs (e.g., ch, th, sh,)
    - word spelling patterns with silent "e" endings (e.g., line, tape, pole)
    - r-controlled vowel patterns (e.g., car, her, bird, corn, fur)
    - vowel digraphs (e.g., ea, ou, oi).

Word study

Word study builds on the foundation of phonemic awareness and phonics, and draws on morphology to further develop word reading skills. Word study helps to make orthographic patterns across words explicit. To draw students' attention to these patterns, word study often focuses on spelling as students learn spelling patterns across words rather than individual words. Students learn about the layers of patterns in English words beyond those that may have been taught in phonics.

Examples of systematic and explicit instructional strategies

Introduce increasingly complex orthographic patterns, syllables, and/or morphemes that are new or require reinforcement for reading and spelling:

- the less frequent associations with c (e.g., circle) or g (e.g., giant)
- a difficult consonant blend (e.g., tr, str)
- a complex rime pattern (e.g., light, bright, might)

Focus on the pattern being taught, provide students with a set of letters, and guide readers to make as many words as possible. For example, for "bl" and "sl" blends, provide b, l, s, l ,n, d, e, o, a, c, k , p, and t. Students can then make black, bloom, blue, blind, sleep, slack, slot, slit, etc.

Choose a commonly used suffix such as "ed":

- introduce the meaning.
- demonstrate the change in tense with examples.
- introduce the different pronunciations of the "ed" suffix, and provide examples of commonly used words with different "ed" sounds at the end (e.g., ended, greeted – /ed/; played, closed, used – /d/; fished, puffed, kicked – /t/).

Teach morphemes beginning from frequently to less frequently appearing suffixes, prefixes, and roots (e.g., comfort, discomfort, comfortable, uncomfortable). Provide opportunities to practice learned prefixes, suffixes, and syllables in isolated words, text reading, and spelling. Provide instruction in compensatory strategies when the primary decoding strategy does not work. For example, when typical left-to-right decoding fails for a student, break the word into syllables or smaller parts, and/or pronounce each part, from left to right, and then blend together.

Assessment and developmental progression

Using evidence to inform instructional decisions, teachers continuously monitor their students' progress in developing foundational reading skills. Early assessment by the classroom teacher provides information about each student's knowledge and skills relative to grade-level expectations and provides a baseline against which progress can be measured. Educators can use a variety of assessment strategies and tools to gain information about specific foundational reading skills. These assessments should measure the skills being taught in the classroom, such as students' phoneme awareness, grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences and decoding skills.

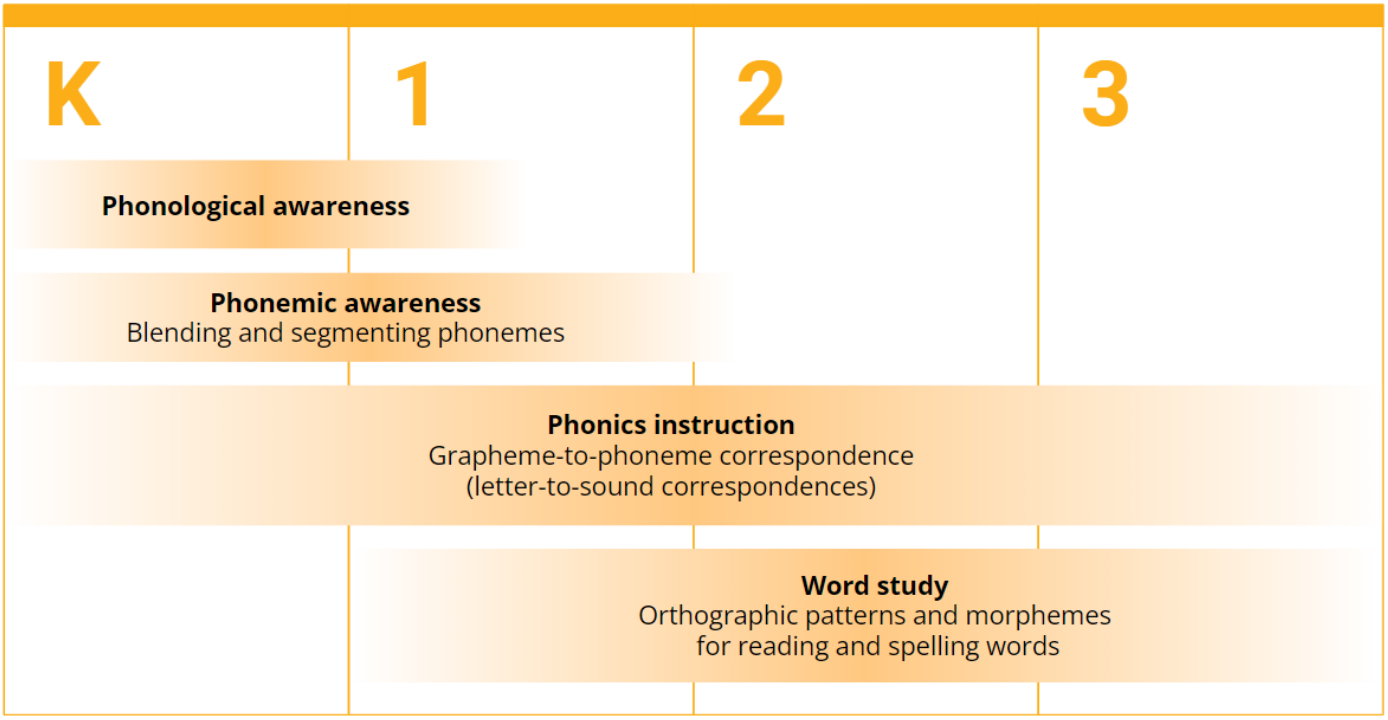
Before engaging in assessments, it is important for educators to be aware of and mitigate biases. These biases could result in the under-recognition or over-recognition of students from

Francophone, Indigenous, Black, other racialized, or LGBTQ2S+ communities, students with disabilities, or students from all other marginalized communities.

Through ongoing assessment, teachers may recognize students who require additional support or early intervention to learn decoding skills. In some cases, classroom teachers may need to reach out to additional resources in their school (e.g., the school special education team, or an English as a Second Language or English Literacy Development teacher) or through their board (e.g., Speech and Language Pathologist) to determine whether and what type of additional support and/or intervention may be required.

The instructional focus of foundational reading skills shifts based on the overall progression and students' mastery of skills that are taught. Instruction on building phonological awareness of words in speech and larger sound units in words (such as syllables and rimes) generally needs to take up only a small amount of time early in the reading program. Phonemic awareness then becomes one focus, alongside phonics instruction within a clearly delineated scope and sequence. Word study skills will play a larger role as students progress. Average reading development by grade is identified in the figure below, but mastery of grapheme-phoneme knowledge, sounding out words and building automatic word reading are indicators that it is time to shift the focus of instruction along a continuum of word-reading skill development.

Phonics instruction and word study becomes progressively more complex across the grades and as students move forward along the scope and sequence of skill development. Word study incorporates knowledge of common syllables in multisyllabic words, knowledge of morphemes, and the morphemic structure of words. This knowledge will lead to improved word reading, building of sight words and spelling skills.



Literacy learning throughout the day

Children come to school with vastly different language experiences and levels of exposure to literacy. The pace at which students learn foundational reading skills will vary. It is essential for early reading programs to build on the knowledge and experiences that children already have when they come to school. Explicit and systematic instruction in foundational word reading skills is one way to close gaps in skills and knowledge in these early school years.

Planning in Kindergarten programs

Kindergarten educators can teach and support the development of literacy skills, including foundational reading skills, throughout the day and across various contexts. The educator team provides various materials to spark further curiosity and create a supportive environment for using language throughout the learning areas in the classroom. The educator team also provides explicit instruction when it is most likely to move a child or a group of children forward in their learning. The team considers the level of support a child or a group of children requires, and then finds an appropriate context in which to deliver the support.

Timetabling for Grades 1 to 3

Effective reading instruction in the primary grades requires thoughtful organization of time. Whenever possible, schedules should allocate an uninterrupted block of time for literacy instruction and activities. The literacy block provides time to include systematic, direct instruction, guided instruction, and student practice of foundational word reading skills through a range of whole-class, small-group and individual activities. Research provides evidence that young children benefit from short and frequent approaches to learning, practicing, and remembering word reading skills, such as phonic blending. Some additional time may be set aside outside the literacy block so that teachers can provide additional support for students who are experiencing difficulties. Although they may need additional instruction and/or intervention, these students also need to feel they are part of the class and share early reading experiences with their classmates.

Teachers can use classroom time effectively by providing an appropriate combination of differentiated instruction that match students' learning needs and instructional focus, including:

- Discrete and relatively short sessions for instruction throughout the day (e.g., in 15-minute blocks)
- Lessons that follow a scope and sequence progressing from simple to more complex word reading skills
- Direct and guided instruction of targeted foundational reading skills and multiple opportunities for independent practice, especially for students who need it most
- Predictable schedules and classroom routines to support students in knowing what the learning is throughout the day
- Supporting students' engagement in tasks by providing timely descriptive feedback as appropriate
- Daily integration of reading instruction into all curricular areas (e.g., during a math lesson, through having teachers read from a book on numbers, or using a book on plants for a teacher-directed lesson that introduces vocabulary for science; providing decodable books and materials on a range of topics).

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Glossary

alphabet knowledge

Alphabet knowledge is the knowledge of letter names and sounds. The alphabetic principle refers to the idea that there is a systematic relationship between letters and groups of letters representing the sounds of spoken words.

decodable text

Decodable text refers to text or books that contain words reflecting grapheme-phoneme correspondences and morphological patterns that have been explicitly and systematically taught to early readers. Decodable texts are used in early reading instruction to practice phonics skills.

differentiated instruction

Differentiated instruction is effective instruction that shapes each student's learning experience in response to the student's particular learning strengths and interests.

digraph

A digraph is a combination of two letters representing one sound, for example: consonant diagraphs: ph, sh, ch, etc., and vowel digraphs: ar, ea, ir, er, oa, ue, etc.

explicit instruction

Explicit instruction is an approach to provide clear, direct, purposeful teaching of specific knowledge, skills, and strategies. It provides learning opportunities for structured learning, clear direction, and specified processes. It requires teachers to:

- Explain the skill and knowledge
- Frequently model the use of skills
- Verbalize thought processes, including steps of learning skills, strategies or processes.
- Provide opportunities for students to practice using strategies and apply knowledge and skills
- Mentor and monitor student practice
- Provide timely descriptive feedback based on on-going assessment data to guide student practice until they can apply their knowledge and skills independently.

fluency

Fluency is the ability to identify words accurately and to be able to read text quickly, with ease, pace, automaticity, and expression. It is the conduit between word recognition and comprehension. Fluency comes from practice in reading texts that primarily contain familiar, sight words so that the student will encounter few unfamiliar words. As they develop fluency, students read expressively, with proper phrasing and punctuation, and gain more meaning from the text.

grapheme

A grapheme is a letter or a cluster of letters that represent a phoneme (see Phoneme) in a word. For example, single letters often represent a phoneme (e.g., c, g, t, p) but digraphs (e.g., sh, ch) are common and 3 or 4 letters can also represent a single phoneme occasionally (e.g. 'igh' in 'light' or 'eigh' in 'eight').

grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence

Grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence is the association between a grapheme and its corresponding phoneme. For example, when a student sees the letter 'd' and articulates the sound /d/ (as in dog). It may also be known (less precisely), as Letter-Sound Correspondence or Sound-Symbol Relationships.

morpheme

A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning within words, consisting of prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Words are made up of one or more morphemes. Morphemic knowledge refers to the understanding of how morphemes can be used to form words.

morphology

Morphology is the study of word structures and the patterns (e.g., prefixes, roots, and suffixes) of how words are formed, and how words are related to each other in the same language.

multimodality

Multimodality refers to the use of a combination of multiple sensory and communicative modes, such as auditory, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial.

neural pathway

A neural pathway is a series of connected neurons that send signals from one part of the brain to another. This is what allows us to complete complex as well as simple thoughts and actions.

onset and rime

Onset is the consonant(s) or the cluster of consonants that occurs before a vowel in a syllable. Rime is the part of the syllable that contains the vowel and all that follows it. For example, in the word "big", /b/ is the onset, and /ig/ is the rime.

orthographic mapping

Orthographic mapping is an internal cognitive process, not a skill, teaching technique, or activity. Through this process, the brain links the phoneme sequence in a known spoken word with the sequence of letters in the corresponding written word. After decoding a word sufficiently often, the internal representation of the sequence of letters is stored in long-term memory, linked with the word's pronunciation and meaning. At this point, the word can be recognized automatically as a "sight word", without deploying a decoding strategy. With repeated practice of decoding many words, young students build up a growing bank of sight words.

phoneme

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in spoken words.

phonological awareness

Phonological awareness refers to the ability to reflect on the sound structure of spoken language, including the ability to identify and produce words that share the same rhyme (See Rhyme), hear individual syllables (See Syllable) within a word, and break a syllable into its onset - initial sound(s) before the vowel sound and rime (See Onset and Rime) - the rest of the syllable.

phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is a subcomponent of phonological awareness. It refers to the ability to identify and manipulate the smallest unit of sound in spoken words, called phonemes (See Phoneme).

phonics

Phonics refers to the systematic and structured teaching of grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences (See Grapheme-to-Phoneme Correspondence) and how to use these to decode/read and spell words.

rhyme

Words rhyme when they have the same or similar ending sounds, for example, “rain” rhymes with “pain”, “stain”.

rime

See onset and rime

self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave.

(Source: Bandura, A. 1994. Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudra [Ed.], Encyclopedia of human behavior [Vol. 4, pp. 71-81]. New York: Academic Press.)

sight words

A sight word is recognized by a student automatically without explicitly deploying a decoding strategy. With increasing practice at decoding many words, students can build up an increasing bank of sight words. Orthographic mapping is the cognitive process that allows individuals to commit words into memory and store them for accurate and effortless recognition. Sight words are different from high frequency words. High frequency words refer to words that are most common in the English language.

syllable

A syllable is the smallest segment of a word that includes one vowel sound, which may have an accompanying consonant, for example, “family” has three syllables: fam-i-ly.

systematic instruction

Systematic instruction refers to a carefully planned sequence for instruction of specific concepts, skills and procedures, with prerequisite skills taught first.

The term "systematic" is often paired with the term "explicit" in reading instruction to refer to employing instructional strategies that are evidence-based. For example: explicit systematic phonics instruction involves:

- Clearly identifying a useful set of grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences
- Planning and introducing these correspondences into a consistent logical instructional sequence
- Carefully scaffolding the introduction and instruction of grapheme-to-phoneme correspondences and phonic skills from simple to more complex.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The goal of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is to create a learning environment that is open and accessible to all students, regardless of age, skills, or situation. Instruction based on principles of universal design is flexible and supportive, can be adjusted to meet different student needs, and enables all students to access the curriculum as fully as possible. In a UDL framework, teachers use systematic approaches and programs that allow the greatest number of students to be successful and gain the required skills and knowledge.

word study

Word study is an instructional approach to develop word reading skills that builds on the foundation of phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding skills and incorporates other relevant aspects of words such as morphology (See: Morphology) and semantics. Word study helps to make explicit orthographic patterns across words. Word study can be part of reading, spelling, and vocabulary instruction past K-3, and it becomes progressively more complex.

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