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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses six instructional components that meet the literacy needs of all students and address all of the components of a balanced and comprehensive approach to reading instruction: (1) phonemic awareness (the understanding that spoken words and syllables are made up of sequences of elementary speech sounds); (2) letter names and shapes; (3) systematic, explicit phonics; (4) spelling; (5) vocabulary development; and (6) comprehension and higher-order thinking. The paper describes each component and offers research-based advice on instructional techniques. (RS)

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# Early Literacy: How to Achieve a Balanced, Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Reading

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Reading programs today must contain the following essential components to be considered a balanced and comprehensive approach:

- (1) a strong, language, and comprehension program that includes a balance of oral and written language;
- (2) an organized, explicit skills program that includes phonemic awareness (sounds in words), phonics, and decoding skills to address the needs of the emergent reader;
- (3) ongoing diagnosis that informs teaching and assessment that ensures accountability; and
- (4) a powerful early intervention program that provides individual tutoring for children at risk of reading failure.

*Teaching Reading, Sacramento, 1996.*

Six instructional components have been identified which meet the literacy needs of all students and address all of the components of a balanced and comprehensive approach: phonemic awareness; letter names and shapes; systematic, explicit phonics; spelling; vocabulary development; and comprehension and higher-order thinking.

## Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that spoken words and syllables are made up of sequences of elementary speech sounds, or phonemes, and the ability to manipulate them. It is an essential understanding for learning to read an alphabetic language.

Phonemic awareness is not synonymous with phonics as it does not deal with the actual reading of words. Without phonemic awareness, phonics can make no sense and spelling can be learned only by rote. In the early stages of its development, phonemic awareness does not involve written letters or words. In its later stages, however, phonemic awareness and phonics appear to be mutually reinforcing.

Phonemic awareness :

- helps children understand how words work through oral language, word play, chanting and rhyming,
- is a necessary but not sufficient condition for learning to read,
- can be taught,
- is a strong indicator of success in learning to read,
- likewise, lack of phonemic awareness is a powerful determinant in the likelihood of failure in learning to read because of its connection in learning the alphabetic system and how print represents words.
- includes instruction in the five areas of: syllables (at the word level) rhymes, segmentation, blending and manipulation.

## **Letter Names and Shapes**

When children can comfortably discriminate the shape of one letter from another, they are ready for the teaching of sound-letter pairings. A familiarity with the letters of the alphabet is another powerful predictor of early reading success. Knowledge of letter names provides the means by which children recall or generate the sounds of letters in their independent reading and writing.

Research suggests that:

- upper and lower case letters be taught separately,
- the teaching of upper case letters should begin in pre-school,
- incorporation of printing into instruction of letters is a powerful means of developing letter recognition,
- when introducing letter-sound instruction, letter/keyword/picture displays be used.
- learning is best fostered through numerous guided and playful exposures to the alphabet.

## **Systematic, explicit phonics**

Systematic, explicit phonics refers to an organized program where letter-sound correspondences for letters and letter clusters are directly taught; blended; practiced in words, word lists, and word families; and practiced initially in texts with a high percentage of decodable words linked to the phonics lesson.

The role of effective phonics instruction is to help children understand, apply, and learn the alphabetic principles and conventions of written language. Good, skillful readers move eyes left-to-right, word-by-word, line-by-line. They fixate on almost every word and in that fraction of a second, they translate speech sounds to a meaningful unit. -- and it's all done automatically.

Children need to learn to decode words instantly and effortlessly. Most effective phonic instruction is explicit - making sure children understand key points, and systematic - building gradually from basic elements to more complex patterns, usually: single consonants; vowels - long then short; blends; digraphs; etc. It is very important for children to practice the phonics they have learned.

Phonic instruction:

- should not be taught through boring drills,
- requires much repetition,
- is best conducted with a relatively small set of consonants and short vowels.,
- should use initial books that are short and decodable since there are so many phonic generalization exceptions that need to be accepted
- can use Word Families for initial instruction because they are consistent and correspond to Spanish reading.

## **Spelling**

The primary goal of spelling instruction is to instill the larger logic and regularities of the system and its conventions. Poorly developed spelling knowledge can hinder children's writing, disrupt their reading fluency and obstruct their vocabulary development. The purpose of spelling instruction is to alert the children to patterns and how words are put together. Research demonstrates that early support of temporary spelling in conjunction

with formal spelling instruction results in more rapid growth of correct spelling and word recognition. As children progress in their abilities, extensive reading and writing instruction, including opportunities to edit for final publication, for real purpose and audiences, play an indispensable role in mastering spelling.

Spelling lists and quizzes should :

- be purposeful
- support and reinforce reading and writing instruction,
- reinforce the sound/symbol relationship and provide opportunities for children to analyze speech sounds in words,
- allow students the opportunity to copy new words as that strengthens their memory for those words.

### **Vocabulary Development**

Written language places much greater demand on vocabulary knowledge than does casual spoken language. From the middle grades on through high school and college, children's reading comprehension can be closely estimated by measures of their vocabulary since these texts depend heavily on precise wording to build meaning. Vocabulary instruction is most effective when explicit information about the word's definition is complemented by attention to their usage and shades of meaning across contexts.

Research indicates that the majority of the 3,000 new words the average student learns per year are learned by encountering them in text. This, of course, is dependent upon how much a child reads. Young children should be read to as much as possible in order to begin the process of vocabulary development. Children need to be encouraged to attend to the meanings of new words they encounter in text. Their ability to understand and remember the meanings of new words depends on how well developed their vocabulary already is.

Vocabulary instruction is most effective when:

- the "concept" of the word is taught,
- study is organized structurally, in terms of roots and affixes, or
- topically, in terms of themes , such as science, math words, weather, etc.
- children create glossaries of new words they encounter in their reading.

### **Comprehension and Higher-Order Thinking**

The single most valuable activity for developing children's comprehension is reading itself. The amount of reading a child does has been shown to predict growth in reading comprehension as well as language, vocabulary and structure of his/her writing. Through reading, students encounter new words, new language, and new facts. In addition, they encounter thought and modes of thinking that might never arise in their day-to-day world.

To help develop students' reading comprehension, they should be given many opportunities for open discussions of both the highlights and the difficulties of text. Comprehension strategies should be directly taught as a regular part of the language arts curriculum beginning in Kindergarten and should be conducted throughout a range of literary genres, both fiction and non-fiction. Research indicates that inadequate amounts of time are being spent on direct comprehension instruction. Teachers currently use either workbooks or textbook questions to determine a student's understanding of content.

Effective beginning comprehension instruction should:

- teach strategies for understanding, retelling, and summarizing narrative, expository, and poetic text,
- facilitate literal comprehension by reading phrases, interpreting multiple meanings, and interpreting figurative language,
- teach strategies for thinking beyond the text, such as prediction, mental imagery, and connection to prior experience,
- directly encourage comprehension monitoring: recognizing what one does not understand and asking questions to clarify meaning.

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