A first-grade teacher is working with a small group of students. She begins a phonics lesson by talking about word families the students have been learning, such as ap, an, and ag. She then introduces a new book and completes a picture walk with the students. The teacher explains that the book has several words from the at word family, including the words cat and bat in the title. As she reads the book aloud, she asks the children to be detectives and to find words with the phonogram at. After the read-aloud, the class discusses the story. The teacher gives each child a magnetic board, an at chunk in magnetic letters, and magnetic consonants. She then asks the students to build at words on their boards. When they finish, she asks the children to tell her the words they have made. Zach says “bat,” Crystal says “pat,” and Julio says “sat.” Pleased with their responses, the teacher asks the children to select an at word and make up a sentence using it. The children dictate their sentences aloud, and she writes them on sentence strips. She then cuts the sentence strips into individual words so the children can work in pairs to re-sequence the sentences for practice. She continues the lesson by asking the students to complete a phonics practice page that features common short a phonograms, including many at words.
The above anecdote illustrates a segment of an exemplary phonics lesson. The children are in a comfortable and child-friendly setting. The focus of the instruction is clear and explicit, and the teacher has planned the lesson to ensure students’ active engagement. High-quality children’s literature and activities focusing on oral language, phonics, writing, spelling, and social collaboration are integrated in the lesson. Furthermore, the teacher has also structured the learning experience in a way that allows immediate feedback to monitor students’ understanding.

What Is the Role of Phonics in the Reading Process?

Phonics refers to the ability to match the sounds one hears within language to printed text. To be successful at phonics, one must possess the skills to hear sounds within words (known as phonemic awareness) and automatically to recognize letters of the alphabet (Adams, 1990).

Proficiency in phonics is essential to reading success (Cunningham, 2007). However, phonics mastery does not come easily to many learners, and teachers often struggle with how best to help their students with this critical reading skill (Allington & Baker, 2007).

This paper summarizes state-of-the-art research on designing and implementing exemplary phonics instruction for 21st century learners.

While many teachers know that phonics ability is crucial to reading achievement, some educators may not be aware of why this is so. Figure 1 (adapted from Adams, 1990) illustrates the central and foundational role of phonics in the reading process. The diagram shows that reading can be thought of as consisting of three levels of processing in the brain (the foundation level/phonics ability, vocabulary meanings, and comprehension):

At the foundational level, letters and sounds are identified. In the center of the foundational level is phonics, where letters and sounds are matched. If letters and sounds are not easily matched at the foundational level, readers will likely have a difficult time identifying unknown words during reading (Stahl, 2002). Consequently, they will not know the meaning of the words they see and will have great difficulty comprehending what they are reading. Like the importance of a good foundation to a well-built house, strong phonics ability provides a key foundation for successful reading.

**Figure 1**

Foundational Level
What Does Research Say About the Importance of Phonics to Reading Success?

Historically, large-scale, influential research studies have repeatedly found phonics instruction to be a key component in effective reading instruction (Baer, 2003). The First Grade Reading Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967) compared different approaches to reading instruction, trying to determine the most effective.

Although the researchers were unable to identify a single program that outperformed all others, they concluded that programs that had an early emphasis on phonics were more effective than those that did not. Similarly, Chall’s (1967) meta-analysis of early reading instruction, Learning to Read: The Great Debate, found that programs that emphasized early and systematic phonics were positively associated with students’ reading achievement.

In the 1980s, a now famous report, Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1984), reinforced the importance of phonics instruction within effective reading programs, as did Adam’s (1990) classic text, Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print. Baer (2003) points out that more recently, work of the National Reading Council (NRC) Committee on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and the National Reading Panel (NRP) on Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) provide further support for the importance of phonics in reading instruction.

The results of the National Reading Panel especially supported the value of starting phonics instruction early and continuing it for at least two to three years.

What Does Research Say About Best Practices for Phonics Instruction?

The consensus of research is that in order to be effective, a phonics program should contain the following elements:

- direct and explicit phonics instruction
- a variety of practice activities for students with different learning styles
- modified instruction for English Language Learners
- intervention activities for striving readers

Direct and Explicit Phonics Instruction

An essential component of effective phonics lessons is that teachers provide direct and explicit instruction on each skill presented (Carnine, Silbert, Kame’enui, & Tarver, 2004). In explicit instruction, teachers clearly identify the objective of the lesson and briefly explain why learning the targeted skill is important.
For example, a teacher might say,

“Today we will be learning the sound of short e. Short e says /e/. You hear the sound of short e in the middle of bed and pet. It is important to know the short e sound because it appears in many words and books you will read.”

After clearly identifying the concept that will be taught and affirming its importance, the teacher presents examples and non-examples of the target skill. In this case, the teacher can state a variety of words and tell the children which words contain the short e sound and which words do not. In this phase of instruction, the teacher can also provide students with one or more strategies to use to master the target skill. For example, the teacher may say,

“Every time you see a three-letter word with an e in the middle, try saying the short e sound and see if it makes sense.”

During the next part of the lesson, teachers should lead children through interactive guided practice. In guided practice, the teacher prompts children’s involvement in activities and is present to support and/or correct the children if they answer incorrectly. To continue the short e lesson above, during the guided-practice portion of the lesson, the teacher may give each child a card with an e on it. The teacher would say a variety of words aloud and tell children to hold up the short e card whenever they hear a word with /e/.

Eventually, teachers should be able to remove their assistance while children are learning specific phonics skills. This gradual removal of adult support is known as scaffolding. Knowledge of the correct amount of support to offer to students and how to slowly reduce the amount of needed support contributes to students’ skill mastery. The ability to successfully scaffold students’ learning is associated with exemplary literacy instruction (Pressley et al. 2001).

A Variety of Practice Activities for Students with Different Learning Styles

Explicit instruction, guided practice, and scaffolding are not sufficient in and of themselves to ensure mastery of phonics skills. All of these components of instruction must be accompanied by a wide variety of independent practice and reinforcement activities for children with different learning styles.
styles. Extensive practice is often needed for children to develop automatic word recognition and fluency in reading. As with teacher-led instruction, activities for independent practice should be carefully organized to progress from easier to more difficult tasks. Furthermore, the practice of new phonics skills should be integrated with the review of already mastered phonics skills. To maximize success for independent practice, directions should be easy for children to read and, if used, pictures should be unambiguous. Activities for independent practice should allow children to apply their newly developing skills in a variety of ways and with much repetition (Cunningham, 2007). The application of new phonics skills to authentic children’s literature is also highly desirable (Morrow & Gambrell, 2004).

Student text pages can be valuable for children’s practice and reinforcement of phonics skills. These pages appeal to auditory, visual, and tactile learners. Children can listen to letter-sounds and hear sentences and passages read aloud. They can see sound-symbol correspondences in print, and they can get tactile input from tracing and writing letters and words.

Hands-on and kinesthetic activities further support teacher-led lessons and paper-and-pencil learning. Writing short a words in the sand, waving hands when a long a word is heard, and “shopping” for objects whose names begin with sh are alternate ways to engage learners.

Card-based activities are also popular and educational for young learners. They can take a variety of forms, such as matching picture cards of objects that share beginning or ending sounds, removing picture cards that don’t belong in terms of a specific phonetic element, and sorting a group of cards into two or more categories.

Children also learn from manipulating plastic, magnetic, or wooden letters or letter cubes to create words, word lists, and sentences. Ink pads and stamps make learning key phonics concepts fun, as do old-fashioned typewriters, colored paper, markers, and alphabet cereal.

Students enjoy cutting out pictures from magazines and making collages that represent one or more sounds. In “Read-Around-the Room,” children are given a clipboard and a target letter sound for which they must search. Working in pairs, they move about the room recording, to the best of their abilities, items they feel represent the target letter sound.

Research also shows that adding literacy props such as pads of paper, pencils, date books, and menus to dramatic play areas set up as doctors’ offices and restaurants leads to children’s improved early literacy skills (Morrow, 2009).
Modified Instruction for English Language Learners

It is anticipated that by 2050 one-fourth of all people living in the United States will have Latino roots (Yaden & Brassell, 2002). Simultaneously, many researchers report that English Language Learners (ELLs) lag significantly behind their English-speaking peers in literacy achievement (Fitzgerald, Amendum, & Guthrie, 2008). Therefore, it is particularly important that educators employ effective techniques for improving the literacy skills of these students.

To optimize support for ELLs’ development, interventions should occur at three levels: student-centered interventions, teacher-mediated interventions, and home-based interventions (Yaden & Brassell, 2002).

Student-centered interventions direct access to literacy materials and activities. Experts on the subject of ELL education suggest a variety of learning supports for first-day, first-month, and first-year ELLs (Brisk & Harrington, 2007). First-day preparations include providing photographs of students already in the class with their printed names, and offering ELLs a booklet of important phrases with relevant pictures, such as bathroom, nurse, water fountain, cafeteria, fire-drill, etc. If the ELLs have some literacy skills in their native languages, then adding classroom signs in their first language next to English signs can be beneficial.

Brisk and Harrington recommend that first-month learners be allowed to observe and listen as much as they like, and to participate only when they feel ready. They should also be taught key high-frequency phrases such as “Can you help me?”

First-month achievement can be further supported by conducting mini-lessons with students prior to whole-class lessons to pre-teach target phonics skills and literacy concepts. The use of pictures, photographs, real objects, and hand gestures is highly encouraged to illustrate key vocabulary and phonics words being studied.

In addition to the above, student-centered interventions for first-year ELLs include conducting “picture walks” through texts prior to reading, building and activating students’ background knowledge of topics using Venn diagrams, graphic organizers and video clips related to lessons, creating educational activities that include paired and cooperative learning, and providing students with supplemental reading materials in their native languages.
At the teacher-mediated level, one of the most promising interventions to facilitate ELLs’ development is the use of high-quality read-alouds. Research shows that ELLs’ vocabulary growth is related to the quality of their teachers’ read-alouds (Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008) and, furthermore, that teachers can be taught to improve the skill with which they engage in this activity (Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). Overall, all children should be verbally active during teacher read-alouds. Teachers should practice extending ELLs’ utterances into full sentences and also elaborate on what children say by providing rich additional language. For example, if a teacher asks, “What is the boy holding?” and a child answers, “a bat,” the teacher should extend and elaborate the child’s contribution with a statement such as “That’s right. The little boy is holding an old, wooden bat.” To facilitate receptive language, teachers should focus on whether or not ELLs comprehend during read-alouds, and simplify the text if the child is not understanding.

To facilitate expressive language, ELLs should be encouraged to speak at the highest level of grammatical complexity of which they are capable. When their language skills permit, English Language Learners should be encouraged to relate concepts in the text to their own lives outside of the classroom.

Because growth in phonological awareness is particularly essential to ELLs’ literacy development (Fitzgerald, Amendum & Guthrie, 2008), teachers should also learn about contrastive analysis, which outlines which sounds in English are most challenging for particular students to master because these sounds are different or unfamiliar in their native languages. Such sounds can then be addressed during read-alouds and through other learning activities.

**Support for English Language Learners/Additional Resources**

In many classrooms across the country, teachers regularly encounter children whose first language is non-English. These children bring a variety of levels of English acquisition. To ensure that reading and writing instruction is provided to these learners in English language learners in the classroom through the five stages of language proficiency.

**Stage 1: Pre-Production** Children at this stage are totally new to the second language. They require language skills at this receptive level, and they are almost completely silent.

**Stage 2: Early Production** In this stage, children are starting to understand language and make some effort in producing it, but they are not yet able to produce connected language.

**Stage 3: Expansion Strategies** Children at Stage 3 are able to speak using more complex and varied language structures.

**Stage 4: Intermediate Fluency** In this stage, children are almost completely fluent in social settings, academic language, literature, and written language.

**Stage 5: Advanced Fluency** In this stage, children reach the stage where they understand and speak fluently in native speakers.

** Pronunciation Guides**

Any error of variation making the English language learner to overstate the difficulty of the pronunciation is crucial for the learner. This encourages the learner to be careful and systematic in their pronunciation. This guide outlines which sounds in English are most challenging for particular students to master because these sounds are different or unfamiliar in their native languages. Such sounds can then be addressed during read-alouds and through other learning activities.

During phonics lessons, teachers can modify and pace instruction so ELLs can be explicitly taught the names of key phonics pictures and vocabulary in a familiar context. Teachers can use actual objects, photographs, manipulatives, and picture cards to teach these concepts. Teachers should appropriately model sound-symbol correspondences and then provide many opportunities for repetition with each skill.

In addition to student- and teacher-based interventions, ELL development is optimally strengthened with home-based interventions. A classroom-based lending library has been
found to be a successful way to increase ELL at-home reading and literacy achievement (Yaden & Brassell, 2002). When lending libraries are located within classrooms rather than in different rooms or different buildings, the ease of borrowing is increased. Additionally, lending libraries give parents and students choices regarding what will be read at home, a factor related to increased motivation to read. Lending libraries can be enhanced by sending home child-friendly props such as puppets and small toys that complement the reading materials. Ideas for parent involvement related to the texts can also be shared. Through at-home shared literacy experiences, ELLs’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities can be strengthened. At the same time, these children’s phonics skills will grow.

**Intervention Activities for Striving Readers**

Even children whose first language is English often have difficulty mastering phonics skills. In a classic study, Juel (1988) found that children who are experiencing reading difficulties at the end of first grade are at high risk of having reading difficulties at the end of fourth grade. More optimistically, however, recent research has shown that appropriate, early intervention with striving readers can significantly reduce the problems that these readers face (Torgesen, 2000).

One of the key characteristics of effective early intervention is increased close and explicit instruction (Allington & Baker, 2007). This is accomplished through small group instruction, which is “a critical literacy component for struggling readers” (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003, p. 122). Small-group instruction allows teachers to provide instruction and materials that are at students’ correct level of difficulty. Small-group instruction also allows teachers to monitor students’ progress more easily and to provide personal and individualized feedback to students.

Other effective techniques for helping striving readers are increasing the amount of engaged reading time with appropriately leveled reading texts, re-reading texts, using the Language Experience Approach, and reading aloud to students to promote reading enjoyment and motivation.

Striving readers need “extensive opportunities to independently practice and apply strategies in high-success reading materials” (Allington & Baker, 2007, p. 100). To accomplish this
goal, teachers need lesson plans and materials designed to support systematic, explicit, small-group instruction followed by practice activities. Teachers should clearly state the skill that is being taught and then model the activity they want students to emulate. Students should practice the skill under the teacher’s supervision until they become proficient. Gradually, as their mastery increases, students can practice the skill in pairs or individually. Manipulatives such as picture cards, letter cards, word cards, and word cubes related to reproducible worksheets are ideal for practice activities.

**How Does Phonics Achievement Relate to Content Area Standards?**

The two largest professional organizations in literacy, The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, jointly published a document entitled *Standards for the English Language Arts*, which outlines 12 criteria that students should be able to meet by the time of high school graduation. Mastery of phonics skills is a necessary requisite for every noted standard. Furthermore, nearly every state in the United States currently has a set of standards for language arts literacy achievement that all students who reside within the state are expected to reach. Mastery of phonics is a central, highly emphasized standard of early literacy achievement in almost all 50 states.

**How Does Phonics Ability Relate to Standardized-Test Achievement?**

Phonics is central to standardized-test achievement both directly and indirectly. Sound-symbol correspondences are directly measured by state-based assessments of early literacy achievement in an attempt to see to what degree content-area standards are being reached.

Sound-symbol correspondences are also directly measured by commercial literacy assessments, which require students to rely solely on phonics skills to read nonsense words. Phonics mastery is indirectly measured in virtually all standardized measures of literacy achievement because of its central role in the reading process.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Phonics ability plays a central and foundational role in the reading process since it is the mechanism through which children match the letters and sounds of words. Without strong phonics skills, children often struggle to identify words and consequently are unable to comprehend the text they are reading.

Research strongly and consistently supports the importance of phonics to reading success and underscores that phonics instruction is most effective when it is started early and taught systematically (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).
About the Authors

Diane H. Tracey is an Associate Professor at Kean University, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy education. Her areas of research and writing include exemplary literacy practices, and theories and models of the reading process. In addition to her work at the university, Dr. Tracey provides literacy coaching and grant writing support to urban, at-risk school districts. She previously served as Chair of the International Reading Association’s Technology Committee and is currently serving as Secretary of the National Reading Conference. Dr. Tracey is a literacy consultant on Sadlier Phonics ©2009.

Lesley Mandel Morrow holds the rank of Professor II at Rutgers University’s School of Education, where she is coordinator of the literacy program. Dr. Morrow is the author of more than 300 publications, including journal articles, monographs, and books. She served as president of the International Reading Association from 2003 to 2004. She was elected to the Reading Hall of Fame in 2006. Dr. Morrow is the senior author of Sadlier Phonics ©2009.
References


Professional Development Series

Volume 1: The Role of Grammar in Improving Students’ Writing
by Beverly Ann Chin
(Code #91337F)

Volume 2: Beginning Literacy: Research-Based Principles and Practices
by Lesley M. Morrow
(Code #91347F)

Volume 3: Nursery Rhymes and Phonemic Awareness
by Research and Development Staff
(Code #91357F)

Volume 4: Word Study Strategies at the Middle Grades
by Richard T. Vacca
(Code #91367F)

Volume 5: The Effective Mathematics Classroom: Research-Based Principles and Practices
by Marie Cooper
(Code #9645-4)

Volume 6: Developing Effective Readers PreK–6
by Lesley M. Morrow and Richard T. Vacca
(Code #91377F)

Volume 7: The Value of Direct and Systematic Vocabulary Instruction
by Jerome Shostak
(Code #90686F)

Volume 8: Using Nonfiction in the Primary Grades
by Alvin Granowsky, Carmelita K. Williams, and Jerry L. Johns
(Code #91387-F)

Volume 9: Vocabulary Instruction in Elementary Grades
by Jerry L. Johns
(Code #9924-F)

Volume 10: Best Practices for Teaching Grammar at the Elementary Grades
by Beverly Ann Chin
(Code #90727F)

Volume 11: Effective Strategies for Engaging Middle School Students in Writing and Grammar Instruction
by Beverly Ann Chin
(Code #908081)

Volume 12: Motivating Middle School Students: The Critical Part of Lesson Planning in Mathematics
by Alfred S. Posamentier
(Code #908381)

Volume 13: Best Practices for Phonics Instruction in Today’s Classroom
by Diane Tracey and Lesley Mandel Morrow
(Code #900891)