

## **Audio Transcripts – Learning to Read: Beginning Reading Instruction**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Welcome to the Most Valued Profession professional development series. This disc "Learning to Read" is designed as a tool to help in training educators about effective, research-based beginning reading instruction. Let's start by looking at some facts:

About 20 percent of elementary students nation-wide have significant problems learning to read.

At least another 20 percent do not read fluently enough to enjoy or engage in independent reading.

The rate of reading failure for African-American, Hispanic, limited-English speakers and poor children ranges up to 60 and 70 percent.

One-third of poor readers nationwide are from college-educated families.

25 percent of adults in the U.S lack the basic literacy skills required in a typical job.

As a society, we have vastly underestimated the difficulty of teaching reading to all children.

Many children come to school with little or no experience with the English language, the English alphabet, or print of any kind.

Teaching reading is a job for an expert, especially when dealing with children who do not come from environments rich in literary experiences.

Many excellent educators, however, do not have the specific training or strategies needed for this very important task.

This disc is designed to

- acquaint educators with the most widely accepted recent research on reading and,

- provide information about professional development opportunities and strategies that are aligned with what research tells us about teaching students to read.

Also provided on this disc are video examples of teachers modeling effective practices with students, and expert commentary.

We recommend that you begin by listening to the seminars, reading the hyper linked research notes, articles and reference materials, and using the reflection journal to record your thoughts and responses to provided questions.

Then view the teacher models under PRACTICE, and listen to the expert commentary that reviews the research.

The next step would be to increase your skill at using research-based strategies through professional development training, or further study in phonemic awareness activities, decoding instruction, fluency practice, and comprehension strategies.

Test them in your classroom - reflect on their success, refine them, and continue to grow and share with colleagues through research, study, practice and reflection.

Why is beginning reading instruction so important? Studies show that children who fall behind in first grade reading have less than a 20% chance of ever catching up to grade level.

Children who start off as poor readers miss out on many opportunities for reading practice, growth in vocabulary and knowledge about the world, and comprehension skills.

On the other hand, children who start as strong readers develop wider reading habits that allow this growth to develop. The result? The gap between the poor readers and the strong readers gets wider.

These studies show how important it is for students to become independent readers as early as possible.

Recent evidence also strongly supports engaging kindergarten children in academic activities that make early reading possible. To help children get off to a good start in early reading development, instruction should include:

- Activities to stimulate print awareness;
- Activities to stimulate phonemic awareness;
- Learning the names and sounds of letters;
- Practice in reading words by blending letter sounds together;
- Opportunities to write meaningful sentences and stories using emerging spelling skill; and,
- Activities and discussion to help children construct the meaning of what they read.

Reading new words by blending sounds together is called decoding. Explicit instruction in decoding is an essential ingredient for an effective beginning reading program. Comprehension instruction should also be taught from the very beginning.

Furthermore, an effective beginning reading program provides students with a rich classroom environment with lots of opportunities to engage in meaningful reading and writing activities.

In the next seminar, we will discuss the complexities of the reading process and the advantages of using a balanced and integrated approach to beginning reading instruction.

#### A BALANCED AND INTEGRATED APPROACH:

What does it take to become a skilled reader? Reading is a more complex process than most people think. In order to read, one must engage in multiple mental operations that seem to occur simultaneously.

Readers must

- identify words accurately and fluently;
- understand the meaning of words;
- develop meaningful ideas from groups of words;
- draw inferences;
- and, relate what they know to what they are reading.

How can we do that all at once? The key is "automaticity."

When children first begin to read, they encounter many words they have never seen before. They must sound them out phonemically and use context to help identify the words.

However, after children have read words accurately several times, they begin to recognize the words "by sight" or as whole units.

A reader is able to identify a word automatically when it can be read with no hesitation.

Even when a reader has developed automaticity, the brain is still conducting many operations, but the reader is not aware of this because the brain has automatically processed the word.

Because skilled readers do not have to devote much energy to identifying most words, they are free to concentrate on the more complicated processes of thinking and comprehending.

The potential stumbling blocks to becoming a skilled reader are:

- difficulty learning to read words accurately and fluently
- poor vocabulary
- lack of knowledge of comprehension strategies
- and the absence or loss of the motivation to read

Good beginning reading instruction helps readers "break the code" and learn how words in English are represented in print.

This helps motivate readers to practice.

Reading practice allows for readers to develop a wider vocabulary and strategies needed for comprehension.

Should children learn to decode first then learn to comprehend? It may seem logical to learn to decode words first and then learn comprehension strategies. However, research indicates effective beginning reading instruction should incorporate explicit decoding instruction and comprehension strategies from the start.

Historically, the debate about teaching beginning reading has been influenced by teacher experience, politics, economics, and educational trends.

The debate has teetered between holistic, meaning-centered approaches and phonics approaches without much hope of settling the debate.

The growing consensus is that early readers benefit from a balance or synergy between code-based systematic word recognition and fluency strategies and meaning-based literacy experiences.

This is what is meant by the phrase A BALANCED AND INTEGRATED APPROACH.

A balanced and integrated approach includes exposure to high-quality literature with many opportunities for authentic reading and writing -- consistent with the whole language philosophy -- integrated with explicit instruction in the basic skills of reading and writing--consistent with a more skills-based approach to reading instruction.

A balanced and integrated approach is most effective when it includes:

- Careful and systematic stimulation of phonemic awareness;
- Direct and systematic teaching of phonemic decoding, comprehension strategies, and literature appreciation;
- Frequent exposure to a variety of types of texts, plus incentives and time to read independently;
- Vocabulary instruction that goes beyond simple definitions to explore relationships among words, and;
- Frequent writing to foster deeper understanding of both the forms and meaning of text.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS:

What is phonological awareness? At the broadest level, it involves sensitivity to the phonological or sound structure of oral language. The most basic level involves ability to identify the individual words within spoken sentences.

At the next level, children become aware of the syllable structure of words like “base-ball” or “fan-tas-tic.”

Then children begin to hear individual sounds within syllables, starting with the onset-rime structure of all syllables

and ending with the awareness of individual phonemes in words.

The terms “phonological awareness” and “phonemic awareness” are often used interchangeably, but phonological is actually a more general term than phonemic. Phonemic refers only to awareness of individual phonemes within syllables.

To understand phonemic awareness, it is helpful to define the word “phoneme.”

A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word that makes a difference to its meaning. When phonemes are combined, they form syllables and words.

Some words have only one phoneme, such as I or oh.

Other words consist of a blend of phonemes such as, my or neck or grass.

Words are made up of strings of phonemes. By changing one, we can change the meaning of a word. For instance, the word “hit” has three phonemes: /h/ /i/ /t/.

By changing the first phoneme to “s”, we create the word sit.

By changing the second to “a” we create the word hat.

By changing the third to “p” we create the word hip.

Speech scientists have discovered the human brain allows us to process complex phonological information without being aware of the individual phonemes.

Phonemic awareness is not required in learning to understand oral language because the brain processes phonemes automatically and blends them into the words we hear in speech.

That's why we learn to speak naturally, without much direct instruction.

However, phonemic awareness is important when learning. In order to understand the way print represents words, a reader must understand that words are made up of these small units of sound.

Many children appear to acquire phonemic awareness from slight exposure to letters and rhymes.

However, many other children require careful and explicit instruction in order to become aware of phonemes in words.

Without at least beginning levels of phonemic awareness, children have difficulty understanding that letters represent the sounds in words. This makes it difficult to decode new words.

To accurately decode new words they cannot read “by sight”, children must have accurate and fluent knowledge of letter/sound correspondences as well as the ability to blend sounds together to form words.

One of the early signs of a child's sensitivity to the phonological structure of words is the ability to tell whether two words rhyme.

To do this, a child must listen to the sound in part of a word rather than attending to the meaning of the word as a whole.

As awareness grows, children will be able to tell if words have the same first sound.

Next, they will be able to determine if words have the same last sound.

Finally, they will be able to tell if a word has the same middle sound.

In further phonemic awareness stages, children are able to isolate and pronounce sounds at the beginning, end or middle of words.

Let's look at some other examples of phonemic awareness tasks.

Phoneme isolation: What is the first sound in the word take? (/t/)

Phoneme identity: What words begins with the same first sound: kite, fat, car, or bat? (kite/car)

Phoneme blending: Put these sounds together to make a word: /p/ /e/ /t/. (pet)

Phoneme segmentation: What sounds do you hear in the word mop? (/m/ /o/ /p/)

Phoneme counting: How many sounds can you hear in the word tree? (3)

Phoneme deletion: What word would be left if the /f/ sound were left out of the word farm? (arm)

Becoming sensitive to phonemes is only part of the challenge when learning to read. A beginning reader must learn that the alphabet represents phonemes - but not always in a one-to-one correspondence.

Some phonemes are represented by more than one letter, as in /sh/.

Sometimes other letters in a word change the sound another letter makes, as in tap and tape.

Sometimes pronunciations are irregular, like the "c-h" in yacht, and chorus.

The correspondence between letters and phonemes is not perfectly regular, but it is regular enough for phonemic decoding to be a very useful way to identify new words.

Can phonological awareness skills be taught? Or should children be able to hear individual phonemes and understand the alphabetic principle without direct instruction?

Research indicates that while many students come to kindergarten and first grade with an appropriate phonemic awareness level for beginning reading, many do not.



Studies suggest that educators can facilitate phonemic awareness through reading aloud, storytelling, word games, rhymes and riddles. For instance, educators can develop playful language activities that encourage attention to patterns of rhyme and alliteration.

When developing phonemic awareness activities, think about the task you want students to perform, such as matching words that have the same sound.

Then considering the students' developmental level, create a playful means to get students to perform the task.

Familiar songs, nursery rhymes, name games, and riddles are all examples of ways to have fun while attending to the sounds of our language.

Many read-aloud books can also help children become more familiar with individual phonemes.

Research shows that phonemic awareness instruction that is integrated with letter/sound instruction is most powerful.

Although phonemic awareness instruction in kindergarten should begin with oral language activities, at some point during the latter part of the year, children should begin using letters to represent the phonemes in their activities.

For specific examples of phonemic awareness activities consult these sources: (graphic of titles).

## LEARNING TO READ WORDS

When children are learning to read, they identify words in text using at least three different strategies:

- They sound them out using phonemic decoding skills;
- They use the context of the passage to help them figure out the word, and;
- They recognize words “by sight.”

Sounding out and using context are particularly important when children are initially learning to read, because they encounter many words they have not seen before in print.

For effective instruction, teachers must help students develop the skill of sounding out unknown words. This means that teachers need to allot time for students to practice this skill.

To do this, teachers need to teach the association between letters and sounds.

Once this is taught and mastered by beginning readers, they must get cumulative practice in building words with the letters they know.

For decoding instruction to be effective, it must be taught in a systematic manner.

Letters that are visually similar (b and d) or auditorally similar (f and v) should not be taught together.

Students should learn some consonants and vowels together so they can begin to build and read words.

Beginning readers should practice sounding out by identifying letter sounds in a word and then blending them into a whole word.

The central activity in systematic, explicit decoding instruction is identifying the sounds represented by letters and blending single sounds into whole words. After students have mastered a few letter-sound correspondences, then blending instruction should begin:

(Host demonstrates on camera with the word sat.)

After enough sound-symbol connections are blended and mastered by the students, it is important that they immediately read these words in sentences. (audio of child reading a sentence)

After students learn letter-sound correspondences and have practiced reading and writing words that “follow the rules”, more challenging words should be introduced.

Children will encounter words they cannot completely sound out. For example, in the word watch, the a does not sound like a short a.  
"waatch??"

Students need to be taught that if a word doesn't sound correct, they need to adjust some of the sounds to come up with a word that makes sense:  
"watch."

Using context is another technique that readers employ when learning to read words. Readers may not be able to read a word immediately, but once they read the words surrounding the unknown word, and sound out part of the word, they may be able to figure out what makes sense.

Keep in mind that children should be taught to attempt a phonemic analysis of unknown words first. Look at this sentence.

A new reader may not know how to sound out the word "chased" but can attempt the sound "ch." Then, using context "chased" can be read.

Children acquire many words as "sight words" after they have been successfully identified several times using phonemic analysis and context.

Some words don't "play fair". That is, one or more sounds in a word do not follow the rules or say their most regular sound. I-s is read iz, not iss.

Words that do not follow the rules are often referred to as outlaw words. Teachers need to teach outlaw words so students can add these words to their repertoire of sight words.

Words that do not "play fair" can be taught directly. The teacher tells the students what the word says and allots ample time for the students to practice these words.

After enough practice of reading these words accurately, students will be able to read them automatically or "by sight".

DEVELOPING FLUENT READERS:

What is fluency? Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with proper expression. It is sometimes referred to as automaticity. Why is fluency important? The reading process requires the reader to identify words on the page and at the same time build the meaning of the sentence or passage.

Identifying words and comprehension require cognitive resources. If reading the words requires a lot of cognitive energy, then there will be very little cognitive resources left for comprehension.

Research indicates that fluent reading of text allows more attention to be given to the higher mental processes required to comprehend the text.

The more fluent readers are, the better they are at comprehending.

How does a reader become more fluent? By reading, reading, and more reading. Studies have shown that students who read well, read more. The more these students read, the better they get at reading. Readers who don't read well, don't read often; therefore, they don't have opportunity to practice and improve.

The increasing gap between the good readers and the poor readers—the rich get richer and the poor get poorer--creates what is called "the Matthew Effect."

With instruction and practice, students can become more fluent readers. Strategies that help students increase fluency include:

- Repeated readings and guided oral reading, and
- Encouraging students to read more.

Repeated readings of the same text is a technique that can help students, especially poor readers, develop fluency. Students read short, meaningful passages several times until a certain level of fluency is achieved.

Note the novice pianist, practicing the same piece over and over again until a certain level of expertise is reached.

Think how frustrating it would be to have to sight read a new piece every day - yet that is what we sometimes expect of beginning readers. A variety of reading activities can help students increase fluency.

For instance, students can practice oral reading while listening to the text being read simultaneously.

Or, teachers can pair students so that there is a higher level reader reading with a lower level reader. The pair of students can echo read a book. The higher level reader reads first, one sentence at a time, and the lower level reader echoes the same text.

Students can also practice for a performance of reading poetry or prose for an audience. Practice for this performance allows for repeated readings of text.

Let students record their own reading on audiotapes and listen to themselves while reading along. Then they can rerecord to improve their performance. All of this practice increases fluency - making comprehension easier to accomplish.

## COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES:

We've spent a great deal of time in this program dealing with ways to help students learn how to read words fluently. That's because these skills are essential in order to comprehend. From the very beginning of reading instruction, however, educators must help children learn strategies to get at the meaning of what they are reading.

The next CD-ROM in the MVP professional development series called "Reading to Learn: Comprehension Instruction" is a program for K-12 educators in all subject areas. It fully explains the issues concerning comprehension, including comprehension of subject area texts, and offers strategies that help students develop comprehension skills.

Obviously comprehension involves more than phonemic awareness, phonics and word reading fluency. To make meaning from text a reader must:

- Have sufficient vocabulary, or word knowledge;
- Have some knowledge or experience with the content;
- Be able to link ideas to what is already known;
- Be able to make inferences and fill in gaps;

- And, be able to use comprehension strategies to enhance understanding.

Comprehension is affected by specific knowledge of vocabulary and word meanings.

A paragraph written with words that are not commonly used may prevent a reader from understanding the meaning.

Comprehension improves, however, if the paragraph is rewritten with the same message, but with more commonly used words.

A reader also needs to draw inferences. That is, infer from what is explicitly stated in the text - in black and white, with what is not explicitly stated - reading between the lines. Drawing inferences is a comprehension skill that must be learned and practiced.

Making inferences requires interpretive thinking and involves higher-level comprehension skills. It requires readers to combine what is stated in the text with their prior knowledge.

Prior knowledge, also referred to as background information, is the readers' own knowledge of the world.

Procedures that guide students as they attempt to read are called comprehension strategies.

Research indicates that explicit instruction of comprehension strategies helps children in this area.

Comprehension instruction occurs when teachers model, demonstrate, explain, or guide the reader in acquiring and using comprehension strategies.

Eliciting Prior Knowledge is one pre-reading activity that can be used to assist comprehension.

If using a picture book, students can make predictions based on the pictures before reading the text. Students can compare their lives with the

situations in the text and answer teacher pre-reading questions that will serve to activate the students' prior knowledge.

Active Listening can promote reading comprehension.

Students follow the text that is read and answer carefully crafted questions posed by the teacher. For more information on promoting comprehension by using questioning during reading, consult the article "Developing Questions That Promote Comprehension: The Story Map."

Comprehension Monitoring is used to help readers develop an awareness of the cognitive process involved during reading. Teachers can read aloud and think aloud so students are able to listen to the cognitive processes used in monitoring comprehension.

An example might be a teacher reading a story and looking back in the text to try to solve a problem.

Mental Imagery can help improve students' memory. Teachers ask students to construct images of what they are reading. Creating a mental image of the text requires understanding of what is being read.

Graphic Organizers are especially effective for expository text such as social studies and science text books. Graphic organizers are created to help readers construct meanings, organize ideas, and show how concepts relate to each other.

Story Structure analysis used with narrative text, improves the ability of readers to recall what was read. Educators teach readers - through modeling and explaining--to ask and answer five questions during or after reading:

1. Who is the main character?
2. Where and when did the story occur?
3. What did the main characters do?
4. How did the story end?
5. How did the main character feel?

## PREVENTING READING FAILURE:

Studies indicate children who start off as poor readers continue to be poor readers - they do not catch up on their own.

One study revealed that 87 percent of students who read poorly in the first grade also were poor readers in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

The key to preventing reading failure is providing early, effective intervention to those students who demonstrate poor reading skills.

When intervention instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, reading fluency and comprehension strategies is provided to children between the ages of 5 and 7, the majority increase performance to average levels. This increase can occur with just 30 minutes a day of extra intervention and prevention by a well-trained educator.

If intervention is delayed to age 9, it requires very intensive instruction to significantly improve a child's reading skills.

At least part of the reason for this is that several years of reading failure cause children to miss out on so much reading practice that it is very difficult for them to catch up with other children.

Screening is the process of determining which students may be at risk for reading difficulties. Screenings should be given to all children. Therefore, they should be easy to administer and inexpensive. Results should be easy to interpret.

A more intensive diagnostic assessment should be given to those students who have demonstrated reading difficulties. Diagnostic assessments help pinpoint causes and suggest solutions.

Screening devices and diagnostic assessments should measure the research-based predictors of reading success.

That is, in kindergarten they should look at phonemic awareness and knowledge of letter names and sounds.



When is a good time to assess phonological awareness? In most programs, the second semester of kindergarten is probably the best time to identify children who need extra help.

How is phonological awareness assessed? Researchers have used more than 20 different tasks to measure awareness of phonemes in words.

These tasks can be grouped into three broad categories:

- Sound comparison
- Phoneme segmentation
- Phoneme blending

It is crucial that these measures not be used to label or track students. They should also not be used to measure accountability. Early screening devices can have a very high "false positive" and "false negative" rate.

When looking for screening devices and diagnostic assessments, make sure that the tests:

- are designed for accuracy
- are technically sound
- measure research-based predictors of reading success
- are of the correct difficulty level for your student population
- are used to pinpoint intervention and instructional needs
- are not used to track or label students

Three widely used screening measures are:

- The Phonological Awareness Test
- The Test of Phonological Awareness
- The Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation

For more information on these and other measures of phonological awareness, consult the text link called "More Info."

Screening activities to identify struggling readers should continue through elementary school. Once children begin to read, the best indicators of difficulties are measures of word reading skill and comprehension.

In first and second grade, simple measures of word reading skill can identify children at-risk.

After second grade, children should be regularly assessed with measures of text reading accuracy and fluency as well as comprehension. For more information on these types of measures, consult the article "Catch Them Before They Fall."

An effective, early screening and diagnostic system is just the first step in preventing reading difficulties.

An intervention plan should be in place even before screening is given. The plan should supplement and reinforce the general reading program. Often this system can be implemented right in the student's regular classroom.

Early reading intervention systems should contain the same components of quality beginning reading instruction that have been outlined on this disc.

The intervention should be specifically designed to:

- Help students overcome deficits in phonemic awareness
- Give specific instruction in letter-sound correspondence
- Emphasize phonemic decoding
- Provide practice to develop automaticity
- Provide instruction in comprehension strategies,
- Provide opportunities for lots of practice in reading, writing and overall language development.

Although reading instruction for at-risk children should share much of the same content with instruction in the regular classroom, it must be different in several important ways.

Compared to whole class reading instruction, it must be:

- More explicit—teachers should leave nothing to chance. All the skills necessary for reading must be directly taught.
- More intensive—students must work in much smaller instructional groups so they have more direct interactions with the teacher.
- More supportive—because reading is difficult for these students, they require more emotional support, and more carefully “scaffolded” or supported instruction.

AFTER EACH SEMINAR ENDS:

Please open your reflection journal now to consider the ideas presented in this seminar before going to the next section.