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# Best Practices for Phonics Instruction in Today's Classroom

by

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*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).

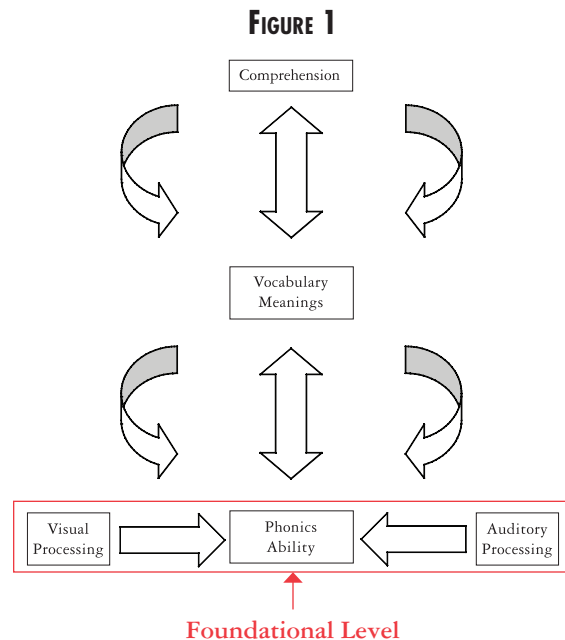
Proficiency in phonics is essential to reading success (Cunningham, 2007). However, phonics mastery does not come easily to many learners, and teachers often struggle with how best to help their students with this critical reading skill (Allington & Baker, 2007).

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.



## 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).

The image shows a page from a teacher's edition for Unit 2, Lesson 78, titled 'Short e'. The page is divided into several sections:

- UNIT 2 • LESSON 78**: Student Pages 131–132. It includes a 'PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ONLINE VIDEO' icon.
- Objectives**:
  - To substitute initial sounds
  - To use phonograms to read short e words
  - To build short e words
- 1. TEACH**:
  - Phonemic Awareness Skill: Substituting Initial Sounds**
    - Say the phonogram **est**. Remind children that **/est/** is only part of a word and that it needs a consonant sound at the beginning. Add **/t/** to make **test**. Ask: *What happens when you change the /t/ in test to /b/?* Then say: *You get best.*
    - Ask: *What happens when you change the /b/ in best to /p/?* Have volunteers add other beginning consonants to make words such as **pest, west, pest, rest.**
  - Phonics Skill: Blending with Phonograms**
    - On the board, write **ed** and read the phonogram. Add a **b** to **ed**, leaving a space between word parts. Tell children you will blend the two parts to read a word. Slide a finger from left to right as you say **/b/-/ed/, bed.**
    - Ask a volunteer to circle the word part **ed**. Tell children that other words can be made with this word part. Replace **b** with **r** and have children blend **/r/** with **/ed/**. Read the new word, **red.**
    - Build more words by replacing the initial consonant with **F, L, W, N, T.**
- Blending Onsets and Boxes**: A grid of 9 boxes for blending. Each box contains a letter, a picture, and a word.
 

v	et	w	ell	r	ed
w	eb	n	est	b	eg
l	en	b	ell	j	et
1.	beg	2.	vet	3.	red
4.	ten	5.	bell	6.	web
7.	well	8.	jet	9.	nest
- CURRICULUM CONNECTION**:
  - MATH**, **SCIENCE**, **SOCIAL STUDIES**, **ART/MUSIC**, **LANGUAGE ARTS**
  - Point out that spiders use their webs to catch and eat bugs. Read aloud *The Very Busy Spider*. Have children draw a picture and write a sentence to tell about the book. Children can draw a line under each short e word they use. Have children read their sentences aloud.
- SPELLING/WRITING**:
  - Read aloud each word and sentence. Ask a volunteer to spell the word. Then have children write each word in a sentence.
  - test** Are you ready for the test?
  - tell** Did you tell Ben the news?
  - red** I like your new red shirt.
  - hen** The hen sits on her eggs.
  - pet** This dog is my pet.

Sadlier Phonics ©2009, Level A(1), Teacher’s Edition Page T131

## A Variety of Practice Activities for Students with Different Learning Styles

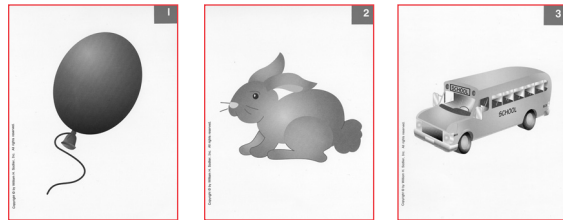
Explicit instruction, guided practice, and scaffolding are not sufficient in and of themselves to ensure mastery of phonics skills. All of these components of instruction must be accompanied by a wide variety of independent practice and reinforcement activities for children with different learning

styles. 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.

If *Sadlier Phonics* is the stand-alone phonics program in the classroom, teachers can use the Assess section of each lesson, along with the Review and Assess lesson for each cluster of skills, to confirm mastery or to identify ongoing areas for improvement. If children need additional instruction, use the appropriate Intervention Routine.

Features that are part of every lesson in the **Teacher's Edition** can also be used with children who are experiencing difficulty. Multi-Sensory Activities are ideal when you work with a small group or one-on-one with a child to reinforce or reteach a particular concept. **Sadlier Phonics Picture Cards** can be used to have children demonstrate knowledge of sound-symbol connections and visually reinforce vocabulary.

**REACHING ALL LEARNERS**

**ELL- ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**  
**DIFFERENTIATE:** Sadlier Phonics Picture Cards for short E and long I words type.  
 To help children distinguish between E and I, have them sort Picture Cards into two categories—words with E as in *bed* or I as in *time*. Write *bed* and *time* on the board. Show each Picture Card at a time, and have children name the picture, decide which category it belongs to, and tape the card under the correct word.

**TACTILE LEARNERS**  
 Discuss long I words pictured on pages 181 and 182, and have children guess them on a piece of paper. Ask volunteers to spell the words on the board so that children can check and revise their own spellings.

**AUDITORY LEARNERS**  
 Say a list of words with various vowel sounds children have studied. Have children raise their hands or echo with long I. Use words such as *find, slide, about, team, hot, like, one, with, beside*.

**Intervention Routines in Sadlier Phonics**  
 The routines in the tabbed Intervention section are flexible enough to be used with any lesson of the same skill type. For example, the Phonemic Awareness routine can be used with any of the lessons that teach phonemic awareness skills. In every **Teacher's Edition** lesson, there is a reference to the appropriate Intervention Routine and the page on which it can be found. The **Unit Planner** for each unit also identifies which routine to use with children who need additional help with lesson skills. Routines for the lesson skills are found in the tabbed Intervention section across the levels in *Sadlier Phonics*.

12 Intervention: Overview

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 not English. These children fall into a number of levels of English acquisition. The activities in the *Teacher's Edition* lessons support English Language Learners as they move through the five stages of language proficiency.

#### Stages of Language Proficiency

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

**Stage 2: Early Production** At this stage, children are receiving meaningful messages and begin to respond with one- or two-word answers. Errors in pronunciation and grammar are common.

**Stage 3: Speech Emergence** Children at Stage 3 begin to use the new language to speak among themselves.

**Stage 4: Intermediate Fluency** At this stage, children are almost completely fluent in social settings. Academic language, however, is still a bit limited.

**Stage 5: Advanced Fluency** Once children reach this stage, they understand and speak almost as fluently as native speakers.

#### Pronunciation Guide

Another aspect of tailoring teaching for English Language Learners is to understand the difficulties speakers of other languages have with various elements of English. When learning to speak and recognize the English language, most non-native speakers transfer the phonological rules of their primary language to their English speech. That system works if the two languages have equivalent sounds. However, when no equivalent sound is present in the native language, learners may need some guidance in producing a new sound.

The following guide will alert teachers to important challenges to English Language Learners.

#### Consonants

Sound	Pronunciation	Challenges to English Learners
/b/	Voiced. Both lips push together to stop airflow. Tongue is in center of mouth. Air is released from mouth and then quickly stopped.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no equivalent sound in Cantonese, Mandarin, Hmong, or Korean. Native Cantonese, Hmong, and Korean speakers often substitute the /p/ sound.</li> <li>In Spanish, the letters <i>b</i> and <i>v</i> represent one phoneme, /b/. This phoneme has two variations in pronunciation, /b/ and /β/. The /β/ sound is articulated much like /v/, except that instead of passing air through the upper teeth and lower lip, air is passed through the upper lip and bottom lip. As a result, a native Spanish speaker will often use /b/ and /v/ interchangeably.</li> </ul>
/d/	Voiced. Lips are slightly separated. Tip of tongue on alveolar ridge stops airflow. Air is released from mouth and then quickly stopped.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vietnamese speakers pronounce /d/ more impulsively.</li> <li>There is no equivalent sound in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Korean; speakers may substitute /t/.</li> </ul>

English Language Learners: Overview and Pronunciation Guide

R1

Sadlier Phonics ©2009, Level A(1), Teacher's Edition Page R1

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

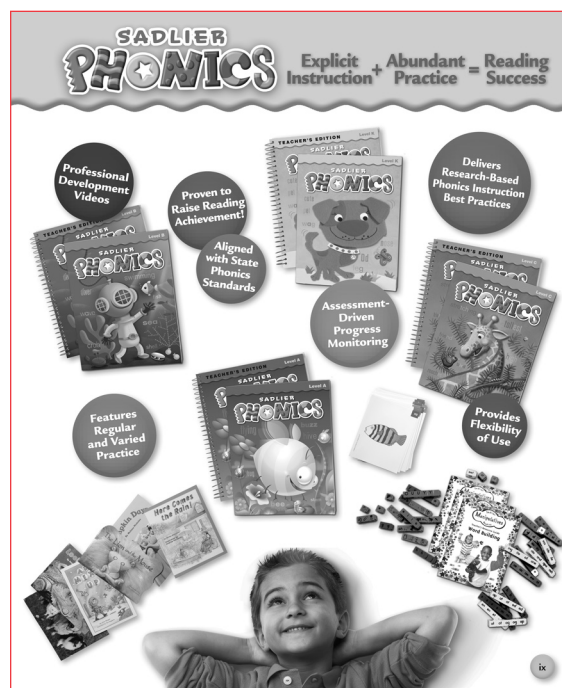
Even children whose first language is English often have difficulty mastering phonics skills. In a classic study, Juel (1988) found that children who are experiencing reading difficulties at the end of first grade are at high risk of having reading difficulties at the end of fourth grade. More optimistically, 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



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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.

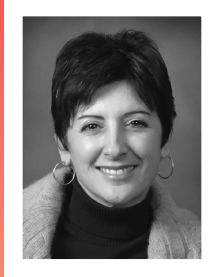
Sound-symbol correspondences are also directly measured by commercial literacy assessments, which require students to rely solely on phonics skills to read nonsense words. Phonics mastery is indirectly measured in virtually all standardized measures of literacy achievement because of its central role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

## Summary and Conclusion

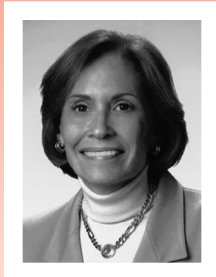
Phonics ability plays a central and foundational role in the reading process since it is the mechanism through which children match the letters and sounds of words. Without strong phonics skills, children often struggle to identify words and consequently are unable to comprehend the text they are reading.

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



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# Nursery Rhymes and Phonemic Awareness

by  
Research and Development Staff

*Sadlier-Oxford*  
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**P**icture this: A young child sits on a parent's lap while the two of them clap rhythmically together and recite in unison:

*Hey diddle, diddle,  
The cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon;  
The little dog laughed  
To see such sport,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

The moment ends as the parent tickles the child's tummy and the two of them laugh and laugh and laugh.

If you guessed that this seemingly inconsequential event in a child's life has profound consequences—you'd be right! Research suggests that hearing, learning, and reciting Mother Goose nursery rhymes can help young children take the first steps toward becoming proficient readers.

In the playful moment described above, the child is not only experiencing the joy of words but is also implicitly developing early literacy skills—one of the most important of which is **phonemic awareness**.



## PHONEMIC AWARENESS

### What Is Phonemic Awareness?

Phonemic awareness is defined as “the awareness of sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken words” (Williams, 1995). Someone consciously and analytically aware of the sounds that make up spoken words would be able to hear the word *pat*, for example, in these ways: it has one syllable; it consists of the initial sound /p/ and the rime *at*; and it is made up of three phonemes, or sounds: /p/, /a/, and /t/.

### Why Is Phonemic Awareness Important in Reading Instruction?

From infancy, a child gradually becomes adept at implicitly recognizing and using phonemes—in speaking and listening (Eimas, Siqueland, Jusczyk, and Vigorito, 1971). A growing majority of educators believe that when children begin reading instruction, they need to become explicitly aware that spoken words are composed of sounds and they must develop the ability to consciously and analytically hear, identify, and manipulate those sounds (Moats, Furry, and Brownell, 1998).

Research indicates that this conscious, analytical phonemic awareness and letter knowledge are the best predictors of early reading acquisition. This means that once children have some degree of phonemic awareness and letter knowledge they can

begin to decode the letter/sound correspondences that make up our written language — that is, they can begin to read (Bond and Dykstra, 1967).

### What Instruction Can a Teacher Provide in Phonemic Awareness?

It has been recognized that there are several levels of phonemic awareness in which children may need explicit instruction before they can begin decoding words on a page (Blachman, 1984b; Lewkowicz, 1980; Stanovich, Cunningham, and Cramer, 1984; Yopp, 1988). Adams (1990) identifies five levels:

1. Knowledge of nursery rhymes
2. Oddity tasks
3. Blending and syllable-splitting
4. Phonemic segmentation
5. Phoneme manipulation

### What Sources Can a Teacher Turn To?

Which materials are the most appropriate for instruction in the five levels of phonemic awareness? There is no definitive answer to that question, of course; but, according to Opie and Opie (1959), nursery rhymes have long been accepted as having a place in the preschool classroom and the range of rhymes that can be used is extensive. Holdaway’s observations (1979) support that finding: “Preschool teachers use nursery rhymes and songs with groups of children or the whole

class, which has a real social benefit as children chant and sing in unison.” Cullinan (1999) adds: “Mother Goose rhymes ... reinforce key reading skills, such as phonemic awareness.” And research reveals that there is a strong link between the nursery rhyme knowledge of PreK children and their future success in reading and spelling (MacLean, Bryant, and Bradley, 1987).

Nursery rhymes are not for the preschool classroom only (Samuels and Farstrup, 1992). They exert their power over all primary

children—and adults! Why? “Stop and listen to the rhymes. See how they awaken responsiveness in boys and girls. They are short, fun-filled, dramatic, pleasing to the ear, easy to remember—and oh, so hard to forget” (Hopkins, 1998).

Traditional nursery rhymes, then, can serve as rich instructional material — not only in developing the first level of phonemic awareness but also in explicit instruction at the other four levels.





## MOTHER GOOSE AND PHONEMIC AWARENESS

Following are practical suggestions for using Mother Goose nursery rhymes to develop phonemic awareness in young learners.

### Level One: Knowledge of nursery rhymes

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Help children develop an “ear” for rhyme and alliteration (1) by telling children that rhyming words sound the same at the end; (2) by encouraging children to listen for the initial sounds in words; and (3) by reading aloud and reciting to children and having the children themselves recite and sing nursery rhymes and poems. Choose nursery rhymes and poems that are rich in rhyme and alliteration. “Hey Diddle, Diddle,” “Little Boy Blue,” and “Mary, Mary” are just three of the many nursery rhymes that will help do the job. “Hey Diddle, Diddle,” for example, contains these rhyme pairs: *diddle/fiddle*; *moon/spoon*; and alliteration in the repetition of the initial consonant *d* in the opening phrase: “Hey diddle, diddle.”

Your school and/or public library will have collections of nursery rhymes as well as some of the many materials that have been inspired by the traditional rhymes. (See the “Nursery Rhyme Books and Materials” bibliography at the end of this paper.)

You may wish to make the world of Mother Goose really come alive in your classroom by

turning an area into Mother Gooseland with big and little books, puppets, audiocassettes, and so on. But most of all—recite and sing to children and have children recite and sing to you and to each other.

### Level Two: Oddity tasks

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Continue asking children to identify rhyming words and listen for initial sounds in words. Provide instruction and practice in listening for ending and medial sounds (Bradley and Bryant, 1983). Read or recite “Mary, Mary” (or one of *your* favorite nursery rhymes) a number of times. Have children recite it until they know it well enough to say it aloud easily and playfully.

*Mary, Mary,  
Quite contrary,  
How does your  
Garden grow?*

*With Silver Bells,  
And Cockle Shells,  
And pretty maids  
All in a row.*

Ask the following questions to check children’s ability to do oddity tasks:

- Which word does not rhyme? *grow, row, bow* (answer: *bow*)
- Which word has a different beginning sound? *maids, does, Mary* (answer: *does*)
- Which word has a different ending sound? *and, shells, bells* (answer: *and*)
- Which word has a different middle sound? *bells, shells, maids* (answer: *maids*)

### Level Three: Blending and syllable-splitting

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Model for children how to blend and syllable-split. For practice in blending, give children the phonemes that make up a word—for example, /k/ /a/ /t/—and have them blend the phonemes together to say the word—*cat* (Lundberg, Olofsson, and Wall, 1980; Perfetti, Beck, Bell, and Hughes, 1987). Read, recite, and have children recite and enjoy the language in “This Little Pig” (or another nursery rhyme of your choice):



*This little pig went to market.  
This little pig stayed home.  
This little pig had roast beef.  
This little pig had none.  
This little pig cried, Wee-wee-wee!  
All the way home.*

Check children’s ability at blending and syllable-splitting by asking them to follow such directions as these:

- Say these three sounds: /p/ /i/ /g/.
- Put (blend) the sounds together and say the word they make. (answer: *pig*)
- Say the first sound you hear in the word *beef*. (answer: /b/)
- Take away /b/ in the word *beef*. Say what is left. (answer: *eef*)

### Level Four: Phonemic segmentation

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Provide instruction in segmenting spoken words into individual sounds. Have children tap or clap at each sound they hear in a word (Lieberman, Shankweiler, Fischer, and Carter, 1974; Blachman, 1984a). Read, recite, and have children recite and delight in the alliterative and rhythmic language of “Shoe a Little Horse” (or a nursery rhyme of your own choosing):

*Shoe a little horse,  
Shoe a little mare,  
But let the little colt  
Go bare, bare, bare.  
  
Shoe a horse  
And shoe a mare,  
But let the little colt  
Go bare, bare, bare.*

Have children follow these directions to practice or assess their skill at phonemic segmentation:

- Tap (or clap) for each sound you hear in the word *go*. (answer: 2 taps or claps: /g/ /o/)
- Tap (or clap) for each sound you hear in the word *let*. (answer: 3 taps or claps: /l/ /e/ /t/)
- Tap (or clap) for each sound you hear in the word *colt*. (answer: 4 taps or claps: /k/ /o/ /l/ /t/)

## Level Five: Phoneme manipulation

✓ **Teacher Tip:** Model for children how to manipulate phonemes as you go about the variety of listening and speaking activities in your classroom (Lundberg, Olofsson, and Wall, 1980; Mann, 1984; Rosner and Simon, 1971). Read, recite, and have children recite and play with the language in “Little Boy Blue” (or another favorite nursery rhyme of yours):

*Little Boy Blue,  
Come blow your horn;  
The sheep's in the meadow,  
The cow's in the corn.  
Where is the boy  
Who looks after the sheep?  
He's under a haystack  
Fast asleep.*

*Will you wake him?  
No, not I,  
For if I do,  
He's sure to cry.*

Check children's ability at phoneme manipulation by asking them to follow directions such as these:

- Say the word *will* without /w/:  
(answer: *ill*)
- Add /h/ to the beginning of the word *ill*:  
(answer: *hill*)
- Say the word *fast* without /s/:  
(answer: *fat*)
- Say the word *sheep* without /p/:  
(answer: *shee*)

## CONCLUSION

Although phonemic awareness is a current focus of literacy discussion, it is only one part of a balanced approach to reading instruction. Yopp (1992) makes these wise recommendations about teaching phonemic awareness: make the activities playful and fun; avoid drill and rote memorization; find ways for children to interact with each other during instruction; encourage children to be curious about language and to experiment with it; and make allowance for individual differences.

As research and best practice by teachers reveal, Mother Goose is ready and willing to help young learners develop phonemic awareness, one of the first steps on the path to becoming eager, proficient readers.

## Terms

**alliteration** the repetition of initial sounds in words (“Betty Botter bought some butter”)

**blend** to say the sounds in a word in a fluid way so the word is recognized and spoken as it is heard in everyday speech

**manipulate** to add or delete a particular phoneme or phonemes in a spoken word

**oddy task** a task in which one is asked to identify the discrepant member of a group of three or four spoken words based on initial, medial, or final sound

**onset** the initial consonant or consonants in a word (for example, the *c* in *cat*).

**phoneme** the smallest unit of sound in a spoken word

**phonemic awareness** awareness of the sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken words

**phonic instruction** “a system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle...of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations” (Adams, 1990)

**rime** the remainder of a one-syllable word when the onset is removed (for example, *at* in *cat*)

**segment** to pull apart phonemes in a spoken word

## Nursery Rhyme Books and Materials

The following is a sampling of the many Mother Goose materials available.

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Lee Bennett Hopkins, the “Pied-Piper of Poetry,” has compiled an enchanting collection of round-the-world nursery rhymes for *Lee Bennett Hopkins MOTHER GOOSE*, published by Sadlier-Oxford. The nursery rhymes used in this paper appear in that work.

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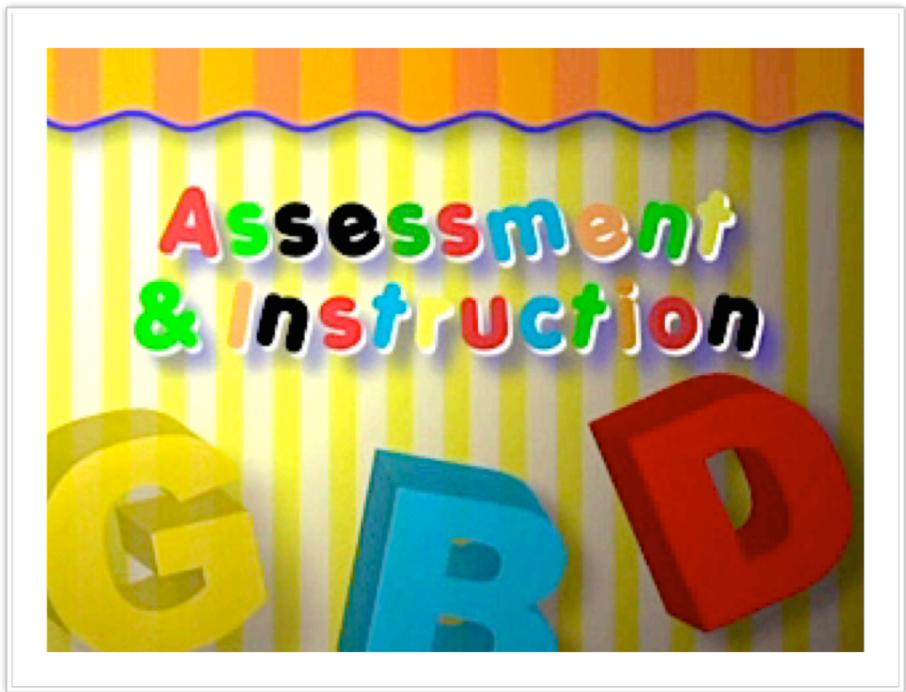
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