8 Ways to Build Reading Skills

1. Phonemic Awareness Instruction

Phonemic awareness is the ability to perceive (hear) phonemes, the smallest unit of spoken language (individual speech sounds) – within words, being able to manipulate sounds – m-a-p to p-a-m and the new word it makes; combine sounds; delete sounds; and replace sounds to make new words – m-a-p to m-o-p.

High-quality instruction in the early grades focuses on helping students understand the role that phonemic awareness plays in learning to read and write. Phonemic awareness refers to the connections between spoken language and literacy, or that learning to read and write involves attending to and analysing the structure of what is said and heard so that utterances can be broken into language, then into sequences of syllables, and then into phonemes within the syllables (NICHD, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Examples of Best Practices for Phonemic Awareness Instruction:

- **Clapping to show distinct parts of sentences and words**: teachers model the distinct words in a sentence, then the syllables in the word, then the distinct phonemes; as students understand the concept of smaller and smaller parts, they clap themselves.
- **Sorting pictures by isolating sounds:** students can practice isolating the beginning or ending sounds represented by the object's name shown in the picture (Foorman et al., 2016).

2. Phonics Instruction

The next step for students is to learn phonics or the actual letter-sound correspondences. As these understandings fall into place, students can decode. Initially, they may recognize familiar words on sight, but gradually they should apply what they know about letter-sound correspondences to decode words as they read and to encode words as they write. Thus, besides learning letter-sound patterns, beginning readers must become fluent in decoding—the process of segmenting letter-sound patterns within words and blending them back together to access that word in their lexicon.

Strong teachers teach these skills explicitly with detailed explanations, modelling, and practice (Strickland, 2011). In these ways, teachers demonstrate the utility of the sophisticated concepts and skills students are working on mastering. Students should also be encouraged to try the skills out themselves by reading simple text or writing on their own. This mixing of explicit instruction and practice activities strengthens students' understanding and confidence as beginning literacy users. Students can also practice phonics skills by taking dictation from teachers; the

resulting products give teachers valuable informal data about students' understanding of letter-sound correspondences and letter formation.

Examples of Best Practices for Phonics Instruction:

- **Word-building activities:** students manipulate magnetic letters or word tiles to create words they recognize and can pronounce.
- **Word-changing activities:** using magnetic letters or word tiles, students transform simple words, for example, by adding the letter e to the end, inserting a consonant into simple CVC words, or removing vowels or consonants to create new words.
- **Composing on paper or computer:** students can use the same knowledge and skills in their beginning writing efforts (Foorman et al., 2016).

3. Fluency Instruction

Practice in reading simple texts and reading their writing contributes to students' development of fluency or reading smoothly with accuracy and expression. When students' word identification becomes fast and accurate, they have freed up some "cognitive space" to draw on their broader knowledge of language and comprehend what they are reading (Baker et al., 2017; Hoover & Gough, 1990).

Teachers model fluent reading when they read aloud to students, especially as they pause for punctuation or change their voice to show expressiveness. Teachers also model prosody, a component of fluency that is most prominent in reading poetry with inflection and rhythm. *Prosody* also refers to how the tone of voice and inflection convey meaning in oral language—for example, the way one expresses sarcasm or irony. Teachers demonstrate prosody in their oral reading and can explicitly explain what they are doing as they read by asking how the change in inflection changes the meaning implied by the words on the page.

As teachers help students become fluent readers, they need to reassure them that fluency means reading with comprehension, not merely saying the words as quickly as possible. Teachers model this distinction in their oral reading by pausing to question the meaning of words, the implications of word choice, or other aspects of the texts they are reading.

Examples of Best Practices for Fluency Instruction:

- **Modelled reading:** hearing teachers read connected text and poetry is one of the best ways to learn how fluent reading sounds.
- **Oral reading**
    - **Choral reading:** students read together.
    - **Echo (or alternated) reading:** individual students practice oral reading with a more experienced reader.
- **Digital software:** students hear examples of fluent reading or facilitate fluency practice (Foorman et al., 2016).

4. Vocabulary Instruction

From the very beginning, high-quality early literacy instruction must also include instruction and practice on vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Foorman et al., 2016). Teachers' everyday conversations with students and academic language skills instruction can minimise the differences in students' vocabularies when entering school and expand students' oral vocabularies and concepts (Foorman et al., 2016; Shanahan et al., 2010). Students' vocabularies expand from repeated encounters with new words, both in the literacy block and in content-area instruction and from listening, reading, and talking to others (Connor & Morrison, 2012).

Examples of Best Practices for Vocabulary Instruction:

- **Teaching language for discussing books:** teachers can model and explain the vocabulary used to discuss narrative and informational texts, including organising and then discussing the actions in a story shared during oral reading time.
- **Teaching academic vocabulary:** students may not understand the different technical meanings for words used in informational texts or content-area books; for example, a scientist can investigate animal habitats, and students can themselves investigate different mathematical relationships.
- **Deepening students' knowledge of words used:** teachers can help students connect new words and words they already know and model the different contexts in which new words can be used (Foorman et al., 2016).

5. Comprehension Instruction

Comprehension is the ultimate goal of learning to read. Even beginning readers benefit from instruction that introduces them to various strategies to help them understand different kinds of texts and their text structures (Duke, 2000; Shanahan et al., 2010).

Part of beginning comprehension instruction is a teacher "externalising" or modelling the comprehension strategies mature readers use automatically. The daily read-aloud period is ideal for this instruction—so long as teachers remember that merely reading aloud isn't enough. Students need to be actively involved in asking and answering questions, making predictions, or explaining characters' motivations or other actions in what they are hearing (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Reutzel et al., 2008; Shanahan et al., 2010).

Comprehension instruction is most effective when teachers have access to high-quality children's literature in various genres, representing a range of cultural experiences and backgrounds (Duke, 2000). One of the great advantages of introducing students to reading comprehension skills through independent reading is that the experience reinforces that the students can become successful readers (Sisk et al., 2018).

Examples of Best Practices for Comprehension Instruction:

- **Using text structure:** teachers can introduce students to the "clue words" used to show the structure of different types of texts; for example, the clue words *both*, *alike*, and *different* are often found in compare and contrast texts.
- **Engaging students in discussion:** during read alouds, teachers can periodically ask students to summarise what has happened and to predict what will happen. Teachers should also ask higher-level questions, such as those addressing the motivations for characters' actions.
- **Careful selection of texts:** rich narratives with clear plots and character development and informational texts that are accurate and well-structured make comprehension instruction easier (Shanahan et al., 2010).

6. Writing Instruction

Most young students will—if given opportunities—become writers. Initial efforts may be part drawing and part writing, with words spelled as students "hear" them while subvocalizing what they want to say. These early efforts also demonstrate young learners' understanding of orthography and syntax, for example, that writing flows from left to right across a page (Gambrell et al., 2007; Graham et al., 2012). Gradually, students' writing becomes more complex and expressive, especially if students receive explicit instruction on the writing process, that is, the recursive steps a writer uses to compose text. The steps in the writing process include initial planning, drafting, sharing with the teacher or peers to get feedback, revising per the feedback, editing for clarity and mechanics, and evaluating the final written product (Graham et al., 2012). As students learn to evaluate their own and others' writing, they look for clarity of expression, thoroughness of ideas, and other features of good writing.

Ideally, many written products will be "published" on bulletin boards, on class blogs or in magazines, or in some other way that demonstrates to the writer and other students the value teacher's place in this activity as part of the literacy block.

As with reading, explicit writing instruction that draws on and builds students' understanding of language will be most effective. Students benefit from instruction on handwriting, spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and other skills. Still, teachers also need to model writing for their students and point out the features of good writing during read alouds and other instructional interactions (Graham et al., 2012). For example, pointing out how dialogue in a story is punctuated reinforces explicit instruction on using quotation marks in writing conversations.

Examples of Best Practices for Writing Instruction:

- **Learning the fundamentals of writing:** kindergarten students may need instruction on basics like holding a pencil and forming letters correctly.
- **Using exemplary texts:** simple texts that teachers have shared with students during oral reading can be used as examples or "frames" for writing practice,

with students changing the story by providing their own ideas for key details, such as the setting or names of the main characters (Graham et al., 2012).

7. Explicit Instruction on Language

One of the important aspects of early foundation skills in literacy is instruction on how language works—instruction that gives students the tools to analyse and produce language. If we accept that successful reading depends on students' ability to decode and access their knowledge about language, then it makes sense to provide them with insight into the various linguistic components that give language order as well as richness, depth, and complexity:

- **Orthography** refers to the patterns and conventions (the spelling system) of a language. Orthographic knowledge is developed as students learn these conventions, such as letters that cannot be used at the end of words or cannot be doubled or the fact that most syllables in English have at least one vowel (Cunningham, 2005). Teaching orthography also includes teaching students to recognize different types of syllables, such as those controlled by an *r* or the VCVe type as in *cake*. As beginning readers recognize written syllable patterns, they are better able to decode single-syllable words (*dog* vs. *dodge*) and break words into readable chunks. Beginning writers gradually apply these understandings in their written efforts.
- As students learn **morphology**, they learn to use morphemes, or the smallest units of meaning, to help them figure out how to read and spell unfamiliar words. Because the English orthography is a morphophonemic system, students benefit from learning the meanings of these segments within words. Prefixes, roots, base words, and suffixes are all examples of morphemes; their spelling and meaning are usually consistent, but they may be pronounced differently depending on the words in which they are used (e.g., *photo* vs. *photography* vs. *photogenic*).
- **Syntax** refers to how words are usually ordered in sentences or clauses to communicate meaning (e.g., nouns or pronouns followed by verbs, with modifiers as needed). Parts of speech, the usual conventions of language, and the structures of different sentence types are included in the study of syntax. Most of the material young students will read will have relatively straightforward syntactical structures, with phrases and clauses used in ways that support comprehension. Students learning to read and write in a second language can benefit from additional support and explanations in mastering English syntax (Cummins, 2016).
- **Semantics** refers to the meanings of single words, phrases, and sentences. Semantics relates to vocabulary instruction but extends to the directly stated or implied meaning of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. The term also refers to understanding text organization (e.g., a poem vs. a story vs. an informational piece all on the same topic). Deepening students' understanding of semantics enhances their ability to draw on their language knowledge as they work to comprehend what they read.

Examples of Best Practices for Instruction on Language:

- **Taking advantage of other instructional moments:** teachers who understand the structure of language integrate this information into other instruction; for example, showing how the prefix *un-* can be used to create the opposite of words such as *happy* or *locked* but that words like *sad* and *open* can also be used and have the same meaning (e.g., *unhappy* is the same as *sad*, *unlocked* is the same as *open*).
- **Helpful ways to remember fine points of language:** teachers encourage students to remember these aspects of language when they give them tricks to remember them; for example, when morphemes are added to words to create new words, the new words are different and can be thought of as "cousins" from the same family (Adams, 2010/2011).

8. Knowledge Building

The more readers know about a topic, the easier it will be to comprehend a text written about this topic. Reading with comprehension, in turn, expands readers' personal background knowledge further and adds to their vocabularies (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991). Teachers of young children have many opportunities to expand students' background knowledge. Content-area instruction in science and social studies provides obvious opportunities for expanding students' knowledge about these subjects.

Teachers can use this instruction to help students connect what they already know to new knowledge and refine their ways of talking about these subjects (i.e., academic vocabulary). If teachers hold morning "message time," they can use this period to talk about topics like the weather, national holidays, and even interesting, relevant items in the news. Asking students to share what they know about these topics also contributes to knowledge building, and gentle correction of misinformation is perfectly acceptable. What teachers read to students and what students read themselves during the literacy block should also expand students' knowledge.

Examples of Best Practices for Building Knowledge:

- **Big ideas:** start planning with the ideas/facts/processes students need to know.
- **Word knowledge:** identify and then teach necessary vocabulary.
- **Multiple genres:** use narratives, narrative nonfiction, and informational texts.
- **Review:** review often and in different ways with questions that move students beyond rote recall and literal comprehension.
- **Language engagement:** encourage students to talk about what they are learning (Neuman, 2019).

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