

Foundations for Learning to Read

1. Oral Language

Oral language is the foundation on which reading and writing are built. Children develop a “working” knowledge of the phonological structure of oral language early in their preschool years. With instruction, this knowledge develops into a conscious awareness of the phonemic composition of spoken words (or phonemic awareness), which is essential to learning to read. In this sense, oral language is the foundation for learning to identify or pronounce written words.

Oral language is, perhaps, even more obviously related to reading comprehension. Oral language and reading comprehension have many factors in common. The syntax of oral and written language is highly similar. The semantics for words heard and read are the same—the word *car*, whether read or heard, will evoke similar though varying meanings for any given person. The background knowledge that a person stores contributes significantly to using and understanding oral language and to reading comprehension. This strong relationship between oral language and reading is manifested in the high correlations that develop between reading and listening comprehension once children have gained a degree of proficiency in word identification.

If children come to school with well-developed oral language, it must be expanded. If children come to school with underdeveloped oral language, it must be developed. Research-based instructional materials must provide instruction and activities to develop and expand oral language, including such opportunities as hearing and using good language models, talking about and discussing meaningful topics, and so forth. The necessity for oral language development and expansion extends from preschool through a child’s later school experiences.

The following quotations from the research reports identified above support these conclusions:

• 1998 - Snow, Burns, & Griffin

“For children learning to read, comprehension can take advantage of skills they have been using in their oral language: the shared basic language components (lexical, syntactic, and interpretive processes), cognitive mechanisms (working memory), and conceptual knowledge (vocabulary, topic knowledge).” (p. 75)

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“Spoken language and reading have much in common. If the printed words can be efficiently recognized, comprehension of connected text depends heavily on the reader’s oral language abilities, particularly with regard to understanding the meanings of words that have been identified and the syntactic and semantic relationships among them.” (p. 108)

- **1998 - Learning First Alliance**

“The foundations for reading success are formed long before a child reaches first grade... During pre-K and Kindergarten, students should develop: Language skills...” (p. 10)

- **1998 - Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris**

“Oral language is the foundation on which reading is built, and it continues to serve this role as children develop as readers.” (Topic 1, p. 1)

2. Knowledge of Letter Names

A long-standing, extremely robust finding in the field of reading research is the high correlation between young children’s knowledge of letter names and success in learning to read. However, simply teaching children letter names in and of itself does not lead to significantly better reading achievement. The relationship between young children’s knowledge of letter names and beginning reading achievement is a complex relationship, not a simple causal one.

Knowledge of letter names in all probability signals the fact that the child has been exposed to a rich, stimulating preschool environment. A rich, stimulating environment allows the child to learn letter names, but it also allows the child to develop rich oral language skills, sensitivity to oral language patterns, concepts of print, motivation for learning to read, and so forth. While knowledge of letter names may somewhat facilitate learning to read, such knowledge is certainly not sufficient for learning to read; learning to read depends upon the multiple skills developed in a stimulating early childhood environment; hence, just teaching letter names does not result in improved reading achievement.

Letter names serve as a “marker” for additional and more complex skills and relationships in the learning-to-read process. First, letter names are the equivalent of a label for the letter form; having a label available

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Knowledge of Letter Names (continued)

facilitates the child's ability to discriminate critical differences among different letters. For example, differences between C, G, and O will be more apparent if each has a separate label.

Second, accurate letter naming may also serve as an index of the completeness with which the letters' identities have been learned by the child. Third, and perhaps most important, letter names may be related to reading achievement because the names of most of the letters of the alphabet contain clues as to the sound that a letter represents (for example, "b" and "f"); knowledge of letter-sound associations is critically important to progress in beginning reading.

From the research reviews it is safe to conclude that measuring a child's knowledge of letter names is a very good predictor of success in learning to read. It is also reasonable to conclude that teaching letter names in kindergarten or first grade is a useful activity. However, children then need to be taught to recognize letters not just accurately but automatically, and to use letter names as a mnemonic for learning the sounds associated with the letter forms. As with other skills that are foundations to learning to read, familiarity with letter forms is necessary, but not sufficient, for learning to read.

Research-based instructional materials should provide many activities and games designed to teach letter names. Such activities should include learning alphabet songs and the shared reading of and listening to alphabet books. The following quotations support the importance of teaching letter names:

- **1967 - Chall**

"Do children need to know the alphabet (and have a knowledge of letter-sound relationships) in order to learn to read? ...based on the research as of now, [the answer] is *probably yes*, especially when the correlational studies are backed by the experimental studies... Perhaps the crucial point is not that children must know all the letters before they learn to read words, but instead they should *pay attention* to letters, and naming or sounding them helps them pay attention."
(p. 158)

- **1985 - Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson**

"Knowledge of letter names is not important in itself so much as it is a reflection of broader knowledge about reading and language." (p. 31)

- **1990 - Adams**

“In study after study letter naming facility continued to show itself as a superlative predictor of reading achievement even through the seventh grade.” (p. 62)

- **1998 - Snow, Burns, & Griffin**

“Among the readiness skills that are traditionally evaluated, the one that appears to be the strongest predictor on its own is letter identification... Just measuring how many letters a kindergartner is able to name when shown in a random order appears to be nearly as successful at predicting future reading as is an entire readiness test.” (p. 113)

- **1998 - Learning First Alliance**

“One of the best foundations for early reading success is familiarity with the letters of the alphabet. Children can learn alphabet songs, match pictures or objects with initial letters, play games with letters and sounds and so on...” (p. 11)

3. Phonological/Phonemic Awareness

The term *phonemic awareness* is used in two very distinct ways in the reading research literature. It is sometimes used broadly to refer to children’s awareness of any of the several units that constitute oral language: spoken words, syllable, onset and rime, and phonemes. Others use the term *phonological awareness* for this broad range of skills and reserve the term *phonemic awareness* for the insight that spoken words can be conceived as a sequence of sounds or phonemes. In this document, *phonemic awareness* is used in the more restricted definition.

Measures of phonemic awareness are among the very best predictors of success or failure in learning to read, rivaled only by knowledge of letter names. There is also clear and indisputable evidence that phonemic awareness skills can be trained and that such training results in a reduction of reading problems and improved reading achievement.

Progression in the development of phonological awareness includes becoming familiar with rhyme and alliteration, becoming aware of spoken syllables, dealing with onsets and rimes, and finally dealing with the blending and segmenting of phonemes. The skills for blending and

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Phonological/Phonemic Awareness (continued)

segmenting phonemes are among the most difficult to acquire but are also among the most important for reading and spelling.

Beyond the beginning stages of the development of phonemic and phonological awareness skills, there is evidence that the relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read is a reciprocal one. While phonemic awareness skills contribute to learning to read, learning to read clearly appears to hasten and sharpen the development of phonemic awareness.

Beginning at the pre-K level, research-based instructional materials should provide activities and instruction designed to systematically develop phonological and phonemic awareness for those students who need it. Young children should be engaged in activities that include identifying and producing rhyme, identifying syllables in spoken words, identifying and blending onsets and rimes, and blending and segmenting phonemes. The following quotations support these conclusions:

- **1990 - Adams**

“The trick in productive letter-sound learning lies in linking the letters to a particular set of familiar sounds. Specifically it lies in linking the letters to the phonemic sounds that one has already learned so well, to the phonemic sounds that are already so deeply and integrally a part of one’s knowledge of spoken words.” (p. 209)

“Children, in short, understand spoken language, and we depend on that. It is from speech and through speech that they must come to understand written language as well. The very architecture of the system ensures that when print is both viewed and spoken at once, it will automatically result in the growth and refinement of the associations to, from and within the child’s orthographic processor—provided that child has sufficient familiarity with the units that are to be associated.” (p. 221)

“Faced with an alphabetic script, the child’s level of phonemic awareness on entering school may be the single most powerful determinant of the success she or he will experience in learning to read and of the likelihood that she or he will fail. Measures of preschoolers’ level of phonemic awareness strongly predict their

future success in learning to read, and this has been demonstrated not only for English, but also for Swedish, Spanish, French, Italian, and Russian. Measures of school children's ability to attend to and manipulate phonemes strongly correlate with their reading success all the way through the twelfth grade. Poorly developed phonemic awareness distinguishes economically disadvantaged preschoolers from their more advantaged peers. It is characteristic of adults with literacy problems in America, Portugal, England, and Australia. And it may be the most important core and causal factor separating normal and disabled readers." (pp. 304-305)

- **1998 - Snow, Burns, & Griffin**

"There is evidence that explicit instruction that directs children's attention to the phonological structure of oral language and to the connections between phonemes and spellings helps children who have not grasped the alphabetic principle or who do not apply it productively when they encounter unfamiliar words..." (p. 321)

- **1998 - Learning First Alliance**

"One of the most important foundations of reading success is phonemic awareness... Phonemic awareness is demonstrated by the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds within spoken words..."

Giving children experiences with rhyming words in the preschool years is an effective first step toward building phonemic awareness... Later, more direct instruction on the individual sounds that make up words is needed." (p. 11)

- **1998 - Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris**

"Two powerful predictors of first-grade reading achievement are letter-name knowledge and **phonemic awareness** (the conscious awareness of the sounds in spoken words)... today, phonemic awareness dominates early reading programs in the manner that letter naming did in previous generations because it is associated with successful first-grade reading."

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4. Concepts of Print

Phonemic awareness involves insights about oral language; concepts of print involve insights about written language. While measures of concepts of print are not as highly related to success in learning to read, they nonetheless are clearly important.

In order to learn to read effectively, children must develop concepts of print, including such things as knowing that printed English has a left-to-right orientation; that a printed word is preceded and followed by a space; that there are letters, words, and sentences in printed English; and that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the number of printed words and the number of words that a reader reads aloud. Some children come to school with some or even all of these concepts, but others do not. Therefore, well-developed, research-based instructional materials must provide opportunities for instruction as well as activities that develop these concepts. The following quotations from research reports support these conclusions:

- **1990 - Adams**

“Children’s performance on tests designed to measure such print awareness is found to predict future reading achievement and to be strongly correlated with other, more traditional measures of reading readiness and achievement. More than that, analyses of the interdependencies among measures of reading readiness and achievement indicate that such basic knowledge about print generally precedes and appears to serve as the very foundation in which orthographic and phonological skills are built.” (pp. 337-338)

- **1998 - Learning First Alliance**

“CONCEPTS OF PRINT. Children need to know that stories and other texts are written from left-to-right, that spaces between words matter, and that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the words on a page and the words a reader says.” (p. 11)