



# Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Phonics*

*“Don't waste time debating whether or not to teach phonics, spelling, grammar, and other 'skills' of literacy. Do spend time discussing how to teach them in a way that contributes to the learners' 'self-improvement'.”*

Dorothy S. Strickland, 1994/1995, p. 299  
Reinventing our Literacy Programs: Books, Basics, Balance  
*The Reading Teacher*, 48(4), pp. 294-302

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## WHAT IS PHONICS?

When looking at reading instruction, phonics is probably one of the most controversial subjects among parents, teachers, and researchers. Although everyone agrees that phonics instruction is necessary, arguments seem to stem from varying philosophical stands regarding how much and when to start and end instruction. Stahl (1992) tells us that the inclusion of some type of phonics component is inherent in nearly all types of reading programs.

The education historian Nila Banton Smith (1965), states that phonics was initially used in reading instruction in the U.S. in 1790s. Later in the mid-1800s reading instruction made a shift with the introduction of the “word method” where students were encouraged to memorize whole words instead of analyzing words by sounds. In *Beginning To Read*, Adams (1990) states that while phonics knowledge is essential for children's success with reading and writing, children must also be taught to read for purpose and meaning.

In 2000 the National Reading Panel identified several types of systematic phonics practices. The NRP report discusses synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, analogy phonics, onset-rime phonics, phonics through spelling, and phonics in context instructional practices. Their findings on phonics instruction were that systematic phonics instruction is more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction. The report also states that the panel did not find any differences in the effectiveness of the different instructional practices.

## WHY IS PHONICS IMPORTANT?

The term phonics addresses instructional practices that support the student's development in assembling a cognitive working system that utilizes the sounds of spoken language and the letters and patterns of written language. Additionally, regardless of the kind of instruction students receive, all students are exposed to the relationship between sounds and letters in the process of reading. According to Stahl, “Learning about words goes hand in hand with other learning about reading and writing” (1992, p. 620). Moreover, he states that all students seem to go through stages that have been identified by Firth (1985). Those stages are logographic, alphabetic, and orthographic. In the logographic stage, learners see whole words embedded in a logo or a sign. For example, students in the logographic stage are likely to recognize McDonald's because of the golden arches or Disney World because of a pair of black ears. In the alphabetic stage, learners start to use sounds and letters to identify words. In the last stage, the orthographic stage, Firth states that students begin to recognize patterns in words and use that knowledge to read words without sounding them out. After the orthographic stage, learners develop their ability to decode and comprehend words with very little attention to structure or pattern.

## INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT PHONICS

Although there are many instructional practices used to teach phonics to students, Stahl (1992) has identified nine guidelines of exemplary phonics

instruction. Accordingly, exemplary phonics instruction:

1. Builds on students' concepts about what reading is, how print functions, and what stories are, and their understanding of the process of reading.
2. Builds on a foundation of sensitivity to the individual sounds of spoken language.
3. Is explicit and direct.
4. Is integrated into a comprehensive core reading program.
5. Focuses on reading words to construct meaning, not learning rules.
6. May include onsets and rimes.
7. Uses students' spelling approximations.
8. Develops independent strategic activities for word recognition, focusing attention on the orthographic patterns of words.
9. Develops automatic word recognition skills so that students can devote their attention to comprehension, not words.

Taking a closer look at the nine guidelines proposed by Stahl, **guideline one** highlights the point that phonics instruction, generally, does not make sense to students that do not have a global sense of what reading is about. Additionally, students should have concepts about print, knowledge of purposes for stories and an overall idea of reading as a process prior to systematic study of sounds and letters. Once students have had exposure to stories and concepts about print they are more likely to benefit from an explicit and systematic phonics program.

**Guideline number two** alludes to the fact that exemplary phonics instruction is preceded by students having developed sensitivity to the individual sounds of spoken language. Students need to have a working knowledge that spoken words are made up of individual phonemes or sounds before learning the relationship between sounds and letters.

In **guideline three**, Stahl states, "good teachers explain what they mean very clearly" (p. 621). His point is that some phonics instruction is ambiguous because many of the consonant sounds cannot be pronounced in isolation. Some of these misunderstandings can be handled by teachers simply working with written words instead of pictures. Students learn to read by reading words;

and this can be accomplished with small groups, pairs, or individually with teacher support.

Stahl's **fourth guideline** states that exemplary phonics instruction is integrated into a comprehensive reading program that provides rich and varied reading experiences. Stahl recommends that no more than 25% (maybe less) of the total reading instruction time should be invested on phonics instruction and practice.

In exemplary phonics instruction, **guideline five** brings to the forefront the importance of instruction focusing on reading words and not just learning rules. Efficient readers notice words by patterns not by categorizing them by rules. Moreover, Stahl reminds us that phonic "rules are not useful enough to be taught as absolutes" (p. 623). Rules may serve a purpose in assisting students in remembering patterns, but the rules should not be required to be committed to memory. Additionally, when rules are highlighted, they should be discussed as tentative, with exceptions being shared simultaneously with common patterns.

Exemplary phonics instruction may include instruction on onsets and rimes. In support of **guideline six** Adams (1990) tells us that letter-sound relationships are more consistent when we look at rimes than when we look at individual letters in isolation. Rime-based instruction is used successfully in a variety of reading programs. Almost 500 words can be derived from the following 37 rimes:

-ack	-ain	-ake	-ale	-all	-ame	-an
-ank	-ap	-ash	-at	-ate	-aw	-ay
-eat	-ell	-est	-ice	-ick	-ide	-ight
-ill	-in	-ine	-ing	-ink	-ip	-ir
-ock	-oke	-op	-or	-ore	-uck	-ug
-ump	-unk					

(Stahl, 1992, p. 623)

**Guideline seven** states that exemplary phonics instruction may include the support of the development of temporary spelling (a.k.a. invented spelling). Although research is limited on the effects of temporary spelling, it does not seem to impede students' reading and spelling abilities.

The **eighth guideline** states that exemplary phonics instruction promotes the development of

independence and flexibility taking students from the logographic stage to the orthographic stage. According to Firth (1985), these transitions through the stages may be supported by writing and spelling. To promote independence and flexibility, students need to be taught when to incorporate such strategic activities as saying words slowly or looking for known parts in unknown words when reading.

Stahl's **ninth guideline** for exemplary phonics instruction addresses automaticity and comprehension development. In other words, when effective phonics instruction is implemented, students are instructed on the purpose for phonics and the need for quick processing of words in light of comprehension. According to Samuels (1988), when students devote too much time to decoding words, attention will be drawn away from comprehending the text at hand. The understanding is also in place that good phonics instruction is generally completed by the end of second grade (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985).

Consequently, questions always arise regarding instructional practices that teach students phonics as a working system that they need to assemble, along with other systems, in order to efficiently and effectively process text when reading and writing. One instructional practice that is being used widely to promote phonics is the interactive word wall or interactive word charts. In the primary grades (K-2), many teachers are using interactive word walls to assist students in their acquisition of phonics, while in the intermediate grades (3-5), middle school, and high school, teachers are using interactive word charts to highlight patterns in more complex words. When using interactive word walls to teach phonics, and support the development of phonemic awareness, teachers are selecting words and discussing the structure of words students are encountering or will be encountering in their reading and writing.

Similar to word walls is the use of interactive word charts with older students. With interactive word charts, teachers usually discuss with students and collaboratively generate word charts highlighting specific morphemic patterns, such as prefixes, suffixes, and Latin and Greek morphemes. Interactive word walls and interactive word charts are also used in many forms of word play and in interactive writing in the primary grades (Button, Johnson, & Furgerson, 1996). In interactive writing, students are encouraged (with strong support from the teacher) to say words slowly while the teacher and the student *share the pen* in writing the words to a message that is collaboratively composed. The interactive shared process supports the development of phonemic awareness through systematic and explicit phonics instruction.

## SUMMARY

Although phonics instruction has been a controversial topic in literacy education, no one will deny the need for phonics instruction in learning to read and write. Virtually all reading programs or published series of materials reflect some aspect of phonics instruction. The question educators express seems to revolve around when and how long do we teach phonics. Even though the NRP states that two years is sufficient in the primary grades, is it necessary in the intermediate grades (3-5)? Is it necessary in middle and high school? Some programs approach the concept from a part to whole framework while others approach it from a whole to part perspective. Regardless of the approach selected, as educators, assessment tempered by knowledge and experience needs to guide our phonics instruction to support students in a biotechnological age. Many questions still remain to be researched.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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