

Renaissance

Putting the Science of Reading into Practice

THE SCIENCE OF READING PLAYBOOK

Why some students are left behind and how assessment and evidence-based reading instruction can close the gaps



Table of Contents

3 | FOREWORD

5 | EXPERT ARTICLES

05 **DR. KIM GIBBONS:** LITERACY AS A SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

11 **DR. SCOTT MCCONNELL:** EARLY EDUCATION AND THE SCIENCE OF READING: IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSING AND TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN

19 **DR. RACHEL BROWN:** THE BENEFITS OF USING A STRUCTURED LITERACY APPROACH WHEN TEACHING LITERACY SKILLS

24 **LINDA DIAMOND:** WHAT'S THE KEY TO TEACHING TO THE SCIENCE OF READING?

28 **DR. MICHELLE HOSP:** THE CRITICAL ROLE OF PHONICS ASSESSMENT IN THE SCIENCE OF READING

32 **DR. SETH ALDRICH:** ADDRESS LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT (MTSS)

36 **DORIS CHÁVEZ-LINVILLE, DR. CAROL JOHNSON, AND DR. AMY PATNOE:** HOW TO SUPPORT EMERGING BILINGUAL STUDENTS WITH A CONTEXT-RICH CLASSROOM

42 **JASMINE LANE:** CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS: WHY STUDENTS AREN'T ABLE TO READ

46 | CONCLUSION

Foreword

The reading wars, a decades-old debate around how students learn to read and best practices for literacy instruction, continue to rage. However, there is growing acceptance of the Science of Reading, which breaks the process of reading into five critical skills that every person must master in order to become a fluent, skilled reader:

- 1 **Phonological awareness:** ability to identify language sounds
- 2 **Phonics and word study:** ability to connect speech sounds to letters and make them accessible by sight
- 3 **Fluency:** ability to read text
- 4 **Vocabulary:** ability to build, store, and retrieve words and background knowledge
- 5 **Comprehension:** ability to deduce meaning from text

It takes explicit, structured literacy instruction and differentiated supports to ensure all students—including Emerging Bilinguals (EBs) and students with word reading difficulties such as dyslexia—are able to build these five skills.

However, some students experience barriers to reading success which, in turn, jeopardize successful learning outcomes. Some of these barriers put students at a disadvantage before they ever enter the classroom. For example, children in low income families often have language and literacy gaps that are evident prior to starting school.



These gaps can become life-long deficits in all content areas if not addressed early through direct and systematic instruction grounded in the Science of Reading. When students are given ambitious but achievable goals, and are provided with targeted, evidence-based instruction to improve the particular areas in which they're struggling, they can become successful readers.

However, the unfortunate reality is that upon entering schools, students who are most at risk often encounter even more barriers to achieving the catch-up growth they need to get on track for reading and academic success. These barriers include:

- Implicit bias that lowers expectations for students who are historically underserved
- Lack of teacher training in evidence-based reading instruction grounded in the Science of Reading
- Missing data around the particular skills a student is struggling with and lack of knowledge around applying that data to instructional planning within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework

This last bullet is a critical first step to addressing inequities in student access to high-quality reading instruction grounded in the Science of Reading. To strengthen the skills necessary for building reading proficiency, teachers must know what students don't know.

Only assessment data that targets the five core reading skills can tell teachers which areas a student is struggling with and guide them toward evidence-based interventions and supports that meet a student's individual learning needs.



In this playbook, reading experts and educators from across the country offer advice for assessing students for reading difficulties and literacy gaps and addressing those deficits with instruction and interventions grounded in the Science of Reading. Keep reading for more about choosing valid assessments, supporting EBs, planning effective literacy instruction, and implementing a school-wide reading improvement model built to provide the supports every student needs to become a proficient reader.

Literacy as a social justice issue

Why we must follow the Science of Reading to give all students the skills and opportunity to succeed

When we think about issues of social justice, many people think of voting rights, health care, hunger and food insecurity, racial injustice, and sexuality and gender equality. However, there is another social justice issue that deserves equal attention: the ability to read. Each year, **over one million** fourth grade students are added to the list of nonreaders in our country.

Not only do poor reading skills impact academic achievement, but they are also associated with increased risk for school dropout, attempted suicide, incarceration, anxiety, depression, and low self-concept. Adults who lack basic literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, and incarcerated. This means they are far less likely to be able to provide for their families, support the economy, and pay taxes. They may not use the healthcare system out of fear or use it too much because they are unable to follow written instructions on prescriptions or discharge papers.

Thus, making sure all children learn to read is not only an issue of social justice but also of economics.

As a nation, we know we have gaps when it comes to reading proficiency. We have achievement gaps for all students compared to proficiency standards and even greater gaps for subgroups of students.



What is the current status of reading proficiency in the US?

As a nation, we know we have gaps when it comes to reading proficiency. We have achievement gaps for all students compared to proficiency standards and even greater gaps for subgroups of students. National performance on the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that only 31% of all fourth-grade students performed at or above proficiency levels in reading, indicating that more than two thirds of students are struggling readers.

When the 2024 NAEP data are disaggregated by race, the results are even more troubling. Only 17% of Black students performed at or above proficiency levels compared to 44% of White students. While there are certainly middle-class White children who have difficulty reading, many suggest that the real fault line for America's high illiteracy rate occurs at class and race.

We know how to teach children to read—but are we doing it?

Unfortunately, along with having large gaps in reading proficiency, we also have large gaps between research and practice. In 2000, the National Reading Panel issued a report summarizing the research and evidence on the best ways to teach children how to read. They found the best approach to teaching reading includes:

- 1 Explicit instruction to teach phonemic awareness
- 2 Systematic phonics instruction
- 3 Methods to improve reading fluency
- 4 Teaching vocabulary and comprehension strategies

Researchers are no longer debating the importance of systematic, multi-year phonics and word analysis instruction and a large academic vocabulary. The scientific community has achieved broad consensus on how children learn to read, what causes reading difficulties, the essential components of effective reading instruction, and how to prevent reading difficulties. As a result, not knowing how to effectively teach reading is not the problem. Rather, the real problem is the gap between science and practice. Even though data show the Science of Reading is effective, this conclusion has not yet been widely adopted in practice in public schools across the nation.

One of the most research-supported models of reading is the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990; Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). The Simple View of Reading asserts that students need skills in two areas: reading each word in texts accurately and fluently (decoding) and comprehending the meaning of texts being read. While the Simple View of Reading does not specify how word recognition and language comprehension should be taught, it does make clear that the first task of a beginning reader is to learn how to decode words. Children need to be explicitly taught direct sound-spelling relationships following a systematic scope and sequence that allows children to form and read words early on.

When children get off to a good start learning how to decode words, they can read the words they know how to say and begin reading widely, learning the meaning of words they have never heard before.

Explicit, systematic reading instruction is critical to keep students from struggling

Many children have difficulty learning to decode without explicit and systematic instruction. Oftentimes these students get labeled as struggling readers. When students cannot read very well, they tend to not read much and miss out on opportunities to learn the meaning of new words through reading. In fact, studies have estimated that fifth grade students who read at the 90th percentile encounter about two million words every year in text read outside of school. Alternatively, a reader at the 10th percentile encounters just 8,000 words. The end result is often described as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer phenomenon.

Children who are still struggling with reading at the end of first grade rarely catch up because the kids who get off to a good start in reading enjoy reading, read often, and increase their vocabulary.

Many children who don't learn to decode in the early grades can easily grow into adulthood without knowing how to read.

Debating the Science of Reading keeps students from learning to read

Even though there is broad consensus over the past 20 years on how to best teach reading, a debate rages on. One side argues students should be taught decoding because if students know how the sounds in words are presented by letters, reading comprehension will follow. The other side argues that students should be taught comprehension because if students are focused on the meaning of what they're reading, they can figure out what the words say. Some prevailing views continue to maintain that if children are read to a lot, reading should come easily for them.

Many of the popular approaches to reading instruction are not aligned with the Science of Reading because they omit systematic teaching about speech sounds, the spelling system, and how to read words by sounding them out. These programs are weak when it comes to the structure of English language and strong in literature, illustrations, and cross-disciplinary units. With these programs, the role of the teacher is to create a literacy-rich environment by setting up reading groups, reading with kids, and helping them find books at their reading level. When this doesn't work, it is assumed that children aren't read to enough at home or the child has a disability. However, usually it is neither of those causes. For many children, the reason they can't read is because they have not been taught to read using the Science of Reading.

Reading equity starts with teachers being taught the Science of Reading

Unfortunately, a report from the National Council on Teacher Quality found that only about half of the traditional elementary teacher preparation programs across the country are teaching scientifically based reading instruction to future teachers. Similarly, an *Education Week* survey found that more than half of teachers and postsecondary instructors who teach courses on reading said children don't need a good grasp of phonics (Schwartz, 2019). Most teachers described their approach to teaching reading as "balanced literacy," which typically includes some phonics. However, that instruction is not systematic and explicit.

Good word recognition skills only make up half of the equation. Once students know how to decode, their ability to understand what they read is determined by their language comprehension. Language comprehension involves all the words students know the meaning of and their understanding of how language works. In addition, a child's ability to comprehend what they read is linked to their prior knowledge. Some researchers have speculated that the association between strong reading comprehension and family income is because larger incomes often mean more opportunities and experiences that build knowledge of the world.



Follow the science and close the reading equity gap

In closing, I have long reflected that I reside in a state (Minnesota) that celebrates the fact that we have the highest ACT scores in the country. Yet my state also has the largest achievement gap between Black and White students in the country. It is time to embrace a fundamental belief that all children can learn to read, despite many obstacles outside of our control. We need to understand that if, as a country, we continue to keep doing what we have been doing, we will keep getting what we have been getting: great variability in outcomes and further disadvantaging the most disadvantaged students.

What we have been getting for the last decade is no change in average reading scores and only a small improvement for students at or above the 90th percentile. **The percentage of students at the 10th percentile that score below NAEP basic is increasing at every grade level.** These data should create urgency that we can and must do better for large numbers of students. We must raise our bar. We can no longer be complacent and accept mediocrity as evidence of change. We must be the ones to demand evidence in our classrooms and acknowledge that literacy instruction is a social justice issue. The ability to read must not be treated as a luxury but as a basic and necessary human need that calls for an urgent response in our nation's classrooms.

**Kim Gibbons, Ph.D.**

Dr. Gibbons is the Director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota. She is co-author of the book Effective Universal Instruction: An Action-Oriented approach to Improving Tier 1 (2018).

References

Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 5-51.

Drake, G., & Walsh, K. (2020). 2020 Teacher Prep Review: Program Performance in Early Reading Instruction.

Hanford, E. (2020). What the words say. <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2020/08/06/what-the-words-say>

Hoover, W. A., & Gough, P. B. (1990). The simple view of reading. *Reading and writing*, 2(2), 127-160.

National Reading Panel (US), National Institute of Child Health, Human Development (US), National Reading Excellence Initiative, National Institute for Literacy (US), United States. Public Health Service, & United States Department of Health. (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health.

Schwartz, S. (2019). The most popular reading programs aren't backed by science. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/12/04/the-most-popular-reading-programs-arent-backed.html>

Early education and the Science of Reading

Implications for assessing and teaching young children

We know the Science of Reading is a broad and important topic. But do we understand its importance for children *before they enter Kindergarten*? This is a question worth exploring.

Often, the Science of Reading comes into play when thinking about formal reading instruction and the prevention and remediation of reading difficulties—which translates most commonly to instruction for students starting in Kindergarten. But what about even younger learners?

The truth is, the research should be applied to our understanding of the development of preschool children, and to our efforts to contribute to their lifelong success. It is also directly relevant for educators and advocates interested in building out a comprehensive approach to supporting great reading outcomes.



In brief, attention to the Science of Reading, and its implications for preschool development and intervention, is one of the major missing links in our collective conversation about prevention and early remediation of reading difficulties.

The science of early literacy for young learners

Attention to the core principles of the Science of Reading shows that early literacy for young learners is empirically, conceptually, and practically important.

- 1 **Empirically**, we have learned a great deal about the developmental “precursors” to competent reading, and about the assessment and intervention practices that make reading achievement more likely.

Since the late 1900s, there has been an explosion of research on developmental processes that lead to proficient reading. Indeed, this research reached such a sufficient “critical mass” that the National Early Literacy Panel was convened and charged with producing a survey and summary of its themes and important features (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2011).¹ This panel identified five developmental achievements clearly associated with later reading proficiency, including alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters or numbers, rapid automatic naming of objects or colors, and writing and phonological memory. Research has continued to accumulate, expanding our knowledge of additional antecedents to successful reading as well as the growing array of evidence-based interventions (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001, 2011).²

- 2 **Conceptually**, we can easily see that development extends over time and follows a trajectory that covers many, many years. Children don’t magically go from “nonreading” to “reading” when formal reading instruction begins in Kindergarten or first grade; instead, we assume that a child’s early experiences, opportunities, and learnings merge into “learning to read” when the time for that instruction arrives.

- 3 **Practically**, this connection matters as well. We now have more information about how to promote better reading outcomes by supporting preschool development. These include classroom and parent-implemented practices that promote oral language development (Elmquist et al., 2020; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003)³ and classroom-based activities that promote both interest in reading books and knowledge of letters and phonemic awareness (Justice & Ezell, 2002a, 2002b; Mashburn et al., 2015; Whitehurst et al., 1999)⁴, including for dual-language learners (Durán et al., 2016).⁵

As we grapple with efforts to improve well-documented stagnation in reading outcomes and persistent differences in reading proficiency among children from different social-economic groups, why not use that knowledge (Diamond et al., 2013)⁶ to better serve our students? Indeed, how can we not?

From commitment to action: the big ideas

Acknowledging the importance of early education in reading is one thing; using this relationship to act on, reflect on, and alter the ways in which we provide services to preschool children might be another.

Fortunately, a variety of specific tactics and some “big ideas” are starting to emerge; early educators can use them to keep their programming fresh and effective.

At the highest level, it helps to think about how preschool development—not reading, but its precursors—points children toward proficient reading. Scarborough’s Rope (Scarborough, 2001)⁷ is a very useful way to do just that. Hollis Scarborough, a noted developmental psychologist, offers a model that connects what we want and can help preschoolers do with the eventual skills and competencies of proficient reading. She works from a “simple view of reading”—that proficient reading requires the somewhat distinct skills of language comprehension and decoding or word recognition—to shift our focus to earlier development.

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE
(facts, concepts, etc.)

VOCABULARY
(breadth, precision, links, etc.)

LANGUAGE STRUCTURES
(syntax, semantics, etc.)

VERBAL REASONING
(inference, metaphor, etc.)

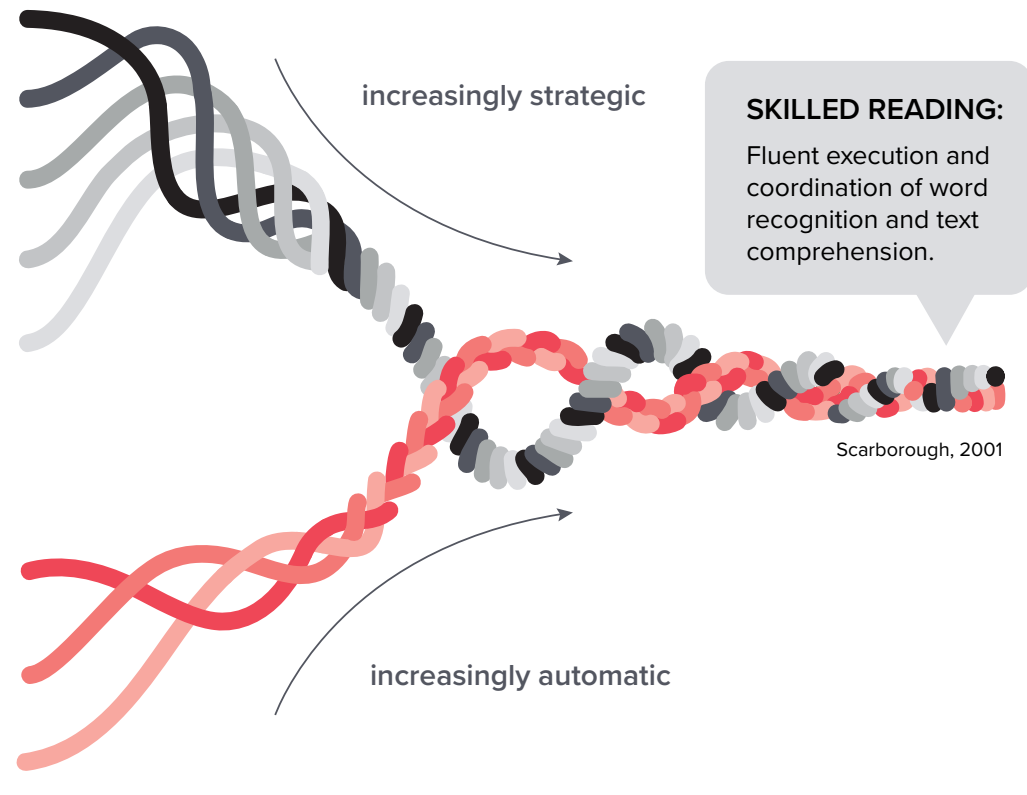
LITERACY KNOWLEDGE
(print concepts, genres, etc.)

WORD RECOGNITION

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS
(syllables, phonemes, etc.)

DECODING (alphabetic principle,
spelling-sound correspondences)

SIGHT RECOGNITION
(of familiar words)



Some of these priorities are familiar and common: vocabulary development, language competence, phonological awareness (such as rhyming), and very early print awareness (“My name starts with an S” or “That sign means stop!”).

We also know that children move along the developmental pathway at different speeds, and experience drives their growth. If we can identify students making great progress, as well as those who seem to be struggling to meet developmental benchmarks, we can adjust our instruction and the overall classroom experience to provide supplemental or more intensive support in ways that prepare all students to benefit from formal reading instruction.

Observing and identifying students is best done systematically, ideally with an efficient and trustworthy system of universal screening; without this systematic approach, the risk of missing kids is quite high—and the negative consequences for those missed can be quite extreme.

Systematic screening allows us to be efficient, avoid bias, and meet the needs of all of our students. Fortunately, assessment practices that quickly and efficiently provide information of individual students’ development (Greenwood et al., 2011)⁸, and more comprehensive “multi-tiered systems of support” that put those assessment results into action (Carta & Miller, 2019)⁹ are available and used in growing numbers of pre-school classrooms. One example is myIGDIs.



myIGDIs are efficient and psychometrically robust measures of language and early literacy development (in both English and Spanish) that immediately produce results that teachers can use to evaluate developmental progress of individual children—and, importantly, identify those children who are candidates for supplemental or more intensive intervention.

What should we do, today, in preschool classrooms?

For all children:

Expand opportunities to experience developmentally enriching environments. Particularly make these opportunities available to children who have demonstrated a need for supplemental support, and for those at risk. How?

- **Materials:** Give children ready access to sufficient, but not an overwhelming array of, materials that promote engagement and interaction! This includes age- and culturally-appropriate books, art materials, and toys that inspire creative play.
- **Activities:** Conduct small- and large-group activities that structure and support child engagement—shared book reading, semi-structured art activities, and science and math discovery activities.
- **Change it up!** Keep interest at its peak by rotating or refreshing the materials and activities that children can access.

Intentionally and expertly provide children with opportunities to engage with, learn about, and act on the world around them. Create a “virtuous cycle” of interesting activities that lead to enriching interactions that cycle around again to students seeking out those interesting activities. How?

- **Talk, listen, and talk some more.** Build activities that create and accelerate conversation and discussion.
- **Read books with individuals and in groups.** Read broadly, use books to prompt discussions, and let children’s questions and comments guide those discussions.





- **Count, combine things, take things away.** Make “number sense” real in intentional activities and throughout the day.
- **Model, praise, and redirect toward positive social interactions** (and the problem solving that comes with them). Not only will “being social” bring individuals into those great interactions, but children will learn valuable skills for accepting and adjusting to what goes on around them—important aspects of “executive functioning.”

Celebrate developmental achievements and instill enthusiasm for learning and the structures and activities that help it happen. We want children of all ages to run into developmental and educational experiences faster than they run out of them. The result is individuals who are always hungry to learn more.

For some children:

Identify, systematically, those developmental domains where an individual’s progress is not what it might be and provide “just right” opportunities to expand and intensify that development as soon as possible.

- **Build on the language, reading, mathematics, and social activities** of your whole classroom by providing more structure and support for participation if needed, and more opportunities, if possible.

Use your great preschool teacher skills to ensure individual students sample activities and interactions that provide those opportunities.

- **Gather information and reflect on the efficacy of your efforts.** Some children are a bit more challenging to serve. Use your best ideas to start, and then notice if those ideas are indeed working. If so, keep going! If not, consider what changes might help.

myIGDIs can help; teachers can monitor an individual’s developmental progress by repeating one or more myIGDIs as often as every three weeks. Over time, children who are benefiting from your tailored efforts will show increases in their rate of growth and will close gaps and achieve at or closer to expected levels on the next seasonal assessment.

Summing up and moving on

We have a long history of early education in the United States, and we have brought great benefit to many children, families, and communities. We cannot rest, however, on our past successes. We know that the needs of children and families are growing.

Our work lies in reflecting on what we want to achieve for our students, how we are meeting those objectives, and what we can do differently to be even more successful. The Science of Reading (along with other empirical, conceptual, and practical sources) provides guidance. It's up to us to pay careful note to that guidance and put it to use.





Scott McConnell, Ph.D., Early Education Advisor | Renaissance

Dr. McConnell has been a teacher, program director, researcher, and professor interested in preschool and early elementary education for more than 40 years. In addition to his work at Renaissance, he is Emeritus Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Prior to joining Renaissance, he was part of a multi-university team that developed Individual Growth and Development Indicators (IGDIs), and he has conducted research on their use in preschool classrooms.

References

1. Lonigan, C. & Shanahan, T. (2009). *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel. Executive Summary. A Scientific Synthesis of Early Literacy Development and Implications for Intervention.*
2. Dickinson, D. & Neuman, S. (2006/2011). *Handbook of Early Literacy Research, Volume 2.*
3. Ford, A., Elmquist, M., et al (2020). *Toward an ecobehavioral model of early language development.* Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0885200618301364>
- Zevenbergen, A. A., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2003). Dialogic reading: A shared picture book reading intervention for preschoolers. In A. van Kleeck, S. A. Stahl, & E. B. Bauer (Eds.), *On reading books to children: Parents and teachers* (pp. 177–200). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
4. Justice, L. M., & Ezell, H. K. (2002). Use of storybook reading to increase print awareness in at-risk children. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 11(1), 17–29.
- Mashburn, A., Justice, L. M., McGinty, A., & Slocum, L. (2015). The Impacts of a Scalable Intervention on the Language and Literacy Development of Rural Pre-Kindergartners. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2015.1051622>
- Whitehurst, G. J., Zevenbergen, A. A., Crone, D. A., Schultz, M. D., Velting, O. N., & Fischel, J. E. (1999). Outcomes of an emergent literacy intervention from Head Start through second grade. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(2), 261–272.
5. Durán, Lillian & Hartzheim, Daphne & Lund, Emily & Simonsmeier, Vicki & Kohlmeier, Theresa. (2016). *Bilingual and Home Language Interventions With Young Dual Language Learners: A Research Synthesis. Language, speech, and hearing services in schools.* 47. 1-25.
6. Diamond, A. (2013). Executive functions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 64, 135-168. [doi: 10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750)
7. Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for research in early literacy.* New York: Guilford Press.
8. Greenwood, C. et al. (2011). The Response to Intervention (RTI) Approach in Early Childhood. *In Focus on Exceptional Children.*
9. Carta, J. & Miller, R. (2019). *Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Young Children: Driving Change in Early Education.* Brookes Publishing; 1st edition.

The benefits of using a structured literacy approach when teaching literacy skills

As noted by Jeffrey Walczyk and colleagues in the 2014 article, “One Hundred Years of Reading Research: Successes and Missteps of Edmund Burke Huey and Other Pioneers,” over the last 100 years, at least five major books published in the US have summarized the available research about the most effective reading instruction practices. Dr. Edmund Huey’s book titled *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* in 1908 was the first to review research about how to teach sound-symbol correspondence (i.e., phonics), the importance of exposure to books, and the role of oral language development. Subsequent volumes, including a report by the National Reading Panel (NRP) published in 2000, also reviewed those topics and documented additional accumulated research. But as noted by Walczyk et al., the actual practices used in classrooms across the decades have not always applied the research findings. Instead, various popular theories about child development have contributed to reading instruction practices.



A variety of methods for teaching early literacy skills have been advocated over time, but none are as grounded in research—or have as equitable of implications—as structured literacy instruction.



For example, theories about how literacy skills are developed put forward by Ken Goodman and Marie Clay suggested that reading is a skill that develops naturally in all children. This theory led to the practice of “whole language” and “guided reading” instruction in many classrooms. Numerous studies have discredited these methods, yet they persist in many schools.

Despite variations in reading instruction practices, all of the major research findings have been consistent in supporting structured reading instruction methods. Recently, the scope of such instruction has been broadened to include written expression and the term “structured literacy” instruction used.

What is structured literacy?

Structured literacy instruction includes both a continuum of skills and a variety of instructional practices, as identified by the International Dyslexia Association. Importantly, structured literacy approaches do not mean teaching only certain skills by certain methods. Instead, structured literacy instruction incorporates activities across all five reading domains, using a variety of teaching practices.

By integrating the necessary skills with a range of teaching practices, structured literacy provides both breadth and depth to students’ literacy development. Structured literacy lessons cover the five reading domains of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension identified in the NRP Report (2000). In addition, spelling and writing instruction are often included. By including all of these domains within lessons at every grade, students learn both the constituent parts of words as well as how to combine parts to create words, sentences, and paragraphs.

The core components of structured literacy instruction

Structured literacy instruction also incorporates a range of teaching practices that focus on ensuring students acquire deeper understanding of written language. Let's take a deeper dive into structured literacy and the components of effective reading instruction, based on the Science of Reading.

1 Systematic and cumulative content

Systematic and cumulative content refers to the order for teaching skills. The smallest and easiest skills are taught first, followed by progressively more advanced skills. In this way, the instruction is cumulative and requires regular practice of earlier learning because that learning is embedded in later lessons.

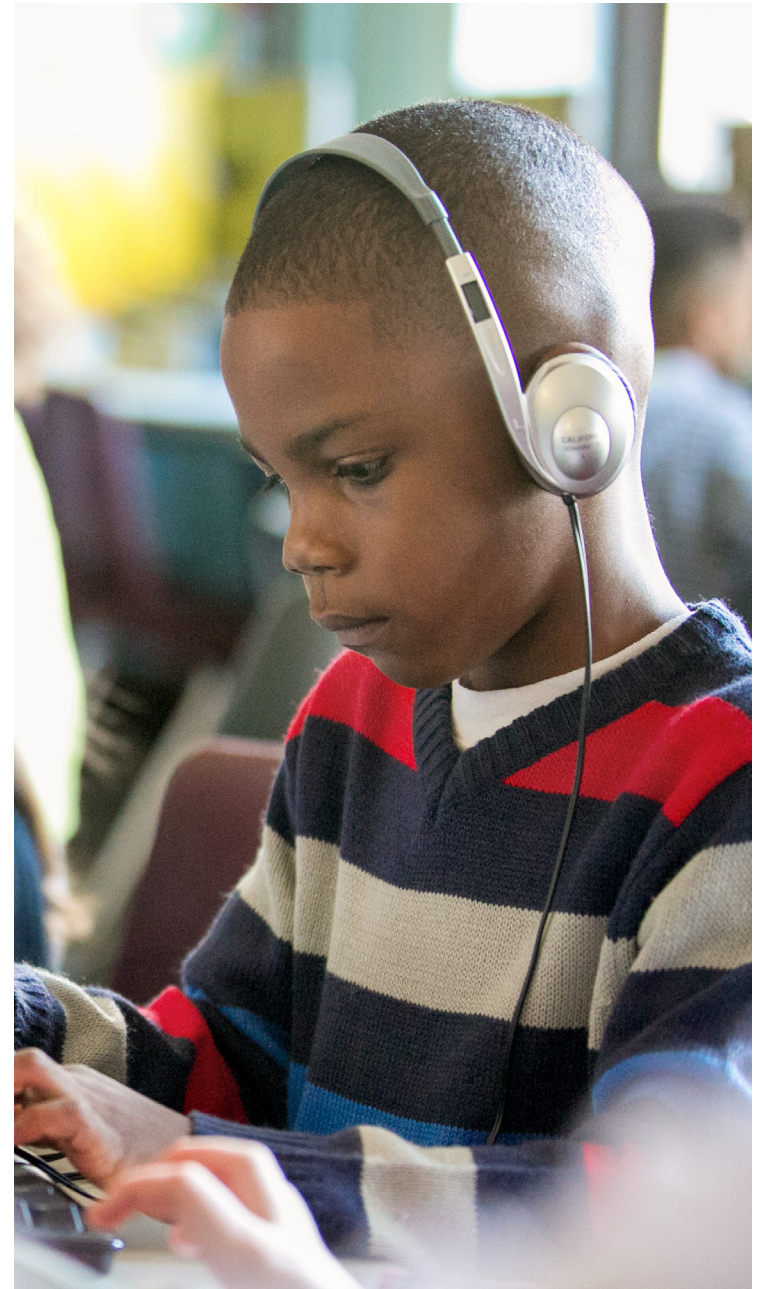
2 Planned explicit instruction

Structured literacy also involves explicit instruction because literacy skills are taught in an intentional way to support student accuracy with reading and writing.

Explicit teaching includes teacher modeling and frequent student opportunities to practice emerging skills. Such explicit instruction is a key foundation for all students; however, some students will require additional support. For this reason, structured literacy instruction incorporates diagnostic teaching strategies.

3 Diagnostic teaching

Diagnostic teaching involves additional mini-lessons for students who are struggling, accompanied by brief assessments to observe the effects. The process of teaching and evaluating student learning during instruction allows the teacher to pinpoint the exact source of a student's literacy struggle and provide additional lessons that fill in any gaps.



The benefits of structured literacy vs. whole language instruction

Despite strong evidence that structured literacy instructional practices are the most effective for all students, as noted above, current classroom practices do not always utilize these methods. As in earlier decades, popular theories about child development and the components of reading sometimes persist.

Some teachers continue to advocate whole language instruction despite evidence that it does not work. The whole language method is based on the theory that reading development occurs for humans in the same way that oral language develops, and it advocates print exposure as the primary pathway for students to develop reading and other literacy skills. This theory has been refuted in thousands of articles and books, including the three research summaries listed in this article. Certainly print exposure is a factor in literacy development and many studies, starting with Huey’s, have documented this. Nonetheless, print exposure alone will not result in literacy for all students.

Instead, structured literacy instruction provides both evidence-based and equitable access for all students.

Students enter school with a wide range of prior exposure to literacy skills and resources. For this reason, structured instruction, as noted by Keith Stanovich in 1986, depending on exposure to print as the primary reading instruction method, will always lead to widely varying student outcomes because it advantages certain students and disadvantages others. To address inequities in education outcomes, providing structured literacy instruction for ALL students is essential.

If we want all students to become strong readers and develop the full breadth and depth of literacy skills—or at least have access to the opportunity for full literacy—we must use structured literacy instruction methods.

		Structured Literacy	Balanced Literacy (Whole Language)
7 Essential Features of Science-Based Reading Instruction Which instructional approach has them all?	1. Planned systematic instruction	✓	✗
	2. Focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension	✓	✗
	3. Teacher modeling of all skills	✓	✗
	4. Immediate corrective feedback	✓	✗
	5. Practice of new skills	✓	Some
	6. Regular review of prior learning	✓	✗
	7. Exposure to and engagement with a variety of texts	✓	✓



Rachel Brown, Ph.D., Senior Research Consultant | Renaissance

Dr. Brown is a nationally certified school psychologist and a licensed psychologist. She is also Professor of Educational and School Psychology Emerita at the University of Southern Maine. Her research focuses on effective reading instruction and assessment within a Multi-Tiered System of Support.

References

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature and its implications for reading instruction*. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Stanovich, Keith E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 22, 360-407.

Walczyk, J. J., Tcholakian, T., Igou, F., & Dixon, A. P. (2014). One hundred years of reading research: Successes and missteps of Edmund Burke Huey and other pioneers. *Reading Psychology*, 35(7), 601-621. <https://doi:10.1080/02702711.2013.790326>

What's the key to teaching to the Science of Reading?

Evidence-based instruction and interventions rely on valid, reliable, and efficient assessments

With a nationwide focus on high-quality core reading curricula and recognition of the importance of evidence-based reading instruction, we also need to consider assessment. Without reliable, valid, and efficient assessments, we are less able to objectively determine if students are on track with grade-level reading or to identify necessary adjustments to instruction and interventions.

Elements of effective reading assessment

In an effective reading program, assessment informs instruction. In the primary grades, reading instruction includes certain discrete skills which, taken together, are predictive of future reading achievement. These early skills provide the foundation for other important outcomes such as fluency and comprehension. Because of the importance of mastery of these early reading skills (phonemic awareness and decoding, for example), reading assessment in the primary grades is often more frequent and quite targeted. In grades 4–12, however, assessment, while continuing to monitor progress, is most useful to identify causes of reading difficulties in older students in order to get them the support they deserve.





1 Define terms in testing

When judging whether a test is useful, we need to understand three important terms: reliability, validity, and efficiency.

- Reliability refers to how consistently a test measures that which it was designed to measure. We want the same result to be achieved under the same circumstances. Curriculum-Based Measures (CBM) such as those in the [FastBridge](#) and [Star Assessments](#) solutions are reliable.
- Validity refers to how accurately an assessment measures what it was intended to measure. It is not enough for an assessment to be reliable; it must also be valid. Again, an appropriately constructed CBM will be valid.
- Efficiency refers to the ease at which teachers can administer assessments and the speed at which they can be taken and deliver results. Efficiency of testing and obtaining results is vital to rapidly determine if students are on the appropriate trajectory to become readers.

2 Conduct universal screening

Teachers deserve efficient tools for universal screening and progress monitoring. [Universal screening](#) is preventive, like regular medical check-ups. Screeners, especially in primary grades, assess the most important reading skills in order to alert teachers to students who may be at risk of reading difficulty. Most screeners are administered three times a year.

If large numbers of students perform poorly on screening measures, it may mean instructional adjustments are needed for the entire class and/or the core curriculum is insufficient. If smaller numbers of students perform poorly on screeners, then diagnostic measures can pinpoint their areas of weakness and identify where to start intervention.

3 Monitor student progress

Frequent progress monitoring is essential for students receiving intervention in order to adjust reading instruction quickly. Think of how frequently a newborn gets weighed and measured. The reason for frequent wellness checks is to quickly adjust nutritional requirements. Frequent progress monitoring is a reading wellness check-up.

4 Apply the data

Skillfully using the data from both screening and progress monitoring assessments supports educational equity by ensuring all students become proficient readers. To reach this goal, educators use the data obtained from valid and reliable measures to gauge the extent to which the core reading curriculum meets the needs of large numbers of students; how well educators are implementing that curriculum; what other materials may be needed, especially for targeted intervention; and what additional professional development and support for teachers may be necessary.



In fact, the use of screeners and progress monitoring assessments will serve a school system at the district, school, classroom, and individual student level.

- If screeners across many schools within a **district** reveal significant numbers of students at risk of reading failure, district leaders need to look carefully at their districtwide reading programs and quality of instruction.
- If students across many classrooms are not progressing, then the **school** needs to take a close look at its instructional materials and the quality of teaching. The core reading program may not be grounded in the Science of Reading and may lack texts that are rigorous and build knowledge. This scenario may lead to the selection of different materials and in organized professional development.
- When many students within a **classroom** are not progressing, the teacher may benefit from coaching assistance.
- At the **student level**, if screeners show most students within a classroom are on track, then only those students who are not making progress will require further assessment and targeted intervention within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).



Linda Diamond, M.Ed.

Linda Diamond is a former teacher and principal and co-founder of the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE). She is the author of the Teaching Reading Sourcebook.

Just as exercise and good nutrition, supported by regular medical check-ups, are a recipe for a healthy life, psychometrically reliable, valid, and efficient assessment measures, coupled with evidence-based instruction, are the recipe for ensuring all students become strong readers. We need assessment to verify, before our students run into difficulty, that our instruction is effective. We need assessment to enable us to intervene rapidly when necessary and do so with the appropriate intensity, targeted to the skills and content students need. Perhaps even more important, we need assessment to tell us whether our curriculum and instruction are of sufficient quality to ensure every child becomes an able and confident reader.

The critical role of phonics assessment in the Science of Reading

Phonics is a cornerstone skill, both in the context of the Science of Reading as well as across curricula. If students do not have the basic ability to read words on a page, any other instruction a teacher delivers will have less staying power. Students who struggle with phonics will become lost, frustrated, and confused by other instruction, from science and social studies to math—much of their mental energy consumed by the task of decoding.

In my work as a school psychologist, teachers often came to me with the same question: “I know my student is struggling to read words; can you tell me which phonics skills I should teach them?” This question came up so frequently that it led me to get my Ph.D., with a focus on assessing and teaching foundational reading skills. In order to help teachers, I built a better phonics assessment: [Star Phonics](#).

Phonics is not the only skill required to read, and it should not be taught in isolation. But its importance within the Science of Reading means that phonics must be taught explicitly, systematically, and cumulatively. We want students to be able to look at words and read them quickly and efficiently. That requires teachers to focus on each specific phonics skill to ensure students have mastered it before moving ahead.



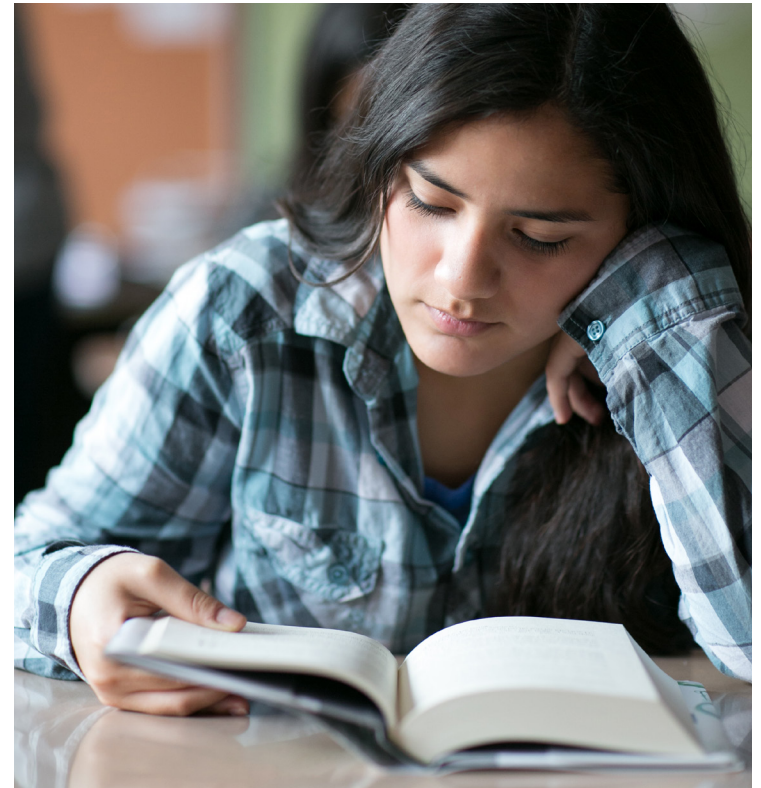
Universal screeners can reveal there's a problem, but don't pinpoint a solution

Universal screeners reveal students' abilities with an array of reading skills, and identify which students are at risk for future problems. They provide useful insights, but were not designed to inform instruction. Rather, their purpose is to identify which students need additional support. To guide instruction, we need a valid, reliable phonics assessment. With the detailed data it provides, teachers don't have to guess about which phonics patterns are causing roadblocks to reading proficiency, or waste time teaching skills a student already knows. They can jump right to teaching the exact skills that their students need.

When learning to read, time is of the essence. Without quick intervention, a student may begin to embed an error—and the more times they repeat it, the more it becomes “stuck” in their brain's neural pathways. The earlier we can correct mistakes and guide students in the proper direction, the more they will build sound neurological connections.

Phonics assessment supports instructional best practices

A phonics assessment is useful at all tiers of instruction within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). At Tier 1, a phonics skill screener that measures many phonics patterns and categories can pinpoint gaps in a whole class's mastery of a skill so that a teacher can revisit it before moving on—and potentially causing a large number of students to fall behind.



Phonics is the most predictive skill of whether or not a learner will become a successful reader.

[Download infographic](#)

For example, a teacher administered the Star Phonics assessment in her classroom at 9:00 a.m. She quickly discovered that about half of the class hadn't mastered silent /e/. She pivoted her 9:30 a.m. lesson to re-teach this skill. Only with data from a reliable phonics skills screener, such as Star Phonics, can a teacher respond that quickly to their students' exact needs.

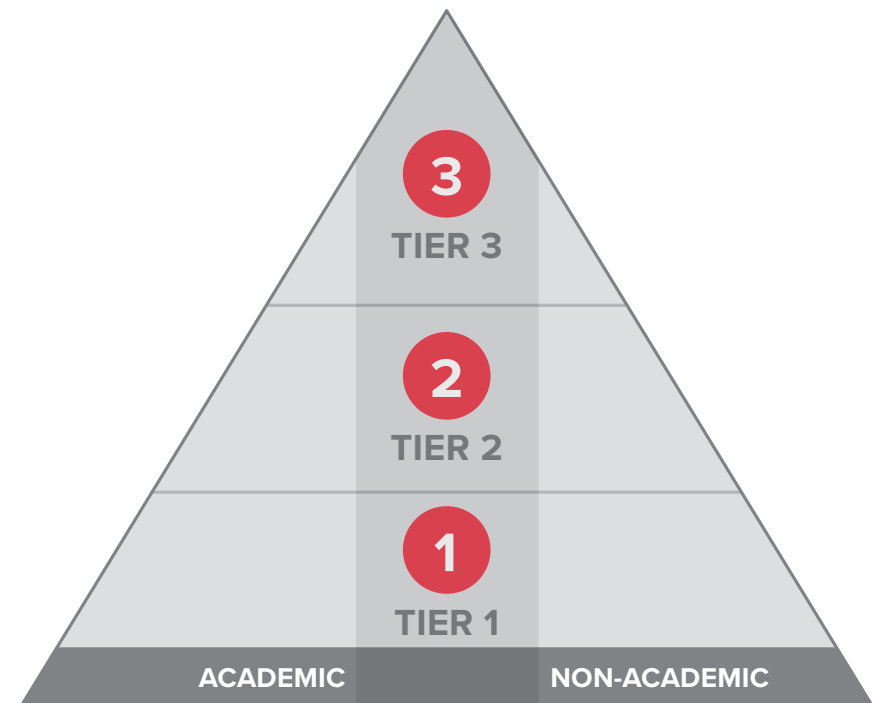
Beyond a phonics skill screener, a phonics diagnostic assessment can reveal how to help those students who are the furthest behind. In the above example, the teacher noticed that four students in the classroom had not mastered short vowel sounds in simple consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words (e.g., cat). These students needed a different approach from the majority of the class, so the teacher administered a phonics diagnostic assessment on CVC to identify the short vowels that the students had mastered and those in which they needed more instruction.

These four students needed additional Tier 2 support before they could move on to the next series of skills. By pulling them into small-group settings and providing explicit and systematic instruction in real time with a lot of corrective feedback, the teacher was able to quickly shore up this skill. In most cases, the same curriculum materials that are used for the whole class can be applied to provide additional instruction and practice, but this time in a smaller group with more individualized attention.

Research on teaching practices shows that this is an incredibly effective approach. In a small-group setting, we can provide targeted instruction and closely monitor students. When they make an error, a teacher or reading specialist can jump in to correct it right away. This reduces the chances of the student continuing to practice the skill incorrectly.

Let's suppose that after small-group instruction, three of these four remaining students have mastered the short vowel sounds in CVC words. Those students can now proceed on to the next skill that needs to be taught.

But one student is still struggling with short vowels and needs Tier 3 support. This may include even more targeted one-on-one instruction, testing them on letter sounds in isolation, and perhaps phonemic awareness skills such as saying aloud all the sounds they hear in the word "cat."





Michelle Hosp, Ph.D., Star Phonics Founder & Director of Assessment Innovation | Renaissance

Dr. Hosp has over 30 years of experience working directly with students, educators, families, and researchers as a school psychologist, professor, and Director of the Iowa Reading Research Center. Prior to joining Renaissance, she developed Star Phonics, and is the lead author of the best-selling book The ABCs of CBM: A Practical Guide to Curriculum-Based Measurement.

Taking a wider view with phonics assessment data

District and school leaders can also use data from phonics assessments to spot patterns across schools, grades, and classrooms and take action to support effective reading instruction system-wide. If almost every student entering the second grade has no understanding of digraphs (e.g., "ph" in phone), for example, then this should be investigated.

We can review the curriculum to see how it is being taught, and determine if any changes should be made or if professional development, specific to phonics, needs to be implemented. We can also look at when this skill was taught; maybe it was included in the last six lessons of the year, and teachers simply ran out of time. If the issue is wide-ranging, then the solution should also be wide: Something needs to be changed. However, if the issue is more isolated (e.g., it affects only one classroom within a grade), then an individual teacher may need support on teaching phonics or on using the curriculum materials as they were designed to be used.

There is no getting around the need for explicit phonics instruction for all students. Without it, many students will not develop the foundational skills needed to read, making it more and more difficult for them to learn across curricula and harder and harder for them to catch up.

With a brief and efficient phonics assessment, teachers can receive actionable data to quickly redirect and fine-tune instruction. A phonics assessment is an essential and powerful tool that takes the guesswork out of phonics instruction—so that teachers can focus on what their students need most to become strong, confident readers.

Address literacy development in a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

Build an MTSS infrastructure that includes reading assessment

Tell educators that they can purchase a core instructional or intervention “program” for literacy development that works for every single student, and you’d be met with dubious laughter.

Educators know there is no one program that works for every single student. In fact, simply spend some time on websites that provide information on the strength of both the evidence and effectiveness of literacy programs (such as [What Works Clearinghouse](#) or [National Center on Intensive Intervention](#)) and you’ll quickly see that few instructional practices in the area of literacy development have strong evidence of effectiveness.

In meta-analytic studies, researchers such as Ken Kavale (1990) and John Hattie (2012) show how the mean effect size for many core instructional strategies and interventions used in both general and special education are below what would be called effective.

Adding to this is evidence that schools are not choosing to implement literacy instruction that is scientifically based. Furthermore, we know the sense of urgency for reading by third grade is still complicated by the effects of the COVID-19 disruptions to education.



The good news is we can use data to keep what is working for many students and modify what is not. Kavale argues compellingly to implement interventions for literacy development with eyes and minds wide open and use progress monitoring data to make timely instructional adjustments when students do not respond. Considering intervention attempts as “best guesses” requiring careful evaluation through progress monitoring is especially important with Emerging Bilinguals (EBs) (August & Shanahan, 2006).

When focusing on early literacy development, an MTSS provides the most effective infrastructure to determine if students are acquiring the foundational knowledge and skills needed to read and write.

By offering differentiated core instruction, interventions for those who need them, and assessments to understand needs and determine whether strategies are working or not, an MTSS allows educators to be responsive to all students’ needs.



An assessment framework for literacy development

Universal screening, assessments to guide instruction, and progress monitoring assessments are elements essential for making good decisions about what is most needed at a district, school, grade, class, and individual level in an MTSS framework.

Assessments to guide reading instruction

Instead of assessment systems that diagnose students and disempower educators to meet their needs, an MTSS provides an assessment system to diagnose the needs and empower educators to meet them. Having the wisdom to know what educators can control (e.g., instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) is key to an effective MTSS assessment and intervention.

Universal screening of reading skills

By using research-based assessments to identify whether students are learning how to read, we take the first step in the problem-solving process. These assessments are used to evaluate core instruction for all students as well as subgroups of students (e.g., EBs, students with IEPs). Universal screening also helps to prioritize, based on data, students who will receive tiered supports.

Monitoring progress of literacy skills

Frequent progress monitoring with timely instructional adjustment leads to positive outcomes for students in the majority of cases when schools implement a menu of interventions with a strong track record.

Too often, schools have one or two intervention options of questionable effectiveness. When a student does not make expected gains, the blame is put on teachers, students, and/or their parents. Or, students are diagnosed as having intractable deficits, when it was the intervention that was weak for that particular student.

There are many key aspects to consider when monitoring the progress of literacy skill development:

- To start, progress monitoring assessments must **match what is being taught**. Assessing progress on letter naming when the intervention addressed letter sounds won't answer the effectiveness question.
- Progress monitoring assessments must be **sensitive to change**. Teachers and students are working hard, and we do not want to wait half of the school year only to discover that we picked the wrong intervention or we need to adjust variables such as fidelity, dosage, or intensity.
- Educators must have opportunities through progress monitoring checkup meetings to be **responsive to data**. With carefully constructed, standardized passage sets conducted weekly, we can determine progress within six weeks. For this reason, educators using progress monitoring should consider weekly rather than biweekly progress monitoring. Two minutes per week for a progress monitoring assessment session is time well spent when you can avoid an additional six weeks of ineffective instruction/intervention.

For example, it would be very difficult or impossible to lose 20 pounds in one month (e.g., five pounds per week) but one pound per week is feasible. The same is true for learning.

Coordinating schoolwide infrastructure

Finally, set up an infrastructure of tiered problem-solving for an MTSS such as post-benchmark meetings, progress monitoring checkups, individual problem-solving, and district and school MTSS meetings. Coordinate this with other school initiatives for problem-solving (school improvement teams, special education decision making) to create a synergy in which assessment and problem-solving are coordinated and efficient.

Given the questionable evidence of many literacy development approaches schools implement, evaluating and removing instructional programs that are not working at a grade level, for certain groups of students, or for individual students helps educators strengthen the resources available for all students.



Seth Aldrich, Ph.D.

Dr. Aldrich is a certified bilingual school psychologist, as well as a NY State licensed psychologist. He works with several school districts concerning Multi-Tiered System of Support for academic and behavioral difficulties.

References

- Ardoin, S. P., & Christ, T. J. (2009). Curriculum-based measurement of oral reading: Standard errors associated with progress monitoring outcomes from DIBELS, AIMSweb, and an experimental passage set. *School Psychology Review, 38*(2), 266-283.
- August, D. & Shanahan, T. (2006) Developing literacy in second-language learners: Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum
- Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kavale, K. (1990). *Effectiveness of special education*. In T. B. Gutkin & C. R. Reynolds (Eds.), *The handbook of school psychology* (p. 868–898). John Wiley & Sons.

How to support Emerging Bilingual students with a context-rich classroom

There are 5.3 million Emerging Bilingual students in US schools, and they comprise approximately 10 percent of the student population (NCES 2022). 64 percent of teachers have at least one of these students in their classroom, and 77 percent of these students come from Spanish-speaking families (NCES 2022).¹

The words we use to describe this group of students are chosen purposefully. We have adopted the term Emerging Bilingual to acknowledge that these students are on a path of growth—on their way to proficiency in not just one language, but two—or even more.² This terminology honors the student's home or dominant language as well as the effort and accomplishment of becoming bilingual. In contrast, commonly used terms such as English Language Learners (ELLs) or English Learners (ELs) carry a singular focus on the acquisition of English. As we strive to support our Emerging Bilingual students, we can celebrate their identities and unique backgrounds in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner.



How do we learn to read?

No matter the language in which we first learn to read, the process for attaining reading proficiency is similar, and there are important considerations to keep in mind for Emerging Bilinguals. The Simple View of Reading posits that reading comprehension arises from a combination of decoding (word recognition) and language comprehension, and that the key components of reading must be taught in an explicit, systematic, and cumulative manner.³

When it comes to language comprehension, instruction must move past the decoding of words and into the context in which we find the word.

A prime example we offer here is the decoding of past tense verbs. We can explicitly teach how to pronounce the ‘-ed’ in ‘jumped’ as /t/, but we must go one step further to explain that the jump happened in the past. We need to apply the meaning or context to word knowledge, a skill Emerging Bilinguals thrive on throughout the reading process.

Emerging Bilinguals are putting together all these skills in more than one language, oftentimes simultaneously, and it is truly a remarkable feat. Research shows that being bilingual has numerous benefits, among them a larger working memory, better reading and listening skills, greater empathy and openness, and expanded job opportunities.⁴

In the following sections, we share two strategies for creating language- and context-rich classrooms to support Emerging Bilingual students’ literacy development. Knowing most Emerging Bilinguals in the United States have a home language of Spanish, we use Spanish in most of our examples. The two strategies will, however, support students of any language background.

Create language confidence by building on students’ assets

It’s important to begin by building a student profile of Emerging Bilinguals to determine their current language and reading proficiency in both English and their home language, when applicable and/or possible. Start by asking:

“What do they already know and what can they already do?”



This asset-based approach not only honors students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but it gives educators valuable insights that will help them deliver targeted instruction that builds on pre-existing skills and knowledge. We can use a student’s home language as a bridge to build language confidence.

Below is a table with actions and guiding questions to begin building a student’s profile:

Action	Considerations
Conduct a home language inquiry • Interview families and/or caregivers to understand language practices of the family and child more deeply • Consider having a translator	Language background • What languages are spoken in your home? • If your family uses multiple languages, in what ways do you use them? • What is the language your child first learned?
Explore the student’s educational journey	• Is there evidence through conversations with the student or caregiver or through school records that the child previously attended school where instruction was in a language other than English? • If so, what language? (When possible, administer assessments in the student’s home language. This will support not only native literacy instruction but will also serve as a starting point for instruction in an English-only setting.) • If so, for how many years?
Gather relevant data	• What do the results of the English language proficiency assessment show? – How is the student progressing in the four domains of language—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing? • Previous academic records (if applicable)

Create a visually- and language-rich classroom that leverages metalinguistic awareness

Imagine a student who has never seen a giraffe in a zoo, or even in a photo, encountering the word “giraffe” on the page for the first time. Now, think about how you first identified a giraffe. Likely, it was from a picture, combined with the word spoken aloud and/or written on the page. Combining visuals with labels is an effective technique to support students in the acquisition of literacy.

By creating a language-rich classroom environment with pictorial support, we can introduce students to new words and concepts—growing their vocabulary and building background knowledge that will benefit them across the curriculum. Furthermore, we can leverage metalinguistic awareness, that is, the process of asking the learner to focus on the form and function of the language, to compare and contrast languages aiding in the language development process.⁵

How so?

To take the example of the giraffe, a teacher could:

- Display a photograph of a giraffe, labeled with the word in English, Spanish (jirafa), and any other languages that are represented in the classroom. Ask students: “Talk to me about what you see in this picture; give me words in your home languages. Now let’s share those words in English.”
- Have students draw their own pictures of giraffes and write a sentence about one of the giraffe’s unique features—first in their home language, then in English.
- Prompt Emerging Bilinguals to collaborate with English-speaking peers to put on a short skit in which several animals have a dialogue in multiple languages. How can the animals better understand one another, even if they are not fluent in all the languages? Are there gestures, movements, or symbols that children can add into the mix to get their meaning across?



Teachers can set up a
“multilingual moment”—a
time to have fun with and
explore language.

Multilingual moments

Play with the word “giraffe” in multiple ways: What rhymes with the last syllable in the word (*laugh, graph, half*)? Are there any Spanish words that rhyme with “giraffe?” What similarities do students notice between the words *giraffe* and *jirafa*? Which sounds in each word are the same, and which sounds differ?

Another effective way to make metalinguistic connections is through cognates. About 40 percent of English words have a Spanish cognate, which means that one word in English has the same linguistic derivation as another in Spanish; they derive from the same original word or root. Thus, we have words such as *giraffe* and *jirafa*, which sound very similar. Other examples are *excellent/excelente*, *guitar/guitarra*, and *fantastic/fantástico*. Sometimes, words are spelled exactly the same in both languages; for example, *chocolate* (although the pronunciation differs).

Highlighting these cognates creates a great lightbulb moment for both Emerging Bilingual and monolingual students, and it builds confidence: “Wow, these words sound the same! I can figure out much more English (or Spanish) than I realized!” Of course, not all languages will give us this gift, but we should definitely take advantage of it when possible.

Conclusion

Creating a language- and context-rich classroom is a highly effective way to support students on the path from Emerging Bilingual to proficiency in more than one language.

Assessments can give educators a clear picture of the literacy skills that Emerging Bilingual students already bring to the table. The more information that we have about a child’s strengths, the more we can focus our instruction on the skills that need more work—as well as on actually teaching students another language.

In the context of language learning, both teachers and school leaders need to ask:

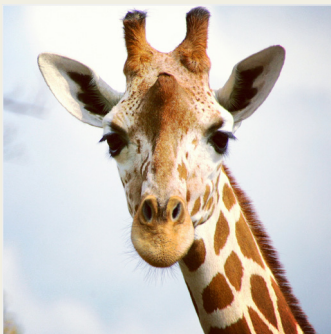


“Are you building a file folder? Or does the file folder exist?”



Students already have file folders, and chances are high that they are already packed with a number of literacy skills. Our job is to open up those folders with students to see what’s inside—and then offer effective support to help children as they continue to build their language and literacy skills.

Zoo Animals



giraffe

jirafa



monkey

mono



lion

león



Doris Chávez-Linville, M.Ed., Director, Linguistic and Culturally Diverse Innovation | Renaissance

Doris Chávez-Linville advocates for the best tools in the marketplace to support and uplift linguistically and culturally marginalized student populations. She has worked with educators around the USA and Latin America with implementing educational technology for almost 20 years. She is also a former bilingual and migrant education teacher.

Carol Johnson, Ph.D., International Education Officer | Renaissance

Carol Johnson is a bilingual educator. In addition to 11 years of teaching experience, Carol holds a Ph.D. in second language acquisition and teaching, specializing in how people learn second languages.

Amy Patnoe, Ed.D., Vice President of Revenue Enablement | Renaissance

Amy Patnoe is a former ESL and bilingual teacher, instructional coach, and district leader. She has managed and consulted with dual language bilingual programs and English Learner programs across the country and currently supports the literacy strategy at Renaissance.

References

1. National Center for Education Statistics (2022). English learners in public schools. *Condition of education*. US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf>
2. Garcia, O., Kleifgen, J. A., & Falchi, L. (2008). [From English Language Learners to Emergent Bilinguals](#) EQUITY MATTERS: Research Review No. 1.

Garcia, O. (2015). How do we refer to students who are acquiring English as an additional language? In G. Valdez, K. Menken, & M. Castro (Eds.), *Common Core Bilingual and English Language Learners: A Resource for Educators* (1st ed., pp. 23–24). essay, Caslon Publishing.
3. Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 19(1), 5-51.

Hoover, W. A., & Gough, P. B. (1990). The simple view of reading. *Reading and writing*, 2(2), 127-160.
4. Burton, N. (2018). Beyond words: The benefits of being bilingual. Retrieved from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-seek/201807/beyond-words-the-benefits-being-bilingual>
- Vince, G. (2016). The amazing benefits of being bilingual. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160811-the-amazing-benefits-of-being-bilingual>
5. Duncan, L., Casalis, S. & Cole, P. (2009). Early Metalinguistic Awareness of Derivational Morphology: Observations from a Comparison of English and French. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ866611>

Challenge assumptions: Why students aren't able to read

Open your mind to the research around how students learn to read

I began my career believing the primary issue holding students back from reading success was a lack of interest and representation in books. As a multi-racial African American woman whose own experience with literature wasn't always representative, this seemed a natural conclusion.

I started teaching high school students with these assumptions—assumptions that privilege some students, inadvertently cause teachers to label other students as behind or needing remediation, and see students through a deficit lens. These assumptions are particularly harmful to students who depend on school to teach them things they would otherwise not be exposed to.

It didn't take long for me to see the effects of the instructional inequity in our schools, especially the disparities in teaching the fundamentals of skilled reading: decoding and background knowledge. I also quickly realized I was assuming my high school-aged students had the benefit of explicit and systematic reading and writing instruction, and that reading words on a page was effortless.

This was not the case.





Reading is not automatic

Ensuring high-quality Tier 1 instruction is the first step toward ensuring every child can read, but teachers in secondary schools are often faced with not knowing how or what to do when the students come into classrooms not having those fundamentals. Skilled reading requires many components of both language comprehension and word recognition. And while decoding becomes more automatic with explicit and systematic instruction, language comprehension is *increasingly strategic* and requires explicit teaching.

Though this may be the case, many educators are trained to do the opposite. Course work and professional development is rife with sayings such as “children can’t learn from people they don’t like,” “when students need to, they’ll become readers and writers,” and the ever pervasive, “it’s all about relationships.” This advice, while of good intention, results in a fundamental misunderstanding of how skilled reading actually works. It also results in students not receiving the intervention and support they need to be successful, starting in the early grades and continuing through high school.

Redefine reading instruction

Nearly half of our nation’s elementary education programs still don’t teach educators the Science of Reading, and research has shown that even if a student’s knowledge base is equal, less-skilled readers still have more trouble generating knowledge-based inferences. In other words, students with poor comprehension construct incomplete representations of texts because they are not successfully integrating the correct pieces of information to make inferences. Words on a page will not magically blend together, nor will dense complex syntax parse itself just because the reader shares an identity marker with the author. The evidence for how children learn to read and how they can read better has little to do with interest, and more to do with prior knowledge and exposure.

We can't assume just because we read to students, or because they have read a text themselves, that knowledge floating around will automatically integrate itself and fall into place.

Even with shared knowledge, we still must teach students how to construct meaning from words. This first begins with ensuring students have a fluid and automatic recall of words. As a high school English teacher, by the time students reach my class I should be able to assume they are proficient decoders and the majority of my work can focus on teaching literary analysis, but this is not the case.

Just as there is no point at which we have arrived at the end of the pursuit of justice, we should actively interrogate what we were taught in our teacher preparation programs and what is reinforced in continuing professional development. Methods we learned may have to be unlearned, and assumptions we hold may have to be corrected in order to provide all students with the skills and knowledge to become strong readers.

How to support adolescents struggling to read

Much of the conversation around reading intervention is seen through the lens of “if we just get students to love reading, everything will fall into place.” As an English teacher and someone who loves reading, I know the feeling of wanting kids to have the same experience with books as I do. The issue is that the approach of focusing on the love of reading doesn't solve the underlying problems.



**Jasmine Lane**

Jasmine Lane is a first-generation college graduate who teaches high school English in Minneapolis, MN.

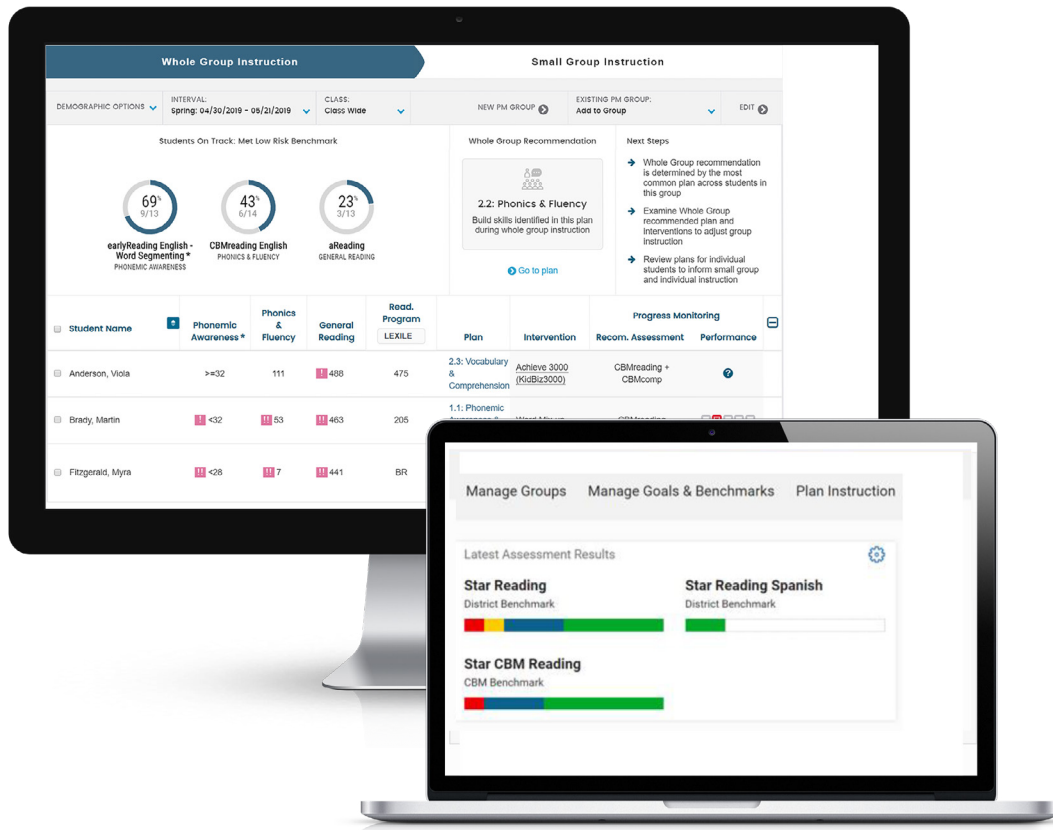
Tim Rasinski **concludes that word recognition and fluency** are major contributors to reading deficiencies early on, but when students do not master these fundamentals, reading difficulties are likely to not only continue in later grades but have a profound and adverse effect on overall reading achievement.

For the adolescent students below the 30–35th percentile, a reading program that provides systematic instruction and that offers at least some explicit phonics instruction is needed. Students reading two to three grade levels below need more work with grade-level texts in the classroom.

To ensure students have success with grade-level texts, you can do the following:

- 1** Read and annotate your article or passage for analysis and note key vocabulary, background knowledge, and “sticky” comprehension points ahead of time (points where if students don’t understand, they may get lost).
- 2** Note points to chunk and summarize the text followed by a text-dependent question to check for understanding.
- 3** Plan high-low paired reading, a low-stakes fluency practice meant to give low or struggling readers an opportunity to listen to a proficient and expert reader (the high reader) and then practice reading.
- 4** Have students re-read small sections of text, and gradually release them to reading longer passages on their own.
- 5** Do teacher “read-alouds” of difficult sections of text, from which prosody can aid comprehension of struggling decoders.

Conclusion



Data is key to getting all students on track to being strong readers

Assessment is a critical component to ensure equitable, evidence-based literacy instruction. Renaissance helps districts improve reading outcomes with aligned assessment and skill-building practice anchored in the Science of Reading.

In addition to providing evidence-based universal screeners, Renaissance offers [Star Phonics](#), the only technology-based phonics skill screener and diagnostic assessment that helps teachers precisely target phonics instruction to increase efficacy while saving time. As a result, educators can accelerate literacy with all students, equitably improve reading outcomes, and eliminate future barriers to success.

[Reach out to learn more.](#)

Connect with us!



Renaissance

As a global leader in education technology operating in more than 110 countries, [Renaissance](#) is committed to providing educators with insights and resources to accelerate growth and help all students build a strong foundation for success. We believe that technology can unlock a more effective learning experience, ensure that students get the personalized teaching they need to thrive, and help educators and administrators to truly, fully, See Every Student.