

SEDL Letter

Volume XIV
Number 3
December 2002

Building Knowledge to Support Learning

Putting Reading First

Ten Myths of Reading Instruction
PAGE 3

The Importance of Phonemic Awareness
PAGE 9

Negotiating *La Frontera*
PAGE 13

Making Every Teacher a Reading Teacher
PAGE 16

The Right Questions
PAGE 20

The Journey
PAGE 24

Sherwood Forest Students Are Reading Their Way to the Top
PAGE 27

Wesley A. Hoover, Ph.D.
President and CEO

Joyce S. Pollard, Ed.D.
*Director, Office of
Institutional
Communications*

Leslie Asher Blair, M.A.
Editor

CREDITS

Jane Thurmond (Austin, Texas) designed *SEDL Letter*. The photographs on pages 20–21 and 27–31 were taken by SEDL staff. The cover photograph and those on pages 3 and 32 are ©Getty Images. The photographs on pages 2, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 17, and 26 are royalty-free images ©Eyewire, Image 100, or PhotoDisc. Nancy Richey (Austin, Texas) was copyeditor for this issue.

SEDL Letter complements and draws upon work performed by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory under a variety of funding sources, including the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Government. The publication is not supported with direct program funds related to any SEDL programs or projects. *SEDL Letter* does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Government or any other source. You are welcome to reproduce *SEDL Letter* and distribute copies at no cost to recipients; please credit the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory as publisher and respect the copyrights of designated illustrators, designers, and contributors. SEDL is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer and is committed to affording equal employment opportunities for all individuals in all employment matters. Available in alternative formats.

Putting Reading First

By Leslie Blair, Editor

Imagine my surprise when halfway through my son's kindergarten school year, his teacher stopped me one day and asked "How about our little reader?" It seems he had learned to read early and without my even knowing it. He is one of the lucky students who started school with strong pre-literacy skills and an excellent kindergarten teacher. And his kindergarten class was fairly small as public schools go, with only 12 students in the class.

As we know, not all students are so lucky. Some come to school without knowing the alphabet or understanding the concept of print. Others must learn to read in a language that is not their native language. Some are put in crowded classrooms and still others have teachers who haven't received adequate training in reading instruction. With passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and its Reading First component, there is the expectation that we can help all of these students learn to read early and well. It will be a challenge, however, as states, districts, and schools scramble to meet the tougher new requirements as well as identify research-based programs and practices.

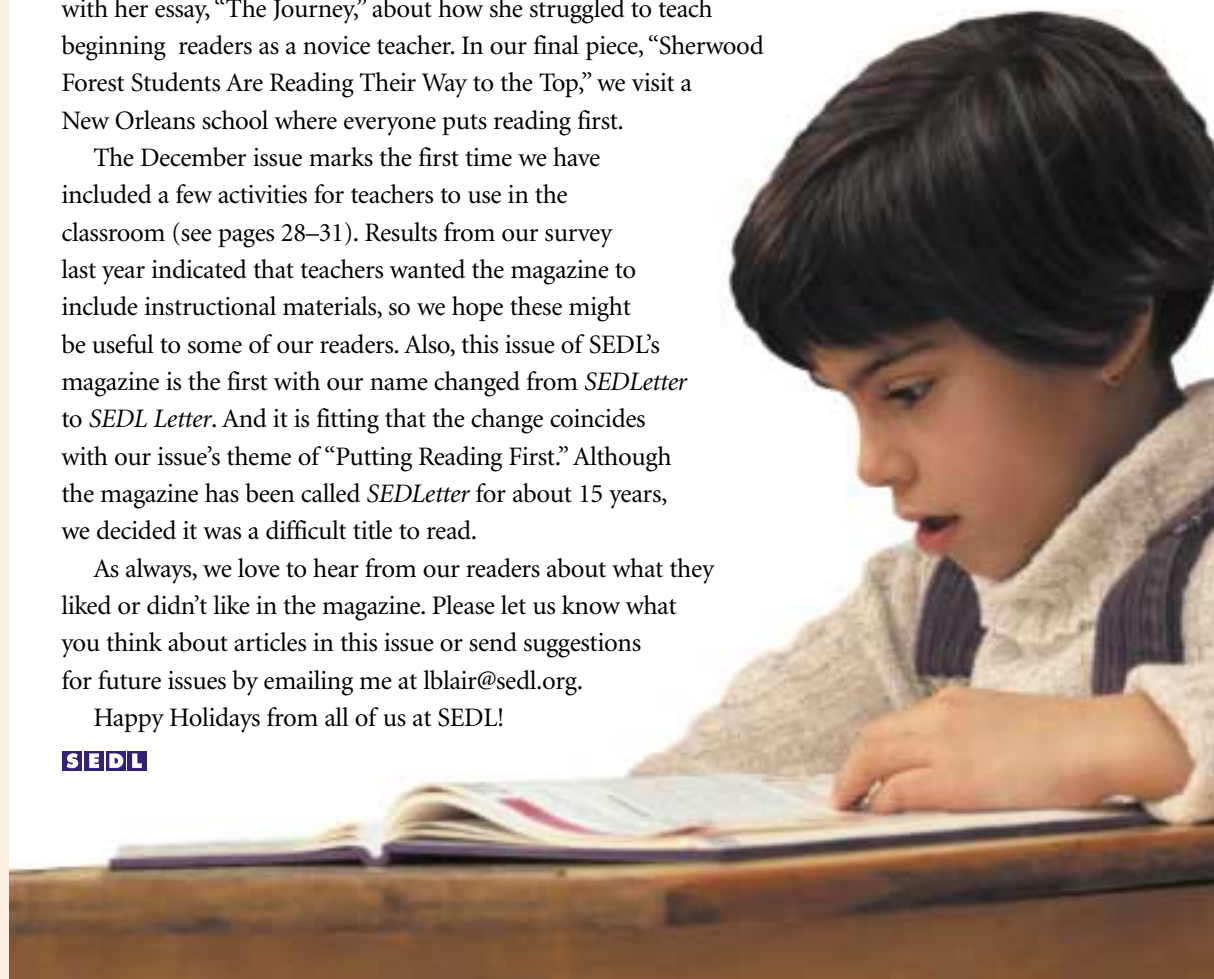
In this issue of *SEDL Letter* we touch on some of the issues related to Reading First. "Ten Myths of Reading Instruction" is a rundown of some fallacies around reading instruction. "The Importance of Phonemic Awareness" addresses one of Reading First's five essential components of effective reading instruction. We also look at how to help struggling secondary readers in "Making Every Teacher a Reading Teacher: Putnam City Secondary Educators Work to Help Struggling Readers" and how to meet the needs of migrant students in "Negotiating *La Frontera*: Reading and the Migrant Student." New Orleans teacher Kathleen Theodore offers hope with her essay, "The Journey," about how she struggled to teach beginning readers as a novice teacher. In our final piece, "Sherwood Forest Students Are Reading Their Way to the Top," we visit a New Orleans school where everyone puts reading first.

The December issue marks the first time we have included a few activities for teachers to use in the classroom (see pages 28–31). Results from our survey last year indicated that teachers wanted the magazine to include instructional materials, so we hope these might be useful to some of our readers. Also, this issue of *SEDL's* magazine is the first with our name changed from *SEDL Letter* to *SEDL Letter*. And it is fitting that the change coincides with our issue's theme of "Putting Reading First." Although the magazine has been called *SEDL Letter* for about 15 years, we decided it was a difficult title to read.

As always, we love to hear from our readers about what they liked or didn't like in the magazine. Please let us know what you think about articles in this issue or send suggestions for future issues by emailing me at lblair@sedl.org.

Happy Holidays from all of us at SEDL!

SEDL



Ten Myths of Reading Instruction

By Sebastian Wren

If reading were natural, everybody would be doing it, and we would not have to worry about dealing with a 'literacy gap.'

Myth #1

Learning to read is a natural process.

It has long been argued that learning to read, like learning to understand spoken language, is a natural phenomenon. It has often been suggested that children will learn to read if they are simply immersed in a literacy-rich environment and allowed to develop literacy skills in their own way. This pernicious belief that learning to read is a natural process resulting from rich text experiences is surprisingly prevalent in education—despite the fact that learning to read is not only unnatural, it is one of the most unnatural things humans do.

There is a difference between learning to read text and learning to understand a spoken language. Learning to understand speech is indeed a natural process; starting before birth, children tune in to spoken language in their environment, and as soon as they are able, they begin to incorporate a language. If the linguistic environment is not sufficiently rich or if it is confusing, the innate drive to find a language is so strong that, if necessary, children will create a language of their own (examples of this include twin languages and pidgin languages). Given the opportunity, children will naturally develop all of the essential comprehension skills for the language to which they are exposed with little structured or formal guidance.

By contrast, reading acquisition is not natural. While the ability to understand speech evolved over many, many thousands of years, reading and writing are human inventions that have been around for merely a few thousand years. It has been only within the past few generations that some cultures have made any serious attempt to make literacy universal among their citizens.

If reading were natural, everybody would be doing it, and we would not have to worry about dealing with a “literacy gap.” According to the National Institute for Literacy and the Center for Education Statistics, more than 40 million adults in this country alone are functionally illiterate, and despite our best educational efforts, approximately 40 percent of our fourth graders lack even the most basic reading skills. These staggering numbers provide evidence that reading is a skill that is quite unnatural and difficult to learn.



Myth #2

Children will eventually learn to read if given enough time.

This is arguably the second most pernicious myth, and it is closely related to the first. Many who claim that reading is natural also claim that children should be given time to develop reading skills at their own pace. This is a double-edged sword because, while it is true that children should be taught to read in developmentally appropriate ways, we should not simply wait for children to develop reading skills in their own time. When a child is not developing reading skills along with his or her peers, that situation should be of great concern.

Over time, the gap between children who have well-developed literacy skills and those who do not gets wider and wider. In the early grades, the literacy gap is relatively easy to cross, and with diagnostic, focused instruction, effective teachers can help children who have poor literacy skills become children with rich literacy skills. However, if literacy instruction needs are not met early, then the gap widens—the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer—until it gets so wide that bridging it requires extensive, intensive, expensive, and frustrating remedial instruction. The gap reaches

this nearly insurmountable point very early. Research has shown that if a child is not reading grade-appropriate materials by the time he or she is in the fourth grade, the odds of that child ever developing good reading skills are slim. It is still possible, but it is much more difficult, and the child's own motivation becomes the biggest obstacle to success.

Myth #3 **Reading programs are 'successful.'**

It is common for schools to buy an off-the-shelf reading program to address their reading instruction needs and trust that the program will solve their school's literacy issues. Typically, these programs are designed to address a single part of the overall reading curriculum (for example, phonics programs or phoneme awareness programs or reading motivation programs), but often a school purchases a program with the hope that it will be a cure for the school's low reading achievement.

Although such reading programs can be a useful part of a larger reading curriculum, no reading program by itself has ever been shown to be truly "successful" — not with all children and all teachers. And no reading program by itself has been shown to accelerate all children to advanced levels of performance. Some of these programs, when properly implemented, have been shown to improve overall reading scores significantly (especially in low-performing schools), but that improvement is often a long way from what anyone should describe as "success." If 60 percent of the students in a school are performing unacceptably on the benchmark reading assessments, moving that number to 40 percent is an improvement, but it is still unsatisfactory. There are a few programs that, if properly implemented, could help a school move in the right direction, but nothing could ever take the place of a knowledgeable and talented teacher. Typically these programs do not provide substantial professional development for teachers beyond the basic training teachers need to implement the program in their classrooms.

Research has repeatedly indicated that the single most important variable in any reading program is the knowledge and skill of the teacher implementing the program, so why do we persist in trying to develop "teacher-proof" programs? Some would argue that it is our overdependence on such programs that prevents us from cultivating more knowledgeable and effective teachers. To achieve success for all children, teachers must become extremely sophisticated and diagnostic in their approach to reading instruction, and substantial resources must be devoted toward professional

development for teachers. Every child is different: A program cannot be sensitive to the varied and rapidly evolving learning needs of individual children, but a knowledgeable teacher certainly can.

Myth #4 **We used to do a better job of teaching children to read.**

The good old days weren't always so good. We have, in fact, never done a better job of teaching children to read than we do today. The bad news is, we've never really done a worse job either. We are basically just as successful today as we have always been — not very successful.

Nothing illustrates this better than the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This assessment has been given to children across the country aged 9, 13, and 17 since 1970. Student performance at those three age levels has not changed substantially in over 30 years — consistently between 24 percent and 39 percent of students have scored in the "below basic" category (depending on the age tested), and between 3 percent and 7 percent have scored in the "advanced" category. Other investigations have found that literacy rates have not really changed in this country since World War II.

While the literacy rates have not changed substantially, the demand and need for literacy has increased markedly. Literacy now is a prerequisite for success. In the future, the ability to read will be an increasingly indispensable skill given the growing technology and information explosion.

Clearly we do not need to get back to the old ways of teaching children to read — the old ways were really no better than (and some would argue, no different from) the current ways. Relatively recent research has given us great insights into why some children have difficulty learning to read, and the next frontier in reading education is to help teachers understand and apply that research information.

Myth #5 **Skilled reading involves using syntactic and semantic cues to guess words, and good readers make many 'mistakes' as they read authentic text.**

Research indicates that both of these claims are quite wrong, but both are surprisingly pervasive in reading instruction. The idea that good readers use contextual cues to guess words in running text comes from a method of assessment developed by Ken Goodman that he called "miscue analysis." For his dissertation,

There are a few programs that, if properly implemented, could help a school move in the right direction, but nothing could ever take the place of a knowledgeable and talented teacher.

Goodman examined the types of mistakes that young readers make and drew inferences about the strategies they employ as they read. He noticed that the children in his studies very often made errors as they read, but many of these errors did not change the meaning of the text (like misreading “rabbit” as “bunny”). He surmised the reason must be that good readers depend on context to predict upcoming words in passages of text. He further suggested that for good readers, these contextual cues are so important that the reader needs only to occasionally “sample” from the text—that is, look at a few of the words on the page—to confirm the predictions. Children who struggle to sound out words, Goodman says, are overdepending on letter and word cues and should learn to pay more attention to the semantic and syntactic cues.

Goodman’s model, which eventually gave rise to the “Three Cueing Systems” model of word recognition, is extremely influential in reading instruction, but has never been supported by research evidence.

In fact, repeated studies have shown that only poor readers depend upon context to try to “guess” words in text—good readers depend heavily upon the visual information contained in the words themselves (that is, the letter and word cues) to quickly and automatically identify the word. Psychologist and researcher Keith Stanovich has been especially critical of the three-cueing-systems model because the predictions made by the model are exactly the opposite of what has been observed in research studies. Philip Gough, a psychology professor at The University of Texas at Austin, and I addressed the second claim and showed that good readers almost never make any mistakes at all when they read, which means the notion of conducting a “miscue analysis” is somewhat suspect—how can you perform a miscue analysis when there are typically no miscues? We had over 400 college students read a passage of text from *Ken Goodman’s Phonics Phacts* (Heinemann, 1993) and showed that the modal number of mistakes made by these students was zero. Almost all of the students read the passage flawlessly. To suggest that good readers correctly guess the words in the passage with 100 percent accuracy stretched the boundaries of credulity.

However, to be sure, we examined how accurate readers would be if they were forced to use semantics and context as their only cues. We concealed the passage of text and asked our college students to guess each of the words in the passage one at a time; after each guess, the

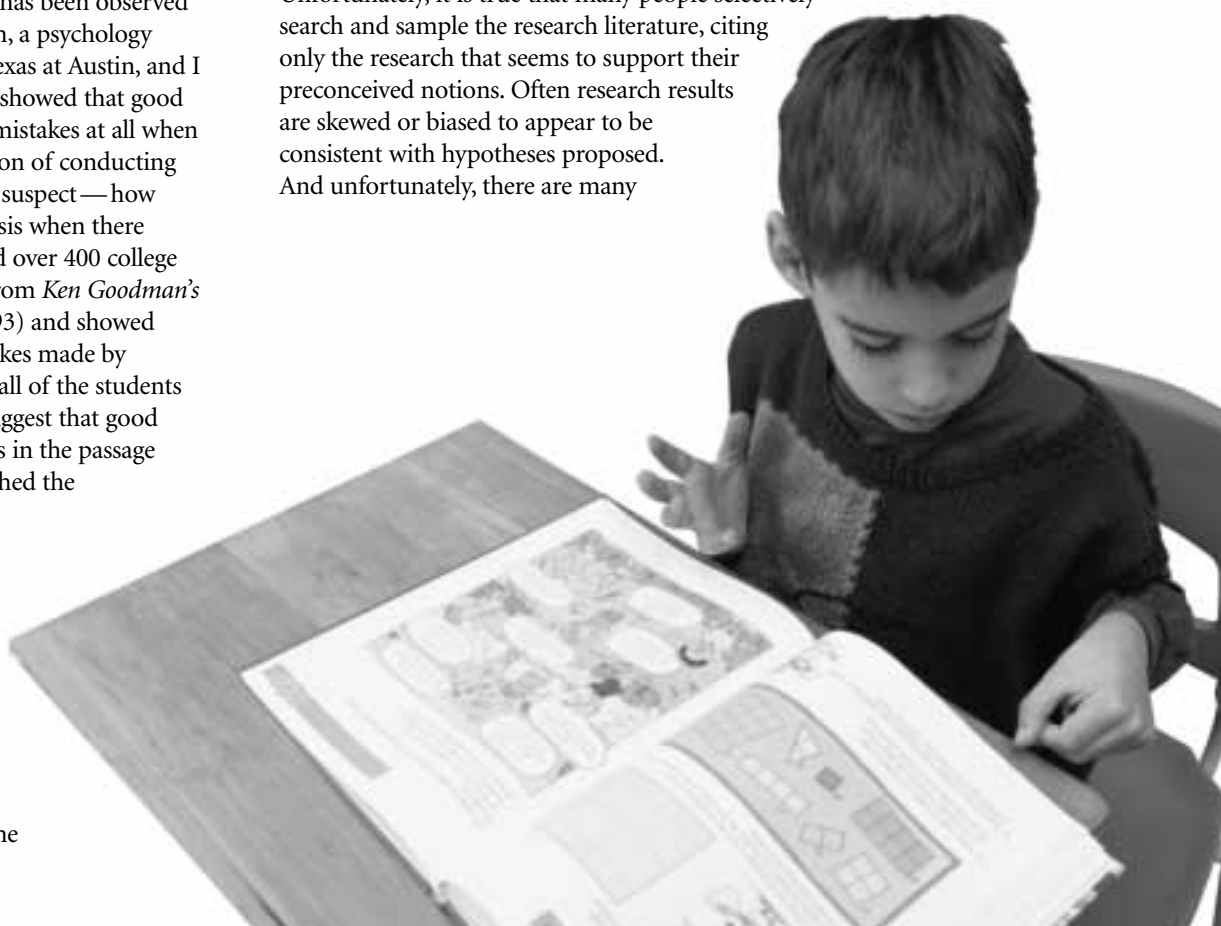
correct word was revealed, and students were asked to guess the next word. This process was repeated for every word in the passage, so the students always knew the words leading up to the unknown word. We found that, given unlimited time to ponder, students were able to correctly guess one out of ten content words in the passage. That’s a 90 percent failure rate, as opposed to the zero percent failure rate seen in skilled readers who were not forced to make guesses based on context.

Research has shown that good readers depend very heavily upon the visual information contained in the word for word identification (what is commonly called the graphemic information or orthographic information). The semantic and syntactic information are critical for comprehension of passages of text, but they do not play an important role in decoding or identifying words. Good readers make virtually no mistakes as they read because they have developed extremely effective and efficient word identification skills that do not depend upon semantics, context, or syntax. For good readers, word identification is fast, fluent, and automatic—it must be so that their attention can be fully focused on using semantics and syntax to comprehend the text.

Myth #6

Research can be used to support your beliefs, whatever they are.

Unfortunately, it is true that many people selectively search and sample the research literature, citing only the research that seems to support their preconceived notions. Often research results are skewed or biased to appear to be consistent with hypotheses proposed. And unfortunately, there are many



It is true that 'research-based' fads and programs come and go, but that stems from misuse of the term 'research based'.

people who are unwilling to reject a hypothesis or a theory even when research evidence does not support that theory. Adding to the problem of poor research is the problem that the public is largely uninformed about the hallmarks of good research.

Many articles appear to be “research” articles, but are not. The article you are reading right now, for example, might be cited as “research” by some, but in fact this is not a research article. This is rather an article written by a researcher, and that is an important distinction. This article, and others that appear in journals like *Phi Delta Kappan* and *The Reading Teacher* are written as informative articles. These articles are usually meant to be analogous to newspaper articles, but are often more like editorials or commentaries. They may stimulate thought and focus attention on interesting issues, but they are not in any way “research” articles.

Publishing a research article requires a great deal of rigor and objectivity, and all good research publications have a formal, relatively unbiased expert peer review process. Research studies are tested and scrutinized from many angles by multiple, unrelated researchers. There is documented objectivity associated with research, and where possible, there is replication of results. And even after all of that, a healthy skepticism is still adopted by the research community. Researchers know that one piece of research evidence is nothing to get excited about. Several bits of evidence might get some attention. But it is only when there is substantial convergent evidence from multiple sources supporting a theory that the research community is willing to embrace the theory.

It takes years to convince the research community that a theory has merit, but often it takes no time at all to convince the public. The media tend to pay attention to unexpected or unusual findings—take the recent contretemps about cold fusion, for example. There is a mountain of evidence showing that cold fusion is not possible given our current technology and understanding of physics. But when one research team circumvented the normal channels of peer review and claimed that they had found a solution for cold fusion, they were celebrated in the media, and the public paid a great deal of attention to their claims.

It is true that “research-based” fads and programs come and go, but that stems from misuse of the term “research based.” All of us need to adopt a bit of healthy skepticism, and we should demand that a substantial research base be provided as evidence to support claims. We also must learn to pay more attention to the research evidence and less attention to the messenger—the credentials of a researcher are important, but even researchers can editorialize and put forth unfounded opinions. That a well-known researcher said it doesn’t make it so.

Myth #7

Phoneme awareness is a consequence — not a cause — of reading acquisition.

The evidence showing the importance of phoneme awareness to literacy acquisition is overwhelming. Still, there are some who are not convinced. Some claim that teaching children to develop phoneme awareness is not necessary or even beneficial. They usually believe children develop phoneme awareness as they learn to read, but they claim phoneme awareness is nothing more than a byproduct of reading acquisition, arising as a result of learning to read—not the other way around. Further, it is often argued that phoneme awareness instruction is “inauthentic” and unnatural and therefore inappropriate. Research findings do not support this view.

First, it is clear that phoneme awareness is a necessary prerequisite for developing decoding skills in an alphabetic writing system such as English. Phoneme awareness in the early grades is one of the best predictors of future reading success. All successful readers possess phoneme awareness. Those who do not have phoneme awareness are always poor readers, and poor readers almost never have phoneme awareness. The most compelling evidence for the importance of phoneme awareness stems from the research demonstrating that when children are taught to develop phoneme awareness they are more likely to develop good word decoding skills—and they develop those skills faster and earlier than children who are not taught to be aware of phonemes in spoken words.

Second, phoneme awareness instruction can be authentic and natural. Teachers can use music, tongue twisters, poetry, and games to help children develop phoneme awareness. Children enjoy playing these games; they love to experiment with language, and teachers should give them every opportunity to explore spoken language.

Given the importance of finding developmentally appropriate ways of helping children to develop foundational reading skills as early as possible (see Myth #2), assessment of phoneme awareness should begin early, and games and lessons that help children develop an awareness of phonemes in speech should be used to help those that need it.

Myth #8

Some people are just genetically ‘dyslexic.’

The belief in an underlying genetic cause for dyslexia ignores the fact that reading and writing simply have not been around long enough to become a specific part of our genetic makeup (see Myth #1). It was

long argued that when a disparity existed between a person's intelligence and their reading skill, the person should be described as a "dyslexic." The term "dyslexic" eventually became a catch-all term used to account for people who failed to learn to read despite apparent intellectual capacity and environmental support.

The term "dyslexia" has come to encompass so many reading difficulties that it is of little use. The term simply means "difficulty with words," and anybody who has not learned to read could be called "dyslexic." There is nothing about this definition that addresses the underlying reasons for the difficulty with words. We know that people fail to learn to read for a very wide variety of reasons, and categorizing all nonreaders under the "dyslexia" umbrella belies the complexity of reading disorders.

Clearly, some people have more difficulty learning to read than others. In broad strokes, the three reasons people have difficulty developing basic reading skills are that they have difficulty developing

1. decoding skills,
2. language comprehension skills, or
3. both decoding and language comprehension skills.

Difficulties developing decoding skills very often arise from difficulties processing sounds in speech. Some people seem to have an easier time than others mentally breaking spoken words apart and discerning the subparts of spoken words—such as alliteration and rhyme. To learn to decode words in alphabetic systems like English, it is necessary to understand that the letters in text represent the phonemes in speech. It is unlikely that people who have difficulty hearing and manipulating the phonemes in speech will make the connection between letters and phonemes.

It could be argued that there is a genetic foundation for variations in phonological processing skills—some people seem to naturally tune in to speech sounds, and others seem to have difficulty examining and manipulating the phonemes in speech. Furthermore, these abilities have a tendency to run in families. However, even if there are specific genetic foundations for phonological processing skills, we know that it is quite easy to teach children to be aware of the phonemes in speech whatever their genetic tendencies.

While some children have difficulty developing decoding skills because of poor phonological processing skills, other children simply do not get adequate instruction in other necessary knowledge domains important for developing good decoding skills (such as concepts about print, letter knowledge, and knowledge of the alphabetic principle). Or they fail to get sufficient opportunities to practice decoding real words and thus fail to develop fluent, automatic word recognition skills. There is no genetic

factor for insufficient instruction—the deficit is not intrinsic to the child; it is intrinsic to the classroom and the system that failed to help the child to develop these critical knowledge domains.

Difficulty developing language comprehension skills often stems from either insufficient exposure to or practice with a particular language (children often have well-developed language comprehension skills in languages other than English). To understand a language well, children must develop a rich vocabulary and appreciation for semantics, and they must combine that with a wealth of background knowledge about the world. They also need to have an implicit understanding of the mechanics of the language (syntax), and their ear needs to be tuned to the phonology of the language so they can distinguish words that sound similar (like "hair" and "here").

There are very few genetic factors that lead to reading difficulty; most factors that result in reading difficulty are environmental, but either way, research has shown that good instruction can overcome all of these factors. The unpleasant fact that we must come to terms with is that the reason that so many children are "dyslexic" has little to do with the genetic makeup of the children; it has to do with the quality of their education. They were simply never taught to read.

Myth #9

Short-term tutoring for struggling readers can help them catch up with their peers, and the gains made will be sustained.

Many reading instruction interventions common in schools involve pulling a student out of the regular classroom for a period of time and sending that student to a reading specialist or a tutor for short, intensive, one-on-one instruction sessions. After a few weeks or months of intensive intervention, the students are exited from the intervention program, and they resume normal classroom activities. The prevalence of these fairly expensive programs reflects an underlying belief that this sort of intervention is effective and that the gains children experience in these programs are sustained when they return to the normal classroom.

But it is evident that such gains as are made by children in these programs are not sustained for very long once they are exited from the program. Studies of pull-out tutoring programs have shown that children who are not thriving like their peers in the classroom continue to fail to thrive when they are placed back in that classroom full time. This suggests that there is something about the classroom environment that is not supporting and scaffolding these children as they learn to read.

Further Reading

To learn more about these and other related issues in reading instruction and reading research, curious readers are encouraged to examine these titles:

Adams, M. J. 1990.

Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Adams, M. J. 1998.

The three-cueing systems. In J. Osborn and F. Lehr (eds.), *Literacy for all: Issues in teaching and learning*, 73–99. New York: Guilford Press.

Gough, P. B., and S. A.

Wren. 1999. *Constructing meaning: The role of decoding.* In *Reading Development and the Teaching of Reading*, eds. J. Oakhill and R. Beard, 59–78. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Moats, L. C. 1999. *Teaching reading is rocket science.* Washington D.C.: American Federation of Teachers.

Snow, C. E., W. S. Barnes, J. Chandler, I. F. Goodman, and L. Hemphill. 1991. *Unfulfilled Expectations: Home and School Influences on Literacy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Snow, C., S. Burns, and P. Griffin, eds. 1998.

Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.

Stanovich, K. E. 1986.

Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 21, 360–407.

Stanovich, K. E. 1992.

How to think straight about psychology. New York: Harper Collins.

Studies have shown that the best hope for these children is to place them with a “strong” reading teacher full time—a teacher who has a sophisticated understanding of the process of learning to read, a tendency to use assessment data to inform individualized instruction, and a talent for engaging students in focused and interesting instructional activities. Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor Catherine Snow has reported research findings that indicate young “at risk” students who are placed with “strong” teachers for two consecutive years are very likely to be successful readers. Similarly, she has shown that students who are not “at risk” are likely to have difficulties learning to read if they are placed with “weak” teachers for two consecutive years.

Once again, we see that the right answer is the hard answer (see Myth #3). The solution for helping struggling readers succeed is to cultivate a population of teachers who are very knowledgeable about how children learn to read and who are adept at applying their understanding of reading acquisition to the assessment and instruction of individual children.

Perhaps instead of having our most highly trained and knowledgeable reading teachers pulling students out of class for individual tutoring, a better use of their time would be to make them responsible for providing ongoing, job-embedded professional development and coaching for the other teachers on staff so that all of the teachers can develop expertise in reading theory and reading instruction.

Myth #10

If it is in the curriculum, then the children will learn it, and a balanced reading curriculum is ideal.

This is only a half-myth. Obviously, if something is not a part of the curriculum, then children are unlikely to learn it. But just because a concept or skill is taught is no guarantee that every child will learn it. Standards are shifting from an emphasis on what is taught to an emphasis on what is learned, and curricula are making the same shift. However, it is still common to divide a curriculum into instructional minutes and to focus more closely on what is taught than on what is learned. A curriculum is too often confused with a recipe, but creating proficient readers is not as simple as mixing ingredients in correct proportions. Teaching a complicated skill (such as reading) to a diverse group of students requires a great deal of flexibility and creativity on the teacher’s part.

As to whether a curriculum should reflect a balanced reading approach, the answer is, again,

yes and no. Unfortunately, the term “balanced reading” is not very clearly defined. According to the NAEP, most teachers currently claim they employ a balanced approach to their reading instruction, but what a “balanced approach” means to one teacher may be very different from what a “balanced approach” means to another. The approach most commonly used is to provide instruction traditionally associated with both the phonics and the whole-language philosophies and to add such elements as phoneme awareness that were never traditionally associated with either philosophy. Sometimes a balanced reading approach involves first using phonics activities first and then later adding whole-language activities. Sometimes a balanced reading approach involves supplementing authentic text with phonics worksheets or decodable text.

According to data collected for the NAEP, the prevalent instructional philosophy shifted in 1996 from “whole language” to “balanced literacy,” but NAEP scores have been unaffected by this shift. This should be no surprise—when the prevalent philosophy shifted in the late eighties and early nineties from phonics to whole language (with a period of balanced literacy in between), NAEP scores did not change then either. Thus it seems the philosophies that drive curricula simply do not in themselves have an impact on student performance.

What does have an impact on student performance has been a recurring theme throughout this essay—the quality, knowledge, and sophistication of the teacher is what really matters for helping children to become proficient readers. The quality of the teacher plays a very large part in determining the reading success of a student. A high-quality teacher can help every one of her students develop advanced reading skills. A low-quality teacher can have the opposite effect. The importance of providing good professional development to engender a population of highly qualified diagnostic reading teachers is paramount, and every child will benefit from such teachers. It is not easy, but anyone who tells you there is an easier solution to the mounting problem of illiteracy is trying to sell a myth.

SEDL



A longer, more detailed version of this article is available online at <http://www.sedl.org/reading/topics.html>.

Sebastian Wren is a SEDL program associate currently working with low-performing schools under SEDL's Regional Educational Laboratory contract. Dr. Wren is the author of The Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read: A Framework.



The Importance of Phonemic Awareness in Learning to Read

By Wesley A. Hoover



Phonemic awareness is a critical skill for learning to read an alphabetically written language. Yet a fair amount of confusion, especially among educators, persists

about what this skill is and why it is so important. Written for practitioners, this article describes phonemic awareness and discusses why it is a prerequisite for learning to read, how we have come to understand its importance, why it can be difficult to acquire, and what happens to the would-be reader who fails to acquire it. Our discussion of phonemic awareness is framed within a particular view of reading, to which we turn first.

What is reading?

Reading, or more precisely reading comprehension, is the ability to derive meaning, particularly that intended by the author, from the printed word—in short, reading is understanding the meaning of written language. The major difference between the written and the spoken word is not what is being communicated, but how the communication is taking place, by eye rather than ear. In this simple view, reading is dependent on two major cognitive capacities. The first is comprehension, the ability to understand language. The second is decoding, the ability to derive a word's phonological representation (one based in the domain of spoken words) from the sequences of letters that represent it. Skilled decoding allows the reader, through print, to retrieve the meaning of words known and organized through the learning of spoken language. Together, decoding and comprehension skills combine to permit language comprehension to take place via the printed word.

To foreshadow the discussion to come, while phonemic awareness is a linguistic skill, it is not a skill that is needed either for learning, or subsequently for understanding, language. Certainly, every competent speaker of a language has mastered its phonology. But since language learning is a tacit process, one that takes place without conscious attention, that mastery comes without the need for

an explicit, conscious understanding of phonology. However, for learning to read, specifically for learning to decode, a conscious understanding of the phonological units underlying the spoken word is critical.

What is phonemic awareness?

Phonemic awareness is a cognitive skill that consists of three pieces. The first piece concerns a linguistic unit, the phoneme; the second concerns the explicit, conscious awareness of that unit; and the third involves the ability to explicitly manipulate such units. Phonemic awareness is thus the ability to consciously manipulate language at the level of phonemes. Let's take each of these in turn.

A phoneme is an abstract linguistic unit. Linguists define it as the most basic unit of language capable of making a difference in meaning. As an example, the difference between the word pairs (each containing three phonemes) *bit* and *pit*, *bat* and *bet*, *bin* and *bid*, is a single phoneme, one occurring in these examples in the initial, medial, or final position, respectively, of the spoken word.

Phonemes are abstract because they are not the actual sounds of which words are composed; these are known as *phones*. Rather they are the underlying category of which the phones are members. To illustrate this, think of how the sound represented by the letter *p* is different in the words *pan* and *span*. To make this readily apparent, hold your hand close to your mouth and notice that the puff of air that is released when saying the former is much stronger than that released with the latter. The puff, known as aspiration, is not distinctive in English, in that there are no pairs of words where this single difference in aspiration marks a difference in meaning. In short, these two sounds (or phones) are different, yet they represent the same underlying category (or phoneme). As we will see, the abstract nature of phonemes presents one of the obstacles a child must overcome in developing phonemic awareness.

It is also important to recognize that phonemes are linguistic units and not units of writing systems. Thus, while *bit*, *bait*, *butte*, and *bought* all differ in the number of letters they possess, they each represent

Terms Often Confused with Phonemic Awareness

Phonics

An instructional approach for helping children learn the relationship between letters and sounds.

Phonetics

The process used by linguists to describe the speech sounds in natural language.

Phonology

The linguistic component of language that deals with the systems and patterns of sounds that occur in languages (distinguished from the other two components of language, which are syntax and semantics).

Phonological awareness

A general term for metalinguistic awareness of any of the phonological characteristics of language, including phonemic units, syllables, rimes, and words.

words containing only three phonemes, which differ only in their second phoneme.

Beyond the phonemic unit, the second piece of the phonemic awareness concept entails the explicit, conscious awareness of these units. Any child who has learned a language knows the phonemes of that language—if she did not, she could not recognize the difference between spoken minimal pairs in that language, like *bit* and *pit*. But being able to *use* that linguistic difference in speaking and listening to language is very different from *knowing explicitly* that the difference being used is in the initial part of the word. This explicit knowledge is the metalinguistic nature of the skill, or the ability, to consciously reflect upon the linguistic units that underlies language.

More than just being conscious of the phoneme, the third piece of the phonemic-awareness concept requires some level of skill in manipulating phonemes. In learning to read an alphabetic language, it is not enough just to be aware of the phonemic units, the child also must be able to manipulate those units. Such manipulation is important because the child learning to read must be able to hold and contrast in memory both the phonemes and the letter strings that represent them. If she cannot, she will not be able to master the relationship between the letter units and the phonemic units. In learning to read, the child must be able to isolate, compare, and contrast phonemes and letter sequences—for example, noting that the final phoneme in both *bit* and *bought* is the same, but that one is represented by a single letter and the other by three letters.

To sum up, the three pieces of phonemic awareness are knowledge of language at the level of individual phonemes, knowledge of these language units that is conscious, and skill at consciously manipulating language at this level.

Why is a linguistic skill that is not needed to learn language so critical for learning to read a language?

As mentioned earlier, phonemic awareness is not necessary for reading all written languages, only those that are alphabetic. For instance, writing systems that use logographic representations (where a single

symbol represents a word) do not require would-be readers to possess phonemic awareness. But any system that links written letters to the phonemes underlying the spoken word requires phonemic awareness, because the would-be learner cannot connect the units underlying the written word (the letters) with the units underlying the spoken word (the phonemes) unless she is consciously aware of both and has the intent to learn the relationship between the two (known as the *alphabetic principle*). Thus, if you know the letters and you know there is some relation between the letters and the spoken word, but you do not know the units underlying the spoken word, then you will not be able to figure out what the relationship is between the two representations.

To summarize, knowledge of phonemes is critical to learn a language, but language learning is an unconscious process that only requires immersion in an active linguistic environment; explicit instruction is not necessary. In accomplishing this remarkable feat, the child's language learning system responds to information at the phonemic level without the need for conscious awareness of that level. Learning to read that language, if it is represented alphabetically, does require explicit knowledge of the phoneme since, unlike learning language, learning to read is a process that requires more than mere exposure to what is to be learned.

How do we know that phonemic awareness is critical for learning to read?

Much research, conducted under a variety of research designs, converges on the conclusion that phonemic awareness is critical for learning to read in alphabetic languages. First, there is evidence from *concurrent correlations*, which are derived from research designs that simply measure two skills in a sample of students at roughly the same point in time and then determine how those skills vary with each within the student sample. For example, a typical design might use all the first-grade students in a school as a sample, measuring each student's phonemic awareness skill and reading skill at the end of first grade. Positive correlations between these two measures exist when, in general,

Some Examples of How Phonemic Awareness Skill Is Demonstrated

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Isolation | Say the first part of the word <i>song</i> ; say the middle part of <i>hop</i> ; say the last part of <i>stick</i> . |
| Deletion | Say the word <i>pies</i> without the first part. |
| Addition | Say the word you have when you add the sound <i>s</i> to the beginning of the word <i>top</i> . |
| Categorization | Say the word that does not belong in this group of words: <i>pig, pack, top, put</i> . |
| Substitution | Say the word you make when you take out the second part of <i>stop</i> and replace it with the first part of <i>lake</i> . |
| Segmentation | Say how many parts there are in the word <i>build</i> . |

students with better performance on one skill (phonemic awareness) also have better performance on the other skill (reading) and vice versa (that is, when students with poorer performance on one skill also have poorer performance on the other skill). Such positive correlations are generally found when both phonemic awareness and reading skills are measured in the early elementary grades. This same positive relationship has been found whether reading skill was measured as skill in reading individual words, skill in reading letter sequences that do not form real English words but are constructed like English words (for example, the pseudoword *splure*), or skill in reading connected text where fluency or comprehension were measured. These correlations are consistent with a causal relationship between the two variables, where skill in one is the cause for the development of skill in the other, but they do not guarantee that the variables are causally linked (indeed, there might be a third variable that is causing the development in the other two skills). Nor, even if causally linked, do these correlations specify the direction of causation (that is, does phonemic awareness cause the reading skill or is it the other way round?).

Even more suggestive evidence comes from a closer look at the distributions between phonemic awareness and reading skills concurrently measured. If you plot skill in phonemic awareness against skill in decoding (measured as reading individual pseudowords), you find *triangular distributions*. In these distributions, there are many instances of either low skill in both domains or high skill in phonemic awareness coupled with either low or high skill in decoding. However, there are *no* instances of low skill in phonemic awareness and high skill in decoding. This pattern suggests that phonemic awareness is a necessary, but not sufficient, requirement for skill in decoding. That is, you must have skill in phonemic awareness if you are to acquire skill in decoding, but having skill in phonemic awareness is no guarantee for successful development of skill in decoding. To get the latter, you need something in addition to phonemic awareness (you also need knowledge of the letters and of the alphabetic principle, plus lots of practice pairing written and spoken words).

Predictive correlations, derived from research designs where phonemic awareness is measured at one point in time and reading skill is measured at some subsequent point in time, are even more suggestive of causal relationships. Many studies report such correlations, where the time lag between the measure of phonemic awareness and the subsequent reading skill (measured either as decoding or reading comprehension skill) ranges from very small (a matter of months) to very large (a matter of many years). While providing stronger evidence than concurrent correlations do, these

results could still appear even when the two variables were not causally related. For instance, as in concurrent correlations, there could be a third, unmeasured factor that is the cause underlying the development of both skills, where the two skills themselves are not at all causally linked.

The strongest evidence for a causal relationship between phonemic awareness and reading comes from *training studies*. In the typical training study design, children who lack phonemic awareness skills are randomly divided into different groups, one receiving training designed to develop phonemic awareness skill and the other receiving training designed to develop a skill that is unrelated to reading (say, a mathematical skill like counting). After training, the different groups are given the same reading instruction, and one looks to see whether those groups that received phonemic awareness training in fact do better in both assessments of phonemic awareness and reading than those who did not. Many studies like this have now been conducted, and the majority of them report that the groups receiving phonemic awareness instruction subsequently did much better in reading development than those who did not receive such training.

Now it is true that reading by itself does advance skill in phonemic awareness—reading practice advances reading skill, and the more skill in reading, the more skill in phonemic awareness. This indicates a *reciprocal relationship* between phonemic awareness and reading, where skill in one supports development of skill in the other and vice versa. But the critical question is whether some amount of skill in phonemic awareness is critical before skill in reading can advance; the evidence suggests (especially that from training studies) the answer to this question is yes.

Definitions of Some Terms Used in Scientific Research

Convergence

When research results obtained under a variety of settings and designs lead to the same general conclusions.

Correlation

An indicator of whether a measure of a skill in one area is systematically varying with the measure of a skill in another area.

Concurrent Correlation

A correlation derived from a research design where the two measures of interest are taken at approximately the same point in time.

Predictive Correlation

A correlation derived from a research design where there is a significant difference between the times when two measures of interest are taken.

Triangular Distribution

A distribution of two variables where all combinations of measured low and high skill occur except one—that is, low skill in one area is never accompanied by high skill in the other area.

Training Study

A research design where students with similar skills are divided into groups, one group subsequently receiving training in a skill of interest while the other one receives no training or training in a different skill; the effects of such training are then measured on some outcome variable at some point in time after the training.

There are no instances of low skill in phonemic awareness and high skill in decoding.



Why is phonemic awareness so difficult for some children to acquire?

Current research suggests that most children who enter school at kindergarten do not come skilled in phonemic awareness. Research also suggests that if there is no explicit instruction in this skill, many will fail to acquire it. Further, for some small percentage of young people, even explicit training is insufficient to guarantee the development of phonemic

awareness. So what is known about the reasons behind the difficulty in acquiring phonemic awareness?

First, as discussed above, phonemes are abstract—they cannot be isolated and presented to the child as objects. When we explain to a child that the first sound in *bug* is "buh," what we are actually pronouncing is neither abstract (for abstract things are by definition unpronounceable) nor something related to a single phoneme. In fact, what we are saying is a syllable, one that has two phonemes underlying it. Thus, one difficulty in developing phonemic awareness is that it is not possible to explicitly state to the child what she must become aware of, rather we can only lead her to try to induce for herself what must be acquired.

Second, the sound units that are transmitted in speech that are derived from the underlying abstract phonemes do not arrive at the ear in a strict serial order. Rather the information that allows the hearer to detect the first sound in a word generally comes overlapped with information about the subsequent segment in the word—linguistic information is transmitted in parallel. As an example, if we recorded our speaking of the word *bug* and then, starting at the end of the tape segment, cut off successive pieces and played what was left, we would never be able to isolate a piece of the tape representing only the initial phoneme of the word. Rather, the best we would come away with would be some resemblance of the first two sounds of the word. This is true because the positions of the articulators (those things we use to produce speech, like our tongue and jaw) are set to reflect both the beginning and subsequent sounds that are to be made. You can get a sense of this for yourself by noting the position of your lower jaw as you begin to say *bug* and *bought*. In the latter example, the lower jaw is lowered from the outset to prepare for the pronunciation of the vowel that follows. These co-articulation effects result in the parallel transmission of linguistic information. And this poses a significant problem for

acquiring phonemic awareness, for in many cases we cannot isolate even the initial sound (or phone) that is a member of the phonemic category the child is attempting to become aware of. Again, the best we can do is to set conditions where the child will induce the phonemic category we are trying to have her attend to.

Third, what we are asking the child to do is counterintuitive. For the child learning language, meaning has been paramount, while the forms in which the meaning is represented have been unimportant—they are merely the medium, which is to be ignored in favor of the message. With phonemic awareness, we are asking the child to focus attention in the opposite fashion, ignoring meaning and attending only to form.

Each of these features of language make difficult the task of acquiring the awareness of phonemes—but there are instructional approaches that can be helpful. Future issues of *SEDL Letter* will address this topic.

What happens if a child does not acquire phonemic awareness?

For the child having difficulty acquiring phonemic awareness, the prognosis is not good. First, such a child is not able to take advantage of the alphabetic principle. She might know the letters, even that the letters are somehow connected to the spoken word, but without phonemic awareness, she is baffled by what that relationship might be.

Second, we know that exposure to print is important for figuring out the relationships between letters and phonemes. With the prerequisites in hand (namely, knowledge of the letters, phonemes, and the alphabetic principle), the greater the opportunity to pair printed and spoken words, the greater the opportunity to learn the relationship between letters and phonemes. The child who lacks these prerequisites cannot take advantage of such opportunities, and print exposure is no longer efficacious for learning to read.

Third, we know that if the child is not making progress in reading by the third grade, there is very little likelihood that she will ever, regardless of the intervention used, be able to read at the same level as her same-age peers. Our challenge as educators is thus to do all that we can to make sure our students are making early progress, including mastering phonemic awareness early in their school careers. This is something that can be achieved, if only we understand what must be done and provide appropriate support mechanisms to help teachers master those techniques that can best help their students master this (and other) skills.

SEDL

Wes Hoover is SEDL president and CEO. He holds a doctorate from The University of Texas at Austin in human experimental psychology, with a specialization in reading and psycholinguistics.

Negotiating *La Frontera*: Reading and the Migrant Student

By Andrea L. Jachman

I arrive at 5 o'clock in the morning. While you are having your first dream, sweat washes my face, and I have bathed with fog in the long furrows. While you drop milk in the school's kitchen, I wish I could drink a drop of water because it seems like I never reach the end of the row. . . . While you checked exams I revisited the fields, and sometimes I pulled out snakes instead of vegetables. . . .

Yes, I'm a migrant. I study when I can so someday I can stop being poor and stop crying in the fields close to the town I never knew.

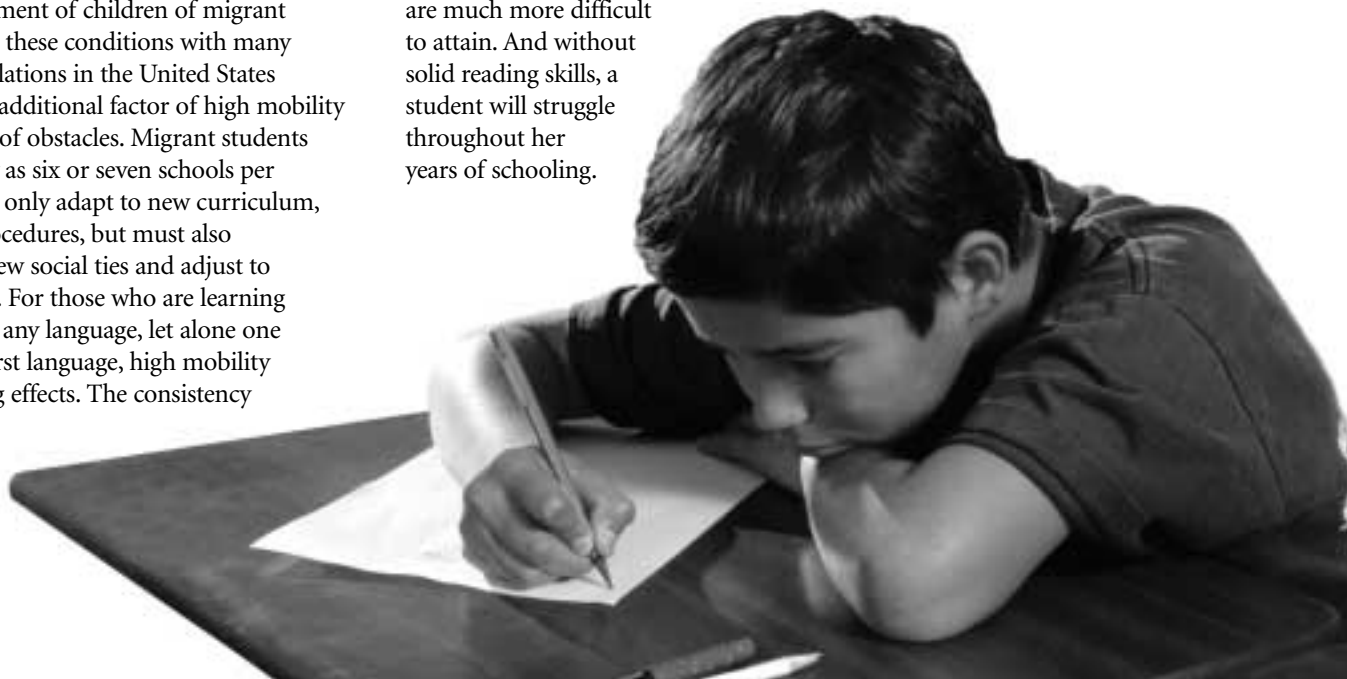
—Sandra Treviño, in *Children of La Frontera*

El otro lado is “the other side.” In the literal sense, it refers to the 2400-kilometer border between the United States and Mexico. Metaphorically, it speaks to the life experience of migrant farmworkers who are carving a place for themselves and their families in the sociopolitical and cultural economies of the United States. What happens to the children of these people on the other side?

La frontera is the borderland. Perhaps better than the melting pot, it describes the confluence of peoples and cultures occurring in the United States today. The migrant child continually negotiates this territory, moving between communities and cultures.

Poverty, health problems, discrimination, and language barriers have a dramatic impact on the educational achievement of children of migrant laborers. They share these conditions with many of the poorest populations in the United States today; however, the additional factor of high mobility creates a unique set of obstacles. Migrant students may attend as many as six or seven schools per year. They must not only adapt to new curriculum, sequencing, and procedures, but must also continually create new social ties and adjust to new school cultures. For those who are learning to read and write in any language, let alone one that may not be a first language, high mobility can have devastating effects. The consistency

and intensity that are the hallmarks of quality reading instruction are much more difficult to attain. And without solid reading skills, a student will struggle throughout her years of schooling.





Successful reading strategies

Despite the odds, there are many success stories. One of these is Pringle-Morse Elementary and Middle School in Amarillo, Texas, where nearly one-quarter of the 112 students qualify for migrant status. Staff at Pringle-Morse focus primarily on early balanced literacy instruction. Early balanced literacy consists of explicit instruction in the nuts and bolts of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—but in the context of meaningful engagements with print. In addition to group and independent activities, it

includes guided work, which occurs in small groups of students with similar reading levels. The groupings are fluid, depending upon the teacher's assessment of each child's individual growth and changing instructional needs.

"I have never had children write as well as they do and gain the self-confidence that they do with this approach," says one Pringle-Morse teacher. Gene Baird, superintendent at nearby Texline School District, believes that early balanced literacy is particularly effective with migrant students because of its high degree of individualization. "The one thing you can count on with our migrant students is that their education backgrounds will be widely dissimilar," says Baird. "Our teachers need to be able to quickly assess a student's abilities and differentiate instruction accordingly, and a balanced literacy approach allows them to do that."

Staff also note that Accelerated Reader, a commercially produced reading program that allows student selection of books and includes computerized assessments, has worked well with their migrant students. Those who use the program believe its reward system (points applied to prizes) encourages students to increase their reading skills.

These schools' successes can be attributed to many internal factors as well. For example, every teacher at Pringle-Morse has English as a Second Language certification to enable them to work better

with the high number of English language learners in their school. Another factor in the success at both Texline and Pringle-Morse is their strong emphasis on parent involvement. Texline parents, for example, participate in such extracurricular activities as taking students on a rare field trip to the opera, and migrant parents are frequently found helping in the classroom during the summer migrant education program. Texline is also laying the groundwork for a formal parental involvement policy. Pringle-Morse holds three parent-teacher conferences per year in elementary school, with bilingual aides to assist Spanish-speaking parents. They are also exploring the possibility of implementing free English classes for parents.

More than anything, teachers at Pringle-Morse point to their community as their source of success. "Our community is a family," says Shannon Lane. "Our school is one of the few institutions in the area, and everyone is focused on the success of our students." Because community spirit is so strong, newly arrived parents have an immediate network of support and information that allows them to tap into available resources. This includes both education and health services, an important piece of the puzzle for families in hazardous farmworking occupations.

Additional strategies for success

"Good programs for migrant students look like good programs anywhere," says Caroline Wilkenson of RMC Research, a partner in the STAR Center (Support for Texas Academic Renewal), which is the state's Comprehensive Assistance Center. The same could be said of good teaching. There are common strategies to improve student literacy that can be employed across grade levels and programs that serve migrant students.

A teacher's first step may well need to be to helping students overcome their fears and insecurities about their performance. A recent publication, *Literacy con Cariño*, relates in a very personal way the story of the astounding success of a South Texas teacher with his migrant students.* This teacher introduced his students to writing by requiring them to journal every day, and every day he replied to what they wrote. Initially hesitant, students slowly responded to the dialoguing process and to the affirmation of their experience. They became confident writers who believed they could achieve in school and beyond.

This teacher exhibits high expectations of his students, which some say can be the most critical piece of the achievement puzzle for migrant students. Wilkenson echoes this belief. "Perhaps the most important quality a teacher can bring to the migrant classroom is believing that kids are capable of thinking critically and achieving success. They can do it."

* *Literacy con cariño: A story of migrant children's success* by Curtis W. Hayes, Robert Bahruth, and Carolyn Kessler. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann ©1998.

Integration and affirmation of the student's culture and lifestyle in the classroom is also of critical importance. Despite the hazards and extreme difficulties of the migrant lifestyle, migration also provides students with a unique set of skills and knowledge. Of necessity, for example, students work to acquire adaptive skills in new settings, an ability which is not as critical for less-mobile students. They learn to cope with the challenges of the road and develop pragmatic skills in problem solving. They also accumulate a broad base of knowledge in geographical and cultural diversity. Validating and utilizing these skills and this knowledge can begin to develop a student's sense of self-worth and confidence in the academic setting. For example, a teacher might have students write brief autobiographies at the beginning of a summer term, then integrate information from those pieces into such content areas as language arts, social studies, and science. She might also include culturally relevant materials in the classroom; a surprising wealth of literature related to the migrant experience is available at all reading levels.

As previously mentioned, parent involvement can have a dramatic impact on student achievement. In fact, the migrant education portion of No Child Left Behind strongly emphasizes family literacy and parental involvement and requires that it occur "in a format and language understandable to the parents." Teachers and administrators must be aware that the very concept of parental involvement may be new to some students and parents; given the traditional respect accorded to educators, parents may equate "involvement" with "interference." In addition, activities and expectations must reflect an awareness of the many demands on migrant farmworkers' time; flexibility and responsiveness are the hallmarks of successful parent involvement programs. Appropriate parental involvement activities might include daily or weekly checklists of their children's work and progress, sharing oral histories, or encouraging family literacy activities. Pringle-Morse has used some of its grant money to send a bilingual aide to each child's home during the summer, to read to students and discuss with parents strategies to improve their children's learning. Aides leave books for parents and children to read together.

Schools must also foster learning independence in their migrant students. While this is a skill that all students must acquire at some point to be successful, the migrant lifestyle forces it upon students at an earlier age and to a greater extent. Services and support available at one site may not be available at the next; students must be taught the difficult skill of seeking out knowledge and assistance of their own accord. This reality lends added credence to the importance of including parents in children's education in meaningful and concrete ways;

Strategies for literacy instruction with migrant students

- *Create a positive environment* by modeling respect for diversity and sharing experiences and values. Teachers can further foster a sense of safety and trust by assigning older students to act as mentors or buddies to new migrant students.
- *Build on migrant students' strengths* by incorporating students' culture and language into the curriculum. A curriculum that includes culturally relevant content enables migrant students to develop pride in their culture and learn content from a familiar cultural base.
- *Personalize lessons* with students' experience. Drawing from students' life experiences helps them to understand ideas and transfer them to other content. It can also enhance students' self-esteem and confidence in a school environment.
- *Develop students' metacognitive learning strategies* to help them become independent learners. If students learn to recognize when they are approaching a learning obstacle, they can learn strategies to overcome it.
- *Implement appropriate assessment* of language proficiency and academic needs.
- *Conduct outreach* in the parents' home language to facilitate communication.
- *Provide staff development* to help teachers and other staff serve migrant students more effectively.

Excerpted from Menchaca, V. D., and J. A. Ruiz-Escalante (1995). *Instructional strategies for migrant students*. ERIC Digest. Charleston: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 388 941) and DiCerbo, P. (2001); *Why migrant education matters*. Issue brief. Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

they are, generally, the most consistent presence in the migrant student's life.

Finally, more must be done to coordinate programs across states. As Donna Marie Marlow, senior education program specialist with the Migrant Education Program at the U.S. Department of Education, observes, "Migrant students are capable of achieving as much as any other students. The real challenge is to provide consistent, long-term reading instruction. Migrant program directors across states need to work to align instruction. Their role as advocates is to reach across states to really impact our kids." Technology will play an increasingly important role in this respect, both in coordinating instruction and in supplying ready access to health and education-related student information for teachers, wherever they may be.

Migrant students are, perhaps, our children most in danger of being left behind. They exist on the very periphery of almost every system, be it political, economic, or social. If education is the door to these systems, then reading literacy is its key, helping to blur the line between *este lado y el otro lado*.

SEDL

Andrea Jachman is a Denver-based freelance writer and editor who specializes in the education and nonprofit sectors. She holds a master's degree in educational policy and administration from the University of Minnesota and previously worked in Tijuana, Mexico.

Making Every Teacher a Reading Teacher:

Putnam City Secondary Educators Work to Help Struggling Readers

By Johanna Franke

Low student achievement in reading at the secondary level is widespread across the nation, including the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's five-state region of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. Because of this, SEDL's Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) is working intensively with nearly 20 sites across the region to assess student reading abilities and improve students' reading comprehension. The lack of research on secondary reading makes this a formidable task, says SEDL program specialist Sebastian Wren.



SEDL program associate Sebastian Wren discusses secondary reading instruction with a Putnam City teacher.

“The lion's share of the research has focused on preventing reading difficulties,” he notes. “But that ignores the fact that some kids get to fourth grade or sixth grade or high school before we understand the depth of their reading difficulties. We just pass them along and they slip through the cracks.”

Millions of dollars fuel early reading research and initiatives in the United States with the hope of catching students before they fall through these reading instruction cracks. Such researchers as Wren and Louisa C. Moats, clinical associate professor of pediatrics at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, believe the focus on early intervention is warranted, considering the number of studies which show that research-based instruction beginning in kindergarten significantly reduces the number of children who have reading difficulty.

In her report, *When Older Kids Can't Read*, Moats says the levels at which students read in first grade are good predictors of reading achievement into high school. If students have fallen behind by then, they rarely catch up. Moats says, “Reading failure begins early, takes root quickly, and affects students for life,” as evidenced by these two statistics:

- More than 40 percent of fourth graders score below the basic level in overall reading skill on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test.
- About 25 percent of all adults in the United States are functionally illiterate.

While educators understand the focus on early reading research, they know that this research doesn't always help students who are already beyond third grade and who haven't had consistent access to appropriate reading instruction and resources. Educators have seen statistics that show—even with intense individual intervention for struggling readers beyond fourth grade—only one in seven of these students are brought to grade-level proficiency.

“While I think the cognitive domains are exactly the same for the 4-, 5-, and 6-year-old as they are for the 14-, 15-, and 16-year-old who is struggling to learn to read, there are other instructional issues that become very important for older students,” Wren says. Motivation is the most important of these issues for the older struggling reader.

When they begin school, students assume they can learn to read, but by second and third grade many of them do everything possible to avoid reading instruction, according to research conducted by Michael Pressley, director of the Master in Education Program at the University of Notre Dame. These students don't like to read, so they don't practice reading and fall further behind. Then they act out or develop coping skills to mask their reading difficulties.

Early reading research initiatives also don't necessarily help the increasing numbers of older students who speak English as a second language. To help these older struggling readers, many secondary schools are asking their teachers to learn how to teach reading in addition to the content areas for which they are responsible. Administrators at one of these schools, Western Oaks Middle School in Putnam City, Oklahoma, have enlisted the staff—from the

Teaching Reading from the Newspaper



When trying to engage older struggling readers in learning how to read, “you’ve got to provide content that relates to real life,” says SEDL program associate Marsha Loyd. As newspapers began publishing special supplements for the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Loyd began to see content for reading and writing lessons in which older students would be interested.

While most of SEDL’s intensive reading sites are still determining the best way to proceed with secondary reading instruction, SEDL staff are offering models based on current events to core content teachers to help their students develop comprehension strategies by asking questions, visualizing, drawing inferences, determining important ideas, and synthesizing information.

With the statement, “I can teach reading with a daily newspaper,” Loyd challenged teachers at SEDL’s intensive work sites at high schools in Green Forest and Grady, Arkansas; Hatch, New Mexico; and Kinta, Oklahoma. When those teachers asked Loyd how she was able to do this, Loyd purchased several copies of a five-day newspaper supplement on 9/11, designed five reading and writing lesson models based on the supplement, and sent them to the teachers.

The models include reading open-response items and writing prompts similar to those used in state criterion referenced tests. Loyd, who plans to use these lessons with teachers throughout the year, hopes to develop partnerships among history and language arts teachers in addition to student reading skills.

history teachers to the orchestra teacher—in the battle to improve reading skills among their students. The school also has partnered with SEDL’s REL to provide staff with the skills they need to detect and address reading difficulties.

Working to Improve All Students’ Reading Ability in Putnam City

Putnam City schools are much like schools in other growing cities across the country—a changing student population means the district must change, too.

Once a suburban school district, Putnam City is now considered an inner-city district, and school and district staff are facing the challenges that come with this change. An increasingly diverse student population has Putnam City faculty searching for the right

professional development to help teachers address these students’ needs. And Putnam City’s high rate of student mobility makes it difficult for teachers to build student knowledge. District and school staff have watched Putnam City Schools slip in their status as one of the premier districts in Oklahoma. They want to regain that title by focusing on reading through their partnership with the REL.

At the 640-student Western Oaks Middle School, educators formerly relied on language arts teachers to fill in reading gaps for students. Now Western Oaks principal Don Wentroth is pulling his entire faculty together to “improve all students’ reading abilities—not just the poor readers’ abilities, but everybody’s.”

This approach won’t be easy because secondary teachers typically have not received extensive training in reading instruction. The challenge is to help them understand how they can teach reading without

Reading failure begins early, takes root quickly, and affects students for life.

— Louisa C. Moats



sacrificing instruction in their regular content areas, Wren says. In secondary settings, “each student may have six or seven teachers, and a teacher may only have an opportunity to work with any one student for 50 minutes a day or less. Coordinating reading instruction across different teachers to support the reading instruction needs of each student is a daunting task,” he continues.

Generating teacher buy-in also is challenging, says Adele Rowland, a Western Oaks reading teacher who provides reading professional development for the staff. “When this subject was first broached a year and a half ago, a lot of teachers thought, ‘That doesn’t have anything to do with me,’” she continues. “But as we convinced them how important reading is and that they, too, have something to contribute to the student’s ability to read, our buy-in rate has grown to about 95 percent.”

Using such SEDL tools as the framework of cognitive elements that underlie learning to read, Wren and other REL reading experts are helping Western Oaks faculty understand their own reading

assessment data so they can make informed choices about the most effective reading strategies for each student.

“There isn’t a powerful instructional strategy I would use with all students,” Wren says. “But there are some good strategies I would use with some students. And helping teachers understand which students, when, and how is the hard part. It’s not the strategy that’s important, it’s how the teacher uses it and with which students.”

SEDL models instructional strategies and provides resources during Western Oaks staff development sessions and reading committee meetings. SEDL and school staff then track the effects of reading strategies on student performance using the Accelerated Reading computer assessment system called STAR Reading, which assesses a student’s reading comprehension skill and assigns a level for independent reading. SEDL also is working with district staff and faculty at Putnam City West High School, which receives many Western Oaks graduates.

Secondary Reading Resources

Building Reading Proficiency at the Secondary School Level: A Guide to Resources

This 2000 Southwest Educational Development Laboratory publication, available online at www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/read16.html, reviews the scholarly literature to determine current theoretical perspectives and research findings on building reading proficiency at the secondary level and their implications for classroom instruction. Rather than reporting all the factors that can impact secondary-level reading proficiency, the publication presents those for which a research base establishes essential importance and for which there are pedagogical implications. The book lists programs and strategies that align with those findings. Visit www.sedl.org/reading for more SEDL reading resources.

Guidelines for Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well

In May 2000, the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) produced *Guidelines*, which was drawn from the research report, *Beating the Odds: Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well*. The report, excerpted at <http://cela.albany.edu/eie2/index.html>, was written by Judith A. Langer, chair of the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University at Albany–State University of New York, director of CELA, and founder and director of the Albany Institute for Research in Education. The guidelines, available online at <http://cela.albany.edu/publication/guidebook.htm>, outline six features of effective instruction for middle and high school personnel working to improve their English programs.

Reading Instruction for Older Struggling Readers

This May 1999 briefing paper produced by Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) provides an overview of the possible reasons for the high number of older struggling readers and what teachers can do to help. Written by visiting PREL scholar Alfredo Schifini, Ph.D., the briefing paper is available online at www.prel.org/products/Products/reading-instruction.htm.

When Older Kids Can’t Read

This March 2001 Educational Leadership report, available online at www.scoe.org/topics/reading_corner/pdf/Older_Readers.pdf, addresses the following reading strategies regarding reading instruction beyond third grade: phonological awareness and decoding, reading fluency and word recognition, vocabulary and phrase meanings, comprehension instruction, and written response to reading. The report’s author, Louisa C. Moats, is a clinical associate professor of pediatrics at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. With a research team from the center, she is completing analysis of a four-year study, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, of reading development and reading instruction in Washington, D.C.’s high-poverty, inner-city schools.

Developing Capacity for the Future

The partnership with SEDL didn't begin quite as expected, Western Oaks Principal Wentroth says. "We thought SEDL's experts would just come in here and fix us. But they showed us that we're the ones who are going to have to design the program and maintain the momentum once the partnership is over. We're the captains of the ship, and SEDL is here to provide support."

The middle school, high school, and district each have assembled leadership teams to make and sustain the changes needed to improve reading skills at Putnam City's secondary schools. Western Oaks also has created a job-embedded professional development model to promote collaborative inquiry. All Western Oaks teachers meet weekly

with Wentroth to discuss the effectiveness of the reading strategies they are implementing in the classroom. SEDL staff meet monthly with Western Oaks staff teams to document their thoughts, listen to their needs and concerns, and serve in the critical role of friend and coach.

If secondary schools have "flexible and creative teachers who are willing to develop strong reading instruction skills and who can overcome the obstacles of time and student motivation, I know we can do better than one in seven," Wren concludes.

Putnam City assistant superintendent Gene Parsons, is confident that Western Oaks will be successful. "I think we're going to do OK. We've got good people who are eager to do a better job for kids."

SEDL

Johanna Franke is a SEDL communications specialist. You may contact Johanna at jfranke@sedl.org.

Appropriate Reading Assessments Are a Click Away with SEDL's Database

Continued from page 32

The database includes information about more than 150 assessments designed for young students. It offers essential information to educators deciding whether to use an assessment, including its cost, how it is administered, cognitive elements supported by the assessment, and languages in which the assessment can be administered.

Debbie Smith, director of reading and literacy at the Oklahoma State Department of Education reports her office used the database when they created Oklahoma's "State Approved Reading Sufficiency Assessment List," which is part of Oklahoma's Reading Sufficiency legislation. "The database was so helpful, because we had to choose assessments for K-3 and designate the specific areas that it assessed. Specifically, we looked at phoneme awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, and comprehension," she says. "We asked all of our eligible districts who were writing a Reading Excellence Act grant to utilize the database when addressing the assessment portion of the grant. In addition, we have a link for SEDL and the database from our state Web site."

Throughout the country, hundreds of educators, state agencies, and technical assistance providers are using SEDL's Reading Assessment Database on an ongoing basis—the site averages 3,000 hits each month.

Knowing how and what to teach to strengthen reading

The searchable database is just one of the many research-based tools and strategies being used in SEDL's systemic work with schools and districts across the southwest region. As part of its Regional Educational Laboratory contract, SEDL and its

partner, the Charles A. Dana Center, are building the capacity of schools and districts to improve performance in reading and mathematics. Most of the schools with which SEDL and the Dana Center are working have chosen to focus on strengthening reading instruction as their first step in raising student achievement.

In the REL site work, SEDL staff are helping schools become more effective reading teachers by providing them with a background of the cognitive development that takes place as children learn to read, using *The Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read: A Framework*. The framework was developed during the last REL contract, along with a collection of tools to help teachers acquire the expertise to strengthen instruction, administer assessments effectively, and use data to inform their instruction. Each school's progress will be measured by progress made on state achievement tests.

SEDL's Reading Assessment Database and Cognitive Foundations Framework work hand-in-hand to help schools increase reading achievement. "It is no surprise that the most effective teachers have a sound understanding of the relationship between assessment and instruction," says Buttram. "They have the ability to assess students' needs and are able to meet those needs with focused instruction that directly addresses the areas."

As one reading support specialist recently reported to SEDL via email, "We have a commitment to good assessment at my school, and to serving kids' diagnosed needs as best we can, so the database is a very helpful source for finding what we need. Our data shows good growth for our students over the past two years, and the right assessments have helped us know what to teach."

SEDL

The Right Questions Can Improve Student Thinking and Learning

By Leslie Blair

“**B**asic literacy is, perhaps, best characterized as a read and recall, write neatly, and spell accurately, model of performance,” write Richard Allington and Peter Johnston in a recent report. But they continue, “thoughtful literacy, on the other hand, is characterized by students who can read, write, and think in the complex and critical ways needed in a post-industrial democratic society.”

For the past several years SEDL program associate Jill Slack has been training educators throughout SEDL’s Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center (SECAC) region to use more effective questioning techniques in their classrooms to increase their students’ level of thinking and to help them to acquire thoughtful literacy as defined by Allington and Johnston.

“Questioning and thinking go hand in hand,” Slack says. Effective questioning also can be an assessment tool for teachers, helping them determine what their students know and don’t know.

Slack talked about the questioning approach in an interview with *SEDL Letter* on April 10, 2002, in New Orleans, where she conducted a one-day training session for New Orleans Public Schools K–3 reading-intervention teachers who are involved in SECAC’s Reading Success Network (RSN).

“Questioning is one of the missing pieces in teacher training,” Slack says. “Teachers often ask closed-ended questions that don’t allow the students to demonstrate their level of knowledge or lack of knowledge.” She explains, “The quality of response is affected by the quality of the question’s content and how the question is asked. The pacing of the question also comes into play.”

Through practice sessions, workshop participants learned how difficult it was to ask questions that solicit a response other than yes or no. They found they habitually began questions with such stems as, “Do you think . . . ?” or “Did you notice . . . ?” that could be answered yes or no. Instead, Slack guides the teachers in asking questions that demonstrate a student’s knowledge and comprehension and allow the teachers to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. As an alternative, a teacher might ask, “What did you notice . . . ?” or “What do you think . . . ?”

Slack breaks questions down into two groups:



core questions and processing questions. Core questions cue and direct the classroom’s thought experiences and focus on observation and recall, comparison, grouping, labeling, classifying, sequencing, predicting, and inferring.

Slack encourages the teachers to take a student’s response to a deeper level by using the student’s response to form their next question, which likely will be a processing question. Processing questions narrow the focus of discussion, elicit a variety of responses from different students, provide students with an opportunity to give evidence for their ideas or information, or help students create relationships between evidence and statements. “Using processing questions means we have to be good listeners,” Slack says.

Slack also encourages teachers to make questioning a common part of their classrooms. “Students fear questions and this can stop learning. Generally speaking, we ask a student a second question only when we consider the first answer wrong. Because of this, students have a trained aversion to the second question.”

Further questioning can help teachers determine how deeply a child is thinking. “You don’t know exactly at what level a child is thinking until you ask follow-up questions.” She notes a student’s answer could indicate a certain level of analysis, but if that student heard the response the day before, she may actually be at a lower knowledge level. By probing, a teacher would be able to tell how well the student truly understands the material.

New Orleans Public Schools K–3 reading intervention teachers Sonya Carter (left) and Judith Jastal work on their questioning techniques at a SECAC workshop.

SECAC's questioning workshop includes guidance in preparing lesson plans to help teachers anticipate what types of responses learners may give to core questions and the types of processing questions that the teacher should be prepared to ask to direct classroom conversation and deepen thinking. For the RSN training in New Orleans, teachers prepared lesson plans related to books they might actually use in their elementary school classrooms.

The workshop also includes time to practice coding a transcript of classroom conversation. This helps teachers refine what types of questioning they should use in different circumstances. To hone their questioning skills, Slack encourages teachers to audiotape classroom discussions. Teachers can then code transcripts and interpret classroom conversation to determine at which points in the conversation they should have used certain types of questions or redirected the conversation to encourage more critical thinking. SECAC's questioning training is usually presented to districts and schools in multiple sessions over a period of time. This allows teachers an opportunity to return to their classrooms, practice using the newly learned questioning techniques, and then return for additional coaching and training, during which time they can share how they used the techniques and receive additional feedback.

The April RSN session was unusual because it was only one day of training, instead of the several days of training that Slack prefers. Teachers, nevertheless,

found the training useful. Kathleen Theodore, a teacher at McDonogh No. 15 Creative Arts Magnet School in New Orleans, notes that since the training her lesson plans "are clearly focused on the questioning techniques that I need to increase student involvement and learning. I am very conscious not only of how I phrase a question, but also of the questions I ask at a particular moment." Theodore says the staff development teacher and principal at McDonogh are now interested in implementing the questioning strategies schoolwide through staff development activities and school improvement planning.

SEDL



SEDL program associate Jill Slack leads questioning training in New Orleans.



For more information about the questioning workshops, contact Jill Slack at the Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center, 800-644-8671 or by email at jslack@sedl.org.

Effective Core Questions

Effective core questions cue and direct the thought experiences of the classroom discourse.

Core questions should be

- **Clear**—Core questions should use language that students understand.
- **Focused**—Core questions should identify content and thinking skill.
- **Open**—Core questions should use words that provide learners with opportunities to state complete responses and allow for diverse responses.

Examples of core questions include these:

- What do you notice about the _____? (Observing)
- Tell me what you remember about _____. (Recalling)
- In what ways are _____ and _____ alike? (Comparing)
- What differences do you find between _____ and _____? (Contrasting)
- Which of the items on the list go together for some reason? (Grouping)
- Based on the reasons for the groups, what would be some appropriate names or phrases? (Labeling)
- Which of the examples belong in the _____ group? (Classifying)
- What is the order of the following information based on (criterion)? (Sequencing)
- What are the causes of _____? (Inferring causes)
- What do you think is true about _____? (Inferring quality)
- What do you think will happen as a result of _____? (Predicting)

Types of Processing Questions

- Refocusing questions are used if learners are not doing the kind of thinking initiated or are talking off subject.
- Clarifying questions are used if learners' responses are unclear or if the teacher feels more appropriate language could be used to express the idea. They are also used to help learners define words and bring additional meaning to the ideas they have expressed.
- Verifying questions are used to encourage learners to cite or provide additional evidence for their ideas or information. Learners verify information through personal experience, stating what authorities say is true, or using a principle or generalization that exemplifies the information.
- Redirecting questions are used to enhance learner-learner interaction. Used to elicit a variety of responses from different students.
- Narrowing-the-focus questions are used to limit the content learners talk about.
- Supporting questions are used to help learners make relationships between and among evidence statements.

Examples of Processing Questions

Refocusing

- What makes you say _____?
- You are noticing ways in which the _____ are alike. In what ways are they different?

Clarifying

- What do you mean by _____?
- Draw that for me.
- Define _____.
- What are you referring to when you say _____?

Verifying

- How do you know _____?
- When or where have you experienced this before?
- Give me an example of _____.

Redirecting

- Someone else tell me in what ways we can group _____.
- What other predictions can we make about _____?

Narrowing the focus

- What do you notice about _____?
- Tell me more about _____.

Supporting

- What makes you say _____ is an example of _____?
- On what basis did you order these?
- What makes you say _____ caused _____?
- What makes you say _____ is the result of _____?
- What is the reason for thinking _____ will result in _____?

Questioning Strategies —

An Annotated Bibliography

By Jill Slack

Beyer, B. 1997. *Improving student thinking: A comprehensive approach*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

In this book, Beyer provides instruction in specific teaching skills integrated into subject matter teaching. Features a practical, how-to-do-it emphasis. Full of sample materials, explanations and examples for creating thoughtful questions and classroom environments, as well as how to encourage and guide student thinking and provide opportunities to think.

Collins, C. & J. M. Mangieri. 1992. *Teaching thinking: An agenda for the 21st century*. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Better Schools.

This book provides practical ideas and strategies for the teaching thinking, along with findings from research on teaching thinking in diverse populations.

Dantonio, M. 1990. *How can we create thinkers? Questioning strategies that work for teachers*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

This manual demonstrates how to ask questions that prompt students to focus, expand, and support their answers. Includes specific and practical steps for developing a successful questioning-skills training program.

Dantonio, M. & P. Beisenherz. 2000. *Learning to question, questioning to learn: Developing effective teacher questioning practices*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

This resource introduces a strategy that develops and refines student conceptual understandings through instructional conversations. Examines the critical issues of productive questioning using vignettes, lesson plans, and transcripts.

Kruse, J. 1988. *Classroom activities in thinking skills*. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Better Schools.

Kruse presents over 40 tested activities in critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and decision making.

Leeds, D. 2000. *The 7 powers of questions: Secrets to successful communication in life and at work*. New York: Perigee.

This book reveals the seven powers of questions and shows how to use them most effectively to get more out of every professional and personal encounter.

Morgan, N. & J. Saxton. (2001). *Asking better questions: Models, techniques and classroom activities for engaging students in learning*. Markham, Ontario: Pembroke.

This guidebook provides tips for modeling questions, lesson plans that emphasize questioning and engage students in learning, and suggestions for using questions to develop knowledge and generate reflection.

Presseisen, B. J. 1988. *At-risk students and thinking*. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Better Schools.

This text examines students at risk in America's schools, the need for thinking instruction, and implications for practice; includes chapters by national experts.

Sousa, D. A. 1988. *Questioning strategies for effective teaching*. Philadelphia, PA: Research for Better Schools.

This videotape focuses on developing thinking skills through effective questioning in the classroom and discusses types of questions, strategies for questioning, and how to utilize student responses.

Sternberg, R. J. & L. C. Spear-Swerling. (1996). *Teaching for thinking*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

This book addresses questions such as, What is "good thinking"? Which strategies promote thinking to learn as well as learning to think? Can asking the right questions enhance student thinking? How can teachers prepare for the challenges of teaching for thinking? Lively classroom vignettes, sample classroom activities, and self-study questions are included.

SEDL

Jill Slack is a SEDL program associate who works on projects under SEDL's Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center and Regional Educational Laboratory contracts. You may contact Jill by email, jslack@sedl.org.



Voices from the Field

The Journey

By Kathleen Theodore

“Voices from the Field,” is a regular *SEDL Letter* column that features essays written by educators. These essays do not necessarily reflect the views of SEDL staff, but serve as a touchstone for the challenges and successes of schools and districts around our region.

The journey began on a hot and humid September day in 1980. Bright-eyed, full of hope, and with the anticipation of successfully making a difference, I was a new teacher with a multi-age classroom of 6- and 7-year-olds. Butterflies danced in my stomach as I faced the challenge of teaching a national treasure—our children—to read.

The school in which I was assigned had a unique child-centered philosophy based on the British infant schools. The philosophy was incorporated into every facet of the curriculum and given to each teacher in a handbook. I read with fervor the handbook’s section on teaching reading. Language experience, listening to each student read individually, and reading aloud to students daily were the key components of the school’s philosophy on reading instruction.

Each day I tried vigorously to incorporate these components into my reading instruction. I was successful reading aloud to my students. However, my attempts at listening to all of my students read individually as well as allowing them to participate in individualized language experience activities were less successful. My students were on so many different levels, ranging from fluent readers to those whose decoding, sight vocabulary, and language skills were minimal. There were not enough hours in the day to individualize instruction to the extent needed for students to achieve mastery of critical reading skills. I remember well those students who learned to read well in spite of me. But the majority of my students seemed to need something more than my instruction offered. There must be something that I was missing. For the sake of all of my students, I knew I had to embark on a journey. It would be the most important journey of my career, requiring a relentless search for knowledge with a commitment to act strategically to ensure that all of my students emerged as readers.

I began to talk to the experienced teachers. I listened attentively as they described their practices, and I also observed them in action with their students. Those successful teachers fascinated me. They illustrated that teaching reading is a multifaceted process that requires careful orchestration, especially the late Ottie Pittman, who as a first-grade teacher in New Orleans effortlessly taught so many students to read. She moved fluidly through various activities such as explicitly teaching sound-symbol correspondences and blending sounds to read words. Her pace was brisk and her expectation for student participation and mastery were evident as she amplified responses, provided immediate correction, and retested orally for mastery. She moved students through tasks involving reading books that contained the phonics elements and sight words taught by having students listen to and interact with stories that were much higher than their reading levels. She incorporated all the reading components I knew were

Kathleen Theodore teaches first grade at McDonogh No. 15 Creative Arts Magnet School in New Orleans, Louisiana. She is a freelance consultant who enjoys working with children and teachers.

important. In an “ah-ha” moment it became evident to me that she obtained results because she had a systematic approach to teaching reading. I realized that you could have all the right pieces, but if they were not carefully and purposefully sequenced, our students — especially our most fragile learners — would not be successful readers.

To my dismay, teaching reading was the most challenging part of my first year of teaching. As I contemplated the process, I realized that I was ill-prepared to teach beginning readers. I could not put together or understand the key ingredients in teaching reading.

It was during my second year of teaching that I experienced a ray of hope through a student named Alicia. She had enrolled after the school year had begun and was not yet able to read. Since I was not confident of my ability to teach her to read, I asked an experienced teacher down the hall to teach her. Toward the end of the school year, I was amazed when I heard Alicia reading. She read beautifully! Immediately I asked her teacher how she taught Alicia to read. She told me that although the school’s philosophy did not condone it, she used a phonics program along with the basal reader. She strongly believed that the phonics instruction was key in enabling her students to read well.

Finally I had something tangible to grasp. Through courses at a local university I began to learn how to teach phonics. My thirst for knowledge led me on. My students deserved no less than the best; I needed to learn more. The end of my second year of teaching was a time of great frustration for me — and unbeknownst to me, it was also a time of frustration for many of my colleagues — both veteran and new teachers. Many of the successful veteran reading teachers had moved on. Then, in what was a turning point, for us all, my colleagues and I began a dialogue about reading: We asked each other, “Do you know how to teach reading?” The answer was a unanimous no. We all knew what we had been told to do in the teacher’s handbook was not working. It was a relief to admit this among ourselves, but we were not comfortable admitting it to our principal. Somehow we felt that the inability to teach reading could negatively reflect on our effectiveness as teachers. We resolved then to figure it out ourselves.

We soon realized that each of us had students in our rooms who not only could read, but could read very well. They all came from one teacher, Jean DeLeon. She gathered us on the patio of her French Quarter home and taught us how to teach reading. Jean’s approach was grounded in the understanding that English is an alphabetic language and that reading any alphabetic language requires a reader to go through the alphabet and crack the code in order to have access to language and meaning. She emphasized the importance of helping students understand that spoken language is made up of sounds. We became the students as she engaged us in the listening activities of rhyming, oral blending, and segmenting larger parts of words, such as syllables, as well as segmenting and manipulating phonemes, the smallest unit of sounds. Jean’s style of teaching respected the needs of beginning readers as they progressed through an intense focus on processing language to reading fluently. She used decodable text to teach reading and rich literature to develop oral language comprehension, vocabulary, and critical thinking skills. Her systematic approach became clear to us as we examined the material she used as a vehicle to literacy with much greater understanding. The circle of colleagues — of professionals teaching and learning from each other — became not only a circle of friends but also a circle of enlightenment.

This circle of enlightenment enhanced the journey and will always be a part of me. It gave me the courage to successfully teach many students to read when so many others wanted me to teach differently.

What I gained from the circle is that we use different texts for different purposes. For example, while the *Velveteen Rabbit* is a beautiful piece of literature, it cannot be used to teach beginning readers to read. Its use should be geared toward increasing oral language, critical thinking, vocabulary, and comprehension. Part of the journey was learning what effective reading instruction is and developing skill in delivering instruction. This skill was accomplished through teacher practice, observation, conversing and studying with colleagues, and coaching. More important, it was the *admission* of not knowing how to teach reading that led to great discovery.

Students need explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics in order to break the code of our alphabetic language. A key component of phonics instruction is integrating phonics into the context of reading through substantial practice with decodable text. Reading is a carefully orchestrated symphony. Applying the right instruction at the right time or stage of development is deeply rooted in its chords. But the heart of the journey was realizing that both my students and I needed time and practice to develop expertise. I needed to be able to deliver effective reading instruction and my students needed to learn to read. My students also needed ample opportunities to develop fluency. Then they could grow wings and fly, celebrating their successes along the way.

It's a great and exciting time to be a part of reading education. The scientific reading research has led the educational community onto the cutting edge of success—leaving no child behind. We can no longer listen to those who promote reading instruction without substantiated research. The cost of failure is too expensive and too often those students who fall behind stay behind. I believe that all teachers want their students to succeed. We must work together to develop our own professional learning communities that will inspire and empower us to achieve great things.

To my colleagues I say: The journey continues. Be of good cheer. These are truly good times. A circle of enlightenment awaits you. Close your eyes and visualize every child reading well.

SEDL



Sherwood Forest Students Are Reading Their Way to the Top

By Leslie Blair

Have no doubt that Antoinette Boissierre is a principal focused on reading. Greeting visitors to Sherwood Forest Elementary last April, wearing a big red-and-white striped *Cat in the Hat* hat, she explains, “We’re all caught up in wanting everyone to be successful readers!” She also explains that this East New Orleans elementary is celebrating “Read Across America Week,” albeit a little late in the school year.

Her bright office is a haven for young readers with its comfortable chairs and storybooks everywhere — on shelves and in baskets. Boissierre is fond of having story time in her office with small groups of children. She points out an apron and chef’s toque, decorated with hand-painted phonics-related sayings and graphics. She often dons the apron and toque for phonics activities.

Boissierre speaks proudly of her students: “They know the emphasis here is read, read, read.”

And she has reason to be proud. This year, for the first time, Sherwood Forest received a “Recognized Academic Growth Rating” from the Louisiana Department of Education. The school’s 1999–2000 Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) scores indicated 27 percent of students were performing at the Basic level in Language Arts; the 2000–2001 scores show that 34.5 percent scored at the Basic level. The 2000–2001 results also showed a considerable decrease in the number of students performing at the Unsatisfactory level, dropping from 43.7 percent in 1999–2000 to 32.7 percent in 2000–2001.

The reasons for increased achievement at Sherwood Forest are many. The primary one is Boissierre’s leadership. The school has instituted a number of strategies and approaches to support reading, including 90 minutes of reading a day for every child and the Open Court phonics program for all grade levels, K–5. Under Boissierre’s direction, the school has also become a Comer school, which provides a structure and process for adults — administrators, faculty, staff, parents — to collaborate to support student learning and overall development.

SEDL’s Southeast Comprehensive Assistance Center (SECAC) has worked with Sherwood Forest staff for three years, through the highly successful Reading Success Network (RSN). SECAC’s

professional development in reading strengthens teacher instruction by providing strategies and tools that can be used with a school’s existing reading program and aligned with district and state standards and goals. Teachers also learn to use reading assessment tools and data collection and analysis to inform instruction and determine appropriate intervention strategies. RSN includes a coaching process that builds professional relationships and expertise within the school through the use of study teams. These teams of teachers collaboratively examine student work and data to make instructional decisions. The RSN has been a valuable experience not only for the Sherwood Forest staff but also for the 30 or so core reading-intervention teachers hired by the New Orleans Public School System to provide additional reading support at several elementary schools.

Boissierre says reading activities and strategies given to her teachers by SECAC “push the idea that you don’t stop with teaching skills, you provide as much practice with skills as possible.” RSN activities have helped bring an enthusiasm for reading and an ease to classroom interaction, too. “Our children are freer in their reactions and responses in the classroom now,” says the veteran principal. “They are deriving so much pleasure from reading and



Principal Antoinette Boissierre gets into the spirit of the “Read Across America” week celebration at Sherwood Forest Elementary.

Sherwood Forest teachers Jeanine Boutte, Tiffanni Shaw, and Christian Arceneaux participate in a summer Reading Success Network activity.





Third graders in Jeanine Boutte's class listen to one last Dr. Seuss story before the dismissal bell rings.

they know now that their teacher will be patient with them as they are learning to read.”

Part of this more-relaxed classroom atmosphere comes from using centers to allow small groups of students to work together. It also comes from RSN instruction such as a recent questioning workshop which helps teachers change their way of questioning to encourage responses from children who may be hesitant to participate and encourage children to think more deeply about what they have read.

With the New Orleans Public Schools' emphasis on reading at the third-grade level, all third-grade teachers have been active in RSN for several years along with Tradonya Domingue, the school's on-site staff developer and some teachers from other grade levels. Domingue reports, “Teachers who are participating in RSN are more innovative and open to change. They are sharing more professional development, relying on rubrics more, and using different forms of assessments.” Domingue shares RSN training and models activities with teachers throughout the school. Third-grade teachers Jeannine Boutte and Tiffani Shaw also demonstrate RSN strategies they have integrated into the reading curriculum to other Sherwood teachers.

Domingue works especially closely with the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, who traditionally

have not had to focus on phonics. “Upper-level teachers sometimes have problems teaching reading because they haven't received as much training in reading. They don't *expect* children in upper grades to have problems reading,” she says. “There are also challenges because usually the struggling readers are low-functioning in many ways. You have to try to keep the content at their higher level, but focus on needed skills.”

Many of the RSN activities are easily adaptable to meet the needs of older struggling readers and help teachers address reading skills without sacrificing subject-matter knowledge. For example, WordSplash (see page 29) for older students can include key terms or concepts in a textbook chapter, newspaper, or magazine article the students are about to study; or it can be used as a summarizing strategy, in which students read and then create their own WordSplash of what they consider to be the key terms or ideas in the passage. Sentence Elaboration can also be adapted by extending sentence length and increasing the number of missing words

Jeanine Boutte notes teachers often feel overwhelmed using assessments and data. But she says SECAC's assessment training has helped—the RSN teachers have shared what they have learned with Sherwood Forest study groups. “Now we're able to look at the data and see where we should change our instruction.”

Since becoming involved in the SECAC training, Boissierre tries to get other principals involved as well. “It's not costing you anything except time,” she says. “And SEDL has taken me up the ladder where I like to be anyway—with others who like success.”

SEDL



For more information about the Reading Success Network, visit SEDL's Web site at <http://www.sedl.org/secac/rsn.html>.

SEDL communications associate Leslie Blair is editor of SEDL Letter. You may reach Leslie at lblair@sedl.org.

Here are examples of some of the RSN activities that Sherwood Forest teachers are using to help students develop the skills necessary to become fluent readers. You may want to adapt these for your class.

Stomp and Snap!

Objective: To develop students' phonological awareness by teaching them that sounds are different from letters.

Activity: The teacher prepares a list of both sounds and letters. If the teacher says the name of a letter, students stomp one of their feet. If the teacher makes the sound of a phoneme, students snap their fingers. This activity can be done with children after they have learned the letter names and some of the letter sounds.

WordSplash

Objective: To develop and activate student's background knowledge by using words in a story to make predictions

Activity: On an overhead or chart paper, display the title of the story in the center and 6–10 colorful, unusual, or unfamiliar words used by the author “splashed” around the title. (See example at right.) Tell the students these are words they will encounter in the story. The students then read the words aloud together as you point to each. Ask the students to use the words to predict what will happen in the story. They should guess how the words relate to each other. Write a few sentences that use the words and summarize the predictions. Read aloud or have the students read silently a part of the story. Then ask the students if they would like to change their predictions and record the changes. Continue this process as needed until the end of the story.

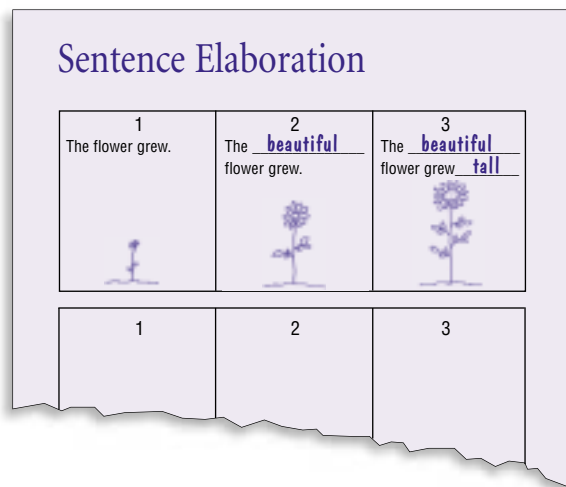
Variations: Create a WordSplash prior to viewing a film, pausing periodically for students to discuss and revise predictions; or for nonreaders, create a PictureSplash and follow the same process.



Sentence Elaboration

Objective: To help students learn sentence structure and expand the sentences they write.

Activity: Fold a sheet of paper into three equal sections labeled 1, 2, and 3. Next write a simple sentence on the chalkboard and have students copy it in the first section of their papers. (An option is to elicit a sentence from a student.) Then have the student illustrate the meaning of the sentence in the space under it. Next ask students to expand on the sentence. Then either you or the student can write the expanded sentence in section 2 and the student can illustrate it. Do the same for an elaborated sentence in the third section. *Variations:* Increase the complexity by extending the sentence length and increasing the number of missing words and make the illustrations optional.

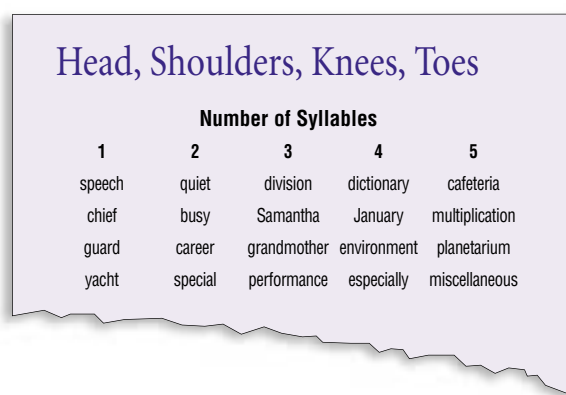


Head, Shoulders, Knees, Toes

Objective: To develop students' phonological awareness by breaking words into syllables

Activity: Prepare a list of words that have one to five syllables. Using the head, shoulders, knees, and toes, students tap out the number of syllables they hear in a word. Those that have five or more syllables are tapped on the seat of the pants. Some examples are given at right.

Variations: Students come up with their own words and they choose the actions to correspond with the number of syllables.



Alphaboxes

The Book _____

The Reader(s) _____

| | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|------------|
| A | B | C | D |
| E | F | G | H |
| I | J | K | L |
| M | N | O | P |
| Q | R | S | T |
| U | V | W | XYZ |

Alphaboxes

Objective: To develop graphophonic understanding and vocabulary through recollection and reflection of important points. (Worksheet shown at left.)

Activity: After reading a story or unit of study, students work in pairs or small groups to think of words that reflect important points. They insert the words into the appropriate Alphaboxes on the template (some boxes may not be filled in), making sure they tell how each selected word relates to the story. The class then creates

a compilation of the most interesting words generated by groups, making a special point to hear justification. Variations: Using the words collected in the Alphaboxes, students can create fact sentences, dictionary pages, and word walls. Older students also can write questions to go with the focus words and play Jeopardy.

December 2002 • 22

Alphaboxes

The Book Amazing Grace

The Readers: Lydia, John, Pat

| | | | |
|--|--|---|----------------------------------|
| A adventure Amazing Anansi the Spider auditions | B ballerina ballet black | C Captain Hook class | D |
| E | F | G girl Grace grandmother | H |
| I imagination | J Jean of Arc Joliet | K | L liner |
| M Ma | N Nana | O | P Peter Pan pretend |
| Q | R Romeo | S school play stories success | T teacher tutu |
| U | V voted | W Wendy | XYZ |



In Jeanine Boutte's class students work in groups to create "alphaboxes" of descriptive words used in a Dr. Seuss book, *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day*. They will use these for a writing assignment the next day.



Group work is a regular part of the school day for these Sherwood Forest students.



Appropriate Reading Assessments Are a Click Away with SEDL's Database

<http://www.sedl.org/reading/rad/>

A New Mexico principal tells the story of an American Indian kindergarten student at his school. When shown pictures of four common objects during an assessment of early reading skills, the child described the objects vividly without ever using the names of the objects. That the child was able to do so may have reflected the powerful oral tradition of his native language, *Keres*, and his fluency in that language. But, according to Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) program specialist Sebastian Wren, it may also have been a reflection of a poor assessment tool or one not suitable for that particular student.

Wren notes that while there are a variety of early reading assessments available, many are poor or inappropriate assessments. "Some don't support the cognitive elements related to learning to read," he explains, such as phonology, syntax, or phoneme awareness. "Many measure skill levels completely unrelated to reading—for example, one assessment

measures fine motor skills." He notes others measure skills that research has shown are not critical to learning to read, such as rhyming.

"The first step in improving reading instruction and increasing achievement is to find out what kids know and don't know. That means assessing kids on a number of cognitive elements, including comprehension, phoneme awareness, syntax, and decoding," says Joan Buttram, SEDL executive vice president and chief operating officer.

SEDL's database meets regional and national needs

To guide educators and technical assistance providers in their search for appropriate assessments, SEDL developed the Reading Assessment Database for Grades K–2, found online at <http://www.sedl.org/reading/rad/>.

Continued on page 19

SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL
SEDL
DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY
Building Knowledge to Support Learning

211 E. Seventh St., Austin, TX 78701-3281
512/476-6861

Read *SEDL Letter* on the Web:
<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedletter/>

Many of SEDL's publications are available on the Internet:
<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/>

NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
AUSTIN, TEXAS
PERMIT NO. 314

