

Foundational Skills for Reading

Before beginning reading instruction, the teacher should determine what, if any, foundational skills the student currently possesses. Foundational skills can be grouped into six major categories: 1) print awareness, 2) phonemic awareness, 3) phonics, 4) vocabulary, 5) fluency, and 6) comprehension.

1) Print Awareness

Print awareness includes the concept of book orientation. Does the student know how to properly hold the book, or does he or she hold it upside down? Left-to-right orientation is also a component of print awareness. Does the student know that pages are turned from the right-hand side of the book? Does he or she know that words are read left-to-right and, when appropriate, the left page is read before the right page? At this stage, a student will also begin to demonstrate understanding of the concept of a word. The student will discover that written words are represented as discrete units; as wholes unto themselves and physically separate from each other.

Many students with physical disabilities have never held a book. Depending on the severity of the disability, orienting the book, turning pages, and pointing to pictures or words are difficult due to the nature of the physical disability itself. Many students do not get to experience sitting on a parent's lap for story time due to the need for specialized positioning equipment. To increase awareness, teachers and parents can deliberately show the parts of the book to the student. The teacher or parent can show the student the spine, the cover, the title page, etc. Books can be deliberately opened or positioned incorrectly so that students with the ability to indicate yes/no can inform the reader if the book is in the correct position. Students with alternative or augmentative communication devices might have a book page that allows them to instruct the reader in positioning the book.

2) Phonemic awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words. A phoneme is a single speech sound (e.g., the letter h represents the sound /h/). When teachers work on phonemic awareness, they are teaching students about sounds (no written letters are used.) There are several different activities that may be used to promote phonemic awareness, although only a few are usually selected for instruction. Some of these include:

Phonemic Isolation. Students are asked what is the first sound in a word, or the last sound or the middle sound. For example, students may be asked, "What is the first sound in the word 'bat'?"

Phoneme Identity. Students are asked to identify the same sounds that are present in different words. For example, students may be asked, "What sound is the same in the words 'bat,' 'ball,' and 'big'?"

Phoneme categorization. In this type of activity, students are asked to identify the word that does not belong. For example, students may be asked, "What word doesn't belong?" "rug," "rag," "cat."

Phoneme blending. The ability to blend phonemes requires that the student understand that small sounds can be combined to make big sounds, or words. Being able to say individual sounds does not necessarily translate to the ability to sound out words. The student must learn how these sounds work together to form a word. Teaching students to put the sounds together without stopping their voice sometimes helps to make this concept more concrete. When teaching phoneme blending, the teacher may give some letters sounds and ask what word it makes. For example, the teacher may ask, “What word is mmmmaaannn?”

Phoneme segmentation. The ability to break a word into its separate sounds is phoneme segmentation. Students may be taught to count or tap out each of the sounds as they hear them. For example, the teacher may give the word “sam” and ask the sounds to say it slowly (“sssaaamm”) and count out the number of sounds.

Phoneme deletion. Students may be taught to drop initial letters from words to make smaller words (e.g., dropping the “l” from “land” to make “and”).

Phoneme addition. Students may also be taught to make new words by adding a phoneme to a word. For example, the teacher may say, “Listen to the word ‘at’. What word do you have if you add ‘sss’ to it?”

Phoneme substitution. Teachers may make a game of substituting phonemes to make new words. For example, the student may be asked to take away the “s” sound in “sat” and replace it with the “c” sound to make the word “cat”. (The Partnership for Reading, 2001).

3) Phonics

Unlike phonemic awareness activities that use only sounds (and not print), phonics is the understanding that there is a relationship between phonemes (the sounds of spoken language) and graphemes (the letters and spellings that represent these sounds in written language). When phonics instruction is being given, teachers systematically teach students how to relate letters and sounds. This includes breaking down spoken words into sounds to promote spelling and blending sounds from printed words to promote reading.

Teachers may initially use predictable books, patterned books, or rhyming books (e.g., *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura J. Numeroff) to help teach the relationship between the written and spoken words, as well as certain phonetic relationships. These books may be read over and over again. The use of repeated readings in early reading instruction is an important approach. Students without disabilities often ask to hear the same story for several days in a row. Students who are nonverbal and nonambulatory often do not have the ability to independently select a book. Therefore, it is important that the teacher or parent present choices to the student, allowing the student to choose the book to be read. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices can also contain requests such as “read it again please” so that students using AAC can request a familiar book.

Making overlays or AAC pages specific to particular books can also facilitate reading for students with severe speech and physical impairments. Programming phrases such as “and he was still hungry” (from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle) allow students with disabilities to participate in reading with the class. Spending time sounding out these words will be important to facilitate phonics. Reading cards or computer programs that help sound out targeted words are often used to promote phonics instruction.

It is important that a systematic phonics program is used to teach phonics and reading. The Nonverbal Reading Approach may be used to help teach students with severe speech and physical impairments to sound out words along with whatever phonics or reading program is used. (See section on the Nonverbal Reading Approach.)

4) Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a large category that includes listening vocabulary, speaking vocabulary, reading vocabulary, and writing vocabulary. Vocabulary refers to the words that we must know in order to communicate effectively. Vocabulary can be learned indirectly (e.g., through being read to, through conversations with adults) or directly (e.g., through specific word instruction or through strategies such as breaking longer words down into familiar parts).

Vocabulary pages for AAC devices can be made to accompany familiar stories. This allows the student with disabilities the chance to assist in reading the book. The teacher or parent can pause before particular words and allow the student time to select the correct word on the device. For example, a student could have the words terrible, rotten, no good, and very bad programmed into his or her device and asked to touch the appropriate word when the teacher or parent pauses during a reading of *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. Students can also participate in writing their own stories using software programs such as *Writing with Symbols*. This allows the student to select personalized, meaningful vocabulary to create a novel story.

Teachers will need to systematically teach vocabulary to increase the number of words the student will be able to recognize when reading and use when writing. It is important that assumptions are not made regarding comprehension of common words since many students with physical disabilities have a more limited experiential background. Word meanings should be taught with multiple, concrete examples given. Teaching vocabulary words before reading passages that contain them will assist the student in reading comprehension. Having activities using the new vocabulary words and promote repeated exposure to the words will help promote learning them.

Students should be taught ways to find the meaning of unknown words. Learning how to use a dictionary to find meanings will be a useful tool. This includes not only a dictionary book, that may be difficult for students with physical disabilities to use, but dictionaries found in software programs or on the internet. Also, students may be taught certain strategies, such as finding the prefix, suffix or root word to help with learning the meaning of certain words. Teachers will need to teach the student strategies to find out the meaning of unknown words.

5) Fluency

Fluency refers to the ability to read text accurately and quickly. Fluency is important because it provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Fluent readers do not have to concentrate on decoding so they can focus their efforts on making meaning of the text.

Teachers need to systematically teach their students to be more fluent readers. Teachers can modeling fluent reading while they read aloud and the students follow along. Students can also practice reading along as a computer reads aloud the text to them (and highlights the text as it is written). A simple technology is the use of a tape recorder in which students read along to a book on tape.

Having students read aloud short, easy text can also help, especially if this is done repeatedly with the intention of practicing reading at a faster rate. However, students who also have speech impairments may be unable to read aloud understandably or quickly. In these instances, the teacher needs to time the student's silent reading and have the student practice silently. The teacher will need to note if the student is able to finish the material more quickly with practice and keep track of the student's reading rate by timing the student. It is helpful if the student can move his finger to indicate what line he is reading so the teacher can actually see how the student is progressing. However, this is not always possible. It will be important to be sure the student is not "cheating" and just looking at the lines of print without really reading it. Asking comprehension questions will help determine if the student is truly reading the material.

6) Comprehension

Comprehension refers to the ability to make meaning out of text. Experiential background (prior knowledge) will contribute to comprehension as the student begins to remember facts, sequence, and main ideas of information read. There may be gaps in comprehension due to lack of experiences that are commonly present in students with physical disabilities. It is therefore important to assess for comprehension difficulties, and to teach what the student doesn't understand.

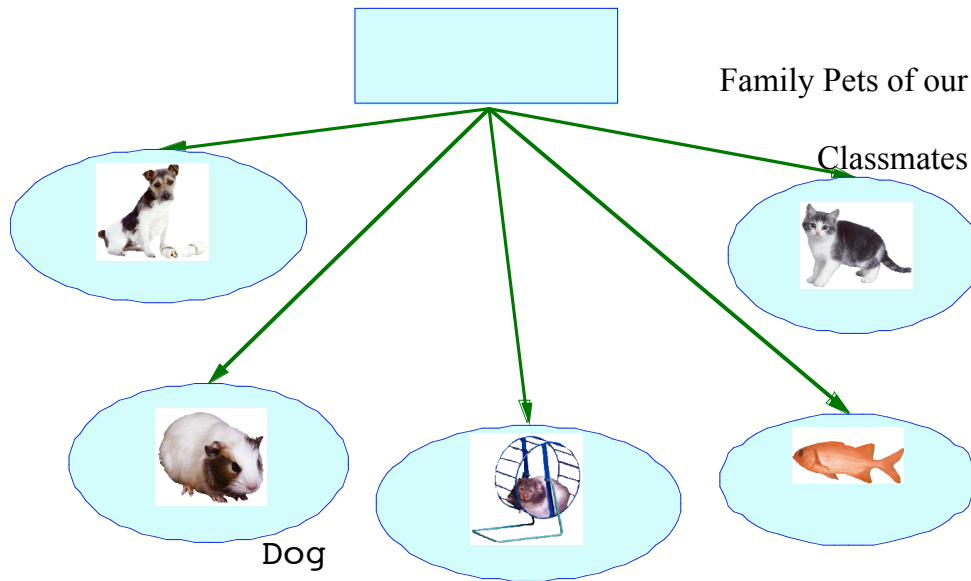
There are several different types of comprehension that teachers may target for instruction. Textually explicit comprehension questions refers to questions that address the literal understanding of what is written (e.g., Where did the girl go in the story?). Textually implicit comprehension questions are those that infer information such as main idea and drawing conclusions. Scripturally implicit comprehension questions are those that draw from background knowledge and include application and evaluation questions.

For students can not answer comprehension questions due to speech impairments, the questions may be presented in a multiple choice format. For example, the teacher may ask, "Where did Sally go in the beginning of the story? To the river? Store? House?" and let the student indicate which one by a motor movement (e.g., raises hand at one he wants to select or eye-gazes a choice) or sound (e.g., yes sound).

Students need to be taught comprehension strategies to increase the likelihood that they derive meaning from text. Students may be taught what to look for before reading the text or be provided questions to answer as they read. Some students will be taught to actively ask questions as they read or summarize or rephrase parts of the text as they read to aid in comprehension. Asking for assistance on parts that are not understood is also important.

For some students, creating a graphic organizer such as a web (see below) helps promote comprehension before reading. (They may also be used to aid in writing activities. For more information on writing, look under the writing section.)

This is an example of a web made on Kidspiration



This is an example of a web made on Inspiration

