Lesson Structure: What Components Lead to Foundational Skills Mastery?

Thinking about lesson structure immediately brought me back to my days as a special education teacher in a resource room. I read research about the importance of phonemic awareness in learning to read and I understood, long before the National Reading Panel published its report, that children benefited from systematic and explicit phonics instruction that included reading decodable text. However, I wasn’t as steeped in the lesson structure that would support students’ acquisition of foundational skills as I knew I needed to be.

I spent the next 10 years working with individuals and small groups of students of all ages and honed my teaching skills. The luxury of working in focused settings that included at least 45 minutes of instruction 3 to 5 days per week set me and my students up for success. Every day I spent time planning for each group based on the formative data that I gathered, and I charted my students’ progress with both word recognition skills and reading comprehension.

After spending 25 years instructing students, I shifted my focus to teacher training. I naively assumed that most teachers had knowledge about evidence-based practices and quickly realized that was not the case. A mind shift needed to occur, and the most powerful method of bringing that about was illustrating for teachers how to analyze screening and diagnostic data to drive targeted...
instruction in foundational reading skills. This data analysis was used to form, manage, and teach small, differentiated groups of children to ensure mastery of foundational skills.

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Evidence-based reading instruction has been a primary focus of our Literacy How coaching for K–3 teachers since classroom teachers are expected to deliver powerful instruction for all of their students. For students with identified word recognition difficulties, the small-group instruction must focus on teaching phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, encoding, reading fluency, and writing (National Reading Panel, 2000). Each lesson must also include time for guided and independent practice and focus on language and reading comprehension.

**Lesson Structure: The “Bones” of an Evidence-based Literacy Approach**

I consider the lesson structure to be the “bones” of an evidence-based literacy approach. Each part of the lesson should build and lead to the next, supporting student independence and foundational skills acquisition. The lesson structure outlined below follows a carefully designed sequence of activities that build from one to the next, incorporating elements of review, small chunks of new learning, and time to apply and practice. These are strong, research-based elements of a lesson (Rosenshine, 2012).

**Phonemic Awareness and Phoneme-Grapheme Relationships**

Each lesson begins with a phonemic awareness (PA) activity that is focused on the phonetic element(s) and level that a student is working on. Following the PA activity, students review phoneme-grapheme correspondences to work on automaticity. Special attention is paid to newly learned sound-letter associations as well as those that students haven't mastered.

**Explicit Instruction in Decoding and Encoding**

The next step in the lesson structure is decoding, which begins with explicit instruction in a new phonetic or morphological element (e.g., digraph /sh/, suffix -ed) or concept (e.g., the floss rule). The research is clear that explicit and systematic instruction in decoding is essential (Snow et al., 1998). Since decoding and encoding are reciprocal skills, students practice spelling those sounds and writing words with those patterns (Møller, Mortenson & Elbro, 2021). Structured decoding and encoding practice is included in each lesson so students see how sounds are spelled with different letters and letter patterns and sequences.

**High-Frequency Word Learning**

The lesson should also include time building automaticity with high-frequency words, many of which are phonetically irregular (Ehri, 2014). There are many clever and motivating activities that will engage students as they practice reading these words that are instrumental in building reading fluency.

**Applying Skills in Connected Text**

The next step is to practice applying all of these previously described elements in reading connected text and writing words and sentences with the patterns that have been explicitly taught (Foorman, et al., 2016). The writing portion of the lesson may include explicit instruction in letter formation as well as structured dictation of sentences. It is also important that students have time to write in response to what they've read so they practice writing independently as well.

**Frequency of Instruction**

The aforementioned sequence of an evidence-based literacy lesson may vary across a week's time. Ideally, students who need focused instruction in word recognition skills will engage in lessons on a daily basis. However, the length of the lesson may not be sufficient to
include all of the elements that have been described here.

For example, it is important that students read connected text daily, and equally as important, that the teacher is listening to them read while informally assessing their accuracy and automaticity. Since this portion of the lesson can be the most time-consuming, the time spent on reading connected text will vary so that the other lesson elements can be covered throughout the day and week. Explicit instruction in writing may only occur in three out of five weekly lessons.

**Moving Towards the Ultimate Goal**

The ultimate goal of an evidence-based literacy lesson focused on word recognition skills is to improve reading fluency so that the student’s cognitive energy can be used to construct meaning of any text that is put in front of them (Rasinski, 2019).

Teachers who adopt this approach follow a clearly articulated scope and sequence and use a gradual release of responsibility to scaffold students’ learning and time needed to practice to mastery. The best way to know when and how to increase the difficulty of the task is to monitor students’ progress using both formal and informal measures—for example, by moving from simple monosyllabic words to multisyllabic words with varying phonetic and morphological elements, and moving from very controlled decodable text to authentic text.

For the teacher learning the approach, understanding how one element of the lesson structure supports the rest allows them to better respond to student needs. The more experiences teachers have with strong lesson structures that apply the elements of evidence-based literacy and the pedagogical principles of instruction, the more adept they will become. Each student will be provided the requisite practice that leads to mastery.

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**References**


National Reading Panel. 2000. *Report of the National Reading Panel—Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.


About the Author

Margie B. Gillis, Ed.D is a nationally recognized literacy expert and a Certified Academic Language Therapist who has been teaching children of all ages to read for over 40 years. She received her Doctorate of Education from the University of Louisville in Special Education. In 2009, Margie founded Literacy How, Inc. to provide professional development opportunities and coaching for teachers on how best to implement evidence-based reading practices in the classroom.

Margie has worked at the policy level through the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). She was instrumental in Connecticut’s adoption of a universal screening test for K–3 students, implementing the Connecticut Foundations of Reading Test as part of the certification process for pre-service teachers, and is a member of the Connecticut K–4 Reading Model management team. Margie was recently a member of the CSDE's SLD/Dyslexia Workgroup.

She is the co-founder and former president of Smart Kids with Learning Disabilities, the former president of the CT Branch of the International Dyslexia Society, a board member of the Dyslexia Society of CT, and New Alliance Foundation, and an executive board member of the Academic Language Therapist Association. Margie is an academic advisor for ReadWorks.org and Understood.org. She is on the Editorial Board of the International Dyslexia Association, Perspectives, and The Reading League Journal.

In her capacity as Research Affiliate at Haskins Laboratories, Margie explores opportunities to empower teaching excellence. In 2010, Margie founded the Anne E. Fowler Foundation to support scholarships for teachers for graduate work in reading and language development.