The Educator's Science of Reading Toolbox

By the National Center on Improving Literacy in Partnership with The Reading League Journal

HOW TO USE SYSTEMATIC PHONICS INSTRUCTION IN YOUR CLASSROOM

The best approach to beginning reading instruction is one that incorporates explicit instruction in five areas: phonological awareness, systematic phonics instruction, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). These are known as the "5 Big Ideas" in beginning reading. While the research is clear on what to teach, figuring out how to teach these pieces can be challenging. This Educator's Toolkit provides practical ways to incorporate instruction in one of the 5 Big Ideas, systematic phonics instruction, within your classroom. Phonics instruction teaches the idea that letters, and groups of letters, match individual sounds in printed words. The ability to apply these predictable relationships to familiar and unfamiliar words is crucial to reading success. Systematic phonics instruction begins with teaching letter-sound correspondence and progresses to regular and irregular word reading.

Tips for Teaching Letter-Sound Correspondence

Letter-sound correspondence, or the relationship of the letters in the alphabet to the sounds they represent, is a key component of learning to read. To teach letter sound correspondence:

- Work with a few sounds at a time by teaching each letter of the alphabet and its most common corresponding sound.
- For each letter-sound relationship, instruction should include naming the letter or letters that represent the sound.
- When introducing each letter-sound relationship in isolation (versus when reading connected text), associate a picture of an object with the target sound. Using picture cues helps students remember the relationship between the letter and the sound (for example, an image of a pig, the printed letter "p," and the teacher orally stating the sound for /p/).
- Incorporating a short story that features the sound and has a picture of an object with the target sound and letter helps students remember the picture and the sound when they encounter the letter in print. For example, if students are learning the letter and sound for "p" with an image of a pig as the picture cue, the accompanying story may be "Polly Pig likes to eat pizza and play with her pals."
- When teaching the relationship between each letter and its corresponding sound, introduce the letter in uppercase and lowercase.

- Multiple practice opportunities with letter-sound relationships should be provided daily to teach new letter-sound relationships and to review letters and sounds previously taught.

Teachers often ask about the best order for teaching letter-sound correspondence. There is no specific agreed upon instructional sequence for introducing letter-sound relationships; however, relationships that enable students to begin reading words as quickly as possible should be introduced earliest in instruction. When teaching new letter-sound relationships:

- Begin with letter-sound relationships of high utility (such as m, a, and s) so students can begin working with words as soon as possible.
- Separate and stagger letter-sound relationships that are auditorily confusing (such as “b” and “v”) or visually similar (such as “b” and “d”) to promote mastery of one before introducing the confusing counterpart to students.
- After students master sounds spelled with one letter, more complex letter-sound relationships such as “sh” for /sh/, “a_e” for /a/, and “igh” for /i/ can be introduced.

Regular Word Reading

Once students have learned a few letter-sound relationships, they can begin to read regular words containing the letters and sounds they have learned. Initially, students learn to decode words that follow phonetic rules and can be sounded out (e.g., cat, box, bet). Strategies for blending or reading words from left to right by linking each letter or group of letters to their sounds, can be taught to help students decode regular words. One such strategy is encouraging students to read words without stopping between sounds. Teachers can prompt students to “keep their motor running” (keep their voices on) as they say the sounds in a word to read it. After students have blended the sounds together to read the word, they should then read it the “fast way,” or in a fluent voice without holding each sound. As students become more fluent, they should do the blending work in their heads without saying sounds aloud, and only read the word aloud in a quick, fluent voice.

Continuous and stop sounds contribute to the complexity of the blending task. Continuous sounds are sounds that can be held without being distorted (e.g., /n/, /s/ and /f/). Continuous sounds are easier to hold and blend together when students are first learning to blend sounds and read words. Stop sounds are made with quick puffs of air and cannot be held without becoming distorted (e.g., /b/, /p/, and /k/). Most students are successful with blending words containing both continuous and stop sounds, but some students may struggle with this.

To support the students who struggle, the following sequence explains the progression of blending from easiest (1) to most difficult (4):

a. Words that follow the consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) pattern and contain all continuous sounds (e.g., man, run, rim, win);
b. Words that follow the CVC pattern with a stop sound at the end of the word (e.g., sap, mat, fit, lot);
c. Words that follow the CVC pattern with a stop sound at the beginning of the word (e.g., top, pan, big, ten);
d. Words that follow the consonant-consonant-vowel-consonant (CCVC) pattern with a blend at the beginning that includes a stop sound (e.g.; step, skit, spot, spun).

Using only words in one level and checking for student mastery before moving to the next level in the sequence will provide scaffolding for students who need additional support with blending sounds to read words.

Table 1

Sequence of Word Types for Blending

Words that Follow the CVC Spelling Pattern			*Words that Follow the CCVC Spelling Pattern*
All Continuous Sounds	**Stop Sound at the End**	**Stop Sound at the Beginning**	**Beginning Blend Includes a Stop Sound**
man	nap	pan	spat
ran	map	can	scam
yam	rag	cab	scat
van	Meg	bed	step
men	fed	ten	sped
fin	rip	big	skit
rim	lid	tip	skip
win	rig	kid	spin
mom	rod	pot	stop
fun	fog	top	spot
run	rub	jug	spun
sum	nut	gum	stud

Note. The lists above do not include all words for each level in the blending sequence, rather they are examples of some words for each level of the blending sequence. There are additional words that fit the spelling patterns and sound placements in the chart above that can be used in blending instruction. Words selected for blending instruction should be contingent upon the spelling pattern of the word (CVC/CCVC), type of sounds (stop and/or continuous) the word includes placement of those sounds within the word, letters-sound relationships students have learned, and the students' current level of knowledge within the blending sequence.

After students have mastered blending words that follow CVC and CCVC spelling patterns, words with more advanced spelling patterns, such as vowel-consonant-silent e (e.g., "a_e," "o_e") and vowel sounds spelled with more than one letter (e.g., "ai," "igh"), can be introduced. As more complex spelling patterns and words are learned, teach students to recognize the vowel pattern and corresponding sound in the word to assist with decoding the word.

Word-Building Activities

To build awareness of how letters and their sounds are connected to spelling and pronunciation, word-building activities such as word ladders (Figure 1.1) and sound boxes (Figure 1.2) should be integrated into literacy instruction. Begin with words that contain simple patterns such as VC (e.g., am) and CVC spelling patterns. After students master simple spelling patterns, gradually incorporate more advanced words as students learn more advanced spelling patterns (e.g., vowel-consonant-silent e, vowel patterns spelled with more than one letter).

When students receive systematic phonics instruction and can apply what they know about letter-sound correspondence to translate printed letters and letter combinations into the sounds they represent, they are able to accurately read a vast number of words, including words they have never encountered in text. For more information about evidence-based reading instruction and

resources you can use in your classroom, please visit the National Center on Improving Literacy at improvingliteracy.org.

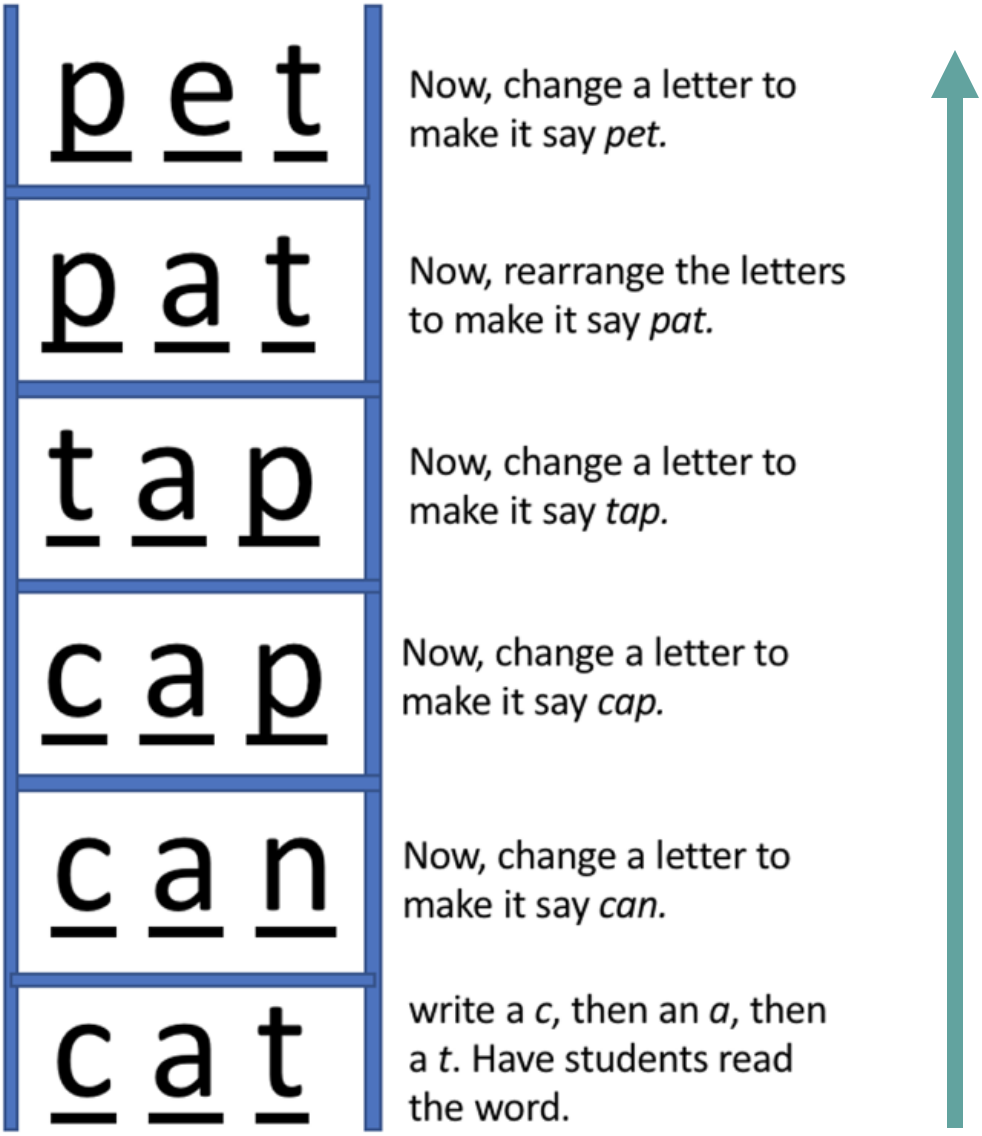

Figure 1.1

The instructor reads the words to the right of the ladder, starting at the bottom and working up to the top of the ladder. Students can complete this activity by using letter tiles or by writing the appropriate letters in the blanks.

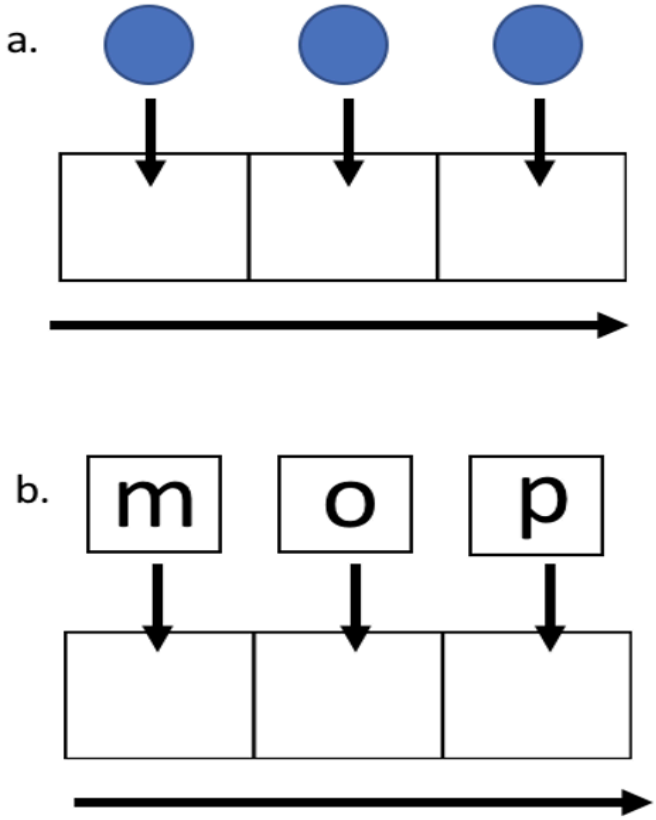

Figure 1.2

Sound boxes can be used when students are learning words with two or three sounds using a set of boxes that matches the number of sounds in the word. If students do not yet know letter-sound relationships, disks can be used for this activity (see example a). Once students know letter-sound relationships, they can use letter tiles for this activity (see example b).
Tell students a word. Then have students repeat the word slowly as they pull a disk or letter tile into each box while saying the sounds in the word. After students have placed the disks or letter tiles in the boxes, have students slide their finger across the arrow under the set of boxes to read the word as a whole unit.

Reference

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.

National Center on Improving Literacy

The research reported here is funded by a grant to the National Center on Improving Literacy from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in partnership with the Office of Special Education Programs (Award #: H283D210004). The opinions or policies expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of OESE, OSEP, or the U.S. Department of Education. You should not assume endorsement by the Federal government.