

# From Phonics to Reading

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The importance of explicit phonics instruction has been highlighted and becomes the spotlight in early reading instruction in recent decades. A number of studies have shown that sufficient letter-sound knowledge acquired from phonics instruction enables learners to decode and read words, which also facilitates progress in reading development (Adams, 1990; Blevins, 2006).

According to the curriculum guidelines for elementary school English courses established by the Ministry of Education, in reading, students have to be able to pronounce new words by applying the rules of phonics. However, some students still have difficulties in applying the phonics rules in reading. Therefore, during the visit, some activities and strategies about how to help students use phonics and transfer to reading were collected and presented in this report.

## 1. Sound boxes

It's also called Elkonin Box. Students draw three boxes. Teacher says CVC words, such as cat. Students learn to segment the words into three sounds and push the letter cards (c, a, and t) into boxes. Sometimes, we can simply ask students to put the letter cards on their desks. Students can learn blending and segmenting skills in this activity.

## 2. Word families

After learning the regular beginning consonants and short vowels, many students in the United States begin to work on word families, such as -at, -an and -it. As Blevins (2006) shows, to teach words containing recognizable chunks facilitates spelling and automatic word reading. Students can try to sort word cards with the same spelling patterns before they read the words.

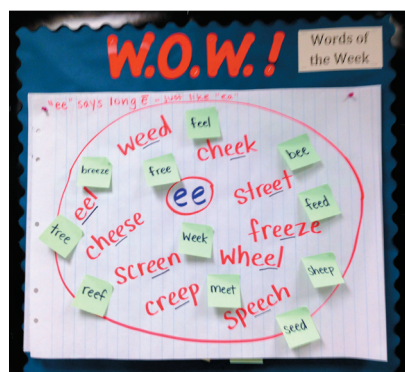
## 3. Name word wall

In the workshop, Dr. Susi Long suggested that “build from what students know.” Names are often the first words students know. Thus, to start lessons with students’ names would make phonics learning interesting. In the United States, we saw name word walls in many classrooms. Students can do a lot of activities with their names. For example, they can sort the names with the same first letter, find some words that

begin with the same letter with their names, count and compare how many letters in the names, or find the words that rhyme with their names. When I came back to Taiwan, I let my first grade students designed their own name tags. After doing some letter sorting activities, I put their name tags in alphabetical order on the wall. During the process, my students learned to capitalize the first letter in names, compared the position (on the writing lines) of each letter in the names, and above all, they were really interested in their names and the names of their friends.

#### 4. Thinking map

While visiting PS244Q The Active Learning Elementary School in New York, I was deeply impressed by the thinking map they used in subject learning. In one classroom, I found a circle map illustrating the words containing the long vowel ee. I think it can help visualize the brainstorming process and serve as a kind of word chart in the classroom. I tried to make a letter Ff map with my first graders. Through the brainstorming process, we got a lot of related words and had deeper impression of the letter Ff.



#### 5. Authentic alphabet

Dr. Susi Long suggests that using “print” familiar to children. For instance, some popular products (e.g., Coke, KitKat) can be the materials for teaching alphabet.

#### 6. Mini white board

As Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns shows, mini white board can be a kind of quick assessment tool. I usually use mini white boards to review the lessons. For first and second graders, I would ask them to work in pairs. They take turns to write down the answers according to the teacher’s questions. Via this activity, you can not only quickly assess students’ learning, but also facilitate peer check and cooperation among students.

#### 7. Print rich classroom environment

Most of the classrooms we visited contain lots of print in them. First, there are books in different bins. There are level library (books are classified by levels), subject library, guided reading library and so on.



Additionally, charts were made and hung as reminders. On each student's desk, there is a sheet of letters and numbers for reference. Also, all the objects are clearly labeled.

## 8. Predictable text

Dr. Susi Long shows that teachers can create predictable text by using pictures or text familiar to children. For instance, for the text “A is for apple. B is for bus”, teacher can use the pictures of the Apple Store and the real bus students can see in their daily lives.

## 9. Positive experience

As Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns mentioned in the workshop, “All children have passion; all children have potentials.” Teachers can start from getting to know the students, recognize their expertise, figure out what their needs are, and think about how to position them to succeed. I was impressed by the video “I can read swag” (a kind of chant) in Dr. Susi Long's workshop. After doing the chant, the student said, “it makes me feel like I am a reader.” It's important to let students experience success in learning to read, which, in turn, promotes reading ability and confidence.

## 10. Reading partner

During the visit, I saw the reading partner chart on the wall in the classroom. We asked the students what reading partners do. They told us they read every day. After reading, reading partners usually retell, talk and peer check. I also let my students do pair reading. Two students were paired and took turns reading the alphabet and chant to each other. One partner read, while the other one gave assistance. Then the process reversed. Through the practice, students were more familiar with their learning materials.



## 11. Hand Signals

In the United States, some teachers adopt hand signals in classroom management, and some teachers use them in alphabet teaching. In classroom management, using hand signals can help teachers deal with students' requests efficiently and save precious class time. I also create some request signals for my students. For instance, hand up and index finger: I need a new pencil; hand up and two fingers (make a v-shape): lower down your volume; hand up and three fingers



(make a w-shape): I need to use the bathroom. My students learn the signals quickly, which enables me to fulfill their needs without interrupting the class.

While being used in alphabet learning, sign language may function as a kind of TPR activity and a visual support for the letter shape learning. I saw a poster of alphabet sign language. It's interesting to learn but some of the signs are hard to make connections with the letters. Thus, in my class I try to use another set of signs - Finger abc (English Works), which not only can keep young learners concentrate, but also help them to remember the shape of the letters.



While visiting Freehold Learning Center, the principal Mr. Smith and the reading teacher patiently introduced their basic reading program “Jump Start”, which impressed me a lot about how they assist beginning readers in learning to read. In the following section, Jump Start Program is briefly introduced, and what might be beneficial for the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Taiwan are also reflected and presented as follows.

### **Brief introduction of “Jump Start to Literacy Program”**

Jump Start to Literacy (JSL) is a K-2 early literacy program developed by the teachers in Freehold Township in New Jersey. It begins as whole group in all K-2 classes through Action Reading (a multi-sensory phonics program) and sight word instruction, followed by the Reading Street Anthology program. Additionally, students are selected to work in small group with teachers to ensure that their individual needs could be fulfilled.

#### **1. Action reading**

In JSL program, phonics instruction focuses on action reading, which begins with objects and pictures for sounds. For instance, a tooth represents the sound /t/, and





have learned, but also brings successful reading experience enabling students to love to read.

## **5. Small-group teaching**

To provide appropriate reading instruction and text, teachers need to know students' reading level first. In JSL program, students are frequently assessed on sight word and decodable word reading. Students who need help are selected to join the small-group lesson. In the push-in intervention, one teacher works with four students inside the classroom. In the pull-out intervention, one teacher works with two students outside the classroom. Students who receive the small-group instruction are assessed every four weeks. The lesson ends at the twelfth week. As Cunningham (2009) suggests, one-on-one or small-group coaching helps students effectively use their phonics knowledge and reading strategies in figuring out new words.

## **6. Parent follow-through with homework practice**

In JSL program, parents also play an important role. They have to join the nightly practice with their children. In the take home folder, there are four assignments each day. First, children have to read a book to their parents. Second, children have to put the sentence puzzle (a cut-up sentence they wrote in response to the book at school) in correct order and read to their parents. Third, they need to read a ring of sight words to parents. Fourth, parents and children play the action reading game together to reinforce the decoding skills and strategies. Nightly practice with parents is crucial for reinforcing the daily lesson. In the parent follow-through homework, we could not only involve parents in children's learning process, but also help children develop successful reading habits.

The purpose of the report is to investigate how to help students solidify their phonics skills and transfer to reading successfully. Based on the classroom observation and data collected during the visit, the reflections are summarized as follows.

First, begin phonics lesson with the print that is familiar, interesting, and meaningful to children to facilitate their learning and validate their knowledge. Second, include the required phonics components: phonemic awareness practices, segmenting and blending activities, word families, supported by multi-sensory activities, and the print rich environment. Third, know your students' skill level and reading level through timely assessment and ensure their learning needs could be met through partner cooperation, small group instruction, or one-on-one remedial coach.

Fourth, scaffold the transition from phonics to reading by offering the sight word instruction and the reading strategies. Furthermore, provide appropriate text reading and involve follow-through practices at home to help students reinforce their reading skills and build their confidence in reading.

### References

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