THE COLLECTION

A periodic publication of
curated articles from the
Virginia State Literacy Association

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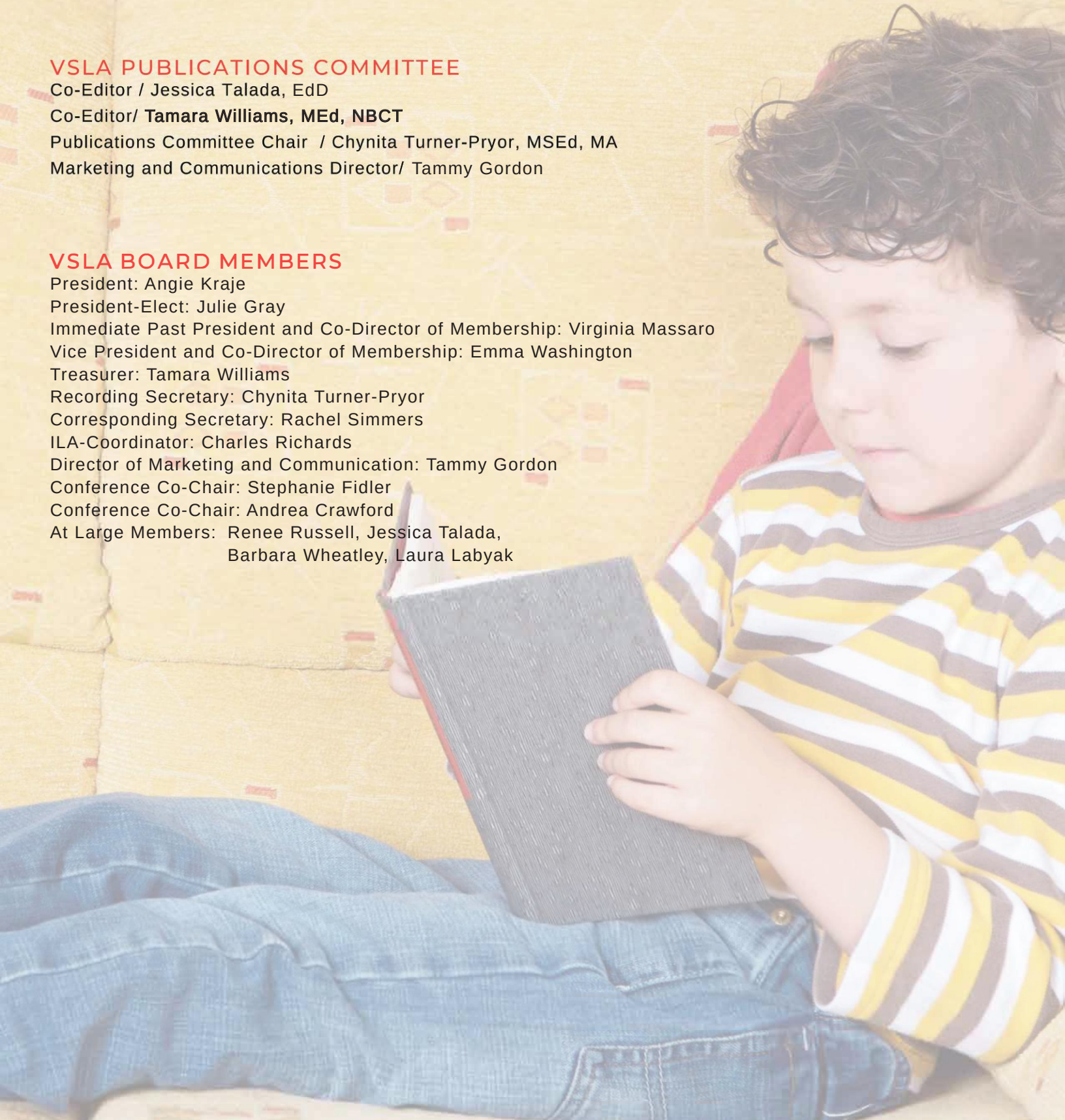
The Collection is a periodic and themed publication of curated articles from the Virginia State Literacy Association. Look for our next edition in Late Fall/Early Winter.



Virginia State
Literacy Association
VSLA

August 2024

Dear Fellow Educators,

We are proud to release the fourth edition of VSLA's The Collection, a publication series designed to meet the needs of educators through a themed topic that is relevant to current literacy research and educational climate. This publication's theme is Building Background Knowledge and focuses on implementing the Science of Reading into Tier 1 instruction and engaging students in learning foundational skills.

The first article by Melissa Baker Wredt, Ed.D provides an evidence-based rationale for using flexible multisyllable strategies for Tier 1 instruction to increase language comprehension and includes examples for implementing these strategies for grade 2-4 that can also be utilized in older grades for students who need additional explicit morphological instruction. The next article by Tammy Williams, Kristin Conradi Smith & Ellen Frackelton addresses the recent shift towards more complex text in the classroom by recommending strategies for building students' world and word knowledge promptly in order to ensure adequate time for engaging with the text. Finally, Patrick Rogers, M. Ed combines personal experience with research to provide instructional support for word recognition for emergent-bilingual students.

Each of these three articles add value and practicality to the current research and I hope you enjoy this fourth edition as much as I did. The usable strategies presented in this edition are timely and relevant as we prepare to navigate all of the changes for this new school year. The next focus will be Integrating Reading & Writing and more information can be found on page 14, including instructions on the call for submissions.

I look forward to hearing from you–our valued members and fellow educators–in sharing your successful implementation of these strategies, as well as any feedback on how we, as an authority on literacy education, can continue VSLA's mission to lead the advancement of literacy across the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Best wishes,

Angie Kraje

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Using Flexible Multisyllable Instruction to Build Language Comprehension

Melissa Baker Wredt, Ed.D

Abstract

This article provides an evidence-based rationale for using flexible multisyllable strategies for Tier 1 instruction to increase language comprehension. Flexible multisyllable strategies consist of phonological, word building, spelling, and word reading tasks students practice to improve reading and spelling. Flexible multisyllable instruction reinforces the alphabet principle as students decode and encode the phonemes within the syllable; however, separating a phoneme for an arbitrary reason (i.e., rules of syllabication) does not reinforce the alphabetic principle. This article provides examples of how to implement Tier 1 flexible multisyllable strategies for grades 2-4. These strategies are appropriate for students in grade 2-12, especially if older students need explicit morphological instruction.

Keywords: Science of Reading, flexible multisyllable strategies, Tier 1, language comprehension

Using Flexible Multisyllable Instruction to Build Language Comprehension

Educators can increase students' language comprehension by providing students with a strategy for reading and spelling multisyllable words. This article will explain the connection between vocabulary building and language comprehension and present the research supporting the use of flexible multisyllable instruction as Tier 1 instruction. Additionally, this article will offer examples of how to implement whole-class flexible multisyllable instruction.

What the Research Says

Before using multisyllable instruction as a Tier 1 strategy, the students should have a firm grasp of foundational reading skills. Phonics instruction explicitly introduces and reinforces the application of the alphabetic principle (i.e., a grapheme or multigraph represents a sound, also known as letter-sound correspondence). Phonics instruction starts with the basic code (i.e., one sound to one grapheme) and progresses to advanced code (i.e., one sound to multigraphs). Readers use letter-sound correspondence to decode and encode for reading and spelling. When readers understand the alphabetic principle and apply letter-sound correspondence to reading, visual memory is freed up for learning multigraphs, special endings, and blending multisyllable words (Ehri, 2014). Therefore, a strong foundation of phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and letter-sound correspondence is necessary for students to be able to read and spell with fluency.

These foundational skills have a reciprocal relationship with language comprehension (i.e., oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge), and both are needed to support orthographic mapping. Automatic word recognition does not occur by rote memorization; instead, it is a function of orthographic mapping. Ehri (2017) describes orthographic mapping as a relationship between symbols, sound, and meaning. When reading, two cognitive mechanisms are activated: the phonological processing pathway (i.e., the pathway that connects the symbols to the sound and enables a reader to blend the sounds into a word during decoding) and the semantic processing pathway (i.e., the pathway that connects the word to its meaning during word recognition). Once those two pathways are activated, orthographic mapping occurs, and the reader accurately decodes and recognizes the word and its meaning (Ehri, 2017).

Multisyllable instruction is introduced in second grade. Secondary students struggling reading either need intensive intervention in early decoding skills (i.e., phonemic awareness, blending, segmenting, letter-sound correspondence, reading decodable words, recognizing high-frequency irregular words, and reading decodable passages), or they need intensive intervention in morphological skills (i.e., multisyllable words) (Archer et al., 2003). Archer et al. focus their research on assessing effective interventions for secondary students needing morphological intervention. Failure to read multisyllable words has an immediate impact on a

student's ability to make meaning from a text and has long-term implications as students with poor reading ability are:

1. More likely to struggle in secondary coursework
2. More likely to drop out of school when given the first opportunity
3. Less able to obtain employment that supports themselves and their families as adults
4. More likely to have social/ emotional challenges as adults
5. Less able to participate in post-high school educational training programs at technical schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities. (Archer et al., 2003, p. 90-91)

Archer et al. review three approaches to multisyllabic reading interventions: part-by-part decoding instruction, syllable-type instructions, and flexible strategy instruction. The flexible strategy proved to be the most effective for students; however, students need to demonstrate mastery over the early decoding skills for this strategy to work. Additionally, teachers need to provide students with repeated opportunities to practice a flexible strategy until students demonstrate mastery. Flexible multisyllable instruction is appropriate for Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 instruction; however, the remainder of this article addresses how to implement this strategy as a whole-class activity.

Flexible Multisyllable Instruction

To work with multisyllable words, a reader needs to be able to segment words into syllables, decode the phonemes within each syllable, and remember the phoneme sequence long enough to blend the phonemes into syllables and the syllables into words. Flexible multisyllable instruction is not the same as teaching syllabification. The first difference is that multigraphs (i.e., letters representing one sound) are kept in the same syllable, or chunk (e.g., "Hammer" is chunked as /**hamm**/ /**er**/ not /**ham**/ /**mer**/ because "mm" represents one sound, not two; however "accent" is chunked as /**ac**/ /**cent**/ because the first "c" represents /k/ and the second "c" represents /s/.). Chunking the syllables this way reinforces the alphabet principle as students decode and encode the phonemes within the syllable accounting for each sound; however, separating a phoneme for an arbitrary reason (i.e., rules of syllabication) does not reinforce the alphabetic principle. The second difference is that words can be chunked in more than one way (e.g., hammer can be chunked as /hamm/ /er/ or /ha/ /mmer/). The only similarities between flexible multisyllable instruction and syllabification are that each chunk should have a vowel sound, and two-syllable compound words should have a word in each chunk.

Preparation

To start, you need to select two or three thematic texts that your class will be reading. For example, if the essential question is "How can too much screen time make me feel?" you may want to pair books like *TEK: The Modern Cave Boy* by Patrick McDonnell and *On a Magical, Do-Nothing Day* by Beatrice Alemagna. After selecting the texts, make a list of the multisyllable words. Sort them by two-syllable compound words, simple two-syllable words, three-syllable compound words, simple three-syllable words, and four-syllable compound words.

Use the Planning Sheet (see Appendix A) to organize which words you are using for each activity. To prepare for the Round Robins (i.e., used during the Phonological and Word Reading Tasks), have words pre-assigned so students chunk a word that is appropriate for their zone of proximal development when it is their turn to contribute. Word lists can be categorized by level of difficulty. Assign the two-syllable compound words and high frequency compound words to students who need additional scaffolding, and assign simple multisyllable words to students who do not need additional scaffolding. For the Word Building Activity, select five words consisting of two syllables, print the words on cardstock and cut them out by phoneme. To avoid confusion, color code the words (i.e., print a class set of the word "hairy" on red paper, a class set of the word "maybe" on green paper, etc). Paper clip the words together and make an envelope for each child, five words per envelope. Print a class set of the Word Building Handout, and two class sets of the Chunking Handout. Select five to ten words (fewer words for younger age groups) for the Spelling Assessment. Finally, prepare a Slide Deck for the Word Reading Round Robin and color code five to ten slides you want the class to segment on the Chunking Handout.

Semantic Orienting Task

Semantic orienting tasks are the memes of instruction: they are attention-grabbing and the best ones are hard to forget. For this lesson, bring a box of regular sized cookies and a box of mini-cookies (if there are dietary restrictions, bring grape tomatoes and regular tomatoes). When you introduce the strategy, you will compare how some words can be small and gobbled up in one bite (like cat, hat, bat), while other words are bigger and take two or more bites to finish. You can then ask students to think about how many bites are in their names, and you can go around the room to help students chunk their names. Avoid clapping out syllables, as some children have hearing difficulties; instead, hold up index cards to differentiate the syllables as you chunk students' names.

Phonological Awareness Tasks

For younger students (i.e., students in Grades 2-4), start flexible multisyllable instruction with two phonological awareness tasks. For example, during the first Round Robin, the teacher will segment a two-syllable compound word and ask the student which word they hear. With each thematic unit, instruction will progress with simple two-syllable words, three-syllable compound words, simple three-syllable words, four-syllable and five-syllable words, and words with special endings (i.e., "-tion," "-cia," "-sion," etc.). During the second Round Robin, the teacher will ask the student to segment (or chunk) a two-syllable compound word. The teacher can provide students with two index cards to hold up as they say each chunk.

Word Building and Spelling Tasks

When moving to print, provide each student with an envelope of two-syllable compound words and a paper with two rectangles (see Appendix B). Each word should be printed on a different color of paper, cut into phonemes, and paper clipped together (see Appendix B). Ask students to get out the yellow word and build the first chunk in the word "X" (e.g., "What is the first chunk you hear in the word 'table'?"). The first chunk will go in the left rectangle. Circulate the room as students are building the first chunk. Then, ask students to build the second chunk in the word "X" (e.g., "What is the second chunk you hear in the word 'table'?"). The second chunk will go in the right rectangle. As you circulate the room, ask students to show you a different way to chunk the word, then ask them which way they like better. After students have chunked the word, they can write it next to number 1. The first chunk will go on the first line, the second chunk will go on the second line (e.g., /bas/ /ket/ or /ba/ /sket/ or /bask/ /et/). Model for students how to sound out the word as you spell it (e.g., Slowly say the first chunk as you write it on the first line, then slowly say the second chunk as you write is on the second line, and blend the two chunks together.). The following day, provide the students with the top half of the handout (i.e., numbers 1-5 with the lines for each chunk), and ask them to spell each of the words they did the previous day. Use this post-assessment to determine which students need small group instruction. Modify the handout for three-, four-, and five-syllable instruction as you build future thematic units.

Word Reading Tasks

For the Word Reading Tasks, students will be working with print. For the first Round Robin, present the slide deck of two-syllable words for students to chunk and blend when it is their turn. As students take turns chunking simple two-syllable words, ask them to show more than one way to chunk the word. Provide all students with a Chunking Handout (see Appendix C) to record the words being chunked for this lesson. Younger students will write five pre-selected words on their Chunking Handout and older students will write ten pre-selected words on their Chunking Handout.

Applying the Strategy to Longer Texts

After completing the Phonological, Word Building, Spelling, and Word Reading Tasks, introduce the first book students will be reading (e.g., *TEK: The Modern Cave Boy*). Read aloud the story to the class, modeling prosody and automaticity. Next, have students work in pairs to buddy read. While students are buddy reading, have each student keep a list of the words their buddy struggles with. These lists can be used to inform Tier 2 instruction. When students move into Tier 2 instruction, reinforce the flexible multisyllable strategy by modeling how to segment and blend the words orally and in print.

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Appendix A: Planning

Word Lists & Student Assignments

	2-Syllable Compound	Students
Low		
	2-Syllable Simple	**Students**
Low-Medium		
	3-Syllable Compound	**Students**
Medium		
	3-Syllable Simple	**Students**
Medium-High		
	4-Syllable	**Students**
High		

Use an * to indicate High-Frequency Words, Highlight Words for last Word Chunking Activity.

Word Building List

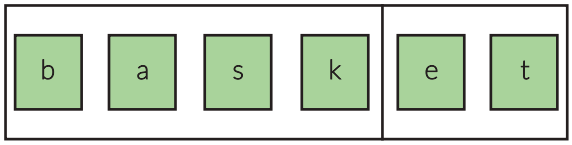
Spelling Assessment List

Select 5 words for younger students.

Appendix B: Word Building Handout

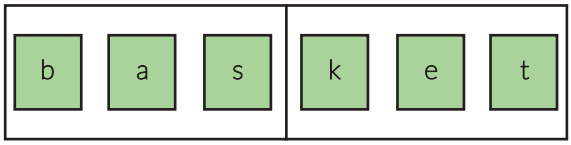
Word Building Handout

1. bask et
2. _____ _____
3. _____ _____
4. _____ _____
5. _____ _____



Word Building Handout

1. bas ket
2. _____ _____
3. _____ _____
4. _____ _____
5. _____ _____



Appendix B: Chunking Handout & Slide Deck

Chunking Handout

1. _____ _____
2. _____ _____
3. _____ _____
4. _____ _____
5. _____ _____

Modern 1	Maybe 4	Eerie 7
Upon 2	Little 5	Pretty 8
Ago 3	Visit 6	Hairy 9

Problem 10	Even 13
Never 11	Making 14
Wanted 12	

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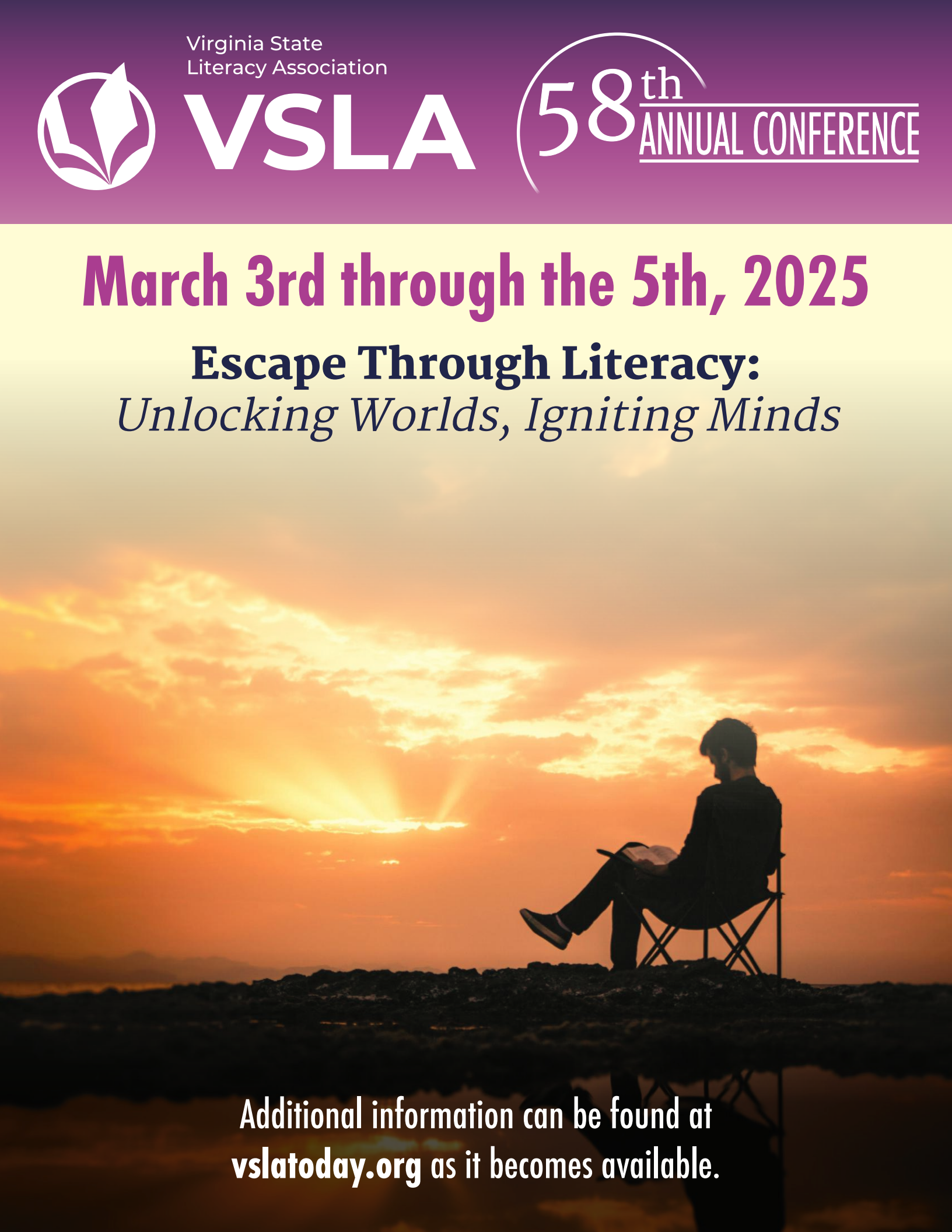

Additional information can be found at
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"The Warm Up Shouldn't Be Longer Than the Work Out": Quick World and Word Building Before Reading Complex Text

Tammy Williams
Kristin Conradi Smith
Ellen Frackelton

Few argue with the importance of ensuring that all students have exposure to grade-level (and complex!) texts. Guided by the science of reading movement, the field has accepted that the long-held practice of matching readers to texts at their "instructional level" (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) lacks research support and that students instead need to be supported and scaffolded as they spend time in (at minimum) grade-level texts (see Amendum et al., 2018).

But in our embrace of more complex texts, teachers aren't always sure how to support students. What if they don't know the vocabulary? What if their background knowledge is inconsistent with expectations in the text? What if they're unfamiliar with that structure? What if this is too hard? What if they give up?

When wrestling with those what ifs, we've observed teachers resort to over-scaffolding of the text. In fact, we've watched teachers spend 20+ minutes preparing their students to read two pages. This practice is born out of good intentions. Teachers want students to be successful. And in anticipation that students might have difficulty with a text, teachers pull out every possible area– which often includes three aspects of background knowledge, eight vocabulary words, attention to author's craft, text structure, and more! Unfortunately, this just takes too long. Unfortunately, sometimes these good intentions––ensuring students will be successful with complex texts––are instead lost because students barely get to be in the text at all.

In this article, we're going to hone in on a couple of recommended supports–– building students' world and word knowledge prior to reading (see Vaughn et al., 2022). We're going to underscore the importance of teaching these swiftly in order to protect students' opportunity to actually read. We specifically do this by highlighting how teachers first have to size up the text they're about to teach (whether as a read aloud or as a shared read), and then how to set up students for success by teaching background knowledge and vocabulary as expeditiously as possible.

Backing Up: A Shared Understanding Of Comprehension

At the forefront, we think it's important to make sure we're all on the same page as to what we believe reading comprehension is and what reading should entail. Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process and in order to successfully understand a text, students have to actively think and engage while reading. We lean heavily on Walter Kintsch's (1998) Construction Integration model to help us think about comprehension. He posits that comprehension is about *building* meaning. As readers, we bring tools (which includes our fluency skills, our lexicon, and our knowledge of the world) to whatever text we read and we use those tools as we transact with that text. We first build a textbase and then we use our knowledge to develop a situation model. This situation model is essentially our takeaway of what the text means and it's one we've developed by combining what we understand about the world with what we've understood in the text.

This is a different way of thinking about reading comprehension than some have previously upheld. Kids, for example, often think about comprehension as finding the right answer. Kintsch's model– and the one we underscore with teachers we work with– is much more about building the answer. In order to help students build that answer, especially as we're putting them in more complex texts, we have to pay attention to the attendant resources needed.

So how do we do it? Obviously, we need to move away from the de-skilling of comprehension; specifically, the idea that we can break down comprehension into small parts that can be mastered. Instead, we prefer to center the text in our comprehension instruction and to consider how we can best support students as they engage with it.

Sizing Up: Looking at Texts and Anticipating What Needs PreTeaching

So what's our first step? We have to start being good at looking at a text, considering our students, and thinking about the aspects of that text that could present difficulty for students. Although there are multiple areas that contribute to a text's complexity, including aspects of author's craft, text structure, and register (see Fisher & Frey, 2014), we're going to focus on two aspects with robust research support, world and word knowledge (see Vaughn et al., 2022). What world knowledge is expected in this text— without which, students might not be able to build meaning? And what words do they need to know to make sense of it?

Take the following sample of text from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900).

> Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles. There were four walls, a floor and a roof, which made one room; and this room contained a rusty looking cookstove, a cupboard for the dishes, a table, three or four chairs, and the beds. Uncle Henry and Aunt Em had a big bed in one corner, and Dorothy a little bed in another corner. There was no garret at all, and no cellar—except a small hole dug in the ground, called a cyclone cellar, where the family could go in case one of those great whirlwinds arose, mighty enough to crush any building in its path. It was reached by a trap door in the middle of the floor, from which a ladder led down into the small, dark hole.

There are so many aspects of this text that could warrant instructional attention. The notion of 'the great Kansas prairies' for example, may be abstract. A child growing up in the Tidewater region of Virginia may not have the schema needed to understand what living on a prairie would be like. The words "cyclone," "lumber," "garret," and "cellar," may also be foreign concepts.

Without this world and word knowledge, a reader might find it difficult to create a clear mental model of the text-– even if they can decode all the words. So what can a teacher do to set the conditions for comprehension without going overboard? By critically selecting what is necessary, teachers can set students up for success while protecting their opportunity to do the actual work of reading. For the remainder of the article, we share our tips for before-teaching strategies.

Setting Up: Background Knowledge

Background knowledge has rightly received considerable attention of late, from both researchers (Neuman, 2019) and reporters (Wexler, 2020). When a student lacks the expected knowledge to make sense of a text, their comprehension suffers. Broadly, to enhance students' knowledge in general, schools should adopt content-rich reading curricula and schedules shouldn't shortchange subjects such as Science and Social Studies. Developing students who know a lot about a lot of different things will, in the long run, lead to better reading comprehension. But when considering specific texts that we put in front of our students, in the short term, we have to be mindful of quick ways to support them.

Show Them. The mind processes information along two pathways; verbal and visual (Sadoski & Paivio, 2021). Our first instructional strategy for setting students up for success is to build background knowledge through the use of pictures. You've heard the phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Teachers can build world and word knowledge by directly teaching background knowledge through the use of images. Prior to reading the text, we provide a few slides depicting the concepts we feel our students need direct instruction on before reading. See Figure 1 for an example.

Figure 1

We selected a picture of a prairie, a cellar, and a cyclone. By providing a picture of each of these concepts, we are supporting students' ability to visualize the setting or events of the story and build world knowledge critical for students' comprehension of the text. We have also seen teachers leave these images displayed when reading so that students have an easy reference to use if needed.

Tell Them. Another efficient way to provide students entry into a complex text is to simply tell them what they need to know. This strategy allows teachers to quickly provide the information students need to understand the section of text. Something for teachers to consider is combining this strategy with pictures. Using the example from the *Wizard of Oz*, a teacher could quickly say, "This is a picture of a cellar. A cellar is a place that is underground that people use for storage. If there is a tornado, it is a safer place for people to be than above ground." This allows teachers to efficiently share important information while avoiding what we sometimes call, "Guess What's In the Teacher's Head". When teachers ask probing questions in an attempt to get a "correct" answer from students, it runs the risk of taking up a substantial amount of time. It also can cause confusions with other students in class remembering the incorrect definition or information from a classmate. We've found success with simply providing the information that students need. Not only is it more time efficient, it also prevents misconceptions.

Setting Up: Vocabulary

Selecting Words. As we mentioned, sizing up the text is important, and one must do it with our readers in mind. When examining texts for difficulty, teachers are typically quick to find vocabulary words that could serve as stumbling blocks. We know that the ability to make sense of a passage depends on a student's knowledge of critical content-bearing words, but the key is that we have to figure out which vocabulary words actually need to be taught, which ones can be ignored, and which ones can be briefly defined.

We try to select words based on a few criteria. First, we want to select high-utility words that are often seen in written language and students will encounter in a variety of texts (Beck et al., 2013). Second, we want to choose words that are critical to the understanding of the text. Finally, we want to choose words that students don't know and may be difficult for students without explicit instruction.

Given those criteria, though we noted that garret might cause some students difficulty, we won't choose to spend instructional time on it because we don't think it holds much value for students to know. Instead, when it's encountered in text, we might just say "A garret is a small attic room."

Preteach Them. A word from the passage that we do think is important is the word ***arose.*** This word is of high utility; it can be used across texts, and it is critical to the understanding of the text in which a tornado can 'arise' from the prairie, or appear out of the dark thunderous sky.

When we preteach our vocabulary before reading, we follow a protocol that provides word-meaning information and actively engages students (Beck et al., 2013). First, we introduce the word using a kid-friendly definition. We love using the website https://kids.wordsmyth.net/ as a place to find student-friendly explanations. We provide instructional context, explaining how the word fits within the text.

Involve Them. Then, we involve the students in active engagement of using the target vocabulary. We help them apply the word to meaningful situations and we support the creation of word networks. We like to play the game "Yes/No/Why?" We give a scenario that depicts the word or non-example, we solicit all students' responses by affirming with a thumbs-up or thumbs-down and then we ask the students to tell a friend "why?" or "why not?" ensuring they use the target vocabulary in their explanation.

Here's how it might sound using the example word *arose*. "A word we need to know today is the word arose. What's the word? Arose is the past tense of the word *arise* which means *to show up or appear*. If you live in Kansas, tornadoes may *arise*, or *show up* during a thunderstorm. Can a plume of steam *arise* from the ground? Yes? No? Why?"

That example included a definition, some context, and engaged students with a quick game, but still takes less than one minute to do. That's the key– as with using pictures or telling students for background knowledge building, we want whatever we do on the front end to be meaningful, but to be quick so that students have time to do the actual reading.

Moving Forward

We acknowledge that what we've presented in this article might seem abrupt or short to some teachers— especially teachers who are used to elaborate vocabulary instruction with Frayer Models or extended background knowledge building through YouTube videos. We're not here to dismiss the value of those instructional activities– just to say, that if our goal is to have students engage with more complex texts, we have to mindfully consider whether we're stealing their time in text with all of those activities. There is a time

and a place for more extended content knowledge building; for example, building knowledge through the use of text sets where students read a variety of texts and genres centered around a topic (Lupo et al., 2020).

But the shift towards more complex text in the classroom will certainly fail if it doesn't come with a commitment to ensuring students actually have time to read it. We proposed the ideas in this article simply as a reminder that sometimes, the most important support we can provide is a solid foot in the door to ensure entry and then a supported time for students to actually engage with the text.

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- Submissions should focus on expanding the reader's understanding of the topic. Additionally, articles should focus on implementing SoR into tier 1 instruction. Articles that focus on the ways to engage students in learning foundational skills will be prioritized.

    1. How are you infusing reading and writing?
    2. What classroom supports do you include (especially in the content area) to help students become better readers and writers?
    3. How does dedicated teaching time in social studies and science drive reading instruction? How can infusing content area literacy strategies build student skills?
    4. Do you have any great strategies/techniques that you use to build motivation?

PROCESS for REVIEW/SELECTION:

Our articles are generally between 1000-2500 words in length and conversational, insightful, and helpful to K–12 educators. (Submissions that exceed 3000 words will not be considered.) Articles should be research-based and give concrete guidance that school leaders and educators can use to improve their practice. Moreover, articles should be written in a straightforward manner. Submissions should be relevant to a national audience interested in our given theme. You are addressing teachers, school administrators, researchers, and other stakeholders in the education community, so remember your audience.

What we look for:

- An engaging and informed analysis of the key issue and trend in education
- An informed perspective on this subject/controversial topic (evidence-based information that is practical for classroom instruction).
- An emphasis on the interpretation of the research rather than strict pedagogical theory
- Authentic examples or experiences from work in schools
- Useful articles with strategies/approaches that can be replicated in the everyday classroom

Avoid:

- Self-promotion or pushing a program or product
- Articles promoting your personal opinion
- Please do not include jargon. This is intended as a straightforward explanation of the topic.
- Submitting articles that are in the process of being reviewed for another publication.

How to Submit:

Timeline:
10/1/24 – Deadline for submissions
10/1/24 - 11/1/24 – Review of Submissions
11/15/24 – Acceptance notification

VSLA's Board of Directors make all decisions regarding publication and reserve the right to reject material, whether solicited or otherwise, if it lacks quality or timeliness. The Collection will be distributed electronically to all members and archived in the resource section of VSLA's website. VSLA offers no compensation for articles. If you wish to submit an article, please send it to Dr. Jessica Talada at Jessica.talada@vslatoday.org.

Word Recognition Considerations for Emergent-Bilingual Students

Patrick Rogers, M. Ed

As a teacher and third generation immigrant (although there is some debate on the terminology, in this case I mean I have grandparents from Mexico) I often think about my mother, who started learning English on the first day of kindergarten. Her teachers would punish her and other native Spanish speakers for socializing with more than one Spanish-speaking student in a friend group, not only in the classroom but also at recess and lunch.

Thankfully, we have come a long way since my mom was in school, but I still see her in so many of the emergent-bilingual students in our classrooms today. I can see the worry and the apprehension on their parent's faces who are navigating an unfamiliar education system that is further complicated because they often cannot help their child with a single piece of homework as they learn a new language. However, I also see something else. I see hope. They have the same hopes as any parent: hope that their child will flourish.

Attempting to erase a native language in this manner causes trauma and is not only harmful to our students' identities, but it's actually the "long way around" to help them learn English. Translanguaging, or allowing and supporting a student in taking advantage of their entire language repertoire, not only benefits their native language, but helps them achieve literacy in English as well. (Bialystok 2007, Collier & Thomas 2004, Garcia et al, 2008)

First, let's establish what it takes for students to be proficient at word recognition. As a prerequisite, we can only do the best job helping emergent bilingual learners if we already have evidence-based phonics and phonemic awareness instruction in our classrooms. (August & Shanahan, 2006) Structured literacy is imperative for many, including emergent-bilingual students. Additionally, vocabulary has a role to play, as all students will read words more readily if they are familiar with it.

What does the research tell us about our role as in supporting emergent-bilingual students, and what, if any, prerequisite skills do students need before we can teach them to read words in English? Is phonemic awareness something we should even address until they are fluent English speakers? And what about phonics instruction? Should we teach it immediately? Are there scaffolds for emergent-bilingual students that have evidence for being effective in helping them to develop word recognition skills? Or... do we just let the ESL teacher handle things?

Phonemic Awareness

- Can we begin phonemic awareness instruction on day one? Absolutely! Becoming proficient in English is not a prerequisite for students to begin to acquire phonemic awareness skills. (Brown & Ortiz 2014)
- Considering that we store phonemes as articulatory gestures of vocal tract and mouth, students need explicit instruction in all phonemes of English while paying special attention to those that do not exist in their native phonology.
    - There are phonemes that would fall into three categories here: 1. Those that directly transfer between languages (easy!); 2. Those that almost transfer (help them make the shift necessary!); 3. Those that will be new. This category needs to be taught explicitly with mouth awareness (you tell them where to put their tongue and lips, voicing, etc). Students need to see you make the sound and watch themself in the mirror with lots of modeling and opportunities to mimic you and practice.
    - Note- If a student has phoneme proficiency in their native alphabetic language, it WILL transfer to English as well (August, Calderón, Carlo 2002), just consider which phonemes will have to be added to their phonetic inventory (see bullet above)

- There are many resources for similarities and differences among languages available online, including:
    - Asha.org's Phonemic Inventories and Cultural and Linguistic Information Across Languages
    - Mylanguages.org's Comparisons of many languages
- Any word we choose to include in phonemic awareness instruction must also be pre-taught for meaning (Cárdenas-Hagan, 2020). This includes attending to the word with:
    - A graphic representation (Calderón et al 2005)
    - Connecting the word back to a word in their native language via cognate or translation (consider that they may not know that word either!)
    - Opportunities for oral language practice in context (Bialystok 2007, Collier & Thomas 2004, Garcia et al, 2008)
    - A student friendly, brief definition

Phonics

- First, a note on letter name knowledge. For emergent-bilinguals, having automatic letter naming skills is a reliable predictor of decoding skills later on. Get those names automatic! (Cárdenas-Hagan 2020)
- Do we have to wait until students are speaking English fluently before phonics? Nope! Once some letter naming and phoneme-grapheme correspondences are in place, they can decode.
- Connecting phonemes to graphemes (sounds to letters) truly is that first foray into phonics. For all students, it is imperative to teach letter-sound correspondences and automate their identification and production. For emergent-bilinguals, we need to take special care to identify sound letter correspondences that transfer, partially transfer, or confuse our students.
- Any word you choose to use for phonics, must also be pre-taught for meaning. Building the vocabulary knowledge of words that students decode is a crucial parallel goal. (Escamilla, 2022) (see above under phonemic awareness on how to attend to this!)
- Finally, harness the power of the syllable to assist emergent-bilinguals by teaching all six syllable types! Spanish has a more salient syllable than English, and while individual phoneme awareness is still paramount, the concept of a syllable transfers across languages, especially those with transparent orthography such as Spanish. (Cárdenas-Hagan 2020) The vast majority of Spanish is multisyllabic (much more than English), with open syllables accounting for the majority in Romance langauges. (Moats & Tolman, 2019)

Putting the pieces together

A selection of scaffolds to word reading instruction or intervention for our emergent-bilingual students have been outlined above, and can be expressed efficiently with the PLUSS Model. Sanford et al.(2012) sum up much of the body of existing research for our emergent-bilingual learners with the following suggestions:

- Pre-teaching critical vocabulary;
- Language modeling and opportunities to use academic language;
- Using visuals and graphic organizers;
- Systematic and explicit instruction; and
- Strategic use of native language and teaching for transfer

We have discussed phonology and orthography in some depth here, while mentioning vocabulary. It should be noted that there are many other systems of our language such as morphology, syntax, prosody, discourse, and pragmatics that must be attended to in order to ensure emergent bilinguals are successful.

As a final note, please remember that English language learners bring a vast array of different strengths, needs, background experiences, stories (some incredible!), linguistic skills, and literacy skills in their native language. While they share some things in common, this group of students is not a monolith. Carefully crafted and well informed instruction across all tiers of instruction is necessary for them to achieve literacy. They require the same care, love, attention, and high quality instruction as all students.

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