

Phonics and ELLs

Phonics instruction aims to help new readers understand that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds. Students benefit from learning and practicing sounds and symbols, including blended combinations. ELLs often show many strengths in mastering early phonics skills but it's important to remember that decoding while reading and correctly spelling words does not ensure comprehension.

That's why it's important to make sure that ELLs are familiar with the words they are learning to decode in order to support their comprehension. The authors of *Words Their Way with English Learners* write, "English learners need structured opportunities to learn many new words to add to their repertoires so that these words can become the material of their literacy learning" (2011, p. 79).

Phonics: Considerations and Strategies

What: The relationship between a sound and its corresponding written letter.

Why it matters: Reading development is dependent on the understanding that letters and letter patterns represent the sounds of spoken language.

Considerations for ELLs

Literacy skills in native language

- If a student has learned to read in their native language, they can apply the skill of matching a symbol with a sound in a new language. Students who have learned to read in their native language have an advantage because they were able to learn this concept with familiar sounds and words.
- Students who have not learned to read in their native language may struggle to put together the sound/symbol correspondence concept, new words, and new sounds all at once.

Unfamiliar vocabulary words

- It is difficult for students to distinguish phonetic components in new vocabulary words.
- Pre-teaching vocabulary is an important part of good phonics instruction with ELLs so that students aren't trying to figure out new vocabulary items out of context.
- This is also a reason that decoding "nonsense words" is not a good strategy for ELLs.

Strategies for ELLs

Help students make a connection between their first language and English.

- For students with native language literacy skills, help them understand that the process of sounding out words is the same across languages. (Even if students don't have literacy skills in their first language, you may be able to point to the sounds letters make that are familiar.)
- Explain that some letters may make the same or similar sounds in both languages. Knowing this can help Spanish-dominant students, for example, as they learn to decode words in English.

Teach phonics in a systematic and explicit way.

- Explicit and systematic phonics instruction benefits ELLs. As noted above, however, it is most effective when tied to meaningful language that students already know and when connections are made to students' home language.
- If these kinds of considerations or strategies are not part of your phonics curriculum, it is worthwhile to bring this up to administrators and request additional training and professional learning from school and district leaders to support ELLs.

Use a word study approach.

- Word study is a powerful approach that connects letters, sound, meaning, word parts, and usage so that students are learning explicit foundational skills within a meaningful context. For example, ELLs need lots of opportunities to connect the sounds, letters, and words they are learning.
- The authors of *Words Their Way with English Learners* write, "What is key to literacy development for English learners in the emergent stage is that they use language with teachers and peers and see oral language they understand captured in print" (Helman et al, 2011).

Look for opportunities to reinforce phonics in context.

Using literature and content material, you can introduce and reinforce:

- letter recognition

- beginning and ending sounds
- blends
- rhyming words
- silent letters
- homonyms

Use hands-on activities to help teach letter-sound relationships.

- This can include using manipulatives such as counters, sound boxes, and magnetic letters.

Have students write for sound.

- Say a short sentence that includes one or more words that include the target phonics feature(s). Ask students to listen carefully and then write what they heard.
- This activity trains students to listen for the individual sounds in words and represent them phonetically in their writing

Taken from: <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/reading-101-english-language-learners>

See also: <https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/early-literacy-instruction-spanish-teaching-beginning-reader>