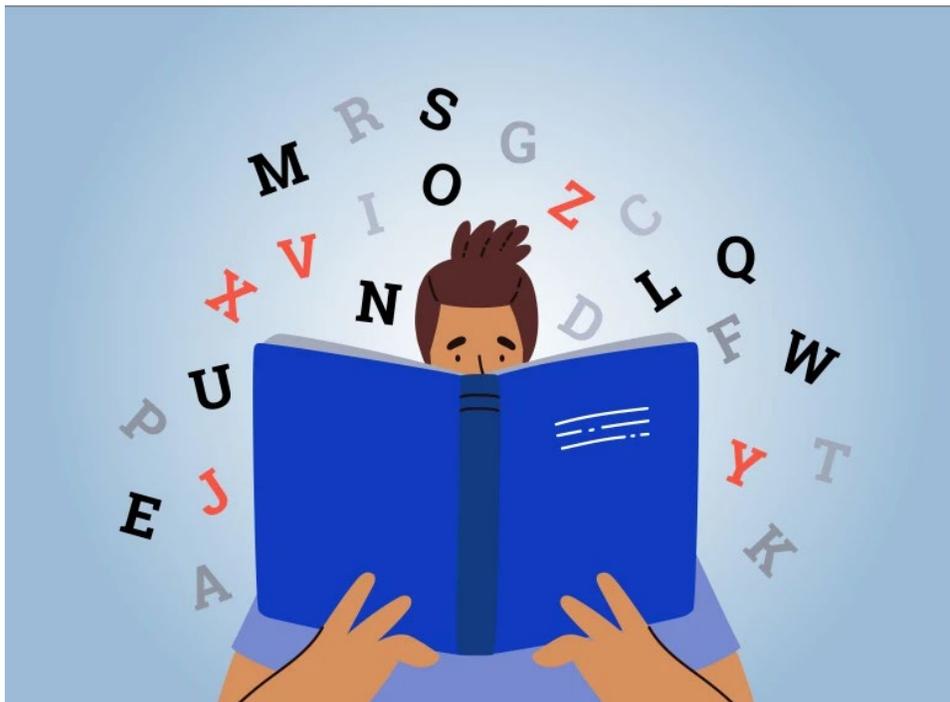


Unlocking Potential: How Interventions Transform Learning



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Effective interventions—whether at the school, classroom, or individual level—are designed to drive positive change and improve student achievement. From **curriculum adjustments** and **innovative teaching strategies** to **targeted tutoring** and **personalized support**, the right intervention can make all the difference. This Spotlight explores how interventions can shape student outcomes across the board, with a special focus on **supporting older students** who struggle with reading, the powerful role of the Science of Reading in **helping English learners**, and what truly effective **one-on-one intervention** looks like in practice.



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Published October 10, 2025

What Makes an Effective Reading Intervention? One Researcher's 5 Criteria

By Sarah Schwartz

Chicago—

Children who are struggling to learn to read often need intervention—targeted instruction beyond what they receive in class to help grow their skills.

But not every intervention is a good one, says reading researcher Matt Burns.

Burns, a professor of special education at the University of Florida who studies academic interventions, recalled one observation he made of a special education teacher conducting a lesson with a student.

The boy was reciting letters while jumping up and down on a miniature trampoline—an activity that was supposed to serve as multi-sensory instruction, a way of teaching reading that incorporates touch and movement. But the jumping wasn't serving any instructional purpose, Burns said.

"I don't even need to look that up to know it's not aligned to the science of reading," Burns said here at the annual conference of the Reading League, an organization that promotes evidence-based reading instruction, on Oct. 10.

The past decade has seen the rise of the "science of reading" movement, a push to align reading instruction in schools with practices supported by research studies. Forty states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation mandating schools to train teachers, select appropriate materials, and use evidence-based practices in classrooms. Many of them also say educators must identify struggling readers and provide them with interventions.

But as part of this effort, researchers have called into question the efficacy and accuracy of some of the most widely used intervention approaches, arguing that they don't pinpoint students' specific needs and as a result, can't target instruction in a way that will move kids forward.

In this landscape, it can be hard for schools and teachers to know what types of intervention to use—or even what criteria they should consider when selecting an intervention program.

While teachers can review research on their own, they often don't have the time to do so, or the resources to access paywalled journals.

"I think that's an unfair expectation," Burns told the room filled with classroom



Cornell Watson for Education Week

Students at R. Brown McAllister Elementary School use telephones for a phonemic awareness lesson in Concord, N.C. Researchers are homing in on the qualities of high-quality intervention for students who continue to struggle after regular teaching.

teachers, of the idea that they should search for studies on every tool they bring into the classroom. "That's my job. That's what I do. Your job is to teach kids."

At the Reading League conference, Burns shared tips from a set of guidelines he created with his colleague, Valentina Contesse, that outline five factors educators should take into consideration. Interventions should, they write:

1. Be appropriately challenging,
2. Be correctly targeted,
3. Give students opportunities to respond,
4. Offer explicit instruction, and
5. Provide immediate feedback.

For specifics on these criteria, see the paper. And read on for three other takeaways from Burns's talk.

1. Reading 'levels' aren't the right tool to pinpoint students' individual needs

Elementary teachers have used reading

"levels" for decades—a ranking system that categorizes children by a composite score of their reading ability across several metrics. In a 2020 EdWeek Research Center survey, 61% of K-2 teachers said they use leveled texts in small group work.

But previous research from Burns has shown that one of the most popular leveling systems only accurately predicts students' reading ability a little more than half of the time.

A more precise way is to test students' discrete skills—phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge, as examples—and then target intervention accordingly, Burns said.

"People ask me all the time, 'What's the best intervention?'" he said. "My response is, 'What's the kid's need?'"

2. Practice solidifies students' knowledge, but not all practice is created equal

Effective practice shares some key qualities, Burns said. Students generate their own response—segmenting the sounds in words themselves in a phonemic awareness drill, for example, rather than listening to a teacher break down the sounds in different ways and

choosing which one is correct.

Teachers mix in information students have newly learned with skills what they've already mastered, a technique called "interleaved practice." And students get lots of repetitions of new information.

Just how many repetitions is enough? "We see a direct, strong relationship between number of opportunities to respond and retention. Around 20 repetitions, that number starts to level off," Burns said.

3. Beware of 'cognitive overload'

Kindergartners famously have short attention spans. And research shows that trying to cram too much information into elementary schoolers' heads at once isn't just a challenge for the teacher—it can also short-circuit the learning process.

Burns shared multiple studies showing that when students were introduced to more new words than they could process in one session, not only did they retain fewer of those new words, they forgot some words they had learned previously.

When working with a teacher or interventionist, if students start getting things wrong that they were previously getting right, it might be a sign that they're reaching their limit for the moment, Burns said.

"When you see kids getting squirmy and start making mistakes, they're done," he said. "They're telling you they're done." ■

Early Interventions Make All the Difference



5 Strategies to Boost Literacy Intervention Success in the Classroom

A Teacher's Guide to Stronger Interventions

Make sure your literacy interventions stick. Use this quick checklist to feel confident you're covering the essentials—identifying needs early, tracking progress, and supporting every learner.

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Published September 22, 2025

How the ‘Science of Reading’ Can Support English Learners

By Sarah Schwartz

There are many sounds in English that don’t exist in Spanish, and vice versa. Take the sound the letter “z” makes in English, or the rolled “r” in Spanish.

In the Southside independent school district in San Antonio, teachers highlight these differences for their Spanish-speaking students. It’s a key part of the school system’s approach to the “science of reading.”

Teachers in the district—where about 30% of students are multilingual learners—give early elementary schoolers systematic phonics instruction, a foundational piece of early reading lessons. They teach beginning readers which letters represent which sounds and how to blend them together into words, whether they’re teaching in English, or in Spanish in the district’s dual-language program.

These practices are common in schools that have adopted evidence-based approaches to teaching early literacy, a movement often referred to as the “science of reading.” But at Southside, teachers also use their knowledge of language structure to help students make connections between English and Spanish—and to identify where children might need more help.

“There’s no need to reteach the whole alphabet,” said Alejandra Ramirez, the district’s elementary reading and language arts coordinator. “If the first language of instruction is Spanish, then we [only] want to teach what doesn’t transfer.”

In its transition to the science of reading, Southside is centering the needs of its multilingual students—something that sets the district apart from many schools.

While at least 45 states and the District of Columbia have recently passed legislation mandating an evidence-based approach to reading instruction, only 10 discuss the needs of English learners in depth—mandating targeted preservice or in-service teacher training, or employing reading coaches for this group of students, according to a 2023 analysis from the Shanker Institute.

It’s a shortcoming that feels familiar for Ramirez, who was a dual-language teacher and bilingual literacy specialist before she moved into her current role. “Usually, our bilingual teachers don’t have enough resources.



Noah Devereaux for Education Week

First grader Kamila Reyes works on an assignment in Diana Oviedo-Holguin’s dual-language class at Heritage Elementary School in San Antonio. The district is making cross-language connections a central part of its shift to the science of reading.

You go to a training and it’s, ‘We have everything for English, but Spanish is coming.’”

As states roll out training for educators in practices shown by research to support struggling readers, and create lists of approved materials, Ramirez would like to see more attention paid to how the reading revolution sweeping the country can better support English learners and students in dual-language programs.

Teachers deserve this information, she said. “If you don’t have an understanding of how language is built, or language acquisition, a program is only going to take you so far.”

Why some English learner advocates have pushed back against the ‘science of reading’

The “science of reading” movement stemmed, in large part, from parents of children with reading disabilities, and researchers who study how teachers can help these children learn to decode and comprehend text.

Studies show that explicit, systematic instruction in letters and sounds can help students who struggle with written language. But as states passed laws requiring this type of instruction, some English learner advocates raised alarm bells.

States were limiting literacy instruction “to an uninspired narrow focus on a few foundational reading skills,” wrote a group of English learner researchers and advocates, the National Committee for Effective Literacy, in a report in 2022. That focus, they argued, could crowd out time for the spoken language development that is crucial for students learning English—activities such as storybook read-alouds or practice using new vocabulary words in conversation.

Eventually, the National Committee for Effective Literacy and the Reading League, an organization that advocates for the science of reading, brokered a tentative peace, releasing a statement agreeing to several high-level principles to guide reading instruction.

English learners need intensive instruction in developing spoken English skills, the statement read, but they also need to be taught phonics and phonemic awareness, skills that unlock the written word and are a “crucial foundation for proficient reading.” It’s not an either/or question; students need both, especially students who are struggling to learn to read.

“As a literacy specialist, and as an interventionist, the majority of the students that I served were bilingual students,” said Teresa Rodriguez, a former school district administrator in Texas who worked in roles overseeing

WHAT IS THE 'SCIENCE OF READING'?

In a science of reading framework, teachers start by teaching beginning readers the foundations of language in a structured progression—like how individual letters represent sounds and how those sounds combine to make words.

At the same time, teachers are helping students build their vocabulary and their knowledge about the world through read-alouds and conversations. Eventually, teachers help students weave these skills together like strands in a rope, allowing them to read more and more complex texts.

Most teachers in the United States weren't trained in this framework. Instead, the majority say that they practice balanced literacy, a less structured approach that relies heavily on teacher choice and professional judgment. While the majority of students in balanced literacy classrooms receive some phonics instruction, it may not be taught in the explicit, systematic way that researchers have found to be most effective for developing foundational reading skills.

Students are generally “reading” short books of their choice very early on, even if they can't sound out all the words. Teachers encourage kids to use multiple sources of information—including pictures and context clues—to guess at what the text might say.

English learners and English/language arts instruction. (Rodriguez was not involved with either of the statements.)

Often, those students didn't have a “solid grounding” in foundational skills, in Spanish or English, said Rodriguez, who now works as a literacy consultant for a national organization. “We had bilingual students who didn't have those opportunities to unlock the code,” she said.

While oral language is “the foundation” for reading, writing, and learning, students also need “very explicit, systematic” instruction in how to read written words—whether they're learning in English or in Spanish, said Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, a bilingual speech language pathologist and the director of the Valley Speech Language and Learning Center in Brownsville, Texas.

Also important is “bridging across languages, and comparing those language structures,” she said.

How interdepartmental collaboration supports English learners

In the Southside ISD, creating those bridges has required more collaboration between the English/language arts and bilingual departments—and a hefty chunk of educators' time.

When Ramirez, the district's elementary ELA coordinator, was tasked with implement-

ing the science of reading, she reached out to researchers who worked at the intersection of English learners and systematic, explicit literacy instruction, and shared her findings with Melissa Martinez, the district's bilingual programs director.

“We talked a lot about what are the major things that we need to consider when helping bilingual students,” Ramirez said.

In early grades, students in the dual-language program do most of their reading and writing in Spanish. So Martinez convened a group of teachers to comb through the state's early reading standards and identify where the Spanish literacy skills students were learning wouldn't translate directly to English—and how teachers could shore up that knowledge.

They kept a running list of English literacy skills to explicitly teach, from syllable types that don't exist in Spanish to the differences in punctuation between the two languages. The district added a 20-minute English literacy development period to the Spanish ELA block to work on them.

“We need this—something that intentionally looks at the nontransferable skills,” said Diana Oviedo-Holguin, a 1st grade teacher at Heritage Elementary School in the district, who is part of Martinez's teacher group.

Oviedo-Holguin still works with her students on the oral language development she's always prioritized, intentionally teaching vocabulary in both English and Spanish, and

providing visual word banks around the room.

“My students, they start out quiet. And by the end of the year, they're pretty chatty,” she said.

But now, with the help of a new English curriculum in foundational reading skills, Oviedo-Holguin targets the English letter-sound connections that don't transfer from Spanish, too.

“Even my nonreaders have started to spell out some of the words,” she said.

Making cross-linguistic connections explicit

Dual-language programs provide natural opportunities for teachers to make explicit connections between students' home language and English. And bilingualism has a host of cognitive benefits, said Cárdenas-Hagan.

“But that doesn't mean our students can't thrive in English as a second language,” she added. “They definitely can.”

Most English learners in the United States are in English-dominant settings, not dual-language programs. Teachers in these classrooms can draw cross-linguistic connections too, said Cárdenas-Hagan, if they have a working knowledge of the structure of their students' home languages.

Her book, *Literacy Foundations for English Learners*, explains where the phonology, or system of speech sounds, of English overlaps and differs from the phonology of languages commonly spoken among ELs in the United States, including Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Chinese.

Schools shouldn't treat English learners “as if they didn't bring any knowledge to the table,” Cárdenas-Hagan said.

Her book includes techniques and scripts teachers can use to show students where sound-letter correspondences are similar and different between English and their home language. In one, a teacher explains how the letter “b” is pronounced in English.

“In Spanish, you have the sound /b/,” the suggested text reads, using the backslash to denote the sound the letter makes. “It is the same sound as the English sound. ... We can use the word bat to help remember this sound. In Spanish, the word would be bate.”

Or, another: “The letter c exists in both Zulu and English. In Zulu, however, the c makes the /ch/ sounds, whereas in English it will make either the /k/ or /s/ sound.”

Adding a sentence or two of additional explanation to a lesson might seem simple, but many reading teachers haven't been taught about the structural underpinnings of

the languages their students speak, said Jim Addison, a literacy leadership coach at Wisconsin's Cooperative Educational Service Agency 3. About half of teachers who work with English learners say they are not at all, or only somewhat, prepared to teach their students, according to a RAND Corporation survey published in June.

"I think back to myself; I didn't have any guidance or learning or help to learn how to support English learners and how to use both languages as an asset," Addison said.

Addison and Rodriguez, the literacy consultant, worked together to create a teacher's companion to UFLI, a popular phonics program. The supplement highlights the cross-linguistic connections for teachers using the curriculum with Spanish-speaking English learners.

Expanding the EL reading instruction toolbox

Learning more about the similarities and differences between English and Spanish language structure has informed how Talita Austin teaches foundational skills.

Austin, an English learner teacher in the Belmont Community school district in Wisconsin, went through reading training from Addison several years ago.

With more than a dozen years of classroom experience, and a background as an English learner herself, Austin already had a toolbox of strategies to support her students. "I knew that I had to be really friendly with my language, use lots of synonyms, lots of actions with my hands," she said.

Still, she said, the training reinforced the importance of foundational reading skills—and why it's crucial to know how phonology differs across languages.

"When I first started [teaching], we focused a lot on sight words," said Austin. "You thought that if you explained what those words were, their definitions, and got kids to practice them in writing, that was sufficient."

But teaching the sounds each letter makes, especially vowels, is key to "building that base" in students' word-reading ability, Austin said.

Because vowels in English function so differently from how they do in Spanish, her students sometimes need extra practice and reminders of these differences to be able to decode English words, she said.

"By default, you're going to go with those sounds you know." ■

Published October 30, 2024

Reading Interventions for Older Students May Be Missing a Key Component

By Sarah Schwartz

It's a well-worn adage in education that students first learn to read, and then read to learn.

At some point, usually around 3rd grade, school systems assume that children have the basics down. They start requiring kids to read increasingly complex text across subject areas.

But new research shows that many older students lack critical foundational skills, limiting how far they can progress in their reading abilities as the volume and variety of text grows steeper.

The study from researchers at ETS, a testing organization, and the Advanced Education Research and Development Fund, a group that creates research programs to support Black, Latino, and low-income students, confirms the idea of a “decoding threshold”—a baseline ability to sound out words that students need in order to make good progress on other literacy skills.

Kids who don't meet this threshold see slower growth in their reading ability than their peers, the researchers found, which can lead to compounding gaps over time.

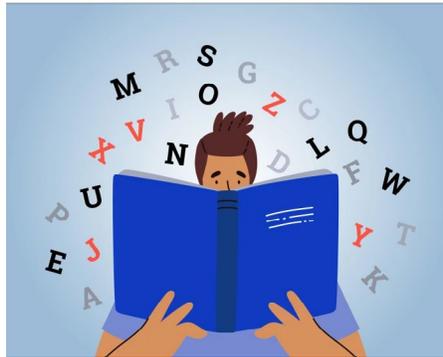
The research is a replication study of 2019 and 2020 papers on this phenomenon, but with a larger group of students. Among the students in the sample, most of whom were in a large, urban district on the East Coast, more than 20 percent of 5th, 6th, and 7th graders fell below the decoding threshold.

The results mean that for some portion of older students, the reading interventions schools use for this age group—most of which focus on reading comprehension—likely won't solve the root cause of students' struggles.

Schools have likely long had students with inadequate decoding skills without knowing, said Rebecca Sutherland, an author on the study, and the associate director of research at AERDF's Reading Reimagined, an initiative that aims to advance foundational reading skills in grades 3-8.

“We don't test students' foundational literacy skills after 3rd grade as a rule, unless they've been flagged as needing to have special attention,” she said.

Having more data on the scope of the



problem is helpful, said Kate Crist, a literacy consultant and member of the steering committee for the Project for Adolescent Literacy, a educator-led group to support older struggling readers.

But understanding this need should lead to action, she said. “What are we going to do to intervene for those students, and provide a valuable intervention that's actually worth their time and the school district's tens of millions of dollars?”

Students below the decoding threshold see slower reading growth

Reading well requires a varied set of skills. Readers need to know the vocabulary in a text and bring their background knowledge to bear on texts to understand new topics. Then there are metacognitive processes that good readers employ, like monitoring their comprehension.

But even if students have all of these skills, they can't read well if they can't decode the words on the page.

Ensuring that children learn these phonics skills in early elementary classrooms has been a main focus of the growing “science of reading” movement. More than two dozen states have passed legislation over the last five years requiring that schools teach evidence-based methods for sounding out words, and that teachers be trained in how to deliver this instruction.

But even as practice begins to shift, there are many older students who won't benefit from policy changes mostly targeted at grades K-5.

“Let's just be honest. We are still sending cohorts of kids to middle and high school who have been denied access to literacy in their K-5 environment,” said Crist.

The ETS and AERDF study examined the reading growth of about 17,000 students in grades 5-9 between 2011 and 2014 on an ETS assessment, Capti ReadBasix. Students who were below the decoding threshold had lower scores across reading subskills—like vocabulary and comprehension—than their peers. They also made much slower progress in those subskills over time.

For example, 5th graders who were above the decoding threshold grew 5.5 points in vocabulary knowledge each year on average. Students who were below the threshold only grew 2.3 points each year.

The researchers also looked at a key measure of decoding ability—how students tackled reading nonsense words. These are “words” that have phonetically regular spelling patterns but no meaning in English. The study analyzed word-reading data from more than 14,000 students in grades 3-12, between 2020 and 2023.

Students who were above the decoding threshold read real words quickly, and nonwords more slowly. It's likely that these students were taking more time with the nonwords because they were sounding them out—using their decoding skills, said Sutherland.

But students below the decoding threshold showed a slightly different pattern. There was less of a gap between how long it took them to read real words and nonwords.

“That suggests that they are less reliant on sound-based strategies,” Sutherland said.

Struggling students need 'strategic, systematic' solutions

To support these students, schools first need to figure out who they are, experts say.

“There's not a lot of good testing instruments for kids that are normed and referenced for older students,” said Crist.

In part, this is because older students have more “heterogeneous” learning profiles, said Sutherland. Some students below the threshold might have trouble decoding even the most basic words. Others might have mastered the basics, but struggle with more complex or multisyllabic words.

Different needs require different instructional approaches, Crist said.

A 10th grader who reads at a 6th grade level, for example, might be able to get the support they require with an attentive, intentional

teacher. English/language arts lessons would include lots of fluency practice, and explicit instruction in morphology, the study of word parts. Teachers would work to build up students' background knowledge so that they can more easily understand a variety of texts.

"For those kids, you see a pretty good payoff in a classroom," Crist said.

But when students can't decode, and they're more than a couple of grade levels behind, fluency practice and morphology instruction can only have a limited effect.

"Because they can't read independently, they can't do that work on their own," said Crist. "Those kids really need strategic, systematic stuff."

A surprising percentage of teachers of older students, do, in fact, spend time working with them on foundational reading skills—a quarter of middle school teachers say they engage their classes in phonics activities, according to a RAND survey from this year.

But these teachers also say they need more support and resources to do this well: Most middle and high school teachers don't get training on supporting foundational literacy.

"Whatever they know about supporting students' foundational reading skills, they've just kind of learned on the job," Sutherland said.

Schools can't rely on teachers to pick up the slack alone, Crist said. Middle and high schools aren't designed to teach basic reading skills, and the infrastructure that fosters this work in elementary schools—reading interventionists on staff, dedicated periods for reading support services—is much less common in upper grades.

"How do we begin to create an ecosystem in 6-12 for reading instruction like we have in K-2?" Crist asked.

It's a question that has to be answered in collaboration with the teachers and administrators who exist in middle and high school systems, she said. "The field deserves, and is owed, practical advice." ■



Published August 29, 2024

Teachers Say Older Kids Need Help With Basic Reading Skills, Too

By Sarah Schwartz

Helping students learn to read is usually the job of early elementary educators. But teachers of older children—who report that nearly half of their students have difficulty reading—say they need more training in this area, too, concludes a new survey.

The nationally representative survey from the RAND Corporation includes 1,483 teachers in grades 3-8. On average, teachers in these grades reported that 44 percent of their students always or nearly always faced challenges reading the content in their classes. Ninety-seven percent of teachers said they modified their instruction to support struggling readers at least once or twice a week.

The results come on the heels of a previous RAND survey that found many secondary teachers still work with students on foundational reading skills like sounding out words and spelling.

As states have pushed school districts to adopt evidence-based practices in early elementary reading instruction, a movement known as the “science of reading,” these two reports suggest they might also have to fill in knowledge gaps for teachers of older students.

“K-3 is when we expect that most students learn these skills,” said Anna Shapiro, an associate policy researcher at RAND, and the lead author of the report. “But we’re at a point where we have older kids in some grades that are still developing these skills.”

Why reading struggles can be more complex for older kids

Reading problems for older students can have disastrous ripple effects across the school day. In these older grades, it’s not only English/language arts classes that require strong reading skills, but social studies, science, and even math. In the RAND survey, teachers of subjects other than ELA said their students spent about half of class time reading and writing.

But teachers of older students usually don’t receive training on addressing the kinds of foundational reading difficulties that can bar students’ access to more complex text. And there often isn’t time to remediate basic skills when teachers are working with their students toward higher-level goals, like writing argumentative essays or analyzing poetry.

The reasons why older students struggle with reading can also be more complex and layered than they are for younger children.

“There’s no ceiling to learning to read,” Shapiro said. “As soon as a child has mastered the foundational skills that they need to look at a word and decode it, the higher-order reading skills that students continue to develop just get more and more complex as students get older, and they also vary by discipline.”

“For a student who has gotten to 4th, 5th, 6th grade and is still struggling with those foundational skills, it is making it harder for them to access that higher-order literacy skill development that we hope students are achieving,” she said.

There’s evidence that older students do have some of these foundational gaps. Nearly half of upper elementary teachers, and almost 1 in 5 middle school teachers, reported that they are teaching word-reading skills like phonics and spelling three or more times a week.

Most states have passed legislation requiring schools to use evidence-based methods to support younger struggling readers. But few have extended these mandates to middle grades.

“We feel like the national literacy discussion has still almost exclusively focused on young readers,” said Christina Cover, a special education teacher and literacy coordinator in the Bronx borough of New York City. Cover is also the project lead of the Project for Adolescent Literacy, a new, educator-led group created to support middle and high school students with reading difficulties.

“We know that shift to reading to learn—that doesn’t happen for kids who are still struggling,” she said.

Older students need different supports than beginning readers

To help students make that shift, teachers say they need more resources.

More one-on-one help for students was particularly popular: 48 percent of middle school teachers said they had a moderate or major need for reading specialists, while 45 percent identified a moderate or major need for tutors.

“It might be that teachers are thinking, ‘I need somebody else’s help, I don’t have the training or the expertise that I need to do this,’” Shapiro said.

Teachers also wanted more training.

Two in 5 teachers surveyed held at least one misconception about how children learn to read, such as agreeing with the statement that “most students will learn to read on their own if given the proper books and time to read them.”

Shapiro stressed that training and resources for teachers in older grades should be age-appropriate for their students.

“When we’re thinking about policy changes, ... we’re not suggesting that you should throw all the 3-8 teachers in the reading class that the K-2 teachers take in their teacher preparation,” she said.

For example, research shows that interventions targeting multiple skills at once—such as fluency and comprehension—can have higher positive effects for older students than single-skill practice.

Cover’s group, the Project for Adolescent Literacy, has fielded a survey to identify practices middle and high school teachers employ to support struggling readers and plans to build a bank of resources that these teachers can use.

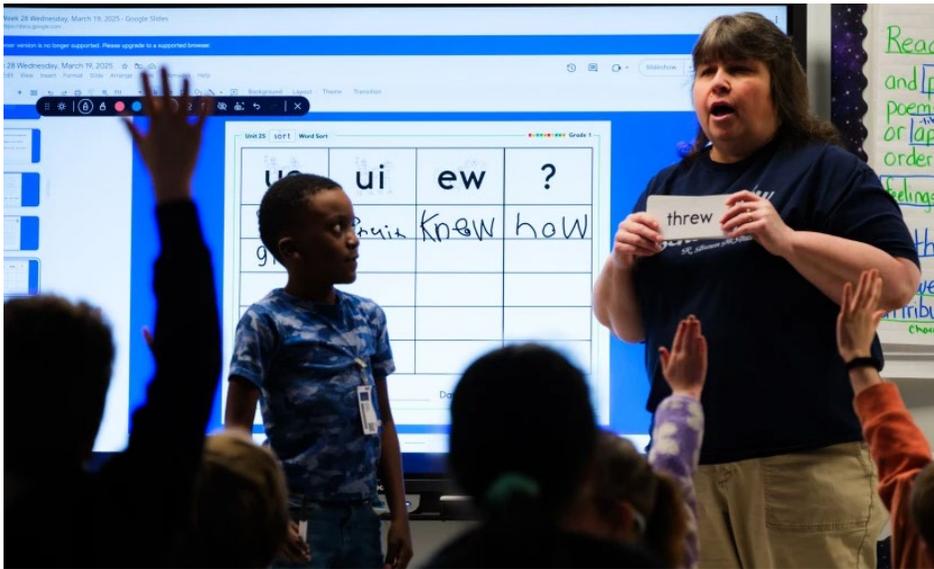
She also hopes that teachers attend to the social-emotional issues that often accompany reading difficulties in teenagers.

Students who have gone from grade to grade without seeing much progress tend to develop “avoidance strategies” for reading, she said.

“They’ve seen it all before, and they feel like it won’t help them,” Cover said. “I think students are rightfully a bit skeptical when they’re in high school, and they’re still struggling with some of those foundational skills.” ■

Additional Resource 

[View this article's charts](#)



Cornell Watson for Education Week

Students at R. Brown McAllister Elementary School use different strategies in phonemic awareness during literacy instruction in Concord, N.C. Teaching spelling in foundational-skills lessons can improve students' reading, research shows.

Published October 06, 2025

Why Teaching Spelling Can Boost Students' Reading Skills

By Sarah Schwartz

All computers come with spell-checkers and iPhones autocorrect their users' texts. But despite those everyday features, formal spelling instruction still pays off, the findings of a new study suggest.

This recent meta-analysis examined 59 studies of spelling interventions for students who had, or were at risk for, learning disabilities across grades K-9. The lessons had a small but significant effect on children's spelling—but also boosted their reading abilities.

"Spelling, especially when you think about early literacy, isn't just about accuracy all the time," said Brennan Chandler, an assistant professor of dyslexia at Georgia State University. "It's really about how we can help kids crack the code of written language, and build that mental dictionary that makes word-reading automatic."

The findings add to an existing body of research demonstrating that teaching spelling can make students stronger readers. And they also point to what kind of spelling instruction might deliver the greatest returns.

"We really looked under the hood," said

Chandler. "We wanted to find, what are the active ingredients that make spelling approaches really matter?"

States' new reading laws often don't reference spelling

It's an especially salient question now, as more than 25 states have passed laws or implemented new policies mandating evidence-based reading instruction in the past five years alone.

Still, most of these laws don't explicitly mention spelling—or writing—alongside other components of literacy, such as vocabulary or fluency, according to a 2023 analysis by the Shanker Institute.

Other research has found that teachers of upper elementary students with reading disabilities only spent about 2% of instructional time on spelling.

Learning to read words and learning to spell words are two sides of the same coin, researchers say.

When teachers teach phonics, they are showing students how letters represent sounds. Students use their knowledge of those letter-sound connections to sound out words in reading. But they also use that knowledge

to write words, representing the words' pronunciation through the letters they put down on the page.

Spelling well also frees up brain space for children while they're writing, said Chandler. "Spelling takes up so much cognitive capacity," he said.

If students don't know how to spell a tricky word that they might use regularly, like "said," they have to pause and try to figure it out every time—potentially interrupting their thoughts about what to write next or how to make their argument, Chandler said.

Focus on phonics, spelling rules, morphology: What spelling lessons can look like

In the meta-analysis, Chandler and his colleagues examined different categories of spelling lessons to identify which interventions would best meet different instructional goals.

Some interventions focused on letter-sound knowledge, which the researchers called "phonemic" interventions. Others asked students to memorize the spellings of whole words. Still others explicitly taught spelling rules, or focused on morphology—teaching students to spell word parts, like common prefixes and suffixes that also carry clues to a word's meaning. Some interventions combined multiple approaches.

Lessons aimed at having students memorize whole words had the largest positive effect, but only on students' ability to spell the specific words they memorized. Some of the studies showed evidence that the effect didn't transfer to spelling ability in general.

Interventions that used multiple approaches—teaching letter-sound connections and spelling rules, for example—also had small positive effects on spelling ability.

Lessons focused solely on letter-sound connections, though, were the only type that had a positive effect on students' word-reading.

What might this kind of spelling instruction look like in a kindergarten or 1st grade classroom? It can be integrated into how teachers teach phonemic awareness—the identification and manipulation of spoken sounds—or into phonics, said Chandler.

For example, a teacher might ask students to break down a word orally, stretching it out to hear the different sounds. Then the teacher could link letters to each sound in the word, and ask students to practice writing the word.

"We don't want kids to just memorize words," Chandler said. "We want them to unlock the pattern." ■

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How Schools Can Support Older Students Who Lag in Reading

By Sarah Schwartz

At the beginning of 2020, Shelly Emann felt like her district was on the right track with reading instruction.

In the Madison public schools in New Jersey, where Emann works as a K-8 instructional coach, teachers in kindergarten and 1st grade had just started using a program that taught students the building blocks of reading in a systematic progression: how to identify the different words in sounds, how to match those sounds to letters, and how to use that knowledge to decode new words.

Emann hoped that this new system would head off some of the reading difficulties she had seen in her nearly two decades as a 4th grade teacher, working with many students who didn't know how to read through harder words with multiple syllables.

But then, COVID-19 hit. "That threw us for a loop," Emann said.

Getting wiggly 5- and 6-year-olds to sit through phonics lessons on Zoom that spring was a losing battle. And then last school year, pandemic-adjusted schedules didn't always leave enough time for K-2 teachers to pull together small groups of students for additional support. This year, the district is expanding the new reading program to 3rd grade, too, but supply-chain issues delayed the delivery of materials for the first few months of the school year.

Madison is far from unique. Over the past two years, many students across the country spent less face-to-face time with their teachers during a critical period of their reading development: the first few years of elementary school, in which students learn how to read words.

National studies of student-test scores during the 2020-21 year found that these students weren't doing as well as their peers in years past. And now, some teachers and reading specialists say that they're seeing more 4th, 5th, and 6th graders with reading difficulties than they used to.

Still, Emann feels good about the progress Madison is making. The elementary principals have worked together to create an intervention block for all kids in grades K-5, and the district has hired additional reading interventionists.

Just as importantly, she feels like the pandemic has finally amplified the message she's



Getty/Igor Aleksander

tried to convey to her colleagues for years: Many older students in grades 4 and up have gaps in their foundational reading skills, too—and that limits their ability to access grade-level work.

Now, the teachers she works with want to talk more about finding and fixing foundational skills gaps, because they're trying to address learning loss, Emann said.

The pandemic has intensified some students' reading difficulties

Older students struggling with reading is not a phenomenon new to the pandemic. In 2019, before COVID disrupted schools, scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 66 percent of 4th graders and 73 percent of 8th graders were at or above a "basic" level of proficiency in the subject.

But the turmoil over the past two years has resurfaced questions about exactly how best to get students up to speed, and it's directed funding toward academic recovery. The pandemic also hit at a pivotal time for reading instruction: When the virus started to shut down schools in the spring of 2020, many states and districts were in the middle of a years-long push to align early-reading classes more closely to research-based practice.

Reading well is a complex process, involving lots of different skills like recognizing

and understanding vocabulary or monitoring comprehension. But the building blocks of reading ability, the foundational skills, involve decoding the printed letters on the page into spoken words. If students can't read words and fluently connect them into sentences, they won't be able to understand what they're reading.

Decades of studies have shown that explicitly and systematically teaching students which sounds represent which letters—teaching them phonics—is the most effective way to get them reading words. This happens in students' first years of school, usually kindergarten through 2nd or 3rd grade. But as reporting from Education Week and other outlets has demonstrated, many elementary-teacher-preparation programs don't teach their students how to deliver that kind of instruction.

As a result, teachers say, some students move on to higher grade levels with gaps in their ability to read words. Research bears this out: Many older students who have comprehension difficulties also struggle with word-level reading.

This reality flies in the face of the maxim that students "learn to read" in K-3 and then switch to "read to learn" in older grades. In fact, as this research demonstrates, the issue is less clear-cut. Students who didn't get enough practice with word-level reading will continue to struggle as the demands of content knowledge and comprehension ramp up.

The pandemic has only compounded this issue, widening the gaps between students who can read fluently and students who can't, said Tiffany Hogan, a professor at the MGH Institute of Health Professions in Boston and the director of the institute's Speech and Language Literacy Lab.

"Teachers are having to differentiate instruction in a way that they never have before. It's a really Herculean task," she said.

What foundational-skills gaps look like in older readers

Foundational-skills gaps can show up differently for older students from how they do for younger ones, said Jeanne Wanzek, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University. "Maybe they don't have gaps in phonics and word recognition that might be more common in K-2, but they struggle with reading multisyllabic words and they don't really have a strategy for that," she said.

That is the case for Jenna Madden's 3rd graders.

"Most of my students are able to decode a one-syllable word, but they have trouble with the 2nd grade material, where they have to decode multisyllabic words," said Madden, who teaches in Emann's district in New Jersey. "And now in 3rd grade, we're seeing not only two-syllable words but words with three or four syllables in grade-level text."

It's also likely that students will have mastered some parts of the K-2 curriculum but not others. "There's often splintered skills," Wanzek said. "It's just more complex, in terms of where their strengths are."

Struggles with word reading and comprehension feed into each other, she added: Students who skip a lot of words because they can't decode them will have a harder time understanding the text, applying comprehension strategies, and storing new knowledge. As students progress through the grades and must read more academic texts, they have to rely on more background knowledge and vocabulary—information they may not have, Wanzek said, if they had trouble reading related content in earlier grades.

"If you're struggling at 4th or 5th grade or higher, it's not going to be as simple as if you're in kindergarten," Wanzek said. "Often, it's multiple components that need to be addressed, and we see in the older grades that these multicomponent interventions have higher effects."

Older students with word-reading difficulties do need support for those skills, Wanzek

said. But reviews of research on upper-grades interventions also find that explicit-vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction can improve students' reading ability. For example, teachers can show students how to paraphrase what they've read or draw inferences based on information in the text and prior knowledge.

Madden, the 3rd grade teacher, makes it a priority to teach students grade-level skills and content, even as she also attends to the building blocks of reading.

"Even though I have students who are reading below grade level, it's still important to expose them to grade-level text," she said.

How to address foundational skills without neglecting grade-level work

How schools address older students' word-reading difficulties depends on what skills children already have.

For students who have some phonics skills and can decode short words, one research-based recommendation is word study. This involves teaching students how to identify different syllables within words and how to read through multisyllabic words, but it also includes morphology: the study of the smallest units of meaning within words.

Morphology instruction teaches how to break up words like "untouchable" into parts: the prefix "un-," the root "touch," and the suffix "-able." And it teaches the meaning of those parts, which research has shown can support vocabulary development.

For students who need support in reading fluency, researchers recommend having students read passages aloud, with monitoring and feedback from a teacher.

This kind of supplemental instruction can be done in a separate intervention block. But it isn't always necessary to break out these skills from whole-class teaching, Wanzek said. "The good news is that we actually do know from previous research that you can make incredible gains in reading with older grades—as well as younger grades—by focusing on classroom instruction."

That is the approach that Bayside Middle School in Virginia Beach, Va., is taking. The school has woven morphology and fluency instruction into whole-class lessons, said Rene Martinez, the 6th grade literacy coach at Bayside.

Students who need more support than what's offered in core classes spend additional time working with reading specialists on a digital supplemental program that addresses

foundational skills. And students who struggle with decoding one-syllable words or letter recognition get time in small groups with reading specialists and interventionists.

Many students struggled with grade-level work before the pandemic, and the shift in practice in the district isn't a response to COVID alone, Martinez said. But the disruptions of the past few years have exacerbated students' needs, she added.

During the 2020-21 school year, Martinez started working with the district's high school and elementary language-arts coordinators to figure out how the school could fill in foundational-skills gaps while still keeping middle schoolers on track to tackle high-school-level work. Together, they adapted a 6th grade curriculum to maintain focus on essential grade-level skills and content, while also allowing time for core instruction in morphology and fluency. This is the first year teachers are working with the new program.

Lorraine Hajjar-Conant, who teaches 6th grade English/language arts at Bayside, didn't think students would like much of the small-group work, with its focus on reading aloud and breaking down words into parts. But so far, kids look forward to it, asking her in the mornings whether they'll get to do it that day. She's seen some improvements in students' comfort with reading aloud, too.

Even so, it's a tricky balancing act to make time for fluency and word work while also teaching 6th grade skills, like identifying the causes and effects of events in informational texts, Hajjar-Conant said. Teachers try to integrate the two as much as possible—for example, asking questions about plot, characters, and theme while students are reading fiction for fluency practice, she said.

"I think it's great that we're trying something different to see if we're going to get a positive outcome," Hajjar-Conant said. She's looking forward to next year, when the school will have data on whether these changes helped set students up for more success in 7th grade.

Experts anticipate a 'protracted period of catch-up'

Even though these foundational gaps can underpin reading difficulties, there are barriers to addressing them in older grades.

"It was something that was completely new to all of us, because we're not from an elementary background," said Hajjar-Conant. The school has started work this year to address students' foundational-skills gaps, both in whole-group instruction and intervention.

“It was a lot of new vocabulary and a new way of learning information. It was definitely a struggle,” Hajjar-Conant said, of the learning process for her and her fellow teachers.

Teachers in older grades may have to put in more legwork to use assessments that can diagnose foundational-skills gaps and materials that can support instruction in that area, Wanzek said. Most of the screeners and diagnostic tests that can identify word-reading issues are the domain of special education teachers, and they’re not generally used in older-elementary general education, she added.

It can also be harder to find age-appropriate materials, said Hailey Love, an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Often when children are perceived as being behind, they’re subject to practices that are actually found to decrease motivation.”

Teachers might have students only read texts at their “level,” which would be written for younger children. It’s important that students still get to engage with grade-level material and that they have the same choice in reading materials that other kids have, Love said.

And then, there’s the shift in mindset. Middle school teachers are used to spending their time teaching to middle school standards, not how to sound out words, Hajjar-Conant said.

“The way that our administrators are trying to put it is, it’s not something additional. We need these kids to read at a 6th grade level, so if we have to go back to 3rd grade skills, that’s what we’re going to do,” she said. “We’re going to have time to address the standards, but we need to teach them how to read.”

Martinez, the literacy coach, acknowledges that change is a long process. Asking teachers to try new instructional methods poses an extra hurdle to jump in a year already fraught with COVID-related challenges.

“Schools are just humans, put together. And humans have limitations,” said Hogan of the Speech and Language Literacy Lab. Her team works with school partners, and many of their literacy initiatives were “rocked by COVID,” she said. In some of these schools, teachers are also trying to support students through the traumas they’ve experienced over the past few years, like losing parents to the virus.

For Hogan, the answer isn’t to abandon efforts but to acknowledge that they might take a more circuitous route than expected. “I think that what needs to be kept in mind,” she said, “is that there’s going to be a more protracted period of catch-up than we anticipated.” ■

OPINION

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Readers Can Struggle at Any Age. Here's How Teachers Can Help

By Larry Ferlazzo

Today's post is the latest in a series offering strategies to support older students experiencing reading challenges.

'Juicy Sentences'

Toni Faddis, Ed.D., previously a bilingual teacher, Reading Recovery specialist, and principal, is now a full-time professional consultant.

Douglas Fisher, Ph.D., a professor and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University is also the dean of Faculty Affairs at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego.

Diane Lapp, Ed.D., is Distinguished Professor of Education at San Diego State University and an academic coach at Health Sciences High and Middle College.

Readers may struggle with comprehension when sentences contain referents that appear as easily readable words, such as it, she, they, them, which, who. Authors use them so the same words and phrases aren't repeated. They expect readers to make connections between ideas. You just did that as you read this paragraph; your brain used syntactic knowledge to make a connection between an idea (referents) and a corresponding pronoun (them) and again between the noun "authors" and the pronoun "they."

A referent may appear before or after a subject, so mental processing of semantic features while reading is necessary for comprehension. Struggling readers may be able to read the words but fail to make the necessary connections between ideas and referents (Goodwin, Petscher, & Reynolds, 2022). When this happens, they lose the meaning of a text.

Being able to make syntactic connections is an important part of language and reading comprehension because they help the reader to create meaning and coherence in sentences and paragraphs. High-coherence text in which authors draw explicit connections between

subjects and referents may foster comprehension because the reader is more easily able to follow the author's message.

Low-coherence passages, conversely, often require readers to be taught how to spot and connect the referent to a word or phrase in context, so they understand the overall meaning of the text (Shanahan, 2022).

Grammar, while similar to syntactic knowledge, is the set of rules that govern how words are combined to form sentences. Teaching grammar through traditional methods, such as diagramming sentences and other memorizing parts of speech out of context, aren't effective approaches that foster language comprehension. Instead, explicit instruction that develops students' abilities to make connections when reading low-coherence texts builds syntactic knowledge, which in turn aids language comprehension (Ozuru, Dempsey, & McNamara, 2009).

We suggest three instructional strategies using mentor sentences that we find effective to build students' syntactic knowledge at the sentence level, which then can be transferred to multiple sentences and paragraphs.

1. Juicy Sentence Protocol. Wong Fillmore (2012) developed the Juicy Sentence Protocol to help students make sense of complex language. The protocol involves analyzing and discussing chunks of a "juicy sentence"—a sentence that is rich in meaning and complexity—to help students understand the different ways language is used to convey meaning. The table below provides an example sentence, chunked by phrases in the left column, with the corresponding questions for analysis and meaning in the right column.

Juicy sentence: When large-scale deforestation and habitat loss are left unchecked, they can lead to the extinction of keystone species, which can have a cascading effect on the biodiversity of entire ecosystems.

Using your knowledge of syntax, select a juicy sentence in an upcoming text that will be sufficiently difficult for your students to comprehend but will provide rich meaning and build students' syntactic knowledge when phrases are decomposed and analyzed. This

can be done as direct instruction, or by students in collaborative groups, or as independent practice. Check out this lesson idea from The New York Times Learning Network for sentences that have been selected from mentor texts and converted into digestible bites for analysis.

2. Sentence Combining. Sentence combining and reduction has also been shown to improve reading comprehension (Neville & Searls, 1991; Wilkinson & Patty, 1993). This is the process of joining two or more simple sentences to form a more complex sentence. This technique provides students with opportunities to practice syntactic skills, including adding referents, while paying attention to the clarity, conciseness, and sophistication of ideas. We model this strategy below:

Present Sentence Chunks

1. Cells are the basic unit of life.
2. They are made up of smaller parts called organelles.
3. Organelles have specific functions including keeping cells alive.

With students, create a combined sentence:

Cells, which are the basic unit of life, are made up of smaller parts called organelles. These have specific functions to keep cells alive.

In addition to curriculum texts, many websites, including CommonLit and ReadWorks, offer grade-level passages in all content areas that teachers can use to identify sentences that align to students' interests and passions. These include passages that relate to Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History, art and music, among many others. Teachers can identify an interesting, complex sentence and reduce it to three choppy sentences so students can combine them and use referents to construct a more robust and sophisticated sentence. Instruction that builds students' syntactic knowledge can be a 10-minute segment of class, a few times per week. This is a perfect activity to promote partner conversation.

3. Sentence Imitation. Students can also practice and deepen their syntactic knowledge by crafting their own version of a mentor sentence. Mimicking a writer's style requires students to attend to the structure of the sentence and make meaning of it before composing a similar version.

Author Anne Lamott (1980) reminds us that we naturally take on someone else's writing style, using it as a prop as we find our own voices. Working in pairs, students could first determine the meaning of a sentence by dis-

cussing and agreeing on the most important word. Then they could start drafting their own version of the sentence by mimicking the author's style. Here's an example from *Sunrise Over Fallujah*:

Sample sentence: "While they waited for the order to attack, the soldiers huddled together in the shadows, their faces grim and determined."

Student-created version: As they waited to attack, the soldiers huddled in the shadows, their faces set in grim determination.

Using a mentor sentence for reading and writing causes students to slow down and really grapple with the meaning as well as the semantic features used by the author. For additional ideas that foster the reading-writing connection, the National Council of Teachers of English offers several tips and examples.

Conclusion:

Mentor sentences work especially well to build students' syntactic knowledge, and comprehension, through the analysis of sentence structure. Importantly, students must gain and apply these skills using authentic sources. While there are mountains of grammar-focused worksheets available, these resources often fall short because of their "drill-and-kill" nature. Instead, identify a few mentor sentences in an upcoming unit of study that will provide students with meaningful opportunities to decompose, analyze, and combine sentences in ways that will transfer to other courses and settings in their lives.

Thanks to Douglas, Diane, and Toni for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades.

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OPINION

Published February 16, 2024

How to Help Students With Their Writing. 4 Educators Share Their Secrets

By Larry Ferlazzo

Teaching students to write is no easy feat, and it's a topic that has often been discussed on this blog.

It's also a challenge that can't have too much discussion!

Today, four educators share their most effective writing lessons.

'Three Practices That Create Confident Writers'

Penny Kittle teaches first-year writers at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire. She was a teacher and literacy coach in public schools for 34 years and is the author of nine books, including Micro Mentor Texts (Scholastic). She is the founder and president of the Book Love Foundation, which annually grants classroom libraries to teachers throughout North America:

I write almost every day. Like anything I want to do well, I practice. Today, I wrote about the wild dancing, joyful energy, and precious time I spent with my daughter at a Taylor Swift concert. Then I circled back to notes on Larry's question about teaching writers. I wrote badly, trying to find a through line. I followed detours and crossed out bad ideas. I stopped to think. I tried again. I lost faith in my words. I will get there, I told myself. I trust my process.

I haven't always written this easily or this

much. I wouldn't say I'm a "natural" writer because I don't believe they exist. Writing is work. When I entered college, I received a C-minus on my first paper. I was stunned. I had never worked at writing: I was a "first drafter," an "only drafter." And truthfully, I didn't know how or what to practice. I was assigned writing in high school and I completed it. I rarely received feedback. I didn't get better. I didn't learn to think like a writer; I thought like a student.

I've now spent 40 years studying writing and teaching writers in kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and high school, as well as teachers earning graduate degrees. Despite their age, writers in school share one remarkably similar trait: a lack of confidence. Confidence is a brilliant and fiery light; it draws your eyes, your heart, and your mind. But in fact, it is as rare as the Northern Lights. I feel its absence every fall in my composition courses.

We can change that.

Confidence blooms in classrooms focused on the growth of writers.

This happens in classrooms where the teacher relies less on lessons and more on a handful of practices. Unfortunately, though, in most classrooms, a heap of time is spent directing students to practice "writing-like" activities: restrictive templates for assignments, with detailed criteria focused on rules. Those activities handcuff writers. If you tell me what

to do and how to do it, I will focus on either completing the task or avoiding it. That kind of writing work doesn't require much thinking; it is merely labor.

Practice creating, on the other hand, is harder, but it is how we develop the important ability to let our ideas come and then shaping them into cohesive arguments, stories, poems, and observations. We have misunderstood the power of writing to create thinking. Likewise, we have misunderstood the limitations of narrow tasks. So, here are my best instructional practices that lead to confidence and growth in writers.

1. Writing Notebooks and Daily Revision.

Writers need time to write. Think of it as a habit we begin to engage in with little effort, like serving a tennis ball from the baseline or dribbling a basketball or sewing buttonholes. Writers need daily time to whirl words, to spin ideas, to follow images that blink inside them as they move their pen across the page. In my classroom, writing time most often follows engagement with a poem.

Likewise, writers need guidance in rereading their first drafts of messy thinking. I've seen teachers open their notebooks and invite students to watch them shape sentences. They demonstrate how small revisions increase clarity and rhythm. Their students watch them find a focus and maintain it. Teachers show the effort and the joy of writing well.

Here's an example: We listen to a beautiful poem such as "Montauk" by Sarah Kay, her tribute to growing up. Students write freely from lines or images that spring to them as they listen. I write in my notebook as students write in theirs for 4-5 minutes. Then I read my entry aloud, circling subjects and detours (I don't know why I wrote so much about my dog, but maybe I have more to say about this ...). I model how to find a focus. I invite students to do the same.

2. Writers Study Writing. Writers imitate structures, approaches, and ways of reaching readers. They read like writers to find possibilities: Look what the writer did here and here. A template essay can be an effective tool to write for a test, but thankfully, that is a very small and insignificant part of the whole of writing for any of us. Real writing grows from studying the work of other writers. We study sentences, passages, essays, and articles to understand how they work, as we create our own.

3. Writers Have Conversations as They Work. When writers practice the skills and embrace the challenges of writing in community, it expands possibilities. Every line read from a notebook carries the mark of a

particular writer: the passion, the voice, the experiences, and the vulnerability of each individual. That kind of sharing drives process talk (How did you think to write about that? Who do you imagine you are speaking to?), which showcases the endless variation in writers and leads to “writerly thinking.” It shifts conversations from “right and wrong” to “how and why.”

Long ago, at a local elementary school, in a workshop for teachers, I watched Don Graves list on the chalkboard subjects he was considering writing about. He read over his list and chose one. From there, he wrote several sentences, talking aloud about the decisions he was making as a writer. Then he turned to accept and answer questions.

“Why do this?” someone asked.

“Because you are the most important writer in the room,” Don said. “You are showing students why anyone would write when they don’t have to.” He paused, then added, “If not you, who?”

Developing ‘Student Voice’

A former independent school English teacher and administrator, Stephanie Farley is a writer and educational consultant working with teachers and schools on issues of curriculum, assessment, instruction, SEL, and building relationships. Her book, Joyful Learning: Tools to Infuse Your 6-12 Classroom with Meaning, Relevance, and Fun is available from Routledge Eye on Education:

Teaching writing is my favorite part of being a teacher. It’s incredibly fun to talk about books with kids, but for me, it’s even more fun to witness students’ skills and confidence grow as they figure out how to use written language to communicate what they mean.

A lesson I used to like doing was in “voice.” My 8th graders had a hard time understanding what I meant when I asked them to consider “voice” in their writing. The best illustration I came up with was playing Taylor Swift’s song “Blank Space” for students. Some students groaned while others clapped. (Doesn’t this always happen when we play music for students? There’s no song that makes everyone happy!) But when they settled down, I encouraged them to listen to the style: the arrangement, her voice as she sang, the dominant instruments.

Then, I played a cover of “Blank Space” by Ryan Adams. Eyes rolled as the song unfurled through the speakers, but again I reminded students to listen to the arrangement, voice, and instruments. After about 60 seconds of the Adams version, heads nodded in under-

standing. When the music ended and I asked students to explain voice to me, they said it’s “making something your own ... like your own style.” Yes!

The next step was applying this new understanding to their own writing. Students selected a favorite sentence from the books they were reading, then tried to write it in their own voice. We did this a few times, until everyone had competently translated Kwame Alexander into “Rosa-style” or Kelly Link into “Michael-style.” Finally, when it was time for students to write their own longer works—stories, personal essays, or narratives—they intentionally used the words and sentence patterns they had identified as their own voice.

I’m happy to report this method worked! In fact, it was highly effective. Students’ papers were more idiosyncratic, nuanced, and creative. The only change to this lesson I’d make now is trying to find a more zeitgeist-y song with the hope that the groans at the beginning die down a little faster.

Teaching ELLs

Irina McGrath, Ph.D., is an assistant principal at Newcomer Academy in the Jefferson County school district in Kentucky and the president of KYTESOL. She is also an adjunct professor at the University of Louisville, Indiana University Southeast, and Bellarmine University. She is a co-creator of the ELL2.0 site that offers free resources for teachers of English learners:

Reflecting on my experience of teaching writing to English learners, I have come to realize that writing can be daunting, especially when students are asked to write in English, a language they are learning to master. The most successful writing lessons I have taught were those that transformed the process into an enjoyable experience, fostering a sense of accomplishment and pride in my students.

To achieve this, I prioritized the establishment of a supportive learning environment. At the beginning of each school year, I set norms that emphasized the importance of writing for everyone, including myself as their teacher. I encouraged students to write in English and their native language and I wrote alongside my English learners to demonstrate that writing is a journey that requires hard work and dedication, regardless of age or previous writing experiences. By witnessing my own struggles, my students felt encouraged to persevere.

My English learners understood that errors were expected and that they were valuable opportunities for growth and improvement. This created a comfortable atmosphere where

students felt more confident taking risks and experimenting with their writing. Rather than being discouraged by mistakes, they viewed them as steppingstones toward progress.

In my most effective writing lessons, I provided scaffolds such as sentence stems, sentence frames, and word banks. I also encouraged my students to use translation tools to help generate ideas on paper. These scaffolds empowered English learners to independently tackle more challenging writing assignments and nurtured their confidence in completing writing tasks. During writers’ circles, we discussed the hard work invested in each writing piece, shared our work, and celebrated each other’s success.

Furthermore, my most successful writing lessons integrated reading and writing. I taught my students to read like writers and utilized mentor texts to emulate the craft of established authors, which they could later apply to their own writing. Mentor texts, such as picture books, short stories, or articles, helped my students observe how professional writers use dialogue, sentence structure, and descriptive language to enhance their pieces.

Instead of overwhelming students with information, I broke down writing into meaningful segments and taught through mini lessons. For example, we analyzed the beginnings of various stories to examine story leads. Then, collaboratively, my students and I created several leads together. When they were ready, I encouraged them to craft their own leads and select the most appropriate one for their writing piece.

Ultimately, my most effective lessons were those in which I witnessed the joyful smiles on my English learners’ faces as they engaged with pages filled with written or typed words. It is during those moments that I knew my writers were creating and genuinely enjoying their work.

‘Model Texts’

Anastasia M. Martinez is an English-language-development and AVID Excel teacher in Pittsburg, Calif.:

As a second-language learner, writing in English had not always been my suit. It was not until graduate school that I immersed myself in a vast array of journals, articles, and other academic works, which ultimately helped me find my academic voice and develop my writing style. Now, working as an ESL teacher with a diverse group of middle school multilingual learners, I always provide a model text relevant to a topic or prompt we are exploring.

When students have a model text, it gives them a starting point for their own writing and presents writing as less scary, where they get stuck on the first sentence and do not know how to start.

At the start of the lesson, prior to using a model text, I create a “do now” activity that guides my students’ attention to the topic and creates a relevant context for the text. After students share their ideas with a partner and then the class, we transition to our lesson objectives, and I introduce the model text. We first use prereading strategies to analyze the text, and students share what they notice based on the title, images, and a number of paragraphs. Then, depending on the students’ proficiency level, I read the text to the class, or students read the text as partners, thinking about what the text was mostly about.

After students read and share their ideas with partners and then the whole class, we transition to deconstructing the text. These multiple reengagements with the text help students become more familiar with it, as well as help students build reading fluency.

When deconstructing the model text, I guide my students through each paragraph and sentence. During that time, students orally share their ideas determining the meaning of specific paragraphs or sentences, which we later annotate in the model text using different colored highlighters or pens. Color coding helps visually guide students through similar parts of the model text. For instance, if we highlight evidence in paragraph 2 in one color, we also highlight evidence in the same color in the following paragraph. It helps students see the similarities between the paragraphs and discover the skeleton of the writing. Additionally, color coding helps students during their writing process and revision. Students can check if they used all parts of the writing based on the colors.

Furthermore, one of the essential pieces during deconstructing model texts that I draw my students’ attention to is transition words and “big words,” or academic vocabulary. We usually box them in the text, and I question students about why the author used a particular word in the text. Later, when students do their own writing, they can integrate new vocabulary and transition words, which enhances their vocabulary and language skills.

As the next step, I invite students to co-create a similar piece of writing with a partner or independently using our model text as their guide. Later, our model text serves as a checklist for individual and partner revisions, which students could use to give each other feedback.

Model texts are an essential part of the writing process in any content-area class. As educators, we should embrace the importance of model texts, as they provide a solid foundation upon which students can develop their unique writing skills, tone, and voice.

Thanks to Penny, Stephanie, Irina, and Anastasia for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades.

OPINION

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Students Need to Make Sense of What They Read. Here Are Ways to Support Them

By Larry Ferlazzo

Today's post is the third in a series offering strategies to support older students experiencing reading challenges.

Verbal Reasoning and Making Inferences

Toni Faddis, Ed.D., previously a bilingual teacher, Reading Recovery specialist, and principal, is now a full-time professional consultant.

Douglas Fisher, Ph.D., a professor and the chair of the educational leadership department at San Diego State University is also the dean of faculty affairs at Health Sciences High and Middle College, San Diego.

Diane Lapp, Ed.D., Distinguished Professor of Education at San Diego State University, is also an academic coach at Health Sciences High and Middle College:

When it comes to understanding text, some students find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They may be able to decode the words, but they're still in over their heads, struggling to answer comprehension questions. This is the next installment of a series dedicated to supporting adolescent readers. In this post, our focus is on verbal reasoning, which is the ability to understand what you see, hear, and make sense of the heaps of implied messages, figurative language, and multiple-meaning words in the English language.

Like any cognitive skill, verbal reasoning can be improved through instruction. It's vital that teachers in all content areas plan opportunities for students to ponder language, then explain and justify their thinking. Activities that prompt students to verbalize their thoughts foster speakers and listeners with chances to revise their thinking while gaining knowledge because of the act of processing out loud.

Teachers who provide experiences where students must negotiate and construct meaning together may get a kick out of how much fun word play and detecting meaning with tweens

and teens can be. Below are five strategies that we've found to work well with our students.

1. Infer by Reading an Image. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so asking students to describe an interesting image can provoke meaningful discussion and different perspectives. Much like the close reading of a text, students can close read an image and respond to questions posed by the teacher and peers. Instruct students to pretend they are looking at the image with a magnifying glass and write down all the details they notice. Time.com offers a free "photo of the day" that students find interesting. A graphic organizer can assist students to make inferences and draw conclusions based on details found in an image.

2. Infer by Reading Amazon Reviews. Another way for students to practice reading between the lines is to read real reviews from Amazon. Choose a product that students are into, such as the latest video game, eyelash extensions, or another current fad. The trick is to provide students with three written reviews of one product but not the accompanying stars. Ask students to infer the quality of the product based on the clues in the writing. A graphic organizer can assist students to make note of the clues in the textual information, inferences that stem from the clues, and their rationale for recommending or not recommending the product. Here is a link to the latest Madden NFL video game as a start.

3. Infer by Watching a Wordless Film. As a whole class, in groups, or in partners, students watch a short film, pausing at designated stopping points to infer what the character(s) is thinking at that moment. Through discussion, students can collaborate to determine the character's inner dialogue based on what is happening in the clip. The short film *Soar*, at 4:50 in length, is a great place for students to get the hang of making inferences.

4. Class Discussion: Paraphrasing. Prompting students to paraphrase a statement encourages them to listen carefully and not just repeat what was heard. For example, if we ask students to repeat what their partner says, we miss an opportunity for students to practice the skill of paraphrasing. Repeating that par-

rots the speaker requires little thought and can bore students, discouraging their participation. Instead, teach students the purpose and skill of paraphrasing and develop language frames with them. Post these frames so students can refer to them throughout the year.

5. Class Discussion: Reasoning. As students become skilled at paraphrasing, teachers can also prompt for evidence that supports their ideas. Asking "why?" or "how do you know that?" encourages students to provide reasons and evidence for their thinking, which decreases guesswork while simultaneously teaching peers. As students engage in these types of discussions regularly, they also practice making inferences in the company of their teacher and peers. The classroom should be a safe place for students to dig into thoughts and inferences, both exploring and explaining them.

Conclusion: Developing students' verbal reasoning skills is mission critical—they're essential for success in school and in life. While wide, independent reading will certainly expose students to a range of figurative language and multiple-meaning words, it's important that we provide students with guided practice activities in which they make inferences based on the clues they identify. In other words, they step up their games, their verbal reasoning games.

Thanks to Douglas, Diane, and Toni for contributing their thoughts! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is a former award-winning high school English and social studies teacher of more than two decades.

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6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
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