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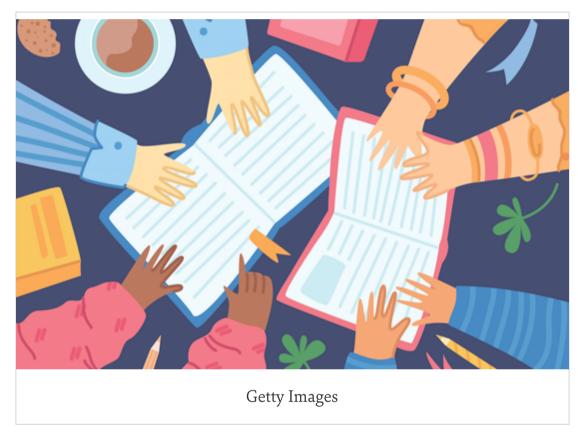
Teaching reading: Development and differentiation

Melanie R. Kuhn and Katherine A. Dougherty Stahl

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Effective reading instruction must be flexible enough to address individual students' needs, wherever they are in their literacy development.

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When it comes to teaching reading, we believe that many of the disputes surrounding best practices are the result of taking what is appropriate for some children and applying it to all learners (Kuhn & Stahl, in press). For example, some children become readers with little or no explicit phonics instruction; however, the majority of learners benefit from some form of explicit decoding instruction and need such instruction to make sense of our alphabetic writing system. On the other hand, while some students (especially dyslexic students or those with specific learning disabilities) need a granular, structured focus on the mechanics of reading, most children do not need such an intensive approach, and teaching what has already been mastered makes poor use of limited instruction time.

According to Jeanne Chall (1979), it is "the teacher that makes the difference" (p. 6). That is because skilled teachers understand what their learners need at a given point in time. They know there are pieces that are critical for all students throughout their schooling and other pieces that are critical at various developmental points. Further, they know it is essential for teachers to differentiate within most classrooms to ensure they are maximizing their students' potential. To accomplish this, teachers need to think about language, vocabulary, content, and the mechanics of literacy development simultaneously, rather than in

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opposition to one another. Our goal is to provide an overview of what the research says about reading development and effective instruction, including the need to teach flexibly and respond to differing student needs, as a means of maximizing student learning.

What to teach when: Thinking developmentally

Discussions of reading instruction often target one component of reading at a time (decoding, comprehension, fluency, motivation, etc.) rather than thinking about how all the pieces fit together and how learners' needs change depending on where they are in their individual development (Stahl, 1998). This can lead to lopsided instruction, causing students to get stuck in their reading development rather than making the progress they should. For example, we have worked with young readers who can create a valid retelling of a story based on pictures or a sampling of words (e.g., reading "bug" as "butterfly"). However, students need to learn that the text's message is in the words, and they need to be able to decode those words if they are to progress as readers. On the other hand, some children are able to decode words accurately and automatically in isolation but are unable to read connected text fluently. Unless these learners are taught to apply their decoding skills to texts, it is unlikely they will move beyond this point on their own (Chall, 1995). As a counter to practices that are overly focused on certain components in readers' development, we argue that reading development is best treated as a holistic process in which some elements need to be consistently emphasized throughout (e.g., vocabulary, comprehension) while others (e.g., alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness) should take on greater or lesser attention depending on student needs (Paris, 2005).

Such a reconsideration involves looking at the ways various components of reading (and writing and language development) support each other (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998), beginning from a child's earliest interactions with text and continuing throughout a reader's life. Consider how much easier it is for you to comprehend a text about a subject you know something about than one on a topic completely unfamiliar to you. For example, Donna Recht and Lauren Leslie (1988) looked at readers' comprehension of a passage narrating a half-inning of a baseball game. What they found was that the students who had the strongest knowledge of baseball also had the best comprehension of the passage, regardless of reading ability — although the strengths or limitations of their reading skills would reappear once the topic changed.

Further, while all the components of reading development are important to skilled reading, in terms of instruction, the emphasis needs to vary depending on where students are in their learning. Our interactive model of reading development (Kuhn & Stahl, in press) can help teachers think about how to address their students' needs as they move from emergent to novice, transitional, and, finally, post-transitional readers.

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Emergent literacy

Reading development begins when children first interact with text (e.g., Chall, 1995; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). For example, when children are read to at home, they develop important understandings that lay the groundwork for later successful reading experiences. Books for young learners often focus on the alphabet, rhyming words, and other components of language that contribute to their developing phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. Additionally, children hear a broader range of vocabulary from most books, including picture books, than they hear in most daily conversations (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). And when caregivers read to children, they show them how printed text works in general (e.g., that letters make up words and words are separated by spaces) and how books, in particular, work (e.g., that they begin with a title

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and author on the cover with the story proceeding as the reader turns the pages). All of these interactions help prepare children for their own book reading (Morrow, 2020; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 2000).

When young children encounter texts, whether through lap reading or broad exposure to a literate environment, and whether at home or in their preK and kindergarten programs, they are more likely to succeed with the literacy tasks required of them in the primary grades. However, such experiences are *not* all that children need to become skilled readers (Reutzel, 2015). This is also the period when children develop alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness, both through intentional instruction (such as by encouraging them to stretch out the sounds in words, and helping them practice letter recognition) and through reading and play (such as coming up with rhyming words, engaging in playground clapping games, and learning nursery rhymes). Further, early writing practice can help students develop their understanding of the alphabetic principle, as they make connections between the letters they draw on paper with the sounds they make and the words they can be combined to represent.

Any emergent literacy instruction should also pay attention to oral language development (Hamilton & Schwanenflugel, 2011), which increases the likelihood that students will recognize and understand the words they encounter in print. However, oral language involves more than just vocabulary. Children also need to begin applying narrative structures in their thinking and social discourse (Nelson, 1996) by telling stories that incorporate a sense of the past, present, and future. This ability to understand temporal sequencing is a foundation of reading comprehension, especially for following narratives.

Young children also need to begin learning to broaden their knowledge through informational texts (Dreher & Kletzien, 2020). Recent research supported by federal Reading for Understanding grants confirms that informational texts can help young children read to learn *and* learn to read (Pearson et al., 2020). Children who are beginning to become familiar with the unique formats of these texts (such as tables of contents, indices, and headings) will be better able to successfully interact with them in the later grades. This does not mean informational texts should be the only, or even the primary, material read to children, although some children do prefer them. Instead, such selections should be included along with materials that are already commonly used during this period (e.g., stories, poems, nursery rhymes, and predictable books).

Novice readers

As learners shift from emergent to novice, the focus in terms of mechanics shifts from how letters, books, and words work to actual decoding (Kuhn & Stahl, in press). Developing word recognition is a multi-year process, and its instruction is especially critical at this point. Because most students need a lot of support learning to blend sounds into words, much of the reading at this point involves relatively simple material with an emphasis on familiar content, regular word patterns, and a limited number of high-frequency words (such as *the* and *of*).

While decodable texts are essential to reading instruction at this point, novice reading experiences should not be limited to them (Hiebert, 2017; Shanahan, 2019). Poems, texts with controlled vocabulary (i.e., books with a limited number of words repeated throughout the story), naturalistic selections (i.e., books that emphasize conversational language), and simple informational texts, among others, should all be used for a variety of instructional approaches. While all these texts should be available for novice readers, simpler selections (decodables, short poems, texts with controlled vocabulary, etc.) should be incorporated into lessons where students practice reading. More complex selections (picture or chapter books, more challenging informational material), on the other hand, should be reserved for read-alouds, both to expand learners' vocabulary and conceptual knowledge and simply for enjoyment.

Decoding instruction needs to be systematic and purposeful, yet flexible enough to meet the specific needs of individual learners. Because not all students benefit from the same instruction at the same time, differentiation is critical (Walpole & McKenna, 2017). A typical 1st-grade classroom is likely to include some students who are still establishing

concepts of print and letter knowledge, some who are learning to recognize words based on common patterns (e.g., consonant-vowel-consonant words), and others who are already fairly fluent readers. Varying what is being taught to which children is an important way of maximizing each child's development. This can be done in multiple ways, from grouping according to specific skill requirements (e.g., students who need phonemic awareness instruction) to differentiating the scaffolding provided to students as they write a response to a shared book.

There are a number of effective decoding methods (including synthetic, analytic, analogy, or spelling-based); the National Reading Panel report's (2000) chapter on phonics instruction provides an overview of many decoding approaches. Which method a teacher uses should depend on teacher knowledge, experience, comfort with the material, and the needs of the students. Regardless of the method chosen, any decoding instruction needs to be combined with the reading of connected texts (i.e., text organized into multiple related sentences), much of which should be scaffolded. Research is clear that the progression from recognizing words in isolation to actual reading occurs most easily for learners when they spend substantial amounts of time in supported practice with connected text, and it may not occur at all for some students without such assistance (Kuhn & Levy, 2015).

It is also essential to continue expanding students' vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and conceptual understanding throughout this period by reading more complex material aloud to students and leading discussions about it (Chambre, Biemiller, & McKeown, 2021). Shared reading experiences can — and should — be built around high-quality literature and informational texts that consider student interests, build their knowledge, and introduce them to a range of genres, even as primary students are learning to decode (Pearson et al., 2020). This increases the likelihood that all the learners in a classroom will be motivated by some of the selections presented. Luckily, there are far more selections on a larger range of topics available for novice readers than there used to be, making it easier to lay the base for successfully reading an assortment of complex texts across a variety of categories.

Transitional readers

Transitional readers differ from novice readers in that they are solidifying their word recognition and developing their fluency (e.g., Kuhn & Levy, 2015). At this point, two essential aspects of fluency should be part of the instructional focus: First, students' word recognition needs to become automatic, and second, they need to learn how to apply prosodic elements (such as stress, pitch, and appropriate phrasing) while reading. Students often are taught to recognize words in isolation, but this ability does not necessarily transfer to skilled reading of connected texts without scaffolding, which can come in various forms of reading aloud — echoing a teacher's oral reading, reading with a partner, or reading together as a chorus. Becoming more automatic in word recognition frees up learners to focus more on meaning. But while automaticity is important, if reading instruction focuses primarily on speed, transitional readers will miss elements, such as pacing, that contribute to comprehension in unique ways. Unless instruction incorporates all the elements of fluency, some students will experience a new set of difficulties with their reading development. As is the case with any component, should students fail to become fluent, it is likely that will stall in their reading development; specifically, their decoding may remain slow and inefficient, their reading rate may not vary enough to allow for comprehension, or they may over-rely on context to aid their understanding to the (limited) degree possible.

The material being used at this point should continue to incorporate a broad range of genres, and challenging texts should be incorporated into the curriculum as part of the students' own reading, not just as read-alouds. Research (e.g., Kuhn, 2020) indicates that fluency development is most successful when the texts are at the upper end of students' instructional level (when they can read with 85-90% accuracy) and the reading of those texts is scaffolded (through echo, choral, or partner reading). And reading multiple texts, or wide reading, is at least as effective as the use of repeated readings when the amount of reading time is equivalent. Wide reading also serves to expose students to a larger number of words in a broader range of contexts than does repeated readings, and it may better

ensure sight-word development for individual learners. Many teachers use text sets on a common topic or theme for wide reading to enhance word recognition, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development as students connect what they learn from one text to the material in a more complex text on a related topic.

What is important at this stage is that students spend substantial amounts of time reading connected texts, with and without scaffolding, to ensure that they transfer what they are learning about word recognition to their reading. Depending on the students and the classroom structure, this can be accomplished through whole-class instruction, through large and small groups, in dyads and triads, and with individual learners who may read repeatedly, along with recordings, or simply read widely for their own enjoyment. These variations tie back to our initial premise that instruction can — and should — be flexible and based on student needs. For example, we have used scaffolded, shared reading as the basis of whole-class fluency instruction with 2nd-grade transitional readers. On the other hand, our research has used the scaffolded reading of challenging trade books with small groups of struggling 3rd-grade readers to help expand their social studies knowledge while simultaneously improving their reading fluency. Including explicit literacy instruction while reading and writing in the content areas enhances, rather than compromises, both literacy learning and knowledge development (Pearson et al., 2020).

Post-transitional readers

Reading development has often been described as a two-step process; first students learn to read and, once the mechanics are in place, they begin to read to learn. In practice, this meant students were rarely introduced to informational texts prior to 4th grade, and this lack of familiarity with informational texts created difficulties for many learners who had previously been successful readers (Chall, 1995). By integrating reading to learn and learning to read from the outset, it is possible to lessen or eliminate this slump. Introducing young learners to informational texts and text structures and teaching them a range of vocabulary and concepts they might find in such texts, while also teaching the mechanics of reading, can ease the transition to what we describe as post-transitional reading.

Post-transitional readers have become comfortable with their decoding and fluency and can demonstrate the skills generally required for success in the upper-elementary grades and beyond. At this point, students are expected to read independently, the amount of material to be covered increases, and the type of reading material assigned is increasingly content intensive. This means the overall literacy focus will be on vocabulary development and text comprehension in the subject areas. However, mechanics should not be entirely set aside. For example, an effective curriculum should include the way morphology, or the structure of words (e.g., the relationship between *maintain* and *maintenance* or the fact that every syllable in English requires a vowel), influences multisyllabic words (Bear et al., 2020) and the importance of situational fluency, or the variation of reading speed depending on the material and the purpose for reading (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019). However, such instruction is likely to take less classroom time than it would in the primary grades.

Remembering individual needs: Differentiation

When thinking of how readers develop, it may be tempting to assign readers of a certain age to a certain stage and instruct them accordingly, but individuals do not learn in a lockstep manner, moving in unison from one stage to the next on a set schedule (Willingham, 2008). And the various elements of reading instruction should not necessarily be consigned to a single developmental moment. Some elements need to be consistently addressed across readers' development, while others should be focused on according to learners' developmental needs.

Further, relationships between aspects of reading development work reciprocally; spending a little time working with younger readers in a developmentally appropriate way on an element of literacy that is crucial for older readers can lay important groundwork while also helping young readers develop skills they need now. For example, the relationship between phonemic awareness and writing can be mutually supportive, which

means there is no need to wait for phonemic awareness to be fully established before asking students to compose. In fact, allowing them to use inventive, or phonetic, spelling will increase their developing letter-sound knowledge.

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At the same time, there is no sound reason to push instruction too early. For example, teaching the 100 most-common high-frequency words to four- and five-year-olds has become a goal in many preschools; however, this is developmentally inappropriate for most young students and can lead to frustration and even anxiety that hinders their development. While we agree that our ultimate goal is to ensure students are college- and career-ready by the end of high school, determining the appropriate level of challenge involves taking learners' individual needs and development into account, and pushing students to take on more advanced learning too early can do more harm than good in the long run.

In addition, because not all students develop in the same way, differentiation is critical across all stages of reading instruction. For example, when students are already reading in 1st grade, there is no reason to include them in whole-group decoding instruction that they have already mastered. Alternatively, some students in a classroom of mostly fluent readers may need additional support blending letter-sounds into words than do many of their peers. In both of these cases, small-group or individual instruction will be more effective than whole-class approaches. This does not mean there is no room for whole-class instruction; in fact, there are many lessons that will benefit all the students in a class. For example, there may be a book that you want all your students to read for a range of reasons (e.g., to better ensure students understanding of colonial America, to increase student knowledge of a weather phenomenon, or to help them develop an insight into a particular work of fiction). However, even in these cases, it is important to bear in mind the lessons' purposes and whether some students will benefit from additional support or opportunities for enrichment.

Given the complexities of learning to read, it is essential to consider how reading develops broadly, the role of each component of reading throughout a reader's development, and the reality that not all readers develop in every area at the same rate. A general understanding of the path learners follow as they grow from emergent to post-transitional readers is critical to understanding reading development and creating effective instruction across formal schooling. At the same time, differentiation and flexibility in the application of this knowledge can prevent the types of overgeneralizations that keep students stuck in place, whether it's because they need more support or because they're ready to leap ahead. By carefully considering both the reading process and the needs of learners, it becomes possible not only to improve reading instruction, but also to increase the likelihood that every student will develop into a skilled reader.

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