

Improving Literacy Brief

SUCCEEDING IN SCHOOL: ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Educators and parents understand that reading skills lay the foundation for academic success. Students also need to have strong communication skills to do well in school. Students learn by reading books and other texts, but they also learn by listening to knowledgeable speakers, participating in discussions, and writing reports and essays on important topics.

From the beginning of school, students should be taught different ways of using language to help them learn and communicate about academic content. This means reading and listening with understanding. It means using facts and evidence to reason and build strong verbal and written arguments. This brief discusses two areas of literacy development that students must learn so that they can do well in school: *foundational reading skills* and *academic language*.

FOUNDATIONAL READING SKILLS

Learning to read in English (and in other *alphabetic* languages such as Spanish) requires teaching students *how* the alphabetic system works. Three issues are critical:

- **Understanding** that each word when spoken consists of smaller units of sounds, and it is important to learn to hear and identify these discrete sounds. For example, there are three sounds in the word “sat.” Saying “sat” without the s sound would be what word? What word would it be if we put an m sound at the beginning of the word “at”?
- **Learning** that the letters of the alphabet are symbols for these sounds. Together, the words “sat” and “mat,” use four different letters, and each letter makes a different sound.
- **Knowing** that the purpose of reading is to understand the text, and understanding requires concentration and practice. The words “sat” and “mat” have meaning. When they are used with other words to make a sentence, that sentence also has meaning. “He sat on a mat” has meaning.

With teaching, time, and practice, most students become fluent readers and understand what they read. *In other words, they develop foundational reading skills.* However, many students have difficulty in spite of these efforts. For these students, instruction and practice should be targeted to address their difficulties as early as possible.

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ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Some words rarely used in everyday conversations are commonly used in academic settings. Learning the meaning of academic vocabulary is essential to understanding and applying new content. Some academic words (e.g., “democracy”) and phrases (e.g., “democracy in action”) should be studied intensely over time. In this way, students learn new vocabulary thoroughly and experience how crucial word and concept knowledge is to learning. Students must also learn that *the way* language is used in school settings is different from the way it is used in everyday conversations. This awareness includes learning how different subjects such as science, social studies, and mathematics frequently have their own conventions for communicating academic content.

Learning academic language also takes explicit teaching, time, and practice. Students should be given instruction and feedback on using academic language across school subjects. They should also be given plenty of time to talk and write about what they are learning within each of these subjects.

CONCLUSION

Teaching students foundational reading skills and academic language should be connected. Progress in reading and progress in academic language will influence each other. Knowing how to achieve this balance is part of effective teaching. Effective teaching also requires knowing when and how to make adjustments for students who are struggling because of dyslexia or other literacy-related disabilities and difficulties.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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