

Phonics Instruction for English Learners

Part I: What Teachers Need to Know



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Phonics and ELLs

Phonics refers to the relationship between a sound and its corresponding written letter. ELLs need explicit, systematic phonics instruction that takes into account their prior literacy experience, home language, and language development. You can request training on these topics if they aren't addressed in your curriculum.

Literacy Background

If a student has learned to read in their primary language, they can apply the skill of matching a symbol with a sound in a new language.

- Learn more about your students' [literacy background](#) through family and student interviews and informal assessments.
- Help students understand that the process of sounding out words is the same across alphabetic languages.

Students who have not yet learned to read will need step-by-step support in putting together sounds, letters, and words – especially in a new language.

- Break the individual skills down that they will need to learn how to decode.
- Teach letter-sound relationships with manipulatives such as sound boxes and magnetic letters.

See related tips and videos in the [online version](#) of this article!



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Part II: Ideas for Instruction



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Home Language: Similarities

Learn more about your [students' languages](#) by going to resources such as [MyLanguages.org](#) or [OmniGlot.com](#). Are they alphabetic languages? Are there shared sounds, letters, patterns, or [cognates](#)? When teaching, explain that some letters may make the same or similar sounds in both languages.

Home Language: Differences

Find out about some of the differences between your students' languages and English. Which sounds may be hard for speakers of that language to pronounce in English? Students will need explicit instruction a) in new sounds and b) in different sound-letter relationships (e.g., in Spanish, the “j” makes an /h/ sound).

Vocabulary

Use [familiar vocabulary](#) in phonics instruction as ELLs learn to decode. Consider pre-teaching words used for phonics practice and using curricular materials such as vocabulary lists to “front load” instruction before teaching new skills. Keep in mind that ELLs’ decoding skills may not accurately predict comprehension.

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