



The Five Pillars of Literacy

Phonemic Awareness – the ability to hear, identify and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken language.

Phonemes are the smallest units in spoken language and, when combined, create syllables and words. Phonemic awareness is an important foundation skill needed for learning to read, write and spell. There are 44 phonemes in the English language and they can be taught explicitly through language play and word games. Here are some activities you could use with your students:

- Identifying individual sounds in isolation: e.g. say /t/ /t/ are these sounds the same? What about /s/ /t/? Remember to focus on the sounds, not the letter names.
- Identifying initial, final and medial sounds in words: Play “I Spy”, e.g. words that begin with the sound /p/ or words that end with the sound /t/ or words that have a middle sound /o/ as in *top*.
- Identifying the sounds in words leading to segmenting and blending: e.g. *m-ou-se*, *c-oa-t*. Students sitting at a table could use plastic counters to represent each sound they can hear.
- Identifying words that rhyme: “How many words can we think of that rhyme with *hat*?”
- Identifying syllables in words: Start with the student’s name and clap out the syllables as they are spoken.
- Practise manipulating phonemes by adding, deleting and substituting initial, medial and final phonemes: The sound at the start of a word, e.g. *hat*, *scat*, *pat*. The sound in the middle of a word, e.g. *pit*, *pat*, *pot*. The sound at the end of the word, e.g. *tip*, *tin*, *tick*.

Phonics – understanding the relationship between written letters (graphemes) and the sounds in spoken language (phonemes).

There are 26 letters in the English language that in isolation or in combination with each other create the 44 sounds. As students develop understanding of these letter-sound relationships, they are able to use this knowledge to sound out many words when they are reading. There are exceptions in English and some “tricky” or high-frequency words such as *the* and *was* cannot be easily sounded out and need to be learnt by sight. Phonics needs to be explicitly and systematically taught so that all students learn the Alphabetic Code and can apply this knowledge when reading and spelling. Over time they should learn the different graphemes used in English to represent the same sound, e.g. the sound /r/ can be represented by r (*run*), rr (*hurry*) and wr (*wrap*).

Comprehension – the ability to understand and make meaning from text.

When reading text, all readers want to make sense of it. Successful readers implement different strategies while reading in order to comprehend the text and they do this in milliseconds without even realising they are doing it! For example, we constantly ask and answer questions in our minds while we are reading to clarify our understanding. If a section of text didn’t make sense, we question it, we go back and re-read it or check up on, or make assumptions, about the meaning of an unknown word, or we question ourselves, “Have I missed something?”

To comprehend, we need to be active and mindful readers with an arsenal of different strategies up our sleeves that we can apply automatically to help us to make meaning of what we are reading. Strategies to support comprehension can be taught and include:

- Asking and answering questions
- Making connections by activating and using prior knowledge
- Visualising by making a mental image drawing on our five senses
- Making predictions before during and after reading
- Summarising
- Inferencing
- Synthesising
- Critical thinking

Teachers can model these strategies and show students when, how and why to implement them.

Vocabulary – developing an ever-increasing base of known words and their meaning.

Vocabulary is important in reading as the more words students know and understand, the easier it is to make sense of what they are reading. Most teachers have come across students who are highly accurate decoders, reading texts at levels way beyond their age but their comprehension doesn't always match up with this decoding proficiency. Being able to read words but not being able to understand what they mean creates a huge block for comprehension. While a student's vocabulary develops indirectly, there are some ways we can support this development via instruction:

- A lot of reading! The more students read, the more vocabulary they are exposed to. Build vocabulary by encouraging them to read more and from a variety of texts. Often new vocabulary can be determined from the context of the sentence.
- A lot of talk! Discussing the vocabulary featured in a book that a student or a small group of students is reading provides an authentic context in which to expand their knowledge. Guided or Reciprocal Reading or Literature Circles provide this opportunity.
- Listening to reading. Reading to students, while being a pleasurable experience, can also expose students to a richer vocabulary they may not yet be able to read for themselves. Discussion around new or interesting words and their meanings follows naturally.
- Word Games, Classroom Word Walls and Dictionary activities will also help to develop students' vocabulary.

Fluency – the ability to read at pace with accuracy and expression.

Being able to read fluently aids comprehension. Students who are unable to read fluently will be slow and laboured, may have problems with decoding and are most likely frustrated and unmotivated. Reading fluently requires students to be able to read the words and the punctuation. Reading the punctuation helps with pausing, flow and intonation – all helping to make sense of the text. Some ways to support fluency development are:

- Practise re-reading the same passage. Re-reading the same book or passage several times allows students to become familiar with the words (accuracy) so they can focus on their speed and expression.
- Modelling. Every time students listen to someone read to them, they can hear what fluent reading sounds like. Reading to and shared reading provides great opportunities for this. Audio books (listening posts) are also ideal for this.
- Choral reading. This is a technique that can help build students fluency. A student or a small group of students read a text together (out loud) with or without the teacher reading along too.
- Record and listen. Students use a device to record themselves reading a passage and then play it back. Not only do students like listening to their playback, the more they repeat, the better their fluency will become.

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Teachers looking for a quality balanced literacy program that focuses on the Five Pillars of Literacy may be interested in the new Sunshine Starters program. [Click here to view](#) or contact Sunshine Books on 1800 244 542 for further details.