Building Strong Literacy Foundations: Phonological Awareness and Phonics Instruction in a Multilingual Kindergarten Classroom

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Teaching early literacy in a multilingual kindergarten classroom presents exciting opportunities and unique challenges. The first author and primary speaker in this article is a kindergarten teacher at an international school in Brazil. The school's emphasis on literacy and language learning attracts many families whose children are learning English as an additional language. The second author teaches literacy studies at a land-grant university in the Pacific Northwest and serves as academic advisor and mentor to the first author. For several months they have engaged in conversations about contextualized language learning, literacy foundations, and the importance of teacher knowledge, which resulted in this collaborative project.

Introduction

Classroom configurations are as varied as students themselves. In my current classroom, I have four students who are native English speakers and speak only English at home; two French students who speak Portuguese, French, and English; ten students who are Brazilian and primarily speak Portuguese at home; and one student who is German-Brazilian and speaks German, Portuguese, and English. This language diversity makes early literacy instruction particularly important—and challenging. Not only are these youngsters learning the alphabetic principle and how reading works (i.e., left-to write and top-to-bottom text placement), they are being introduced to the sounds of English within a new language system.

Research consistently shows that phonological awareness is a strong predictor of early reading success and plays a critical role in helping students develop strong decoding and word recognition skills (Milankov, et al., 2021). Foundational concepts such as phonological awareness and knowledge of letter-sound relationships provide the essential building blocks students need to become confident, skilled readers (Ehri, 2005; Kilpatrick, 2015; Savage, 2011). Without this foundation, students may struggle to decode words, recognize patterns in reading,

and develop reading fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000). In an international school setting with multilingual learners, these competencies become even more essential because some students may not have the same exposure to the English language outside of school as native speakers do (August & Shanahan, 2006).

In my classroom, I have seen first-hand how intentional, explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phonics can affect students' confidence and literacy growth. At the beginning of the school year, some learners are being exposed to English for the first time. Distinguishing different sounds that may not exist in their primary language spoken at home can pose quite a challenge. However, over time students begin to recognize patterns in words and letters, articulate sounds, and apply these understandings to their growing language abilities.

This school year has been particularly noteworthy. Not only is it my third year of teaching kindergarten, but I feel more confident in knowing what works with early readers. Significantly, our kindergarten team received extensive coaching from our school's instructional coach, who helped us develop and sustain effective strategies for delivering explicit instruction using the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) program (UFLI Foundations, 2025). The progress and growth that I have seen in my students this year reinforces my belief that strong foundational literacy instruction is key, especially in a multilingual classroom.

Changes in schools abound, and my school is experiencing transitions with a new administrator whose leadership focus is different from former school leaders. There has been a stronger emphasis on explicit instruction rather than the inquiry-based model our school had gravitated toward during the International Baccalaureate accreditation cycle we just completed. It represents a shift in thinking for our lower-primary school educators. While an inquiry-based environment has many benefits, watching my students respond to lessons has taught me that

early literacy skills learning requires intentional approaches alongside inquiry-based experiences. Finding that just-right balance while I prepare and execute evidence-based lessons results in helping my young learners realize early literacy success.

What follows is an overview of current research that highlights the impact of early phonological awareness, how these skills contribute to early reading development, and how I implement these strategies in my own classroom. I will also explore how explicit, intentional instruction and inquiry-based learning can coexist within the classroom

Early Literacy Development Knowledge for Teachers

When I was first teaching, I believed that learning to read was mostly about memorizing letters and words. However, from teaching and professional development I now understand that learning how to read is more complex than that. Authorities in the field observed that "You weren't born reading…every brain needs to be taught to read" (Fisher, et al., 2023, p.4). A teacher's expertise in helping non-readers become readers cannot be overstated. Experimental psychologist Steven Pinker (1999) observed that "children are wired for sound…print is an optional accessory that must be bolted on (p. ix.). The ability to hear sounds in words and to understand how spoken language works begins with strong phonological awareness that lays the foundation for how these sounds connect to written letters and patterns (Ehri, 2005; Kilpatrick, 2015; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

One of the most important realizations that I have gained is that while these language skills come naturally to some students, for others, deliberate repetition is essential. Without this intentional focus on the alphabetic code, the latter group of learners is lost in a maze of letters they find confusing and illogical. Research suggests that when students understand letter-sound connections, they are then equipped to decode unfamiliar words (Fisher, et al., 2023; National

Reading Panel, 2000; Savage, 2011; Snow, et al., 1998). Indeed, phonological awareness is the bellwether for future reading success. My classroom observations show that students who develop strong sound awareness early read with more confidence compared to their peers who struggle to hear sounds and need additional support.

Strong phonological awareness is more than just identifying and distinguishing initial sounds in words. It also includes more advanced sound manipulation: blending sounds, segmenting words into individual sound units, and manipulating sounds to form words (Rauth & Stuart, 2008; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). These composite skills are vital because they help developing readers move beyond simply memorizing words to developing strategies for reading unfamiliar words independently (Blevins, 2017; Kilpatrick, 2015).

For multilingual learners, phonological awareness does not develop automatically. Many struggle as they negotiate multiple language systems and sort out linguistic features of each language. While some students appear to understand sound patterns easily through exposure, others need intentional instruction, scaffolded support, and ample opportunities to practice (Kilpatrick, 2015). For this reason, I have found the UFLI phonics program to be effective. Importantly, it provides multiple opportunities for modeling within each lesson. The UFLI program, intended for kindergarten through second grade, employs the same basic structure across all grade levels, and this familiarity of the program's features helps my young learners anticipate what to expect in language lessons.

My current classroom has provided the space for me to shift my thinking about the balance between play-based learning and explicit instruction. As an inquiry-focused teacher, I place a high value on student exploration and agency. However, research findings coupled with my own classroom experiences confirm that foundational reading skills require direct,

progressive instruction, which can co-exist with opportunities for exploration and free inquiry (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Once students have mastered basic language essentials, they are better able to engage in literacy experiences with greater independence and success.

The Multilingual Piece: Supporting English Language Learners

Teaching early literacy in a multilingual international school adds to the complexities of teaching foundational early literacy skills. The majority of my students are learning English as an additional language while also learning how to read and write. For some students, I am asking them to develop their phonological awareness in a language that they may not be fully proficient in orally. In many of these situations, no one at home speaks English. Students may not be exposed to certain English sounds and consequently benefit from increased exposure at school along with opportunities to practice (August & Shanahan, 2006).

It has been necessary for me to identify those English phonemes, which do not exist in my students' home language. For example, distinguishing between the short vowel sounds /*a*/ and /*e*/ can be a difficult phonetic concept. Accordingly, instruction must be slowed down, with an emphasis on clear articulation of sounds and how to produce them. When introducing a new sound, I focus on the physical shape of the mouth and tongue needed to produce it correctly. Research supports the idea that multilingual learners benefit from attention to sound structures, as these skills are transferable across languages and support reading development (Geva & Yaghoub-Zadeh, 2006).

One area that our kindergarten team is focusing on this school year is making instruction accessible to all learners. Without strong phonological awareness and phonics instruction for the entire class, multilingual learners may struggle due to unequal access to instruction. Consequently, our team has shifted from a small-group instructional model to more whole-group

instruction. This change helps ensure that all students, both native and non-native English speakers, have the same opportunity to succeed.

Classroom Practice Described

In my kindergarten classroom, phonological awareness and decoding skills are an integral part of our daily routine. Seventy-five minutes is dedicated to phonics each day. We start our morning with structured sound work that gives learners repeated opportunities to hear and identify sounds in words. This includes letter/sound correspondence practice, an auditory drill in which students hear a sound and write the grapheme, along with structured opportunities to segment sounds in words and blend them together. Our routines are predictable, fast-paced, and interactive, which helps maintain student engagement in a whole-group setting.

With this routine in place, I am able to introduce a new concept to the entire class at the same time each day. Once the lesson concludes, I divide students into three groups based on demonstrated knowledge of the target concept. This allows instruction to be individualized. Grouping is fluid, and students transition between groups once skills are mastered. Students practice decoding text specifically aligned to the new concept that we are learning. Additionally, during writing activities, I encourage students to use their segmenting skills to hear sounds and spell words. This helps reinforce the connections between reading and writing. As Ehri (2005) explains, developing secure associations between letters and sounds helps students develop stronger automatic word recognition.

Along with explicit phonics instruction, I provide opportunities for inquiry and literacy experiences. Students engage in read-alouds, shared reading experiences, and opportunities for individual book selection. Skill instruction, integral to the learning-to-read curriculum, also

provides space for developing readers to explore, ask questions, form opinions, and think independently.

Reflection and Implications for Practice

Drawing from research findings and my own classroom experience, I have come to understand that strong early literacy teaching is not about choosing between inquiry and explicit instruction, but about recognizing that they can and do work together to support literacy growth (Moats, 2010). While inquiry-based learning helps foster curiosity, critical thinking skills, and student agency, research continues to show that young learners benefit most from clear, predictable, and systematic instruction in foundational language skills (Castles, et al., 2018; Moats, 2020). These skills provide students with the tools they need to fully engage in richer, deeper literacy experiences.

These new understandings have encouraged me to reflect on my own classroom practice. Earlier in my teaching career, I sometimes worried that too much teacher-centered direct instruction was limiting creativity and reducing opportunities for exploration. However, I now see that providing students with essential knowledge increases their independence and confidence, thereby enhancing their ability to inquire more freely. This shift in my thinking reflects what current research describes as the need to balance knowledge building with opportunities for application (Willingham, 2017).

Working in an international school rich with multilingual learners has strengthened my belief in this approach. Multilingual learners face the dual challenge of learning academic content while also developing proficiency in English. If students lack strong phonological awareness, they may struggle with decoding, which, in turn, limits quick, accurate word recognition necessary for comprehending text. Providing explicit phonics instruction is not

merely best practice but also an issue of equal access to a high-quality education (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Conclusion

Ultimately, these teaching experiences and daily opportunities to reflect on how young children learn written language have reinforced my belief that strong foundational literacy instruction supports all other areas of learning. When students develop confidence in their reading and writing, they are better positioned to engage with complex ideas, collaborate with peers, and see themselves as capable learners. As teachers, our responsibility is not just to foster and encourage curiosity, but also to ensure that students have the tools they need to act on that curiosity. Early foundational literacy skills provide access to school and life-long learning.

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