# Pre-Kindergarten Foundational Skills Instruction: Whole and Small Group Settings

In **pre-kindergarten**, children develop phonological awareness, print concepts, and knowledge about letters, all of which contribute to the development of fluent reading. These skills are a necessary **foundation** to reach the ultimate goal of reading: **comprehension**.

## Print Concepts: What are They and Why Do They Matter?

**Print concepts** includeknowledge of print conventions (e.g., in English, print is read top to bottom, left to right), the understanding that printed letters make words that correspond to oral language, and that print carries meaning. Print concepts allow children to begin interacting and interpreting text. Print concepts may be modeled and discussed in authentic reading contexts, such as during a teacher-led read-aloud or during teacher-child interactions in the classroom library. Interacting with print and observing others interacting with print in both authentic and dramatic play contexts supports development of print concepts (Morrow & Schickedanz, 2006).

### Research-Based Instruction to Support Students to Acquire Print Concepts

* Print Awareness, from Reading Rockets ([Instruction\*\*](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/print-awareness-guidelines-instruction))
* Print Concepts, from Road to the Common Core, Nashville Public Television ([Video](http://d3tt741pwxqwm0.cloudfront.net/Nashville-TN-PBS/print-concepts-k-1/index.html))
* Book Knowledge and Print Concepts, from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning ([Research and information](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/dtl-pla-book-knowledge-print-concepts.pdf))

#### Print Concepts: Leveraging Linguistic Assets for Multilingual Learners

Different languages have different concepts of print. For example, Arabic and Hebrew read from right to left while English, Spanish and French all read left to right (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Because writing systems have specific conventions that govern the visual and orthographic aspects of print, conventions of written English can be unfamiliar to students who primarily use a language other than English. Teachers can point out and help children compare print characteristics of English and their home languages.

##### Supports for English Learners

* Become familiar with student background so instruction can be tailored (Gay, 2000).
* Model how you read in addition to reading to students. The act of pointing visually reinforces the process for learners who are looking for context (Tabors, 2008).
* Reinforce the forms and functions of print found in classroom signs, labels, posters, calendars, etc. Include multilingual environmental print to make the connection between English and the language(s) spoken by students in the class.
* Remember to involve parents as collaborative partners.

* [5 Classroom Elements that Provide Opportunity for Dual Language Learners](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/5-classroom-elements.docx)
* [5 Practical Strategies for Supporting Dual Language Learners’ Language and Literacy Skills](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/5-practical-strategies.docx)

##### Learn More

##### [8 Strategies for Preschool ELLs' Language and Literacy Development\*\*](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/8-strategies-preschool-ells-language-and-literacy-development), from Colorín Colorado

## Phonological Awareness: What is This and Why Does This Matter?

**Phonological awareness** is “the recognition that words have constituent sounds. Constituents of a word (e.g., book) may be distinguished in three ways: by syllables (/book/), by onsets and rimes (/b/ and /ook/), or by phonemes (/b/ and /oo/ and /k/)” ([Massachusetts 2017 English Language Arts and Literacy Framework](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/2017-06.pdf), page 180).

Phonological awareness is necessary for learning to decode words in an alphabetic language, such as English. “People who can take apart words into sounds, recognize their identity, and put them together again have the foundation skill for using the alphabetic principle. Without phoneme awareness, students may be mystified by the print system and how it represents the spoken word” ([Moats & Tolman, 2009\*\*](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/why-phonological-awareness-important-reading-and-spelling)).

“Phonological awareness measured at the *beginning of kindergarten* is one of the two best predictors of how well children will learn to read” ([National Reading Panel, 2000](https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf), page 2-11).

### What Linguistic Factors Might Impact How Students Acquire Phonological Awareness?

Students have greatest awareness of the sounds in the language or [language variation](https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2021/washington_seidenberg) that they  hear and speak most often, and can connect that awareness to new or unfamiliar sounds in English. Phonological awareness developed in one language has been shown in studies to “cross over” into English, enabling children who have developed awareness in their home language to utilize those skills in English as well ([International Literacy Association](https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/9457_Phonological_Awareness_1-2020_Final.pdf), 2020).

#### Research-Based Instruction to Support Students in Acquiring Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness develops in a [typical sequence\*\*](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/development-phonological-skills), first with larger units of spoken language (e.g., syllables) and then moving into smaller units (e.g., onsite-rime, individual phonemes). These are not distinct “steps” but broad stages that can overlap. Awareness of phonemes is most important for reading ability, because in an alphabetic language like English, words are made of letter patterns that correspond to individual sounds. Even in PreK, when many children will not yet be able to segment or blend phonemes, wordplay and awareness activities at the phoneme level are beneficial.

Poetry, songs, and rhymes are authentic contexts that offer opportunities for students to notice the sounds in words. Word and sound games are also engaging for young children while promoting phonological awareness. Shared reading and engaging students in conversations about texts, while often seen as strategies that primarily promote [language development](http://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/oral-language.html) and comprehension, also strengthen phonological skills for children with different skill levels ([Swanson et al., 2012](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3319370/); Schickedanz & McGee, 2010).

##### Resources

* Teaching Phonological Awareness in Preschool, from Doing What Works Library ([Video](https://dwwlibrary.wested.org/resources/410))
* Phonological Awareness, from Florida Center for Reading Research ([Activities](https://www.fcrr.org/student-center-activities/pre-kindergarten#sca3))
* Mindful Minutes: Sound Play, from National Center on Improving Literacy ([Video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6L7R7bWpdZ8))
* Rhyming, from the Reading League ([Video](https://video.wcny.org/video/reading-league-102-j9d1yn/))

#### Phonological Skills: Leveraging Linguistic Assets for Multilingual Learners

* English learners may benefit from supports for hearing and producing sounds in English that are new to them. Instruction in the sounds of English will help English learners develop phonological awareness in English (Bear et al., 2003; Helman, 2004).
* Phonological skills are more closely related to word reading ability than is language-minority status (Lesaux et al, 2008).
* Phonological awareness developed in one language has been shown in studies to translate into English, enabling children who have developed awareness in their home language to utilize those skills in English as well ([International Literacy Association](https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/9457_Phonological_Awareness_1-2020_Final.pdf), 2020). Beginning phonemic awareness practice with the sounds and patterns that the two languages share is supportive. Instruction can then progress to sounds and patterns that exist in English but not the student’s home language (Helman, 2004).

##### Supports for English Learners

* Create extensive experiences with fun and appealing songs, poems, chants, and read-alouds that will allow students to hear and reproduce the sound patterns of English.
* Songs and poems, with their rhythm and repetition, are easily memorized and can be used to teach phonemic awareness and print concepts to English learners. In addition to increased retention due to repetition, rhymes allow English learners to safely play with language. Rhymes exist in every language and teachers can ask students or their parents to share culturally relevant and teachable rhymes with the class and can build phonemic awareness activities around them ([Colorín Colorado\*\*](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/english-language-learners-and-five-essential-components-reading-instruction-0))
* Help very beginning readers learn to identify sounds in short words. Use words that begin with a consonant, have a short vowel, and end in a consonant (CVC) (Gersten & Geva, 2003).
* Be familiar with the sounds that might be difficult for students of particular language backgrounds to hear or pronounce, and provide extra practice (Helman, 2004).
* [5 Classroom Elements that Provide Opportunity for Dual Language Learners](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/5-classroom-elements.docx)
* [5 Practical Strategies for Supporting Dual Language Learners’ Language and Literacy Skills](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/5-practical-strategies.docx)

##### Learn More

* [Literacy Development for Preschool EL’s\*\*](https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/8-strategies-preschool-ells-language-and-literacy-development#h-literacy-development-for-preschool-ells), from Colorín Colorado
* [Phonemic Inventories and Cultural and Linguistic Information Across Languages](https://www.asha.org/practice/multicultural/Phono/#phon), from American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

## Phonics: What is This and Why Does This Matter?

**Phonics** is a “way of teaching the code-based portion of reading and spelling that stresses symbol-sound relationships; especially important in beginning reading instruction”([Massachusetts 2017 English Language Arts and Literacy Framework](http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/2017-06.pdf), page 180).

### What Linguistic Factors Might Impact How Students Acquire Phonics Knowledge?

For multilingual learners, teachers should consider if a student’s home language is logographic or syllabic to inform plans to introduce the child to English letters and to make supportive connections to their home language-based knowledge (Bialystok, 2002; Durgunoğlu, 2002). To make supportive connections to a student’s home language, educators may consider:

* How is the home language the same and how is it different from English?
* Are there words in the home language that sound the same and mean the same thing in both languages?
* Are there words in the home language and English that sound the same but mean different things?
* How are words changed and formed in the home language — singular and plural forms, present tense, and past tense forms of verbs? (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan, 2009, Chapter 3)

English learners may speak with a dialect different than the teacher’s. This can affect the pronunciations of English words. This does not indicate any problem with phonics or decoding acquisition, as long as pronunciations are consistent (Colorín Colorado\*\*). Additionally, students who primarily use a non-mainstream dialect of American English experience a mismatch between their oral language system and the written language system taught in school; this can impact the acquisition of phonics skills.  For example, if within the student’s dialect the final /g/ sound is dropped from words like *jumping* or *going*, phonetically decoding those words will take additional time or instruction so the sound/spelling variation used in instruction can be learned (Seidenberg & Washington, 2021).

#### What does Phonics include in PreK?

Phonics begins with alphabet knowledge. In preK, children are beginning to learn names, letter sounds, and formation of letters. Pre-kindergarten students should learn to recognize and name some uppercase letters of the alphabet and the lowercase letters in their own name. Letter-sound correspondences may be introduced in preK. Letter formation may also be introduced in preK, especially with modeling. Students benefit from rapid, repetitive cycles of practice with each letter’s name, sound, and form, rather than focusing on a letter per week ([Jones, Clark, & Reutzel, 2012](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/teal_facpub/404/)).

#### Research-Based Instruction to Support Teaching Letter Names, Letter Formation, and Letter-Sound Correspondences in PreK

* Letter Naming, from Florida Center for Reading Research ([Activities](https://www.fcrr.org/student-center-activities/pre-kindergarten#sca2))
* Letters vs. Phonemes, from The Doing What Works Library ([Video](https://dwwlibrary.wested.org/resources/405))
* Promoting Preschoolers’ Emergent Writing, from NAEYC ([Instruction](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2017/emergent-writing))

#### Phonics: Leveraging Linguistic Assets for Multilingual Learners

* English learners may have alphabet knowledge in a home language with similarities and differences from English. A child’s home language may use the same letters as English but have different names and sounds for letters (e.g., Spanish). Or a child’s home language may use a different alphabet and English letters are not yet familiar (e.g., Cyrillic alphabet).

##### Supports for English Learners

* Plan instruction that provides many opportunities to see, play with, and compare letters. Include games, songs, and other activities that help children identify and name letters, provide activities in which children learn uppercase and lowercase forms of letters, and point out differences and similarities among the letters (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013).
* [5 Classroom Elements that Provide Opportunity for Dual Language Learners](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/5-classroom-elements.docx)
* [5 Practical Strategies for Supporting Dual Language Learners’ Language and Literacy Skills](https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/literacy-block/5-practical-strategies.docx)

### Sources of Information for Educators: Foundational Skills in PreK

* Duke, N. and Mesmer, H. A. [Phonics Faux Pas: Avoiding Instructional Missteps in Teaching Letter-Sound Relationships](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2018-2019/duke_mesmer), from American Educator (2018).
* [How Children Learn to Read Words: Ehri's Phases](https://education.ufl.edu/ufli/files/2020/03/EhriPhases.pdf), from University of Florida Literacy Institute.
* [Meeting the Challenges of Early Literacy Phonics Instruction](https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-meeting-challenges-early-literacy-phonics-instruction.pdf), from International Literacy Association (2019).
* Neuman, S. [First Steps Toward Literacy: What Effective Pre-K Instruction Looks Like](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2018-2019/neuman), from American Educator (2018).
* [Phonological Awareness in Early Childhood Literacy Development](https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/9457_Phonological_Awareness_1-2020_Final.pdf), from International Literacy Association (2020).
* Strickland, D., Neuman, S., Morrow, L. M., and Roskos, K. [The Role of Literacy in Early Childhood Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242123308_The_Role_of_Literacy_in_Early_Childhood_Education), from The Reading Teacher (2004).
* What Is Phonological Awareness, from Understood.org ([Video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0G6teawxls)).

### References

Bear, D. R., Templeton, S., Helman, L. A., & Baren, T. (2003). Orthographic development and learning to read in two different languages. In G. G. García, ed. English learners: Reaching the highest level of English literacy. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Bialystok, E. (2002). Acquisition of literacy in bilingual children: A framework for research. Language Learning, 52 (1), 159-199.

Cloud, N., Genesee, F., and Hamayan, E. (2009). [Literacy instruction for English language learners: A teacher's guide to research-based practices](https://www.colorincolorado.org/book/literacy-instruction-english-language-learners)*.*Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Durgunoğlu, A. Y. (2002). Cross-linguistic transfer in literacy development and implications for language learners. Annals of Dyslexia, 52, 189-204.

Gay, G. (2000). Culturally responsive instruction: Theory, research, and practice. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gersten, R., & Geva, E. (2003). Teaching reading to early language learners. Educational Leadership, 60 (7), 44-49.

Helman, L. A. (2004). Building on the sound system of Spanish: Insights from the alphabetic spellings of English-language learners. The Reading Teacher, 57(5), 452-460.

Lesaux, N., Geva, E., Koda, K., Siegel, L.S., & Shanahan, T. (2008). Development of literacy in second language learners. In August, D. and Shanahan, T., eds. Developing Reading and Writing in Second-Language Learners: Lessons from the Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth. New York: Routledge.

Morrow, L. M., & Schickedanz, J. A. (2006). The relationship between sociodramatic play and literacy development. In D. K. Dickinson & S. B. Neuman, eds. Handbook of early literacy research (Vol. 2, pp. 269–280). New York: Guilford.

Peregoy, S. F. & Boyle, O. F. (2000). English learners reading English: What we know, what we need to know. Theory into practice, 39(4), 237-247.

Schickedanz, J. and Collins, M. (2013). So Much More than the ABCs. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Schickedanz, J. A., & McGee, L. M. (2010). The NELP Report on Shared Story Reading Interventions (Chapter 4): Extending the Story. Educational Researcher, 39(4), 323–329. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X10370206>

Tabors, P. O. (2008). One child, two languages: A guide for early childhood educators of children learning English as a second language, 2nd ed. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Washington, J.A. & Seidenberg, M. (2021). [Teaching reading to African American children: When home and school language differ](https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2021/washington_seidenberg). American Educator, Summer.

\*\*Disclosure Statement: Reference in this website to any specific commercial products, processes, or services, or the use of any trade, firm, or corporation name is for the information and convenience of the public, and does not constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Our office is not responsible for and does not in any way guarantee the accuracy of information in other sites accessible through links herein. DESE may supplement this list with other services and products that meet the specified criteria. For more information contact: [RMB252@mass.gov](mailto:RMB252@mass.gov).