Language Foundations in the Early Years Leading to Literacy Learning in the Early Grades and Beyond

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Ohio Read Literacy Academy
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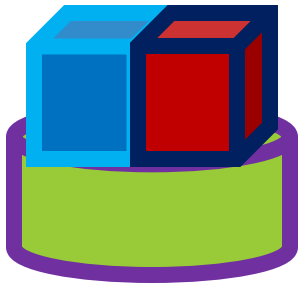
Session Topics

Language connections to ALL learning



Developmental trends AND everyday routines for early literacy learning

- Oral Language
- Phonological Awareness
- Print knowledge

ALL of Learning for Young Children

- Language

- Executive function

- Social emotional learning

Depends on adult/child interactions

AND

Depends on adults taking the lead.

(Adamson et al., 2020)

Oral Language Skills

- Listens to and understands increasingly complex language
- Follows directions
- Uses language to express thoughts and needs
- Uses an expanding expressive vocabulary
- Uses appropriate conversation
- Uses social rules of language

Executive Function Skills

- Uses flexible thinking
- Considers others' perspectives
- Keeps information in mind
- Refrains from responding immediately
- Sustains attention
- Resists distraction
- Tolerates frustration
- Makes a plan and persists in tasks

SELF-REGULATION

Social Emotional Skills

- Expresses a range of feelings
- Understands and respond to others' feelings
- Learns to manage feelings
- Engages in positive social interactions with peers and adults
- Learns to follow classroom rules and social expectations
- Participates cooperatively in group situations
- Learns to solve social problems to resolve conflict

Let’s Do: Going on a Bear Hunt

Directions:

Tell children they will first listen, then join in. Read the chant Going on a Bear Hunt slowly using strong expression, rhythm, and gestures to demonstrate spatial actions. Lead a clapping pattern (hands to legs, hands, legs) while chanting one line at a time. Have children repeat each line. Repeat several times, gradually allowing children to lead the chant and movements independently.

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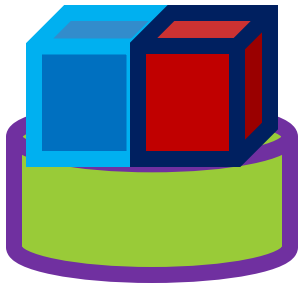

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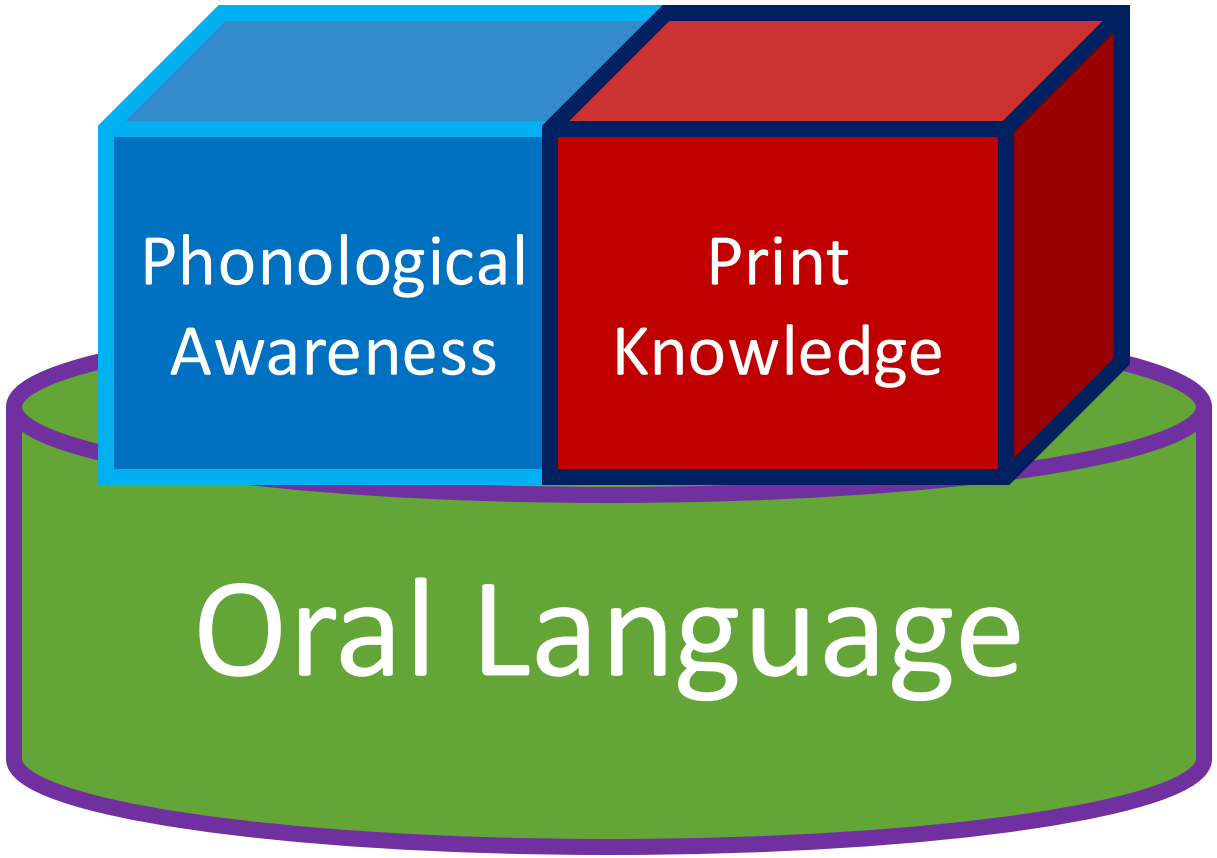
Early Literacy Foundation Skills



Oral Language:

- Prosody
- Phonology
- Semantics
- Morphology
- Syntax

AND

Pragmatics

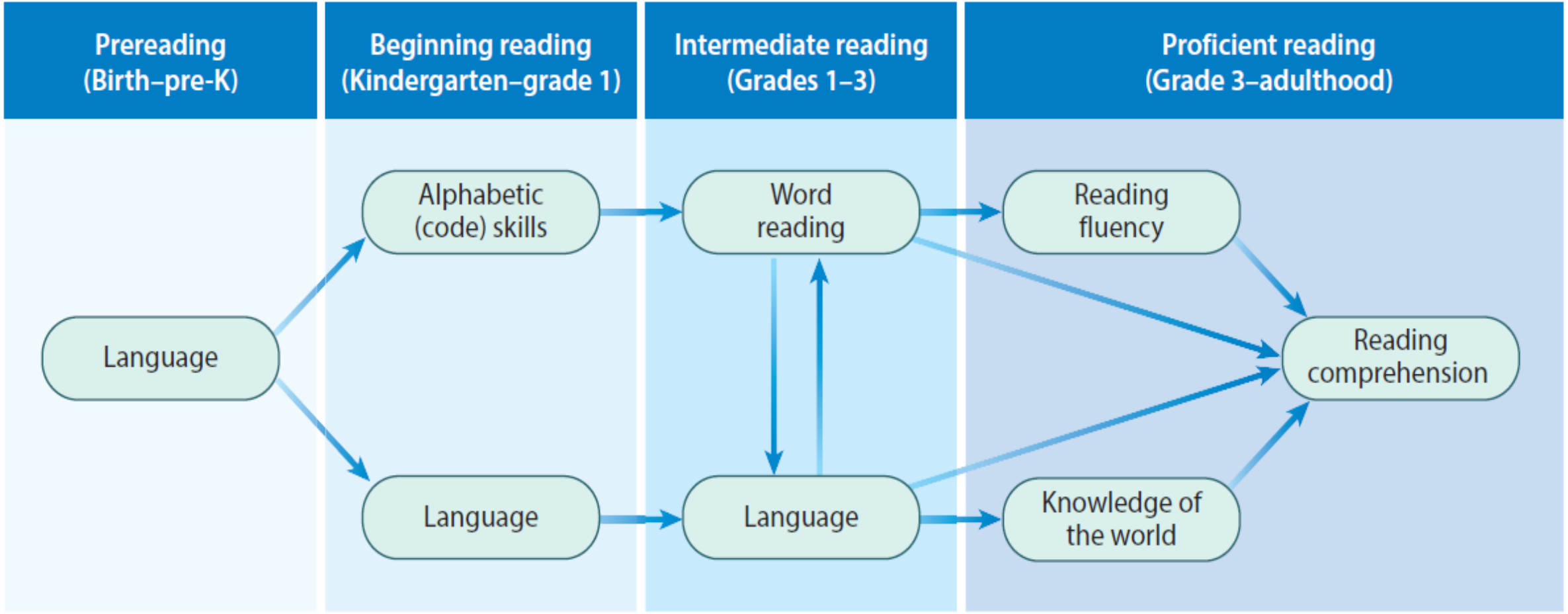
Phonological Awareness:

- Blending sounds into words
- Segmenting sounds in words

Print Knowledge:

- Alphabet knowledge
- Being a writer

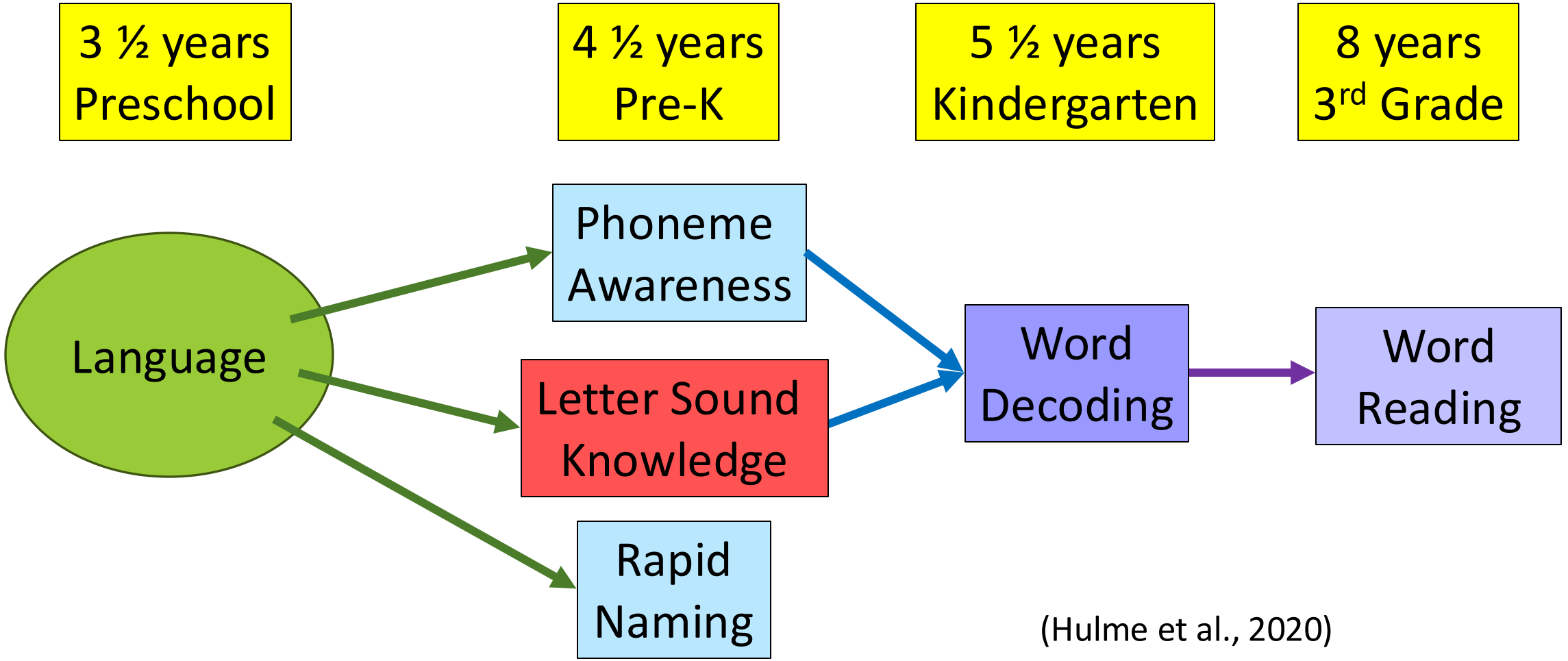
Reading is Language: Causal Developmental Model



(Snowling & Hulme, 2025)

Language Structures	Purposes	
	Oral	Written
Phonology - the speech sounds and the rules used to put sounds together into meaningful words	Speech sounds	Letter sounds
Semantics - word meaning	Meaning	Comprehension, composition
Morphology - the rules of word formation	Root words, prefixes, and suffixes	Root words, prefixes, and suffixes
Syntax - the rules of word order in grammatical form	Word order and selection	Word order and selection
Prosody - the expression, melody, and intonation of language	Speaking with expression	Reading with expression

How does language support reading – or not?



(Hulme et al., 2020)

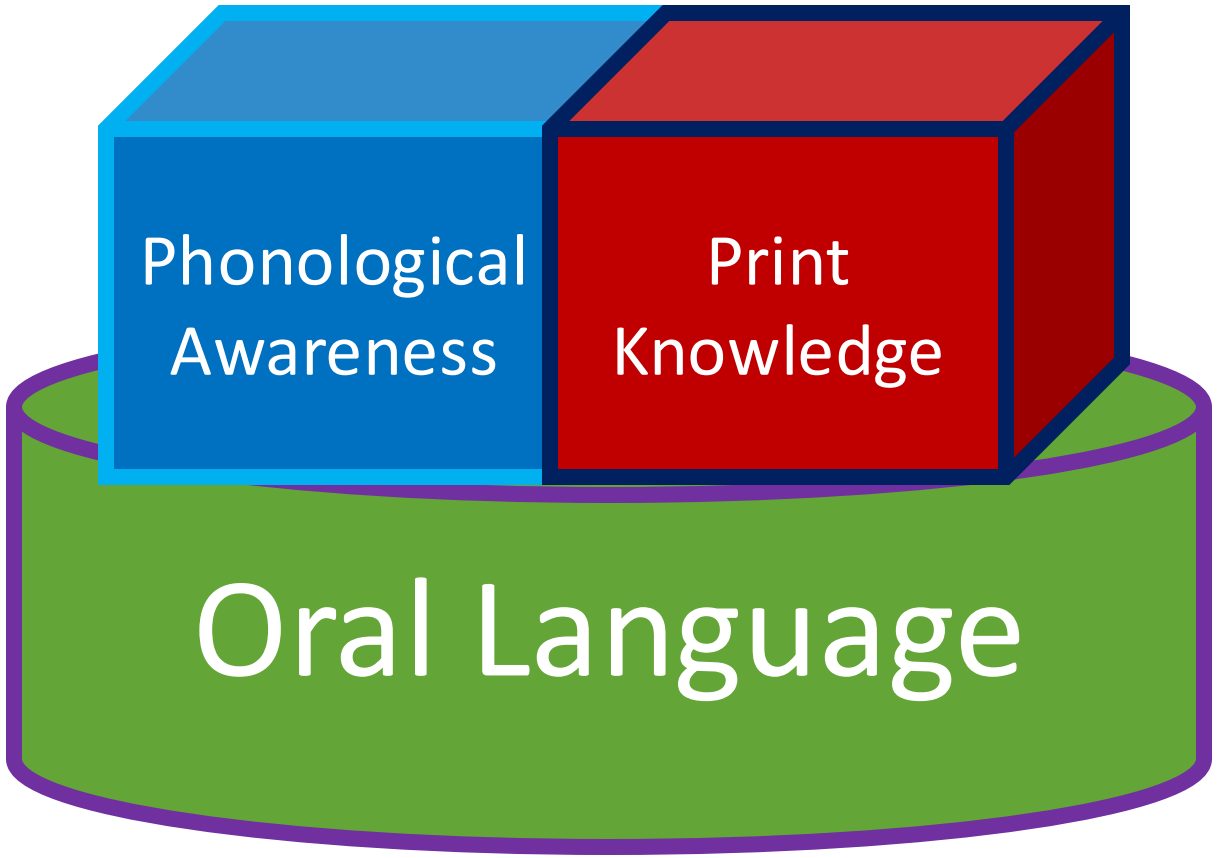
Predicting Literacy Development
Pre-K to K Transition

The **best TWO** predictors of literacy achievement from early kindergarten to 2nd grade are:

- ☑ **Phonemic awareness (sound isolation)**
- ☑ **Letter name knowledge**

(National Reading Panel, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008)

Early Literacy Foundation Skills



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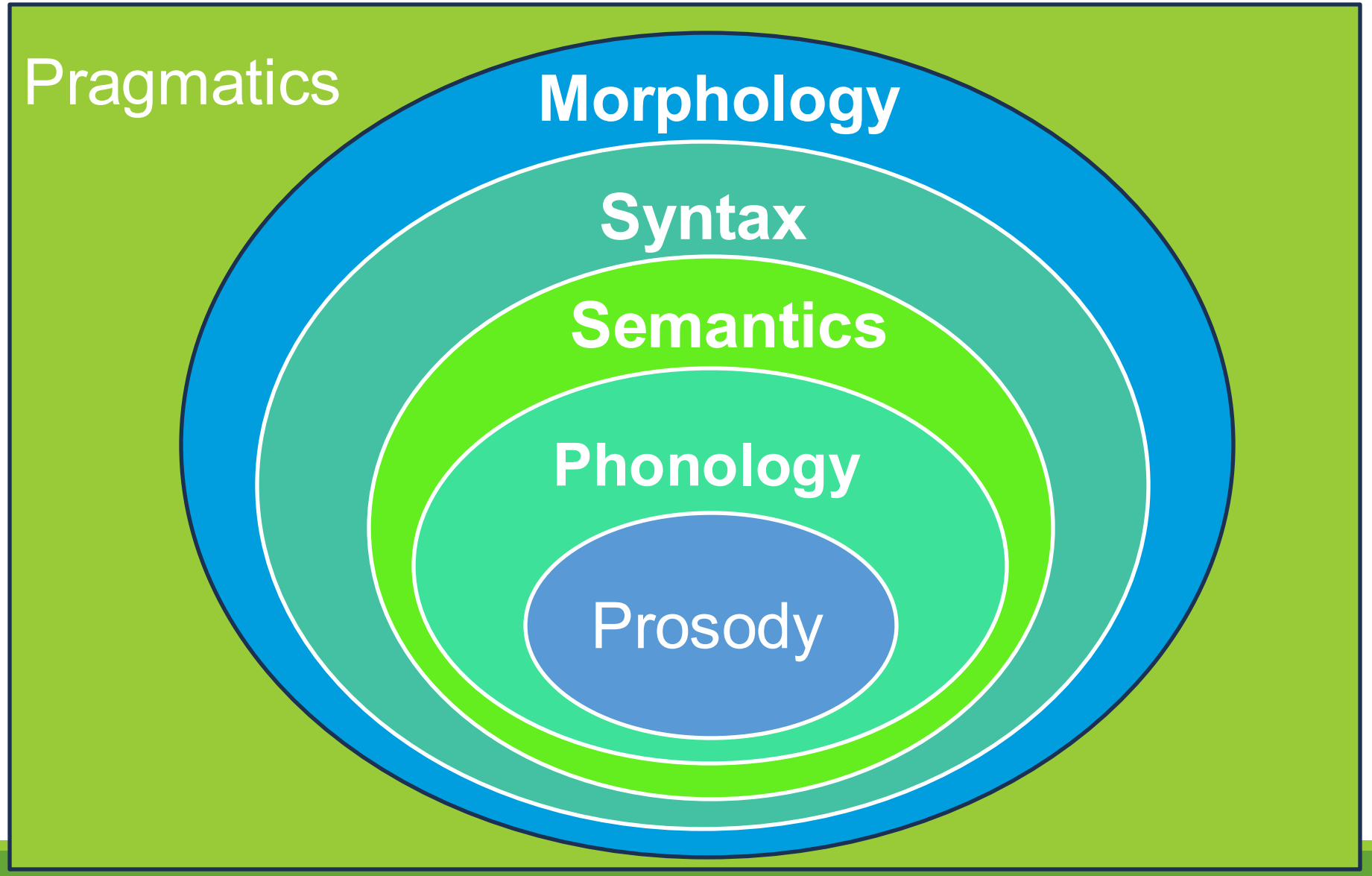
Structures and Emergence of Oral Language



Word parts

Word order

Word meaning

Sounds in words

Expression

Phonology Milestones

Age for Speech Sound Acquisition at 90% criterion:

- 2- to 3-year-olds: /p, b, t, d, k, g, m, n, ng, f, h, j, w/
- 4-Year-olds: /v, s, z, sh, l, ch, j/
- 5-6-year-olds: /th^{v}, zh, r, th/

(Crowe & McLeod, 2020)

Expressive Vocabulary Progression

Age	Number of words
8-14 Month	First words
18-24 months	~50 words
24-30 months	~200-300 words
3 years	~900-1000 words
Kindergarten	~2000-2200 words

(McLaughlin, 1998)

Sentence Structure Development

Syntax and Morphology together make grammar.

2-Year-Olds	Start putting words together in short phrases
3-Year-Olds	Use three- to six-word sentences and add word endings like *-s*, *-ing*, and *-ed*
4-Year-Olds	String many words together and combine sentences related to the same topic
5-Year-Olds	Carry on conversations with mostly grammatically correct sentence forms

Morphemes emerge

Language Development Review

Infants should:

- Babble by 12 months
- Gesture (wave, point) by 12 months
- Say single words by 16 months

Preschoolers should:

- Say understandable words
- Understand what is said to them
- Say new words all the time
- Combine 4-10 words spontaneous sentences
- Relate 3 to 5 events in a narrative

Toddlers should:

- Say words understandable to care provider
- Say new words all the time
- Use 2-word spontaneous combinations by 24 months (not imitation)

Early graders should:

- Say correctly articulated words
- Understand complex sentences
- Use grammatically correct sentences
- Relate a number of events in complex narratives

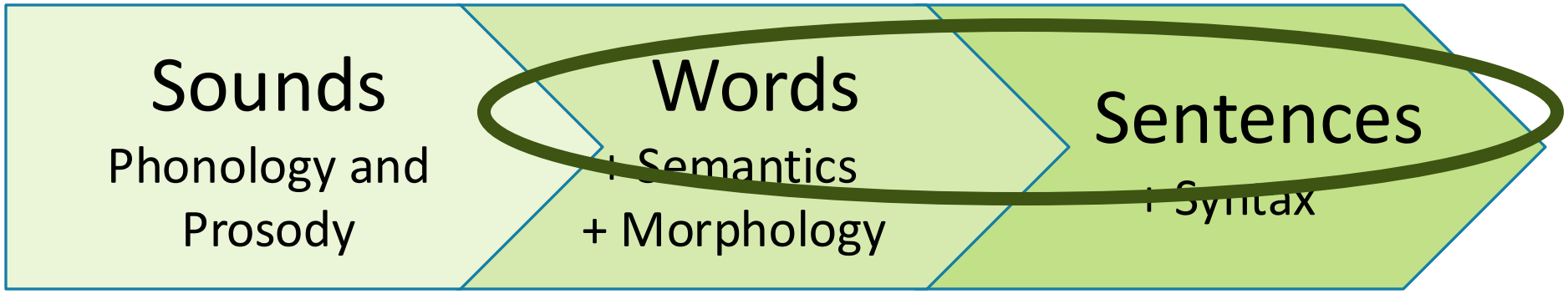
Oral and Written Language in Parallel Form

Learning to:

Key structures to focus on in preschool to grade 5:(Lonigan & Milburn, 2017)

talk

Infants – toddlers - preschoolers



read and write

Preschoolers – kinders – early graders

Key Principles for Teaching Vocabulary

1. Children need both explicit and implicit instruction.
2. Be intentional in word selection.
3. Build word meaning through knowledge networks.
4. Children need repeated exposure to gain vocabulary.

(*All About Words: Increasing Vocabulary in the Common Core Classroom, Pre-k-2,* Neuman and Wright, 2013)

Intentional Vocabulary Instruction

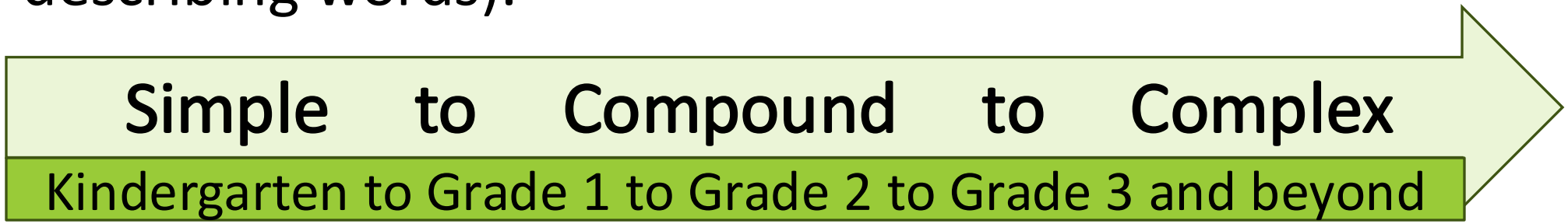
1. Have the [illegible]bulary word.
2. Provide a [illegible]h a gesture.
3. Have the children share the word's meaning with a neighbor.

Kineme

(Adapted from Beck et al., 2013)

Sentence Building Strategies

- Have students respond to questions using complete sentences.
- Have students practice combining short sentences into a longer, more complex sentence.
- Help students learn parts of speech (nouns, verbs, describing words).



Let’s Do: Brown Bear Alive

Directions:

Read Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? several times until children can repeat the sentence pattern. Have children hold animal pictures and stand in a line. Prompt the first child using the pattern (“What do you see?”). Each child responds by identifying the next animal in line. Continue the sequence so children practice repeating and producing the patterned sentence structure.

Brain Development and Conversational Turns

- **Conversational turn-taking** is one of the most powerful routines to develop language and is correlated with academic performance in middle school. (Gilkerson et al., 2018)

- Young children who experienced more interactive turn-taking conversations showed more engagement and attention when listening to voices and stories. (Romeo et al., 2018)

"In the flesh" talk matters!

Serve-and-return

Strive for 5

Strive-For-Five Routine

(Dickinson, 2003; Zucker & Cabell, 2024)

Strive-for-Five Conversations

1 – Adult asks question, “What covering do birds have on their bodies? (concrete question)

2 – Child responds, “They have feathers.”

3 – Adult extends, “Yes, what do feathers help them do? (abstract question)

4 – Child responds, “Keep them warm and help them fly.”

5 – Adult expands, “Yes, feathers cover their bodies and are lightweight to help them fly.”

Effective Questioning Routines

- Use a questioning routine that guides children's learning.
  - First, ask more specific or closed-ended questions to check for understanding.
  - Next, ask higher-level or more open-ended extend their learning.
- Only use higher-level questions when children are able to correctly respond to lower-level questions. Children might remember inaccurate responses or wild guesses they hear.

Labels and descriptions

Requires background knowledge and abstract thinking

(Neuman & Wright, 2013)

Let’s Do: Show & Tell Book

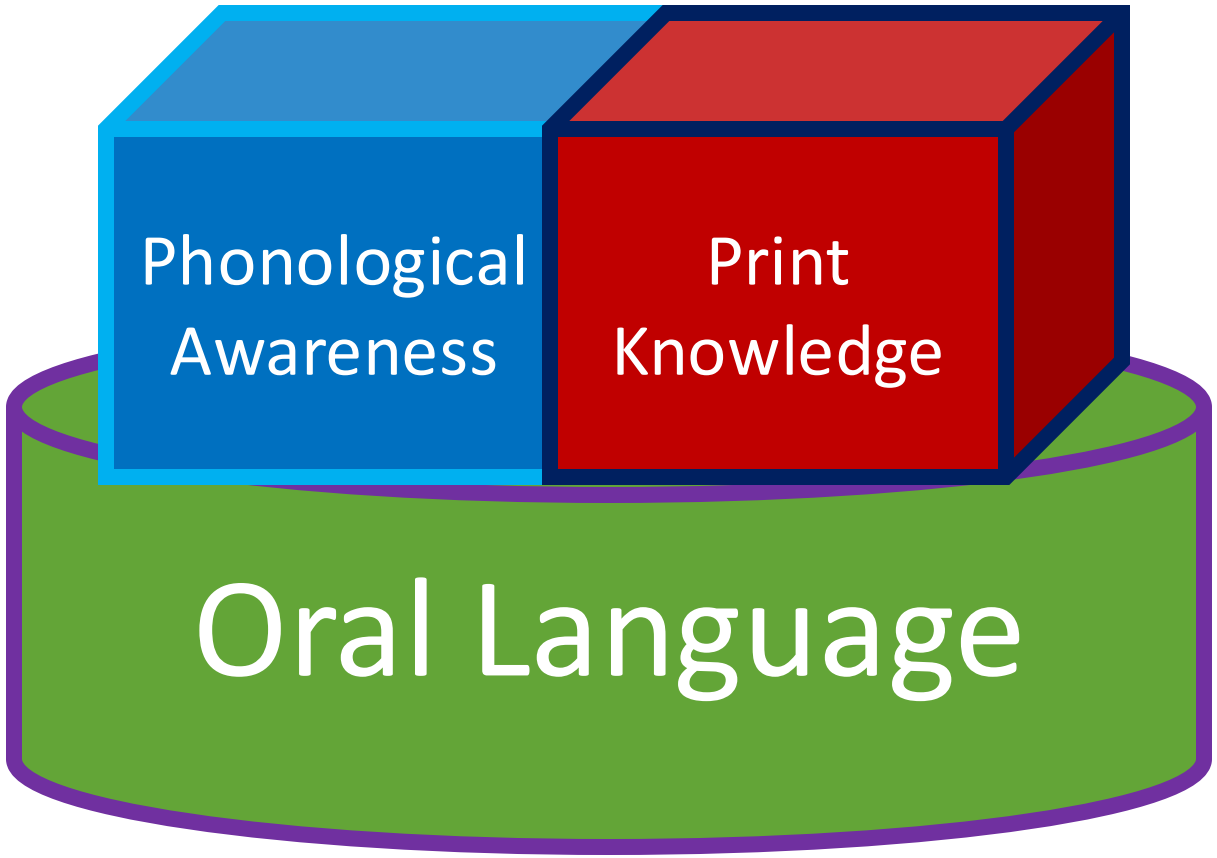
Directions:

Invite children to share an object during show-and-tell. As each child describes their item, write down their words. Model correct sentence structure by recasting their language when needed and prompting them to repeat it. Encourage peers to ask questions. After sharing, have children draw and label their item, then compile descriptions, drawings, and photos into a classroom book.

Your Reflections

- How do oral language activities impact executive function and social-emotional skills?
- How does this information match up with what you are already doing?

Early Literacy Foundation Skills



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Print Knowledge:

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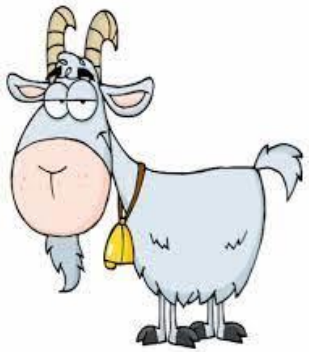
Rhyming Development

2-3 years old	Children participate in saying words in nursery rhymes, fingerplays, jingles, songs, and books that are read to them.
3-5 years old	Children match words that rhyme.
4-5 years old	Children produce words that rhyme.
5-6 years old	Children produce a string of words that rhyme.

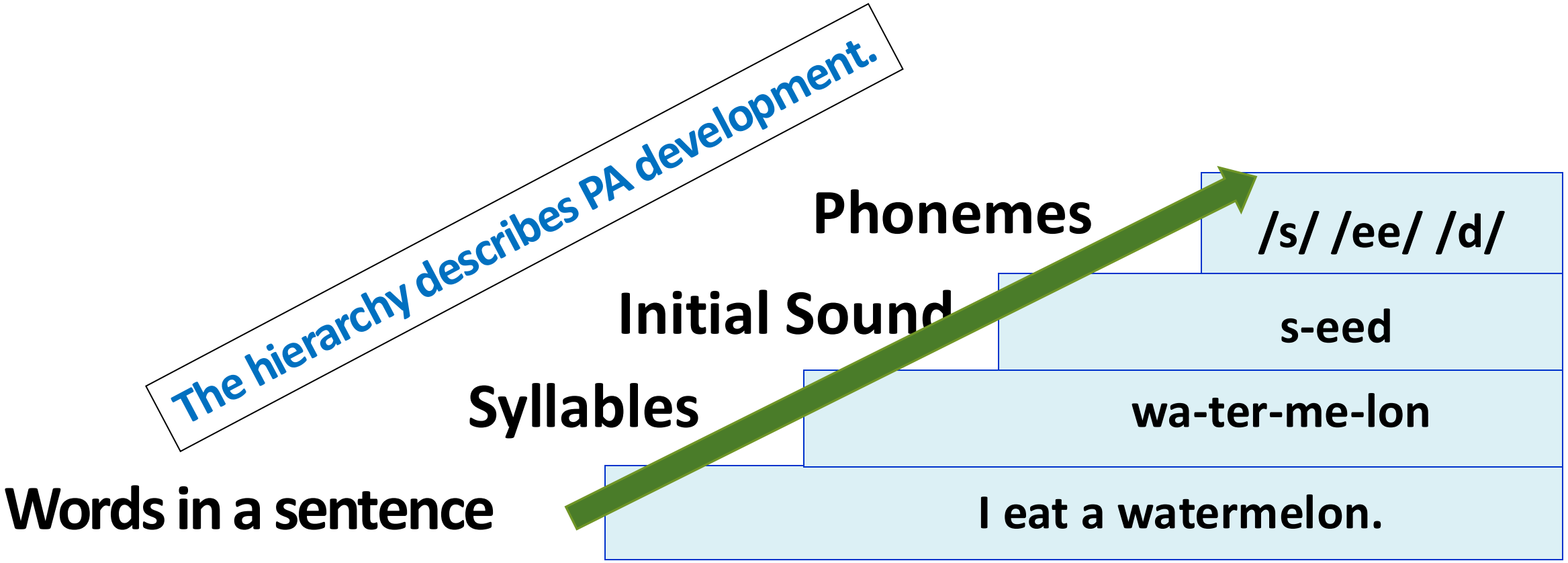


Let's Do: A-Fishing We Will Go

Directions:

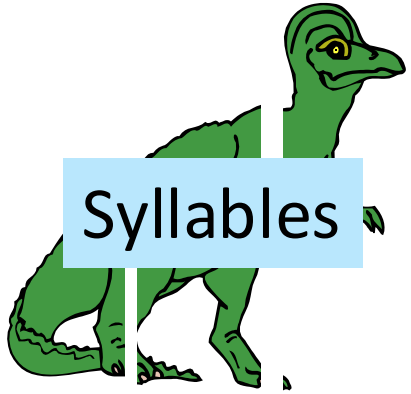
Place picture cards with paper clips on the floor and rhyming pictures along the wall. Have children "fish" using a magnet pole to pick up a card. Sing the song as they fish. Once a card is caught, have the child identify the picture and find a matching rhyming picture on the wall, reinforcing sound patterns in spoken words.

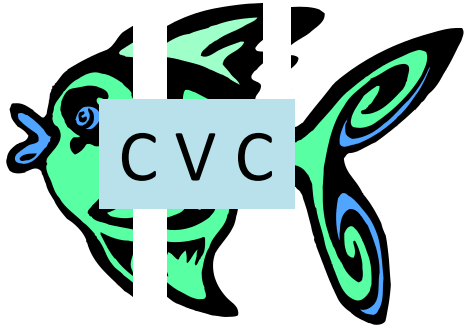
Blending and Segmenting Progression on the Linguistic Hierarchy

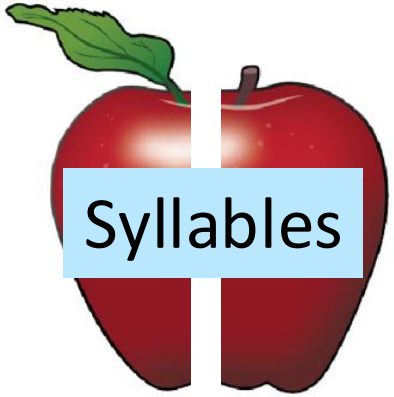


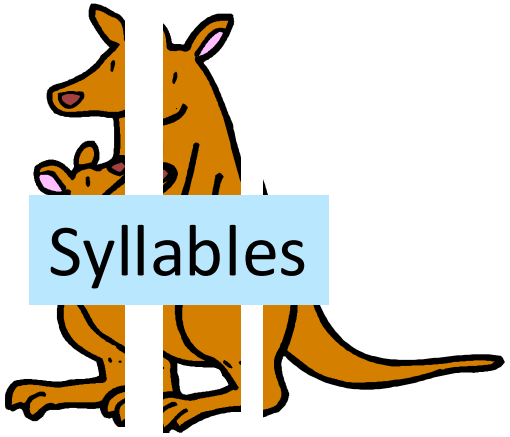
Words at Each Linguistic Level

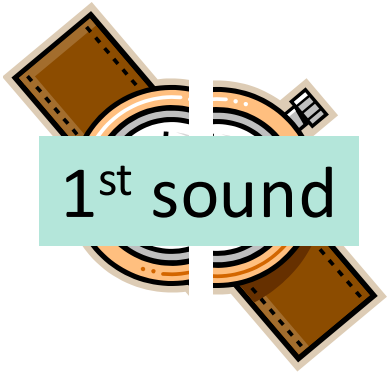
What is the linguistic level of these segmented words?

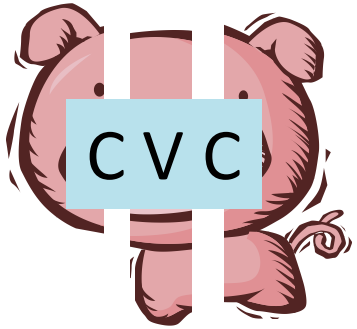












Phonemic Awareness:

How many phonemes in each word?

string	5	hippo	4
joyless	5	thought	3
dodge	3	chew	2
mixed	5	house	3
heard	3	quiet	5

Syllable to Phoneme Awareness

	Sounds ← Syllables	BLENDING	SEGMENTING
3-4 years		Children blend syllables to produce words.	Children segment syllables in words.
4-5 years		Children blend initial sound and sounds to produce wor	ort words and tial sound.
5-6 years		Children blend sounds to produce longer words.	C ent sounds in s
6-7 years		Blend sounds to produce longer words.	Segment sounds in CCVC or CVCC words.

Alliteration

Onset

Phonological Awareness Age Expectations

What are the approximate age expectations for each of these skills?

1. Blending and segmenting syllables — 3–4
2. Rhyme matching — 3–5
3. Initial sound segmentation — 4–5
4. Rhyme production — 4–5
5. Segmenting sounds in single-syllable words — 5–6
6. Sound deletion — 6–7

Let's Do: Hickety Pickety Bumble Bee

Directions:

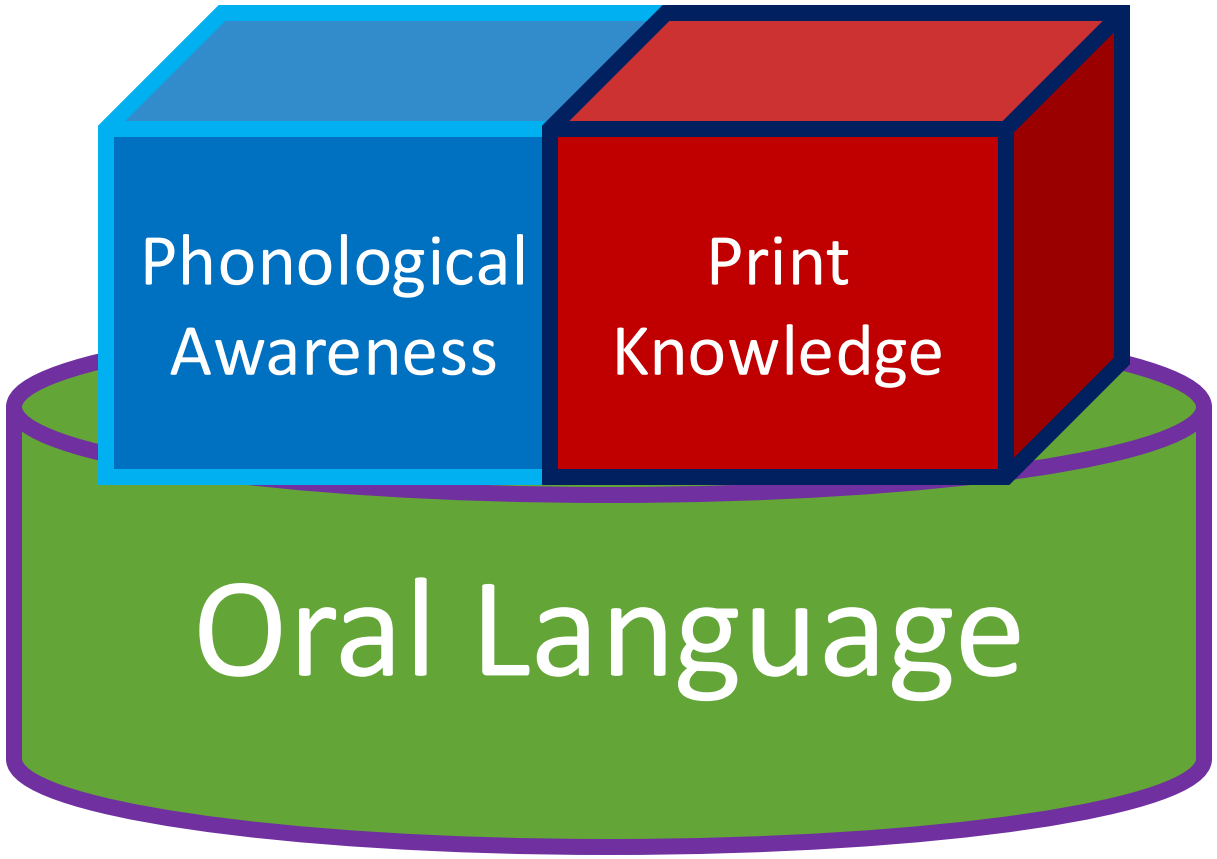
Sing the chant together while clapping to the rhythm. Choose a child and pass the bee puppet to them. The child says their name and segments it into syllables while clapping each part. Have the group repeat the name using the same pattern. Continue passing the puppet so each child practices segmenting their name and hearing syllables in spoken words.

Let’s Do: Grab Bag Surprise

Directions:

Place objects in a bag and secretly select one. Say the object’s name in segmented syllables (e.g., mo–tor–cy–cle), pausing between each part. Have children blend the parts to guess the word, then reveal the object. Next, have children clap and segment the word themselves. Repeat using new objects and progress from syllables to individual sounds as children are ready.

Early Literacy Foundation Skills



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What are those squiggles for?
Those are for people who can't read the pictures.
Billy And the Dinosaur

Grade Expectations for Letter Learning

(Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012)

The optimal benchmark at pre-K to kindergarten is:

18 uppercase letter names

15 lowercase letter names

• Letter-name fluency	K–1	1
• Letter-sound fluency	K–1	1
• Letter writing	PS–K	K

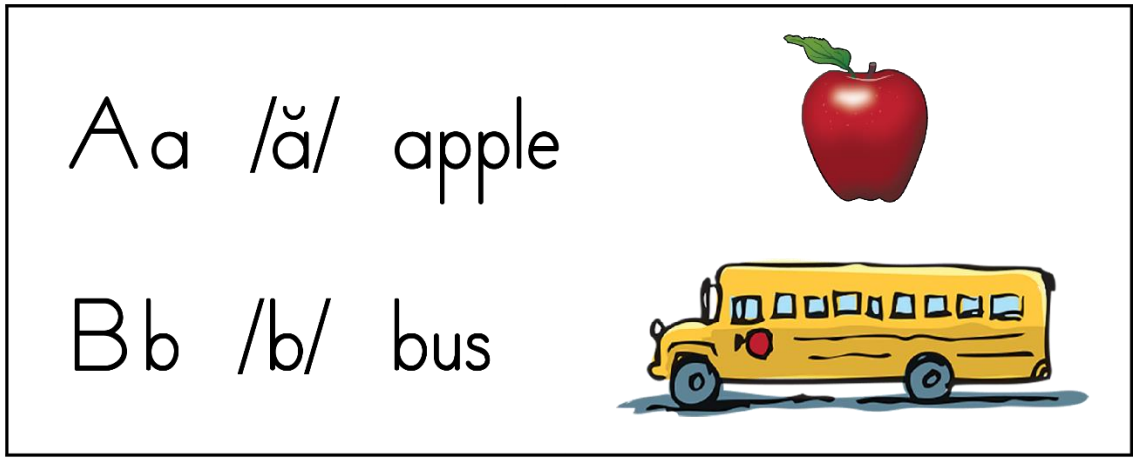
Alphabet Instruction Processes for Optimal Learning:

- **Paired associate learning** – powerful basic memory learning
  - repetition and practice associating the letter label and form
- **Articulation-referencing learning**
  - speech part of speech
  - mouth movements and mirrors
- **Orthographic learning**
  - print part of speech
  - letter writing

(Roberts, Vadasy,& Sanders, 2019)

Letter Instruction Components

1. Name
2. Shape (uppercase/lowercase)
3. Sound
4. Target word
5. Mouth shape
6. Writing it



Teaching more than one letter at a time with component parts results in better learning outcomes for young children.

(Sunde et al., 2020; Vadasy & Sanders, 2021)

Let’s Do: Magic Mirror

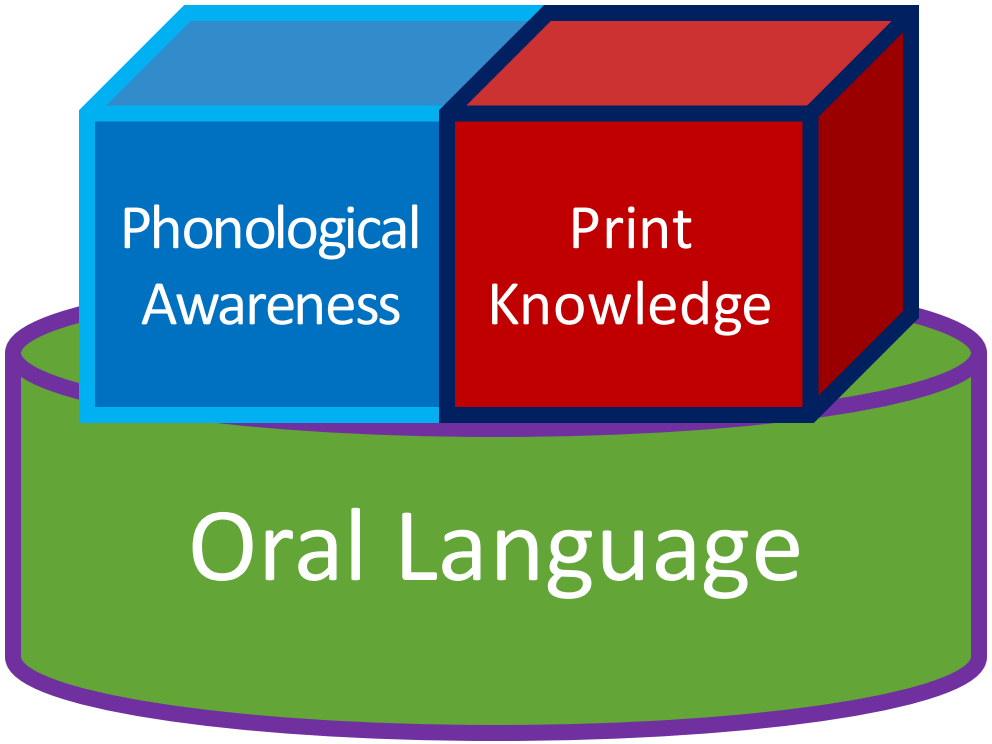
Directions:

Have children create a magic mirror with a transparent center. Ask them to hold the mirror and listen as you say, “Mirror, mirror, lead the way, find the word that I say.” Segment the name of a classroom object into syllables or sounds. Children use their mirrors to find the object, say the word blended, then repeat it in segmented form.

Writing Developmental Sequences

YEARS		
2-3	0.	No Distinction between drawing and writing
2-3	1.	Scribble
3-4	2.	Mock Letter
4-5	3.	Random Letter Strings
4-6	4.	Semi-phonetic
6-7	5.	Phonetic
7 +	6.	Conventional

Oral Language First



"What I think, I can say. What I say, I can write."

- Vocabulary and background knowledge
- Sentence structure (syntax and grammar)

Writing Instructional Strategy

"What I think, I can say. What I say, I can write."

Focus on student's **content** first.

Handwriting and **spelling** development provide valuable instructional indicators for the next steps in their learning.

(Beringer, 2009; Moats, 2012)

Writing Development in Preschoolers

- learn to name alphabet letters
- learn motor control to use a pencil by connecting dots in drawings, staying in lines in mazes, and by tracing over alphabet letter forms
- learn to imitate adults making alphabet letter forms

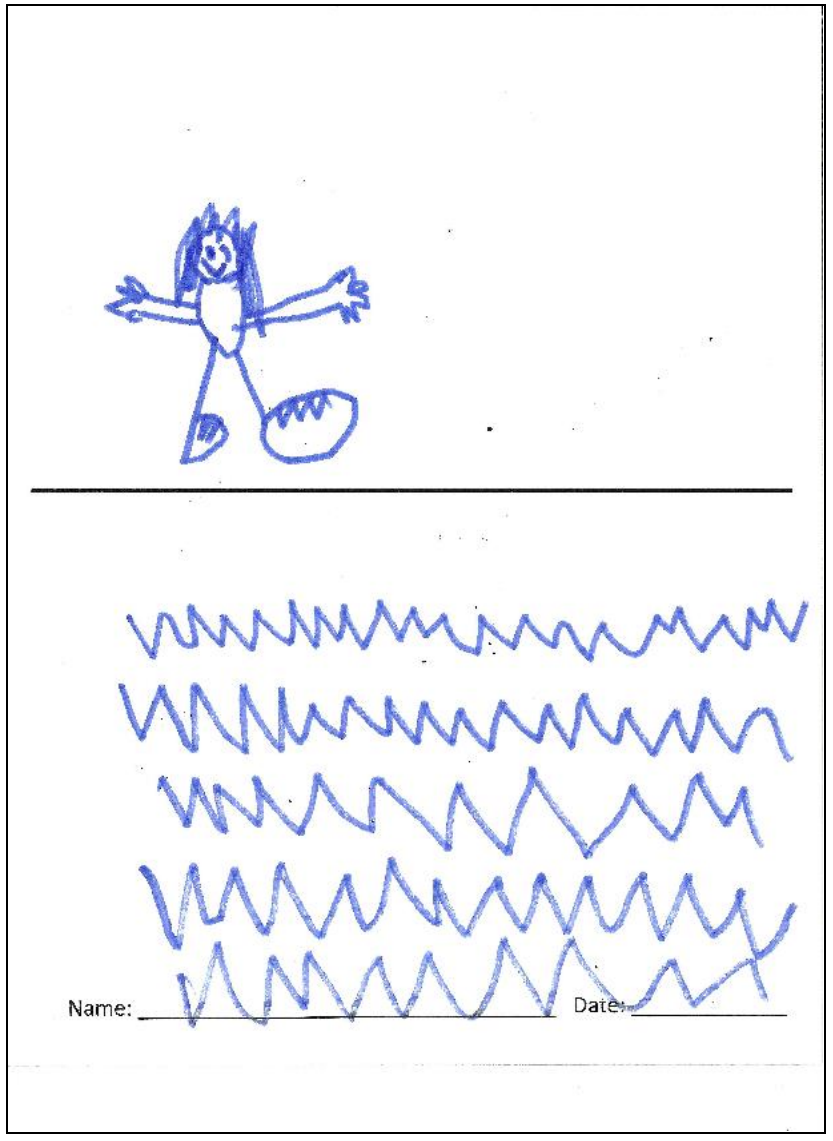
(Berninger et. al, 2006)

Writing Development in Early Elementary Grades

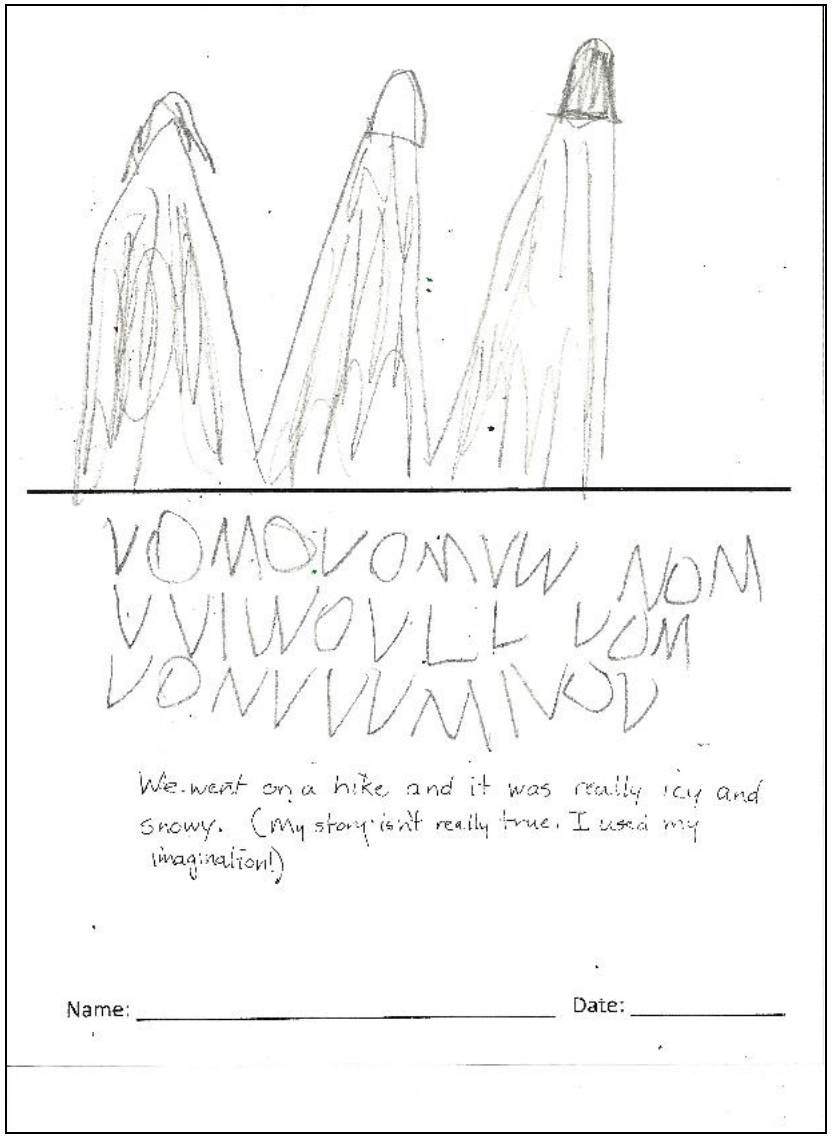
- learn to write upper-case and lower-case alphabet letter forms accurately
- can name all the upper-case and lower-case alphabet letters when presented in a random order
- write dictated letters in both cases accurately from memory

(Berninger et. al, 2006)

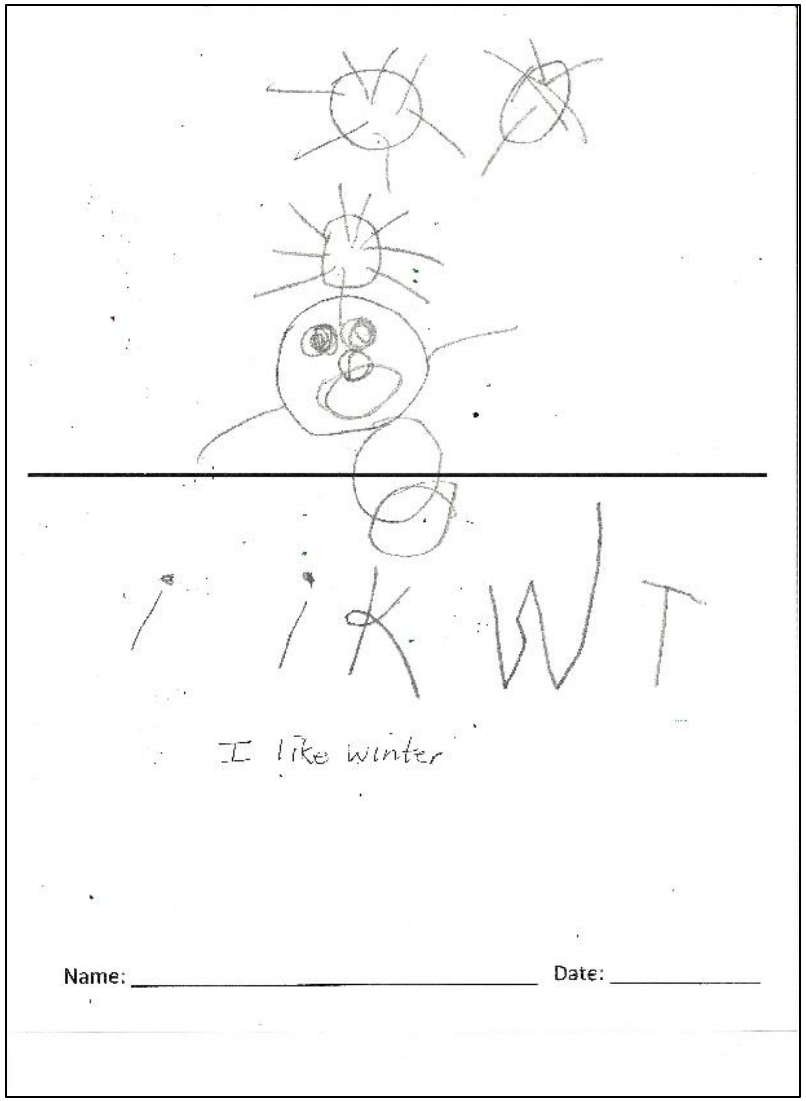
Scribble



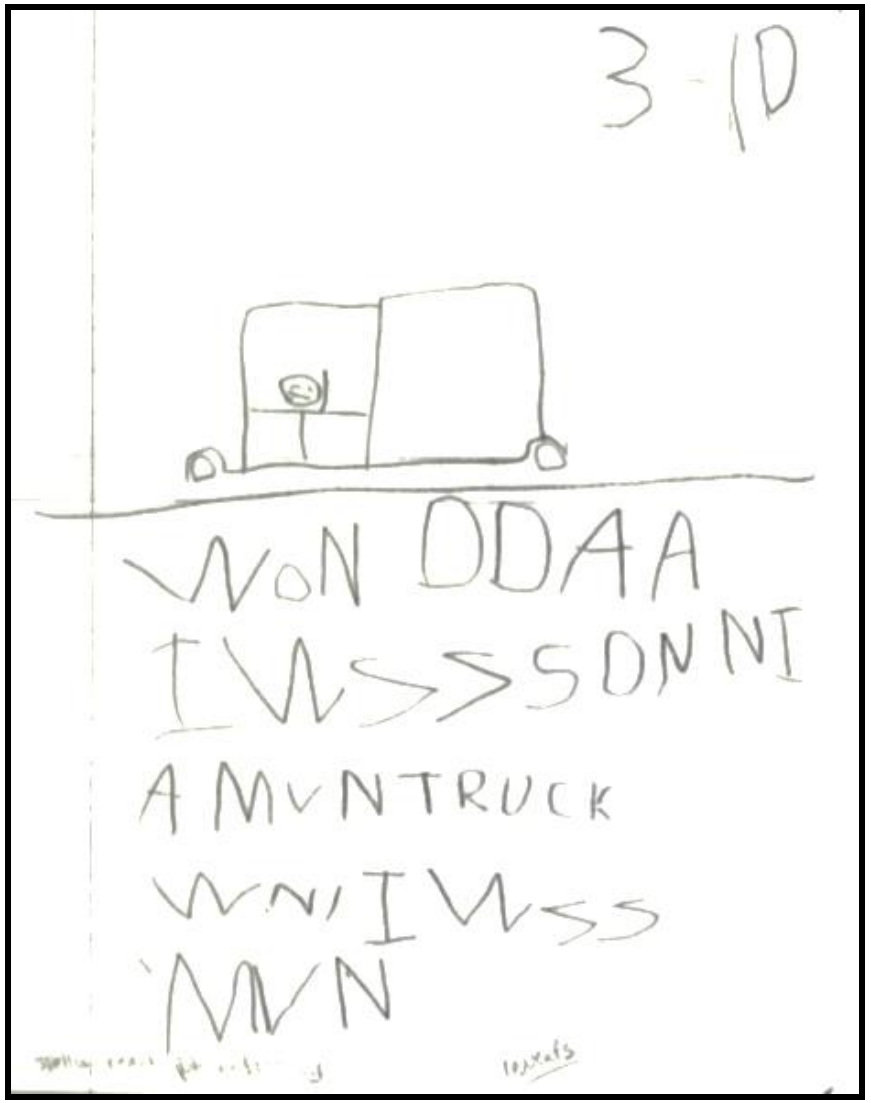
Random Letter Strings



Semi-phonetic



Phonetic



Robust Tier 1 Instruction for Every Student:

Preschool

Phonological Awareness:

- Recognize and begin to produce rhyming words
- Blend and segment syllables
- Blend and segment initial sounds

Phonics and Word Recognition:

- Learn letter names and a few sounds
- Recognize familiar signs in environment

Robust Tier 1 Instruction for Every Student:

Kindergarten

Phonological Awareness:

- Recognize and produce rhyming words
- Blend and segment syllables
- Blend and segment initial and final sounds
- Create new words by manipulating the phonemes in one-syllable words

Phonics and Word Recognition:

- Demonstrate letter-sound knowledge of consonants and short and long vowel sounds
- Begin decoding CVC words
- Read common high-frequency words

Writing Instruction Tasks

Preschool Tasks:

- level of writing development (scribble to semiphonetic)
- own name writing
- letter name knowledge
- phonological awareness

(Berninger & Wolf, 2016)

Kindergarten Tasks:

- level of writing development (random letters to phonetic)
- letter name and sound knowledge
- letter writing
- phonological awareness
- alphabetic principle in CVC word reading and spelling
- sentence writing

Robust Tier 1 Instruction for Every Student:

First Grade

Phonological Awareness:

- Blend, segment, and count phonemes in single-syllable words that include consonant blends
- Create new words by manipulating individual phonemes in one-syllable words

Phonics and Word Recognition:

- Know the letter-sound correspondence for consonant blends and digraphs
- Decode words with final–e and vowel teams
- Connect syllabification with a vowel sound
- Begin to decode two-syllable words
- Identify root words and simple suffixes
- Read common high-frequency words

Use decodable books to practice the patterns that have been taught.

Writing Instruction Tasks

Primary Grade Tasks:

- automaticity and accuracy of alphabet letter writing
- accuracy and fluency of decoding and spelling of phonetic and high frequency words
- phonological awareness
- paragraph writing organization and content

(Berninger & Wolf, 2016)

Writing Instruction Tasks

Later Grade Tasks:

- automaticity and legibility of handwriting
- phonological awareness
- accuracy and fluency of word reading and spelling (phonological and morphological)
- paragraph writing
- essay writing
- keyboarding

(Berninger & Wolf, 2016)

Let’s Do: Picture Story/Word Story

Directions:

Model drawing a picture on the top half of a page and writing a sentence on the bottom half. Demonstrate different writing levels. Have children draw their own picture based on an experience and tell their story. Encourage them to add writing at their level, supporting all attempts as part of the writing development process.

Let’s Do: Can-Do Quilt

Directions:

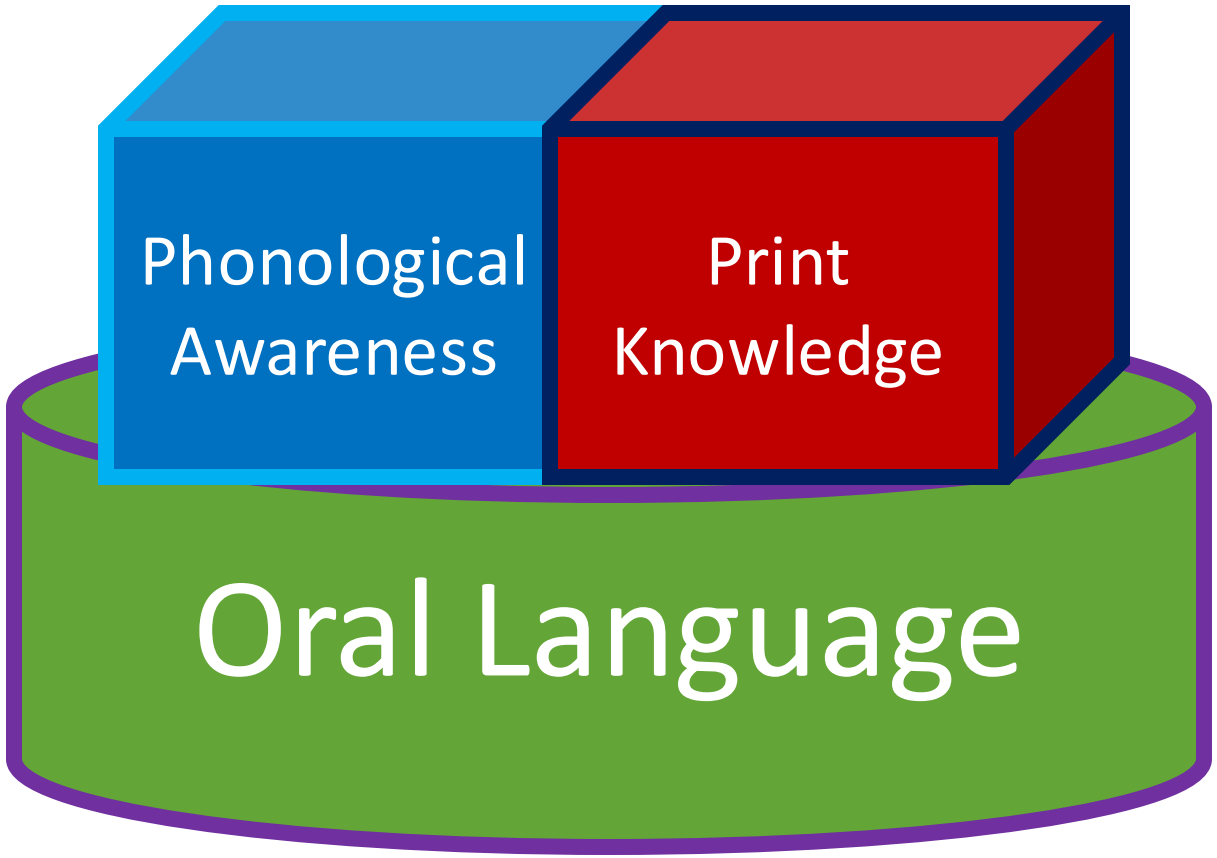
Discuss skills children can do and model drawing and writing one example. Provide each child with paper and have them draw a picture of something they can do. Ask them to describe it and add writing through scribbles, letters, or dictation. Attach each piece to a quilt square and connect them to create a classroom quilt representing children’s growing abilities.

Your Reflections

- What are your big Take-Aways?

- What are your action plans?

Early Literacy Foundation Skills



Oral Language:

- Prosody
- Phonology
- Semantics
- Morphology
- Syntax

AND

Pragmatics

Phonological Awareness:

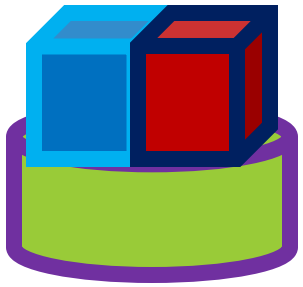
- Blending sounds into words
- Segmenting sounds in words

Print Knowledge:

- Alphabet knowledge
- Being a writer

Session Topics

Language connections to ALL learning



Developmental trends AND everyday routines for early literacy learning

- Oral Language
- Phonological Awareness
- Print knowledge

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