



# Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter – February 2025

*"Putting the child at the center of their learning."*

## CHILD-CENTERED PHONICS INSTRUCTION

In recent years, phonics has taken center stage in the literacy education community. Explicit, systematic, and sequential phonics, to be exact. In this recent push for reconsidering phonics, I (Krista) often hear about the importance of teaching the full scope of the phonics curriculum, including phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, and orthography.

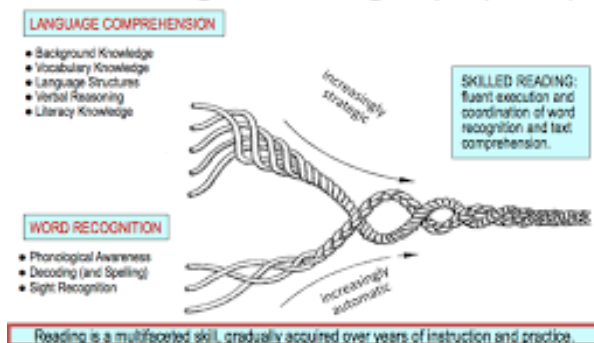
Scarborough's reading rope (see figure below) addresses phonics' undeniably significant role in developing a skilled reader. **WHAT** to teach in our phonics curriculums has been given much focus. Yet, knowing how to teach phonics is essential and goes hand in hand with systematic, sequential instruction.



Constructivist teachers embrace explicit phonics instruction with a child-centered approach. We introduce new skills while building upon what the student already has control over. Within the scope of the phonics curriculum, we observe and assess to identify students' strengths and needs. Our goal is to apply phonics learning to reading and writing authentic texts. From there, we plan lessons to

meet our students where they are, leading with the child and building on what is known. **HOW** we teach phonics is crucial to child development.

### Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001)



students examine words closely while working through the developmental scope and sequence of skills.

**1. Use Elkonin boxes and manipulatives daily.** I started my lessons after the winter break by reassessing students' understanding of phonics using the spelling inventory. The spelling inventory takes a few minutes to administer, offering immediate data on the spelling patterns children have

### So, How Do You Teach Phonics?

After taking the LETRS course for over two years, I was excited to see the many hands-on strategies incorporated into that curriculum. My LETRS manual states, "To know what the word actually says, the reader must look closely at all the letters and recode them into sound and sense" (p.161). Let's start there. The following list of strategies supports the goal of helping

mastered and those they need to learn. I use it three or four times yearly to assess skills and progress. After administering this mid-year assessment, I learned that many students were still omitting sounds or letters in words—time to get out the sound boxes for explicit instruction. I use Elkonin boxes regularly in my reading intervention lessons.

This time, rather than introducing words for students to add to the boxes or have students manipulate sounds in words with the boxes, as I often do, I asked students to use Elkonin boxes and magnetic letters to make and blend words with two, three, and then four sounds. (Students will need their own sound boxes and magnetic letters or letter tiles.) After students experimented with making and recording words for a while, I could see where there was some confusion. I asked, “Can a word have two sounds and three letters? Show me. How about four letters and two sounds?” And so on. Some students grew to making words with three sounds, such as ‘church’ – impressive! Others were figuring out how ‘she’ had only two sounds. These open-ended activities pushed my students’ ability to notice and blend all the sounds in each word they were spelling. After a few days of working through these lessons, blending phonemes, digraphs, and vowel teams dramatically improved without omitting letters or sounds.



➡ Check out a student spelling ‘you’ while working on words with three sounds. She has three letters but likely needs to develop her understanding of vowel teams making one sound. I prompted her to tap the sounds and work in the 2-box.

**2. Teach phonological awareness.** We can’t assume students hear every sound in a word or if they hear rhyme or syllables. I use quick exercises where students tap and count the sounds they hear in words, manipulate the sounds in a word, clap the syllables they hear, or identify which words rhyme from a list of a few words. These skills are foundational to solving words and spelling correctly when reading and writing connected texts.

**3. Offer charts and scaffolds to anchor learning.** I use a variety of scaffolds to support the students’ phonics skills. (Some examples are pictured on pages 2 and 3.) When children are confused or firming up a new skill, these charts give them a reference point. Some of these anchor charts are handheld for individual needs. Others are large posters including beginning blends and digraphs, ending blends and digraphs, vowel teams, and the alphabet. Often, the charts are co-created with students; other times, I use a pre-made poster. These resources are ready to help students use analogies to learn alphabetics and spelling rules. For example, when teaching the /ow/ vowel team, the /ow/ is accompanied by a picture of snow and a picture of a cow. These visuals remind us that /ow/ will likely be read as in snow or cow.



3. **Employ word or sound sorts often.** Open and closed word sorts help students key in on the phonics skills you are teaching. When sorting words, students distinguish between specific spelling patterns. You can say, “Sort the words in four groups” for a closed sort. For an open sort, have students come up with as many groups as possible, giving each group a label for what unites it. You can sort beginning blends, rimes, words with CVCe, vowel teams... the possibilities are endless. Add some “non-conformers” to the words and see what the students do with them. Many of the closed word sorts I use have an “other” category. Sometimes, students make their own “other” category when doing open word sorts. When sorting sounds, such as beginning, ending, or vowel sounds, use pictures so that children identify the picture and then sort by the sounds they hear. Each student needs to have their own words or pictures. Watching students sort the words reveals what skills are understood or what skills need more practice.



ar 	or 	er 	ir 	ur 
ay 	all 	ee 	ea 	ea 
oo 	oo 	ow 	ow 	ou 
ew 	oa 	oi 	ai 	aw 
oy 	igh 	ie 	ue 	eigh 

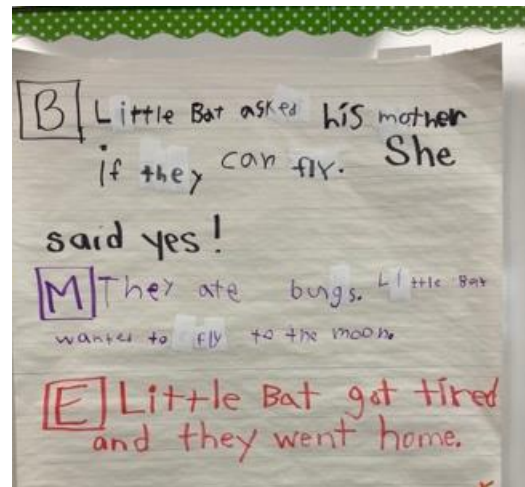
4. **Make word ladders.** Word ladders help us teach for transfer. See an example below. They are a quick way for students to manipulate sounds in words and learn to transfer what is known about one word to what can be used to make another word. Below is an example of a word ladder. Each student can do their own on a dry-erase board or strip of paper. To raise the stakes, we sometimes do one on a large chart with students taking turns and cheering each other on. When learning about multisyllabic words, use syllable tiles. You can make word ladders by changing out syllables.

ship  
shop  
hop  
hope  
hole  
hold  
bold  
and so on...

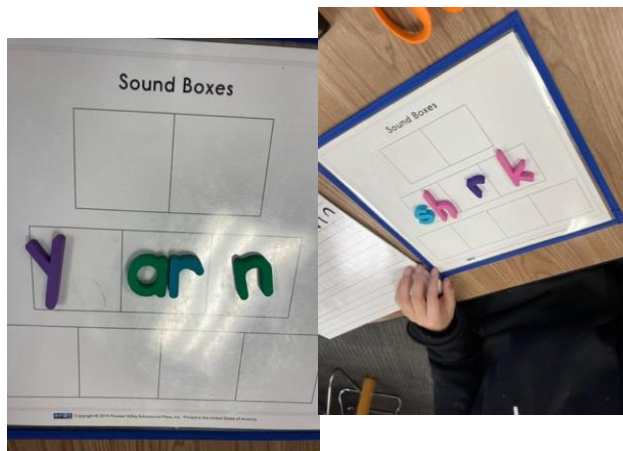


6. **Apply phonics learning in each lesson.** Make every effort to connect skills taught and practiced to reading and writing authentic texts. Wiley Blevins (2024) says this should happen daily and be allotted more time than learning the isolated phonics lesson. You can do this by reading books with controlled text, dictating sentences, interactive writing (see example below), and daily monitored independent reading and writing.

7. **Use a variety of assessments.** Gone are the days of teaching a spelling rule, when students memorized the spelling list and took a Friday spelling test. We use multiple data points for differentiated instruction. We use a variety of assessments to measure where students are in their phonics learning and how they apply this learning to reading and writing connected texts. I love the Spelling Inventory. This assessment offers immediate information about where children are in their understanding of the phonics continuum. You can also use electronic data from programs like iReady or ESGI (Educational Software for Guiding Instruction). Take running records and note students' substitutions. Offer regular dictated sentences and observe students' confusions and what they understand in their daily reading and writing.



Explicitly teaching a systematic, sequential phonics curriculum is essential daily. Lessons should be fast-paced with little downtime. Teachers can observe students work to learn if they have confusions or misconceptions. We can teach to these misunderstandings in real time. Then, repeat similar activities to provide ample practice and solidify the learning.



← Notice the 3-sound spellings offered by two different students in this example. Both students had the correct number of sounds from left to right in the word they were spelling. One student appears to understand the /sh/ digraph but does not yet remember that every word needs a vowel nor the vowel-r rule for the /ar/ sound.



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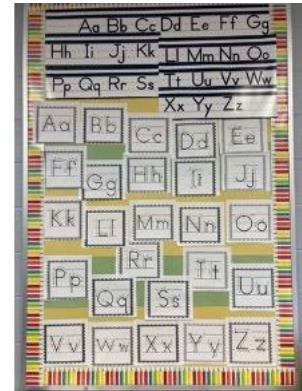


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## What Not To Do

Watching YouTube videos of animated phonics rules, slide presentations, or demonstrations (where only the teacher has the manipulatives) offer minimal support to phonics learning. These passive learning activities do not allow children to experiment and engage in the learning process.

Wiley Blevins (2024, p. 52) offers advice on what can go wrong in our teaching. He warns us to beware of omitting review and repetition of each phonics skill, sharing that skills should be circled back upon for at least six weeks to give students ample review and practice. Also, when skills are assessed in isolation, we may not know if students can use the skill while reading or writing continuous text. Blevins says the absence of consistent application to daily reading and writing experiences is one of the biggest mistakes in teaching phonics.



## Conclusion

Consistently using evidence-based teaching practices is paramount to students' literacy development. While running students through daily phonological awareness drills, presenting lessons on phonics rules, or assessing and pinpointing areas of strength and weakness is important, it is not enough to develop students' skills and increase their reading and writing proficiency.

A constructivist approach to teaching phonics involves encouraging students to build their understanding by connecting new learning to what is known through experimentation, hands-on, and multimodal instructional strategies. Offering scaffolds and anchors to support learning helps students advance to the next level. Constructivist teachers apply phonics learning to reading and writing meaningful texts, offering real-time coaching and support.



### Works Cited:

Moats, L. C., & Tolman, C. A. (2019). *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)*. Voyager Sopris Learning, Inc.

Blevins, W. (2024). *Differentiating phonics instruction for maximum impact: How to scaffold whole-group instruction so all students can access grade-level content*. Corwin Press.



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## Child-Centered Phonics Instruction Reflection Questions:

What do you find to be the most challenging phonics skills for your school or class? What can you do to teach for understanding?



How do you help students apply phonics learning to reading and writing connected texts?

Share your comments about this newsletter topic,  
“Child-Centered Phonics Instruction” [here](#).

## Teaching with High-Quality Children’s Books

### Theme: It’s Black History Month!

*Black History Month was created to highlight African Americans' contributions to the United States. It honors all Black people from all periods of U.S. history, from the enslaved people first brought over from Africa in the early 17th century to African Americans living in the United States today.*



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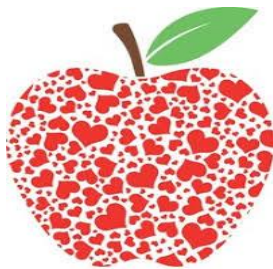


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Text Set Overview: February is **Black History Month**, a time to commemorate and **celebrate** the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans in the United States. Of course, much of Black History is also American History, and it is taught in the social studies curriculum all year. February is a time to remember, renew, and celebrate.

We have compiled this set of recently published texts for reading aloud to help all children understand the purpose and spirit of Black History Month. When you teach with this text set, students will learn the overarching purpose of Black History Month and the historical events, people, and cultural heritage unique to the Black experience in America.



## Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

**Q:** How do I teach sight words now that I have learned that students should not rely on whole-word reading? Can I still ask students to memorize sight words?

**A:** We call the words you are talking about “sight words” because readers encounter them regularly in daily reading and writing, and we want our students to know them automatically “by sight”. They are sometimes called “high frequency words,” which may be a better description. Children do need to learn high-frequency words with automaticity to be fluent readers. Although, when teaching these words, we do not need to emphasize the need to read them by sight, but we can emphasize how to learn the words using phonics when appropriate and memorizing the part that doesn’t follow phonics rules. The word “the” is a great example. We can read the word from left to right, starting with the standard /th/ digraph, and then we acknowledge that the e does not follow a phonics rule, and we will need to remember that part by heart. I know some teachers who call these types of words “heart words”. Applying this high frequency word learning regularly to reading and writing connected texts is important!



*Thanks for reading!*

*Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter?  
Submit [here](#)!*

