Effective Literacy Instruction for Early Childhood Education Students

Clara Rouse, PhD
Melissa Morris
The Importance of Early Literacy Instruction

Preparation for learning to read begins early in children’s lives as they acquire language and are exposed to printed material. Reading skills that are developed during preschool years build the foundation for future literacy development. Yet the reading readiness levels of preschool children vary greatly. While some children enter school prepared to learn to read, many others lack the skills and experiences necessary for reading success (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

There is a clear correlation between prior literacy knowledge and reading achievement in future grades. In fact, “research consistently demonstrates that the more children know about language and literacy before they arrive at school, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading” (National Research Council, 2000, p. 8). During students’ early years, family environment drastically affects vocabulary and reading comprehension development, which can impact reading success in future grades. Because these early years are so crucial to students’ literacy development, effective early literacy instruction delivered through preschool and other programs is essential to ensuring reading success for all students (National Research Council, 2000).

Effective Early Literacy Instruction

According to the National Early Literacy Panel (2008), interventions that have been shown to improve early literacy incorporate the following instructional strategies:

1. Code-focused interventions, including phonological awareness instruction
2. Shared-reading interventions
3. Parent and home programs
4. Language-enhancement interventions

Imagine Language & Literacy is an interactive software program that builds the foundation for successful reading by teaching essential early literacy skills. This comprehensive program incorporates all four instructional strategies outlined by the National Early Literacy Panel. The following sections describe how Imagine Language & Literacy uses those instructional strategies to help young students build a foundation for literacy by developing key reading skills.

Code-Focused Interventions

Code-focused interventions help students develop critical early literacy skills by teaching aspects of the alphabetic principle, including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and early decoding skills (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Imagine Language & Literacy is a code-focused intervention that delivers instruction in these key areas through engaging literacy activities.
Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness, or the ability to perceive the sound units of words, is a critical component of effective early literacy instruction. Research shows that phonological awareness is critical for reading success; children who struggle with reading often have a poorly developed ability to differentiate sounds in words (Neuman and Dickinson, 2011). The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) indicates that phonological awareness training typically involves teaching children to both identify and manipulate the sounds in words.

Imagine Language & Literacy uses sequenced instruction and interactive phonological awareness activities to help students develop these essential literacy skills (Table 1). Students are introduced to phonological awareness through activities that teach the concept of rhyme. Other activities teach young learners how to segment words into phonemes and determine whether a specific sound is a frontal, medial, or final phoneme. Through this explicit, sequenced instruction, students build a foundation for literacy by developing phonological awareness skills.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample Activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to Rhyme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yakkity Yak</td>
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<td>Syllable Count</td>
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Alphabet Knowledge

Before learning to read, students must learn letter names, sounds, and shapes. Researchers Treiman and Bourassa (as cited in Neuman and Dickinson, 2011) note that this is a crucial component of literacy development. Letter-name skills promote letter-sound knowledge, which is directly related to the development of phonemic awareness, decoding, and word recognition skills. Further, “there exists a wealth of evidence that the speed and accuracy with which young readers can recognize individual letters is a critical determinant of their reading proficiency and future growth” (Adams, 1994, p. 112). Developing letter recognition automaticity, or the ability to quickly and accurately recognize letters, is an important component of effective early literacy instruction.

Imagine Language & Literacy helps students master the names and sounds of all letters, both uppercase and lowercase, by providing explicit instruction in alphabet knowledge. The program offers eleven activities for each letter of the alphabet and provides instruction in letter names, sounds, and shapes (Table 2). In the activity Letter Shapes & Sounds, students learn about letters through a multi-sensory experience that draws on auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning opportunities. First, students learn the name, sound, and shape of a new letter. Then they practice tracing the letter shape with their finger as they say the sound out loud. Finally, the letter is presented as part of a word, and students are taught that the word shown starts with the letter sound they just learned. After multiple exposures to the letter name, sound, and shape, students practice identifying the target letter and distinguishing it from other letters. For additional practice and reinforcement of learning, a letter worksheet is automatically printed after students complete the activity.
Imagine Language & Literacy also uses repetition in activities like Recognize Letters and Free the Aliens to help students develop letter recognition automaticity (Table 2). For example, in Recognize Letters, students review previously learned letters and practice identifying them correctly. After a letter is reviewed, students use the mouse to click examples of the letter on the screen. Students have many opportunities to correctly identify the letter. If they make a mistake they are told the name of the incorrect letter they selected and are prompted to try again. Additional activities such as Free the Aliens and Underwater Adventure provide opportunities for students to practice rapid identification of letters in engaging, game-like settings. Each of these letter recognition activities use embedded assessments to help teachers quickly identify a student’s level of proficiency with both uppercase and lowercase letters.

### Table 2

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<thead>
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<th>Sample Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Letter Shapes and Sounds</strong></td>
<td>Students learn about letter shapes and sounds by hearing the name of a letter, tracing the letter shape on the screen, and identifying the target letter by distinguishing it from similarly shaped letters. At the end of the activity, a worksheet is automatically printed, and students practice writing the newly learned letter on their own.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recognize Letters</strong></td>
<td>Students develop letter recognition automaticity by identifying and selecting the correct letter from among similarly shaped letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Free the Aliens</strong></td>
<td>Students practice recognizing letters quickly, racing against a timer to correctly identify letters and free as many aliens as possible. Students score points by quickly and correctly clicking the target letter.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Underwater Adventure</strong></td>
<td>Letter bubbles appear and quickly float upward off the screen. Students practice letter recognition by clicking a target letter before it floats away. When students click the correct target letter, the treasure chest fills with treasure.</td>
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</table>

### Early Decoding Skills

According to the National Early Literacy Panel (2008), instruction in early decoding skills involves “teaching children about letters and simple decoding tasks involving the use of letter sounds” (p. 108). These decoding skills are an essential component of early literacy development. Research confirms that a combination of phonological awareness training and systematic phonics instruction can improve young students’ early reading achievement (Neuman and Dickinson, 2011).

Imagine Language & Literacy helps students master early decoding skills through engaging activities that blend phonological awareness and phonics instruction (see Table 3). Activities like Monster Blend and Making Music help students learn to segment and blend phonemes, preparing them to be successful readers.

### Table 3

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<th>Sample Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monster Blend</strong></td>
<td>Students practice blending onsets and rimes to make words.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Making Music</strong></td>
<td>Students practice recognizing phonemes by segmenting the initial sound and selecting pictures of objects that begin with the target phoneme. They are shown a mouth model and are encouraged to repeat the target sounds.</td>
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Shared-Reading Interventions

Shared-reading practices such as parents reading books with their children or teachers sharing good literature with their students are widely known to promote literacy development. According to the National Early Literacy Panel (2008), “shared-reading activities are often recommended as the single most important thing adults can do to promote the emergent literacy skills of young children” (p. 153). In fact, shared reading can facilitate the development of key early literacy skills that contribute to later success in reading (Neuman and Dickinson, 2011).

Imagine Language & Literacy provides many opportunities for shared-reading experiences. Through interactive activities like *Listen and Read*, students can hear and see books read out loud—much like they would in a shared reading experience at home or during story time with their teachers (Table 4). Before the books are read in *Listen and Read*, the narrator introduces new words and phrases that will be encountered during reading. The new words and phrases are shown on the screen as the narrator explains their meaning. Students participate in reading by clicking to turn the page, so they can move through the story at their own pace. Students can also click any word in the story to hear it repeated. Additional activities ask students to practice putting story events in order. Since reading comprehension is “a later-developing manifestation of reading and writing,” these types of activities build the experience base necessary for future reading comprehension skills (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, p. vii).

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<tr>
<td><em>Listen and Read</em></td>
<td>The narrator explains vocabulary (predictable text) before a book is read. Print concepts, such as left-right directionality and matching spoken words to printed text, are taught through sync-highlighted text and clickable pages. Students can click words within each story to hear them segmented into individual phonemes and blended back together.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Read-Along Comprehension</em></td>
<td>Students answer questions based on read-along books.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Printout: Write, Tell, or Draw a Story</em></td>
<td>Students complete a worksheet on which they retell a story based on a sequence of printed pictures. Then they draw, write, or tell about personal experiences related to stories they have heard.</td>
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Parental and Home Programs

While parental involvement is a necessary and important component of education at all levels, it is especially important in the early years. Research indicates that supportive parental involvement can boost children’s early literacy development (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Effective parental involvement includes promoting parent-child book reading, encouraging parent-child literacy activities, and equipping parents with the skills and strategies to foster their child’s language and literacy development (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Imagine Language & Literacy makes it easy for educators to communicate with parents by first providing parent letters that describe Imagine Language & Literacy. This letter also describes ways parents can help continue their child’s literacy education at home.

The program provides teachers with offline, skill-correlated worksheets and materials (Figure 1) that can be sent home to help parents support student learning. In some schools, parents are invited to come to school and work on the program with their
students. This helps parents understand how the program works and how it improves academic performance. All of these strategies strengthen the home-school relationship that is crucial to boosting student achievement.

**Language-Enhancement Interventions**

Numerous studies demonstrate that interventions designed to improve language development are an essential component of early literacy instruction (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Research suggests that effective language development instruction includes explicit vocabulary instruction followed by opportunities to read or use new words in context (Neuman and Dickinson, 2011).

Imagine Language & Literacy focuses on language development and directly teaches more than 1,400 vocabulary words. These nouns, adjectives, and verbs were carefully selected from research by Paynter, Bordrova, and Doty (2005) and Marzano and Pickering (2005), as well as items from various state tests, the AWL world list, and other sources. Imagine Language & Literacy teaches vocabulary in context, building a bridge between words and real-world experiences to help students retain new words and integrate them into their vocabulary. Further, a multi-sensory instructional approach helps students build vocabulary as they hear, see, and say new words. Engaging activities, including songs and chants, foster language development and provide multiple opportunities for students to not only recognize and learn new words but also apply vocabulary in context. This method of instruction adds meaning and supports retention of key vocabulary that is critical for emergent readers (Table 5).
Student progress is monitored and teachers can access detailed reports that list vocabulary words that students have encountered (Figure 2). This data enables teachers to uniquely tailor classroom instruction to meet students’ individual needs. The program also provides additional vocabulary worksheets that can be used to extend learning opportunities as needed, as well as parent reports that list vocabulary words for parents to practice with their students at home.

**Table 5**

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<tr>
<td><strong>Everyday Words in Scenes</strong></td>
<td>Students learn nouns in categories such as family members, animals, and things that go. Students use visual, audio, and tactile modalities in this activity as they move each graphic into a puzzle. The vocabulary words come from kindergarten curricula and the academic language of school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explore Everyday Words</strong></td>
<td>Students practice using newly learned vocabulary by clicking a picture that illustrates the word, hearing the target word spoken, and dragging the pictures to create their own scene.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Silly Animals</strong></td>
<td>Students practice recognizing learned adjectives and verbs in a game that gives them a well-rounded understanding of each word. They match a spoken adjective or verb to two pictures that illustrate the target word. After they answer correctly, students listen to the target word used in a sentence.</td>
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**Figure 2: Detailed vocabulary reports**
Conclusion

Literacy is incredibly important for all students, and the ability to read well is necessary for lifelong success. Research provides compelling evidence that effective interventions can provide the foundation for literacy and help students prepare to be successful readers. With appropriate instruction, young students can not only find success in reading but also use their literacy skills to achieve mastery in other academic areas. With Imagine Language & Literacy, teachers can provide the research-based, effective instruction that students need to develop literacy and find success both inside and outside of the classroom.

Works Cited


