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Strategies to Develop Phonics Skills

Phonics skills and strategies work together. Strategies are procedures that serve as ways to use specific skills; they help children connect knowledge of letter-sound patterns to their independent reading and writing by providing specific thinking for children to use. When we listen to teachers talk about strategies, we hear explanations of what to do, descriptions of explicit, procedural knowledge. For example, when a first grader reading on his own pauses before a word he doesn’t know, Janice Eddey explains the strategy:

Here’s how to get a word you don’t know. Think about the meaning. Look at the first letter of the word and get your mouth ready to say that word. Try to say the word and think about whether it makes sense.

Here she explains the use of semantic cues in combination with letter-sound information and monitoring the outcome for meaning. The strategy is to link semantic and letter-sound cues, then test the outcome in terms of making sense.

Strategy support is often based on familiar information and provides a scaffold to guide the learner. For example, Lisa Dapoz works with Francis, a low-progress student who wants to write the word craft. The teacher elongates the word c-r-a-f-t. Francis listens and writes C R A. Mrs. Dapoz encourages her further, “You almost have the whole word.” (She says it slowly and emphasizes the F sound). “What’s that FF sound? Like fist, fun, and Francis?

Francis responds, “F!”

Some of the time, strategy talk is simply reinforcement. The teacher helps children see their actions as procedures that can be repeated. Linda Orlich, for example, is working with a child in a reading conference. The child corrects a miscue after rereading part of the text. Mrs. Orlich points out that action of rereading and making a correction as a strategy that can be used again. She explains, “When you knew what would make sense [in that sentence], you used your strategy to go back and correct the word.” The child looks at the word again in light of that strategy reinforcement and reads on.
While it may seem that these three quick examples are tiny threads of instruction, they represent a powerful support network for young readers when woven repeatedly into the daily reading and writing experiences of the classroom. Consistently, children hear strategies explained and see them repeated and reinforced in the context of their use in reading and writing. They practice them in the classroom and eventually use them on their own. The teacher gradually releases support as learners gain confidence in using strategies independently.

**Strategies**

In this chapter we present eight strategies that we observed over and over (often in combination with each other) as we studied exemplary first-grade classrooms. They are explanations of procedures involving phonics knowledge that occurred as part of instruction in nearly every classroom visit. These strategies help children work through unknown words and solve the letter-sound problems they encounter. They serve as pathways for applying phonics knowledge. We introduce each strategy and then include examples of various ways the teachers talked about them with children. The first strategy is already familiar.

**Strategy 1: Use of Onset and Meaning to Figure Out a Word**

In this strategy, children simultaneously use the beginning letters of the particular word with their sense of meaning for the sentence to rapidly identify an unknown word. This strategy includes prompts by the teacher such as the following two options:

- Look at the first letters. How does that word start? Get your mouth ready (to make that sound).
- Look at the way the word begins. Now look at the picture. What word would make sense here?

Children combine their knowledge of language and their grasp of sentence meaning with the onset of a word as a prompt. **Onset** means the consonants before the vowel of a syllable (*str* in *street*). The **rime** part of the word is the vowel and any consonants that come after it (*eet* in *street*) (Moustafa, 1997). Of course, teachers don’t use the term “onset” as they talk to first graders. Instead, they urge children to look at the beginning of the word and think about that sound while also keeping sentence meaning in mind. Sometimes children refer to pictures and then say a possible word.

**Strategy 2: Sound Out a Word by Elongating Its Sounds**

This is a commonly used strategy. It means segmenting the sounds from left to right in order to sound out a word, stretching out the sounds, and
producing them in order. It is a procedure that gets the decoding started and ensures that the segmented sounds are all included. The next step is blending sounds to get the word.

We know that some of the time the letter-sound patterns are not simply a left-to-right matter. For example, noticing the E at the end of make helps a first grader say a long A sound and that’s a right-to-left matter. Recognizing a familiar word chunk like –ing at the end of the word may also not need to be sounded out. Obviously, this sounding-out strategy starting with the left and continuing on across the word is not applicable every time. Appropriate teacher talk for this strategy includes two options:

- Sound it out, start at the beginning, and make each sound.
- Stretch that word out, and say it slowly. Find all the sounds that are there.

The flip side of this strategy occurs in writing, where the elongation strategy means segmenting the phonemes of an intended word and matching appropriate letters to sounds. The child is shown how to match letters to needed sounds and is supported through the encoding process as she writes the word. There are many ways that teachers talk about this strategy and many quick decisions they make while helping children write a word. Often the teacher says the segmented sounds while the child listens and writes the letters. This scaffold enables the left-to-right progress to occur and helps with decisions about which letters to write. Again, we tap the teaching of Janice Eddey for an example:

At the beginning of writing workshop, Cindy, a learner just beginning to produce writing, asks for help.

CINDY: I need help spelling Cinderella.

MRS. EDDEY: s-s

CINDY: (Recognizes the help has begun.) S

MRS. EDDEY: i-n

CINDY: N

MRS. EDDEY: der

CINDY: D

MRS. EDDEY: Cin-der-eLL

CINDY: L

MRS. EDDEY: Now Cin-der-ell-a. What are you going to write about Cinderella?

CINDY: (Shrugs, looks at her attempted spelling and starts to develop her writing idea.)

Here the strategic support is very basic, just a scaffold to help some segmenting to occur and guide encoding from left to right. Since the point of
this quick conference is enabling the child to begin writing about Cinderella, the talk about S and C, about hearing vowel sounds in a word, about hearing the *er*, is saved for later when those concepts can be developed clearly.

The goal in this writing program is to move the child toward conventional spellings. Throughout the year, Mrs. Eddey conducts editing conferences where she works on conventional spellings and other editing matters. She supports children’s use of this sounding-out strategy in conferences by demanding careful attention to each sound. The teacher talk for this strategy could involve these choices:

- Say the word slowly then write the sounds you hear.
- Listen to the word, say it to yourself, and write letters for the sounds you hear.

**Strategy 3: Recheck Writing by Rereading and Monitoring Sounds**

There are two strategies that involve checking one’s work by going back to look again at how sounds are represented. One strategy relates to writing, the other to reading. In the writing-related strategy, children reread words they’ve written to see if every sound is represented. They check to see if the word looks right and sounds right. For example, a child in Mrs. Eddey’s classroom corrects a first try at spelling *Santa*. He wrote *S A T*, but in the editing conference he changes it so every sound is represented. Editing conferences support this rechecking strategy. With guidance, the expectation is that the child will start using this strategy independently while writing. The teacher talk for this strategy includes these options:

- Recheck your words, look closely at the spellings. Are all the sounds you hear written down?
- When you check your spellings, move your finger under the word while you say it. Are all the sounds you hear written down?

**Strategy 4: Use Letter-Sound Information to Rethink a Miscue**

The doubling back strategy in reading is just like its counterpart in writing. Children rethink and correct a miscue by using phonics cues to help the reading make sense. A miscue is a reader’s unexpected response to a text—a difference between what is printed and what is read. It could include a substitution (*house* for *home*) an omission, insertion, or a combination of these (Wilde, 1997). The point of this strategy is that letter-sound relations are part of rethinking and correcting a miscue. They are part of the information that readers use when meaning breaks down. The teacher talk involved is to direct attention to the miscue and help the learner look closely.

For example, Beth Swanson helps first graders in a guided reading group correct a miscue for the word *WANT* in their story. She asks them to point to the word *WANT* in their book.
Mrs. Swanson: What is this?

Andy: Like.

Mrs. Swanson: That’s what you said. Check yourself. What does like start with?

Andy: L

Mrs. Swanson: And do you see L here?

Andy shakes his head to say no.

Mrs. Swanson: What other letters does like have?

Andy: K

Mrs. Swanson: Do you see K here?

Andy shakes his head to indicate no.

Mrs. Swanson: You need to check what you see.

Eventually this interaction becomes a routine. The initial reminder to recheck may simply involve the teacher pointing at the word where the miscue occurred and expecting the correction. In Linda Orlich’s class, for example, this pointing strategy is a key part of some individual conferences. We look at a conference with Marty, a beginning reader, who often reads inaccurately. Mrs. Orlich is trying to get him to look closely at miscues and recheck his reading. The sentence they are reading is *Lamb had no mother*.

Marty: (reading slowly) Lamb heard on mother.

Mrs. Orlich: Does that make sense?

Marty: Lamb heard NO mother.

Mrs. Orlich points to the letters of *had* to focus attention. She keeps her fingers under the word.

Mrs. Orlich: Does that make sense?

Marty: Lamb HAD no mother.

Mrs. Orlich: Good.

The strategy for Marty is to look again at the word, rethinking it with the letter-sound relations in mind. He knows the sentence has to make sense.

**Strategy 5: Use Pattern Knowledge to Figure Out Words**

This strategy involves making analogies. For example, if children know the word *fight* they can read *blight* by substituting the initial sound. It also entails using relatively consistent letter-sound relationships and word patterns to figure out new words. As the child works from a known word pattern, he applies information to figure out a new word. He makes the connection between known and unknown. A quick example will clarify.

Dorothy is trying to write, *Time to watch TV.*
Mrs. Swanson: Let’s look at this word. (Points to watch.) Time to watch. 
Ch. What two letters work together to make that sound? Like in Chandler (another student).

Dorothy: S H

Mrs. Swanson: That’s really close. That’s like Sharon. If you had SH, it would be watSH. You want watCH like the harder sound CH, like Chad, Chandler.

Word patterns and analogies serve as tools children can use to figure out new words. We provide two examples of teacher talk from our observations. The first relates to reading, the second to writing:

• You know the word feet, you can figure out this one. That’s an M. (meet)
• What do you hear at the beginning of the word that? Do you know how to write the? Do the and that begin the same way? What do you think the letters are? Write the word that.

The teacher’s strategy guidance in each example focuses on what the child knows about letters, sounds, and word patterns and helps the child connect it to the needed word.

**Strategy 6: Kinesthetic Information**

Children may be unclear about how specific speech sounds are made and confuse some sounds that have not been sufficiently differentiated from each other. This strategy focuses on the way the mouth is shaped in producing sounds for certain letter cues (sh, wh, th, for example). The term *kinesthetic* refers to movement during sound production, the positions of the mouth, lips, and tongue. Teachers explain how sounds are produced and help children make distinctions between the sounds that they confuse. The point is to clarify sound production and relate it to the letters that represent those particular sounds. The instruction is explicit and often embedded in the child’s point of confusion or need at the moment.

Mrs. Swanson is conferring with two boys who have completed a joint mural and each is writing a sentence strip about it. One boy indicates the next word he wants to write is throw.

Mrs. Swanson: Throw, throw. There are two letters that work together.

Do you know what they are?

Keshawn: F

Mrs. Swanson: They do sound like that. Listen, frow or throw?

Keshawn: O

Mrs. Swanson: There is an O, but before that, there are two letters. Do you know the letters that start THing and THistle?

Silence
Mrs. Swanson: (Writes T and H.) You are hearing F. (Writes F.) Say fish.
Keshawn: fish.

Mrs. Swanson puts her teeth on her lip as if saying F. “Where are your teeth?”
Keshawn: On my lip.
Mrs. Swanson: Say throw.
Keshawn: throw.

Mrs. Swanson puts her teeth on her tongue as if saying th. “Where are your teeth?”
Keshawn: On my tongue.
Mrs. Swanson points to her mouth. “Can you see the difference?”

In this strategy the child uses sight and touch in learning to hear and discriminate similar sounds. Possible teacher talk:

• Think about how that sound is made. Say the sound. How does your mouth move when you say that sound?

Strategy 7: Understand Variation in Complex Letter-Sound Relations

Many of the letter-sound relations in English are variable. This strategy stresses knowing the options and being flexible. The reader may have more than one option when working on a particular set of letters in reading. Vowel diphthongs, vowel digraphs, and the variable sounds of C and G are just some examples of more complex letter-sound relations. Teachers use brief directed lessons to develop these more complex concepts.

DIPHTHONGS AND DIGRAPHS

• Diphthong is a vowel phoneme that contains two sounds. Sound production glides from one part of the mouth to another (example: boy).

• Digraph is a spelling of a sound (either vowel or consonant) with two letters representing a single sound (example: flip, string, thing). (Wilde, 1997)

Teachers’ talk with readers after a lesson helps them recall the information and remember options. Strategy talk is about which choice to make. For example, in sounding out giant, a teacher might suggest when the hard sound is made as a first try, that the reader make the soft sound of G, the other option.

Teachers also help children see that some words are exceptions and do not correspond to general rules or expected patterns. The strategy for
thinking about exceptions is seeing the departure from pattern. We observe a first-grade class studying a word pattern -ake (take, make, rake). As children suggest words, the teacher lists each one in a column with the -ake pattern printed in red. One child suggests that ache fits the pattern. When the word is written alongside the list rather than in the vertical column with the others, the teacher explains, “In this case the CH makes a K sound. It’s one of those words that isn’t spelled exactly the way you would think it is.” Additional teacher talk options include:

• That letter can stand for more than one sound. Make it sound like _____ (mention words with the desired sound).
• This one is an exception. It is not spelled the way you expect.

Children’s work with word sorts is a way to address these variable letter-sound relations. See Chapter Five for details of further word study instructional activities.

**Strategy 8: Voice Print Matching to Focus Attention Word-by-Word During Reading**

This strategy involves looking at the exact word that is being read and literally saying the word while focusing on it. Many first graders need support in this area. They need to focus on the correct word, understand the concept of one-to-one matching during reading, and realize the full potential of talk about letter-sound relations. Word matching may be complex for some beginning readers. There may be confusion about the concept of word and children may struggle to stay on the right word when words with multiple syllables are read. Voice print matching is often part of big book lessons, poetry reading, choral reading, and children’s rereading of their own writing. Teacher talk may include:

• Point to each word as you read it. Keep your finger under the word you are reading.

**Resources and Responsibility**

An important support for children’s independent reading and writing is the rich array of resources around the classroom. There are word lists, word walls, pattern charts, personal dictionaries, ABC word lists, neighbors that can help, and dictionaries, to mention just a few. Children are expected to use their resources—it’s a matter of them thinking about what to do when they get stuck on a word and understanding that their task is to use the multiple resources around them.

In a sense, this resourcefulness is a strategy for independence. We observed teachers reminding children to use what they knew about language, letter-sound relations, and resources around the room as they
worked. They reminded children of their options. JoAnne Lane reviews strategies before a writer’s workshop.

**MRS. LANE:** What do we do after we start writing?

**SAMMY:** Look for a beginning, middle, and end?

**MRS. LANE:** What do you do if you’re trying to make sense?

**JANET:** Ask your neighbor.

**MRS. LANE:** What do you do if you can’t write a word?

**CASEY:** Sound it out.

**MRS. LANE:** You can stretch out the words. What else, do we have anything else in the room to help us?

**FRANKIE:** We have all kinds of words around the room to help us.

**Strategies in Combination**

So far in this chapter we have described strategies one at a time, providing examples and showing teacher talk. Our experience in watching teachers in action, however, has shown that talk about strategies often includes two or three strategies talked about or suggested in tandem. As teachers monitor children’s reading, they point out the strategies that are being used. As children struggle, they suggest strategies to help.

To understand how strategies are talked about (used as a scaffold to prompt the reader or writer along) we notice the effort of both teacher and student. For example, in one of our observations, JoAnne Lane was supporting Tim’s reading with a scaffold of questions that prompted useful strategies. They were reading in the middle of a book about the ocean.

**TIM:** (reading) Some are (self-corrects) some come in beautiful? (aside) No.

**MRS. LANE:** Does it make sense? Does it sound right?

**TIM:** Some come in beautiful bright colors. (He rereads to confirm, then continues reading fluently until he comes to the word giant.) Let me think of that word.

**MRS. LANE:** What do you do when you’re stuck?

**TIM:** G G Is it long or short? [meaning hard or soft]

**MRS. LANE:** Try both. Which one makes more sense?

The reading continued in this conference. Tim did all the work and JoAnn prompted and supported his efforts by reminding him of strategies to use. She closed the session by confirming his actions, “I really like when you were rereading when it didn’t make sense and you were using picture cues and sounds when you read.” When we step back and think
about this observation, we see that the teacher’s scaffold supported the reader and guided his strategy use.

**Ways to Teach Strategies**

We have just shared teacher-student conferences in reading, writing, and guided reading lessons as instructional contexts for strategy instruction. Another powerful approach is the reading or writing demonstration. The teacher shares her thinking while writing a message or reading a story. She points to the print as she talks about the strategies she employs. She might show how she goes back to recheck a word and look closely at letters as she considers meaning. She might tell how she works on a word with a vowel digraph that is tricky and explain how she decides which letters to write. Often the demonstration includes children’s participation as they suggest possible spellings for needed words. Here the level of engagement is high, the reading or writing is a meaningful text, and the demonstration contains explicit talk about strategies. (See Chapter Nine for a detailed description of writing demonstrations.)

**Summary**

The important understandings about strategies are:

- Strategies are partners for phonics skills and concepts.
- Strategies give children paths of action.
- The flexible use of skills and strategies is an essential part of children’s reading and writing.
- Instruction needs to help children understand which skills and strategies to use when working with unknown words.

The strategies described in this chapter are not a comprehensive list. They are meant as a sampling of common strategies that occur in instruction with beginning readers and writers. We review the list here with the hope that our readers will add to it.

- Use onset and meaning to figure out a word.
- Sound out a word by elongating its sounds in order left to right.
- Recheck writing by rereading and monitoring sounds.
- Use letter-sound information to rethink a miscue.
- Use pattern knowledge to figure out words.
- Monitor kinesthetic information.
- Understand variation in complex letter-sound relations.
- Use voice print matching to focus attention word-by-word during reading.
In my classroom, reading and writing are completely intertwined. I believe that children learn to read through the writing program. I think of phonics as one wheel on the car to successful reading, and although it is a very important part, I teach other strategies as well. The embedding of the phonics instruction in a meaningful context, the connectivity of the skill focus, and the need to know on the part of the student allows the learner to develop the mental networks to use skills they’ve acquired in new reading situations.

Many times during the day I spontaneously slip in a minilesson as we read a story, as a child shares a project or writing, or as we record a science experiment. Tiny dialogues, multiple times during each day, connect the teaching moment to some skill I was trying to help the children learn. It happens across the entire curriculum. The little connectors are the glue that cement the formal lessons together—the bridges that help children reinforce what they already know and put new skills they are learning into a usable context.

My reading component is all literature. I have leveled books for instructional purposes, so the children can read successfully, but there is some challenge, too. In the morning, the children come in and choose a book from the leveled sets. They read it to themselves before school and during silent reading. As soon as they finish reading their chosen book, they go and pick something else for quiet reading. There are several hundred books from which the children can choose in the classroom.

When students read in class, they get support from their peers and from me to help decode or figure out unknown words. Usually they don’t need much help. They may ask about one or two words. I would probably say ten percent of the children ask something every day. The rest of them don’t ask anything. They just figure it out on their own. They’ve got all kinds of strategies to figure out unknown words.

Reading progress is tracked two ways. The first occurs when I listen to them read. I write down the level they’re in and whether it’s easy, challenging, or difficult. Sometimes I’ll ask them a comprehension question or two about what they read. I try to vary the questions to get at higher level thinking skills, not just factual recall. I look for fluent reading. If the reader does not fly through the text with 95 percent accuracy or above, they don’t really have a handle on it. Sometimes if they stumble through the story I’ll wonder if they have any clue what they read. I’m amazed that sometimes they do know exactly what happened in the story. I don’t know how they processed meaning when they stumbled that much through the book. I do running records once every nine weeks for sure. I do them more often with kids who are having trouble.
The second way I track reading progress is a reading journal where the children report the books they read at home. When the parents keep the log, I know Mom and Dad have a real good handle on the progress. There’s no room for comments on the log, but there could be. I’ve often thought of providing room for parent comments on the take home log, but I want to make that reading homework as hassle-free as it can be. I know, as a parent, to find ten minutes to listen to your kid at night is sometimes a challenge, so I try to make it as painless as possible—just write down the title and the date, and that’s enough. Sometimes parents will drop me notes and I’ll write back.

We also keep writing portfolios. The rough drafts are more important to me than the finished products, so I save all the rough drafts. I save writing samples from every month or so. I’ll just take a writing sample and stick it in there, so that I can see chronological progress. It comes in handy at parent conferences because we can look back at what their child did in the beginning of the year. It doesn’t matter that everyone gets to point \textsuperscript{x}; it’s just how far you have come and if you are still moving.

Writing happens every day at some point. Some days we do class shared writing. The class helps compose a color rhyme for the day and records it on chart paper. Students later recopy the rhyme into their individual color rhyme books. Other days we have writers workshop where we’re doing stories and we’re writing. We do drafting, revising, editing. As the year goes on, that gets more intense. In the first half of the year, they’re revising and editing with me. They may revise with peers, too, but not edit. In the second half of the year, when people get to be better spellers, they start editing with peers.

While the other children are doing independent work, the students who are ready to revise or edit come up to my desk one at a time. They read their drafts to me. I think that’s where a lot of the reading instruction comes in, because you can really talk about it in the context of where they are so it makes sense to them. It’s a lot harder for them to read what they’ve written two or three days later. The revision takes various forms. Sometimes the sentences don’t hang together; there’s stuff in there that doesn’t make sense, and so, when they read it aloud, you say, “Oh, this doesn’t make sense.” Most of the time their writing does make sense. Usually they just need a little bit more at the end to bring it together, or to clarify something in a story. We do a lot of editing for spelling and sentence endings (usually periods).

I firmly believe that the children’s needs and interests dictate when something is presented. The shared reading, the individual writing conference, the group story—all can provide opportunities for instruction, not an arbitrary sequence or planned performance. My job is to support and encourage their curiosity for knowledge, immerse them in print, and provide endless opportunities for exploration with books and writing.