A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years

NEPS Good Practice Guide

This NEPS Good Practice Guide was developed by educational psychologists. It is based on current knowledge in this area. It is intended as a guide only. Not all the suggestions here will apply to any one student or situation.

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Section 1 Introduction

1.1 Who is this Guide for?

This Good Practice Guide is intended for use mainly by teachers working with children in Junior and Senior Infants and may also be relevant to teachers of First Class children. It has been developed by psychologists from NEPS and is intended to support the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2011. The aim of the pack is to help teachers plan and deliver a balanced approach to literacy in the early years, by sharing information about evidence-based approaches and best practices. The research literature is supplemented by short video clips, filmed in Irish schools, which demonstrate good practice in action.

This resource is also intended to support the work of principals, deputy principals and literacy coordinators in primary schools. The National Strategy outlines objectives in relation to school self-evaluation, effective approaches to literacy teaching and the use of assessment in supporting literacy. It is hoped that this resource pack will inform and support that work.

[Click here to see Mary Nugent, (Educational Psychologist, NEPS) talking about this resource.](#)

This Good Practice Guide is also aligned with the NCCA Primary Language Curriculum. This NCCA curriculum is the statutory curriculum which describes learning outcomes, progression continua and milestones for oral language, reading and writing for both English and Irish, from Junior Infants to the end of Second Class. It is intended that this NEPS guide will support schools in delivering that curriculum and achieving the learning outcomes set out, particularly in relation to the reading and writing strands. While the NCCA curriculum covers children from Junior Infants to the end of second class (Stages 1 and 2), this guide focuses largely on Stage 1 (Junior and Senior Infants) and the early stages of Stage 2 (First Class).

While the literature reviewed has been published in English and reflects the teaching of the English language, it is suggested that much of the material here is relevant to the teaching of any language and would apply to Irish medium schools and Gaeltacht schools. However, detailed information in Chapters 4 and 6, relating to the teaching of phonological awareness, phonics, sight words and spelling patterns needs to be revised and adapted where Gaeilge is the first language of instruction.

A Gaeilge version of this resource is in development.

While the thrust of this document is to support teachers in the teaching of literacy to children in early years, it is acknowledged that there are some children who may experience significant challenges in the development of literacy skills, for example, those students with sensory issues, those with speech and language difficulties, general learning disability, students who are deaf / hard of hearing or blind / visually impaired. The balance within this model will shift depending on the needs of these children and they may require structured and targeted interventions based on their identified needs at an appropriate level. Support and continual professional development for teachers is available from the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in this regard www.sess.ie

Click here to apply to the SESS for support http://www.sess.ie/support

Click here for the SESS materials relating to the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Learning and Life, 2011 http://www.sess.ie/lnll

The guide is divided into the following sections:

Section 1- **Introduction**

Section 2- **The Need for a Balanced Approach**

Preventing reading failure, evidence-based practice, introducing the balanced approach, framework of the balanced approach, time for reading

Section 3- **Essentials for Reading**

Access to books, oral language experiences, reading at home, motivation

Section 4- **Learning to Recognise Words**

Phonological awareness, phonics (alphabetic knowledge), sight words, word reading strategies

Section 5- **Meaningful Reading**

Vocabulary, comprehension, fluency

Section 6- **Written Communication**

Handwriting, spelling and meaningful writing

Section 7- **Assessment for Teaching and Learning**

The assessment plan, assessment for learning, assessment of learning

Section 8- **Rich Reading Experiences**

The gradual release of responsibility, interactive read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, oral reading from just-right texts, independent reading

Section 9- **Teacher Development**

Quality of teaching, professional development for teachers

1.2 What sources of evidence were used?

The synthesis of research findings reported in this guide, is drawn from a range of publications and seminal texts, with a focus on material published in the last 15 years. The key texts used are listed in the References section.

Section 2- The Need for a Balanced Approach

It is possible today to help our youngest readers learn to read more successfully than ever before, particularly by taking advantage of what many years of conclusive evidence from research assures us about the effectiveness of a balanced approach to reading instruction.

Cowen, 2005, xiii

2.1 Preventing Reading Failure

In Ireland, approximately 20% of children in first and second class are offered learning support in literacy, as they are considered to be under-achieving. Data from 2013 indicated that 11% of children attending disadvantaged schools in Ireland were reading at or below the 10th percentile in second class (and an additional 8% were not tested, due to absence or exemption from testing) and this rose to 20% by sixth class (Weir and Denner, 2013).

However, there is also international evidence that schools which provide quality instruction in the early years find that the vast majority of their pupils can achieve at age appropriate levels (Solity et al, 2000). NEPS psychologists have collected evidence from a number of Irish schools who are implementing a balanced approach and the data supports this view. Look at the data below, taken from end of year testing in one DEIS school in 2012.

Table 1. Mean 1st class scores, Woodcock Johnson Test of Achievement

Area Tested	Percentile	Standard Score
Word Reading	82nd	114
Reading comprehension	64th	105
Reading fluency	75th	110
Spelling	55th	102

This data shows us that quality teaching can bring about above average outcomes for children, including children in disadvantaged communities and children for whom English is not their first language.

There is a view that dyslexia is often misdiagnosed as an explanation for reading failure. Vellutino, Snowling and Scanlon, 2004, in a comprehensive review of dyslexia research, concluded that, '*recent intervention studies have clearly demonstrated that reading difficulties in most beginning readers are not invariably caused by basic cognitive deficits or biological origin*', and therefore '*current estimates of the incidence of true reading disabilities are greatly inflated*'. They suggest that some struggling readers are 'instructional casualties'. This view is supported by Pressley, 2006, who points out that biological dyslexia is rare compared with reading failure due to inappropriate instruction. He suggests that for many poor readers, their problem may be that they never received systematic, intensive instruction in decoding or have had it in a watered-down fashion.

Another explanation for reading failure, is that some readers have English as a second language. However, '*the vast majority of children and adults with poor literacy skills were born and raised in the country they live in and speak its language of instruction as their mother tongue.*' (EU Final Report, 2012).

Every child can, in principle, learn to read and write.

EU Final Report, 2012

2.2 Evidence-Based Practice

Teachers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of literacy development, informed by evidence-based best practice (Morrow and Gambrell, 2011). This practice is informed by research and the methods used to teach literacy should be rigorously tested in real world situations. There is converging evidence from multiple sources about effective teaching in the early years. The following ten evidence based best practices for comprehensive literacy instruction, which will support the effective implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum, are taken from Gambrell, Malloy and Mazzoni, 2011;

1. Create a classroom culture that fosters literacy motivation.
2. Teach reading for authentic meaning-making purposes: for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task.
3. Provide children with scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension to promote independent reading.
4. Give children time for self-selected reading.
5. Provide children with high quality literature across a wide range of genres.
6. Use multiple texts that build on prior knowledge, link concepts and expand vocabulary.
7. Build a whole-class context that emphasises community and collaboration.
8. Balance teacher and child led discussion of texts.
9. Integrate technologies that link and expand concepts.
10. Differentiate instruction using a variety of instructionally relevant assessments.

While placing emphasis on evidence-based practice, the importance of professional wisdom is also acknowledged. As Gambrell et al, 2011, p29, point out: *No matter how well a particular practice is shown to be effective by research, optimal literacy teaching and learning can only be achieved when skillful, knowledgeable and dedicated teachers are given the freedom and latitude to use their professional judgement to make instructional decisions that enable students to achieve their full literacy potential*.

2.3 Introducing a Balanced Approach

There is a consensus emerging that children's early literacy experiences need to involve a balance of varied activities and experiences (Cowen, 2005, Morrow and Gambrell, 2011, Pressely, 2006). Effective literacy instruction requires a combination of skills-based and whole language teaching in a motivating and supportive environment (Pressley, 2006).

2.4 Defining a Balanced Approach

There is no absolute, agreed definition of a balanced approach to literacy, although there is reasonable consensus as to the main elements. Different models tend to emphasise different elements or use different headings. A broad description is offered by Cowen, 2005, see below.

A Balanced Approach

A balanced reading approach is research-based, assessment-based, comprehensive, integrated, and dynamic, in that it empowers teachers and specialists to respond to the individual assessed literacy needs of children as they relate to their appropriate instructional developmental levels of decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, motivation and socio-cultural acquisition, with the purpose of learning to read for meaning, understanding and joy.
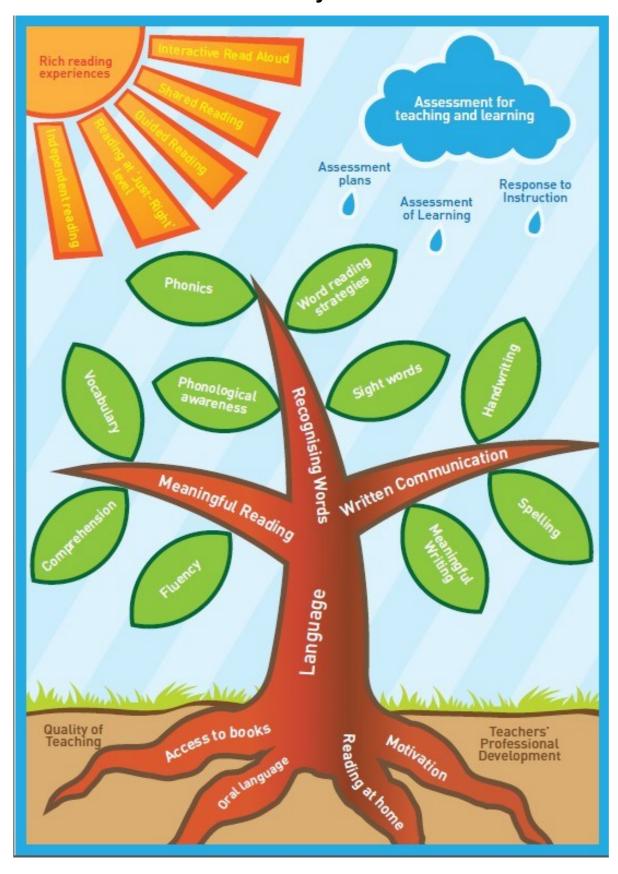
Cowen, 2005, p10

2.5 A Framework for the Balanced Approach- Introducing the Literacy Tree

The framework presented here, draws on various models. Of particular importance is The Primary Language Curriculum, which outlines three main strands:

- Oral language
- Reading
- Writing

This NEPS resource focuses particularly on the reading and writing strands. Our model of reading uses the analogy of a tree- an organic, developmental and flourishing organism.
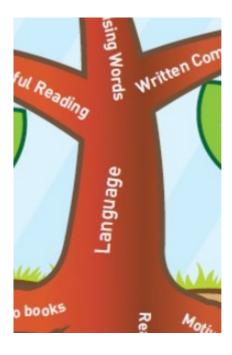
The Literacy Tree

The Literacy Tree

Rich reading experiences
- Interactive Read Aloud
- Shared Reading
- Guided Reading
- Reading at 'Just-Right' level
- Independent reading

Assessment for teaching and learning
- Assessment plans
- Assessment of Learning
- Response to Instruction

Leaves:
- Phonics
- Word reading strategies
- Vocabulary
- Phonological awareness
- Sight words
- Handwriting
- Comprehension
- Fluency
- Meaningful Writing
- Spelling

Branches:
- Meaningful Reading
- Recognising Words
- Written Communication

Trunk: Language

Roots / soil:
- Quality of Teaching
- Access to books
- Oral language
- Reading at home
- Motivation
- Teachers' Professional Development

[Click here to hear Siobhan O'Donoghue, Reading Recovery Specialist (PDST) talking about the structure of the Literacy Tree.](#)
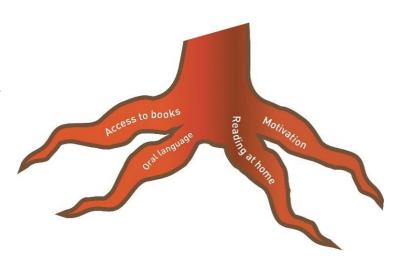
Broadly, we see language as being at the core of reading - it is the trunk of the tree. Reading and writing are essentially language skills. The language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing are in a reciprocal relationship.

In order for the tree to grow well, it needs healthy roots. These roots need to be present before reading begins, and to continue to develop and grow as reading develops. These are the **Essentials for Reading** and they are represented as the roots of the tree:

Essentials for Reading

- [Access to books](#)
- [Oral language experiences](#)
- [Reading at home](#)
- [Motivation](#)

Growing from this language trunk are three strong branches, which represent the skills of reading:
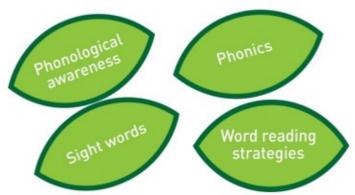

Recognising Words

Written communication

Meaningful Reading

Each branch has many leaves or subskills- the **Recognising Words** branch has the following leaves:
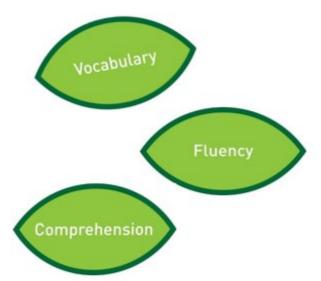
- [Phonological awareness]
- [Phonics]
- [Sight words]
- [Word reading strategies]

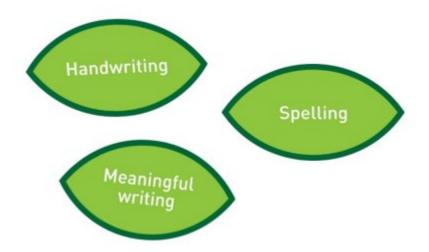The **Meaningful Reading** Branch has the following leaves:

- [Vocabulary]
- [Fluency] (repeated and guided reading)
- [Comprehension]

The **Written Communication** branch has the following leaves:

- [Handwriting]
- [Spelling]
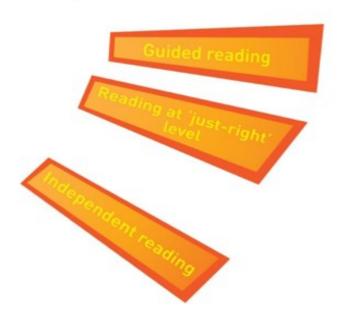- [Meaningful writing]

There are further elements needed for a tree to grow: sunshine, rain and good soil.

The tree needs sunshine, identified here as **Rich Reading Experiences,** which include:

- Interactive read aloud
- Shared reading
- Guided reading
- Reading at the just-right level
- Independent reading

The rain that helps the tree to flourish represents **Assessment for Teaching and Learning**. The rain drops make up the elements of assessment:

- Assessment Plans
- Response to Instruction
- Assessment of Learning

The section of assessment of learning incorporates the progression continua for reading and writing, as set out in the Primary Language Curriculum and references the relevant progression milestones and progression steps.

Finally, the reading tree will do best when grounded in soil which is rich in nutrients. The soil represents **Teaching**:

- Quality of teaching
- Professional Development

2.6 How much time for each element?

The weighted importance of each part of the framework will depend of the needs of the children. Children for whom English is an additional language may need greater emphasis on vocabulary building and oral language. Some children may have a need for more intensive work on phonics. Assessment for Learning is crucial to decisions about how best to use teaching and learning time. Please see Section 8.

2.6.1 How much time for literacy?

On the matter of how much time should be dedicated to literacy activities, the advice is clear, that the more time dedicated to teaching literacy, the better the outcomes for children. Many experts suggest that, in the early years, children should be offered 90 minutes of literacy tuition per day (Kennedy et al, 2012, Shanahan, 2008). This is best presented in three 30 minute sessions, with each session offering a variety of activities. Circular 0056/2011 set out the initial steps to be taken in primary schools in the implementation of the national literacy and numeracy strategy. The requirement from January 2012 is that primary schools will increase the teaching time devoted to literacy in the first language of the school, by one hour overall per week, so that children in infant classes (with a shorter school day) will be offered 6.5 hours per week for language development (equal to 78 minutes per day).

There is good evidence that frequent teaching and distributed practice is beneficial (see Solity, 2000 and Solity, Deavers, Kerfoot, Crane and Cannon, 2000). Distributed practice means that practice of emerging skills is distributed throughout the day, rather than focused on one period of time. For example, if teaching a new letter sound, frequent practice (three times per day for 3 minutes), will be more effective than spending 10 minutes on that sound once in the day.

2.7 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy refers to the skills, knowledge and understanding required to access, use and produce multimodal texts that are disseminated through electronic media, such as computers, consoles, mobile phones and touch screen technologies. This is sometimes referred to as 'new literacy' or 'literacy for the digital age'. The specific skills associated with this form of literacy deserve separate consideration and do not form part of this resource.
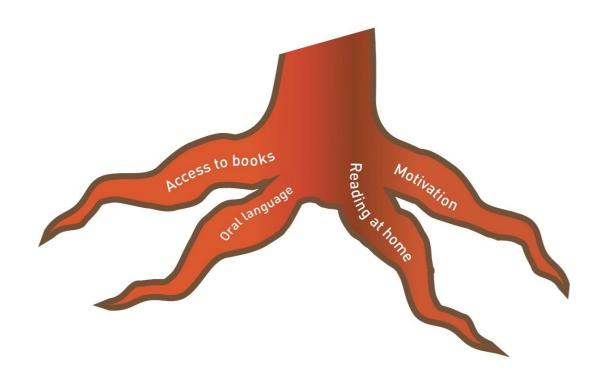
Section 3- Essentials for Reading

Access to books, oral language experiences, reading at home, motivation

The essentials for reading are at the roots of the literacy tree**.**

3.1 Access to books

Research supports the common-sense view that children who have more books in the home will read more. Unfortunately, often children from disadvantaged backgrounds have restricted access to high quality reading material. Neuman and Celano, 2001 found the children from middle class backgrounds are likely to be deluged with a variety of reading materials, while children from economically disadvantaged communities often have to persistently seek out books.

Schools play a critical role in helping to level the playing field in terms of access to good quality books. Enriching the print environment in infant classes will result in more use of books by children in free time. Children will benefit most when books are "on-display" and physically accessible. Infants will especially enjoy going to the library corner and picking up and "reading" books that they have familiarity with through teacher or parent readings. It is also important that the children are allowed to borrow books to take home.

Therefore schools (and DEIS schools in particular) need to:

- Have a classroom library with at least 15 books per child.
- Have a well-stocked school library (with adults available to match children to suitable texts).
- Have libraries stocked with popular books that attract children (e.g. The Gruffalo).
- Continuously update stock.
- Encourage active participation in the community library.

Libraries are integral partners in any family literacy programme. Parents need be to constant providers of books for children, from the picture book for a toddler to the latest mystery from Anthony Horowitz for an older child.

3.1.2 Selection of Texts

It is very important to give children exposure to different genres of text. There is a tendency for teachers of young children to allow narrative stories dominate over all other material. A survey of preschool settings in the US showed that information texts make up only 10-15% of material read aloud in early childhood classrooms (Yopp and Yopp, 2000). Children with limited exposure to informational text will be disadvantaged, when they are required to read this type of material.

High quality, non-fiction texts will provide children with;

• Background knowledge on various subjects: dinosaurs, trucks, insects, etc.

• Specialised vocabulary

• Examples of sequences or steps, e.g. from tadpole to frog etc.

• Opportunities to compare and contrast

• An introduction to cause and effect

Click here to see a list of the top 100 picture books for younger children.

http://blogs.slj.com/afuse8production/2012/07/07/top-100-chapter-book-poll-results/

Click here to see a Professional Learning Community discussing access to texts, including non-fiction, in St Tola's National School.

3.1.3 Concepts of print

Children need to know what books are and how they work. Some children come to school with a good knowledge of books, while others need to be taught key concepts, such as:

- Know a book is for reading
- Recognise the front, back, top and bottom of a book
- Know how to turn the pages of a book properly
- Understand the difference between print and pictures
- Know where a person begins reading on a page
- Understand basic concepts such as letter, word, top of the page
- Understand what simple punctuation means
- Understand the terms 'title', 'author' and 'illustrator'

(Adapted from Morrow, L., Freitag, E., and Gambrell, L.B., 2009)

Click here to see children being introduced to concepts of print using a shared Big Book approach in Bansha National School.

3.2 Oral Language Experiences

Oral language is the foundation of learning to read and write. Speaking and listening skills learned in the preschool and infant classes are crucial to future reading and writing achievement and school success. Children who do not develop strong oral language skills during this time find it difficult to keep pace with their peers in later years.

Roskos, Tabors, and Lenhart, 2004.

Research shows that academic advantages in reading have a stronger correlation with children's language skill than their general cognitive ability (National Early Literacy Panel, 2004; National Institute of Child Health and Human Services, 2000).

Children will arrive to Junior Infant classes with huge variations in their language development. We know that vocabulary is learned gradually over many encounters with a new word again and again (Stahl, 2003). However, the enduring challenge is that many children do not have access to talk-rich homes that promote language development. Hart and Risely's, 1995, seminal work highlighted that many households expose children to a limited number of vocabulary words and there are reduced opportunities for conversations. They found that privileged families engaged in about five times as many conversations with their children and used more extensive vocabulary in these conversations compared with experiences in disadvantaged homes.

This is supported by data collated in a cluster of DEIS schools in 2012. This showed that many of the children entering Junior Infants had language and vocabulary development that was significantly lower than the national average (more than a full standard deviation). Poorly developed vocabulary levels are one of the major obstacles to overall literacy achievement. *For children with too little exposure to and development of oral language, learning to read and write is very hard* (Roskos, Tabors and Lenhart, 2004). Children from families whose parents are learning English for the first time may face additional challenges.

In addressing these language difficulties, teachers may find it helpful to consider the following: However seductive an off-the-shelf language programme may seem, schools should strive towards creating "authentic, contextualised language experiences in classrooms" (Kirkland and Patterson, 2005). To be effective the oral language teaching must be planned coherently alongside all of the components within the balanced early literacy approach. For further detail about oral language development, see the Primary Language Curriculum.

Within the Primary Language Curriculum, the elements of language learning across the three stands of oral language, reading and writing are:

- Developing communicative relationships through language

- Understanding the content and structure of language

- Exploring and using language

Infant teachers need to be **planful, purposeful** and **playful** in their daily interaction with young children (Assel, Landry, Swank, and Gunnewig, 2007). Teachers need to assess where children are and use this information to plan and adjust instruction to meet their children's needs. The Primary Language Curriculum supports this assessment process, as each element has a related set of learning outcomes. The learning outcomes and progression continuum for oral language provide important reference points for teachers to plan for, and make judgements about children's language learning, and to decide on the next steps in teaching and learning to support progress.

Activity time, when children play or work alongside an adult, is an important opportunity for conversation, discussion and role play. As stated in the Primary Language Curriculum, '*The teacher plays a critical role in organizing and providing a rich language-learning environment for children: modelling language, observing and tuning in to children's language and literacy across a range of experiences and activities with different text genres.*' (p101).

In addition to purposeful dialogue with adults and other children, several specific instructional approaches can be used to help children explore, learn, and use oral language. In section 8, the importance of reading aloud in an interactive way is discussed in some detail. Besides this important approach to developing oral language skills, the following specific approaches are recommended:

• Dramatic play
• Storytelling
• Circle time

3.2.1 Dramatic play

Considerable research demonstrates the positive relationships between play and oral language development (Johnson et al, 2005). There is a consistent relationship between the language children use during play and long-term language growth (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001).

The elements of dramatic play for children at this stage typically involve:

- Creating an imaginary situation
- Using props/ toys in a symbolic way
- Using language to enact a play
- Taking on explicit roles
- Persist at the play (for 20 minutes or more)

(Adapted from Roskos, Tabors and Lenhart, 2004)

Teachers can intentionally link dramatic play to their story book reading and circle time themes. Teachers and SNAs can introduce new vocabulary or model roles during play. After play, the children (in pairs or small groups) can talk about their play and connect it to the learning themes. For example the children might talk about the different roles they played in the "post office" and say the special words (stamp, letter, postman, post-box, counter).

Areas of the room can be devoted to conversation and dramatic play centres where pupils can engage in rich, meaningful conversation. Various costumes and other real-life props will enhance language development.

3.2.2 Circle-time/ Round Robin Approaches

Circle time in this instance, refers to a widely used practice where the teacher invites children to contribute to discussion in a round robin forum. It is easy to take for granted the very important benefits of circle time for developing oral language skills.

The "Day's Plan" is a well- known language activity where the teacher introduces the day's schedule. This is an opportunity for the teachers to discuss new (or consolidate recently introduced) themed vocabulary.

The "News of the Day" is another well- established oral language activity. It provides a window for teachers to introduce rich vocabulary and for children to share personal experiences. The children practice everyday language, times of the year, weather, and comment on special days in their family's lives. The children benefit most when there is a familiar and consistent routine for circle time.

3.2.3 Storytelling

Storytelling is considered a best practice for developing listening and speaking skills in young children (Roskos et al, 2004)

Story-telling is an important context for developing oral expression skills. It begins with the teacher selecting appropriate stories (Gingerbread Man, Goldilocks) to model initially. The stories should be age-appropriate, have a clear and logical story line/plot, and have memorable characters (Brenerman and Brenerman, 1982).

When the teacher has modelled telling a number of stories they can begin guiding the children to tell their own stories. It follows the gradual release of responsibility: the teacher models good storytelling, guides the children and supports them in their own storytelling. It helps develop the children's ability to sequence a narrative and give the *who, what, when* and *where* of an experience.

Click here to access a link to the PDST website, showing the use of "conversations corners" in classrooms, which is a more individualised approach to language development.

3.3 Reading at home

> *When families provide a rich literacy environment at home, teaching reading and writing becomes easier for both the teacher and the child at school.*
>
> Morrow, 2009.

To prepare children for reading success in the early years, it is important that they are exposed to high-quality language and literacy environments in homes, child-minders, crèches and pre-schools.

The majority of parents are very enthusiastic about helping their children to learn to read and write. In those schools where children achieve high standards of literacy, parents are seen as key partners. Reading aloud to a child has an indisputably positive influence on literacy development. When a parent interacts with their child during picture book reading, they explain vocabulary, provide information, explain new concepts and develop their language ability, (Morrow, 1987).

[Click here to see Maire O'Sullivan (Home School, Community Liaison Teacher) talk about the benefits of reading at home and a book sharing initiative in Limerick.](#)

Children who learn to read easily, tend to come from homes where they are read to regularly from a very young age. Conversely, children who struggle with reading often have:

- Less access to books
- Only limited conversations with adults
- Very few stories read to them
- Little or no exposure to rhymes and songs
- Observed adults with poor experiences of reading and writing

These children will often struggle to acquire early literacy skills and may never close the gap on their more advantaged peers. Early school and pre-school settings can intentionally intervene to improve early literacy development.

There are a number of ways schools can provide guidance on language and literacy development for young readers.

- Have workshops/information sessions on different aspects of language and literacy development.
- Provide pamphlets on the dos and don'ts of reading to children.
- Provide lists of great books to share with children of different ages.
- Encourage families to join their local libraries.
- Organise summer reading challenges.

Good Practice in Action- Limerick Book Sharing Initiative

This book sharing initiative was a partnership between Limerick's Granary Library and a group of DEIS schools in Limerick City. The schools and preschools in this clip have been provided with a large number of high quality picture books on a medium term loan.

The choice of book titles has been inspired by the Bookstart programme. Bookstart is a UK national programme that encourages all parents and carers to enjoy books with children from as early an age as possible. Some of the books selected are rich in rhyming and alliteration and are ideal for beginning phonological/phonemic awareness activities. Others have been selected because they provide a strong sense of narrative.

The initiative begins with sessions for the parents in their local school on the benefits of sharing books with young children. The parents also receive training on effective book sharing approaches for young children. The parents are then encouraged to take books home on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday. At the end of the 12 week initiative the Children's Librarian attends the closing session to share information on joining the local library.

To find out more about Bookstart, follow this link: http://www.bookstart.org.uk/ .

Click here to see a parent interactively reading aloud.

3.4 Motivation

There is good evidence that young children come to school well motivated, eager to learn and believing that they will be able to learn to read. However, there then may follow a clear decline in positive attitudes towards reading over the years of primary schooling. As Tyner, 2009, p19, says, '*Children come to school expecting to learn to read. It is only when we fail to support these readers in meaningful ways that motivation becomes an issue'*. Pressley, 2006, sets out a number of facets of student motivation:

- Reading self-efficacy- believing that one can read well
- Reading challenge- having access to books that challenge
- Reading interest- having books of interest to the reader
- Reading fun- having texts that are intrinsically enjoyable
- Reading choice- having the ability to select reading material
- Importance of reading- feeling that reading is a valued and important skill
- Reader recognition- being acknowledged as a 'good reader'
- Socially meaningful reading- being able to read and discuss books with family and friends

One theme that runs across a number of the points above, is the importance of the availability of suitable books. As Tyner, 2009, p19, notes*, 'An overlooked yet critical motivator is giving books that they can read successfully. Students who are routinely given books to read at frustration level will soon lose motivation. Children get excited about reading when they are surrounded by a variety of books to explore, read, and enjoy.'*

A further theme is the importance of literacy activities being meaningful and embedded in real experiences. Children became better readers when they were motivated by: seeing the benefits and purpose of reading, being able to collaborate with peers and learning comprehension skills in meaningful contexts (IES report, 2010).

There are also factors which can de-motivate readers, such as books that are not of interest, or books that are not challenging enough (or indeed, too challenging). But there are less obvious de-motivators, such as competition in reading and literacy tasks, which results in de-motivation for those who perceive themselves to be failing and the use of extrinsic rewards for those who would have been naturally motivated.

Teachers and parents can encourage motivation by the following practices:
- Ensure reading success.
- Offer support and scaffold learning.
- Encourage students to attribute their success and failures to effort, rather than innate ability.
- Teach children that failure is a natural part of learning.
- Encourage co-operation and interaction in literacy tasks.
- Make certain children have access to a wide range of books that are interesting and challenging.
- Allow children choice in which books/ texts they read.
- Integrate literacy tasks with content learning.
- Offer frequent encouragement and praise.

[Click here to see the use of motivating books in engaging young learners.](#)

3.4.1 Using positive declarations

McKay, 2006, noted that motivation and literacy success can be enhanced by the frequent use of positive declarations with young children. His 10 week study focused on changing attitudes and values towards reading. The intervention, which required no extra cost and took only a few minutes each day, lead to significant gains in reading skills, with gains of approximately one year in reading accuracy scores. See Figure 1 below, which shows the difference in scores achieved by the experimental (positive declarations) group and the control group. Additionally, McKay, 2006, p142, reported, *Qualitative feedback from teachers, parents and pupils also reported improved attitude, higher confidence levels and more reading taking place at home, with teachers indicating a "dramatic" change*.
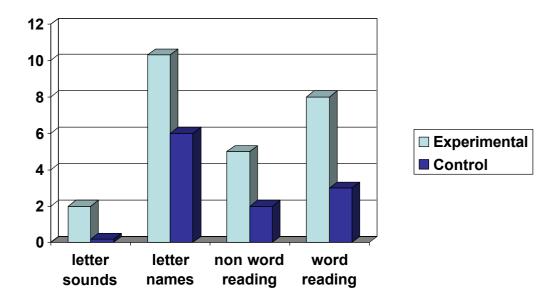

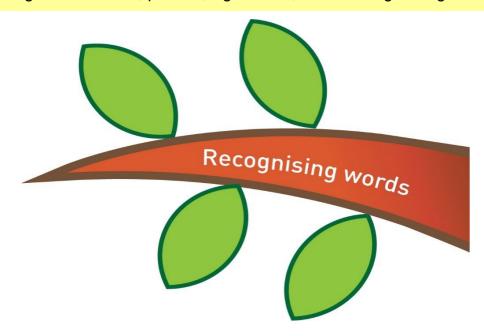**Figure 1. Early reading skills outcomes, post-intervention**

The technique used was relatively simple: Staff were trained to help pupils make declarations about their future reading achievement, and this was implemented daily. Children were encouraged to repeat phrases such as, *I will become a very good reader; I like books- books are fun.* They were also encouraged to generate their own positive statements. In some cases, props, such as puppets were used to support the work.

Click here to see affirmations in practice in Glor na Mara, National School, Tramore.

4. Introduction to word reading

There are several approaches that readers use to read words. All require some knowledge of the alphabetic system. While each approach is different, more skilled readers can combine a number of approaches. Here we introduce four key elements in learning to recognise words:

1. **Phonological awareness**
2. **Phonics** (or alphabetic knowledge)
3. **Sight words** or recalling words from memory
4. **Word Reading Strategies**: (Using analogy, context and semantics, with letter-sound cues).

All these skills should be taught within the context of a broad and balanced early literacy programme that includes oral language development, comprehension and writing skills.

Click below to see 3 clips of a single teaching session. This lesson demonstrates how to integrate these literacy strands within a balanced lesson.

Part I- positive declarations, reading fluency, shared reading, children reading text at the just-right level

Part II- explicit phonics instruction, phonemic awareness, development of synthetic phonics, early spelling, Elkonin boxes, sentence cut-up

Part III- guided reading, picture walk, questions checking comprehension, word and sentence level work, context and letter-sound reading strategies, paired reading, independent reading, positive declarations

4.1 Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is a continuum of awareness of the <u>sounds</u> of speech, ranging from the ability to discriminate different words in a sentence, to the ability to separate out different sounds within a spoken word.

Phonological awareness encompasses larger units of sound, whereas *phonemic awareness* stems from this concept, but refers to the smallest units of sound at the level of letter sounds such as /b/, /sh/ etc. (IRA, 1998)

As set out in the Primary Language curriculum, phonological awareness is a broad concept, which includes:

- word discrimination
- rhyming skills
- syllable awareness
- phonemic awareness
- phonemic segmenting and blending
- phonemic manipulation

Click here to see Siobhan O'Donoghue, Reading Recovery Specialist (PDST), talking about phonological and phonemic awareness.

As with any component of language competency, some children will have more natural phonemic ability than others. However, even the most able pupils will need explicit instruction particularly in the higher levels of phonemic awareness. The children with the least developed awareness will need the most intensive teaching. Without this their decoding and spelling will be compromised as they progress through school.

The National Reading Panel (2000) supports the teaching of phonemic awareness alongside the ability to recognise written letters. The NRP has shown that phonemic awareness instruction is more effective when it was taught with letters, thereby linking the knowledge of sounds with the visual symbol of the letter (grapheme)." (NICHD, 2001b, p. 2-33)

Click here to see children in St Michael's Infant school, Limerick, developing their phonemic abilities.

Table 2. Progressive Levels of Phonological Awareness

Skill	Example
Word discrimination Children who are just beginning to discriminate words within sentences.	Can hear that *fat* and *dog* are separate words in the sentence, *The man has a fat dog.*
Rhyme recognition Children can distinguish rhyming words in nursery rhymes, songs and books.	Can identify that *hill* rhymes with *Jill,* when hearing or reading the nursery rhyme, Jack and Jill.
Syllable awareness Children who are aware of syllables in words. Every syllable has to have a vowel sound/s.	Can say the syllables in the word *turtle, tur…tle.* Can *c*lap out the syllables in the word caravan, *car…a…van.*
Phonemic awareness Children are becoming aware of individual phonemes at the beginning, middle, and end of words.	Can hear that *fat*, is made with a /f/ sound at the beginning, that /t/ is at the end and that the middle sound is the /a/ sound.
Phonemic segmenting and blending Children can both segment and blend phonemes (these skills are often challenging for young children).	Can tackle words and break them into component sounds (segmenting) AND can put sounds together (blending) to make words.
Phonemic manipulation The most able children can manipulate phonemes in and out of words, adding, deleting or even substituting phonemes to make new words.	Knows that the word *shop* has three phonemes /sh/, /o/, /p/. Can change the /sh/ with /ch/ to create a new word, *chop.*

4.1.2 Teaching phonemic awareness in five steps

1. Provide young children with ample rhyming text so that they will have opportunities to explore sounds. Children who come from homes and pre-schools where they have exposure to rhyming books will have a great start.

2. The next important stage is to teach children to recognise the constituent sounds in a spoken word. This involves teaching children to correctly shape their mouths to produce individual sounds. It also involves children having to attend to the similarities and differences in beginning sounds, medial sounds and in ending sounds.

3. Teach children to blend isolated sounds into whole words. Teaching opportunities should be provided for children to blend by syllable (e.g. /car/ /pet/) then onset /rime (e.g. /b/ /at/) and finally individual phonemes (e.g./c/ /a/ /r/). Link blending of phonemes with the visual representation of letters.

4. Teach children to hear a word and break it down into its individual sounds. Children will need opportunities to break sentences into words, words into syllables, words into onset and rime and finally words into constituent sounds. A typical lesson would involve children placing pennies into Elkonin boxes as they stretch a word. Phonemic segmenting lessons should always be linked to phonics, so that children learn the link between sounds and written letters, for example, the children could replace the pennies with magnetic letters in the next part of the lesson.

Working with Elkonin boxes

5. Finally, teach the most advanced level of phonemic awareness which is manipulating phonemes in and out of words. It involves:

adding a phoneme /p/ + /late/ = plate.

subtracting a phoneme /late/ - /l/ = ate

swapping a phoneme /l/ate = /m/ate

[Click here to see an example of a phonemic awareness assessment schedule from the SESS](#)

This phonemic awareness assessment schedule relates to the learning outcomes set out for the reading strand at Stage 1 and 2, within the Primary Language Curriculum.

4.2. Phonics (alphabetic knowledge)

Phonics is the knowledge that a particular letter (grapheme) or pattern of letters represents a sound (phoneme). This knowledge can be used by a child to read and spell words. Knowledge of the letter-sound system is essential for learning to read in English.

Good phonics instruction achieves the following:

- Teaches children that letters in words represent specific sounds
- Develops phonological awareness
- Teaches automatic recognition of the form of each letter
- Involves a great deal of practice in reading words
- Results in automatic word recognition
- Is only one part of reading instruction (Pressley, 2006, p180)

If an activity can be conducted with the lights off, it is phonological awareness because it is auditory only; if an activity requires the light to be on, then it is phonics, as phonics involves seeing letters.

Beck and Beck, 2013.

4.2.1 Assessment and teaching of phonics

Every child needs to be taught phonics systematically. Teach all the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences in a clearly defined sequence (*see link to list of grapheme-phoneme correspondences*). *Click here for consonant sounds* and *here for vowel sounds*). Provide ample opportunities to practice the phonics they are learning in real books. A child needs opportunities to read books that contain the letter-sound patterns that they are currently learning. This way they are using their knowledge and generalising their skills with meaningful texts.

Assessment and monitoring of phonics acquisition should occur frequently. Use observation and more formal assessment such as checklists e.g. if you have taught the sounds /s/ /a/ /t/ /p/ /i/ /n/ check whether the child knows those letters. It is useful to have a checklist based on the phonics taught and to check whether the child knows the letter sounds taught. It is important to see if the child can apply and generalise their ability to decode nonsense words. The Primary Language Curriculum sets out a progression continuum for reading, with progression milestones from a to h and these milestones include reference to phonic skills. Further support materials are available through the related NCCA toolkit.

If children are not achieving learning outcomes then the pacing of their learning programme should be adjusted and differentiated to reflect their progress. Letter combinations or phonic facts that prove difficult for some children need to be revisited often, until the child no longer needs guidance.

Commercial programmes are available for the teaching of phonics. These generally teach children letter sounds and teach them how to blend and segment these into real words. While a commercial phonics programme is not necessary, it has the advantage of providing a framework for teaching and materials to reinforce learning. They also often provide checklists for teachers to monitor student progress. Unpublished evidence collected from Limerick schools as well as international research (Mackay, 2007) have had very positive results from using the Jolly Phonics programme. The NNCA toolkit also contains support material for teachers and examples of pupils' work to inform teaching and learning.

Effective phonics programmes are:

1. Part of a balanced framework
2. Evidence based/ research validated
3. Implemented with fidelity/ applied consistently
4. Monitored and reviewed

It is important that there are opportunities to meet the needs of individual children through differentiation and pacing of the programme. This is particularly relevant to children with short-term auditory memory difficulties who may benefit from increased multi-sensory instruction. (Fautsch-Patridge, McMaster, and Hupp, 2011).

4.2.2 Synthetic and Analytic Phonics

There are a number of different approaches to teaching phonics. For example, the National Reading Panel (2000) cites the following: synthetic, analytic, spelling-based and embedded approaches. This document does not intend to discuss each approach in detail. However, there is a longstanding discussion in the research literature regarding **synthetic and analytical phonics**, and which approach is superior. Synthetic phonics emphasises a part-to-whole letter approach, letter by letter phonological decoding in which the child learns to sound and blend the sequential letter sounds. Sounds are learned in isolation and when reading the child is instructed to blend the sounds together from left to right, across the whole word. (/c/a/t/)

In analytic phonics the sounds are not learned in isolation but a phonic element is identified from a set of words in which each word contains the particular sound to be studied (*How are these words alike? Mat, fat, bat, rat*). This is a whole-to-part approach. The analytic method includes teaching children to compare and contrast known words in order to induce pattern knowledge that can transfer to reading new words (Morris, 2015). The following teaching strategies may be useful to use when teaching analytical phonics:

- Teaching word chunks in beginning reading, particularly in guided reading
- Teach word families when decoding words
- Teach word endings, staring the most commonly occurring endings first

The synthetic approach tends to emphasise the segmenting and blending of sounds while the analytical approach tends to start with the whole word and break it down.

The research evidence for which type of phonics teaching is superior is simply insufficient to provide a definitive basis for choosing between 'analytic' or 'synthetic' phonics. There is evidence that some students learn to read best through a synthetic phonics approach, while others rely more on a decoding-by-analogy approach (Berninger, Yates and Lester, 1991, Freebody and Byrne, 1988 cited in Pressley, 2006). It makes sense therefore for beginning reading instruction to encourage both approaches to teaching reading; analysing and blending individual sounds, while also using words parts during decoding (Pressley, 2006).

It is critical, however that whatever phonic approach is adopted by the school, that it is taught in a **systematic** way

Morris (2015) states that, '*Both analytic and synthetic methods should be systematic in nature, ensuring mastery at one conceptual level before proceeding to the next level. Furthermore, either phonics approach, if it is to fulfil its purpose (i.e., automatic recognition of basic spelling), will require help in the form of copious amounts of contextual reading at the appropriate difficulty level*'.

Teaching Phonics to Deaf Children

While phonics is generally accepted (and supported by research) as an important key skill in learning to read and write for the majority of hearing children, it is advisable to teach to a child's strengths and so understandably, over the years, many teachers (including Teachers of the Deaf) have thought that phonics, with its obvious emphasis on listening for and hearing sounds in words, inappropriate for deaf children. However, the earlier detection of deafness (especially through the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme), cochlear implants and improved hearing technology makes it much more realistic and important to develop ways to ensure the effective teaching of phonics <u>to most deaf children</u>. Teachers have found the following SESS seminar useful.

http://www.sess.ie/deafness-introduction-primary-and-post-primary-11

Additionally, the National Deaf Children's Society in the UK have developed a teacher guide and a separate parent guide to the teaching of phonics to deaf children. These guides can be accessed through the link below:

http://www.ndcs.org.uk/family_support/education_for_deaf_children/education_during_school_years/teaching_phonics_to.html

4.2.3 A systematic, structured, sequenced, approach to teaching phonics

As noted by Morris (2015) above, an important feature of high quality phonic work is that it should be systematic: this means teaching phonics in a clearly defined sequence. The following pages outline one example of a developmental, staged approach to the teaching of phonics.

Stage 1

At this stage, the focus is on speaking and listening in order to prepare the ground for effective phonics instruction. Children at this stage become increasingly proficient in discriminating, identifying, distinguishing and articulating different sounds and phonemes (see phonological awareness in section 4.1). They become increasingly aware of the relationship between sounds, letters and words and are introduced to a broad range of rhymes and songs with rhythmic patterns. Encourage children to:

- Listen to stories and songs and join in by repeating patterns of words and refrains
- Listen to rhymes and take part in games to notice alliteration
- Notice sounds in names and words in the environment e.g. children's names or items in a shopping bag
- Discriminate between sounds, recognise initial phonemes and have increased awareness of sounds, letter and words

Stage 2

In this stage, teaching focuses on grapheme-phoneme correspondences for a small selection of common consonants and vowels (one example widely used is (/s/a/t/). Children need to learn how to blend these together to read simple CVC words and how to segment them for spelling words. Children grow in confidence in recognising graphemes taught and make connections with the phonemes they represent. They begin to use their knowledge of the phoneme to blend simple CVC words, moving from left to right. They recognise an increasing number of grapheme-phonemes in reading and spelling and they

apply this knowledge when reading and writing new and unfamiliar words. Encourage children to:

- Apply their developing knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences to blend simple CVC words
- Apply their phonic knowledge <u>in texts </u>that contain the letter-sound correspondences already taught and through the use of games
- Write simple CVC words as captions and messages

Stage 3

At this stage the focus is on all 44 phonemes with their most common graphemes including digraphs and double letters. Children at this stage recognise that the process of segmenting words into their individual phonemes is the reverse process of blending and enables them to spell words. As the 44 phonemes and their grapheme correspondences are learned, children read an increasing number of words and show an increasing interest in using their new knowledge to attempt to read and write new words. Encourage children to:

- Play games and activities to match sounds to graphemes
- Apply phonic knowledge to reading simple texts
- Read and write simple CVC words through guided writing activities

Stage 4

Children need to focus on the skills of blending and segmenting words containing adjacent consonants. Children at this stage can read and spell an increasing number of new words moving beyond CVC words (e.g. pin) to reading CVCC words (e.g. pins) and CCVC words (e.g. spin) and CCVCC words (e.g. spins) and in due course CCCVC words (e.g. split). Encourage children to:

- Blend and segment phonemes in longer words and apply these skills in reading and writing
- Engage in paired writing using small whiteboards, selecting magnetic letters to build more complex words (e.g. from 'a', to 'an', to 'and', to 'sand', to 'stand')

- Engage in shared and guided reading and writing so they can apply their increasing phonic knowledge and skills

Stage 5

In this stage the focus is on long vowel phonemes and the different grapheme correspondences (such as /oe/ /o-e/ /o/ /oa/ /ow/). Graphemes that can be pronounced in different ways will be explored (e.g. /c/ in coat and city). Children at this stage can read and spell a range of simple and complex words, applying their knowledge of graphemes to make phonically plausible attempts at more complex words.

- Encourage children to blend and segment long vowel phonemes.
- Encourage children to recognise and accurately use long vowel phonemes in longer and more complex words.
- Encourage children to apply these skills in reading and writing activities.
- Encourage children to tackle reading and writing words of more than one syllable.
- Teach some tricky words.
- Shared and guided reading and writing reinforce the use of phonic knowledge to read and write unfamiliar words.

Stage 6

Teaching will focus on less common grapheme-phoneme correspondences (e.g. /s/ in vision and as pronounced /zh/). Students are supported in continually developing and applying their phonic knowledge and skills in discrete phonics teaching as well as in shared, guided and independent reading. Students widen their knowledge of word families and recognise phonic irregularities. They develop an understanding of different spelling patterns.

Adapted from (http://www.teachfind.com/)

4.3 Sight Words

Children need to acquire a mental bank of words that they know automatically by sight. This means a child recognises a word as a whole rather than having to decode it sound by sound. Some words are less amenable than others to phonic analysis and so children benefit from being taught to learn these as sight words e.g. /said/, /does/. The more frequently a child reads a word the more likely the word will be retained in long-term memory. Therefore children benefit from both reading and reviewing target sight words and meeting these words though levelled readers. When words can be read automatically by sight there is a freeing up of short-term memory capacity for other activities such as comprehension. Of course, a child will be more likely to learn a sight word if it is in their oral vocabulary.

4.3.1 Teaching and assessing sight words

High quality reading schemes focus on the most frequently occurring words in the English language. The first 100 most frequently occurring words from the

Dolch list make up approximately half of the words a young child is likely to meet. Focus on just a few sight words each week. Display sight words on word walls around the room. Use word banks/boxes for students to keep words they have mastered and words they need to learn. To teach a word try the following approach.

- Present the first word on a flashcard/whiteboard.
- Draw attention to the initial and final sound of the word, if it is a sound they already know.
- Look at the tall letters and letters with a tail and draw a shape around the word.
- Look for familiar words or commonly occurring letter patterns in the word e.g. -ay, -ight, -ing.
- Ask the child to put the word into an oral sentence.
- Ask the child to look at the word and say what it is.
- Place the target words on the board and ask the child to point to the word. Practice this step repeatedly.
- After practising this step, point to a word ask the child, "what is this word?"
- Revise these words at multiple points throughout the day and include them for homework.
- Provide reading material or texts for the children which contain these words.

Basic sight vocabulary can be checked using a copy of the Dolch/Fry basic sight vocabulary lists (click here) and/or the basic sight vocabulary lists from their levelled readers. Ask the student to read down the list and tick off the words they can read instantly, noting the errors. Repeat this test throughout the year to monitor progress.

4.4 Word Reading Strategies

Another approach to recognising words is to read words by analogy to known words. This approach is often used by children and adults. The key here is that the reader knows a word or word part from previous experience and can apply that knowledge to new words. For example, a child who knows the word *car*, will find that this is helpful when trying to read the word *carpark*. Good readers know and use words parts or chunks to decode unfamiliar words (Pressley, 2006). For example, a child who knows the word *run* and the *ing* pattern, is likely to succeed when reading the word *running*.

There is, of course, considerable overlap between this strategy of reading by analogy and knowledge of both analytic phonics and synthetic phonics. Indeed skilled readers use a range of overlapping strategies when reading and effective teachers draw on all approaches as children develop their skills. Such strategies fit with the learning outcome for the Reading Strand of the Primary Language curriculum; *Use a range of word identification strategies with flexibility and confidence when reading instructional and independent level texts*. (p52).

Click on each part below, to see small group teaching, focusing on creating strategic readers. This clearly illustrates the ways in which readers use a variety of strategies to read new material.

Part 1: Reading Fluency, positive declarations, gradual release of responsibility, creating strategic readers, attacking unknown words, how to cross-check

Part 2: Shared practice of reading strategies, alternative phoneme digraph sounds, linking phonemic awareness to spelling

Part 3: Creating strategic readers, trying alternative vowel sounds, linking phonemic awareness to spelling, segmenting words into individual phonemes, actively sorting words into groups, irregular words

Part 4: Introduction of a new text and to the narrative genre, new and memorable vocabulary

Part 5: Creative readers putting it all together, awareness of sight words, applying strategies in meaningful reading, cross-checking for meaning, flipping the vowel

4.4.1 Using letter cues, context and semantics to decode words

It is important to teach students to pay attention to semantic context and syntactic cues to help them to understand what they read. However, relying **heavily** on semantic cues is a weak strategy and is often the preferred strategy of weak readers (Pressley, 2006). Sometimes children use context or background knowledge and the first one or two letters of the word to help them guess a word, (for example, *The dog was* b...). Good readers who have prior knowledge about dogs will be able to make a good guess that the word is 'barking', without having to even sound out the remainder of the word. If a word does not make sense in the context within which it is read, the good reader tries decoding the word.

Section 5- Meaningful Reading

Vocabulary, comprehension, fluency

5.1 Vocabulary

> *Vocabulary instruction should be an essential component of any reading curriculum.*
>
> Adolf, Perfetti and Catts, 2011.

What is vocabulary?

Vocabulary knowledge is a key indicator of later oral language development as well as proficiency in reading. There are two types of vocabulary; *receptive* and *expressive* and both can be either oral or written.

Receptive vocabulary refers to the bank of words we instantly understand when listening to someone speak or when reading independently. Receptive vocabulary is often called listening vocabulary.

Expressive vocabulary is the bank of words we use to communicate when speaking or writing. Our receptive vocabulary is generally much larger than our expressive vocabulary as we understand a great many more words than we are in the habit of using when speaking and writing (Graves 2006).

Vocabulary is typically linked to language comprehension and knowledge of concepts (Anderson and Freebody, 1985). Knowledge of words is crucial for understanding text and there is a positive association between the extent of a child's vocabulary and his or her comprehension skills. Vocabulary size may also indirectly influence the development of reading abilities through phonological awareness in young children (Adolf et al, 2011).

5.1.2. The teaching and assessment of vocabulary

In the early primary classes, listening and speaking are particularly important for promoting vocabulary growth. Young children will learn new words from discussion, being read to and from having attention directly focused on words (Graves, 2006). A single vocabulary instruction method will not result in optimal learning (NRP, 2000). It is important to use a variety of teaching methods to have a positive impact on vocabulary, such as those listed below:

- Read aloud to students so they learn new words and to ensure new vocabulary is introduced in meaningful contexts. Provide interactive oral reading experiences, where adults read to children, stopping periodically to highlight and discuss individual words and sometimes other aspects of what they are reading (e.g. dialogic book reading, text talk).

- Teach vocabulary both directly (talking about/defining a specific word) and indirectly (the use the word has in meaningful contexts) and provide multiple encounters with new vocabulary.

- Foster word consciousness by encouraging students to notice when they've encountered new words and to notice special characteristics of words e.g. *waterfall* and *waterslide*, both have the word '*water'* in them.

- Have children relate new words to past experiences and to words they already know. For example is a child knows the word *fruit* and the word *apple*, these words can help students to learn the word *kiwi.* If a child knows what it means to *be mad,* that may help them learn *frustrated.*

- Provide high quality books, as wide reading and good quality reading material promotes the growth of vocabulary and other world knowledge.

- Engage students in independent book reading.

- Teach conceptually-related words, for example words related to farms or families, rather than teaching words in isolation.

- Provide content-rich instruction and rich meaningful conversations in the classroom.

- Pre-teach new vocabulary of new texts and teach these in meaningful contexts.

- Teach children the words they most need to know. Consider how useful knowledge of the word would be, how relatable the word is to other words the child knows and how much knowing the word will help with the strand or text at hand.

- Provide lots of repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items.

- Have children involved in active learning of vocabulary. Children learn words they hear frequently and they also learn words for things and events that interest them.

- Use computer technology.

Assessment of vocabulary can help to explain a student's current reading skills and predict future reading achievement. Assessment of vocabulary should be carried out routinely during the school year. Assessing vocabulary can be problematic particularly with younger students.

- Which words should be tested?
- What does it mean to know a word?
- How do you actually test the word?

Again, the starting point for such assessment should be the Primary Language Curriculum and the progression milestones and progression steps in the oral language section are particularly helpful (see pages 64 and 65, referencing the learning outcomes for the acquisition and use of vocabulary).

Informal assessments and formative assessments may provide more information for programme planning and measuring progress, than more formal, standardised approaches. This can be collected throughout the year using multiple measures to determine vocabulary growth. Formative assessment of a student's vocabulary development could include.

- Anecdotal Records – Teacher takes notes during class time as they listen for students to use target vocabulary during class discussions. Most class teachers automatically monitor throughout the day whether children are following class instructions and are using words that have been taught in their everyday speech.
- Informal/formal checklists – Teachers create checklists of vocabulary skills and ask pupils to show them what a word is, e.g. "Show me the huge elephant", or to follow an instruction, "Put the teddy beside the tractor".
- There are a number of assessment tools that provide standardised scores of a child's receptive language skills, for example the British Picture Vocabulary Scale Third Edition (BPVS) and The Bracken Basic Concept Scale, The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Scale 4th Edition.

5.2 Comprehension

> *There is a broad base of agreement that the most important goal of reading education should be to develop readers who can derive meaning from texts.*
>
> Pressley, 2006.

5.2.1 What is comprehension?

Comprehension is about constructing meaning from text or narrative. Good readers make associations to prior knowledge to help make inferences that are needed to understand text. They also know why they are reading a text and are clear about what they want to get from it. Good readers are also sensitive to the structure of the text (Pressley, 2006). When we comprehend, we gain new information that changes our knowledge, which is then available for later comprehension (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, and Billman, 2011).

5.2.2 Teaching comprehension

Here are some practices for fostering and teaching reading comprehension:

- Teach children how to use **reading comprehension strategies** with a gradual release of responsibility by the teacher.

- Teach children to **identify and use the text's organisational structure** to comprehend, learn and remember the content of each text e.g. description, sequence, problem, theme.

- Guide children through **focused, high quality discussion** on the meaning of text with teachers modelling ways to think about the text that can help students when they are reading independently.

- Select texts purposefully to support comprehension development, providing **exposure to a volume and range of texts** (e.g. electronic texts, levelled books, child/teacher work) and genres (narrative genre, informational genre, functional genre e.g. signs and labels) as well as motivating texts and contexts for reading.

- Teachers can use interest surveys or observations of the students to **learn about their interests.** (Shanahan et al, 2010).

Here are some additional practices for fostering reading comprehension:

- Engage children in class discussion to help readers work together to make meaning from the texts they encounter.
- Build vocabulary and language knowledge.
- Integrate reading and writing as they are mutually reinforcing.
- Observe and assess.
- Differentiate instruction by carrying out comprehension instruction in small groups or individually, based on children' need. (Duke et al, 2011).

Comprehension skills and other basic literacy skills develop in tandem rather than in sequence. There is general consensus in the literature that instruction and assessment of comprehension should start from the earliest years (Pressley, 2006) and that comprehension strategies need to be **taught** to children.

5.2.3 Reading Comprehension Strategies
Although there may be slight variation in the terminology used there is some commonality in the literature as to the comprehension strategies that need to be taught to children:

- Activating prior knowledge and making connections
- Predicting/inferring
- Questioning
- Visualisation/constructing mental images
- Monitoring/clarifying or fix-up
- Summarising/synthesizing/retelling
- Evaluation/interpreting

Commercial programmes for teaching comprehension as well as many on-line resources are available. When teaching strategies it is important to remember the following:

- Name the strategy, (use ' cue cards' or hand placements/movements to portray the physical and visual representation of the comprehension processes

listed above).

- Model how to use the strategy.
- Support readers to use the strategy.
- Give readers time to practice the strategy over a number of weeks with gradual withdrawal of support.

5.2.4 Assessment of Comprehension Skills

Reading comprehension tasks should not be confused with reading accuracy. Children need to have some decoding skills and be able to read most of a written text if they are to comprehend it. However, providing more challenging texts to some children may promote higher engagement when a variety of instructional strategies are used (e.g. partner reading, extra support) and/or additional support is provided to those students (Duke et al, 2011).

Readers bring different strengths and weaknesses to the process. Some may have good prior knowledge related to a text that compensates for relatively poor clarifying and fix-up strategies. Other children may have poor prior knowledge of the related text but make up for it by using a variety of strategies (good decoding skills, or use of context) that help them build meaning. Some children may struggle because of word reading and fluency difficulties. Most recent research suggests that reading fluency is associated with adequate levels of reading comprehension (Raskinski and Samuels, 2011). Others may have good reading skills and fluency but relatively poor vocabulary and strategies for constructing meaning.

The learning outcomes and the progression milestones of the Primary Language Curriculum address key areas of comprehension development, and set out the expected levels of achievement for the majority of children. For example, at Stage 1 (typically Junior and Senior Infants) children are expected to achieve the following learning outcome: *Use a range of comprehension strategies to engage with and create meaning when working with a range of text independently or collaboratively.* (p52).

Simple techniques can help the teacher decide whether the child is achieving

such an outcome. All interactions with children can be seen as an opportunity for informal assessment:

- Ask children to summarize or retell, orally or in writing, what they have read or heard.
- Ask children to tell or write their responses to the text.
- Observe their contributions to discussions about the text.

The teacher can then adjust instruction based on assessment of children's progress and set the next progression step to be achieved.

Standardised tests can be used to assess reading and listening comprehension or it can be done more informally.

Click here to see a Professional Learning Community in St Tola's N.S. discuss the assessment of comprehension.

Table 3. Sample Rubric for Assessing Reading Comprehension

Aspect	Score	Criteria	Cross-referenced with Progression Steps, (Primary Language Curriculum), Strand: Reading, Outcomes 8 & 9 Comprehension, (Page 69)
Identify the characters a story by pointing to the picture in the book		Points to the characters in the book when asked, "Show me.. ."	Finds specific objects in stories read to them and responds non-verbally and/ or verbally to simple statements and questions about a main event or character. *Progression step (a)*
Make simple predictions about a familiar story		Can make a realistic prediction of what might happen next.	Predicts the story/ topic based on title. *Progression step (c)* Modifies predictions based on new information... *Progression step (d)*
Answers specific factual questions and information about the story		Can answer the following questions: Who was in the story? What happened in the beginning? At the end? What was the story about?	Asks and answers questions about main events and characters. *Progression step (b)*
Recount the storyline in chronological order		Can retell the story in order.	Retells main points of a story in sequence. *Progression step (c)*
Can infer information from the text		"Why do you think he did that?"	Makes inferences *Progression step (b)* Asks questions, discusses predictions and inferences and clarifies their reasons. *Progression step (e)*
Activate prior knowledge.		Can make connections between background knowledge and text.	Predicts the story/ topic based on title while drawing on their prior knowledge *Progression step (c)* Clarifies their responses and provides justifications, drawing on prior knowledge. *Progression step (f)*
Can pick out the main idea		"What was this story about?"	Begins to determine the importance of information. *Progression step (c)* Recounts orally key points of information. *Progression step (d)*

Scoring might be based on a 1-4 range, with 1 indicating little or no skill in this area, 2 indicating emerging skill, 3 indicating reasonable competence and 4 indicating advanced skills.

5.3 Reading Fluency

Fluency is the critical link between decoding and comprehension (Raskinski and Samuels, 2011).

Reading fluency has two major components that are associated with adequate levels of reading comprehension: *Automaticity in word recognition* and *prosody or expressiveness in oral reading.*

Automaticity in word recognition: When readers are automatic in their ability to read a word, it frees up other cognitive resources for the more important task of comprehension.

Prosody or expressiveness in oral reading: Prosody is reading with expression, using all the variables of timing, phrasing, emphasis and intonation that speakers use to help convey aspects of meaning and to make their speech lively. Readers who read with good oral prosody and text phrasing tend to have better comprehension in silent reading that readers who are less proficient in the use of prosody, (Rasinski and Samuels, 2011).

Although reading rate can be an indicator or measure of one aspect of reading fluency, fast reading may not always be fluent reading. Fluency is best taught by focusing on the development of automatic word recognition within the larger process of comprehension. Automaticity is achieved through guided oral reading approaches such as assisted reading, wide reading and repeated readings. As automaticity improves, reading rate, reading comprehension and overall reading proficiency will also improve (Rasinski and Samuels, 2011). Automaticity of sight word reading will also improve reading fluency. The NCCA, 2012, suggest the following activities to promote and teach fluency in reading:

- Expose children to fluent reading patterns modelled both at home and school.

- Give children opportunities to apply the skills they've learnt (e.g. sight words) to read in real texts.
- Allow children to practice reading developmentally appropriate texts with expression through guided and repeated reading activities.
- Allow children to engage in fluent reading in a variety of texts at both their independent and instructional levels.

For students to become fluent readers and to understand and use prosody they need to hear reading produced by a more fluent reader. In practice this means teachers need to read aloud to students meaningfully and expressively, to model fluency.

5.3.1 Wide Reading

Students also need access to a large and wide amount of reading if they are to become fluent and proficient readers. Wide reading refers to maximising the sheer volume of what a person reads. When we finish reading a book, we usually move on to the next book – and the next and the next.

5.3.2 Repeated or Deep Reading

Repeated Reading is when a child reads the same text over and over again until the reading has no errors. Repeated reading is a powerful tool for developing reading fluency in struggling and developing readers (Rasinski and Samuels, 2011). The benefit of Repeated Reading is that it also promotes appropriate prosody (reading with expression) and helps develop automaticity. Repeated Reading is a method that is useful to use when children have developed some reading skills and can read relatively independently. However, for most younger readers, repeated readings need to be under the guidance of a teacher or coach.

5.3.3 Assisted Reading

Assisted reading is when a text, that a child is unable to read on her own, can be read with the assistance of a more fluent reader who reads alongside. One of the most common forms of assisted reading is choral or group reading. When done with a single more fluent partner, choral reading is known as paired reading. Another approach to assisted reading is having children listen to text on disc, podcast or recordings.

Click here to see an older child helping a younger child with book reading.

5.3.4 Automatic Sight Word Recognition

Teaching children to recognise words automatically or by sight will help improve their reading fluency once it is followed with exposure of new words in real texts. See section 4.3.1

5.3.5 Phrasing Instruction

Rasinski and Samuels, 2011, suggest that the natural unit of reading may not be the word at all, but the phrase, clause or other grouping of words that reflects meaning as it is expressed in a sentence. There are two approaches to phrasing instruction:

1. Have children practice reading short phrases or sentences.
2. Format brief texts for students to read which demonstrates graphically the location of phrase and sentence boundaries when reading; The man stood/ at the top of the hill/ and looked down/ at his dog.

Section 6- Written Communication
Handwriting, spelling, meaningful writing

> *Children need daily instruction and practice in order to develop good writing skills.*
>
> Pressley*, Mohan*, Fingeret, Reffitt, and Raphael-Bogaert, 2007.

It is important to recognise the reciprocal nature of all the components of early literacy development. For example, young children with good phonemic awareness and phonic knowledge will have an obvious advantage of being able to hear constituent sounds and being able to link the sounds with letters. Similarly, children who read lots of books at the 'just-right' level, will have greater exposure to sight-words and letter patterns. Conversely, practice at spelling helps oral reading and reading fluency skills (Vellutineo, Scanlon, Small and Fanuele, 2006).
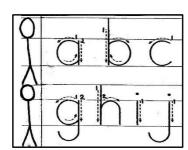
6.1 Handwriting

While, it is important to teach children that writing is a form of meaningful communication, the technical aspects of writing also need to be taught. If a child has underdeveloped fine motor skills, then writing instruction begins with fine-motor skill development such as cutting, colouring, playing with Marla and making patterns. We recommend that these skills be taught in their own discrete planned time, as well as integrating them into the teaching of other aspects of literacy. Information below was sourced from Foundations for Literacy, 2008.

- Teach correct pencil grip - this is important for letter formation and to prevent physical problems with hand and arm later in life (Beringer et al, 2006).
- Encourage children to make patterns using flowing movements.
- Teach letter formation one letter at a time, pointing out similarities to other letters e.g. c, a, d, g.
- Reinforce the formation of the target letter in emergent writing and in phonic lessons.
- Use mantras to help children form letters e.g. when forming the letter **d**, "*around, straight up and straight down".*
- Teach upper and lower case of each letter.
- Teach children to leave spaces between words and to write letters and words on (copy) lines from left to right.
- Use different types of media (paper, show me boards, iPad, whiteboards).

6.2 Spelling

In this section we look at ways to assess young children's spelling ability and research validated approaches to improving it (word study, developing a stock of sight-words, developing a stock of phonograms and encouraging invented spelling).

6.2.1 Assessment of Spelling

To be effective teachers need to have a thorough knowledge of the stages of spelling development. While children vary in the **rate of progress** through the stages of spelling, most will follow the **same order of development**. As the pace of children's progression through the stages varies, children in a class should rarely all be studying the same list of words. (Barnes, 1986) If teachers begin in the same place for all children, '*they can expect frustration or boredom and little learning*', (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston, 2008).

The first step then is to ascertain where a child is on the continuum of spelling development. This can be achieved by:

a) Observing and analysing attempted spellings in class writing activities. The clearest information about a child's spelling development can be

gleaned from their independent writing. An informed analysis of these spellings signposts the knowledgeable teacher to where phonic and spelling instruction should be pitched.

b) In addition, on a regular (termly) basis, teachers should administer a developmental spelling test which provides qualitative information about the child's orthographic knowledge.

This will serve three important functions:

1. It will identify which spelling features a child has and his/ her approximate developmental level in spelling.
2. It will help organise the class into developmental groups.
3. It monitors yearly progress (by use of the same test).

The Primary Spelling Inventory is a suitable assessment for this age group (available as part of the *Words their Way* resource).

6.2.2 The importance of invented spelling

In invented spelling, children use their phonemic knowledge to sound out words into their constituent sounds. Then using their letter-sound knowledge (phonics), they try to "spell" words such as /eenuf/ for *enough* or /wrx/ for *works*. Children should be encouraged and praised for using invented spelling as it has been shown to promote phonic knowledge and conventional spelling (Burns, Griffin and Snow, 1999). This exploration of letter-sound associations through invented spelling facilitates reading acquisition and the development of orthographic skills (the ability to recognise symbols and patterns within words), (Oueletter and Sénéchal, 2008).

Children should be allowed to try to spell words for themselves, and only then, should teachers scaffold a child's attempt and provide them with the correct letters.

[Click here to see children in St Michael's Infant School, Limerick working on invented spellings](#).

The following pictures show the development of a child's spelling and written expression over one academic year.

Figure 2. Development of Spelling over One Year.

6.2.3 Phonograms/ Letter families

In addition to teaching individual letter-sound relationships, emerging spellers should be taught letter patterns, (also called word families or phonograms, e.g. /am/ /at/ /og/). The advantage of patterns is that they are more efficient because children do not have to work out individual letters and sounds. When children are ready, simple phonograms can be taught, starting with the vowel-consonant (VC) pattern. Fountas and Pinnell, 2008, suggest the following order for the teaching of phonograms:

Table 4. Order of Teaching of Phonograms

Teaching sequence	Phonograms to be taught
Initial teaching, VC phonograms	-ad –ag -ed –en –et –ig –og –op –ot -ut
More complex, VC phonograms	-ab –ip –ow -em
VCC phonograms, with double consonants	-all –ell -ill –oll -uff
VVC phonograms, with double vowels	-eed –eek –eel –ook -oon

6.2.4 Teaching frequently used words

As children experiment with invented spelling in early writing and begin to acquire phonograms, they should also be explicitly taught to spell a small but growing repertoire of sight-words. These words should be displayed prominently so that they can be seen frequently by all children (Cunningham and Allington, 1999). Unlike invented spelling, where children's close approximations to the real words are accepted and celebrated, the spelling of sight-words is a conventional skill that is best taught early. One of the most important early literacy goals is for children to be able to automatically spell and read the first 100 most commonly occurring words. Unfortunately many of these 100 sight-words do not follow conventional spelling patterns (e.g. *was, said, does)*. Therefore the words need to be taught at the whole word level using a multisensory approach. They should be revised and assessed frequently in everyday writing.

6.2.5 Word Study

Word study is an alternative to traditional spelling instruction. It is based on learning word patterns rather than memorising unconnected lists of words. Word study provides pupils with opportunities to investigate and understand the patterns in words. Take, for example, the difference between hard /g/ (as in *go*) and soft /g/ (as in *giraffe*). After collecting many words containing the letter **g** pupils discover that g is usually hard when followed by the vowels a, o, and u (as in goat and gum). In contrast, **g** is usually soft when followed by i, e and y (as in giant, and gem) (Leipzig, 2000).

Of course, for every rule there are exceptions that threaten the rule. Through this method however, children learn that spelling patterns exist and that these patterns help to explain how to spell, read, and write words.

One of the fundamental principles of word study is that instruction must match the child's developmental level. It begins with finding out what each child already knows and then starting instruction from there.

In word study, teachers encourage pupils to compare and contrast features in words. One common method for doing so is by having pupils sort words. When sorting, pupils use their word knowledge to separate examples that go together from those that don't go together.
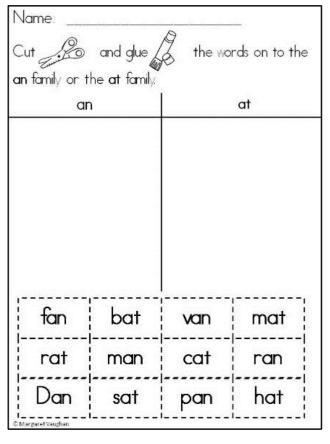

Figure 3. Word study worksheet

In addition, children can:

- Hunt for words in their reading and writing that fit the pattern being studied.
- Construct a word wall illustrating examples of the different patterns studied.
- Keep a word-study notebook to record the known patterns and their new understandings about words.
- Play games and activities to apply their word knowledge. (Bear et al., 2000).

A typical word study lesson includes the following steps:

1. Introduce a new spelling pattern by choosing words for pupils to sort.
2. Encourage pupils to recognise the pattern in their reading and writing.
3. Use reinforcement activities to help pupils relate this pattern to previously acquired word knowledge.

Teachers then test pupils' pattern knowledge rather than their ability to memorise individual words. For example, a teacher might have pupils work with ten words during a word study cycle and then randomly test pupils on five of those words. For example, when pupils studying the -ate pattern, a teacher might include the word "*slate*" on the spelling test even though it wasn't on the initial spelling list – this allows the teacher to see if pupils are able to generalise their knowledge of the "ate" pattern to a new word they haven't seen before.

6.2.6 What about Spelling Tests?

Many schools give weekly spelling tests, typically administered on Friday morning to the whole class group. However, there is increasing evidence that such tests are not an effective way of teaching spelling, nor of assessing spelling skills. In fact, such spelling tests are often just a test of short term memory and not of learning. For many students, words that are apparently known on Friday, are forgotten by Monday and there is often very little transfer of word knowledge from the spelling test to independent writing. There are also a number of children who know all the spellings before they are even assigned, and therefore are learning nothing by doing the same test administered to the whole class. Whole class spelling tests do not differentiate learners. In fact, spellings should be taught and assessed in the context of sentences and children's own writing.
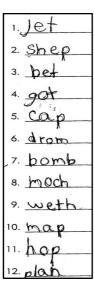
Figure 4. Typical weekly spelling test

[Click here to see Mary Nugent (NEPS, Educational Psychologist) talking about spelling tests and the alternative approach of word study.](#)

An over-reliance on spelling tests can mean that sometimes spelling skills are not taught at all, but assigned for homework. The skills of learning to spell, by detailed word study, may not be given adequate class time. Additionally, for those who find learning to spell difficult, the experience of weekly spelling tests is often stressful and demoralising (Alderman and Green, 2011). Competitive activities, with very public scores, have been shown to decrease motivation, particularly among the very students who most need to be motivated. As Pressley, 2006, says, '*Intrinsic academic motivation is killed off by academic failures'*.

6.3 Meaningful Writing

If it is to be motivating, writing has to be meaningful. Writing instruction for early writers needs to be sensitive to the developmental nature of learning. In the average senior infant class, there can be a range of up to five years in children's writing development (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). The first step therefore is to pinpoint where a child is on the continuum of writing development.

Figure 5. Emergent Writing

At the emergent writer stage, children are aware that marks on a page communicate a message but they do not understand the relationship between letters and sounds. In the first few weeks of Junior Infants, children should be encouraged to draw a picture and write about it, whatever form that writing takes (e.g. scribbles, marks). Encourage children to "read" what the writing says. Encourage children to draw a picture and dictate a sentence to the teacher/parent to go with the picture. This helps establish the purpose of writing for a child. With encouragement, children begin to label their pictures, attempt to write sentences and tell stories about the pictures they have drawn.

The next steps are taken as children begin to learn letter-sound correspondence and learn how to spell their names and other key words such as *play* and *went*. Often such early writing forms part of, '*My News',* activities. At this stage children begin to understand that words are distinct entities and that a group of words makes a sentence. It is a good idea to ask children to tell an adult what they plan to write about. They can talk about the ideas, what words they will need, and how to fit them on paper. Children begin to use invented spelling at this stage and they can also begin to learn to spell high frequency words correctly e.g. *this* and *is*.
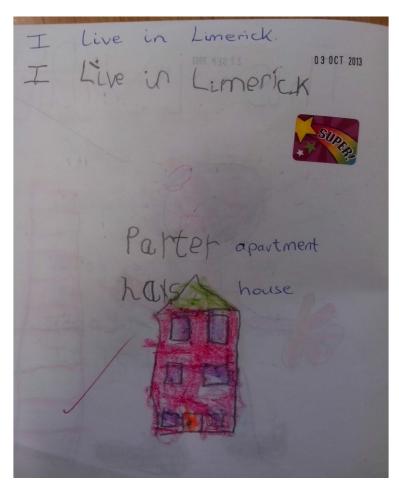

Figure 6. Early writing with picture

Sentence Development

Teachers can use sentence frames to support children's writing. *I like to* _____*and to*_____. Have the children use the frame to make their own sentences and let them share their sentences with the class. As the children become more independent, slowly fade the use of the sentence frame.

Teachers can then encourage children to extend their sentences. For example, from '*The cat was sleeping'* to '*The lazy cat was sleeping in front of a roaring fire*'. This can be done interactively with the class group, or alternatively, the children can work in pairs or small groups and then share their expanded sentences with the class.

6.2.3 Shared Writing

Shared writing involves the teacher and children composing a longer piece of writing together. The teacher is the scribe and usually works on the whiteboard. The children contribute with ideas and vocabulary. The children reread the text many times. The final written product becomes a model for reference and class discussion. This shared writing can be in response to an oral language activity or an interactive read aloud.

Once children demonstrate an understanding of the strategy (brainstorming, composing, editing etc) the teacher should encourage children to practice applying these skills as they write independently.

Teachers need to mindful of the gradual release of responsibility to children. In some cases, this may mean having some children spend more time with teacher directed tasks until they are ready to become more independent, while other children might be able to work in small peer groups.

6.2.3 Reviewing and Editing

It is important to strike a balance between encouragement of creative ideas and putting a structure on the ideas. A child will only be ready to start editing their own writing when they have a good stock of sight-words they can spell

automatically; when they know how to use simple punctuation like capital letters and when they have a sense of simple sentence structure (Rog, 2007). At this point a child should be taught to review their work, to check if sight-words are spelled correctly and to add-on new details if needed. This is all part of the writing process in the early years.

6.2.4 Writing Opportunities

For children in the infant classes, at least 30 minutes each day should be devoted to writing and developing writing skills. Time for writing practice can occur in the context of other subjects, for example, in science, children can label pictures. Encourage children to read what they write for an audience, whether that audience is a teacher, parent or class mates. It is also important that the pupils receive opportunities to write in different genres, including:

- *Narrative genre*: Draw a picture and tell a story about it; tell or draw about a personal experience; use words orally that tell about the passage of time; talk about feelings when telling a story; use some features of narrative text such as speech bubbles, titles and page numbers.
- *Functional Information genre*: make lists; write invitations; create labels; show facts; draw objects and talk about them; write short information books.
- *Poetic/creative genre*: Express feelings through poetry; notice interesting words; understand that poems can be serious or funny; actively participate in shared writing of a poem or song or rhyme; illustrate poems with drawings; know and enjoy rhyme and humour; closely observe the world.

7. Assessment

The goal of assessment has to be above all to support the improvement of teaching and learning. Frederickson and Collins, 1989.
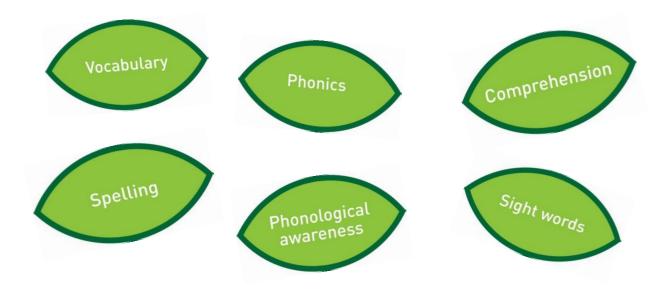
7.1 The Assessment Plan

An assessment plan should form an integral part of a literacy policy. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy states that schools should use assessment data to inform the development of a school improvement plan. Additionally, assessment information should provide, by at least the second term of junior infants, a means of identifying those children for

whom in-class support and intervention strategies are required. Therefore, the assessment plan should contain guidance about the following:

- Aspects of literacy that are assessed formally and informally
- Details of when assessment occurs
- A school-wide system for recording and monitoring informal and formal data on a child's literacy skills
- Plans for investment in assessment instruments and professional development for teachers and principals
- Plans for how information will be shared with parents/ guardians

This section covers different types of assessment and includes a glossary of frequently used assessment terms. For some areas of learning, such as handwriting, assessment may be largely based on observation: observing the child's posture, pencil grip and letter-formation. The same may be said of assessing word-reading strategies or reading fluency- assessment is best conducted through careful observation of the child reading continuous text. The use of portfolios of work can be helpful in assessing the development of meaningful writing. Further information about observations methods and the development of portfolios is contained in this section. However, there is also detailed information about specific assessment methods linked to various areas of literacy development in previous sections. Click on any of the following leaves for advice on the assessment of particular literacy elements:

Using the Primary Language Curriculum Progression Continua

The Primary Language Curriculum sets out learning outcomes for the strands of reading and writing (and oral language). These learning outcomes describe what children should know and be able to do as a result of the teaching and learning process, when due account is taken of individual abilities and varying circumstances.

These outcomes help teachers to:

- Plan, implement and reflect on the appropriate teaching methods for teaching and learning
- Use assessment methods that are matched to the intended learning outcomes
- Provide focused feedback to children and parents.

The Primary Language Curriculum uses progression continua and examples of children's work to help teachers to make judgements about where children are in their learning and to plan for next steps in learning. There are three progression continua- one for each strand of the curriculum:

- Oral language
- Reading
- Writing

Within each progression continuum, there are eight descriptors of progression milestones, labelled from a to h. Each progression milestones encompasses a range of skills. The progression continuum for reading (see page 67) is outlined below. One benefit of using the progression milestones is that is can help the teacher identify the next steps in the child's development and therefore plan the next steps in teaching.

Reading: Progression Continuum

Collaboratively and independently the child listens to, reads and engages with familiar and unfamiliar texts** in a variety of genres◊. The child uses prior knowledge and previous experience to make sense of and interpret text. As the child progresses, the texts** will increase in complexity of reading vocabulary and content. To develop fluency, the child engages with texts** at his/her instructional and independent reading level. To identify where a child is at on the reading continuum it is useful for the child to be engaging with texts at his/her instructional reading level.

② Progression Milestones - Reading

☐ Stage 1 ☐ Stage 2

Stage 1

a The child has fun playing with books and joining in with nursery rhymes. He/she enjoys looking at, listening to and handling books and indicates favourites. The child associates some meaning with pictures and familiar logos, signs, letters and words. He/she sequences familiar stories or personal experiences using objects, marks or mimes to focus on 2-3 key points or events.

b The child shows reading behaviours in play scenarios and enjoys listening and responding to stories and poems, taking part in nursery rhymes, and playing with language in riddles and jokes. He/she understands that print carries messages and that text** tells the same story each time it is read. The child recognises some personal and familiar words and some familiar letters. He/she uses new words and phrases read aloud and modelled by the teacher in his/her emergent reading.

c The child begins to associate letters with sounds and identifies some high frequency words. He/she draws on personal experience, knowledge and memory when sharing in the 'reading' of a text** either alone or with others, and retells familiar stories accurately. The child visualises while listening to a story or informational text** read aloud, shares responses and discusses with others. He/she understands some basic conventions of print and recognises rhyming words.

d The child uses book-handling skills and identifies more conventions of print. He/she sounds and names all letters of the alphabet. Begins to blend and segment some sounds in words, recognises some common letter patterns and generates rhyming words. The child reads a range of high-frequency and CVC words and uses some contextual as well as pictorial cues to aid comprehension. He/she modifies predictions based on new information and shows understanding through discussion of texts** read.

Stage 2

e The child enjoys listening to, reading and exploring text** showing knowledge of the structure of a range of narrative and procedural text** genres◊. He/she understands messages conveyed in illustrations and uses sight words, rhyming words, syllables, common letter patterns and text** cues to read. The child reads familiar texts** independently using full-stops to punctuate. He/she begins to monitor comprehension, asks questions about texts** and offers some reasons for predictions. With help, the child locates key points in informational texts** using a graphic organiser.

f The child enjoys choosing and exploring texts** for specific purposes and generates and responds to questions on a range of text** genres◊ providing justifications for responses. He/she reads a range of words with digraphs, letter patterns and syllables and uses prior knowledge, contextual cues, some punctuation and adds some intonation while reading aloud. The child locates key information using text** features such as table of contents and sub-headings, and begins to use dictionaries for word meanings. He/she discusses miscomprehension in text.

g The child enjoys a range of genres◊ and reads for specific purposes, justifying preferences and opinions. He/she uses a range of comprehension strategies and text** features such as indexes to help understand texts, locate key information and disregard unnecessary detail, and cites specific evidence in text** to support a viewpoint. The child uses a range of word identification strategies and knowledge of synonyms, homonyms, antonyms, affixes and root words to understand unfamiliar words.

h The child enjoys a wide range of genres◊ and reads detailed texts** at their independent level for a range of purposes. He/she uses letter/sounds sequences, digraphs, root words, syllables, silent letters, prefixes and suffixes to identify, read and comprehend a wide range of unfamiliar words. The child explores the author's intent in texts** and comprehends text** by using a repertoire of comprehension strategies more flexibly and with increasingly complex texts. He/she focuses on language features, imagery and reading vocabulary and recognises that individuals can interpret text** differently. He/she uses a range of text** features such as boldface, glossaries, electronic menus and icons to locate key details efficiently.

** 'text' to include all products of language use: oral, gesture, sign, written, braille, visual, tactile, electronic and digital.

Methods of assessment

The key to effective assessment is to have clarity about the purpose of assessment, and then to match that purpose with the most appropriate assessment method or process. Assessment methods and issues discussed in this section are

- **Response to Instruction (formative assessment)**

- **Summative assessment (assessment of learning)**

7.2 Response to Instruction

*Response to Instruction (RTI) is a comprehensive, systemic approach to teaching and learning designed to address language and literacy problems for **all** students through increasingly differentiated and intensified language and literacy assessment and instruction.*

International Reading Association, 2010

RTI (also known as 'response to intervention') is an approach that allows the teacher to monitor how the child is responding to instruction and then modify teaching accordingly. It is a form of assessment **for** learning and it can impact significantly on learning when it is properly employed in the classroom (Black and William, 1998a). The response to instruction process is a cycle of *quality teaching- assessment – modified instruction*.
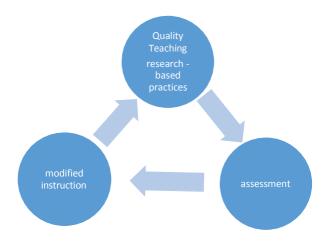
Figure 7. Response to Instruction

The first and foremost intention is to prevent problems by offering the most suitable teaching. Therefore, all children are offered scientific, research-based classroom instruction. Each child is then assessed to see how he or she has responded to that instruction and whether s/he has attained the learning outcomes set out in the Primary Language Curriculum. Such assessment is typically done through the use of curriculum-based measures, with short, quick, classroom based assessment, done by the class teacher. The progression milestones and outcome criteria of the Primary Language Curriculum offer such a curriculum-based method of assessing. Assessment is done frequently, (weekly, if necessary) so that timely interventions are put in place, ensuring the child is always working at his/her correct instructional level. If it is found, that a child is not responding to instruction as expected, then instruction needs to be differentiated and modified and intensified to take account of the child's needs. The teacher can consider where the child is in terms of progression milestones and can plan the next progression steps.

On the following pages there is a sample checklist which assists teachers in reviewing a child's progress in early literacy. It may be particularly helpful in identifying the exact nature of difficulties for those children who are struggling. This, in turn, will help identify appropriate interventions. The progression continuum milestones from the Primary Language Curriculum are cross-referenced in blue print on the left-hand column.

Balanced Literacy Framework Review/Checklist

Name of student: _____

	Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
Early Literacy Concepts **Progression Milestones for Reading** **a & b**	Identify the front of the book Recognise that print and pictures are different but connected Know you can read the print, not the pictures Show where the story begins by pointing to the first line of text in a story Turn pages to read and look at the left page first Read and write left to right and then go back to the left to start a new line (can move finger to indicate the direction of print along and between lines of text) Recognise that a group of letters is a word Follow print with their finger putting their finger under each word Say one word for each word we see in writing/reading Know there is a difference between a word and a letter (Can point to a word on request? Can point to a letter on request?) Know that there are upper case and lower case letters (Can point to a capital letter on request) Know that the first word in a sentence is on the left and the last word is before the ending punctuation mark. (Point to the beginning of a sentence by pointing to the first word. Point to the end of a sentence by pointing to the appropriate full stop) Point to the first word in a sentence and/or line Point to the last word in a sentence and/or line			

		Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
		Can understand that speech marks indicate that someone is talking and can demonstrate this by pointing to "spoken words".			
		Can identify the first and last letter in a word			
		Recognise one's name and write the letters in their name			
Phonological Awareness **Progression Milestones for Reading** **c & d**		**Rhyming words and syllables** Can recite 3 nursery rhymes with correct words and rhythm			
		Provide the final word in line when rhyme is said by an adult			
		Match picture card of objects with rhyming sounds			
		Can select odd one out from 3 words (2 pictures rhyming), with picture aids and then without picture aids. Hear and say rhyming words?			
		Make rhymes by thinking of words that end the same (Provide a word which rhymes with a given word)			
		Claps or counts the words in a three to five word sentence			
		Can clap or counts correct syllables in own name and then names of children in class			
		Can hear and say the syllables in a word			
		Know some words have one syllable, and some have three or more syllables			
		Blend syllables together (pen-cil, pencil)			
		Onsets and Rimes Can hear and say the first, middle and final sounds in a word (**c**ar, c**a**r, ca**r**,)			

	Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
Progression Milestones for Reading c & d	Can blend words parts together (d-o-g, dog) **Phonemes** Can identify initial sounds in names of children in class Can match pictures according to initial sound Can select the off one out when given 3 words (2 sharing the same initial sound) with pictures aids and then without picture aids Say each sound in a word (b-a-t) Know some words sound the same at the beginning (**r**un, **r**ace) Know some words sound the same at the end (wi**n**, fu**n**)			
Progression Milestones for Reading d & e	Say a word without the first sound (ch-air = **air**) Say a word without the last sound (ant –t = **an**) Change the first sound in a word to make a new word (**n**ot – **h**ot) Change the last sound in a word to make a new word (hi**s** –hi**m**) Hear and say the sound in the middle of a word (s-**u**-n) Know that some words have the same sound in the middle (c**a**t, r**a**n) Change the middle sound in a word to make a new word (**hit, hot, hat, hut**,) Blend 3 or 4 phonemes in words (n-e-s-t = nest) Add phonemes to the end of words (an +d = and; and + y = Andy)			

	Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
Phonics or Letter/sound relationship **Progression Milestones for Reading** **d & e**	Recognise/identify all the 26 letter sounds in random order			
	Recognise that letters represent sounds: **b** is the letter that stands for the first sound in *bear*			
	Recognise that some letters are consonants and some letters are vowels			
	Recognise and use beginning consonant sounds and the letters to represent them			
	Know that when you see a letter at the beginning of a word you can make it's sound			
	Know that some consonants or consonant clusters stand for two or more different sounds? (car, city, get , gym)			
	Know that a group of two or three consonants is a consonant cluster? (bl, fl, tr, sp)			
	Recognise that some words have consonant clusters at the end (-ld, nd, -nt)			
	Know you can usually hear each sound in a consonant cluster (spring = s-p-r-i-n-g)			
	Recognise and use consonant digraphs at the beginning of words: *sh, ch, th,wh*			
	Recognise and use consonant digraphs at the end of words: *sh, ch, th,wh*			
	Recognise that some words have consonant letters that are silent – (wrap, know, climb). Understand that some consonant sounds can be represented by several different letters or letter clusters : final *k* sound: picni**c**, ma**k**e, du**ck**			

	Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
Progression Milestones for Reading **d & e**	Know that a, e, o, u, i are vowels Hear and identify short vowel sounds in words and the letters that represent them Recognise shorts vowels in the middle of words (CVC): hat, bed Hear and identify long vowels sounds in words and the letters that represent them Recognise and use long vowel sounds in words Recognise and use vowels in words with silent e: make, take, home A vowel has two sounds a *long* and *short* vowel sound Recognise and using *y* as a vowel sound Recognise and use letter combinations that represent long vowel sounds: *ai, ay, ee, ea, oa, oe, ow, ue, ui, ew: chair, play, meet, near, roar, tow, blow,blue, suit, new* Recognise and use letter combinations that represent other vowel sounds: **oo** as in moon, **oi** as in oil, **oy** as in boy, **ou** as in house, **ow** as in cow, **aw** as in paw, **ay** as in always, **au** as in autumn. Recognise and use vowels sounds in open syllables – (ho-tel, Pe-ter, Lo-cal) Recognise and use vowels sounds in closed syllables – (lem-on, cab-in)) Form and letters correctly, efficiently and fluently Use the computer keyboard			
Letter Knowledge	Know the alphabet has 26 letters Can recite the alphabet			

	Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
Progression Milestones for Reading d & e	Know that a letter has a name, a sound and a shape			
	Know that you can look at the shape of a letter and say its name			
	Name all the letters in the alphabet			
	Know that a letter has two forms, One form is uppercase (or capital) and the other is lowercase (or small)			
	Know that your name starts with a capital letter			
	Knows that every word has a vowel			
	Find words with the same beginning, ending and middle letter			
Sight Vocabulary/Fluency **Progression Milestones for Reading c, d & e**	Can match words with picture cards			
	Can match word cards with print only (no picture)			
	Know that some words cannot be read by blending letter sounds and are 'tricky' words			
	Recognise the first 12 dolch words/ or common sight words			
	Recognise the first 20, 50, 100 dolch words			
	Recognise_____ words from their class readers			
Writing and Spelling **Progression Milestones for Writing c & d**	Hold the pencil correctly			
	Copy his forename and surname			
	Write his forename and surname independently			

	Can/does the Student?	**Date achieved**	**Date achieved**	**Date achieved**
Progression Milestones for Writing d & e	Form or copy all the letters correctly			
	Write the letter which represents a sound when asked (Followed at a later stage of writing a letter when prompted.)			
	Write the letter sound they hear at the beginning of a word/end of a word			
	Can write the sound they hear in the middle of a word			
	Copy sentences in their copy			
	Copy sentences from the board			
	Can spell and write CVC words (sun, bat)			
	Can spell and write spelling patterns with CCVC e.g. (flag, star)			
	Can spelling and write single syllable words that end with double letters (VCC) – all, -ell, - ill.			
	Can spell and write single syllable words that end with consonant clusters : (damp, nest, belt)			
	Recognise and use spelling patterns with a silent/magic e: -ake, -ame, -ice			
	Write simple sentences from dictation using capital letter and full stop			
	Writes with appropriate spacing and alignment			
	Write simple sentences independently			
	Spells frequently used words correctly			

	Can/does the Student?	Date achieved	Date achieved	Date achieved
Comprehension **Progression** **Milestones for** **Reading** **b, c & d**	Identify the characters a story by pointing to the picture in the book			
	Make simple predictions about a familiar story			
	Recalls information about the story (e.g. plot, character, beginning and ending)			
	Recount the storyline in chronological order			
	Answer specific factual questions relating to the story			
	Can make connections between background knowledge and text			
	Can pick out the main idea			

8484

7.2.1 Observation

Observation is the most natural method of assessing a child's progress. It is an integral part of assessment for learning and response to instruction. A teacher who is in daily contact with a child has the most potential in terms of planning for a child's learning and of making judgements regarding a child's progress.

While too much data collection would be counterproductive, it is important to record observations (data) about a child's progress towards a known objective e.g. does the child know the **sh blend**, or can a child **form the letter d** properly? Here are some useful ideas for recording assessment observations**:**

- A list of names with a space after each name to record observations
- Post it-notes
- A checklist of objectives (e.g. the alphabet)
- A dated sample of work in a child's file
- A rubric i.e. a table with specific criteria to help a teacher monitor progress

Table 5. Example of a Rubric for First Class Written Expression

Aspect	Score	Criteria
Ideas		At least one original idea
Vocabulary		Use of new vocabulary word *bright*
Lay-out		Letters formed correctly Correct spacing of letters and words.
Spelling		Correct spelling of *is, look, was*
Punctuation		Capital letters and full stops used

7.2.2. Running Records

Running records, an approach developed by Marie Clay as part of the Reading Recovery programme, is an assessment that documents a child's individual reading of a continuous text. A running record provides a way to assess the child's reading, determine the correct instructional level and inform teaching. Taken at intervals, such records can also document a child's progress in reading.

To take a Running Record, sit beside a child as he or she reads a selected portion of text aloud in a natural and relaxed environment. It is necessary to select a time when you can hear the child read without interruptions. Observe and record everything the child says and does during the reading. You will find yourself noticing more and more about children's reading behaviours each time you take a Running Record. Because there is a set code for recording, all teachers can understand and then discuss, analyse, and plan teaching strategies for the child or small groups of children.

Click here for more detail about running records and sample templates.

Click here to see an example of a running record.

Click here to see a professional learning community discussing running records.

7.2.3 Portfolio of work

A portfolio is a collection of work that shows the progress made by a child over time. The evidence of the learning may be in the form of photos, digital video, audio files or any other appropriate indication of the child's achievements.

Child 1:
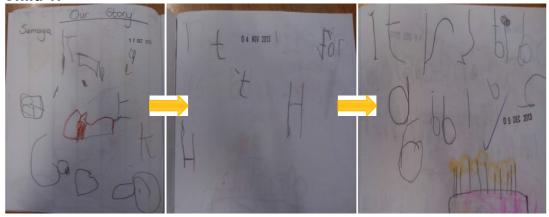
Figure 8. Portfolio of work showing progression (1)

Child 2:

Figure 9. Portfolio of work showing progression (2)

7.2.4 Criterion referenced tests

A criterion referenced test can be used for both response to instruction and as part of a summative assessment. It is a test (often teacher made) that seeks to find out if a child has understood a certain concept (e.g. knows that words are made of sound parts) or can perform a certain skill (e.g. read key sight words). Criterion referenced tests that are dated and safely stored in a child's portfolio can become records of a child's grasp of concepts and can identify learning targets.

[Click here to see a teacher assessing phonemic awareness](#)

[Click here to see a teacher assessing word reading skills and spelling skills (using sentence dictation)](#).

7.2.5. Diagnostic assessment

Diagnostic assessment is part of formative assessment. When a teacher sees that a child needs an intervention (e.g. phonemic awareness training), the intervention should be put in place as early as possible. Commercially produced diagnostic reading tests might help a teacher to pinpoint an underlying difficulty (sight vocabulary, phonemic awareness or phonic knowledge). However, diagnostic assessment can be done (without tests) by competent teachers who have a thorough understanding of literacy development in the early years. It should be noted that there can be overlap between criteria-referenced tests and diagnostic tests.

[Click here to view Siobhan O'Donoghue, Reading Recovery Specialist (PDST), speak about assessment for learning and valuable observational tools](#).

7.3 Assessment of Learning

Assessment of learning is also sometimes called **outcome assessment** or **summative assessment** and it refers to the assessment of a child's learning at a particular time e.g. mid-term or end of term. This type of assessment determines if particular skills or criteria have been mastered. Examinations, performances, projects, and end of term tests are examples of summative assessments. While this kind of assessment is typically used to report on progress over a longer period of time, it is less flexible than other approaches, such as observation and running records, which can make more useful contributions to establishing the child's instructional level.

7.3.2 Standardised Tests

Standardised tests are tests that are uniformly developed, administered, and scored. Some standardised tests can be given to a whole class groups and some must be given on an individual basis. Group tests can be time efficient, but individually administered standardised tests often yield more information as teachers can observe the child more closely. Standardised tests yield scores such as standard scores, STEN scores, percentiles and age equivalents. While these scores point to where a child's skills lie relative to their peers, such bald scores are often not particularly useful for informing instruction. Careful scrutiny of a child's performance on test items can be helpful.

Click here for a more detailed discussion of the various forms of scoring, typically reported in Irish schools. It also offers teachers helpful advice about sharing assessment information in meaningful ways with parents.

Table 6. Definitions of Terms used in Formal Testing

Term	Definition
Standard score	A standard score is always based on the assumption of a normal distribution, i.e. the scores occur in the form of a bell curve with a mean and a standard deviation. There are a number of different types of standard score depending on how the mean and standard deviation are defined, e.g. **T-scores**, **Stanines**, **STen** scores and **percentiles**.
Percentile rank	A percentile rank of a score gives an indication of how that score compares to the scores of the total population on whom the test was normed. It shows how well an individual performed by giving the percentage point at which their score lies. For example, a percentile rank of 22 indicates that 21% of the population would score lower. All percentiles between 25 and 75 are in the Average range.
STen	STen scores are a 10 point scale, with 1 representing the lowest category and 10 the highest. STen scores of 5 and 6 are in the average range.
Age (or grade) equivalent	Some test scores are reported as age equivalent test scores. Simply put, an age equivalent is a comparison of the child's performance compared to age groups whose average scores are in the same range. For example, if your 9 year old child scores a 42 raw score on a test, and that score is average for 8 year olds, his age equivalent score would be 8.

Reading ages and grade equivalents are not recommended for use in the early years of reading development. However, it is important to match just-right text to a child's ability. For this reason, a finely graded reading scheme (such as PM readers) should be used for all developing readers. Books should be closely matched to the child's skills. |

Gradual release of responsibility, interactive read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, reading at 'just-right' level, independent reading

8.1 Gradual Release of Responsibility

This section demonstrates ways to use the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) Model (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983) to help young children to become independent readers. It shows how skills and strategies taught during **reading aloud**, **shared reading**, **oral reading to an adult** and **guided reading** transfer to the children's own **independent reading**. It should be emphasised that this is not a strictly linear process and rich reading experiences will involve young children moving backwards and forwards through various activities, but there should be a gradual shift from the child being dependent on the adult, to the child being independent of the adult.

| Interactive read aloud | Shared reading | Guided reading | Oral reading just-right texts | Independent reading |
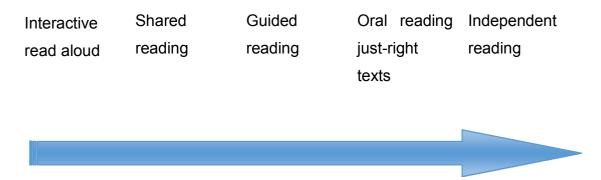
Figure 10. The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

Table 7. Release of Responsibility from Teacher Control to Child Control

Teacher control		→ ←		Child control
Interactive read aloud	Shared reading	Guided Reading	Oral reading to an adult	Independent reading
The teacher reads aloud and pauses to model a particular strategy by 'thinking aloud'	The teacher and children practice the strategy together using a Big Book or multiple copies of texts.	The teacher provides support as the children read in small groups.	The teacher provide a just right text for the child to read to an adult (at home or in school).	The child applies new skills/strategies while reading at home or at school.

8.2 Interactive Read Aloud

Interactive read aloud

> *The single most important activity for building knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.*
> Anderson, Hibert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985.

Interactive Read Aloud (also sometimes known as *Interactive Shared Book Reading*) is an umbrella term for a range of common literacy approaches that adults use when reading with children. Typically, it involves an adult reading a book to a child or a small group of children and using a variety of techniques to engage the children with the text. Many of the skills and activities described in this section on reading aloud may also be applied to shared reading or guided reading.

While simply listening to a story is motivating, an interactive read-aloud really helps children engage with the text. The teacher makes explicit the kinds of thinking the children should be doing when they are reading themselves. The read aloud format provides a context for introducing comprehension strategies (building background knowledge, connecting, inferring, summarising and predicting) that children will later employ when reading independently.

As a rule of thumb the teacher should read aloud from books that are two or three years above the children's reading level. It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of reading aloud to pupils of all ages. In many cases pupils who are proficient decoders may have limited comprehension due to 'not knowing what the word means'. The teachers can preselect vocabulary to be taught in context, and review frequently.

Several large scale reviews of research on reading aloud to children highlight its critical importance in developing early language and literacy skills (Karweit and Wasik, 1996; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Substantial evidence

indicates that reading aloud to children improves their vocabulary, word knowledge, language patterns and story structure while instilling a love of books.

Reading aloud is most influential when it occurs on a daily basis. However, *how we read* to children is as important as *how often we read* to them. When reading aloud to children it is critical that the children are encouraged to be as interactive as possible by asking them to respond to questions, discuss pictures in the books, and make associations with the book. Children will get the most from a read aloud if it is an interactive process. Activating prior knowledge of a text will improve their understanding of that text. When children listen in a small group they will often repeat each other's comments or elaborate on each other's responses which is a form of peer modelling and learning.

Good Practice in Action

Before reading the book it is important to ask questions, which will help the children relate the text to their own lives. For example;

*This morning I am going to read a story called **The Smartest Giant in Town**.*

Let's look at the pictures and see if we can tell what the story is all about.

Have you ever bought new clothes?

Have you ever given somebody a present of clothes?

Have we read a story with a giant in it before?

An established strategy is called a *picture walk* (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996), which involves showing the children pictures and asking them to predict how the story will go. This helps children anticipate or predict what's to come, and establish a personal incentive to see if their predictions come to pass.

Click here to see an interactive read aloud with a class in Bansha N.S.

8.2.1 How interactive reading aloud builds vocabulary

High quality children's books are an excellent way of exposing children to new and more sophisticated vocabulary words. Adults can pause to discuss new words and their meanings in child-friendly language, provide other words or role-play to illustrate new words. Young children need to meet new vocabulary on multiple occasions. This is why it is important to have repeated readings of the same book. In a study of children who listen to repeated stories, Morrow, 1987, found that they were more likely to use vocabulary and syntax from the story, in new contexts.

8.2.2 Retelling

Encouraging children to retell a story is an important strategy for developing their language skills, particularly their sense of story structure and sequencing. When young children retell a story they usually need the support of the pictures in the book, and/or teacher prompting. Adult prompting can take the form of providing some additional story details or alternatively providing words to help the child sequence the story (*because, then, but, after* etc). For example, the adult can ask, '*What happened to the Giant then/next?*'

Once children reach school-age, stories will become a central part of their reading classes, so it is helpful for young children to become comfortable with narrative concepts such as characters, plot, and resolution of problem.

8.2.3. Using questions to encourage book talk

It is considered best practice to use questions throughout the book reading session, as opposed to presenting all the questions at the beginning or the end of the session. Nonetheless, it is important not to let over-questioning diminish the flow of a story. There are different types of questioning an adult can use when sharing a book with young children. The questions can be literal or inferential, closed or open-ended and intentionally dialogic in nature.

Literal questions generally ask children to clarify information and check that the children have all the details of the story; the *who, what, when* and *where.* Inferential questions are usually open-ended and are more conducive to language development. This is a skill which should be fostered in pre-schoolers and is essential for later reading comprehension development (Van Kleeck, 2006).

Close-ended questions refer to questions which have a right answer, which is usually one word. It has been estimated that three quarters of adult questions during book reading are closed questions (Wasik et al., 2006). Open-ended questions help generate discussion and generally elicit more elaborate responses than simple yes/no answers.

- Who do you think this story is about?
- Why do you think the tiger is at the door?
- What do you think Sophie is thinking about?
- What do you think Sophie's mummy is going to do now?

8.2.4 Dialogic reading

Dialogic reading uses a scaffolded method of supporting children's vocabulary and language development. As the child becomes increasingly familiar with a book, the adult uses higher-level prompts to encourage the child to go beyond naming objects in the pictures, to thinking more about what is happening in the pictures and how this relates to the child's own experiences.

Two approaches to this type of dialogic reading are known by their acronyms, CROWD and PEER.

Table 8. CROWD questions

C	**Completion questions** about the structure of language used in the book, for example, *And Sophie's daddy said, "I know what we'll do. I've got a very good "* The child fills in the missing word.
R	**Recall questions** related to the story content of the book, for example, *Do you remember where Sophie and her parents went for food in the end?*
O	**Open-ended questions** to increase the amount of talk about a book and to focus on the details of the book, for example, *What is Sophie doing on this page?*
W	**"Wh" questions** to teach new vocabulary, for example… *"and they walked down the road to a café". What is a 'café?*
D	**Distancing questions** that help the child connect the material in the book to their real-life experiences. For example, *Has anybody ever had an animal come to their house? Has anybody ever seen a tiger in real life?*

Table 9. PEER Approach

P	**Parent (or other adult) initiates** an exchange about the book, and
E	**Evaluates** the child's response,
E	**Expands** the child's response, and
R	**Repeats** the initial question to check that the child understands the new learning.

Good Practice in Action

Example of using PEER dialogic approaches when reading *The Tiger who came to tea?* by Judith Kerr

Teacher: *What is the tiger doing?* (Parent (or other adult) initiates)

Child: *Drinking water.*

Teacher: *Yes, he's drinking water from the tap at the sink*. (Evaluates and expands)

Teacher (Next time through the book): *What is the Tiger doing? Do you remember?* (Repeats question)

Child: *He's drinking water from the taps*.

Teacher: That's right, he's drinking water from the tap, he seems really thirsty." (Evaluates and expands)

As the adult becomes more skilled in the use of these techniques, they can be combined. For example, the adult might first use a prompt, by using one of the CROWD questions. Then the adult could evaluate and expand on the responses, perhaps repeating the prompt to see if the children had more to add.

8.3 Shared reading in the classroom

Shared reading

In early childhood classrooms, shared reading typically involves a teacher and a large group of children sitting closely together to read and re-read a Big Book. Early childhood settings should invest in big books, which are oversized picture books, big enough to allow the children to see the print as it is being read aloud. This helps the children to begin to see the connection between the spoken and printed words.

As the children get older shared reading involves the teachers reading a class-level text while the children follow along by choral reading or by whisper reading. Shared reading can also be done effectively with smaller groups.

With this instructional technique, children have an opportunity to gradually assume more responsibility for reading as their skill level and confidence increase. Shared reading also provides a safe learning environment for the children to practice the reading behaviours of proficient readers with the support of teacher and peers.

The teacher models the reading process as the children observe and respond. This is often the first opportunity for young children to experience print in a

group setting. It provides the children with a context to apply the skills they are learning such as phonemic awareness, recognising sound-symbol relationships, sight-words, and print features. Shared reading can also provide a context to develop the children's comprehension skills. Some of the children will be able to directly transfer the skills they learned in class when they are reading with their parents at home or during independent reading. Others will require additional scaffolded support in the form of guided reading.

8.4 Guided Reading

Guided reading

> *In guided reading the teacher helps the children use strategies they already know so they are able to read an unfamiliar text independently with success.*
> Hornsby, 2000

Guided reading is a well-established form of small-group instruction. It begins with the teacher undertaking a systematic assessment of each pupil. Children who perform at a similar level are then grouped to be taught together. The children in each group are typically reading independently at a similar level, and use the same type of reading strategies.

Typically a class is divided into four to six guided reading groups. The teacher supports the reading in a way that allows the pupils to read more challenging text and employ more strategies. Generally each guided reading group consists of between four and eight learners (with 6 usually being the optimum number.) The teacher supports the children to use learned reading strategies to read for meaning, including:

- Use phonic knowledge to decode words
- Use the picture cues
- Activate prior knowledge

- Use context to make predictions

- Make connections

- Infer

- Self-monitor for accuracy, does it *sound* right? Does it *make sense*?

- Read ahead

(Adapted from Hornsby, 2000)

An integral component of guided reading is selecting books that match the children's needs. This involves ongoing observation and assessments, including running records/ records of reading behaviours, which will simplify the process of matching a group of children to an appropriately graded set of books. It is very important that teachers use books which have been carefully levelled against well thought-out criteria. The Reading Recovery levels are often used as a broad continuum for this purpose. Books are placed on the continuum of easy-to-hard relating to a wide range of factors such as sentence length, text complexity, vocabulary, and picture cues. There is debate among leading experts in the field about exactly how easy or difficult a text should be for optimum learning. Generally the readers should be able to read 90% plus of words in a new text. However, it is just as important to analyse the errors as often one child may make slightly more errors than another but because the errors are less significant, the meaning of the text will not be undermined.

Guided reading groups are usually frequently reviewed based on teacher observation and assessment and children consequently move between levelled groups. Generally. teachers use a benchmark assessment system to determine each pupil's guided reading level. Therefore multiple copies of each text are a necessity for guided reading.

Reading at 'just-right' level

8.5 Oral reading from just-right text

Oral reading with adult feedback (a child reading **to** an adult) has a very positive effect on word reading, reading fluency and reading comprehension (NRP, 2000). Children in the early stages of reading have very individual needs and will be developmentally at different places on the reading continuum. Therefore the use of whole-class readers is not effective to meet the needs of such a diverse group. There is typically a four year age range between the least and most able readers by first class. There will need to be differentiated reading material if this diversity is to be addressed.

The struggling child will gain least from a class reader because the text will be at frustration level. These children will quickly become overwhelmed and de-motivated and the spiral of reading difficulty begins. Similarly the practice of round-robin reading where the teacher asks children to read orally from a class reader is questionable. This approach may inadvertently set some children up for failure.

An expansive set of quality levelled books should be a cornerstone for literacy development in every school. Each child should take a book home every night matched at their **instructional level** (93-97% of the words). Each reading of a new book can begin with the child being encouraged to predict what the story is going to be about from the illustrations. The adult should connect the story with the child's personal experiences and build some background knowledge. (If a child cannot be supported with reading at home then additional reading in school will be necessary.)

The next night the child should re-read the previous book before starting a new book. The new books should be only marginally more challenging than the previous one. It is this gradual pacing of a child through a finely graded levelling system that will provide the best growth in reading development. Reading and re-reading a variety of texts at appropriate level drives instruction forward for all pupils, (Tyner, 2003).

Click here to see Lucy Gannon (Educational Psychologist, NEPS) talking about the importance of levelled readers.

8.6 Independent reading

Independent reading is the time when children apply the skills and strategies they have learned during read-aloud, shared reading and guided reading activities. Guthrie, 2004, argues that it often the volume of independent reading that distinguishes between the weak and strong reader.

> *The balance of explicit instruction and time to practice is what it's all about. Instruction without time to practice won't work: neither will time to read without explicit instruction. They're both part of what it means to read and learn, and it's our job to strike the right balance.*   Tabersk, 2010.

During independent reading the teacher has to make sure the child is reading text at the just right level (97 % or greater accuracy). Reading at this level is less cognitively demanding and therefore will help the reader to become more confident. It also helps them go beyond decoding text and engage with the story. As a general rule of thumb, a six year old should not be expected to read independently for more than 6 minutes and a seven year old for 7 minutes.

> *Successful reform in reading must address in systematic ways the development of teachers' professional knowledge and practice and not be limited by false hopes and unrealistic expectations that often accompany a school's adoption of a packaged programme.*
>
> Taylor, Raphael and Au, 2011, p623

1. Quality of Teaching

Samuels and Farstrup, 2011, tell us that the quality of teaching is of critical importance to children's literacy development. The teaching of reading is a complex and sophisticated task (Hall and Harding, 2003) and clearly teacher training (both initial training and on-going Continuing Professional development (CPD) is a vital element in improving the quality of teaching. It has been identified by the National Reading Panel, 2000 as one of the key factors in improving reading. They note, '*in-service professional development produced significantly higher student achievement*'. Quality teaching is one of the key factors in improving reading (NRP, 2000, Morriss, 2015) and there is a clear relationship between the number of successful readers and the number of effective literacy teachers (Allington, 2011).

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2011, states that, '*we continue to be fortunate in Ireland in attracting some of the most able and talented people to the teaching profession*' (p27). The strategy makes clear that continuing to recruit, train and support excellent teachers is a priority. This means there is a need for both quality pre-service and on-going in-service for teachers.

Effective teachers of literacy have been found to have the following characteristics:
- Excellent classroom management skills
- Positive relationships with children
- Implement a balanced literacy framework
- Take a metacognitive approach to instruction
- Emphasise high order thinking skills
- Teach basic skills in meaningful contexts
- Differentiate instruction
- Use a range of formative assessment tools
- Link with parents and the community
- A commitment to Continuing Professional Development
  (Kennedy, 2010, Hall and Harding, 2003)

9.2. Continuing Professional Development

While initial training is important, the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy point out that, '*The best teachers are not just trained well, they are trained often, throughout their entire careers.*' (2012, p4).

There are 3 key elements of continuing professional development
- **Time: Quality professional development needs time**
- **Embedding development in practice**
- **Collaboration with others**

[Click here to hear Siobhan O'Donoghue, Reading Recovery Specialist (PDST), talking about the importance of continuing professional development.](#)

9.2.1 Quality professional development needs time

Successful professional development takes time - both time spent by teachers on professional development tasks, and the time it takes to see the results/ effects of the professional development. Research suggests that the number of hours spent on professional development correlates with outcomes, in terms of teacher learning and student achievement (Yoon et al, 2007). It is important for teachers to implement sustained efforts to improve their practice. '*Growth in student's reading scores as well as change in classroom teaching practices came in small increments from one year to the next. There were no quick fixes and no magic bullets in these schools- only hard work, persistence and professional commitment'*, (p64). Indeed Taylor, Raphael and Au, 2011, suggest that teachers and policy makers need to, '*stay the course for 5 years or more to make the improvements necessary to achieve substantial gains in student learning'*.

9.2.2 Embedding development in practice

Coburn et al., 2011, argue that implementation of any policy may be superficial rather than substantial, if teachers are not invested in the process. Professional development that is embedded in real world practice and the immediate concerns of teachers, is more likely to be positively received by teachers. One way of embedding policy in real world practice is for teachers to use data about their students' learning as a basis for discussion. This data can include standardised measures, but should also involve a wide variety of data, including teacher-constructed tools. Teachers may be motivated to sustain their efforts if they can see student improvements over time. See Taylor et al., 2011.

9.2.3 Collaboration with others

Collaborative, reflective practice is one of the most accessible and effective ways for teachers to develop their practice in a way that is meaningful for them. Collaboration can happen in many ways; for example, within a school, or through a network, such as a local Education Centre, or with colleagues in a university. In their study of seven effective literacy projects, Taylor et al., 2011, noted that all studies featured the development of a positive culture and collaborative work practices.

9.3 Evidence- Based Methods of Continuing Professional Development

Bean and Morewood, 2011, have identified four approaches to professional development that show promise in terms of improving classroom teaching (and ultimately, student learning).

i) Literacy Coaching

It is suggested that the best professional development is 'job embedded' (Bean and Morewood, 2011). Coaching models, which allow teachers to observe, to have practices modelled for them, to co-teach, to practice new methods and to be provided with feedback have been found to be effective.

ii) Professional Learning Communities

One approach to professional development is the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools. This approach allows teachers to work with their teaching colleagues, typically within their own school, but also in clusters of schools. In these settings, teachers evaluate their practice and contribute to decision making and problem solving. This approach requires trust, respect and commitment. Kennedy's work (Kennedy, 2010) was undertaken in an urban disadvantaged primary school and focused on empowering teachers through professional development. Very significant improvements in children's literacy achievements were recorded in this research.

Professional learning community at work.

Part 1   Part 2   Part 3   Part 4   Part 5

iii) Teacher Research

When teachers engage in research, it is often because of professional studies, but it can also be linked to collaborations with universities, training colleges or other agencies, such as NEPS or the NBSS. A strength of this approach is that it allows teachers to feel empowered and involved in the process. In action research models, they may be generating their own data, thus leading to a more sophisticated understanding of data generally.

iv) Technology

The internet has also opened up a vast range of resources and teacher development opportunities. Many of the agencies listed in the next section offer on-line supports and resources, including podcasts, as well as more traditional courses and supports. Technology also opens up a new form for professional dialogue and sharing, such as blogs, wikis and tweets.

9.4 Accessing Continued Professional Development

Click here to read the final report of the EU high level group on literacy (2012) and click on www.eli-net.org to read about the European Literacy Policy Network (ELINET).

There are a range of supports available to teachers in Ireland.

- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) www.pdst.ie

- Education Centres

- Literacy Association of Ireland (was known as Reading Association of Ireland) www.reading.ie

- Special Education Support Service, www.sess.ie

- National Educational Psychological Service

- Irish Learning Support Association http://ilsa.ie/

- Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education http://irishassociationofteachersinspecialeducation.com/

- Institute of Child Education and Psychology Europe www.icepe.co.uk

Key Texts- Literacy in the Early Years

Author, Date, Title	Published by/ Commissioned by
A Balanced Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction Cowen (2005)	Published by the International Reading Association
Creating Strategic Readers Ellery (2009)	Published by the International Reading Association
Guided Reading Fountas and Pinnell (1996)	Heinemann
Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education Kennedy, Dunphy, Dwyer, Hayes, McPhillips, Marsh, O'Connor and Shiel (2012)	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) In association with St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, The University of Sheffield, the Education Research Centre.
Primary Language Curriculum Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile English-medium schools, English Language 1 and Irish Language 2 (2015)	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment & Department of Education and Skills
Report of the National Reading Panel Fourteen individuals, including 'leading scientists in reading research' (2000)	Convened by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, in consultation with Secretary of Education, at the request of US Congress
Reading Instruction that Works Pressley (2006)	Guilford Press
Independent review of the teaching of early reading Rose (2006)	Department of Education and Skills, UK
What Research has to say about Reading Instruction Samuels and Farstrup (2011)	International Reading Association

Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten through 3rd Grade Shanahan, Callison, Carriere, Duke, Pearson, Schatscheider, Torgeson (2010)	National Center for Educational Evaluation and Regional Assistance Institute of Educational Sciences NCEE 2010-4038 US Department of Education
Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel Shanahan, Cunningham, Escamilla, Fischel, Landry, Lonigan, Molfese, Schatschneider Strickland (2008)	National Institute for Literacy National Center for Family Literacy RAND Corporation
Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children Snow, Burns, Griffin (1998)	Office of Special Education Programmes, Office of Educational research and Improvement, National Institute on Child Health and Human Development

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