Structured Literacy: An Effective Approach for All Students

Kristie L. Stu-McCarthy

Abstract: Learning to read is an essential skill that allows students to increase their knowledge of any topic they desire. Many students struggle to learn to read and teachers are tasked with the challenge of ensuring all students, including students with reading disabilities, are successful readers. This paper examines the structured literacy approach as a successful method to teaching all students to read. It gives a clear description of the components of a structured literacy approach and the benefits it has over using typical literacy practices, such as balanced literacy or whole language approaches, to teach reading. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that all students succeed and are called to advocate for the structured literacy approach in their schools.

Structured Literacy: An Effective Approach for All Students

Learning to read may be one of the most anticipated events as students begin their school careers and enter kindergarten. However, for some students, this task is met with struggle, disappointment, and a negative attitude toward reading that could affect their entire school experience. Our children deserve the opportunity to learn to read successfully, and it is the responsibility of school districts to provide students with an effective instructional approach that is based in science and appropriate for all students to learn to read. School districts should reexamine their reading curriculum to ensure that a structured literacy approach is being implemented with fidelity.

A great debate about how to teach reading has been going on for years. The "Reading Wars" is an educational and political debate about how to teach reading. Some educators and politicians believe that explicit, systematic phonics instruction, which is part of structured literacy, should be the basis of reading, while others believe that typical literacy practices, such as whole language or balanced literacy approaches, are appropriate methods. The whole language approach is a philosophy for learning to read by emphasizing meaningful connections to language and literacy through life experience, active discussion, writing, and speaking instead of breaking words down into decodable parts (Dixon & Tuladhar, 1996). This paper will focus on the phonology and sound-symbol association (phonics) elements of structured literacy.

What is Structured Literacy?

Structured literacy is a term coined by the International Dyslexia Association (Ray, 2020). It is an approach to reading that teaches the components of literacy in a highly explicit and systematic manner. The International Dyslexia Association's six

elements of structured literacy include phonology, sound-symbol association, syllables, morphology, syntax and semantics (Cowen, 2016). In addition to the elements of structured literacy, three principles which are systematic and cumulative, explicit, and diagnostic, guide how the elements are taught (Cowen, 2016).

The main difference between learning to read with a structured literacy approach versus typical literacy practices, such as whole language or balanced literacy approaches, is the explicit and systematic elements for the teaching of phonics. An explicit and systematic phonics program needs to consist of sequential phonics essentials, precise, unambiguous instruction, and the ability to practice reading words using phonics strategies (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005).

Explicit

Explicit teaching means that the teacher is giving direct instruction of the skill. The teacher would model the skill and state exactly what the students need to know and then the students would have extensive practice on the skill. Lane and Contesse (2022) followed the framework of structured literacy to create an explicit and systematic phonics program titled UFLI Foundations. According to the UFLI Foundations teacher manual (2022), explicit instruction follows the gradual release of responsibility method (I do, We do, You do). This is essential for teachers to apply because the teacher gives explicit instruction, demonstrates and models the skill (I do), guides the students through practice of the skill (We do), then allows students to practice the skill independently (You do). An example of an activity that follows an explicit phonics lesson would be a making words activity. During this type of lesson, after the teacher delivers the direct instruction, the teacher is directly involved by requesting what words the students build and circulating the room giving timely, corrective feedback (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). A typical literacy practice might include a worksheet about the skill where the teacher gives the directions and the students complete the worksheet independently, but do not receive corrective feedback until the teacher has time to assess their work (Mesmer & Griffith, 2005). Giving immediate feedback to students is essential to students' achievement. According to Visible Learning 250+ Influences on Student Achievement, feedback received an effect size of 0.66, which translates to having the potential to accelerate student achievement (Corwin, 2019).

Systematic & Cumulative

Systematic teaching of early literacy skills means that the skills are taught in an organized manner. The UFLI Foundations teacher's manual (2022) provides a scope and sequence that begins with the alphabet, systematically adds more advanced skills such as vowel teams, and ends instruction with affixes. Prerequisite skills are taught first before more complex skills can be added (Spear-Swearling, 2019). For example, students would be taught that the letter s makes the /s/ sound before introducing the digraph sh. Also, students would be taught to decode simple words that would follow the vowel-consonant-vowel pattern before being expected to decode multisyllabic words.

Diagnostic

Diagnostic is another principle of structured literacy. Just like any skill in any subject being taught, assessment is a critical part of the process. The assessment process follows a formative structure and periodically assesses the students on previously taught skills. Teachers will use observation as well as brief quizzes to measure student success and to assist with pacing and next steps within the lesson framework (International Dyslexia Association, 2020). Teachers use the diagnostic data to adjust their pacing, differentiate according to individual needs, and make decisions on if the students are ready for the next skill within the systematic process of structured literacy.

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is a student's ability to manipulate individual sounds in a spoken word. These individual sounds are called phonemes and are the smallest units of sound in spoken language. The English language consists of 43 phonemes of which 25 are consonants and 18 are vowels (International Dyslexia Association, 2020). These phonemes can be combined to form individual words. Phonemic awareness is an auditory and verbal skill and does not include the written word. Phonemic awareness skills include phoneme isolation, phoneme identification, phoneme categorization, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, and phoneme deletion.

Sound-Symbol Association

Sound-symbol association (phonics) is when students begin to associate a letter sound with its name or label and then tie the sound (phoneme) to its symbol (grapheme). This is known as the alphabetic principle and is the basis of learning how to read decodable words (Villaume & Brabham, 2003). Teachers must explicitly teach phonemes and graphemes systematically in order for decodable words to be read and have meaning.

Why Use Structured Literacy to Teach Reading?

When you examine both structured literacy and typical literacy practices to teach reading, you may find benefits to both. However, the vast amount of research that has been conducted has proven that teaching phonemic awareness and phonics in an explicit, systematic manner will benefit all students. Proponents of typical literacy practices will argue that students will learn to read by being exposed to whole words through shared reading experiences with high interest literature. Using typical literacy practices would seem to be adequate for most students, but pure exposure to words is not appropriate for students with dyslexia or decoding difficulties. D'Mello and Gabrieli (2018) report that between 5% - 17% of students have developmental dyslexia. Furthermore, Young (2018) reports that 40% - 50% of students learning to read require systematic, explicit instruction to be successful. Even though the remaining percentage of students will learn to read easily with standard instruction through typical literacy practices, Young (2018) reports that they will benefit from

a structured literacy program. Although the Visible Learning 250+ Influences on Student Achievement doesn't directly report on structured literacy, it does give phonics instruction an effect size of 0.70 (Corwin, 2019). The effect size for teaching phonics is leaps and bounds higher than that of the whole language approach which has an effect size of 0.06 and is considered to only have a small impact on student achievement (Corwin, 2019).

Phonemic awareness and sound-symbol association (phonics), must be taught in an explicit, systematic manner, so that all students can master reading. A meta-analysis of the research on phonics instruction was conducted by the National Reading Panel (2000). The effect sizes of the studies that involved the teaching of phonics increased from a 0.41 for strictly teaching phonics to a 0.55 when phonics instruction was taught systematically and began early (Castles et al., 2018). The National Reading Panel's (2000) evidence-based report has concluded that phonemic awareness knowledge is one of the two best predictors of how efficiently students will learn to read in the first two years of formal education. The teacher's role would be to provide systematic and explicit phonemic awareness instruction to assist students in achieving mastery so phonics instruction becomes more meaningful for the students. The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that regardless of the method used for teaching phonics, (i.e phoneme-grapheme approach, onset-rime approach, word family approach), students' reading achievement was better than not teaching phonics at all.

As stated previously, there are 43 phonemes in the English language. Mastering only a few of these phonemes will allow a student to be able to read words soon after they are introduced. For example, the systematic and cumulative curriculum provided by the Orton-Gillingham method teaches the phonemes and graphemes of c, o, a, and d in that particular order. Not only do these four letters allow students to read consonant-vowel-consonant pattern real words such as cad, dad, and cod in addition to many pseudowords, forming these letters for writing is cumulative as well. The letter c is created with a half circle, but to form an o the c gets completely closed to a circle shape. The benefit of teaching these letters and sounds in a systematic manner not only benefits the students phonics skills, but also helps their writing skills by teaching the phonemes and graphemes in a cumulative manner. If we teach just six more letters and their phonemes and graphemes using the structure of the Orton-Gillingham method, students will now be able to read 350 three-sound words, 4,320 four-sound words, and 21,650 five-sound words (Ordetx, 2021). If you compare this to typical literacy practices such as whole language, a student would be exposed to a finite number of words during a reading lesson and therefore would only learn those words. It is essential that teachers explicitly teach phonemes in a pattern that allows students to decode and encode as many words as possible early on in the instructional sequence.

Learning to recognize graphemes and be able to connect them to a phoneme is a complicated task. Once phonemes are learned from explicit and systematic teaching, students will begin the process of decoding words. Word decoding is understanding that most words are made up of individual, predictable phonemes and can be blended together to create a word. A true test of if a student has mastered phonemes and decoding is asking students to read pseudowords. This is a great skill to master for decoding purposes, but a word must have a meaning attached to it for

reading comprehension to occur. In 1986, Gough and Tunmer created a formula called The Simple View of Reading (Farrell et al., 2019). The formula states that reading comprehension is the product of decoding times language comprehension (Farrell et al., 2019). A student will never reach reading comprehension if they do not master decoding and language comprehension. Students who haven't learned how to blend phonemes together to decode words will struggle to make meaning out of what they have read. It is essential that teachers ensure that students master decoding through explicit and systematic instruction because decoding is a necessary skill that must be learned for students to achieve comprehension as demonstrated by The Simple View of Reading.

Structured literacy has received criticism from those who support typical literacy practices because they claim it is a practice of "kill and drill" instead of being an engaging delivery of instruction (Spear-Swerling, 2019). However, some methods include hands-on learning opportunities such as building words with letter tiles, color coding sentences to denote different parts, and Elkonin Boxes (sound boxes), which are used in the UFLI Foundations program to represent different sounds in words (Lane & Contesse, 2022). The Orton-Gillingham Three-Part Drill uses multi-sensory sand for students to practice phoneme and grapheme skills after both have been taught explicitly and systematically. For example, the teacher will say a phoneme. We will use /t/ for this example. The students will say, "/t/, t says /t/," while writing the grapheme in the multi-sensory sand and underlining it (Robbins, 2018). This method is not only engaging, but it satisfies the visual, auditory or kinesthetic learning needs of students.

The overwhelming research of the success of the structured literacy approach has not only caught the eye of reading teachers, but it has also influenced lawmakers to take action. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 specifies that phonemic awareness and phonics, as well as other components of reading such as fluency, vocabulary acquisition and comprehension, are essential components of reading instruction and should be taught in an explicit and systematic manner (2002). This same phrasing was used when the Every Student Succeeds Act became law in 2015. In addition to the federal laws that have been passed regarding explicit, systematic instruction to teach reading, laws have been passed at the state level requiring districts to teach reading using research-based methods. In an article written for EducationWeek, Schwartz states, "As of July 28, 2022, 29 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws or implemented new policies related to evidence-based reading instruction since 2013 (2022, p.1). Five of those states specifically state that reading instruction must be explicit and systematic, a structured literacy program must be used, or that teacher preparation programs must train teachers in explicit and systematic instruction for teaching reading (Swartz, 2022). Locally, the State of Ohio has passed a new law to identify students with dyslexia, which took effect in April 2021 (Ohio's Dyslexia Guidebook, 2022). The state of Ohio is requiring dyslexia screening of all K-3 students and for older students who transfer from another state (Ohio's Dyslexia Guidebook, 2022). Teachers are required to become certified in a structured literacy program and begin intervention with students who have been identified as dyslexic, using an approved structured literacy program (Ohio's Dyslexia Guidebook, 2022).

Conclusion

Teaching a student to read may be one of most rewarding, but stressful challenges that early elementary teachers face. This challenge not only comes with individual obstacles, such as not having the proper training or fully understanding the best methods for how to teach reading, but it also may come with obstacles brought about by district mandates and curriculum implementations. Even when faced by these challenges, teachers are responsible for the academic achievement of their students. Executing best practices for reading is essential for our students to succeed. Structured literacy is more than just the newest buzz word or fad. It is a well-researched approach based in the science of reading that all teachers should be using. Regardless of the demographics of your district, you will have students with dyslexia or reading disabilities. Explicit, systematic instruction is necessary for these students to learn to read, but it will also benefit your typical learners. It is up to educators to change the mindset of those who believe that typical literacy practices are enough and start advocating for the structured literacy approach so all students can become successful readers.

References

Castles, A., Rastle, K., & Nation, K. (2018). Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 19*(1), 5–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100618772271

Corwin. (2019, June). V*isible learning 250+ influences on student achievement.* Corwin Visible Learning Plus. https://visible-learning.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/VLPLUS-252-Influences-Hattie-ranking-DEC-2017.pdf

Cowen, C. D. (2016). *What is structured literacy?* International Dyslexia Association. https://dyslexiaida.org/what-is-structured-literacy/

Dixon, J., & Tuladhar, S. (1996). Whole language: An integrated approach to reading and writing. *Action-Learning Manuals for Adult Literacy,* 4.1-67. https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cie_actionlearningmanual

D'Mello, A. M., & Gabrieli, J. D. (2018). Cognitive neuroscience of dyslexia. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 49*(4), 798-809.

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 1177. (2015). https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf

Farrell, L., Hunter, M., Davidson, M., & Osenga, T. (2023, January 24). *The simple view of reading.* Reading Rockets. https://www.readingrockets.org/article/simple-view-reading

International Dyslexia Association. (2020). Structured literacy: Effective instruction for students with dyslexia and related reading difficulties. *International Dyslexia Association.* https://dyslexiaida.org/structured-literacy-effective-instruction-for-students-with-dyslexia-and-related-reading-difficulties/

Lane, H., & Contesse, V. (2022). *UFLI foundations.* Ventris Learning. https://www.ventrislearning.com/uflifoundations/

Mesmer, H. A. E., & Griffith, P. L. (2005). Everybody's selling it--but just what is explicit, systematic phonics instruction? *Reading Teacher, 59*(4), 366–376. https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.59.4.6

National Reading Panel (U.S.) & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (U.S.). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pd

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 6319. (2002). https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/1/text

Ohio Department of Education (2022) *Ohio's dyslexia guidebook.* https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Literacy/Dyslexia/Ohio_s-Dyslexia-Guidebook.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US

Ordetx, K. (2021). *What is the science of reading?* IMSE Journal. https://journal.imse.com/what-is-the-science-of-reading/.

Ray, J. S. (2020). Structured literacy supports all learners: Students at-risk of literacy acquisition-dyslexia and English learners. *Texas Association for Literacy Education Yearbook, 7*, 37-43.

Robbins, L. (2018). *Three part drill.* CPS Intervention. http://www.cpsinterventions.com/three-part-drill.html

Schwartz, S. (2022, December 30). *Which states have passed 'science of reading' laws? What's in them?* Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/which-states-have-passed-science-of-reading-laws-whats-in-them/2022/07

Spear-Swerling, L. (2019). Here's why schools should use structured literacy. *International Dyslexia Association, 8*(2). https://dyslexiaida.org/heres-why-schools-should-use-structured-literacy/#:~:text=What%20Is%20Structured%20Literacy%3F,reading%20comprehension%2C%20written%20expression).

Villaume, S. K., & Brabham, E. G. (2003). Phonics instruction: Beyond the debate. *Reading Teacher, 56*(5), 478–482.

Young, N. (2017). *Ladder of reading infographic. Examiner.* International Dyslexia Association. https://dyslexiaida.org/ladder-of-reading-infographic-structured-literacy-helps-all-students/

About the Author

Kristie Stu-McCarthy is a 15-year education veteran with experience in teaching students of all ages as well as administration. She possesses a B.S. from Eastern Michigan University and is completing her M.E. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Toledo. Kristie is currently a special education teacher.