Powering Lifelong Learning for Elementary Students with Dyslexia
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Today’s K-5 literacy initiatives and action plans call for supporting all learners, including those with specific disabilities such as dyslexia, with intensive instruction to develop the knowledge and skills required for effective reading.

As evidence of the growing focus on addressing this category of learners, in 2016, the United States Senate passed Senate Resolution 576, requiring schools and state and local educational agencies to be aware of the educational implications of dyslexia and to address them properly (S.R. 576).4

Many states are making progress in developing guidelines to assist in identifying, assessing, and supporting students with dyslexia. Some states have outlined a set of screening and assessment measures which aim to pinpoint the needs of learners with dyslexia and provide proper instruction to:

- Systematically identify student learning needs through the implementation of evidenced-based instruction and assessment
- Use Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) instructional models
- Provide evaluation for dyslexia that includes assessment of letter identification, letter-sound associations, word identification, reading fluency, reading comprehension, spelling, and written expression

What is Dyslexia?

According to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), dyslexia is a neurobiological learning disability that is characterized by difficulties with word recognition, poor spelling, and minimal decoding abilities (IDA 2018).2

Typically, students with dyslexia have difficulties in these areas due to a deficit in the phonological component of language. Students can also experience problems with reading comprehension and reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge (Lyon et al. 2003).3

Phonological processing is the most common deficit in students with dyslexia. Phonological processing includes a student’s ability to acquire sound-letter correspondences, know syllables, learn new words, communicate clearly in writing, and understand vocabulary and different word meanings (Wagner et al. 2013).6

Direct Instruction and Achieving Literacy for ELs

Direct Instruction is a research-validated method of teaching proven to transform all students into confident learners. It is designed with lessons that are explicit, intensive, consistent, and interactive to ensure the best learning experience for all students. Direct Instruction differs from other instructional methodologies in that it:

- Uses an extensively tested method of systematic, explicit instruction that ensures every student can learn
- Is proven to work in many different types of classrooms, schools, and districts
- Enables achievement through clear, consistent reinforcement of learning from teachers

Research Evidence: In a study conducted on the effects of Direct Instruction for ELs in elementary school, it was found that Reading Mastery was highly effective for Spanish-speaking students and students speaking some other languages in improving these essential skill areas. The study also found that the Direct Instruction approach achieved the same level of success for ELs as with English-only students (Abbott et al., 2007).1

Research Evidence: Another study which implemented Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading into an elementary school setting reported that EL students who received the instruction had higher test scores and better word-decoding abilities than those who did not receive instruction (Ary et al., 2000).2
Direct Instruction Raises Mastery of Literacy for English Learners

In 2014–15, there were more than 4.8 million English Learners (EL) in the United States. The population of ELs across the country is growing rapidly and effective instruction that meets the specific needs of ELs is critically important as these students strive to achieve the highest learning outcomes. Academic research recommends that an instructional reading curriculum for ELs should:

- Be evidence-based
- Be explicitly taught
- Include a systematic curriculum of essential reading skills

Explicit, systematic instruction in literacy can help all K-12 students, including those who are ELs, who are struggling to achieve higher progress by providing regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills. This, in turn, empowers students to apply these skills toward content learning.

Guiding Principles for Supporting ELs

The success of English Learners in second-language literacy is directly tied to the success of these students in all core academic areas. For ELs to achieve the highest possible outcomes, there needs to be an equitable foundation of learning for all.

Based on research across a wide range of disciplines, McGraw-Hill has developed and applied a set of nine guiding principles to support ELs as they acquire content and develop language. Four of these principles are particularly relevant to reading achievement among English Learners and have informed the development of DI programs:

- **Provide Specialized Instruction**: Well-implemented instruction focused on acquiring English language skills while also teaching grade-level content is essential for providing additional support to ELs.
- **Cultivate Meaning**: Providing intensive vocabulary instruction in every way—writing, speaking, and listening—encourages the learning of meaning and cultivates deeper understanding of language.
- **Develop Language in Context**: Providing regular, structured opportunities to develop written language skills empowers the development of language in the context of content area instruction.
- **Scaffold to Support Access**: Implementing scaffolding strategies that connect language to visual or written information in ways that clarify language—pictures, video, and graphic organizers—helps all students access grade-level core content.

Effective Approaches for Teaching Students with Dyslexia

Students with dyslexia are present in almost every classroom, so effective instruction is critical. Between 15-20% of the US population exhibits symptoms of dyslexia (IDA 2016). Effective instruction for students with dyslexia should be explicit, direct, cumulative, intensive, and focused on the structure of language. Especially for these students, teachers and educators need to focus on how the curriculum is taught and what content should be taught. In this context, the Structured Literacy approach is highly effective for students with reading disabilities.

Direct Instruction employs a Structured Literacy approach which is explicit and systematic. The Direct Instruction model provides a structured curriculum to support reading and spelling programs that serve learners with dyslexia, in addition to those with other special needs.

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Structured Literacy is systematic, cumulative, and diagnostic. This approach emphasizes the acquisition of accurate and fluent decoding skills with multiple forms of progress monitoring across many different learning paths. Two Direct Instruction curriculum programs, SRA Reading Mastery and SRA Corrective Reading, provide essential content that educators should be teaching to students with dyslexia. Both programs teach decoding strategies by incorporating six major elements that work together to provide effective instruction for students with dyslexia:

1. **Phonology**
2. **Sound-Symbol Association**
3. **Syllables**
4. **Morphology**
5. **Syntax**
6. **Semantics**

Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading are identified by Dr. Sally Shaywitz (Shaywitz 2005) as effective research-based programs because they incorporate the features that are essential elements for teaching students with dyslexia. Both programs successfully do the following:

1) **Address the phonological weakness that blocks decoding and, in turn, interferes with word identification**; teach phonemic awareness through segmenting, blending, and rhyming.

2) **Teach phonics explicitly and systematically in a way that empowers learners to analyze and sound out an unknown word, rather than guess from the pictures or context.**

3) **Afford many opportunities to develop fluency, the ability to read accurately, quickly, and smoothly.**

4) **Progress from sounds to words to stories, all the while supporting students with ample practice.**

5) **Provide the direct instruction and rich reading experiences needed to build vocabulary and to develop reading comprehension strategies.**

6) **Deliver intensive instruction that is more finely calibrated and more explicit than that provided by other programs.**
About Direct Instruction

Direct Instruction delivers a learning experience proven to transform students at all ability levels into highly skilled and confident learners—whether they are striving learners, English Learners (EL), learning disabled, or on-level.

Direct Instruction curricula give educators the instructional framework and resources required to meet and even surpass school achievement and improvement objectives.

Skills are introduced gradually, reinforced, and continually assessed, so no student can fall behind. Lessons are scripted and quickly paced. Teachers correct errors immediately and motivate students with positive reinforcement.

Fifty years of independent research shows measurable success in all kinds of classrooms.

To find out more, visit directinstruction.com.

References and Sources Consulted:


About McGraw-Hill Education

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