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# Developing Foundational Reading Skills in the Early Grades

Teaching Decoding Skills  
Through Small-Group Lessons

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# Introduction

The ability to read is among our greatest accomplishments and enjoyments, and being able to understand and engage with a range of text types is critical to success in our ever-changing society. Helping young children “crack the code” and become independent readers who love to read is one of the most important roles of a teacher in the early years of schooling. To enable children to become proficient readers, teachers must lay the groundwork for students’ foundational reading skills, including teaching them the essential skill of decoding written words.

This paper discusses the instruction and development of foundational reading skills, with a particular focus on how to help students learn to decode words in order to become independent readers. Given the period at which this foundational reading instruction needs to take place, the primary audience for this piece is transitional kindergarten through first grade teachers and those who support them, such as instructional coaches, principals, and curriculum designers. In addition, the guidance in this paper may be useful for educators who support students in grades two and beyond, as some students in those later grades come to school with learning needs that involve foundational reading skills (e.g., newly arrived immigrant students who are learning English for the first time). Appropriate modifications should be made for older students based on students’ ages, primary languages, and other characteristics.

## Reading: The Bigger Picture

Being able to read a variety of literary and informational texts can be both entertaining and enlightening. For example, reading literature can offer access to new worlds, invite us to understand ourselves better by reflecting on universal themes, and help us empathize with other people and perspectives. Ideally, reading literature can also help us see that we have choices in how the world is shaped. As fiction author Neil Gaiman puts it,

Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you, and you alone, using your imagination, create a world and people in it and look out through other eyes . . . Empathy is a tool for building people into groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals . . . You’re also finding out something as you read vitally important for making your way in the world. And it’s this:  
The world doesn’t have to be like this. Things can be different. (Gaiman, 2013)

While reading fiction can open our minds in a variety of ways, reading a range of nonfiction texts — such as articles in science magazines, historical accounts, or newspaper op-ed pieces — also enriches our minds and helps us engage more deeply with the world and with one another. Knowledge is power, and the more information we can obtain through reading a variety of texts, the deeper the well from which we can draw to understand how the world works and our role in shaping it. Much of this powerful engagement with texts, with others, and with the world is unavailable if one has not “cracked the code” of reading.

In order to delve deeply into books, articles, blog posts, and other texts, one must first be able to fluently and accurately decode the print on the page. It is critical for all children to decode independently no later than *the middle of first grade*.

Effortless decoding is the ultimate goal of foundational reading skills instruction. One effective way of teaching decoding skills is through small-group decodable reading lessons. In the early grades, these lessons involve the use of short books with words that have letter-sound correspondences that children already know and are ready to blend together in print, along with some high-frequency words to help the book make sense and be engaging to young students. Along with other foundational reading skills teaching and learning tasks, small-group decodable reading lessons are designed to ensure that all children gain independence with the code and begin their journeys as independent and critical readers of a variety of text types across the disciplines as early as possible.

## Organization

This paper begins with a discussion of how to implement the California Common Core State Standards for Foundational Reading Skills and the English Language Development Standards, based on the guidance provided by the California English Language Arts/English Language Development (ELA/ELD) Framework (2014). An excerpt from the California ELA/ELD Framework is presented to explain the components and sequencing of foundational reading skills instruction. Next, the paper discusses the importance of tailoring and differentiating foundational reading instruction in order to effectively support *all* learners, particularly English learners, in developing these skills as quickly as possible. Finally, the paper provides an in-depth classroom vignette to illustrate how one kindergarten teacher designed teaching and learning tasks so that all of his students would be on track to achieve independence with the code both quickly and joyfully. The vignette includes a step-by-step process for teacher-facilitated, small-group decodable reading lessons.

# The California ELA/ELD Framework: Guidance on Teaching Foundational Reading Skills

California's ELA/ELD Framework provides over 1,000 pages of sound, research-based guidance, along with practical teaching examples, on supporting all children and youth in transitional kindergarten through high school graduation to develop language and literacy competencies that are critical to their academic and career success and to meaningful engagement in civic life.

The framework is the state of California's guidance for implementing the California Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for ELA/Literacy and the California English Language Development (ELD) Standards. It is a comprehensive and rich resource that all teachers and leaders in California should use as their primary guide for shaping curriculum, instruction, programs, and assessment.

A comprehensive and equitable early learning program in transitional kindergarten through first grade (TK–1) should focus on the five overarching teaching and learning themes identified in the California ELA/ELD Framework (Figure 1). The themes comprise

the core of teaching and learning for all grade levels: meaning making, effective expression, foundational skills, content knowledge, and language development. These themes act as organizing components for all grade-level teaching and learning, including TK–1, and throughout the ELA/ELD Framework there is a strong emphasis on the integration of these themes in learning tasks.<sup>1</sup> All teaching and learning should be firmly grounded in the standards, and these five themes highlight the interconnections among and between two sets of standards: the CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy and the CA ELD Standards.

**Figure 1. California English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework: Circles of Implementation**



<sup>1</sup> For an extensive discussion about the five themes, see Chapter 2 of the California ELA/ELD Framework. To read about the purpose, structure, and intent of the California CCSS for ELA/Literacy and the California ELD Standards, see Chapter 1.



## Foundational Reading Skills: Developing “Independence with the Code”

Foundational skills (or foundational reading skills) are specifically called out as a teaching and learning theme in the ELA/ELD Framework because acquisition of foundational reading skills is essential for independence with printed language. Meaning making and decoding are both critical to early learning and language literacy development. All young children need to achieve “independence with the code” – that is, the ability to decode text on one’s own – by the middle of first grade. All children in TK–5 (and beyond, if necessary) should be monitored closely to ensure that they are able to decode and encode (i.e., write the sounds they hear) as quickly as possible.

The text box below, “ELA/ELD Framework Excerpt: Independence with the Code,” presents an excerpt from the ELA/ELD Framework that emphasizes the importance of early independence with the code. This excerpt outlines the steps through which children should progress as they develop decoding skills, beginning with phonological awareness.

### ELA/ELD Framework Excerpt: Independence with the Code

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A major goal of early reading instruction is to teach children the skills that allow them to become independent readers. Children learn to recognize effortlessly an increasing number of words, which frees them to think about what is being read. They master the skill of decoding words. This starts the process of putting together words with letters children can automatically recognize, sounding out the words more and more fluidly, and then adding these words to the set of words they can read with little conscious effort.

A child sounds out, or decodes, a new word by connecting the letters or letter combinations with the sounds they represent and blends those sounds into a recognizable spoken word with its attendant meaning. (Of course, this spoken word should already be in the child’s vocabulary.) Once a child decodes a word several times, this sound, symbol, meaning package becomes established, and from then on, when the child encounters the word in print, the meaning is automatically understood the way a familiar word heard or spoken is understood.

Assuring that by mid-first grade each student knows how to decode or sound out new words is crucial to becoming an independent reader. What does it take to decode? First, the student should be phonemically aware (especially able to segment and blend phonemes), understand the alphabetic principle, and be able to use that knowledge to generate and blend sounds from the various categories of letter-sound and spelling-sound relationships in the English language. Sequences of letter-sound instruction usually start with children learning the sounds of consonants and short vowels and then systematically progressing to consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words. This is followed by learning long vowels and, as used in words ending with an e, consonant blends, diphthongs, and the various ways to represent sounds from high-frequency to rarer words. By second grade the student should be familiar with all spelling patterns and the sounds they generate and be able to decode two-syllable words accurately.

Second, most students need to learn how to decode or sound out and blend unfamiliar words. They need constant practice in decoding new words representing the letter-sound and spelling-sound patterns they have already learned. Students also need to learn to automatically recognize a significant list of sight words and high-frequency words with either irregular or



uncommon spelling-sound patterns where decoding is less useful. They need to expand their vocabularies so that more words can be recognized automatically by being decoded and understood. Finally, learning how to spell the words that consist of the spelling-sound patterns being introduced reinforces learning the alphabetic principle.

Compared to more phonemic written languages such as Spanish, English is much more orthographically complex. For example, English has approximately 43 sounds but only 26 letters so some sounds must be represented by letter combinations such as *th* or *sh*. In contrast, in Spanish there are just about the same number of sounds as letters. In English there can be several ways of representing a sound, such as the long sound *ā* (for example, in the words *fate*, *bait*, *way*, *hey*, *straight*, or *freight*) and some letter combinations can represent different sounds in different words (such as “*ough*” in *tough*, *through*, and *ought*). This complexity can be confusing for many students and is the reason why instruction should start with simple patterns and build to the more complex ones as students develop the idea of how the alphabetic principle is used in decoding words. This strategy makes the words used in beginning reading instruction more regular and similar to the more transparent languages (in which most students have a much easier time mastering the alphabetic principle than in English).

*Note:* For the purposes of this publication and for clarity, wording has been modified slightly, without changing the original meaning.

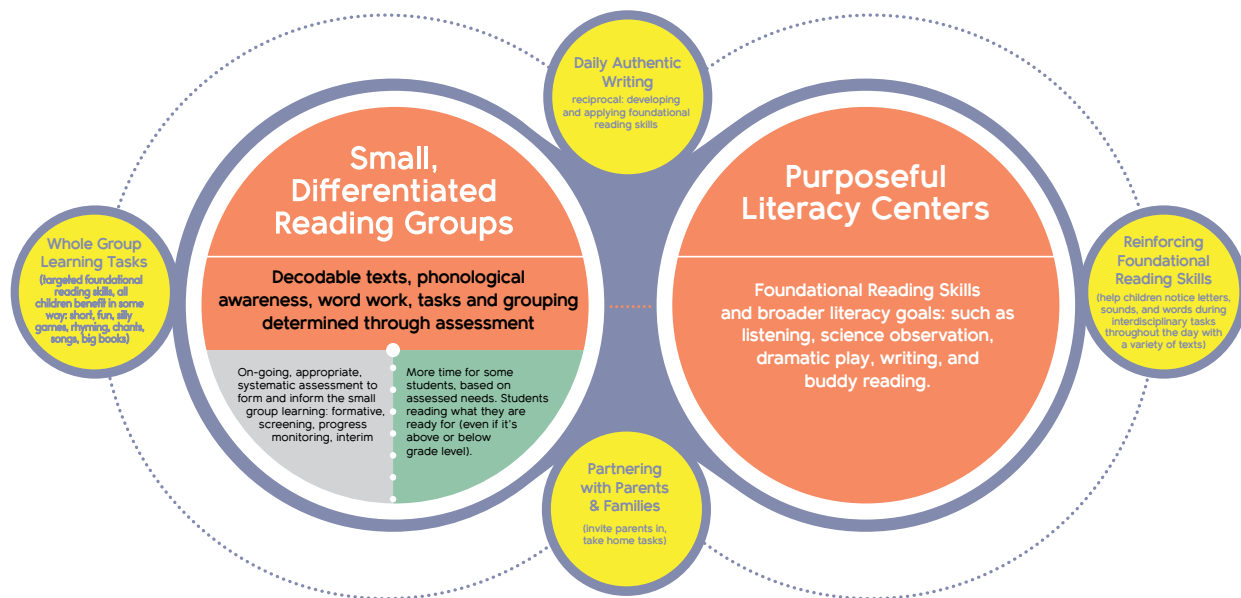
*Source:* California ELA/ELD Framework (2014).

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## Learning Tasks Designed to Develop Foundational Reading Skills

There are several key classroom learning tasks, pedagogical approaches, and student groupings that teachers can use when teaching children foundational reading skills such as decoding. Figure 2 represents various intersecting and overlapping activities, strategies, and groupings designed to facilitate foundational reading skills development in transitional kindergarten through first grade (TK–1), based on guidance in the California ELA/ELD Framework.

**Figure 2. Learning Tasks to Support the Development of Foundational Reading Skills**



The two largest elements in Figure 2 are “small, differentiated reading groups” and “purposeful literacy centers” because these are typically considered to be cornerstones of foundational reading skills learning and often take up the bulk of classroom time in this area of language and literacy development. The other four elements in the figure are also key aspects of foundational reading skills instruction. Below are descriptions of each of the elements from Figure 2.

- » **Small, differentiated reading groups:** At the center of foundational reading skills development are teacher-led small, differentiated reading groups. The teacher assigns these groups based on results from a comprehensive assessment system that includes frequently observing students as they grow in their independence with the code. The teaching and learning tasks in this teacher-led small-group instruction vary according to what the children’s learning needs are. The teacher is not in a fixed “literacy center” but instead has the flexibility to pull children from their independent tasks, group them by need, and work with them for the duration of time the children need.
- » **Purposeful literacy centers:** While the teacher is working with small groups, the children engage with text and with one another at purposeful literacy centers that cultivate their developing language and literacy skills. They may be working on forming or matching letters at a “word-making” center, writing stories at an “authors’ corner,” or making observations and noting them in their science journals at a “science lab.” One important literacy center in TK–K (and even in first grade), especially for English learners, is a “dramatic play area” where the children can use language authentically and act out stories, events, or daily activities. As children become more confident with writing, they may even use or write their own skits to act out scenarios. In the early grades, these literacy centers are

important opportunities for young children to learn through play and self-directed exploration and also to develop their collaboration and negotiation skills as they work and play together.

- » **Daily authentic writing:** Daily writing (multiple times throughout the day) is critical for foundational skills development, as writing reinforces foundational reading skills and is also an important means of communication and effective expression. Squiggles and approximations of letters and words (often seen in TK and early K) count as writing. Children should have ample opportunities throughout the day to engage in authentic writing, such as journal writing, labeling pictures, and story writing, in addition to the occasional more structured writing (e.g., using a sentence frame or practicing writing letters of the alphabet). Very young children may draw and label their pictures, and the teacher can transcribe their messages, then read the message together with the child. This reinforces the idea that we write to communicate with one another and that children have important things to say.
- » **Whole group tasks:** Some foundational reading skills activities are done in whole groups. These include singing silly songs (e.g., emphasizing rhyming or word play), chanting or chorally reading poems, or playing fun word games (e.g., guess my word: /b/ - /a/ - /t/), which easily can be done during transitions. These experiences should benefit all children in some way, whether the goals are linguistic or social and emotional in nature. For example, even children who are already decoding fluently and do not “need” support with phonological awareness development benefit from singing daily as this is a fun and joyful task that can promote a positive classroom culture.
- » **Reinforce foundational skills all day long:** This is done in both planned and spontaneous ways. For example, teachers might strategically plan to point out specific letters or words on billboards or signs while the class takes a walking fieldtrip. The opportunity to help students notice letters and words might also arise spontaneously in the midst of a learning activity.
- » **Partnering with parents and families:** When parents and families are viewed as partners in early literacy development, children benefit. Teachers might invite parents into the classroom to work with children at literacy centers, read books aloud to small groups or the whole group, or teach the children songs from the family’s culture or community. Teachers can send foundational reading skills “kits” home, along with tips for parents to engage their children in fun activities. This should be balanced with support for parents to engage their children in rich interactive read-alouds using complex texts and other language-rich activities that promote early learning and positive home-school connections.

## Not One-Size-Fits-All: Tailoring Instruction of Foundational Reading Skills

While the classroom activities and student groupings described in Figure 2 are designed to facilitate the development of students’ foundational reading skills, it is important to also keep in mind that effective foundational reading skills instruction should always be tailored to each child’s assessed needs and be adapted quickly based on ongoing (minute-by-minute, daily) formative assessment. The importance of tailoring foundational reading skills instruction to each student’s strengths, needs, and growth trajectory is expressed in the California CCSS for ELA/Literacy:

These foundational skills are not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are necessary and important components of an effective, comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines. Instruction should be differentiated: good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know – to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention. (California CCSS Reading Standards for Foundational Skills K–5, 2010, p. 17)

In the early years of schooling, there may be wide variation in children's foundational reading skills, so instructional time and approaches should be adapted to their needs. Children who appear to be developing foundational skills at a slower rate may need their teachers to spend more individual or small-group teaching time with them so that they develop decoding skills in a timely manner. Careful observation and an intentional assessment system helps teachers to know where specific and intensified reading instruction is needed. Children who already have the end-of-year foundational reading skills when they enter kindergarten or first grade should have the opportunity to excel beyond that skill level. Differentiation – personalized learning based on children's identified needs – is key and small-group reading instruction is the most effective way to provide this differentiated attention.

The California ELA/ELD Framework also calls for teachers to think deeply about contexts for learning in order to foster classrooms that are positive, respectful, culturally responsive, and joyful places for learning and growing. All learning tasks should occur in an environment that is motivating, engaging, integrated, intellectually rich, and respectful. The ELA/ELD Framework calls for educators to take an additive and asset-based stance toward their students (this is addressed explicitly in Chapter 9 and woven throughout the entire framework). This asset-based stance includes understanding, valuing, and leveraging the cultural and linguistic resources children bring to school, as well as respecting all languages and dialects of English as equally valid and valuable.

## Scaffolding for English Learners

Children who are English learners (EL students), depending on their level of English language proficiency and other background factors,<sup>2</sup> should be able to develop foundational reading skills at the same pace as their non-EL peers, as long as appropriate scaffolding is provided. Working from an asset-based, additive stance, teachers should be aware of which foundational skills their EL students already have in their primary language and which of those skills are transferable to English so that valuable instructional time is not wasted. For example, since phonological awareness transfers across languages, children who have these skills in their primary language do not need to be retaught them in English. A child who can orally blend sounds together in their primary language does not need to relearn the skill of orally blending sounds in English.

In addition, teachers should be aware of those foundational skills that do not transfer across languages and take this into account in instructional planning. For example, the writing system in Arabic is quite different from the writing system in English, so even if a child whose primary language is Arabic is familiar with print concepts in Arabic, they are likely to need instruction in learning the Latin alphabet for English, as compared or contrasted with Arabic. Thus, their knowledge of print in Arabic does not transfer directly to knowledge of print in English. Teachers can work closely with school and district language specialists to obtain and understand this information.

### *Considering accents and dialects*

In culturally and linguistically diverse schools, it is important for teachers to understand that not all children come to school with the same language backgrounds. Some EL children may speak English with an accent.

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<sup>2</sup> Many children who are English learners were born in the United States and already speak English. Other children are new to both spoken and written English when they enter the primary grades. The California ELD Standards and the California ELA/ELD Framework provide guidance on attending to the foundational skills development of children at different levels of English language proficiency.

Other children may speak a dialect of English from their home communities or families, such as children who speak African-American English (AAE) or another dialect of English. Other children who are native speakers of English may speak with a regional accent. When children are learning to decode, pronunciation differences that are due to accent or dialect variation should not be interpreted as decoding problems. Teachers should listen to their students carefully as they are speaking and reading aloud in order to determine where to provide judicious feedback on pronunciation. Teachers should also accept children's pronunciations as they practice orally blending or reading words containing sounds that are new to them, purposefully focusing on the skill of fluent decoding.

This is not to say that teachers should ignore dialect differences or accents. On the contrary, teachers should respectfully and strategically draw students' attention to how words are pronounced in so-called<sup>3</sup> "standard American English." For children who speak culturally or regionally based dialects of English (such as AAE), it is particularly important to convey the message that all dialects are valid, but that different settings may value certain ways of using language above others (for example, the kind of everyday language we use with friends generally differs from the literary language and vocabulary used by fiction writers in storybooks). For EL children and all bilingual and/or bidialectal children, it is important to convey that spoken English does not have to sound "perfect" or like standard American English for learning to occur.

### ***Attending to meaning when decoding***

Great care should be taken to ensure that EL children – and all children – who are learning to decode understand that it is important to attend to meaning when they read. Some EL children may not know the meaning of the words they are decoding, so teachers can support their meaning making while decoding by anticipating which words or phrases EL children may not know and briefly explaining what the words mean before the students read. This sort of assistance is given within a broader context of rich early learning where the children are developing language through frequent informal and structured academic interactions in which they are encouraged to actively negotiate meaning in peer-to-peer discussions about a range of intellectually rich content area topics.

As they are learning to read, some students may want to race through the text, decoding as quickly as they can. All children should be encouraged to understand that the ultimate goal of reading is to make meaning, not just to accurately decode and read as fast as one can. Accordingly, children should be encouraged to learn to slow down and stop periodically to think about what they read, which is an important skill for all readers of all ages.

### ***When to focus on foundational reading skills for English learners***

For EL children, the California ELA/ELD Framework recommends that the development of foundational reading skills in English be addressed during ELA instruction (with integrated ELD instruction<sup>4</sup>). During designated ELD instruction, foundational skills that children are learning should be reinforced, but direct instruction of foundational skills is not the focus of this protected time. For children enrolled in an alternative bilingual program, the guidance provided by the ELA/ELD Framework is the following: "(W)here foundational literacy skills are first developed in a language other than English, foundational literacy skills

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<sup>3</sup> "So-called" is used intentionally to openly question the concept of a "standard American English" dialect that is valued above other dialects, such as those typically used in marginalized communities (e.g., African-American English, Chicana/o English).

<sup>4</sup> The California ELA/ELD Framework promotes a comprehensive approach to English language development in which the ELD standards are used in an integrated way in all disciplines.

in English may be introduced and reinforced during designated ELD. However, for the most part, designated ELD instructional time should be devoted to developing the academic vocabulary, grammatical understandings, and discourse practices children need for comprehending and conveying understanding of ELA and other disciplinary content, provided in meaningful, interactive, and grade appropriate ways” (California Department of Education, p. 163). For additional considerations for foundational skills instruction for EL students, see Appendix E.

This section has highlighted some important aspects about foundational reading skills instruction in the early years, particularly for EL students. For additional details about the standards and instructional considerations for foundational reading skills in the early years, see the California Common Core State Standards: Reading Standards for Foundational Skills K–5 (Appendix D) and the CA ELD Standards: Foundational Literacy Skills Considerations for English Learners Students in Transitional Kindergarten through First Grade (Appendix E). In addition, a great deal more guidance on foundational skills instruction, along with references to additional resources, is provided in the California ELA/ELD Framework.

# Classroom Vignette: Teaching Foundational Reading Skills in Kindergarten

This section provides a classroom vignette that illustrates teaching and learning tasks that support students' independence with the code. The vignette reflects guidance provided in the California ELA/ELD Framework and provides an exemplar classroom for TK–1 teachers to learn from in their continuous professional learning. The vignette shows several aspects of the teacher's planning and instruction, including independent learning centers that the teacher has established, in which small groups of students work together on different kinds of learning tasks; assessment and lesson-planning activities that the teacher and his colleagues regularly engage in; as well as a step-by-step sample lesson in which the teacher uses small groups to teach his students to decode.

## Background: Mr. Khang's Kindergarten Classroom

It's close to the end of the school year, and the 25 students in Mr. Khang's kindergarten class are flourishing in the rich learning environment their teacher has established for them. At the beginning of the year, 15 children in Mr. Khang's class were identified as English learners (EL students) – 10 with Spanish as their primary language, and five with Hmong as their primary language, and all at the early *Expanding* level of English language proficiency.<sup>5</sup> Two children are proficient in two languages (Spanish and English), and the remaining seven children are native English speakers and live in a community where African-American English is spoken. All of the children qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. From Mr. Khang's perspective, all of his students and their families bring to school deep wells of cultural and linguistic assets, and he sees his job as valuing, leveraging, and adding to those assets.

Mr. Khang has a range of daily activities in his classroom, including many extended discussions about ideas the children are curious about; interactive teacher read-alouds of complex literary and informational texts; frequent writing; science and math exploration; singing and playing; opportunities for expressing creativity through drama and the visual arts; time to process feelings and problem-solve together in a community circle; and small-group reading instruction that is differentiated based on needs identified through assessment. Some foundational reading skills development occurs in whole-group settings through fun rhyming chants and poems and with games and songs focused on letters and words (e.g., the A-B-C song). More explicit foundational skills instruction is provided in small groups or with individual children based on learning needs.

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<sup>5</sup> The California ELD Standards identify three levels of English language proficiency: Emerging, Expanding, and Bridging. More nuance about children's specific levels can be expressed by using the terms "early" and "late," such as "early Emerging," "late Expanding." Please refer to the California ELD Standards to learn more about these English language proficiency levels and how they might compare to your state's ELP/ELD Standards.



## Establishing Independent Learning Centers

Mr. Khang spent the first month of school preparing his young students to interact with their peers in the classroom's "learning centers." In the first couple of weeks, as the class was coming together as a community, he modeled each learning center task for the children, sometimes by acting out and explaining the tasks himself and sometimes in a "fishbowl" format in which several children acted out a learning task while the others watched. The class established classroom norms (which they decided to call "Our Caring and Learning Community") for how they would interact with one another. Some of the norms are "We help each other to learn," "We explore ideas," "We say kind words and do kind things," and "We talk when there's a problem."

These norms have grounded the classroom community all year long, and they supported the children to become increasingly independent over the first several weeks of school as they learned to work independently at the learning centers. In order to foster this independence, Mr. Khang first worked with most of the students in whole-group lessons while a small group of four or five children worked independently at one learning center, all the while being monitored and supported by a parent volunteer. Each child had multiple opportunities to work at all of the different learning centers and with different peers. Gradually, Mr. Khang shifted the balance so that by the second month of school, he was able to work with a small group of four or five children while the other children worked in small groups or pairs at independent centers. Mr. Khang also invited one parent volunteer per day to monitor the learning centers and support the children to gain independence with the process so that he could work with the small groups. Later in the year, the parent volunteers moved into a more significant role of reading with children, listening to children read, or interacting with them in other authentic ways at the learning centers.

The independent learning centers are set up to help the children to develop language and literacy, content understanding, and autonomy. The centers also allow Mr. Khang to work with small, differentiated reading groups so that all students make steady progress toward – or exceed – the end-of-year California CCSS for ELA/Literacy Foundational Skills. The norms and routines he established and the time that he invested at the beginning of the year has ensured that the children know how to engage with high-quality tasks at the learning centers.

Each week, the children refer to a chart where each day's center groups are visibly displayed. Mr. Khang groups his students strategically in order to allow for the children to socialize with all of their peers in small-group, goal-oriented settings. The children do not stay in the same group for each center task each day. Instead, they visit five learning centers each day in different diverse-ability groups. The children also have a "learning centers journal" so that they can record their learning at each center (children who are just learning to write may use symbols or squiggles that approximate letters, which is a normal part of writing development).

### *Different goals and activities for each learning center*

Understanding that in the early grades, play and talk are essential for learning and that children need to have opportunities to explore and inquire, Mr. Khang's learning centers include the following:

- » **Dramatic play center:** Includes a puppet theater, a dress-up chest, and a playhouse where the children can invent and act out their own stories or everyday life experiences they have encountered.
- » **Table toys and blocks center:** Children can explore math and engineering concepts.

- » **Writing with art center:** Children can collaborate on writing and illustrating stories or poems, advocacy or informational posters, and other text types, or write letters to their classmates and other members of the school community.
- » **Listen and reflect center:** Includes recordings of culturally relevant stories and poetry, as well as informational texts, that the children listen to, discuss with one another, and reflect on through writing and drawing, based on a predictable, or routinely used, prompt.
- » **Library center:** A cozy corner where the children can enjoy reading books together from their book bags and then selecting other books they want to read.
- » **Science exploration center:** Invites the children to be “kid scientists” through their exploration of science topics that are part of a larger unit of study. For example, during a unit about ecosystems, the children observe and discuss what is happening in a terrarium, and record and label their observations and questions in their science logs, which stay at the center.
- » **Word work center:** Children can practice their phonics, decoding, and high-frequency word reading skills through playful activities that rotate each week and are tailored to students’ assessed learning needs. For example, the children may have the task of being word (or letter) detectives by using a short list of letters or words (pre-determined by the teacher) and working together to explore books or “investigate the room” to find and then track (in their detective’s notebooks, of course) the words or letters that are on the list.

## Small-Group Reading Table

Mr. Khang has a kidney-shaped reading table where he meets with small, skills-based reading groups (as opposed to the mixed-ability small groups he assigns for the learning centers) for decodable reading lessons (see the “Decodable Versus Leveled Books” text box below for details on the differences between “decodable” and “leveled” readers). The reading table is not a learning center through which the children “rotate.” Instead, Mr. Khang invites his students to the reading table from their learning centers so that he can provide them with the differentiated instruction they need for the amount of time he deems appropriate. Sometimes, his small groups consist of only one or two children, and he may only need 10 minutes or fewer with them. Most of the time, however, he works with groups of four or five children for 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the needs of the group. He does not necessarily see every group or every student each day and the groups change about every three weeks and sometimes even more frequently, based on Mr. Khang’s ongoing formative assessment of students’ skills.

Sometimes during the year, Mr. Khang may use rich literary trade books with small groups to promote language development (including students’ understanding and use of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary), listening comprehension, meaning making with a more sophisticated text (such as identifying the book’s themes or life lessons), and a love of reading. These complex literary texts (e.g., *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña or *Marisol MacDonald Doesn’t Match* by Monica Brown) are the same culturally responsive and highly engaging books he reads aloud to the whole class. However, in the small-group setting he is able to attend more closely to the children as they discuss some of the “below-the-surface” and “deeper dive” questions (that is, more complex questions that require inference making and discussion). In the smaller group setting, he can clarify questions the children have, prompt the children to elaborate on their ideas or to use more sophisticated vocabulary, and ask follow-up questions that extend the children’s thinking. These targeted prompts may not be needed for all children, since he also does these things when he reads aloud to the whole class, but for some students – such as English learners or students with special needs – this smaller group setting provides a more equitable opportunity to engage with the complex texts.

## Decodable Versus Leveled Books

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Teachers use many different types of books with young children every day, including complex literary and informational texts. It is helpful to know the difference between these kinds of books and how they are useful for young children's content, language, and literacy development. Selecting the right kind of book is critical for developing and teaching effective lessons, so it is important for teachers to fully understand the different attributes and educational goals of the texts they select for their students. Two types of books – *decodable* and *leveled* books – are explained below.

The difference between decodable and leveled books is in the words and sentences in the texts. Leveled books use high-frequency words and (mostly) words that can be inferred from pictures. When these books are used in early reading, children are told to look at the pictures to help them "predict" what the words are and to use the first letter sound of words as a "cue" to guess the word.

Decodable books also use high-frequency words that the children already know or are still mastering, but they mostly use words that have letter-sound correspondences that the children already know and are ready to blend together in print. In decodable books, children should be able to work out the words even if they have not seen that exact word before, provided they have already learned the letter-sound correspondence for all of the letters in the book and also have the phonemic-awareness skill of blending sounds into words.

Decodable readers are very important in the early years of schooling. As soon as children know a handful of consonant letter-sound correspondences and just one vowel letter-sound correspondence, they can begin decoding. The faster they "crack the code," the faster they will be able to apply their attention to making meaning with complex texts.

### Leveled Book Example (Kindergarten)

In this example, each sentence below is on a page by itself in the book, with a colorful photograph that matches the text exactly.

Title: Rosa Counts Pineapples

Rosa has one pineapple. Rosa has two pineapples. (and so on . . .) Rosa has too many pineapples!

There are several problems with this type of text in terms of supporting children to achieve independence with the code by the middle of first grade. One is that children can guess most of the words by looking at the pictures. Another is that most of the words are not decodable by beginning kindergarten students. They would not yet have learned many of the graphemes, including the diphthong (ou) or the consonant blend (-nts), or how to sound out two-syllable and three-syllable words like "Rosa," "pineapples," and "many." The word "has" can be decoded, but might have been taught as a sight word, and so the children would still not be practicing accurate decoding.

There is nothing wrong with children enjoying this type of book, but if the purpose is to teach children how to decode, it's not the best fit.

## Decodable Book Example (Kindergarten)

In this example, each sentence is on a page by itself, with a simple illustration. The illustration helps the child confirm that they decoded accurately.

Title: I Like My Pig

I like my pig. My pig and I like to play. We like to hop on the rug. We like to get a bug.

We like to sit on a rug in the sun. My pig likes to bug me in the sun. He dug a pit. He put my mug in a pit.

While this is not great literature in terms of the meaning and themes it has to offer, it does meet the purpose of providing children with a chance to practice and master an important skill: accurate and fluent decoding. The earlier they master this skill, the earlier they will be engaging independently with complex texts.

*Note:* Leveled text example and decodable book example adapted from Jay Matthews (2008, May 14).

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## Assessment and Planning

The K–1 teaching team at Mr. Khang’s school meets each week (and often more frequently in pairs or in grade levels) to collaborate on lesson planning, analyze student work for evidence of learning, and reflect on their own practice.

### *Assessing foundational reading skills*

At the beginning of the year and then once every two months thereafter, the team meets to discuss the results of several foundational reading skills assessments they administer to each of their students until the students “master” the skills. They use the following reading skills assessments:

- » Several phonological awareness assessments (rhyming, blending, segmenting)
- » Basic Phonics Skills Test (BPST, which assesses letter-sound knowledge and accurate decoding)
- » A letter naming assessment with lower case and upper case letters
- » A high-frequency word assessment
- » A decodable reader running record assessment (differentiated, based on students’ instructional reading level) with a few literal comprehension questions at the end

The teachers are released for a half day at least three times a year – with a substitute overseeing their classroom – so they can assess their own students. The battery of assessments (which varies by child since some children may master certain skills before others) takes about 20 minutes to administer per child at the beginning of the year and less time as the year progresses and students master an increasing number of skills. In addition, the teachers administer a short writing assessment to all of their students, in which students write their name and a sentence that the teacher dictates. The writing assessment is also done three times a year and is meant to complement the monthly writing samples, daily journal, and other writing the teachers use to monitor the children’s progress so that they can plan instruction accordingly.

The teachers rely on these common assessments, along with their day-to-day observations, notes of students’ progress, and the authentic writing students do daily to keep them on track with differentiating instruction for their students as they work toward the end-of-year goals. Each teacher has a spreadsheet with a row for each student’s name and each assessment as a column header. Having all of the students

and their assessment results visible on one page allows the teachers to identify where students are in their learning of each skill. By color coding where students are (e.g., blue for “ahead of expected progress,” green for “making expected progress,” and purple for “not yet making expected progress”), the students can be grouped appropriately for differentiated, small-group instruction, and progress can be charted over time. The teachers rely heavily on their formative assessment practices: the day-to-day, minute-by-minute careful observation of students and the correlating timely and appropriate actions based on interpretation of students’ strengths and needs.

The K-1 teaching team deliberately discusses this evidence of student learning from various sources and plans accordingly for the learning needs of each student. The team intentionally considers the specific learning needs of their EL students, other culturally and linguistically diverse learners, and students with special needs. Since the school has a dual immersion strand, half of the teachers teach foundational skills in English and the other half in Spanish. While the team understands that there are differences in the details of foundational skills instruction in the two languages, they find that it is powerful to collaborate on the common areas of instruction, including assessment processes and pedagogical practices, as well as ideas for learning centers. The team has built strong professional relationships and they rely upon one another to support their mutual professional growth.

### ***Planning for small-group reading instruction***

Mr. Khang and his colleagues use framing questions, adapted for foundational skills instruction from the framing questions for lesson planning in the California ELA/ELD Framework, to plan for small-group reading instruction (see Figure 3 for a list of the framing questions used by the teaching team). The team also uses a common lesson planning template (Appendix D) for each small-group lesson to keep them on track with learning tasks and pacing.

**Figure 3. Framing Questions for Planning Decodable Reading Lessons**

<i>Framing questions for all students</i>	<i>Added questions for students who are English learners or second language (L2) learners<sup>a</sup></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What background knowledge, skills, and experiences do my students bring to this lesson?</li> <li>• What is the learning target for this lesson, and what should students be able to do at the end of the lesson?</li> <li>• Am I attending to all of the California CCSS FS in a cluster, rather than just one?</li> <li>• Do my students speak a dialect of English different from mine or English as an additional language? What are some culturally responsive considerations that need to be included?</li> <li>• What types of scaffolding, accommodations, or modifications will individual students need to effectively engage in the lesson tasks?</li> <li>• How will my students and I monitor learning during and after the lesson, and how will that inform instruction?</li> <li>• How can I partner with families on the goals of this lesson/series of lessons?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the English language proficiency levels of my students as evidenced by ongoing assessment and observation?</li> <li>• What primary language knowledge can I connect to and/or leverage for this lesson?</li> <li>• What words might be new and need a brief explanation?</li> <li>• How will students interact with the text in collaborative, interpretive, and productive modes?</li> <li>• How will I focus students' attention on how language works?</li> </ul>

a. Second language (L2) learners are students in bilingual programs, typically native English speakers, who are learning the target language (e.g., Spanish) as an additional language.

Source: Adapted from the California ELA/ELD Framework (2014).

## Sample Lesson: Teaching Decodable Reading Skills in Small Groups

In this day's lesson, Mr. Khang meets with five small reading groups as the rest of the students work collaboratively at the independent learning centers.

### *Grouping students by reading skill*

For their small reading groups, the children have been grouped with students of similar reading skills (based on their assessed skills), and each group will be working with a different decodable text. For all of the children, Mr. Khang introduced simple word reading as soon as they had learned a small number of letter-sound correspondences. He began teaching the children to decode texts with connected sentences containing one-syllable words (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) as soon as they knew the letter sounds for a handful of consonants and one vowel. Through ongoing assessment, Mr. Khang knows that one reading group has exceeded the grade-level standards and is still progressing; most of the children are on track to master the grade-level foundational reading skills; and one or two students are below grade-level standards and are receiving significant extra attention from Mr. Khang to ensure that they will soon be on track as well.

The first group Mr. Khang meets with consists of five children. Three of the children are EL students who are now at the *Expanding* level of English language proficiency, although they entered kindergarten at the *Emerging* level, and two of the children are native English speakers who speak African-American English. The children know that they are the first group to meet with Mr. Khang because the names of the children in each reading group are posted on the whiteboard.

### **Multi-step routine for the small-group decodable reading lesson**

The children know that when Mr. Khang calls each group, they are to tidy up their learning center materials and quietly proceed to the reading table. As the first group of children arrives at Mr. Khang's table, they immediately open their folders, take out the decodable book they have been reading with Mr. Khang the past few days, and begin reading the book out loud and at their own pace as Mr. Khang listens by leaning in to each child at different points in the text. This is the first step in Mr. Khang's small-group reading routine, a routine that promotes efficiency and allows Mr. Khang to work with more reading groups each day.

Mr. Khang's learning target for the day's lesson is to have the children read a new decodable book with new short vowel words with consonant digraphs and blends and two new high-frequency words. The steps of the familiar instructional routine Mr. Khang uses are outlined in Figure 4 (and a more detailed explanation of each step is provided in Appendix A).

### **Figure 4. Routine for Small-Group Decodable Reading Instruction**

- **Step 1:** Read Familiar Decodable Text (~3 min.)
- **Step 2:** Phonological Awareness (~1 min.)
- **Step 3:** Phonics and Word Work (~2 min.)
- **Step 4:** Read New Decodable Text (~5-7 min.)
- **Step 5:** Literal Comprehension Questions (~1 min.)
- **Step 6:** Quick Write (~3 min.)
- **Step 7:** Practice Reading the New Text (independently at the library center)

*Note: Times are approximate.*

**Step 1: Read familiar decodable text.** After the children have read their familiar decodable text, and Mr. Khang feels confident they are ready to move on to the next one based on their accurate decoding and ability to read the text at the appropriate rate and with expression, he introduces the new text. He shows them the cover of the book, reads the title, and tells them very briefly what it is about.

**Step 2: Phonological awareness.** Next, he prepares the children to successfully practice decoding the text by having them orally blend and segment some of the words they will be decoding. He first has the children orally blend the words.

*Mr. Khang:* We're going to play the blending game.

*Children:* Yay!



*Mr. Khang:* Listen to me as I remind you how to play the game. /m/ /o/ /m/ /z/ – moms, /p/ /o/ /t/ /s/ – pots. Okay, ready to play? [The children nod and say yes.] /m/ /o/ /p/ /s/

*Children (in unison):* Mops!

The children play the blending game with five more words, including the words “box” and “fox,” and then Mr. Khang tells them they are going to play the segmenting game.

*Mr. Khang:* Okay, you just put all those words together, now let’s see if you can take them apart into their little sounds, or segment them. Ready? Hops.

*Children:* /h/ /o/ /p/ /s/

The children play this game with several more words. Mr. Khang notices that one child, Jada, is having difficulty with the segmenting game. He supports her by slowing down his pronunciation of the words and, for one word, segmenting the word orally with her individually.

**Step 3: Phonics and word work.** Next, Mr. Khang continues to preview the new decodable words the children will encounter in the text by showing them the list of words with a short “o” in writing on a small hand-held white board. He knows through assessment that the children know the sounds of all of the graphemes<sup>6</sup> they will encounter in the new text, so he does not spend time practicing letter-sound identification. He models decoding the first word while tracking it with his finger. Then, he has the children decode the same word with him, first slowly, and then at a fluent rate. He invites the children to practice decoding each word in the list, first slowly, grapheme by grapheme, and then at a fluent, normal rate after decoding them.

Mr. Khang previews the two new high-frequency words in the new text (“little” and “some”) by writing them on the whiteboard, telling the children that the words are not decodable words for them (yet), and then playing a game to memorize the spelling of each word in a fun way. The children spell out the letters of each word orally and then say the word as though cheering.

*Mr. Khang:* Okay, ready to do the word cheer?

*Children:* Yeah!

*Mr. Khang:* Okay, watch and listen. I’ll do it first, then you chime in with me. “S” – “o” – “m” – “e,” “s” – “o” – “m” – “e,” “s” – “o” – “m” – “e,” “some,” “some,” “some!”

The children do the word cheer with Mr. Khang for the two new words, much to their delight. Now they are ready to practice reading the new decodable and high-frequency words in a connected sentence. Mr. Khang writes the sentence on the white board:

The little fox hops on the box.

<sup>6</sup> Graphemes are spellings for individual phonemes. Consonant graphemes include single consonants (for example, p, t, n), consonant blends (for example, bl-, scr-, -st), consonant digraphs (for example, th, -ng), and combinations with silent letters (for example, -bt, wr-), as well as some oddities (qu-, x). Vowel graphemes include single vowels (a, e, i, o, u), and other vowel combinations (for example, ai, igh, ou, oi).

The children read the sentence with Mr. Khang a few times, first focusing on decoding the words, and then on reading with more expression. Now, they are prepared to successfully practice reading the new decodable text.

**Step 4: Read new decodable text.** Mr. Khang hands each child a copy of the new decodable text,<sup>7</sup> and the children read it out loud at their own pace, not in unison. Mr. Khang has noticed that when the children read in unison, they tend to imitate what they hear the other children saying, rather than decoding the words for themselves. The children track the words with their fingers in order to ensure attention is paid to accurate decoding.

Mr. Khang leans in and listens to each child as they read, to provide differentiated levels of support as needed. He also takes notes on how the children are reading so that he can refer to his notes when planning the next series of lessons. At one point, Jada gets stuck on the word “hops” and is having difficulty putting the last two sounds together.

*Jada:* ho- p, hop, hop- s, hop- s. Can you help me?

*Mr. Khang:* You’re doing the right thing by blending the sounds together. Can you blend the last two sounds a little faster?

*Jada:* ho-, hop, hop- s, hop- s.

*Mr. Khang:* Would you like to sound it out together?

Jada and Mr. Khang sound out the word together, and then Mr. Khang asks her to go back and read from the beginning of the sentence. Jada still sounds out the word in a somewhat choppy way, but Mr. Khang anticipates that with more practice with this text, she will be able to read the word fluently very soon. He quickly notes this interaction and leans in to listen to the other children.

Some children finish reading the text more quickly than others. If they do, they know to go back and begin reading from the beginning, with Mr. Khang’s encouragement to especially focus on reading with expression this time.

**Step 5: Literal comprehension questions.** Once all of the children have finished reading the text at least once, Mr. Khang asks them a literal comprehension question about it, just to ensure that they are attending to meaning making.

**Step 6: Quick write.** At the end of the lesson routine, understanding that writing promotes the development of foundational skills, Mr. Khang dictates a short sentence for the students to write. Today, the sentence he dictates is the same one the children read in Step 3 of the lesson (“The little fox hops on a box”). Mr. Khang watches as the students write their sentences and then asks each student to read them aloud to him before they leave the table.

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<sup>7</sup> Decodable readers are not intended for deep comprehension development, but rather for developing the ability to accurately and fluently decode. However, it is important to dissuade children from racing through a text without understanding what they read and to reinforce the idea that the goal of reading is to make meaning.

**Step 7: Practice reading the new text.** The children take a photocopied version of the text and place it in their folder. Before they go to their next learning center, their job is to practice reading the book to three friends.

After this reading lesson, Mr. Khang takes about 10 minutes to observe his students at their learning centers. He uses a clipboard to take notes in a table on what he observes them saying and doing. The table has a cell with each child's name and a place in which to record the date and some observation notes. Mr. Khang is especially interested in listening to his EL students' conversations. He is listening for language and ideas from the texts the class has been reading in different content areas, and he is also curious about which children are doing most of the talking. Mr. Khang takes a moment to listen to a few students in the library as they practice reading the decodable texts in their reading bags and then reading books they select themselves. These observation notes will inform Mr. Khang's planning of subsequent lessons.

## Teacher reflection and next steps

When Mr. Khang meets with his grade-level team to plan lessons for the next week, he brings his notes from the small reading group lessons and his observations of the learning centers. Mr. Khang discusses his notes from Jada's reading group and shares some initial concerns he has about her progress. One of his colleagues suggests that he consider meeting with Jada individually to provide extra practice in segmenting words with consonant blends and digraphs. The group helps Mr. Khang to make a plan for Jada for the next week and Mr. Khang commits to report on her progress at their next meeting.

Each week, Mr. Khang sends home a copy of the same decodable books the students are reading at school so that they can also practice reading them at home. The books go home in a large book bag, and previously read books stay in the bag so that the children can continue to reinforce what they have learned (e.g., by reading with a parent or to a younger sibling). The parents have expressed that this routine has helped them to understand what their children are learning at school and also provides them with a tangible way to help their children develop as readers. Also included in the book bags are three library books that the children choose themselves during their weekly visit to the library. For EL and other bilingual children, Mr. Khang encourages the children to select at least one book in their primary language so that their parents can read to them. He understands the importance of maintaining one's cultural and linguistic heritage, as he himself is biliterate in his primary language and in English.

Young children are eager and ready to tackle the code of print and unleash the knowledge awaiting them in books. With a well-designed program and the right tools, including decodable books and guidance on how to use them, teachers can make sound instructional decisions so all children are decoding by the middle of first grade, and soon thereafter, independently delving into more complex texts where deeper knowledge and a world of possibilities reside.

# Appendix A. Routine for Small-Group Decodable Reading Instruction

This appendix describes the steps for small-group reading instruction for students learning to decode in English. For students learning to decode in other languages, steps in this routine would be similar – however, teachers would need to make adjustments based on language differences and students' exposure to the language.

All times are approximate.

**Step 1: Reread familiar decodable text** (~3 minutes). The children begin reading the familiar decodable text they've read in the previous few lessons. This builds the children's confidence right away and is a progressive step to reading new decodable text. The teacher listens carefully to each student by leaning in to ensure they are ready to move on to the next text.

**Step 2: Phonological awareness** (~1 minute). With teacher guidance, the children orally blend and segment words that will appear in the text, as well as words with similar structure (e.g. consonant-vowel-consonant words with short "o" or words that have consonant blends). Blending and segmenting the words orally prepares students to do this in print. Some of the sounds in English may be different from sounds in the children's primary language. Be sure to point out any sounds that are new. This should be quick, fun, and feel like a game.

**Step 3: Phonics and word work** (~2 minutes).

- » *Preview letters and sounds* that the children will encounter in the text, if needed, by using an alphabet chart or cards with pictures (e.g., the letter "b" with a picture of a ball). Point to the letters one by one, and say each sound of the letter and then the name of the object *with* the children (e.g., /b/ ball). This should be quick and fun, and if the children already know all of the sounds of the letters that will appear in the text, this part can be skipped.
- » *Preview the new decodable words* the children will encounter in the text by showing them the words in writing (e.g., on a table-top chart or on a white board), saying the sounds of the graphemes with the children while pointing to the graphemes, and then blending the sounds together with the children while tracking the graphemes as they are blended with a finger or pointer. Be sure to say each word again at a fluent, normal rate after reading them.
- » *Preview new high-frequency words* in the new text by showing them on a chart or whiteboard, telling the children what the word is, and then spelling each word and saying it *with* the children in a fun way (e.g., doing a word cheer: "t - h - e - the, t - h - e - the, t - h - e - the, the, the, the!"). Again, this should be quick and fun.
- » *Read a connected sentence* together a couple of times. The sentence should include some of the new decodable and high-frequency words.

**Step 4: Read the new decodable text** (~5–7 minutes). The children read the text out loud at their own pace. They can track the words with their fingers or with a pointer in order to ensure attention is paid to accurate decoding. The teacher leans in and listens to provide differentiated levels of support as needed. For example, if a child gets stuck on a decodable word, ask the child to sound the word out letter by letter. If the child still has trouble, sound out the word together, and then have the child go back and sound it out on his or her own. If the child reads a sentence word by word in a “choppy” way, have the child go back and read the sentence more fluently. If the child gets stuck on a high-frequency word, orally spell the word with the child and then chant it to see if this helps. If not, tell the child the word. As the child is reading, make sure to make positive, affirming comments and occasionally comment on the meaning of the text (e.g., “The fox hops on the box? That’s pretty silly!”).

**Step 5: Literal comprehension questions** (~1 minute). Some children will finish reading the text more quickly than others. If they do, they can go back and begin reading from the beginning, with encouragement to especially focus on reading with expression this time. Once all of the children have finished reading the text, they can respond to one or two literal comprehension questions to ensure that they are attending to meaning making.

**Step 6: Quick write** (~3 minutes). Select a way for the children to write about what they read. If time permits, have each child read what they wrote to you when they finish, and discuss what you notice. Use this writing to inform the next lesson.

- » *Oral dictation.* Read a sentence from the text out loud and have the child write it and then reread it.
- » *Quick write.* Ask a literal comprehension question that prompts the children to write some of the same decodable words and high-frequency words that appeared in the text.

**Step 7: Practice reading the text** (daily practice). The children place the text or a paper copy of the text in their folders and practice reading the text at least three times to a friend at the library center that day and each day until they progress to another text.

# Appendix B. Small-Group Decodable Reading Planning Template

The following is a template that teachers can use when planning decoding reading lessons.

**Figure B1. Small-Group Decodable Reading Planning Template**

<b>Learning Target:</b>
<b>Reread Familiar Decodable Book</b> (~3 minutes*) Decodable book title: Observation notes as students read:
<b>Phonological Awareness</b> (~1 minute) Words to blend: Words to segment:
<b>Phonics and Word Work Development</b> (~2 minutes) New decodable words to preview: New high-frequency words (HFW) to preview: Connected sentence with new decodable and HFWs:
<b>Read New Decodable Book</b> (~6–8 minutes) Decodable book title: Observation notes as students read:  Comprehension question:
<b>Quick Write</b> (~3 minutes) Oral dictation sentence or question for students to write about:
<b>Notes for the next lesson:</b>

\*Note: All times are estimates.

Source: Created collaboratively by Pam Spycher (WestEd) and Thea Fabian (Fresno Unified School District).

# Appendix C. Phonics and Word Recognition Terms

The figure below is from the California ELA/ELD Framework (Figure 3.10). It provides definitions of key phonics and word recognition terminology, including terms related to morphology (linguistic units that contribute to understanding the meaning of a word). Knowledge of these concepts and their terms can help teachers to carefully monitor their students' progress in being able to fluently and accurately decode, and talk with other teachers and parents about children's decoding progress.

**Figure C1: Phonics and Word Recognition Terms**

Term	Definition	Example
<b>Consonant</b>	A phoneme that is articulated with partial or complete closure of the vocal track	/b/ in <i>boy</i> /t/ in <i>at</i> /r/ and /n/ in <i>run</i>
<b>Short Vowel</b>	An open phoneme (that is, one for which there is no obstruction by the tongue, lips, or teeth of air flow); short vowels are lax in that there is little tension in the vocal cords	/ă/ in <i>cat</i> /ĕ/ in <i>jet</i> /ĭ/ in <i>kick</i> /ŏ/ in <i>stop</i> /ŭ/ in <i>cup</i> /ō/ in <i>book</i>
<b>Long Vowel</b>	An open phoneme; long vowels are tense in that they are spoken with more tension in the tongue muscles	/ā/ in <i>cake</i> /ē/ in <i>feet</i> /ī/ in <i>night</i> * /ō/ in <i>boat</i> * /ū/ in <i>use</i> /ōō/ in <i>school</i>
<b>Diphthong</b>	A vowel sound that involves the shifting of mouth position when spoken	/oi/ in <i>boil</i> ; <i>oy</i> in <i>toy</i> /ou/ in <i>out</i> ; <i>ow</i> in <i>cow</i>
<b>Consonant Blend</b>	Two or three adjacent consonants in a syllable, each of which represents a separate sound	/tw/ in <i>twin</i> /sk/ in <i>mask</i> /str/ in <i>street</i>
<b>Consonant Digraph</b>	Two or more consonants that together represent a single sound	<i>sh</i> in <i>ship</i> <u>ch</u> in <i>chin</i> and <i>tch</i> in <i>watch</i> <i>th</i> in <i>this</i> (voiced /th/) and <i>thin</i> (unvoiced /th/)



Term	Definition	Example
<b>Grapheme</b>	The letter or combination of letters that represent a single sound (phoneme)  (See letter-sound correspondence and spelling-sound correspondence)	<i>f</i> in <i>leaf</i> <i>oa</i> in <i>boat</i> <i>igh</i> in <i>night</i> <i>ough</i> in <i>through</i>
<b>Letter-Sound Correspondence</b>	A single letter and its corresponding sound	<i>m</i> represents /m/ <i>k</i> represents /k/
<b>Spelling-Sound Correspondence</b>	Letter combinations and their corresponding sound	<i>lgh</i> represents /l/ <i>dge</i> represents /j/
<b>Morpheme</b>	The smallest meaningful part of a word	<i>cat</i> <i>cat-s</i> <i>un-happy</i>
<b>Affix</b>	A morpheme attached to the beginning or end of a root	See prefixes, suffixes, and inflectional endings
<b>Prefix</b>	An affix attached to the beginning of a root word	<i>re</i> in <i>redo</i> <i>un</i> in <i>unkind</i> <i>pre</i> in <i>preschool</i>
<b>Suffix</b>	Affix attached to the end of a root word  (See inflectional ending and derivation)	<i>ing</i> in <i>discussing</i> <i>less</i> in <i>useless</i> <i>ful</i> in <i>helpful</i>
<b>Inflectional Ending</b>	A type of suffix that does not change a word's part of speech but does change its:  tense number comparison person	<i>ed</i> in <i>jumped</i> ; <i>ing</i> in <i>flying</i> <i>s</i> in <i>dogs</i> and <i>es</i> in <i>wishes</i> <i>er</i> in <i>faster</i> ; <i>est</i> in <i>hardest</i> <i>s</i> in <i>plays</i>
<b>Derivation</b>	A type of suffix that changes the root word's part of speech or grammatical role	<i>ly</i> in <i>swiftly</i> <i>tion</i> in <i>projection</i>
<b>Decodable Words</b>	Words that are wholly decodable on the basis of the letter-sound and spelling-sound correspondences already taught	Assuming the relevant letter-sound and spelling-sound correspondences have been taught:  <i>dog</i> <i>run</i> <i>ship</i>

Term	Definition	Example
<b>Sight Words</b>	<p>1) Words that are taught as wholes because they are irregularly spelled (see below) or because the spelling-sound correspondences have not yet been taught</p> <p>2) Regularly spelled words that have been decoded enough times that they are recognized on sight, that is, with little conscious effort</p>	<p><i>they</i></p> <p><i>there</i></p> <p><i>could</i></p> <p>Assuming the relevant letter-sound and spelling-sound correspondences have been taught and practiced enough times for automatic recognition:</p> <p><i>fish</i></p> <p><i>jump</i></p> <p><i>catch</i></p>
<b>Irregularly Spelled High-Frequency Words</b>	High-frequency words that are not decodable in that the letter-sound or spelling-sound correspondences are uncommon or do not conform to phonics rules	<p><i>said</i></p> <p><i>of</i></p> <p><i>was</i></p> <p><i>come</i></p>

\*The long /ī/ and /ō/ sounds are classified by some as diphthongs.

Source: Figure 3.10 from the California ELA/ELD Framework (2014).

# Appendix D. California Common Core State Standards: Reading Standards for Foundational Skills K–5

State standards are end-of-year outcomes that, with appropriate instruction, all children should be able to attain (with some exceptions based on individual characteristics). Standards help keep teachers focused on critical aspects of children’s educational development. Some children will progress in mastering the standards at a faster rate, and therefore teachers should refer to standards from higher grade levels so that students continue to progress. Some students may start their learning process at a point at which it makes sense for the teacher to use standards from lower grade levels, with the understanding that the end-of-year minimum goal is always the students’ grade-level standards.

The Kindergarten and Grade 1 Foundational Reading Skills standards are provided here as a reminder that all decoding skills teaching and learning tasks should be grounded in the standards.

**Figure D1. California Common Core State Standards: Reading Standards for Foundational Skills K–5**

	<i>K</i>	<i>Grade 1</i>
<b>Print Concepts</b>	<div>1. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.<div>a. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page.</div><div>b. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters.</div><div>c. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print.</div><div>d. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.</div></div>	<div>1. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print.<div>a. Recognize the distinguishing features of a sentence (e.g., first word, capitalization, ending punctuation).</div></div>

	<i>K</i>	<i>Grade 1</i>
<b>Phonological Awareness</b>	<p>2. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Recognize and produce rhyming words.</li> <li>b. Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words.</li> <li>c. Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words.</li> <li>d. Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words.* (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /r/, or /x/.)</li> <li>e. Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.</li> <li>f. Blend two to three phonemes into recognizable words. CA</li> </ul>	<p>2. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Distinguish long from short vowel sounds in spoken single-syllable words.</li> <li>b. Orally produce single-syllable words by blending sounds (phonemes), including consonant blends.</li> <li>c. Isolate and pronounce initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in spoken single-syllable words.</li> <li>d. Segment spoken single-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds (phonemes).</li> </ul>
<b>Phonics and Word Recognition</b>	<p>3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words both in isolation and in text. CA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences by producing the primary sounds or many of the most frequent sounds for each consonant.</li> <li>b. Associate the long and short sounds with common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels. (Identify which letters represent the five major vowels [Aa, Ee, Ii, Oo, and Uu] and know the long and short sound of each vowel. More complex long vowel graphemes and spellings are targeted in the grade 1 phonics standards.) CA</li> <li>c. Read common high-frequency words by sight (e.g., the, of, to, you, she, my, is, are, do, does).</li> <li>d. Distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying the sounds of the letters that differ.</li> </ul>	<p>3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words both in isolation and in text. CA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Know the spelling-sound correspondences for common consonant digraphs.</li> <li>b. Decode regularly spelled one-syllable words.</li> <li>c. Know final -e and common vowel team conventions for representing long vowel sounds.</li> <li>d. Use knowledge that every syllable must have a vowel sound to determine the number of syllables in a printed word.</li> <li>e. Decode two-syllable words following basic patterns by breaking the words into syllables.</li> <li>f. Read words with inflectional endings.</li> <li>g. Recognize and read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words.</li> </ul>
<b>Fluency</b>	<p>4. Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.</p>	<p>4. Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Read on-level text with purpose and understanding.</li> <li>b. Read on-level text orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.</li> <li>c. Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.</li> </ul>

*Note:* For guidance on teaching foundational skills in Spanish, see the Spanish translation of the California CCSS for English Language Arts/Literacy (Common Core en Español: <http://commoncore-espanol.com/california-common-core-state-standards-spanish-language-arts-and-literacy-historysocial-studies>).

*Source:* California Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (2013, pp. 17–18),

# Appendix E. California English Language Development Standards: Foundational Literacy Skills – Considerations for English Learners in Transitional Kindergarten through First Grade

Learning foundational reading skills in English is different for children whose primary language is not English. Teachers should inform themselves about their students' language and literacy backgrounds and implement differentiated instructional approaches that ensure appropriate progress toward mastery of foundational reading skills in English. For children in bilingual programs, additional considerations need to be considered since many children in these programs are learning foundational reading skills in their primary language (Spanish, for example) before or at the same time as learning foundational reading skills in English.

Figure E1 presents a chart from Chapter 6 of the California ELD Standards. The chart outlines general guidance for providing instruction to EL children on foundational reading skills that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards for ELA/Literacy. This guidance is intended to provide a general overview; it does not address the full set of potential individual characteristics of EL children that need to be taken into consideration in foundational literacy skills instruction.

**Figure E1. California English Language Development Standards: Foundational Literacy Skills – Considerations for English Learners in Transitional Kindergarten through First Grade**

<i>Student Language and Literacy Characteristics</i>		<i>Considerations for Foundational Literacy Skills Instruction</i>	<i>CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy Reading Standards: Foundational Skills</i>
Oral Skills	No or little spoken English proficiency	Students will need instruction in recognizing and distinguishing the sounds of English as compared or contrasted with sounds in their native language (e.g., vowels, consonants, consonant blends, syllable structures).	<b>Phonological Awareness</b>  2. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).  • RF.K-1.2  •
	Spoken English proficiency	Students will need instruction in applying their knowledge of the English sound system to foundational literacy learning.	

<i>Student Language and Literacy Characteristics</i>		<i>Considerations for Foundational Literacy Skills Instruction</i>	<i>CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy Reading Standards: Foundational Skills</i>
<b>Print Skills</b>	No or little native language literacy	Students will need instruction in print concepts.	<b>Print Concepts</b>  1. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RF.K-1.1</li> </ul>
	Some foundational literacy proficiency in a language not using the Latin alphabet (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Russian)	Students will be familiar with print concepts, and will need instruction in learning the Latin alphabet for English, as compared or contrasted with their native language writing system (e.g., direction of print, symbols representing whole words, syllables or phonemes).	<b>Phonics and Word Recognition</b>  3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RF.K-1.3</li> </ul>
	Some foundational literacy proficiency in a language using the Latin alphabet (e.g., Spanish)	Students will need instruction in applying their knowledge of print concepts, phonics and word recognition to the English writing system, as compared or contrasted with their native language alphabet (e.g., letters that are the same or different, or represent the same or different sounds) and native language vocabulary (e.g., cognates) and sentence structure (e.g., subject-verb-object vs. subject-object-verb word order).	<b>Fluency</b>  4. Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RF.K-1.4</li> </ul>

Source: California English Language Development Standards (Chapter 6) and California English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework (Figure 3.11).

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