

# Reading Curriculum

## Learning Today's Reading Curriculum: Theoretical & Methodological Foundations

### Overview

Learning Today's reading curricula is designed to be used in conjunction with *Smart Tutor™*, Learning Today's web-based differentiated instruction system, or as an instructional resource by teachers or specialists both in school or after-school environments.

The Learning Today reading curricula spans Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The activities can also be used with at-risk older learners who are in need of intervention. The program engages students through interactive activities, engaging animations and connections to real-world themes and metaphors.

### Research-Based Principles

A significant finding from recent research indicates there is no single best way to teach students how to read. A combination of methods and approaches is needed to target different learning styles and profiles as well as learning objectives.

Learning Today's Reading Curriculum includes the following key areas that have proven to especially help young emerging readers move from being able to "learn to read" to "read to learn".

### **Phonics**

Phonics helps new as well as experienced readers make connections between letter patterns and the speech sounds for which they stand. The Learning Today reading curricula incorporates many key research-based principles that make it both effective and engaging for young learners.

Studies have shown that the ability to name the letters of the alphabet is one predictor of a student's success in beginning reading. Since the English language uses 26 alphabetic letters in more than 100 combinations to represent between 44 and 45 speech sounds, the phonics instructional strand begins at this level, with an awareness and recognition of letters and sounds. It then constructs connections between them.

| Our research-based systematic teaching sequence begins with consonant and short vowel

sounds, followed by initial consonant blends, the silent E rule, consonant digraphs, vowel digraphs, r-controlled vowels and diphthongs. In Learning Today's phonics instruction, students learn how to identify and manipulate these various phonetic principles in the beginning, middle and ending parts of words.

Beyond learning important letter patterns and their sounds, students should also learn how to recognize larger units or "chunks" within words. This skill is important in helping students make quick connections from one word to another, increasing their rapid recognition of words. Also, because many within-word patterns (i.e., suffixes and prefixes) often carry meaning, recognizing these larger patterns in words is important in understanding what one reads. In Learning Today's reading curriculum, students are taught to recognize and make meaning from word chunks through lessons in syllabification, compound words, prefixes, and suffixes.

What sets Learning Today's phonics instruction from many other instructional programs is the emphasis on teaching students to use various phonics skills strategically in the context of sentences, stories, letters, and expository paragraphs. Since too much emphasis on phonics encourages students to rely on the "sound-it-out" strategy as their first, and possibly, *only* independent strategy for dealing with problem words, it is crucial that any balanced literacy program include an emphasis on using different strategies to identify unknown words. Subsets of lessons within the Learning Today phonics strand include reading strategy lessons. Beginning with first grade, students are taught how to use 1) graphophonic (letter and sound) cues, and 2) semantic and syntactic cues (meaning and language-based cues) in two separate lessons to figure out unknown words. Then, students are taught the "Tricky Word Strategy" to figure out tricky words by re-reading sentences and using what they know about letters and sounds and the context of the sentence. In the last two strategy lessons, students are taught how to check their reading using various cues and self-monitor their reading on a more metacognitive level. The goal of these reading strategy lessons is to help students find strategies that are useful *to them* with the goal of making them independent readers.

# Reading Curriculum

## Phonemic Awareness

Much research has emphasized the importance of phonemic awareness in developing proficient readers and writers. Phonemic awareness is an understanding that words are composed of discrete sounds. In Learning Today's phonemic awareness strand, students learn to identify, think about, and work with individual sounds in spoken words. The Learning Today program offers several types of phonemic awareness instruction which are consistent with the National Reading Panel's recommendations for phonemic awareness instruction. They include sound isolation, blending, segmentation, addition, deletion, substitution, categorizing, identifying, and rhyming activities. All these activities help students learn how sounds work in words and in speech. It implies a critical step in metalinguistic understanding.

## Sight Words

Due to the irregular spellings of many English words, the effectiveness of phonics analysis is limited. Furthermore, an over reliance on any one method of word identification can impair reading efficiency. Therefore many words must be learned as sight words. Additionally, numerous words appear so frequently in English speech and writing that it would be wasteful to sound out those words each time they are met. Whole word learning allows children to quickly gain a sense of "real reading". The recognition of common sight words serves to increase reading fluency. The activities in the Learning Today program incorporate sight words from both the Dolch and Fry word lists.

## Comprehension

In order to become proficient, readers need to learn how to orchestrate a variety of reading strategies in order to accomplish the larger goal of comprehension. The development of essential skills like phonics to read text increases accuracy and speed. The major focus of the comprehension strand is on developing various comprehension skills such as comparing and contrasting, distinguishing fact from opinion, and prediction, to name a few. The use of graphic organizers, concept maps, and flow charts, are used to aid in the explicit instruction of main ideas and details, story elements, sequencing, and determining cause and effect. Comprehension activities emphasize the ability of the reader to actively construct meaning when reading both narrative and expository text.

## Vocabulary

A wealth of research has documented the strength of the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. Some studies have shown that the proportion of difficult words in a text is the single most powerful predictor of text difficulty, and a reader's general vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of how well that reader can comprehend text. One of the goals of the Learning Today program is the expansion of vocabulary in order to help readers communicate and comprehend effectively. Vocabulary instruction that makes students think about the meaning of a word and demands that they do some meaningful processing of the word is more effective than instruction that does not, and for that reason the Learning Today program provides instruction that helps the learner use target words in meaningful contexts.

## Conclusion

Learning Today's reading curriculum comprises over 1500 tutorials and activities that instruct and motivate students. A sound research base and pedagogy ensure that students gain the necessary skills that will help them become better readers in an engaging and non-threatening learning environment.