

Planning for a guided lesson to develop word-reading skills

Daily teaching of phonics will lead to the rapid acquisition of phonic knowledge and skills for the majority of children. However, they also need to be able to apply this knowledge; it is an essential part of the process. Many teaching programmes have an ‘apply’ component to the phonics lesson but this is not enough. Application of phonic skills needs to be modelled in shared reading, prompted for and practised in guided reading, and seen to be applied in independent reading. It is powerful if the phonics-based guided lesson takes place soon after the phonics lesson so as to reinforce the learning as soon as possible.

Some schools will set classes for phonics teaching sessions, grouping children according to their level of phonics expertise. Children go off to work with different adults (often teaching assistants), coming back together as a whole class after their lesson. It is crucial that the class teacher knows exactly what has been taught in these phonics lessons and how well her children are doing if she is to provide opportunities for them to apply their skills in reading and writing activities.

Timing and organisation

We suggest that a guided lesson should take between 10 and 20 minutes. You may want to use a little of this time for children to play a related phonics game, or to re-read their text to a partner or toy. This all helps to reinforce the application of newly acquired learning.

Planning for progress

Before you begin to plan, consider the needs of the group of children, basing this on your phonics assessments and knowledge of each child’s response to reading (including their early print concepts, if working with children just beginning to read). From this, you will be able to decide on an objective or focus for the group based on the relevant grapheme–phoneme correspondences to be practised, consolidated or applied from the whole-class phonics lessons. Consider what reading strategies need to be highlighted – for example, using the initial phoneme or blending the sounds in a word.

Next you will need to choose an appropriate text and become familiar with it. You want the children to read this text with almost complete accuracy; you have selected it to give them the opportunity to practise and reinforce the grapheme–phoneme correspondences you have been teaching and the teaching focus you consider appropriate for the needs of the group. Check that the text will do what you need it to.

Consider also what additional resources you might need to support the lesson. Sets of phoneme frames, counters and magnetic letters could prove useful for children at early levels. It might be helpful to keep your teaching programme’s mnemonics or phoneme charts nearby. Will you have a game before or after the reading? What follow-up activity might you want the children to carry out when they have finished their lesson with you?

An excellent phonics teaching session was observed by a head teacher and literacy consultant. They then went to observe a literacy lesson. The class teacher brought together a group for guided reading – some of whom had been in the phonics group observed earlier, working with a different adult. During the independent section of the guided lesson, both observers were fascinated to note that some of these same children were unable to apply their knowledge of the grapheme–phoneme correspondence they had only just been taught.

It transpired that the teacher had not been aware which grapheme–phoneme correspondence had been taught in the phonics session and was therefore unable to highlight this or prompt for use during the strategy check of the guided lesson. An ideal opportunity to embed the learning and improve decoding skills had been lost. Effective communication between the adults is essential.