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Introduction

While there are no easy answers or quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement, an extensive knowledge base now exists to show us the skills children must learn in order to read well. These skills provide the basis for sound curriculum decisions and instructional approaches that can help prevent the predictable consequences of early reading failure.

National Institute for Literacy (2003)

*S*trategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills* is a collection of practical activities and building blocks for helping children learn to read. The materials in this book are resources designed by teachers to build proficiency in key areas of beginning reading: recognizing and naming letters; hearing and manipulating sounds in words; associating sounds with letters and using them to form words; and reading words in connected text effortlessly, automatically, and accurately. We grouped and identified each activity by the early literacy skill and the area of instruction it addresses as well as by a *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) benchmark indicator used to assess it. We present a purpose for each activity, including an exemplary Standard Course of Study (SCOS) Competency Goal Objective, grouping strategies, instructional strategies, and differentiation ideas. Handouts, presentation masters, and related readings are also part of this resource.

We wrote the book for elementary school teachers who use DIBELS or similarly focused early literacy skills assessments to measure student progress. We have included practical suggestions for activities and lessons in a format that is easy to use to help children improve their early literacy skills. We also present case studies illustrating use in real classrooms. We have used this content effectively to help teachers use assessment information to inform their instruction.

Literacy skills are the foundation for achievement of a fundamental goal of education: all children reading by the end of third grade. Regular assessment of progress toward benchmarks on key indicators provides the foundation for teaching critical literacy skills. *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills Activities* links outcomes of selected early literacy skills assessments to instruction.

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Each set of activities addresses a different early literacy skill and different benchmarks on the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) assessments. We illustrate the scope and content of the activities below:

Table 1.1 Basic Early Literacy Skills (BELS) Scope and Content

Early Literacy Skill	Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills	Basic Early Literacy Skills Activities

Ability to recognize and name letters	Letter Naming Fluency	• Distinguishing Letters from Non-Letters
		• Distinguishing Letter Forms
		  ○ Tall Letters
		  ○ Short Circular Letters
		  ○ Short Stick Letters
		  ○ Short Hump Letters
		  ○ Hanging Letters
		• Distinguishing Same and Different Letters
		• Distinguishing Uppercase and Lowercase Letters
		  ○ Differentiating Using American Sign Language
		  ○ Differentiating Using Sense of Touch
		• Distinguishing Letter/Sound (Using Sense of Touch)

Ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words	Initial Sound Fluency	• Silly Sentence—Part 1 • Picture/Sound Charts • Letter/Sound Books—Part 1 • Letter/Sound Books—Part 2 • Sound Collages • Sound Identification Game • Picture/Sound Identification Game
	Phoneme Segmentation Fluency	• "Stretching" Sounds in Words • Elkonin Boxes—Identifying Sounds With Fingers • Elkonin Boxes— Pushing Sounds

Early Literacy Skill	Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills	Basic Early Literacy Skills Activities
		• Elkonin Boxes—Sound Boxes • Elkonin Boxes—Transition Boxes • Elkonin Boxes—Letter Boxes
Ability to associate sounds with letters and use them to form words	Nonsense Word Fluency	• Distinguishing Letters/Sounds Using Sense of Touch • Sound/Letter BINGO • Letter/Sound BINGO • Sound Identification Game • Making and Breaking Using Magnetic Letters • Blending (VC) • Blending (CVC) • Sorting Beginning Consonant Sounds • Sound Line • Word Wheel • Flip Books • Slide-a-Word • Word Scramble • Word Maker • Roll the Dice • MATCH! • RINGO! • Go Fish
Ability to read words in connected text effortlessly, automatically, and fluently	Oral Reading Fluency	• Reading Punctuation • Reading Punctuation: Period, Exclamation Point, Question Mark • Reading Text in Phrases to Promote Fluency • Reading Fine and Bold Printed Text as Author Intended • Reading Dialogue

USING ASSESSMENT TO INFORM INSTRUCTION

Effective teaching uses information from ongoing assessments to inform instruction. This means that effective teachers informally and formally assess their students' current levels of skill development and analyze the performance to identify what to teach. They also use the information to decide on the type of instruction needed by individual students. When a student is performing as expected compared to his neighbors and peers, effective teachers provide continuing instruction grounded in principles and practices that have been effective with the student in the past. When a student is not performing as expected

compared to his neighbors and peers, effective teachers adjust their teaching to support individual learning needs and foster success. Assessment data, especially standardized, state testing outcomes, rarely provide the kind of specific information that classroom teachers need for instruction. Assessments that are productive in this regard are conducted a minimum of three times a year or on a routine basis (i.e., weekly, monthly, or quarterly) using comparable and multiple test forms to (a) estimate rates of reading improvement, (b) identify children who are not demonstrating adequate progress and therefore require additional or different forms of instruction, and/or (c) compare the efficacy of different forms of instruction for struggling learners so that more effective, individualized instructional programs can be put in place for them.

The *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS) is a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development (http://dibels.uoregon.edu/). They are short (one minute) proficiency measures used to regularly monitor the development of pre-reading and early reading skills. Results can be used to evaluate individual student development as well as to provide direction and feedback to inform instruction. Decision rules or benchmarks provided by the developers of DIBELS for use in preparing instructional recommendations for children in kindergarten and first grade are in the following tables.

Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills Activities is a set of teacher-developed, evidence-based instructional materials for improving the performance and skills of children needing strategic and intensive instruction. They are brief, multilevel activities grounded in principles and practices of effective assessment and instruction. To be most effective, instruction must be grounded in accurate assessment information. Our lessons bridge the gap between early literacy assessments and the expectations and content of core reading programs. As illustrated in Table 1.3, when problems arise, problem solving grounded in different types of assessments leads to solutions.

INCORPORATING BASIC EARLY LITERACY SKILLS (BELS) INTO THE LITERACY BLOCK

Many teachers use DIBELS or similar early literacy assessment data to place students in instructional groups and then provide targeted instruction to meet the students' needs. There are several models for this instruction. We summarize three typical models below to help teachers plan and implement the BELS activities into their existing literacy instructional period.

Whole Class Instruction/Independent Work Time

In this instructional model, daily whole class reading instruction is followed by independent work time (IWT). Reading instruction occurs using a commercial reading series (Houghton Mifflin, Open Court, etc.) for roughly a 45–60 minute time period. IWT then follows for approximately 30 minutes. During this time, children work independently and the teacher may select students for

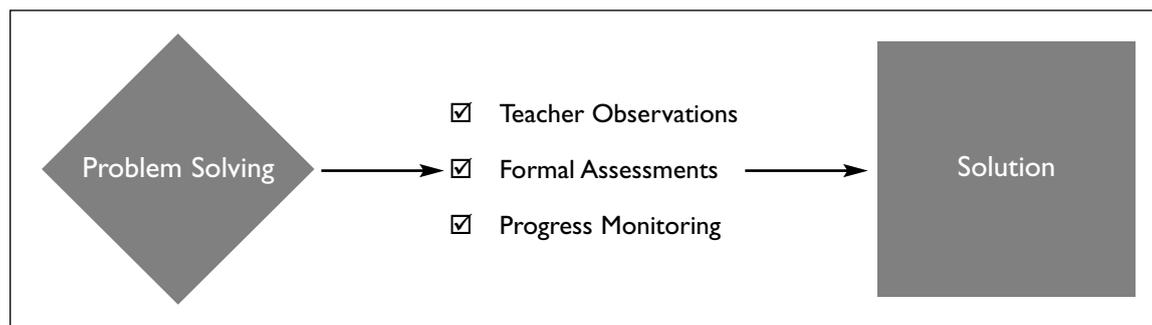**Table 1.2**   DIBELS Benchmark Goals and Indicators of Risk

Kindergarten

	DIBELS Kindergarten Benchmark Goals and Indicators of Risk					
	Three Assessment Periods Per Year					
	Benchmark Assessment					
Indicator	Beginning of Year Month 1–3		Middle of Year Month 4–6		End of Year Month 7–10	
	Scores	Status	Scores	Status	Scores	Status
Initial Sound Fluency	ISF < 4	At risk	ISF < 10	Deficit		
	4 <= ISF < 8	Some risk	10 <= ISF < 25	Emerging		
	ISF >= 8	Low risk	ISF >= 25	Established		
Letter Naming Fluency	LNF < 2	At risk	LNF < 15	At risk	LNF < 29	At risk
	2 <= LNF < 8	Some risk	15 <= LNF < 27	Some risk	29 <= LNF < 40	Some risk
	LNF >= 8	Low risk	LNF >= 27	Low risk	LNF >= 40	Low risk
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency			PSF < 7	At risk	PSF < 10	Deficit
			7 <= PSF < 18	Some risk	10 <= PSF < 35	Emerging
			PSF >= 18	Low risk	PSF >= 35	Established
Nonsense Word Fluency			NWF < 5	At risk	NWF < 15	At risk
			5 <= NWF < 13	Some risk	15 <= NWF < 25	Some risk
			NWF >= 13	Low risk	NWF >= 25	Low risk

(Continued)

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Table 1.2 (Continued)

First Grade

DIBELS First Grade Benchmark Goals and Indicators of Risk

Three Assessment Periods Per Year

Benchmark Assessment

Indicator	Beginning of Year Month 1–3		Middle of Year Month 4–6		End of Year Month 7–10	
	Scores	Status	Scores	Status	Scores	Status
Letter Naming Fluency	LNF < 25	At risk				
	25 <= LNF < 37	Some risk				
	LNF >= 37	Low risk				
Phoneme Segmentation Fluency	PSF < 10	Deficit	PSF < 10	Deficit	PSF < 10	Deficit
	10 <= PSF < 35	Emerging	10 <= PSF < 35	Emerging	10 <= PSF < 35	Emerging
	PSF >= 35	Established	PSF >= 35	Established	PSF >= 35	Established
Nonsense Word Fluency	NWF < 13	At risk	NWF < 30	Deficit	NWF < 30	Deficit
	13 <= NWF < 24	Some risk	30 <= NWF < 50	Emerging	30 <= NWF < 50	Emerging
	NWF >= 24	Low risk	NWF >= 50	Established	NWF >= 50	Established
Oral Reading			ORF < 8	At risk	ORF < 20	At risk
			8 <= ORF < 20	Some risk	20 <= ORF < 40	Some risk
			ORF >= 20	Low risk	ORF >= 40	Low risk

SOURCE: © University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, http://dibels.uoregon.edu/benchmark.php

Table 1.3   Assessment Drives Instruction

Problem Solving → ☑ Teacher Observations / ☑ Formal Assessments / ☑ Progress Monitoring → Solution

Table 1.4   Reading Instructional Models

Whole Class/IWT (1½–2 hours)	Whole Class/Block (1 hour—reading)	Whole Class/Four Blocks (2 hours)
Whole Class Instruction (45–60 minutes)	*Guided Reading Groups* 4 groups, 15 minutes each	*Guided Reading* (30 minutes)
IWT 30 minutes (2 groups, 15 minutes each, teacher directed)	*Small Skills Groups* (Teacher Assistant)	*Writing* (30 minutes)
BELS lessons	BELS lessons	
Literacy Centers (Independent)	*Literacy Centers* (Independent)	*Word Work* (30 minutes)
BELS activities	BELS activities	BELS lessons/activities (whole class or small group)
		Independent Reading (30 minutes)

skills groups based on assessment information. Teaching during this time typically involves preteaching, reteaching, or reinforcement. Teachers can easily follow the 10–12 minute BELS lessons to address student needs in phonemic awareness, alphabetic knowledge, phonics, and fluency. We suggest meeting with only two skills groups during the 30-minute block. The two lower skills groups (e.g., initial sound fluency, phoneme segmentation) may meet with the teacher three out of the five days, while the medium and high groups (nonsense word, reading fluency) meet with the teacher two out of the five days. Depending upon the skill level and independent work habits of the students, many of these activities can be completed as independent literacy centers (e.g., letter/sound books, sorting consonant sounds, Slide-a-Word).

Guided Reading/Literacy Center/Skill Group Instruction

Reading instruction in this model occurs within a 60-minute block of time. The teacher meets with small groups of students (4–6) to direct guided reading groups using leveled books. Each group meets for roughly 15 minutes, while the other students in the classroom are working independently and completing literacy centers. A teacher assistant may also work one on one or with small groups of students during this time. The BELS lessons, with an explicit lesson structure, become an excellent resource for the teacher assistant during the small-group lessons. In addition, students can complete BELS activities independently or at a literacy center to reinforce their literacy skills.

Whole Class Instruction/Four Blocks Reading Model

This instructional model is referred to as the Four Blocks framework (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1991, 1998; Cunningham, Hall, & Sigmon, 1999). Literacy instruction is divided into four 30-minute periods. Within this structure, 30 minutes are allocated for guided reading instruction, 30 minutes for writing instruction, 30 minutes for independent reading, and 30 minutes for "word work" or word analysis skills. These four instructional periods typically are taught with the whole class. The BELS lessons can easily be adapted for the whole class during the word work phase of the literacy period. If needed, the teacher or assistant could also select targeted students to reteach or practice needed skills using the BELS activities during this time.

We feel that the BELS activities are unique. The lessons are easy to follow and *written explicitly* to provide modeling, guided instructional practice, and independent practice; each also has a "product" associated with it for use in evaluating progress and providing accountability markers. This clear structure gives the necessary support for new teachers or teaching assistants as they become familiar with early literacy skills and strategies. When students can work independently, the BELS activities provide a strong reinforcement and practice of skills with an *end product,* illustrating the student's understanding of the skill. These products (e.g., word sorts, unscrambled words, etc.) assist the teacher in monitoring student performance at the literacy center and determining success with the particular skill. The *stages or levels of difficulty* section noted on each BELS activity provide a guide to teachers as they differentiate instruction and meet the specific skill needs of all of their students.

TEACHING EFFECTIVELY

Teaching early literacy skills effectively requires that the teacher review with the students why the skills are important. Next the teacher provides examples that model or show children what they are expected to do, and last the teacher provides both supervised and independent opportunities for children to show that they understand and can use the skill or strategy. The *demonstrate, demonstrate, practice, and prove* teaching model is essential for effective teaching and critical for teaching early literacy skills.

First, the teacher should *demonstrate* the expected behavior. Next, students are given a chance to *demonstrate* their understanding. When students are actively engaged in doing this, the teacher should provide supportive feedback so they will know when they are doing it right or corrective feedback so they will know when they are doing it wrong and how to do it right. This step helps to ensure that children know what to do and that they don't practice skills or strategies incorrectly. It is an opportunity for the teacher to "check for understanding" before asking students to practice or perform independently. When the teacher is sure that all of the children have learned the skill, it is time to *practice* doing it "independently." To maximize the benefits of practice during "independent work time" (IWT), the teacher should:

- Provide supportive feedback so students know they are doing the behaviors correctly.
- Provide corrective feedback so students don't practice doing behaviors incorrectly.

This type of "guided practice" reduces errors because students perform under direction and with clear, specific feedback on their performance. After the teacher has shown students what to do (teacher demonstrates) and students have shown that they know what to do (students demonstrate) *and* can do it (students practice), the teacher should have students periodically *prove* that they have mastered the content by frequently checking for understanding and monitoring performance and progress.

Letter Naming Fluency Content Preview

Assessments of letter naming fluency typically require that students are presented with upper- and lowercase letters arranged in random order and asked to name as many letters as they can. In DIBELS Letter Naming Fluency, students are considered at risk for difficulty achieving early literacy benchmark goals if they perform in the lowest 20% of students in their district and at some risk if they perform between the 20th and 40th percentile (Good & Kaminski, 2002). These students will profit from many of the activities in *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills*.

Initial Sound Fluency Content Preview

Assessments of initial sound fluency (ISF) require that the child is shown a set of pictures and then asked to identify (i.e., point to or mention) the one picture that begins with the sound produced by the teacher. For example, the teacher says, "This is sink, cat, gloves, and hat. Which of these begins with /s/?" and the child points to the correct picture. The child is also asked to orally produce the beginning sound for an orally presented word that matches one of the given pictures. The teacher keeps track of the amount of time taken to identify and produce the correct sound and converts the score into the number of initial sounds correct in a minute. The ISF measure takes about three minutes to administer and has over 20 alternate forms to monitor progress. On DIBELS

Initial Sound Fluency, the benchmark goal is 25 to 35 initial sounds correct by the middle of kindergarten. Students scoring below 10 initial sounds correct in the middle of kindergarten may need instructional support (Good & Kaminski, 2002). The activities in *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills* will address these needs.

Phoneme Segmentation Fluency Content Preview

Phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF) assessments evaluate the extent to which a child can orally divide a word into its individual sounds. For example, the teacher says, "sat," and the student says, "/s/ /a/ /t/" to receive three possible points for the word. After the student responds, the teacher presents the next word and so forth. The total number of correct phonemes produced in one minute determines the final score. Students scoring below 10 in the spring of kindergarten and fall of first grade may need instructional support to achieve benchmark goals (Good & Kaminski, 2002). Teachers will find that the activities in *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills* will specifically address these student skill needs.

Nonsense Word Fluency Content Preview

The nonsense word fluency (NWF) assessment identifies the student's knowledge of letters and sounds. The child is shown randomly ordered nonsense words (e.g., sig, rav, ov) and asked to produce verbally the individual sound of each letter in the word or to verbally produce, or read, the whole nonsense word. For example, if the stimulus word is "vaj" the student could say /v/ /a/ /j/ or say the word /vaj/ to obtain a total of three letter sounds correct. The benchmark goal for Nonsense Word Fluency is 50 correct letter sounds per minute by the middle of first grade. Students scoring below 30 in the middle of first grade may need instructional support to achieve first-grade reading goals (Good & Kaminski, 2002). These students will profit from activities in *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills*.

Oral Reading Fluency Content Preview

Oral reading fluency (ORF) is measured by having students read a grade level passage aloud for one minute. Words omitted, substituted, and hesitations of more than three seconds are scored as errors. Words self-corrected within three seconds are scored as accurate. The number of correct words per minute from the passage is the oral reading fluency rate. The benchmark goals are 40 in spring of first grade, 90 in spring of second grade, and 110 in spring of third grade. Students may need instructional support if they score below 10 in spring of first grade, below 50 in spring of second grade, and below 70 in spring of third grade; students scoring below 30 in the middle of first grade may need instructional support to achieve first-grade reading goals (Good & Kaminski, 2002). The activities in *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills* will provide both fluency practice and guidance using short stories and nursery rhymes that emphasize reading with expression, appropriate phrasing and intonation.

Teaching Early Literacy Skills

Reading is fundamental to success in our society and at the center of the latest federal, state, and local initiatives to improve education (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002; Goodman, 2006; Kuhn et al., 2006; International Reading Association, 2001, 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; National Research Council, 1998; National Reading Panel, 2000; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; Samuels & Farstrup, 2006; Vaughn & Briggs, 2003). The ability to read is highly valued and essential for academic, social, and economic advancement. Despite America's effective educational system, many children fail to read adequately by the end of third grade and large numbers of young people continue to struggle with reading and remain at risk in middle school, rarely performing at the same level as their more advantaged peers. Culturally and ethnically diverse learners who are struggling readers are also more likely to experience continuous failure, to be referred and placed in special education, to experience life in the lower track in school, and to enter the world after school as a high school dropout.

When questions arise about how best to teach reading skills, all fingers point in the direction of a few fundamental factors (International Reading Association, 2007; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). According to the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), these include (a) using reading to obtain meaning from print, (b) having frequent and intensive opportunities to read, (c) being exposed to frequent, regular spelling–sound relationships, (d) learning about the nature of the alphabetic writing system, and (e) understanding the structure of spoken words. Further, this group pointed out that adequate progress in learning to read beyond initial levels depended on:

- a working understanding of how sounds are represented alphabetically,
- sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different kinds of text,
- sufficient background knowledge and vocabulary to render written texts meaningful and interesting,
- control over procedures for monitoring comprehension and repairing misunderstandings, and
- continued interest and motivation to read for a variety of purposes. (pp. 3–4)

Efforts to improve reading and literacy skills also must avoid some pitfalls to be effective:

There are three potential stumbling blocks that are known to throw children off course on the journey to skilled reading. The first obstacle, which arises at the outset of reading acquisition, is difficulty understanding and using the alphabetic principle—the idea that written spellings systematically represent spoken words. It is hard to comprehend connected text if word recognition is inaccurate or laborious. The second obstacle is a failure to transfer the comprehension skills of spoken language to reading and to acquire new strategies that may be

specifically needed for reading. The third obstacle to reading will magnify the first two: the absence or loss of an initial motivation to read or failure to develop a mature appreciation of the rewards of reading. (Snow et al., 1998, pp. 4–5)

These critical factors, directions, and conclusions were supported by blue-ribbon panels (cf. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; National Research Council, 1998), and most literacy scholars agree that the majority of reading problems faced by children, adolescents, and young adults are the result of stumbling blocks, obstacles, and problems that should have been addressed during early elementary school years (cf. International Reading Association, 2007). To that end, *Strategies and Lessons for Improving Basic Early Literacy Skills* is a collection of lessons/activities to use in helping students remain actively engaged in critical tool skills that many believe are the foundation for literacy and academic achievement later in life.

EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN PERSPECTIVE

The most successful teachers of reading implement appropriate instruction to teach literacy skills and strategies, evaluate the effectiveness of their lessons, and identify the students who need further practice with the skill or strategy taught. We know that even when students are receiving instruction in the concepts in which they are being assessed, some need more practice with particular skills. In an attempt to provide assistance with specific instruction in deficit areas, as identified on formal and informal assessments, we created lessons to extend those concepts for children. We did this with activities that teach concepts at their most basic levels, using a script with a four-step instructional presentation, providing examples of differentiation and scaffolding, and maximizing the use of instructional time. *Although the lessons are explicit, teachers we have worked with have personalized them while maintaining their overall purpose.*

Each lesson has the potential to be taught repeatedly, adjusting the materials as needed, until the skill/strategy is mastered. This gives opportunities to personalize the lessons to meet the needs of the students. We encourage you to use your own knowledge of literacy development to extend and enrich the lessons. We intentionally designed the lessons to have three stages of differentiation and, in some cases, sequenced the lessons specifically to scaffold instruction.

Knowing that the biggest issue facing teachers in the classroom today is time, our lessons were developed so that they may be implemented in under 15 minutes. In cases where the lessons required more time to complete, we intentionally separated them into parts. Finally, we provided a list of materials needed to teach the lesson and included black line masters for handouts and transparencies.

Although we have a suggested framework for including these lessons in the literacy block, you may find that they are also a valuable resource for use during transition times or when you find an extra 15 minutes in your schedule. They may also be used by literacy support teachers, tutors, and/or parents to reinforce concepts taught in the classroom.

BUILDING EARLY LITERACY SKILLS

We have worked with many teachers who have used the activities in this book to help children develop critical early literacy skills. They have worked in small rural and large urban schools. Their students have come from the variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are common in many districts across the nation. Their experiences have helped us improve the activities. Their work has also provided support for the effectiveness of using regular assessments to plan instruction. We share brief case illustrations of their work before presenting the letter naming fluency, initial sound fluency, phoneme segmentation fluency, nonsense word fluency, and oral reading fluency classroom activities in the sections that follow.