CHAPTER 1

Introduction

How Structured Literacy Interventions Can Help Students with Varied Reading Problems

Alysha Bentley, a reading interventionist at a diverse, urban K–8 school, sighed as she looked at a recent round of progress monitoring data for her most challenging group of students. All fifth graders, this small group had started intervention at exactly the same level on the school's reading comprehension assessment, which is why the students were grouped together. The progress monitoring data confirmed what Ms. Bentley thought. None of the students was progressing well, not at all. Furthermore, despite having considerable assessment data for the students, Ms. Bentley was having trouble coming up with a good plan for how to help them, although she very much wanted to do so.

Ms. Bentley was in her third year as a reading interventionist, with some experience teaching struggling readers. In her teacher preparation program, she had taken several courses on how to help poor readers. Her courses had generally emphasized the importance of developing higher-level comprehension abilities through motivating, engaging activities that would lead students to make important inferences on their own. Both Ms. Bentley's teacher preparation coursework and the core Tier 1 English/language arts program in her school tended to view teacher-led, explicit instruction negatively, as drill-and-kill that would quash students' interest in learning. However, this group of fifth graders was especially hard to engage, and the work she had done on comprehension to this point did not seem to be having much effect.

Furthermore, Ms. Bentley was expected to work on grade-level standards, with grade-level texts, and for all of these students, grade-level standards and texts were very difficult. For instance, one standard involved determining the theme of a story from details in the text, and one of the required texts at Ms. Bentley's school was *The*

Black Stallion (Farley, 1941). This classic novel tells the story of a teenaged boy, returning from a visit to his missionary uncle in India, who is shipwrecked with a wild black stallion on a desert island; the stallion turns out to be a thoroughbred racehorse. Two of the students in Ms. Bentley's intervention group have little idea what a *stallion*, *missionary*, or *thoroughbred* are, what *pedigree* means, or why pedigree matters in horse racing. One of these students has additional limitations in background knowledge. He has never seen a horse race or been on a boat, and he does not understand words such as *deck*, *rail*, or *gangplank* in describing parts of a boat. Ms. Bentley does her best to explain, and occasional problems with vocabulary and background knowledge are to be expected. However, these students' limitations are extensive, weighing them down and getting in the way of their ability to become engaged in the story, let alone determine the theme. Another student in the group has different challenges. Although he met expectations on a basic phonics assessment, when reading text, he repeatedly stumbles in reading words like *stallion*, *missionary*, and *thoroughbred*. He also is overwhelmed by the demands of the text, though for different reasons.

Ms. Bentley is a caring, capable, and dedicated teacher. However, she could substantially improve her effectiveness with a broader range of students, including the fifth graders who have her so concerned, through two key ideas. The first idea involves common types or patterns of reading difficulties, sometimes called *poor reader profiles*, which could help her better understand and plan for individual students' needs. The second involves using Structured Literacy (SL) interventions to teach students more effectively. Both key ideas can help all practitioners who teach poor readers, not just Ms. Bentley. This chapter explains each idea in detail, as well as their value for teachers and their students.

Common Poor Reader Profiles

Research on Poor Reader Profiles

Common poor reader profiles relate to the simple view of reading (SVR; Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990), a widely referenced scientific model of reading, which says that good reading comprehension involves two broad types of abilities: (1) reading printed words and (2) oral language comprehension, understanding what has been read. Each broad ability involves numerous component abilities. Reading printed words requires skills such as knowledge of grapheme–phoneme (letter–sound) correspondences, phonemic awareness (PA; e.g., the ability to blend sounds into whole words), and the ability to read words automatically as well as accurately. Oral language comprehension requires knowledge of vocabulary, the ability to understand syntax or sentence structure, and background knowledge, among other areas. These abilities underlying reading development also interact and become more tightly interconnected over the course of development (Scarborough, 2001).

Both word reading and language comprehension are essential to reading comprehension, and good readers must be strong in both of them. From the SVR, it therefore

follows that reading problems can relate specifically to word reading, or specifically to language comprehension, or to both areas. The three poor reader profiles have been termed (Catts et al., 2006) specific word recognition difficulties (SWRD), specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD), and mixed reading difficulties (MRD). Research supporting the existence of the different poor reader profiles is extensive and multidisciplinary in nature, from fields such as reading, cognitive psychology, special education, communication sciences, and neuroscience (e.g., Capin, Cho, Miciak, Roberts, & Vaughn, 2021; Catts et al., 2006; Catts, Compton, Tomblin, & Bridges, 2012; Cutting et al., 2013; Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2019; Leach, Scarborough, & Rescorla, 2003; Lesaux & Kieffer, 2010; Spear-Swerling, 2004).

Why Should Teachers Know about Poor Reader Profiles?

Researchers who have studied experts and novices in numerous domains, including not only teaching (e.g., Hattie & Yates, 2014), but also many other areas such as chess, chemistry, physics, and medicine, have identified some fundamental characteristics in which experts and novices differ (Chi, Glaser, & Farr, 1988). Across all domains, experts are much more likely than novices to recognize important patterns of data and to grasp their implications. They organize their knowledge around core concepts and big ideas, not lists of individual facts. Expert teachers perceive large, meaningful patterns that include being able to anticipate and plan for difficulties that students are likely to encounter in the future. They understand individual students' difficulties at a deeper level that enables them to plan instruction more effectively (Hattie & Yates, 2014).

For practitioners who work with struggling readers, poor reader profiles represent key patterns that are both *meaningful* and *actionable*. The profiles are educationally meaningful because they are valuable in making educational decisions, including planning instruction. They are actionable because they involve skills that can be improved through appropriate instruction and intervention. Furthermore, they are useful for understanding a wide variety of reading problems across the K–12 range, in students with and without disabilities.

Knowledge about the profiles facilitates teachers' abilities to choose appropriate reading assessments and to integrate data across those assessments, not just interpret each assessment in isolation. This knowledge would enable Ms. Bentley to see that even though the students in her intervention group started intervention with very similar reading comprehension scores, as well as similar performance on silent reading fluency and basic phonics assessments, they had different underlying patterns of reading problems—that is, different reading profiles.

The reading skills of Ms. Bentley's three students—Drew, Marcus, and Eli—are displayed in Table 1.1. If one looks only at the first three left-hand columns of the figure—the assessment data available to Ms. Bentley—the students look quite similar, and it seems to make sense to group them together. Nevertheless, the students differ substantially in their underlying component skills for reading, as shown in the three right-hand columns. Drew, a student with dyslexia, has serious difficulties in reading

TABLE 1.1. Performance of Three Fifth-Grade Students in Reading

Student (profile)	Reading comprehension	Silent reading fluency	Basic phonics assessment	Phonics assessment—multisyllabic words	Oral vocabulary	Oral language comprehension
Drew (SWRD)	Below basic	Below benchmark	Met benchmark	Well below benchmark	Above average	Average range
Marcus (SRCD)	Below basic	Below benchmark	Met benchmark	Met benchmark	Well below average	Low end of average range
Eli (MRD)	Below basic	Below benchmark	Met benchmark	Below benchmark	Below average	Below average; especially weak background knowledge

multisyllabic words but has strengths in his oral vocabulary knowledge and oral language comprehension—a profile of SWRD. In contrast, Marcus's skills for decoding multisyllabic words meet grade expectations, but he has significant weaknesses in oral vocabulary knowledge—a profile of SRCD. Eli, with a profile of MRD, has weaknesses in all of these areas—multisyllabic word reading, vocabulary knowledge, and broad language comprehension. He is also the student with significant weaknesses in background knowledge.

However, Ms. Bentley was not fully aware of these differences in her students' component skills because the necessary assessments for detecting them had not been administered. Poor reader profiles have implications for the types of assessments to administer in reading evaluations, which can improve assessment practices. Furthermore, the profiles provide an important starting point for planning interventions. A crucial initial consideration in intervention planning involves deciding whether a student's reading comprehension or reading fluency difficulties are based in word reading, language comprehension, or both areas. Yet sometimes this seemingly obvious step is overlooked. For instance, students with SWRD, whose difficulties center mainly on word reading and do not involve language comprehension, are sometimes given comprehension interventions because they score poorly on measures of reading comprehension, when word reading, not comprehension itself, is at the root of their poor reading. In fact, this was true for Ms. Bentley's student Drew, who was receiving comprehension intervention that did not address his true needs in multisyllabic word reading, which had not been detected by the basic phonics assessment, focused mainly on one-syllable words, in use at Ms. Bentley's school. Profiles also help teachers identify and plan instruction for multiple components of literacy in which a given student may be weak, a very useful aspect of profiles, because most poor readers' intervention needs go beyond a single component of literacy. This was true for Drew: He needed intervention in not only multisyllabic word reading but also spelling multisyllabic words and reading fluency.

In addition, poor reader profiles have implications for academic domains beyond reading. The profiles involve underlying patterns of strengths and weaknesses in

different components of language, and these patterns tend to affect poor readers' performance in written expression as well as reading. For instance, Ms. Bentley's student Marcus had a profile of SRCD that was linked heavily to limitations in vocabulary, which also affected his word choice in written expression. Effective intervention for Marcus's vocabulary weaknesses might therefore help improve his written expression, as well as his reading comprehension.

Finally, information about poor reader profiles can help a teacher anticipate and prevent, or at least lessen, problems that students are likely to encounter in the future. For example, Marcus's oral vocabulary weaknesses dated back to his earliest years in school. Vocabulary limitations did not impact his reading comprehension greatly at first because the texts he had to read were relatively simple and did not place heavy demands on vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, he progressed appropriately in learning phonics skills, which led his teachers to think that he was not at risk in reading, a common experience for students with SRCD (Clarke et al., 2014). However, as Marcus advanced in school and the expectations for reading comprehension increased, his underlying weaknesses in vocabulary began to have a much more negative impact on his reading comprehension. If teachers had recognized his vocabulary weaknesses and his profile of SRCD sooner, then earlier intervention could have been provided, which might have helped to prevent or at least lessen some of the reading difficulties that Ms. Bentley observed in him (Clarke et al., 2014).

The next section of the chapter considers each poor reader profile in depth. Table 1.2 summarizes the three profiles in detail.

Detailed Description of the Poor Reader Profiles

As shown in the top row of Table 1.2, students with SWRD have problems that are specific to reading printed words; these students have at least average oral vocabulary knowledge and average oral language (listening) comprehension. Although these students may demonstrate poor performance on measures of reading comprehension, their difficulties are due entirely to problems with word reading, and not actually to comprehension, as was the case for Drew. Even when students with SWRD have some accurate word-reading skills, nonautomatic word reading may drain their comprehension as they read text because the effort they have to put into reading words leaves fewer mental resources available for comprehension.

When students with SWRD are reading texts they can decode well, or when they are listening to texts read aloud, their comprehension is average or better. Interventions for these students need to address individual students' weaknesses in word reading, in areas such as PA, basic decoding skills, and strategies for reading long words (e.g., structural analysis and morphology). Interventions for SWRD must also address spelling. Because SWRD are usually based in phonological weaknesses, spelling interventions often must include teaching the phonological aspects of spelling, for example, being able to segment and correctly sequence sounds in words. Typical phonologically based spelling errors in students with SWRD include omissions of sounds (e.g., misspelling *flap* as *fap*) and incorrect sequencing of sounds (e.g., misspelling *desk* as *deks*).

TABLE 1.2. Description of Common Poor Reader Profiles

Profile	Out-of-context word reading	Oral vocabulary/ comprehension	Text reading fluency	Reading comprehension	Examples of underlying causes	Typical intervention needs
Specific word recognition difficulties (SWRD)	• Below average in reading real words, nonsense words, or both • Difficulties may involve accuracy, automaticity, or both • Phonemic awareness (PA) often weak	• Oral vocabulary at least average • Broad oral language comprehension at least average	• Typically below average due to problems in accuracy and/or automaticity of word reading	• Often below average compared to peers due to problems in word reading • Good in texts student can decode well	• Dyslexia • Inadequate teaching or curriculum in PA, phonics, or other word-reading skills	• Phonics and other word-reading skills (e.g., structural analysis of long words) • PA if PA is weak • Spelling • Text reading fluency (accuracy and/or rate)
Specific reading comprehension difficulties (SRCD)	• Real word reading, nonsense word reading, and PA all at least average • Automaticity as well as accuracy at least average	• Oral vocabulary, broad oral language comprehension, or both, often below average • Weaknesses may be mild, not sufficient for student to qualify for SL services	• May be in average range or higher • If below average, fluency problems *not* related to word reading (e.g., student may read slowly because he or she is trying to understand the text)	• Below average • Weaknesses in language areas (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, and so forth, *not* word reading) • Student often has similar comprehension difficulties in listening as in reading	• Limited exposure to academic language or background knowledge • Certain disabilities (e.g., some cases of autism spectrum disorders) • Inadequate curriculum or instruction	• Individual students' specific comprehension weaknesses (e.g., background knowledge, syntax, vocabulary) • May need nonphonological spelling skills (e.g., morphology)
Mixed reading difficulties (MRD)	• Below average in reading real words, nonsense words, or both • Difficulties may involve accuracy, automaticity, or both • PA often weak	• Oral vocabulary, broad oral language comprehension, or both, often below average • Weaknesses may be mild, not sufficient for student to qualify for SL services	• Typically below average • Poor fluency may relate to both word reading and language comprehension	• Below average • Poor reading comprehension relates to both word reading and language comprehension • Listening comprehension often relatively better than reading comprehension	• Dyslexia combined with limited exposure to vocabulary and academic language • Broad language disabilities • Inadequate curriculum or instruction	• Phonics and other word-reading skills • Spelling • Individual students' specific comprehension weaknesses • Text reading fluency, if weak • PA, if weak

Students with SRCD, shown in the middle row of Table 1.2, have the opposite profile to that seen in SWRD. These students have at least average word reading, including at least average phonological skills such as PA and nonsense word reading, but nonetheless have difficulties with reading comprehension. Poor reading comprehension in these students is often linked to the second domain of the SVR, problems in oral language comprehension, for example, limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulties with complex syntax, and/or problems with inferencing that may relate to lack of background knowledge (Elleman, 2017; Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015). Similar types of comprehension difficulties may be evident whether the student is reading a text or listening to it, as in a teacher read-aloud. However, in many students with SRCD, oral language weaknesses are milder than the students' reading comprehension difficulties, perhaps reflecting differences between oral and written language, such as the fact that academic texts tend to make greater demands on vocabulary, syntax, and background knowledge than does oral language (Spencer & Wagner, 2018).

Students with SRCD may have grade-appropriate reading fluency, but if their fluency is poor, this is not due to problems in word reading; rather, slow rate of reading may relate to problems in language comprehension, such as a student reading slowly in order to try to comprehend. Students with SRCD need interventions focused on their specific weaknesses in language comprehension, which may vary across students. Ms. Bentley's student Marcus had a profile of SRCD, linked mainly to weaknesses in vocabulary knowledge, but students with SRCD can have weaknesses in many other language areas.

Spelling may or may not be weak in students with SRCD. However, these students have grade-appropriate phonological skills, so any spelling weaknesses usually relate to other aspects of spelling, such as difficulties with morphology, meaningful word parts (e.g., misspelling *psychology* as *sikology*) or with spelling generalizations (e.g., misspelling *hoping* as *hopeing*). Because the phonological aspects of spelling are intact, the intended word is generally obvious even when the word is misspelled. Spelling intervention may need to address aspects of spelling other than phonology, such as teaching about morphology, rules for adding endings to a base word, or semantic knowledge about homonyms, depending on the student's specific needs and grade placement.

As shown in the bottom row of Table 1.2, students with MRD have difficulties in both broad abilities of the SVR, word reading and language comprehension, and intervention needs to target both areas. Ms. Bentley's student Eli had a profile of MRD, with language comprehension weaknesses linked both to vocabulary and background knowledge, but with his poor reading comprehension further complicated by difficulties with multisyllabic word reading. As is true for students with the first two profiles, in MRD, individual students' specific weaknesses within the areas of word reading and language comprehension may vary.

Students with MRD frequently have poor reading fluency, related both to poor word reading and difficulties in language comprehension. Likewise, poor reading comprehension in these students relates to both areas, word reading and language comprehension. Unlike students with SWRD, who have good reading comprehension when reading texts they decode well, students with MRD may struggle even when reading

texts they can decode because of language-related weaknesses such as limitations in vocabulary knowledge. Often, students with MRD will comprehend relatively better when listening than when reading because when listening, they do not have to cope with decoding demands. However, weaknesses in language areas such as vocabulary still contribute to listening problems, with these students' listening comprehension often somewhat below grade expectations, and reading comprehension even lower, due to the influence of poor decoding. Also, spelling is frequently a weakness in students with MRD and may include weaknesses in phonology as well as in other types of spelling knowledge.

For students with MRD as well as SRCD, it should be noted that language comprehension weaknesses can be mild, not at a level that would make them eligible for speech–language services (Nation, 2005). Mild difficulties may not have much impact on reading when children are in the earliest grades, reading relatively simple text, but have a bigger impact on reading as students advance in school and the comprehension demands of reading increase. Without appropriate assessment of oral vocabulary and oral language comprehension, milder difficulties in these areas may not be noticeable to teachers. However, more serious language comprehension weaknesses may be evident even without formal assessment, and their impact on reading comprehension may manifest earlier.

Executive Function, Reading, and Poor Reader Profiles

Recent research on reading development and reading difficulties has highlighted the potential importance of certain reading-related abilities beyond those captured by the SVR (Wagner, Beal, Zirps, & Spencer, 2021). One area that has received considerable attention from scientific investigators is executive function (EF), which has been defined in a variety of ways, to include working memory, for example, the ability to hold words in memory during reading to understand a long, complex sentence; cognitive flexibility and shifting processes, such as the ability to think about multiple ideas in a text at the same time and shift focus as needed; inhibitory processes, including the ability not to be distracted by information in a text that is irrelevant to understanding key points; and higher-level planning and monitoring processes, such as monitoring one's comprehension during reading to think about whether what has been read makes sense (Cartwright, 2015; Nouwens, Groen, Kleemans, & Verhoeven, 2021). EF and language abilities interact, with each area influencing the other, but EF generally is conceptualized as involving a set of specific cognitive abilities distinct from the abilities in the SVR.

EF appears to contribute both to decoding and reading comprehension (Nouwens et al., 2021) but has been studied especially in relation to the latter. EF may contribute to reading comprehension even after decoding and language comprehension are accounted for (Spencer & Wagner, 2018; Wagner et al., 2021), and it may be a key precursor to the development of skilled reading (Spencer, Richmond, & Cutting, 2020). Also, the importance of EF appears to increase with grade level (Cutting, Materek, Cole, Levine, & Mahone, 2009; Sesma, Mahone, Levine, Eason, & Cutting, 2009),

perhaps because of increases in text demands across grades. Nevertheless, findings about the role of EF in reading have been somewhat conflicting, likely in part due to methodological differences among studies, such as the ways in which EF is defined and measured, as well as the age of the participants and other sample characteristics.

So, what is the relevance of research on EF to poor reader profiles and to teachers? First, research supports the importance of certain abilities conceptualized as part of EF, such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and higher-level planning and monitoring processes, to success in both reading (e.g., Foorman et al., 2016; Shanahan et al., 2010) and written expression (e.g., Graham et al., 2012). Teachers should know that students identified with weaknesses in EF—as is often the case, for example, for students with attentional disorders—may be at added risk in literacy. Students with any poor reader profile may have difficulties in EF, but problems in EF are especially likely to play a role in SRCD and MRD, profiles that involve comprehension difficulties. Intervention involving certain EF processes such as planning, monitoring, and organization—especially when done in relation to reading and writing, not in isolation—can benefit the literacy achievement of students with weaknesses in these areas (e.g., Cartwright, 2015; Vaughn et al., 2022). Such intervention should also address individual students' needs in word reading and/or language comprehension.

A Few Cautions

An essential point to remember about poor reader profiles is that although they are extremely useful educationally, they are descriptive, not at the level of causation, as shown in Table 1.2. The fact that a student has a profile of SWRD, with significant problems in PA and word decoding despite strong language comprehension, does not, by itself, mean the student has dyslexia. Like Ms. Bentley's student Drew, students with dyslexia do often have a profile of SWRD, but there are other reasons why a student could have this profile, including a core literacy curriculum that fails to adequately address foundational skills in reading. As another example, although some students with autism spectrum disorders evidence a profile of SRCD, with difficulties concentrated in language and reading comprehension rather than word reading (Norbury & Nation, 2011), many other causes may underlie a profile of SRCD, such as limited experiences with English vocabulary and academic language, as sometimes seen in English learners (Li et al., 2021).

Although poor reader profiles are very useful in initial planning of intervention, they do not eliminate the need for in-depth, ongoing assessment or grouping considerations beyond the profile. Two students with SWRD, for instance, might be functioning at very different decoding levels, with one needing instruction at the one-syllable level and the other needing instruction in decoding multisyllabic words. Grouping these two students would not be advisable. Likewise, two students with SRCD might have very different underlying comprehension needs and also not be suited for grouping together in instruction. Furthermore, individual poor reader profiles are not necessarily stable over time. A student with MRD might respond well to phonics intervention in the elementary grades, with his or her word-reading problems fully resolved but

with lingering problems in language comprehension, yielding a profile of SRCD in the later grades.

Finally, poor reader profiles involve the use of cutoff points for deciding what is "average" or higher, and what is "below average," and an individual poor reader's profile might be unclear in a given test administration. Here is an example. All standardized tests specify a range for average scores, often 90 to 109 for standard scores. A poor reader who has language comprehension standard scores around 100, and real word reading of 75, has a profile of SWRD. In contrast, consider the poor reader whose language comprehension scores are in the low 90s, and whose word-reading scores are in the mid- to high 80s. Technically, the student's language comprehension is in average range and word reading is below average, but based on standardized test data, the profile is much less clear for this second student than that for the first.

Identification of any poor reader's profile should not rely solely on standardized test data taken at one point in time. In the situation just described, additional assessment data—from screening and progress monitoring assessments, informal assessments, and classroom performance—as well as information about a student's educational history can be especially valuable. Although the different poor reader profiles are not always stable over time, the profiles often do manifest in distinctive ways in a student's history. For example, students with SWRD typically show a history of difficulties in phonics skills in the early grades, whereas those with SRCD do not. Consideration of a student's educational history may therefore help clarify his or her poor reader profile. Chapter 3 examines these issues, with some specific examples of students.

The Value of Structured Literacy Interventions

Knowledge about poor reader profiles can help practitioners better understand poor readers' individual needs, an understanding critical to providing appropriately targeted interventions (Connor & Morrison, 2016; Connor et al., 2011). However, without interventions that are actually effective in improving poor readers' reading and writing, the value of profiles is limited. To help a wide range of poor readers, practitioners also need SL interventions. These interventions can benefit struggling readers with all three poor reader profiles, whether they are beginners or functioning at more advanced levels, and whether or not they have disabilities. *Structured Literacy* is an umbrella term for a variety of commercial programs and instructional approaches that share an emphasis on certain types of **content**, as well as specific **instructional features** (International Dyslexia Association, 2019, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2018, 2022c).

The Content of SL: Key Areas of Language and Literacy

The content of SL involves key areas of language and literacy: PA, phonics, orthography, morphology, vocabulary, syntax, and discourse comprehension. Research has shown that these areas are critical in learning to read, spell, and write, as well as often implicated in reading difficulties (Carlisle, 2010; Clarke et al., 2014; Fletcher, Lyon,

Fuchs, & Barnes, 2019; Foorman et al., 2016; Moats, 2020; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000; Oakhill et al., 2015; Seidenberg, 2017; Stanovich, 2000).

Table 1.3 displays these areas, with a brief description of each area and some examples. PA, in the first row of Table 1.3, involves sensitivity to and the ability to manipulate phonemes (individual sounds) in spoken words, such as being able to blend sounds into a whole word or segment a spoken word into its constituent sounds. PA is especially important to the early stages of learning to read because in order to learn to map printed letters to sounds—that is, to crack the alphabetic code—children first have to understand that spoken words comprise individual phonemes; in order to decode a printed word, they must not only know grapheme–phoneme (letter–sound)

TABLE 1.3. Content of Structured Literacy: Important Components of Language and Literacy

Component	Description	Sample expectations for students
Phonemic awareness	Sensitivity to phonemes (sounds) in spoken words and the ability to manipulate them	Blend individual sounds (phonemes) such as /s/, /u/, /n/ to form the word *sun*; segment *sun* into its individual sounds.
Phonics	Knowledge of phoneme–grapheme/grapheme–phoneme correspondences and the ability to use that knowledge in reading and spelling unfamiliar words	Relate the letter *m* to the sound /m/ and the sound /m/ to the letter *m*; use this knowledge in reading and spelling words such as *am*, *mat*, or *men*.
Orthography	Knowledge of common letter sequences and spelling patterns in English	Recognize that words with a vowel–consonant-*e* pattern (e.g., *hope*, *shake*) usually have a first vowel that is long and an *e* that is silent; apply common spelling generalizations such as the "floss" rule to spell words such as *pill*, *mess*, and *stuff*.
Morphology	Knowledge about meaningful word parts (e.g., roots and affixes) and the ability to use that knowledge in reading, spelling, and understanding words	Recognize common roots such as *astro*, *ject*, and *psych*, including their meanings and spellings; read, spell, and understand words with shared roots from semantically related word families (e.g., *astronomy*, *astronomer*, *astrophysics*).
Vocabulary	Knowledge of word meanings in both listening and reading	Understand the meaning of grade-level words, including academic vocabulary.
Syntax	Knowledge about sentence structure	Understand, in both listening and reading, grammatically complex sentences, such as those with center-embedded clauses or passive voice, as expected for grade level.
Discourse comprehension	Listening and reading comprehension beyond the sentence level (e.g., paragraphs, stories, conversations); depends in part on background knowledge	Understand narratives and informational text while either listening or reading, including having adequate background knowledge to understand grade-level texts.

correspondences, but also blend the sounds once they have pronounced them. Likewise, to spell a word, they must segment a spoken word into its individual sounds before they can pair the appropriate grapheme with each sound.

Phonics, when used to refer to a component of reading rather than to an approach to instruction, means knowledge of grapheme–phoneme and phoneme–grapheme correspondences (e.g., the phoneme /s/ usually corresponds to the letters *s*, *c*, or *ss*), as well as the ability to apply that knowledge in reading or spelling unfamiliar words. Typical readers learn phonics skills mainly in the primary grades, although further developments in word reading, such as those involving morphology and etymology (word origins), continue beyond the primary grades.

Orthography involves knowledge about common letter sequences and spelling patterns in English. English has many regularities and recurrent patterns, but most English words cannot be decoded letter by letter. Instead, students must recognize common letter patterns—such as those involving common vowel patterns (e.g., *igh*), vowel–consonant–*e* syllables (e.g., *ride*, *broke*), and consonant-*le* syllables (e.g., the *-dle* in *candle*) —and be able to use that knowledge to read and spell words.

Morphology involves knowledge about meaningful word parts, such as roots, prefixes, and suffixes. English represents morphemes as well as phonemes in written words, so knowledge about morphology is valuable in multiple ways, including in reading, spelling, and understanding words. For example, if a student recognizes the root *psych,* as well as how to read and spell it, this knowledge can help the student read and spell semantically related words such as *psychology*, *psychologist*, *psychiatrist, psychiatric*, *psyche*, and so on. Furthermore, if the student knows that this word part means "mind," this knowledge can help in inferring the meanings of semantically related words. Morphology is important even in the earliest stages of reading, when children have to recognize, for instance, that dogs is not spelled *dogz* even though its final sound is /z/ because *dogs* is a plural, and to spell plurals, one uses *-s* or *-es*. Morphology becomes even more important at advanced stages of reading, when students have to read, spell, and understand an increasing volume of multisyllabic words, such as words with Greek and Latin roots (Carlisle, 2010).

Vocabulary refers to knowledge of word meanings, both in listening and in reading. Vocabulary directly influences reading comprehension because if there are many individual words in a text whose meanings a student does not know, this will inevitably affect the student's comprehension of that text. Vocabulary plays a role at all stages of reading but becomes especially important as students advance beyond the primary grades and the vocabulary used in grade-level reading materials becomes much more sophisticated (Chall, 1983).

Syntax is the area of language involving sentence structure. For example, a sentence with a center-embedded clause, such as *The cat that jumped off the table and scratched the boy ran under the bed*, may be difficult for typical young children and older students with syntactic weaknesses to understand; they may think that it is the boy, not the cat, that ran under the bed because of the juxtaposition of *boy* and *ran* in the sentence. Like vocabulary, syntax has a direct influence on students' reading comprehension, and syntactic demands in texts increase across grades. The earliest texts

used in school tend to contain short, simple sentences, whereas more advanced texts contain a higher proportion of syntactically complex sentences.

Finally, *discourse comprehension* involves the understanding of language beyond the sentence level, with a direct impact on reading comprehension, and with escalating demands for students beyond the primary grades. Among other skills, students need to understand how different types of texts—such as narratives and a range of informational text structures—are organized (Oakhill et al., 2015). They must recognize in reading, and be able to use in their writing, common cohesive ties such as *for example*, *in summary*, and *in contrast*, as well as resolve anaphoric references such as pronouns (e.g., when a text says *she*, to whom is it referring?).

Background knowledge is particularly important to discourse and reading comprehension (Oakhill et al., 2015). As the opening story about Ms. Bentley's students illustrates, when students lack background knowledge for a text, comprehension will be difficult. Furthermore, background knowledge plays a role in inferencing (Elleman, 2017), that is, understanding what is not explicitly stated to achieve full comprehension of a text. For example, suppose ninth-grade students are reading a news article about Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. If the students do not have background knowledge about Winston Churchill and the Battle of Britain, they will likely have trouble inferring the meaning of a phrase such as *Zelensky was seen as an almost Churchillian figure*, or to understand that the phrase is a compliment.

The Instructional Features of SL

The instructional features of SL approaches are displayed in Table 1.4. Two of these features involve instruction that is **explicit and systematic**. *Explicit* means that key concepts and skills—such as common grapheme–phoneme correspondences, important spelling generalizations, essential vocabulary and background knowledge for understanding a text, and common text structures—are directly taught by the teacher. Teachers model and clearly explain new concepts and skills, with multiple, well-chosen examples. *Systematic* means that important concepts and skills are taught in a logical sequence, with simpler concepts and skills taught before more complex ones. Another feature of SL, related to systematic teaching, involves **attention to prerequisite skills in instruction**. For instance, students are not expected to decode or spell complex multisyllabic words if they have not yet mastered prerequisite skills such as decoding and spelling simpler word patterns; they are not expected to understand syntactically complex sentences if they cannot yet comprehend simpler sentences.

SL approaches involve the provision of **targeted, unambiguous, prompt feedback** to students' responses, with affirmative feedback when students respond correctly, and feedback to errors that is clear, concise, and designed to help the student improve. For example, during students' oral reading of text, teachers do not ignore word-reading errors, but provide scaffolding and cues—such as pointing to part of a word that was misread—to help students read words correctly.

In SL approaches, teachers' instructional choices are **planned and purposeful**. These careful choices include instructional examples, texts, and tasks. For instance,

TABLE 1.4. Features of Structured Literacy

Feature	What it means	Example(s)
Explicit teaching	Key skills are directly taught, modeled, and clearly explained by the teacher	Teacher clearly models and explains how to segment a simple word into phonemes; how to apply a comprehension strategy, such as summarization
Systematic teaching	Instruction follows a planned, logical sequence, simple to complex	Children learn how to spell simple consonant–vowel–consonant words before spelling short vowel words with consonant blends; how to write correct sentences before writing paragraphs
Attention to prerequisite skills	Instruction considers prior skills needed to complete or understand a more advanced task	In teaching the meaning of a new vocabulary word, teacher uses clear definitions with words children will know
Targeted, unambiguous, prompt feedback	Teacher provides timely feedback to children's mistakes that helps children correct errors and avoid similar mistakes in the future	Teacher asks questions during children's text reading, with prompt clarification of misunderstandings as needed
Planned, purposeful choices of examples, tasks, and texts	Examples of words, instructional tasks, and texts for reading/writing are carefully chosen to fit children's current skills and avoid confusion	Phonics activities avoid the use of phonetically irregular words; children with limited decoding skills read phonetically controlled (decodable) texts
Synthetic-phonics approach at grapheme–phoneme level for initial phonics and spelling instruction	Initial approach emphasizes grapheme–phoneme correspondences and blending rather than larger units (e.g., whole words, onset–rime)	Children learn to decode a word, such as *shack,* by learning phonemes associated with the graphemes *sh, a*, and *ck,* and how to blend the phonemes into the correct word
Consistent application of skills and teaching for transfer	Children are expected to apply skills they have learned to varied and increasingly complex tasks, with tasks chosen to facilitate application of those skills	During oral reading of text, teacher draws children's attention to decoding errors and has child correct them; in writing activities, children are expected to spell previously learned words correctly
Data-based decision making	Assessments are used on a continuing basis to target interventions, monitor progress, and make needed adjustments	Assessments help a teacher target the specific comprehension weaknesses of a poor comprehender

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teachers working with poor readers in the early stages of decoding and spelling present words in a carefully structured sequence, typically facilitated by a scope and sequence that establishes an order for teaching specific skills, from simple to complex. Specific instructional sequences can vary, and there is not one ideal scope and sequence; however, any sequence used in SL filters out potentially confusing words that do not fit the patterns students have learned. These words are eventually taught, but only after students have a command of simpler word types. Also, students in these early stages of word reading are placed for instruction in decodable texts, texts controlled to the specific word patterns that students have learned, so that students have ample opportunities to practice their developing decoding skills. Later, once students have learned a variety of word patterns, they do not need decodables, but in intervention, they still generally read texts that are at their instructional levels—not too difficult, and not too easy.

Texts used in SL approaches also are purposefully chosen with regard to comprehension, such as texts tapping vocabulary or background knowledge that students know or have been taught. As another example, if students are learning how to summarize a text, teachers begin with texts that lend themselves to summarization, rather than choosing a text that does not. The aim is to provide students ample opportunities to understand and apply what they are learning, while at the same time avoiding undue confusion, such as confusion caused by unintentionally misleading examples or by overwhelming students with too many new skills at once. These kinds of planned, purposeful choices can improve poor readers' chances of success and help increase progress (Fletcher et al., 2019).

In addition to teaching phonics skills explicitly and systematically, SL approaches generally use a particular approach to initial phonics instruction: **a synthetic-phonics approach at the grapheme–phoneme level**, for both decoding and spelling. In this approach, beginning readers learn grapheme–phoneme (and phoneme–grapheme) correspondences, as well as how to blend and segment phonemes. Teaching of PA skills is integrated with phonics instruction (see, e.g., Al Otaiba, Allor, & Stewart, 2022). Synthetic phonics at the grapheme–phoneme level is not synonymous with decoding all words in a letter-by-letter fashion; even early on, children must learn common letter patterns for phonemes such as /sh/, /ch/, and /th/.

The point, however, is that initial instruction is at the phoneme level, which contrasts with other phonics approaches, such as *analytic phonics* (e.g., teaching word families), in which students learn highly patterned words but are expected to infer common phonics relationships, or onset–rime approaches, in which initial instruction emphasizes common onsets (i.e., any consonants in a syllable that precede the vowel, such as the *sh* in *shop*) and rimes (the rest of the syllable from the vowel onward, e.g., the *-op* in *shop*). Regardless of the phonics approach that is employed, children must eventually learn to attend to larger units within words, such as common morphemes. Table 1.5 contrasts examples of how children are taught to decode words using synthetic phonics at the grapheme–phoneme level with other phonics approaches to the same words.

TABLE 1.5. Some Different Approaches to Phonics Instruction

Initial phonics approach	Description	Sample word: *vat*	Sample word: *stick*
Word families (analytic phonics approach)	Teacher presents highly patterned words for children to learn; children are expected to infer the phonics pattern, as well as apply it to reading and spelling unfamiliar words	Child learns the family of words *sat*, *rat*, *cat*, *mat*, and so forth, and infers the pronunciation of *vat*	Child learns the family of words *sick*, *pick*, *chick*, *thick*, etc., and infers the pronunciation of *stick*
Onset–rime	Teacher teaches sounds for common onsets (e.g., single consonants, blends, consonant digraphs) and common rimes (*-at*, *-it*, *-ack*, *-ick*, *-ake*, etc.), as well as how to blend and segment onsets and rimes	Child learns that the onset *v* corresponds to /v/ and how to pronounce the rime *-at*, then blends *v-at*, *vat*	Child learns how to pronounce the onset *st-* and the rime *-ick*, then blends *st-ick*, *stick*
Synthetic-phonics, initial grapheme–phoneme level	Teacher teaches common grapheme–phoneme correspondences, as well as how to blend and segment phonemes	Child learns that *v* corresponds to /v/, *a* to /a/, and *t* to /t/, then blends *v-a-t*, *vat*	Child learns that *s* corresponds to /s/, *t* to /t/, *i* to /i/, and *-ck* to /k/, then blends *s-t-i-ck*, *stick*

Yet another feature of SL approaches involves **consistent application of skills and teaching for transfer** (Wanzek, Al Otaiba, & McMaster, 2020). Students are expected to apply previously taught skills to subsequent, increasingly complex texts and tasks. Texts and tasks are carefully chosen so as to help promote transfer. This aspect of SL means that review of previously taught skills is built into instruction in a comprehensive way, although some review is also always part of SL lessons.

Finally, SL approaches involve **data-based decision making**—in particular, the use of appropriate assessments to inform intervention. As shown by the example of Ms. Bentley's three fifth graders, appropriate assessments are a critical first step in planning interventions. Once intervention has been designed, other assessments are vital to monitoring students' progress and to adjusting interventions as needed. Chapter 3 discusses assessment in detail.

Research Support for SL Approaches

As previously noted, the content of SL—key components of language and literacy—is very well supported by research from the past several decades, which shows that these areas play important roles in literacy development and are often implicated in literacy difficulties. Research also supports the instructional features of SL, which are highly consistent with research on effective methods of intervention for a variety of struggling

readers, including those with disabilities, as well as poor and at-risk readers in general (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Cardenas-Hagan, 2020; Fletcher et al., 2019; Gersten et al., 2008; NRP, 2000; Vaughn et al., 2022; Wanzek et al., 2020).

With regard to initial approaches to phonics instruction, the report of the NRP (2000) found clear benefits to explicit, systematic phonics instruction as compared to no phonics teaching or to incidental teaching of phonics, but could not differentiate among the phonics approaches illustrated in Table 1.5. To be sure, any explicit, systematic phonics approach is far preferable to no phonics teaching. However, post-NRP research suggests a significant advantage of initial synthetic-phonics approaches at the grapheme–phoneme level (Brady, 2011, 2020; Christensen & Bowey, 2005; Sargiani, Ehri, & Maluf, 2022) over other phonics approaches. This advantage is seen especially in relation to reading and spelling more advanced words, as well as students' abilities to transfer their skills to unfamiliar words—and learning to read unfamiliar words is, after all, the main point of phonics teaching. Moreover, this approach enables teachers to integrate PA with phonics instruction rather than teaching PA separately (Johnston & Watson, 2004). Also, other approaches to phonics instruction, such as onset–rime, ultimately require a transfer to a phoneme-level approach because many words in English do not readily lend themselves to onset–rime decoding, such as long words. An initial synthetic-phonics approach at the grapheme–phoneme level avoids the need to make this transfer.

SL approaches are sometimes wrongly viewed as involving only teaching of phonics, or as only appropriate for students with phonics needs. However, SL approaches are effective for teaching higher-level literacy skills, as well as foundational skills (Vaughn et al., 2022), and these approaches can benefit students with a variety of reading profiles. For example, Ms. Bentley's student Drew, who had SWRD, could benefit from SL interventions for reading long words (Kearns, Lyon, & Kelley, 2022). Marcus, who had SRCD, could benefit from SL interventions for vocabulary, oral language comprehension, and reading comprehension (Coyne & Loftus-Rattan, 2022; Stevens & Austin, 2022; Zipoli & Merritt, 2022). Eli, who had MRD, could benefit from SL interventions involving all of these areas. Targeting individual poor readers' needs correctly in intervention is critical to effectiveness (Connor & Morrison, 2016); with appropriate targeting, SL interventions can help a broad range of struggling readers.

What Do Non-SL Practices Look Like?

Although SL is an umbrella term, certain popular core general education practices and interventions clearly do not fall under the SL umbrella. Some of these non-SL practices are more common with children at beginning levels of reading, especially non-SL practices involving teaching of foundational skills, whereas others are commonly found with students at relatively advanced levels of reading. Table 1.6 contrasts SL practices with examples of non-SL practices for students at early and more advanced stages of reading.

TABLE 1.6. Some SL and Non-SL Practices for Beginning and More Advanced Readers

Stage	SL practices	Non-SL practices
Beginning readers	• Basic phonics skills taught explicitly and systematically, using initial synthetic-phonics, grapheme–phoneme level approach • Use of a scope and sequence for teaching foundational skills to help ensure prerequisite skills for decoding and spelling are addressed • Beginning decoders usually read decodable texts • In text reading, students are encouraged to look carefully at words and apply decoding skills, *then* check to ensure that what has been read makes sense • Spelling generalizations, such as the "floss" rule, are explicitly taught and practiced	• Basic phonics skills usually taught, but often not systematically, and often with a larger-unit approach (e.g., word families or onset–rime) • Instruction in foundational skills may not use a scope and sequence, so prerequisite skills are not always addressed • Beginners often read predictable texts • In text reading, students may be encouraged to use picture or sentence context rather than looking carefully at words to decode • Application of basic phoneme–grapheme correspondences in spelling usually taught, but spelling generalizations, such as the "floss" rule, often not explicitly taught or practiced
More advanced readers	• Skills for decoding long words, such as use of morphology, taught explicitly and systematically • Advanced spelling skills, such as spelling of Latin- or Greek-derived morphemes, taught explicitly and systematically • Students read texts at or near their instructional levels • Important prerequisite skills for understanding a text, such as vocabulary and background knowledge, addressed in instruction • Instructional strategies to help students understand challenging syntax are used • Different passage structures for informational texts are explicitly taught • Explicit teaching about cohesive ties (e.g., cause–effect signal words such as *because*, *consequently*, *as a result*) is provided	• Teaching of decoding beyond basic phonics skills sometimes not addressed • Advanced spelling skills often not taught; focus may be on memorizing specific words, without attention to morphology or other useful patterns in words • Poor readers may be expected to read grade-level texts that are much too difficult for them • Important prerequisite skills for understanding a text, such as vocabulary and background knowledge, may not be addressed • Syntax often is not addressed in instruction • Differences between narratives and informational texts are usually taught, but individual informational passage structures (e.g., compare–contrast, problem–solution), as well as cohesive ties, may not be explicitly taught

For beginning readers, a highly influential non-SL approach involves the three cueing systems model (Clay, 1994; Goodman, 1976; for a discussion of the influence of this model in education, see also Hanford, 2019). The three cueing systems model maintains that good readers do not attend carefully to all the letters in a word to decode, but rather make use of partial letter cues—such as the first and last letter of words—along with meaning and sentence structure to read unfamiliar words. Despite the fact that this model is not consistent with research on how beginners progress well in reading (Foorman et al., 2016; Moats, 2017; Seidenberg, 2017; Stanovich, 2000), its popularity in education has led to many problematic practices, especially for poor and at-risk readers. These practices include teacher feedback that encourages guessing rather than looking carefully at words to decode, as well as the use of predictable texts in beginning reading. Predictable texts are written and structured to encourage guessing based on pictures and sentence context rather than consistent application of decoding skills. Table 1.7 contrasts examples of decodable and predictable texts.

At more advanced reading levels, SL approaches address skills for decoding and spelling long, complex words, such as morphology, useful generalizations, and orthographic patterns. However, in non-SL approaches, these skills often receive little attention (Moats, 2017, 2020). Students at advanced levels generally do not require decodables, but in SL approaches, they would be placed in texts at or near their instructional levels, whereas in non-SL approaches, they may be reading texts that are far too difficult

TABLE 1.7. Examples of Decodable Text and Predictable Text

Decodable text	Predictable text
Ben has a tan cat. The cat is Max. [picture of smiling boy with cat]	Good morning! It's time to have breakfast. What does Nicholas want to eat? [picture of smiling boy at table]
Ben has a lot of fun with Max. [picture of Ben and Max playing]	He can eat oatmeal. [picture of bowl of oatmeal]
Max likes to sit on a red rug in the den. [picture of Max on the rug]	He can eat waffles. [picture of waffles on a plate]
A big bug is on the rug near Max. [picture of bug]	He can eat bacon. [picture of bacon on a plate]
Max sees the bug run by him. [picture of Max looking startled]	He can eat scrambled eggs. [picture of scrambled eggs on a plate]
CVC words: *Ben, has, tan, cat, is, Max, lot, fun, sit, on, red, rug, in, den, big, bug, run, him* High-frequency words (not CVC): *a, the, of, with, likes, to, near, sees, by* Other words: (no other words)	CVC word: *can* High-frequency words (not CVC): *good, morning, it's, time, to, have, breakfast, what, does, want, eat, he* Other words: *Nicholas, oatmeal, waffles, bacon, scrambled, eggs*

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for them, to the point that success is not possible even with good teacher scaffolding and preteaching. Non-SL approaches also may ignore important prerequisite skills for understanding a text, such as teaching of key vocabulary and background knowledge (Wexler, 2019), and syntax is rarely addressed in these approaches.

Like many teachers, Ms. Bentley had been prepared in non-SL rather than SL approaches. Her preparation had actively discouraged her from using explicit, systematic teaching, as had the core general education practices in use at her school. Furthermore, she was expected to address grade-level standards without regard to whether students had mastered prerequisite skills for those standards, as well as to have students read texts that were far too difficult for them. These issues were especially acute with her most challenging students—Drew, Marcus, and Eli—because of the extent of the students' difficulties and problems with grouping them together. Knowledge about poor reader profiles, combined with the use of appropriate SL interventions, could enable all of these students, and many others, to be much more successful in reading.

SUMMING UP: The Value of SL for Different Poor Reader Profiles

Here are the most important points from this chapter:

- Two key ideas can enable practitioners to improve their effectiveness in teaching struggling readers: common poor reader profiles, which describe common patterns of reading difficulties, and SL interventions.
- Three common poor reader profiles, based in the SVR, are SWRD, SRCD, and MRD.
- Knowledge about the profiles is critical to targeting and designing interventions appropriately.
- SL approaches involve specific content—important areas of language and literacy—as well as certain features of instruction that are highly effective for poor and at-risk readers.
- Features of SL include explicit, systematic instruction; attention to prerequisite skills; prompt, targeted feedback; the use of a synthetic-phonics approach at the grapheme–phoneme level in initial phonics instruction; planned, purposeful instructional choices; teaching for transfer; and data-based decision making.
- SL interventions can benefit all profiles of poor reading, whether they involve weaknesses in foundational skills or in higher-level components of literacy.

APPLIED EXERCISES

Exercise 1

Shari is a beginning fourth grader who was identified with reading problems in grade 2. She has been receiving SL interventions for phonics and reading fluency

for about the past year and a half, and she has made good progress, although she still needs some additional intervention involving long words. Recently, however, Shari has started evidencing some difficulties with reading comprehension, even when she is reading texts at her instructional level, texts that she can decode fluently. Shari's teachers are puzzled by the emergence of this new problem with comprehension. What poor reader profile does Shari appear to have, and how could it explain her emerging reading comprehension difficulties? What kinds of additional assessments could confirm it and help inform her intervention?

Answer

Shari appears to have a profile of MRD, involving weaknesses in both word reading and language comprehension. In the early grades, Shari's difficulties with word reading might have been more obvious than her language comprehension weaknesses, especially if those weaknesses are relatively mild, because the texts Shari could read did not place heavy demands on comprehension. However, Shari's decoding has improved to the point that she now can read more challenging texts that place greater demands on her comprehension. Further assessment of Shari's oral language comprehension, especially her oral vocabulary knowledge and broad listening comprehension, with more in-depth assessment of language (e.g., syntax) as warranted, could help confirm whether Shari has a profile of MRD. These assessments also could be very helpful in adjusting Shari's intervention to include additional areas of comprehension in which Shari is weak.

Exercise 2

A ninth-grade poor reader with a profile of SRCD has difficulties with higher-level EF involving planning, monitoring, and organizational processes. How might these kinds of difficulties affect the student's reading comprehension and written expression? How could SL interventions improve the student's performance in these areas?

Answer

In reading, the student might have weaknesses in monitoring comprehension, as well as identifying the gist of a text and summarizing it. In written expression, planning and organizing a piece of writing, as well as monitoring processes such as identifying errors for editing and revision, could be weaknesses. Formal and informal assessments could help to determine whether these areas are in fact problematic. If so, addressing these difficulties through explicit, systematic teaching of comprehension monitoring, summarization, and important writing processes, along with prompt, targeted feedback and other features of SL, could greatly benefit this student.

Exercise 3

What type of initial phonics teaching is usually emphasized in SL approaches? How is this approach different from other initial phonics approaches, and what are its advantages? Explain how a beginning reader would learn to decode a word such as *smash* in SL approaches.

Answer

SL approaches typically emphasize a synthetic-phonics approach at the grapheme–phoneme level in initial phonics instruction. To decode a word like *smash*, children would be taught grapheme–phoneme correspondences for *s*, *m*, *a*, and *sh*, and how to blend the phonemes associated with those graphemes. Other phonics approaches involve larger units for initial instruction, such as whole words or onsets and rimes. Although the use of synthetic phonics at the grapheme–phoneme level places somewhat greater demands on children's phoneme blending skills than do other initial phonics approaches, it has many advantages: It appears to be more effective, especially in developing skills for reading advanced words and unfamiliar words; PA instruction can be integrated with phonics instruction; it is applicable to a wider range of words right from the start rather than being limited to words with common rimes or word families; and it avoids the need eventually to transfer from a larger-unit phonics approach to a grapheme–phoneme level.

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