

Teaching with Reading Rods®: Content and Theory

by Dr. Peter Fisher

Introduction

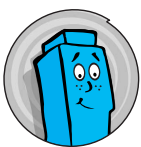
Research studies focused on best teaching practices in alphabetic principle, phonemic awareness, and word structure abound. Reading Rods Phonics is based on a variety of research studies including the comprehensive National Reading Panel Report, as well as the many research studies cited below.



Alphabet and Phonemic Awareness (Complete Kit, Kindergarten; Picture Rods only, Grades 1, 2, and 3)

English is an alphabetic language—one in which letters are combined to produce syllables and words. It is no surprise to us, therefore, that knowledge of the alphabet is a good predictor of success in learning to read (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). Some children explore the alphabet prior to coming to school—through spelling their names, pretend writing, arranging magnetic letters on the refrigerator, and so on. For those students and for students having no prior experiences with the alphabet, the rods in this set provide an interesting and motivating play activity for learning and reinforcing of letter knowledge, including naming and sequencing letters.

Some children do not understand that speech can be broken into sentences, words, and syllables. They may not recognize that certain words rhyme, or that others begin with the same sound. Even when they know all this, some may be unaware that words can be broken down into separate phonemes. All this knowledge is known as phonological awareness—of which phonemic awareness is only one part. It is a well-established research fact that phonological awareness is a strong and reliable predictor of early reading success, and that this awareness can be taught (Blachman, 2000). Using the set of picture rods, students build their phonemic awareness by learning to recognize rhyming words, count syllables, and distinguish and manipulate phonemes in words.



Initial Consonants and Word Families (Kindergarten)

While all aspects of phonological awareness are important, children find phonemic awareness the hardest to learn. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that makes a difference in a word's meaning—for example, the phoneme /b/ is what makes the word *big* different from *pig*. It is important to know that phonemic awareness instruction is not phonics instruction—it does not try to teach an accurate written representation of phonemes. Students may develop phonemic awareness through a variety of activities such as segmenting words into phonemes and blending phonemes into words; and deleting, adding or substituting phonemes to make new words (National Reading Panel, 2001).

Phonemic awareness may begin with the ability to segment an initial phoneme from words—recognizing that *bat* and *ball* begin with the same sound. The Reading Rods Initial Consonants and Word Families Kit allows students to develop their phonological and phonemic understanding in a novel and important way. The ability to physically manipulate letters that represent phonemes reinforces the segmentation and blending that needs to occur for reading success. Many years ago, a Russian psychologist, Elkonin, explored students' ability to manipulate phonemes by asking them to place counters in boxes (Elkonin, 1973). Many programs, such as Reading Recovery, now use this technique for instruction. Both this kit and the next one can be viewed as Elkonin boxes that are three-dimensional and can be pulled apart and put back together again.



Short Vowel Word Families (Grade 1)

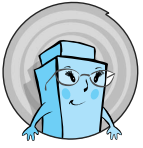
The Short Vowel Word Families Kit continues the phonemic awareness work but goes one step beyond. We know that successful readers use onsets (initial phonemes) and rimes (word families) to read and spell new words by analogy with the ones they already know (National Reading Panel, 2001). This kit's instruction on word patterns gives students practice in making those analogies. Such pattern-based instruction is particularly effective in developing children's spelling abilities (Cunningham, 1995).



Phonics Word-Building (Grades 1, 2, and 3)

Phonics instruction teaches children the relationships between individual sounds (phonemes) and their written representations (graphemes). Although the debate about phonics has gone on for many years, it is not really about whether to teach phonics, but when and how to teach phonics. It is clear that some form of systematic phonics instruction is necessary for most students in order to learn to read (National Reading Panel, 2001). Whether your phonics instruction is synthetic (building up the sounds of words) or analytic (breaking down the sounds of words), or both, the Phonics Word-Building Kit will help reinforce the teaching method in your classroom. In particular, the National Reading Panel found that systematic and explicit phonics instruction is appropriate for children who are at risk of failing to learn to read. Not only does this kit provide instruction and practice, it does so in a systematic way. Although we know that students do not learn sounds in any set sequence, we understand that most students will learn blends before digraphs; short vowel sounds before long vowel sounds; and both before *r*-controlled vowels. Reading Rods is flexible; you may use the sequence provided or one designed by your basal text.

In addition, the physical manipulation, the color-coding, and the sound-matching activities with the rods allow students to use multiple modalities to explore sound-symbol relationships (Gardner, 1993).



Prefixes, Suffixes, and Root Words (Grades 2 and 3)

Shane Templeton and Darrell Morris (1999) observe that children's knowledge of English orthography (rules of spelling) develops in fairly predictable stages, from understanding the alphabetic principle to recognizing patterns across words, and finally, to grasping how meaning impacts spelling. This final stage is sometimes referred to as the "derivational constancy" stage (Bear, et al., 1999). Structural analysis helps children understand the meaning of words by showing them how prefixes, suffixes, root words, and base words can be combined in novel ways (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002). This is sometimes called morphemic analysis. Just as a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word, a morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning. For example, "cats" has two morphemes—"cat" and "s." Derivational constancy, then, refers to how the spelling of a morpheme can remain the same while the pronunciation changes—for example, "relative" and "relation." Once children have reached this stage and can benefit from instruction in word analysis, teachers can easily integrate vocabulary and spelling instruction. This set of Reading Rods helps make the meaning and spelling patterns clear and, through the use of color codes, develops students' understanding of both prefixes and suffixes. It also develops students' vocabulary by teaching them Greek and Latin roots (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002).



Simple Sentences (Grades K, 1, and 2)

Although phonics is necessary for becoming a proficient reader, children learn to recognize many words by sight—for example, their names and other words important to them, such as "mom" and "school." That is, they recognize these words without applying phonic analysis. English orthography is phonically irregular—many phonemes are represented by more than one grapheme (ai, ay, and so on.), and one grapheme may represent several phonemes (the "o" in "hot" and "wonder"). Some words, therefore, need to be learned by sight. The Simple Sentences Kit helps students learn these sight words.

Predictable books are often used in classrooms with children in the early stages of literacy. The predictable sentence patterns and use of the same words in a sequence of sentences does two things—it provides instruction in sight word identification, and it develops students' concept of word (the understanding that a word

is bounded by white spaces in text (Bear et al., 1999). The predictable sentence aspect of this kit addresses the same two things. The students' concept of word is developed by physically removing and adding words to a sentence. The repeated use of the same words develops their immediate word recognition of those words.

The rods in both the Simple Sentences and Sentence-Construction kits (see below) are color-coded by part of speech. This allows students to understand how English works. It makes explicit the relationships between nouns, verbs, and adjectives—and even adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions. All students have some proficiency with language prior to coming to school. They have what Hartwell (1985) called Grammar 1—the grammar in our heads that allows us to form words in patterns that convey meaning. By using a sight-word approach to the systematic study of parts of speech, the rods in both kits help students develop their metalinguistic knowledge (Hartwell's Grammar 5). That is, they make explicit what students know implicitly, and thus help develop students' understanding of how language functions and how it is used for different purposes. All of this sounds very complex for a simple sentence kit! But simply stated, these kits provide an arena in which students and teachers can talk about how oral and written language work.

Finally, the Simple Sentences Kit introduces students to compound words, contractions, and punctuation, as well as the concepts of synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms. Introducing these terms provides them with the metalinguistic knowledge to manipulate language, and thus be comfortable with all aspects of literacy (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002).



Sentence-Construction (Grade 3)

This kit continues the sight word and metalinguistic work begun with the Simple Sentences Kit (see above). Although there is good evidence that the traditional teaching of grammar does not transfer to students' oral language and writing (Patterson, 2001), grammar still needs to be taught in some fashion. These Reading Rods make grammar activities fun. Patterson points out that the errors in grammar that are noticed most frequently are in fact errors in usage—this set allows students to practice appropriate usage and mechanics in addition to learning traditional grammatical concepts in a fun and interesting way.

Summary

As outlined above, Reading Rods Phonics employs a strong and solid theoretical and research base. For a complete list of research studies cited in this report, please see pages 159–160 or request additional materials from ETA/Cuisenaire®.