

# How Much Time Should Teachers Spend on a Foundational Reading Skill? Research Offers Clues



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A reading block in an elementary school classroom can feel like a carefully choreographed 120-minute dance.

Time is a finite resource, and it often falls to teachers to make decisions about how much instructional time to devote to the many interrelated components of reading. What's the dosage of each that will ensure kids get it?

A new study offers insight into that question for one key component of early reading development: phonemic awareness. It finds, in essence, that you *can* have too much of a good thing.

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Phonemic awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate the individual sounds in words—to blend the sounds /c/, /a/, and /t/, into the word cat, for instance. It serves as a kind of springboard for reading and spelling by giving young children knowledge they can map onto written letters, aiding them in sounding out words.

Instruction in this skill is important. But at some point, students master this ability, and don't need further teaching. The new study, from a team at Texas A&M University, aimed to figure out where that point might be.

The researchers examined 16 experimental and quasi-experimental studies on phonemic awareness instruction, all conducted in small groups or one-on-one settings with students in grades pre-K-1. They found that the more time teachers spent, the better students became at the skill compared to a control group—but only up to a certain point: 10.2 hours total. Programs that spent longer on phonemic awareness instruction after that point showed diminishing returns.

Practice with this skill is crucial, the study concludes, but also that an “overemphasis” on phonemic awareness may not be beneficial, said Florina Erbeli, an assistant professor of educational psychology at Texas A&M and the lead author on the paper.

“We have to remember that phonemic awareness is not the goal of the whole instruction. The goal is to teach the students to read,” she said. “Phonemic awareness instruction is just one of the steps that will bring us to kids starting to read and spell. ... After a while, you wouldn't expect a typical child to go on forever and ever needing this.”

## Research doesn't provide a 'magic number'

As the “science of reading” movement has spread across the country, more schools have taken up phonemic awareness instruction as part of their early literacy approach. A 2022 EdWeek Research Center survey found that about a quarter of preK-2 and special education teachers use Heggerty, an early literacy curriculum provider that offers popular daily phonemic awareness lessons.

The study is one of the first to provide research-based guidance on dosage for phonemic awareness. It comes at a time when questions about how to structure classroom time loom large in the science of reading movement.

While many states have passed new legislation mandating that schools use evidence-based practice, these laws and accompanying state guidance don't often come with a roadmap for structuring an effective literacy block. The lack of concrete instructions can leave some teachers feeling frustrated—wanting to change their practice, but not knowing exactly how. Some educators have offered examples of what their lessons look like.

But there's not one singular research-based schedule, in part because dosage is difficult to study, said Matt Burns, a professor of special education at the University of Florida who studies reading interventions. Burns was not involved with the Texas A&M study.

The same amount of cumulative time can have different effects depending on how it's divided up, he said. For example, 30 minutes once a week of practice with a skill might lead to different outcomes than 10 minutes three times a week. Many studies don't report this kind of detailed information about dosage. And then students' needs vary—some may need more practice and repetitions, and others fewer, Burns said.

Such differences should be considered in interpreting the study, Erbeli said.

"10.2 hours is not some magic number," she added. "We say in the paper that this number does not tell us anything about a particular class, a particular individual." Teachers should plan phonemic awareness instruction based on the needs of students in front of them, she said.

Still, this study can provide a useful guidepost, Burns said. "If you're spending more than [10.2 hours], take a look at your practice. If you're spending much less than that, take a look at your practice."

## Phonemic awareness: With or without letters?

The study also touches on a distinction that has become a source of debate in the reading field: Whether it's better to teach phonemic awareness orally, or alongside written letters.

Many teachers use materials that are designed for oral practice only. The teacher will say a word, and then ask students to segment the sounds within it, for example. But some researchers argue that having students look at the letters in a word as they practice this skill can reinforce their understanding—and some studies have shown that students' reading and spelling outcomes are better when phonemic awareness instruction includes letters.

In the Texas A&M study, the researchers found that phonemic awareness instruction with letters led to bigger returns over a longer period of time—the intervention groups continued to show better phonemic awareness skills than control groups after 16 hours of instruction over the course of the program. (These programs also spanned grades pre-K-1.)

That may be because phonemic awareness and decoding ability are reciprocal skills, Erbeli said. Seeing how sounds are connected to letters could help students manipulate sounds more precisely.