

FAQ Video Transcripts

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Question: *How are the phonics units especially beneficial for English learners?*

Amanda Hartman:

Of course, English language learners need opportunities to learn English phonics. So I may have some phonics work in my first language, or I may not. Either way, I need to have some instruction that's going to help me to learn English phonics. And for some language groups, that might be a really easy transition and transfer, and for other students, it can be more complicated. And so I think we need to make sure that English language learners are included in phonics instruction in the classroom.

When I think about what English language learners need most in classrooms, it's a lot of interaction. And so one of the things that I think is very special and important about these units of study is that there's a lot of opportunity for collaboration amongst students. So there's quite a bit of partnership work in each session for students to work together with other students, so that it's not just a solitary experience. You're not just at your table, on your own, by yourself, with no input or feedback from other students or even the teacher. In each of the sessions, there's work that the class is doing all together, but then there's also opportunities for partners to work together, either with magnetic letters, or manipulating letters and sounds on a white board, or a sort activity. So there's quite of bit of work that kids can do together, and thus, an opportunity for language input, as well as oral language practice.

There's also, in our sessions, a chance and an opportunity for partnerships to work with other partnerships, almost like a little rug club, a phonics book club, as it were. So this opportunity to, again, work with other students is helpful. It's helpful both because it can be literally supportive in terms of skill development and content, but it's also supportive in that I can also be receiving some really strong language input from my peers in the classroom.

And then it also provides a way for teachers to give and adjust feedback in the classroom to the partnerships and the small groups, and to tailor or adjust, not only just what is being taught, but how it's being taught. So just like in our units of study for reading and writing, one of the things that's very supportive for English language learners is that kids can really get the things that they need most.

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We developed a toolkit for language development that helped us to think about methods to help make language more comprehensible for students, both in student-to-student interaction, student-to-teacher interaction, and of course, teacher-to-student interaction. And those strategies, those teaching strategies to make language more comprehensible, can all be also applied to these phonics units of study. There's also, in that document, ways to think about building off a student's prior knowledge and background knowledge. Just as we think about that for reading and writing, we can also think about that for the phonics work. And then there was also the section on giving kids more opportunities for oral language practice. I think as you look at these phonics units of study, while yes, they are teaching phonics, they're also very language rich, meaning that the kids are reading a lot of texts and are referring back to their own writing also. They are thinking about a series of words, and how those words fit in context and can be taken out. So there's quite a bit of language work, which on the one hand can be a challenge, but on the other hand can really serve as an enrichment, and a growth of understanding of not just how to read words or how to write words, but the meaning of these words, and what it means to use them in reading or in writing.

That document that we made of ways to support English language learners to get more oral language practice to build up a prior knowledge, to make our language more comprehensible, all applies to these units of study in phonics. In our units, we are going to have a book on small group work. There are extensions to think about ways to extend the work in each of the sessions. And I think when you start to look at the extensions, and also look at the small group work possibilities, these are things that would be quite helpful for English language learners. With the small group work, we know that, for sure, there is something that you get from your whole group instruction, but for students who are learning English as a new language, we know that the smaller we can make their groupings, often the better for them. And so small group opportunities in reading workshop, and writing workshop can give kids an opportunity to get more targeted instruction, and more practice, and more feedback from the teacher.

In our extensions, you'll see quite a few of them are using shared reading, are using interactive writing, are using some controlled text that still have rich meaning to them. And these are really important because they are building familiar materials with and for kids. And so when materials become more familiar, students can really use the language and their own understandings and backgrounds to then isolate and help them learn reading, and writing, and even phonics more efficiently. I think alongside using these components of balanced literacy in the phonics program is the work around building and making texts together. And we know that for ELLs, when they get to make texts together, often times they are made at a reading level that's above where their "just right" book level may be. But because they have made the text with the language and the syntax that they are learning and

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using, it becomes a really meaningful and, actually, pretty motivational material to include, not just to work on during phonics time, but to read during reading workshop. So your phonics work with ELLs can be quite supportive, not only to support their language development and growth, but also their reading and writing growth.