

Implementing the K–2 Reading Foundations Skills Block

Reading and writing are ultimately about understanding. In order to gain and show that understanding independently, students need to be able to “crack the code” of written language. In the primary years, they need systematic and specific instruction in the basics of reading and writing—so that they acquire strong and automatic knowledge of letters and sounds.

Because of this widely recognized need, EL Education has created the K-2 Reading Foundations Skills Block (K-2 Skills Block). The intent is to ensure that, by the end of Grade 2, students acquire the depth of skills they need in the Reading Foundations standards in order to be able to navigate grade-level text independently. The lessons and assessments explicitly address the CCSS Reading Foundations standards as well as some Language standards associated with spelling and letter formation.

At the primary grades, EL Education’s comprehensive language arts curriculum consists of three hours per day of instruction: the K-2 module lessons, the K-2 Labs, and the K-2 Reading Foundations Skills Block. Three hours for literacy is a lot of time—and well worth it. Building strong literacy skills and knowledge in the primary years is key to ongoing success in school and life. All three hours address the fundamental needs of primary learners for learning and joy.

This document helps teachers understand the why, as well as the concrete what and how, of the K-2 Skills Block. Specifically:

- How did research inform the design of the K-2 Skills Block?
- What is the overall structure of the K-2 Skills Block?
- How is time used within the hour of instruction?
- What do students do during whole group instruction?
- What do students do during differentiated small group instruction and independent work?
- How does the design of the K-2 Skills Block reflect grade-level reading and language standards?
- What do assessments look like in the K-2 Skills Block?
- How is the K-2 Skills Block related to the two hours of content-based literacy in EL Education’s K-2 curriculum (module lessons and Labs)?
- What does a day in the K-2 Skills Block look like?
- What are some frequently asked questions about the K-2 Skills Block?

Know that many of the topics addressed here are also addressed in greater detail in the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual.

How did research inform the design of the K-2 Skills Block?

The K-2 Skills Block uses a structured phonics approach, grounded in the Phase Theory of Dr. Linnea Ehri, which describes behaviors related to the types of letter-sound connections students are able to make as they learn to read and write. (See the Phases and Microphases section of the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual for more details.)

Phases of Reading and Spelling Development (abridged)

Pre-Alphabetic (Pre-A)	Partial-Alphabetic (PA)	Full Alphabetic (FA)	Consolidated Alphabetic (CA)
Able to identify very few letters, if any	Able to identify many upper and lower case letters	Able to identify all upper and lower case letters and their associated sounds	Able to identify all upper and lower case letters and their associated sounds
Not yet able to identify letter sounds	Able to identify some letter sounds	Able to blend and segment sounds in a word	Has built a large bank of sight words, including multisyllabic words; learns words more quickly
Able to identify some environmental print	Has limited phonemic awareness	Has memorized a growing number of sight words (mostly shorter words)	Able to use context to confirm reading of a word in a text
If tries to spell words; may use a random string of letters or shapes	Has limited decoding ability; predicts unknown words by identifying beginning sound	Growing ability to decode words and non-words	Has proficient memory for correct spelling; able to draw from alphabetic principles to spell new words
	Able to produce some invented spelling; weak memory for correct spelling	Has a growing memory for correct spelling, some invented spelling	
		Able to use context to confirm reading of a word in a text	
		Growing memory for correct spelling, some invented spelling	

Metsala, J. and Ehri, L. (1998); Word Recognition in Beginning Literacy; Mahwah, NJ; Erlbaum

What is the overall structure of the K-2 Skills Block?

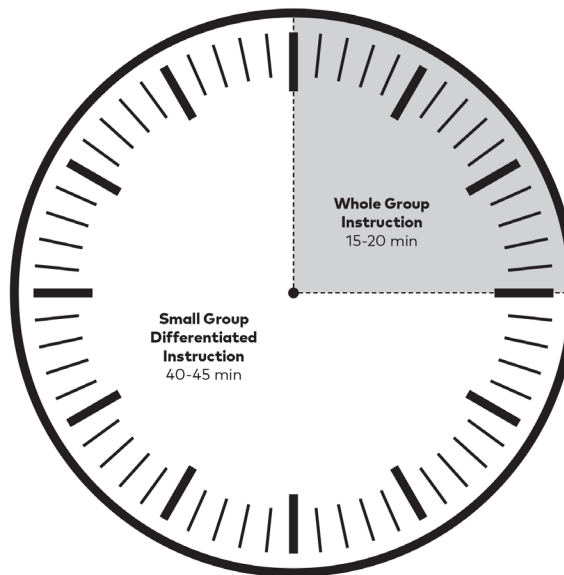
The K-2 Skills Block, like the K-2 module lessons and K-2 Labs, is divided into four eight-week-long¹ modules that span a full year. In the K-2 Skills Block, each module is broken into seven five-day “cycles” of instruction. These cycles include an intentional sequence of Instructional Practices (simple routines such as Chaining or Spelling to Complement Reading), each of which builds on the learning from the previous lesson and connects to the next lesson’s learning.

Every eight-week module includes a flex week of five days. These days can be used at the teacher’s discretion at any time throughout the cycle for such things as reteaching or making up for a short school week. Each Module Overview includes suggestions for these days based on the content of the module. The table that follows shows the breakdown of an eight-week K-2 Skills Block module.

Eight-Week K-2 Skills Block Module)

Cycle 1	Each five-day cycle includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Four days: Repeated Instructional Practices (one per day)• One day: Assessment and Goal Setting (end of cycle)
Cycle 2	
Cycle 3	
Cycle 4	
Cycle 5	
Cycle 6	
Cycle 7	
Flex week	The days in this flex “week” should be used throughout the module at the teacher’s discretion

How is time used during the one hour of instruction?



The K-2 Skills Block is one hour long, divided into two major chunks:

- 15-20 minutes of whole group instruction
- 40-45 minutes of differentiated small group instruction (including independent work time)

¹ Note: Module 1 of each grade level is only six weeks long, with five weeks of instruction and one flex week.

The table that follows summarizes the full hour of the K-2 Skills Block with approximately 15–20 minutes spent in whole group instruction and 40–45 minutes spent in differentiated small group instruction. Whole group and differentiated small group instruction are described in greater detail following the table.

Grouping	Instruction
WHOLE GROUP INSTRUCTION	<p>Opening (3–5 minutes): Students engage in a brief and familiar instructional practice that provides connections to prior learning and/or warms students up for the Work Time instructional practice.</p> <p>Work Time (10–15 minutes): Students engage in a familiar instructional practice routine through which they practice newly introduced phonemes, graphemes, spelling patterns, or skills.</p> <p>Reflection and Goal Setting (2–3 minutes): Each module includes a character focus (e.g., collaboration). Students make and/or reflect on personal goals connected to their growth as readers and the current character focus of the module.</p>
DIFFERENTIATED SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTION	Teacher meets with two or three differentiated small groups, based on phase. Each group meets with the teacher for 10–12 minutes while other students do purposeful independent work.

What do students do during whole group instruction?

In the K-2 Skills Block, whole group instruction is broken into three parts: Opening, Work Time, and Reflection and Goal Setting. During the Opening, students engage in a familiar instructional practice that connects to prior learning or warms them up for the Work Time. In the K-2 Skills Block, an instructional practice is a routine used consistently over one or more modules that addresses grade-level standards, ensuring that all students have access to grade-level instruction as a whole group.

Work Time is the heart of whole group instruction. This is where students use instructional practice routines to practice newly introduced graphemes (letters), phonemes (sounds), spelling patterns, or skills. For example, in both kindergarten and Grade 1, there is an instructional practice called Phonemic Blending and Segmentation. It’s a simple routine in which students use thumb tapping as they segment a word into its phonemes, and then slide their fingers to blend the phonemes back into a complete word. Students learn this instructional practice early in the year, practice it, and then apply it every time they learn new phonemes or words. So in a cycle early in first grade, they might be tapping out the phonemes in the word *nut*: “n/u/t” and then blending it back together to pronounce *nut*. By the middle of first grade, they might be using this same instructional practice with more difficult words like *shut* and *gasp*.

What follows are just a few of the many other examples of instructional practices in the K-2 Skills Block:

- The Mystery Word instructional practice is a fun way to introduce new high-frequency words. The practice engages students by providing clues, such as the number of letters, in a new word and encouraging inquiry as they work together to guess the new word(s).
- The Silly Sentences instructional practice in Grade 2 encourages students to use their imagination to come up with the silliest sentence they can, using words that include the spelling pattern(s) taught in that cycle.
- The Cycle Assessment review activities include an instructional practice called Spelling with Style. Students practice spelling words aloud that follow the taught spelling patterns of the cycle, but they do it “with style.” For example, they might do it “opera style” and sing with a silly opera voice or “ketchup style,” pounding one hand into the other (as if they are trying to get ketchup out of a bottle) as they spell the words.

Just as with math instruction, building a set of familiar practices supports students as they apply those practices with increasingly complicated content. Primary learners thrive on a sense of rhythm and ritual. And the instructional practices also help you as a teacher: It will be slow going early in the year learning each practice, but then you will find you can use them with increased comfort and automaticity later in the year.

The instructional practices in the K-2 Skills Block are designed with the characteristics of primary learners in mind, incorporating music, movement, flexibility, and joy. For example, instead of being asked to raise their hand when they hear a set of rhyming words in the Rhyme Time instructional practice, students are encouraged to stand up and jump when they hear the rhyming words. Teachers model the practice, and then students join in. As students become more familiar with a particular practice, less teacher modeling and explicit instruction is needed. All of the instructional practices used in the K-2 Skills Block, such as Phonemic Blending and Segmentation, are detailed in the Module 1 book for each grade level.

During the Reflection and Goal Setting portion of whole group instruction, students set goals for their growth as readers. Throughout our comprehensive K–2 curriculum, we focus on students’ habits of character; the K-2 Skills Block is no different. The lesson’s Closing often emphasizes growth mindset, helping students notice: “How did our work today help us become even more proficient readers?”

What do students do during differentiated small group instruction and independent work?

Differentiated small groups are determined after administering the grade-level Benchmark Assessments, which help teachers determine each student’s microphase (a more detailed breakdown of each phase, which denotes “early,” “middle,” and “late”). During differentiated small group instruction, teachers work with a group of students to teach new material, reteach, or extend based on students’ needs. (For more information about independent and small group work, including the Benchmark Assessments, see the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual.)

Small group differentiated instruction lasts 40–45 minutes per day and features the following:

- The teacher meets with approximately three groups per day.
- Students reading below grade level meet with the teacher every day.
- Students reading at or above grade level meet with the teacher one or two times per week.
- For each group, the teacher refers to the suggested activities and instructions, which may include:
 - Reteaching or extending the whole group lesson (suggestions found in the Differentiated Small Group sections of lessons)
 - Activity Bank activity (suggestions found in the Differentiated Small Group section of lessons; full Activity Bank found in the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual)
 - Differentiation Pack activities (found in the K-2 Skills Differentiation Pack book for each grade level)

Each day, students who are not working with the teacher engage in purposeful independent rotations. Students should engage in a combination of the following each day:

- **Accountable Independent Reading:** This is a time for students to choose from a variety of texts based on interest and/or reading goals. Teachers can use this time, possibly during a rotation or between rotations, to observe and/or confer with students about their reading proficiency goals and to monitor fluency and comprehension.
- **Word Work:** This is a time for students to analyze words and word parts. Teachers may use materials from the K-2 Skills Block (e.g., suggested Word Sorts and Activity Bank activities) or other existing classroom materials (e.g., games, letter tiles).
- **Writing Practice:** This builds students’ ease with the skills and habits needed to generate ideas on paper—everything from letter formation to spacing to knowing how to begin a sentence and continue a thought. In a primary classroom, students can practice writing and letter formation using a wide variety of mediums—teachers can use their creativity to design ways to help students practice these skills, build stamina as writers, and write about topics of interest in creative ways.

- Reading Fluency:** Fluency involves lots of rereading. Teachers can use a variety of familiar texts from the K-2 Skills Block or from existing classroom libraries for fluency work. Teachers should give students texts that are familiar and/or easily decodable for a given phase. For example, readers in the Pre- or Partial Alphabetic phase are not yet able to decode, so they should “read” familiar classroom poems or songs that they have memorized.

How does the design of the K-2 Reading Foundations Skills Block reflect grade-level reading and language standards?

The K-2 Skills Block is designed as a seamless continuum with three years’ worth of lessons from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of Grade 2. The sequence of instruction progresses at a pace that aligns to grade-level CCSS (Reading Foundations and some Language standards) and the four Phases of Reading and Spelling Development.

Because the K-2 Skills Block Continuum is tightly connected to the phases and the standards, teachers gain a clear picture of what a student is able to do at a given microphase, how it aligns to grade-level expectations, and the instructional steps that can be taken for differentiated small group instruction and meeting students’ needs during whole group instruction. The table that follows shows how the four microphases, the lesson content of the K-2 continuum, and the grade-level expectations (based on CCSS Reading Foundations standards) align.

	Early	Middle	Late
Pre-Alphabetic	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	GKM1, C1–4: ABC sounds and recognition; syllable and rhyme identification, concepts of print GKM2, C5–11: ABC sounds and recognition, syllable identification; rhyme identification and production, concepts of print
Partial Alphabetic	Kindergarten, Module 3, Cycles 12–18: digraphs, decoding CVC words, comparing short vowel sounds	GKM4, C19–22: decoding CVC words and beginning to decode CVCC; comparing long and short vowel sounds	G1M1, C 1-4 kindergarten review G1M2, C5–6: continued review of phonemes taught in kindergarten G1M2, C7–11: initial and final consonant clusters, “y” as / /
Full Alphabetic	Grade 1, Module 3, Cycles 12–17: syllable types: closed- syllable, open-syllable, and CVCe syllable-type words	G1M3, C18: two syllable, CVCe syllable-type words G1M4, C19–20: introduction r-controlled vowel sounds G1M4, C21–24: long vowel patterns	G1M4, C25: two-syllable words with long vowel patterns G2M1, C1–6: review vowel patterns by learning spelling generalizations, syllable types, and r-controlled vowels from Grade 1
Consolidated Alphabetic	Grade 2, Module 2, Cycles 7–C12: new vowel teams and spelling generalizations, contractions, affixes: “-ed” suffix (three ways), “-tion” and “-sion”	G2M3, C13–C19: consonant-le (C-le) word endings, other word endings, new vowel teams, and contractions	G2M4, C20–C26: “y” generalizations with plural endings, schwa, homophones, compound words, new word endings, and contractions

What does assessment look like in the K-2 Skills Block?

Primary teachers are deeply and rightfully committed to ensuring that all students are progressing as readers. Toward this same end, most schools and districts tend to heavily emphasize assessments, assessment systems, and reporting on data to the school community and parents. So, understandably, teachers using the K-2 Skills Block curriculum always have significant and specific questions regarding assessments. In the table that follows, we summarize the three major types of assessments in the K-2 Skills Block. (Note: For much more detail, refer to the Assessment Overview section of the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual.)

The results of these assessments, particularly the Benchmark Assessments, are so tightly aligned with the phases and microphases that each one helps teachers pinpoint and track students' progression through the phases toward mastery of taught skills. This targeted information empowers teachers (and students, parents, and leaders) with common language to discuss, plan, and set goals around students' strengths and areas of need.

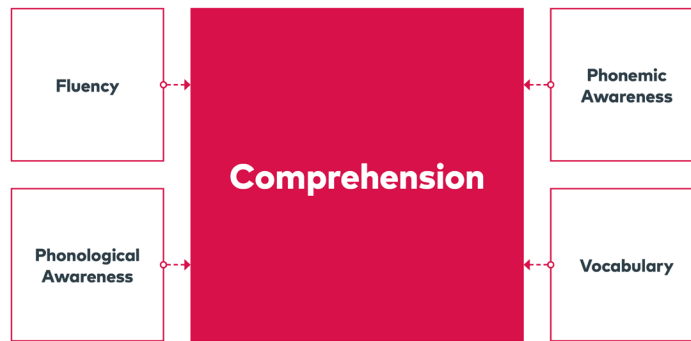
Assessment Types in the K-2 Reading Foundations Skills Block

Purpose	Administration Frequency
Assessment Type: Benchmark Assessments	
Depending on the time of year teachers administer these assessments, they can be used to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide diagnostic information to help determine a student's current phase• Provide guidance for choosing lessons from the K-2 continuum to best fit a student's instructional needs• Gauge whether the student is approximately on grade level (as defined by the CCSS)• Track students' progress and measure mastery of end-of-year goals (as determined by the K-2 Skills Block grade-level Scope and Sequence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beginning, middle, and end of year
Assessment Type: Cycle Assessments	
Cycle assessments are used to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess students' progress toward mastery of skills taught up to a given point in the curriculum• Give teachers information to help students set personal goals around reading proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kindergarten: every cycle, starting in Module 4• Grade 1: every cycle, starting in Module 1, Cycle 2• Grade 2: full cycle assessment one or two times per module; optional, brief cycle assessments available for cycles in between
Assessment Type: Daily Assessments	
In kindergarten and Grade 1 optional daily assessments are called Snapshot Assessments, and in Grade 2 they are called exit tickets. In both cases they are used to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Track progress toward mastery of Daily Learning Targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• After every daily lesson

How is the K-2 Skills Block related to the two hours of content-based literacy in EL Education's curriculum (K-2 module lessons and K-2 Labs)?

As we've continued to emphasize, and primary teachers know, the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. In order for students to reach this goal, to comprehend text with increasing independence, they need to be able to "crack the code"—to decode more and more complex words, and to acquire automaticity with those words. As any parent or teacher of a primary-aged student can attest, there is nothing more exciting than seeing this really click; young readers feel more confident and empowered and their reading takes off from there.

One way of thinking about this relationship between reading comprehension (the goal) and decoding and automaticity (the tools) is the Five Components of Reading, as defined by the National Reading Panel.



Comprehension is certainly the end goal. Yet we know that readers cannot independently comprehend a text if they can’t actually make sense of the letters and sounds. And primary readers, especially those who are reading below grade level or learning a second language, need extra practice with these skills, specifically Phonological Awareness, Phonemic Awareness, and Fluency. As readers become more secure in these skills, their reading can become more automatic and they can ultimately read independently and with meaning.

The K-2 Skills Block instruction sharply focuses on these skills. Explicit instructional practice guides students to read with automaticity and fluency, ultimately freeing up their brains to focus on the end goal—comprehension—rather than laboring over every word and losing track of the meaning. The K-2 Skills Block focuses on just three of the Five Components of Reading. Comprehension and vocabulary are explicitly taught in the K–2 comprehensive curriculum, primarily through read-alouds of rich, complex texts in the module lessons.

The table that follows illustrates these five components, notates the standards associated with each, and identifies where each is taught and assessed within the three-hour comprehensive literacy curriculum.

Where the Five Components of Reading Live in EL Education’s K–2 Language Arts Curriculum

Component of the Big Five	CCSS Standards	Explicitly Taught and Formally Assessed
Comprehension	Reading: Informational Texts Reading: Literature	<i>Module Lessons</i>
Fluency	Reading Foundations	<i>K-2 Skills Block</i>
Phonemic Awareness	Reading Foundations	<i>K-2 Skills Block</i>
Phonics	Reading Foundations	<i>K-2 Skills Block</i>
Vocabulary	Language	<i>Module Lessons</i>

We hope the preceding table will help teachers “connect the new to the known” in terms of mapping the EL Education curriculum onto what they already know or do. And it should reassure teachers that everything they care about in terms of literacy is formally “held” somewhere in the three hours that make up our comprehensive curriculum.

But it’s not so simple. For example, even though comprehension is taught and assessed in the module lessons, this does not mean that there is no comprehension work happening in the K-2 Skills Block. So the table that follows gets a bit more specific, showing more concretely how different strands of the standards show up across the three hours of instruction.

Addressing the Standards: The Interconnections between the K-2 Skills Block and the K-2 Module Lessons and Labs

Aspect	How it is addressed in the K-2 Skills Block?	How it is addressed in the K-2 module lessons and Labs?
COMPREHENSION (CCSS Reading Informational Texts; Reading Literature)	<p>Assessment of basic comprehension in the Fluency Benchmark Assessment and Fluency Cycle Assessments (aligned to CCSS RF.4)</p> <p>Optional assessment of basic comprehension in the Decodable Student Reader routine</p> <p>Optional comprehension conversations (text-dependent questions tied to the engagement texts)</p>	<p>Read-aloud and independent reading paired with discussion and writing in response to text-dependent questions</p> <p>Assessment of deeper comprehension in unit assessments and using the Reading Literature and Reading Informational Texts checklists (aligned to RL and RI standards)</p>
FLUENCY (CCSS RF.4)	<p>Fluency instructional practice and Fluency independent rotation</p>	<p>Modeled fluency through read-aloud and fluency practice through shared reading</p>
LANGUAGE STANDARDS	<p>Language standards associated with spelling and letter formation are explicitly taught and practiced; other language standards associated with writing and composition are echoed in the Interactive Writing instructional practice and Writing Practice (suggested independent rotation)</p>	<p>Read-aloud and analysis of songs, poems, and other texts, paired with practice and authentic application tasks, including shared writing and independent writing</p> <p>Assessment of language standards 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 embedded in unit assessments and using the Language standards checklist</p>
WRITING	<p>Conventions (letter formation and spelling) and Writing Practice independent rotation (CCSS Language Standard 1)</p>	<p>Composition of shared writing, individual scaffolded writing tasks, and individual on-demand writing tasks (CCSS Writing Standards)</p> <p>Assessment of writing standards in unit assessments using Writing rubrics and ongoing assessment with Writing checklists</p>
VOCABULARY (CCSS Language standards 4, 5, and 6)	<p>Word structure/word parts—explicit instruction around how affixes change the meaning of words</p>	<p>Direct vocabulary instruction before, during, and after reading with vocabulary selected from texts. Instruction focuses on determining the meaning of words and using new vocabulary in speaking and writing tasks</p> <p>Assessment of vocabulary standards (R, W, and L) embedded in unit assessments and using Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening checklists</p>

What might a day in the K-2 Skills Block look like?

The scenario that follows describes a typical day for first grade teacher Ms. Sanchez and her students:

It is Wednesday morning, and students are starting the third day of Cycle 4, which is part of Module 1. Before the students arrived this morning, Ms. Sanchez stacked all the soundboards (a horizontal row of three boxes on one side and four on the other, printed and laminated) and gathered the white board markers and erasers next to the class meeting area. She is ready for the K-2 Skills Block Work Time. But first, the class will warm up with an opening instructional practice called High-Frequency Word Fishing.

Ms. Sanchez leads the class in a transition song, the students singing together as they move from their seats to stand in a circle on the carpet (sung to the tune of “The More We Get Together”):

“Gather around together, together, together. Gather around together, together, let’s go. Stand up in a circle to think about what we’ve learned. Let’s make some great connections with letters and sounds.”

The students stand excitedly around the “pond,” eyeing the “fish” (high-frequency word cards) as they wait for Ms. Sanchez’s cue to begin the practice—High-Frequency Word Fishing. These cards include review words that were introduced in Cycles 1–3 and some new high-frequency words introduced on the second day of this cycle.

Ms. Sanchez says, “Remember, learning high-frequency words helps us be more proficient readers. They are words we see a lot when we read and use a lot when we write. Okay, now let’s all catch our fish!”

Each student, familiar with the routine and management expectations, holds up his or her (pretend) fishing poles and gets started. Kristina reels in (picks up) a card with the word “did” on it. Ms. Sanchez calls on her to read her card aloud.

“Did!” She reads aloud proudly, then “releases” it back into the pond. Ms. Sanchez calls on Omar, who has trouble reading the word “she” on his card. He has been working on identifying the sounds of digraphs “sh,” “ch,” and “th,” but still mixes them up sometimes. Ms. Sanchez points to the keyword card posted on the wall with a picture of a person holding a finger up to her lips and saying “Shh.” This helps Omar remember the /sh/ sound. He looks at the word again, remembering that “she” was one of the words they learned yesterday. Beaming, he exclaims, “She!”

Students sing another transition song as they sit down and prepare for the Work Time Instructional Practice: Spelling to Complement Reading, or SCR.

In the days leading up to this in the cycle, students reviewed a list of letters and letter sounds they had learned in kindergarten, including /t/, /n/, /u/, /s/, and /sh/. These letters and sounds were introduced and practiced through a variety of instructional practices on the first day of the cycle. Students engaged with the letters and sounds and in various ways, such as skywriting the letters and blending and segmenting word containing those letters. On the second day of the cycle, the new high-frequency words were explicitly introduced, as was the engagement text and Decodable Student Reader for this cycle.

Now Ms. Sanchez begins today’s Work Time by passing out the sound boards and white board markers, one set to each “row captain.” The row captain then distributes the materials to the other students in his or her row.

Once all the students have their materials, Ms. Sanchez begins the practice by saying a word aloud: “shut.” Students say the word after her, pronouncing each sound in the word slowly. Students then point to the boxes on their sound board, pointing to one box for each sound that they hear in the word, moving from left to right. Then they write the letters that represent each sound of the word in one box each.

Ms. Sanchez watches the students and notices that Omar needs a bit of help. She signals for the students to erase their boards and do the next word (“quit”), walking over to Omar and stopping him from erasing his board. She says, “Omar! I see that you remembered the “sh” makes the /sh/ sound. Wonderful. Now I want you to say the word

aloud for me one more time and use your fingers to tap out the sounds. Omar taps out /sh//u//t/ on his fingers, as he learned to do in the Phonemic Blending and Segmentation practice. He counts the sounds he hears and says, “Three!”

“That’s right. There are three sounds in this word, Omar. How many boxes did you use to write the word?”

“Four,” he said.

“So, let’s erase your first try. Can you try again?”

Omar used the sound board option with three boxes, writing “sh” in the first box and “u” and “t” in the second and third box.

Ms. Sanchez gives the class two more words, then closes the practice by saying each word once more as the students write each from memory on the back of their sound boards. This is her quick check for understanding, which will help inform some of the work she will do in differentiated small groups in a few minutes.

The class closes out Work Time with a short reflection. Ms. Sanchez has defined the word “proficient” with the students in past lessons and asks the students, “What have you done today that helped you become a more proficient reader? Think about your own personal goals that we set after our cycle assessments last week. Turn and talk to a partner about it.”

She walks around and listens in on the brief partner conversations, noticing that Elvin says, “I need to work on listening for the middle sound in words. I did that when we wrote the words on our sound boards. It was still kind of hard for me when I tried to spell the words on the back without the boxes, though.”

Ms. Sanchez signals for the group to turn back to the front and finish their conversations. She asks Elvin if he would share out his reflection with the group. She then sends students off to their independent work rotations, calling the Late Pre-Alphabetic Group, named “The Mallard Group” (all groups have been named after ducks as a connection to the topic of the module lessons), to meet her at the kidney table to begin their differentiated small group work together.

Frequently asked questions about the K-2 Reading Foundations Skills Block

Why does EL Education use a structured phonics approach as one key component of its comprehensive literacy curriculum?

The National Reading Panel has concluded that a structured phonics approach is the most effective way to teach students how to read. It is imperative that students receive explicit instruction and differentiated practice to know how phonemes (sounds) map to graphemes (letters). Some students figure this out inferentially. Many, particularly those who are most behind, do not.

What about guided reading?

We believe, based on a large body of research, that a structured phonics approach is the most effective way to teach reading, but it is not the only way. Guided reading is an effective practice for some readers, and many educators have had great success using this approach. That said, EL Education’s comprehensive curriculum does not set aside time for traditional guided reading, though elements of this practice are evident in three specific ways in the K-2 Skills Block: the Fluency instructional practice (used in whole group instruction) and the Decodable Student Reader routine and Reader’s Toolbox routine (both used in differentiated small group instruction).

There are three main reasons traditional guided reading is not included in EL Education’s curriculum: 1) weight of cueing systems, 2) text type, 3) comprehension focus.

Weight of cueing systems: Typical Guided Reading places equal weight on three cueing systems (visual, structural, and meaning) when students are learning to read. By contrast, based on the phases and research of Dr. Linnea Ehri, the EL Education curriculum emphasizes visual cueing. The structure and meaning cueing systems are “confirmatory” (i.e., a reader uses these to confirm a word she has decoded if she is still unsure). This is because research has found that the structure and meaning cueing systems are not the most efficient way to teach students to decode words (e.g., student decodes the word “dog,” using visual information from the word level, then looks at the picture or rereads the sentence to confirm that it was decoded correctly). That said, if a student has not yet been taught a certain spelling pattern or a word is irregularly spelled, it is necessary to draw on the other two cueing systems (structure and meaning). As such, the Reader’s Toolbox routine provides instruction and practice using these other cueing systems to solve an unknown word, though students are still taught to first attend to the visual cues as much as possible.

Text type: Texts used in a typical Guided Reading program are not controlled for taught spelling patterns. Consider how a math lesson usually works: When teaching a specific math skill, teachers give students math problems that give students an opportunity to apply those specific skills that they were just taught, without the complication of the problem requiring math skills or concepts they have not yet learned. Similarly, when learning a spelling pattern, students need opportunities to read text that lets them apply that spelling pattern. In the K-2 Skills Block whole group instruction, students practice and apply what they have learned using a decodable text instead of leveled readers to ensure that they get to practice the skills they have been taught.

Comprehension focus: In a typical Guided Reading program, small group instruction includes a focus on comprehension of leveled texts. Within the EL Education curriculum, much of this comprehension work (aligned to the standards for Reading Informational Text and Reading Literature) is addressed in the K-2 module lessons

and K-2 Labs, not the K-2 Skills Block. Note, though, that automaticity and fluency are taught and assessed in the K-2 Skills Block. Although these skills do not necessarily demonstrate comprehension, they tend to be strong indicators of whether a student is reading with meaning. Targeted focus on automaticity and fluency (including basic comprehension per RF.4) in the K-2 Skills Block frees teachers up to focus on deep comprehension of complex texts (the RL and RI standards) in the module lessons (primarily through read-alouds of complex text). And as students' alphabetic skills become more automatic and consolidated (making more complete and automatic connections between letters and sounds), they are then freed up to focus on comprehension independently.

I'm confused: So where does comprehension live in EL Education's K-2 Language Arts Curriculum?

Basic comprehension of grade-level text lives in the K-2 Skills Block, aligned to Reading Foundations standard 4: "Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension." Students have regular practice with basic comprehension (see preceding FAQ regarding "comprehension focus"). But comprehension is not the primary purpose or focus of the K-2 Skills Block. Deep comprehension—the ability not only to understand, but also to analyze complex text—lives in the module lessons alongside basic comprehension. The CCSS Reading Standards define what solid comprehension looks like at a given grade level, and all RL and RI standards are explicitly taught and formally assessed in the module lessons. Most of this is done through read-alouds of complex text (although as students move toward second grade, they do more independent and buddy reading).

Is there a conversion chart that aligns the decodable readers with Fountas & Pinnell/A-Z leveling systems?

Yes and no. Fundamentally, comparing EL Education's K-2 Skills Block to programs that are not based on structured phonics is an "apples to oranges" comparison. However, in the Assessment Overview, the "Approximate Alignment of Phases and Grade with Levels of Common Reading Assessments" chart shows an approximate correlation (see the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual). This chart can be used to get a sense of the approximate range of leveled texts that align with a given microphase and help identify appropriate books for students to use during Accountable Independent Reading.

What if the whole group lesson takes longer than 15 minutes?

When first implemented, the whole group lessons may take a little longer as students familiarize themselves with the instructional practices. Because the instructional practices repeat, students should become familiar with the routines and it will become easier to finish within the allotted 15–20 minutes. That said, each module includes five "flex" days. These days can be used any time throughout the module. If a lesson takes longer than anticipated, the teacher might choose to use a flex day to make up for the time lost in small groups as a result of an extended whole group lesson.

During differentiated small group instruction, can I use materials from other programs?

Yes. However, note that the purpose of this time is for students to have reinforcement with particular patterns: the same letters, letter sounds, and spelling patterns suggested in the differentiated small group instruction section of the particular lesson. So, for example, if you choose to use Words Their Way sorting materials, be sure to use words that contain relevant spelling patterns and/or word features. For further details, refer to the Independent and Small Group Work document within the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual.

What if I am already doing a bunch of district-mandated benchmark assessments? Do I still need to administer all of the K-2 Skills Block Benchmark Assessments?

It is not necessary to duplicate all assessments. But it is strongly suggested that “priority assessments” (i.e., Letter Sound and Recognition for readers in the Pre- and Partial Alphabetic phases; and Decoding and Spelling for readers in the Full and Consolidated phases) are administered. These assessments tightly align with the design of the K–2 continuum and provide important information necessary to determine lessons within the continuum that may need reteaching or extension. Refer to the Assessment Overview and Assessment Conversion Chart in the K-2 Skills Block Resource Manual for more details.

What about students who are way, way behind?

The beginning-of-the-year Benchmark Assessments provide valuable information about how far behind a student might be. Using this information, the teacher can consult the Assessment Conversion Chart to identify lessons within the K–2 Continuum to best meet the student’s needs (or specific instructional practices if students are below the earliest lessons of the continuum). In addition, the Meeting Students’ Needs column (in the whole group lesson) and the suggested differentiated small group section provides suggested accommodations and activities to meet the needs of every phase.