How to teach phonics to English learners - with Alison Ryan

Triple R Teaching Podcast #233

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today we're welcoming Alison Ryan to the podcast. She is going to help us understand how to help English language learners learn phonics. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Alison.

Alison Ryan:

Thanks, Anna. It's great to be back with you again!

Anna Geiger:

Today we're going to talk about helping students learning English during phonics lessons. But before we do that, could you reintroduce yourself and tell us about yourself and your work and your book?

Alison Ryan:

Absolutely.

My name is Alison Ryan, and most of the work I do now is in private reading intervention. I also work with teachers, coaching and supporting teachers, in literacy instruction. I'm a dyslexia specialist, so one of my passions is helping kids who are having a little bit more trouble learning to read. Through Learning at the Primary Pond, I support lots of teachers through our courses, my blog, YouTube channel, and my membership sites, just lots of ways to promote literacy in the world.

Anna Geiger:

Can you tell us a little bit about your book that was published recently?

Alison Ryan:

Yes, so it's been a little over a year ago now that my book, *The Phonics Playbook*, came out. I wrote that book because what I really wanted to focus on was how to differentiate phonics instruction and meet the needs of a big range of learners, because we know that in today's classrooms, we're not going to be presented with a class of kids that are all at the same level. We know that it's important to differentiate our phonics instruction, but sometimes it can be really hard to make that practical. The book breaks that down and makes it very practical.

Anna Geiger:

Today we're going to talk about helping students learning English. Why do those students need extra support with phonics?

Alison Ryan:

Really they need extra support with language learning in all subjects. To back up a little bit, we know that whatever we're teaching, whether it's literacy, even science, social studies, infusing vocabulary, sentence structure, comprehension into that, learning English for all students is important, right? We know that's important for all students.

But with our English language learners, for kids whose first language is not English, there's a greater mental load that they're carrying when they're learning phonics, or really any other skill.

To explain this, what I like to do is compare it to kids carrying books and backpacks. Many kids who have spoken English their entire lives, they're carrying one heavy book. That one heavy book represents the skill they're trying to learn. For example, different ways to spell long O. The book feels a little heavy, right?

The kids who are also learning English are actually carrying two heavy books. One book is the skill that they're learning, and one book is the English language skills that they're learning and trying to make sense of what the teacher is saying and how to express themselves. Their backpack is heavier. Their cognitive load is greater.

We need to do what we can to lessen the load so that they can be successful in learning phonics while still developing their skills in English.

Anna Geiger:

That was a very good explanation, thank you. I love that.

So what are the specific things that we can do during our phonics lessons to lighten that load and help them learn those skills?

Alison Ryan:

I think a lot of this, by the way, will apply to other skills beyond phonics even.

I break this up into receptive language and expressive language skills. Receptive language is just the understanding of spoken language or understanding language that's written down, like reading. Expressive language would be communicating. That could be with speech; it could be in writing.

There's some overlap between these strategies, but I kind of like to break it up that way. It's helpful to think about that when you're thinking about how to make the content accessible, whether it's phonics or something else for our multilingual learners.

To start with receptive language, something that we can do is to use pared down language when we're giving instructions to students. I used to be very guilty when I was earlier on in my teaching career of talking too much where my directions were not clear, concise, or to the point. I might say, um, and then, and then this, and maybe you could do that.

We want to think through what we're going to say before we teach any lesson for all kids, but especially for our English language learners. What are the fewest words that you can say to communicate something? Just say that. Say less with pared down language.

Anna Geiger:

That is a really good tip, and I don't think that's something many people would think of, but it makes so much sense.

Alison Ryan:

It's so important, not to digress, even for our kids that have reading difficulties too because they may have trouble processing language. All kids benefit when we use pared down language and just say less. We should try to repeat ourselves less too, unless we really need to.

Anna Geiger:

That's where routines and routine language can come in, right?

Alison Ryan:

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

The next kind of area of tips I want to talk about is probably pretty familiar to most teachers, and that would just be using modeling, pictures, and visual aids. Letting kids not just *hear* directions, but also *see* what you mean.

That could be visual directions. First, do this and there's a picture. Second, do that.

When you're modeling, again, something that's good for all kids, we want to show and tell. Tell using concise language.

If you're modeling, for example, how to maybe decode a word with a blend, at least the first time you do it, don't start asking the kids for help. You just do it, and they watch and listen.

This can feel uncomfortable for some teachers because they're like, "Oh, I want to involve my students!" Yes, you do, but when you're modeling something for the first time, it's show and tell. It is all about *you*.

Try to make it brief, but show them and tell them what you're doing. Try to make it as clear and to the point as possible so that they can see exactly what you mean. Because just explaining directions using language, again, for our English language learners, there's a greater cognitive load. They may not get it.

Whenever we can be very clear, show them what we mean, and use visual aids, that's something that's going to help our students for sure.

When I think specifically about phonics instruction, something that we know about decodable text or even word lists, especially when the kids are younger and they're just learning those basic skills, there might be some words on there that are not familiar to English language learners, or sometimes any of our kids! They use some strange words, right?

Even if it's something like the word "rag," because we're working on short A. Your English language learners may not know what a "rag" is, so have your tablet on hand or have a picture of a rag that you can show them.

You don't necessarily need to show them every word, but just pick out a couple that you want to focus on that you have pictures ready for. Just think through that ahead of time. Fortunately with the internet, it only takes a second to just maybe put them on a slide or copy and paste them in, but that can be really helpful for English language learners.

Then on that topic of vocabulary, again, in phonics instruction, like in any subject, we want to be developing that vocabulary for all of our students.

We don't just want to have them spell ten words, but we want to give example sentences with those words. Maybe if there's a picture that could better illustrate what a word is, just pull it up real quick. We want to define vocabulary, whether we're working on spelling words, or maybe reading a word list.

We don't have to go in depth on every single word, but just pick out a few that you want to focus on. That's helping kids bring meaning to what they're doing, and that's beneficial for all students.

Another thing we can do is, let's say we're working with a small group of English language learners, and we know that we've got this additional cognitive load going on. Instead of spelling ten words, maybe you only have them spell five words or seven words, but you spend a little bit longer on a couple of those words developing vocabulary.

Otherwise, you're just having them spell all these words and it's very rote. Maybe they're building their phonics skill, which is good. We know that the same type of structured literacy is great for kids that are learning English, I should have said that upfront. It's the same overall strategies that we're using, but they need a little bit more language work.

Maybe we do fewer words and we get the kids to orally use some of those words in a sentence. That's kind of bridging over into the expressive language strategies. We do maybe a little bit less, but it's higher quality, because they're not going to know all the words that maybe their English-speaking peers do.

Another thing we can do when it comes to receptive language is to break up decodable texts into smaller chunks.

A lot of our learners may be able to handle, especially if the decodable text is brief, if we introduce it, they read it, and then we discuss it. But with our kids that are learning English, even those simple texts may contain language and vocabulary that's really unfamiliar to them.

Of course, before we read, we can anticipate that, right? We can preload a couple of those vocabulary words, not all of them, but those that are going to be most critical to them understanding the text.

We go through it and think, "You know what, if they don't understand what a rag is, the whole story is going to go over their heads." I'm going to make sure, before we read it, that they understand what a rag is. We can do that.

Then as they are reading, with my English language learners, what I will do is I will maybe break the text in two, or maybe break it into thirds. I'll have them read up to that point, and then we'll stop and discuss it. I will make sure that they are actually understanding what they're reading, because yes, with the decodable text, the goal is to get them to apply their phonics knowledge, but I don't want to accidentally teach them that reading is just saying words and not trying to make meaning of it.

That's why I might slow it down a little more and have more stopping points so that I can ensure that they actually understand what the text means. Then we don't get to the end and it's like, well, I have no idea what I read. We're kind of preventing that.

Also it allows me more opportunities to maybe teach a little bit of extra vocabulary, or maybe get them talking a little bit more about the text using those expressive language skills.

All of these things will help with making the language that you're saying to them, that they're hearing even from their peers, and that they're reading, more comprehensible to kids that are learning English.

Anna Geiger:

Well, thank you so much. You laid that out so well with so many practical tips for teachers. Like you said, these can be useful for any kids, not just kids who are learning English, especially with all those tricky CVC words. Some of them are pretty obscure in terms of using those in everyday language.

Alison Ryan:

Yes. Ready to move on to expressive language?

Anna Geiger:

Yes, go ahead. Awesome.

Alison Ryan:

Okay, so when we're thinking about expressive language, again, that's how kids are communicating in words and writing. There are many things we can do here as well, and again, this is good for all kids, but explicitly teaching the mouth positions of the sounds can be really helpful. There are some sounds, like between Spanish and English, for example, that do not exist in Spanish that are then tricky for kids to pronounce in English.

It may be that kids never get a true native-sounding pronunciation of that sound and that's fine, but we can get them closer and help them hear that sound by making sure that we're showing and telling them that this is what your teeth, your lips, and your tongue are doing. This is what's going on in your mouth when you're producing this sound. They can use little mirrors to look at themselves while they're practicing pronouncing that sound.

Again, the goal is not perfection, but it's to get them a little bit closer because it may not be a sound that they have spoken for most of their lives.

Another thing we can do for expressive language support is to provide sentence starters. This can be something that we do, whether it's just on the board or we give it to them orally when they're responding to a question.

For example, let's say that they I'm asking them what their favorite fruit is. I might just tell them, start your sentence by saying, "My favorite fruit is...," and then say your fruit. I might model what that sounds like with my favorite fruit. Then they say that when they give their response.

Now, of course, you can do that in writing too. You can have a sentence starter up on the board or on their paper, and make sure they know what it says, but then they finish that sentence.

That's less cognitively demanding than coming up with their answer. Okay, it's a very simple question, but I have to think of my favorite fruit. I have to figure out how to say that in English. Then if I have to write the whole sentence, things kind of start to break down.

We can use sentence starters as a scaffold, but eventually we do want to take them away. That scaffold is temporary. If you think about work they do on a building, that scaffolding there is not forever, it's just temporary.

That's something that we can do to help them communicate in complete sentences, whether orally or in writing.

Then another thing I mentioned when I was talking about the receptive language strategies is just infusing oral language and giving them more opportunities to talk than we might think. Especially with small group, that's a great opportunity because there are fewer kids.

In a whole group, we can have them turn and talk and maybe pair them with a student who can serve as an English model for them. My English language learner might be paired with a child that's been speaking English for their whole life, and so they can support each other there.

But in small group, that's a great opportunity because you can stop in the middle of the decodable text and ask them questions and get them talking more.

Maybe when you're working on high frequency words, and once they've seen you introduce a word and use a word a couple of times, get them using that word in a sentence orally to a partner.

That's something that's great for all kids, using more oral language. Especially when we're in this world of technology where kids are often on their phones and not having as many actual conversations with peers and adults.

It's thinking about how can I get more turn and talks in? How can I especially leverage that small group time to get kids using the vocabulary that I'm teaching them or the sentence structure that I'm teaching them. It's just getting them using that, whether it's about a decodable text or even something in science or something else.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much. You're an excellent teacher. You laid it out so clearly, and I know that people will enjoy your book as well as learning from you in other ways. Where can people find you?

Alison Ryan:

Yeah, on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and everywhere I'm Learning at the Primary Pond.

Then you can also get my book on Amazon or at Barnes and Noble. It's called *The Phonics Playbook* by me, Alison Ryan. In that book, I go more in depth on the phonics strategies for English learners, but that's just one chapter. The whole thing is about what can your schedule look like if you differentiate? What are some different options based on the types of kids that you have in your class? How do I, as a teacher, meet the needs of all my students when there's one of me and there are many of them, and they're at a big range of levels. We know that differentiating instruction can help kids make progress faster, so this is all about making it practical and doable for you.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, and I appreciate that. Obviously today you talked about practical things, and the book very much does the same. It lays it out very clearly for teachers.

Thank you so much, Alison, for joining me for the second time, and I'll make sure to link to all those things in the show notes.

Alison Ryan:

Thanks, Anna! It was great being with you.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode233. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.