



Essential Lessons in Foundational Skills Research Base

Reading



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PROGRAM OVERVIEW

i-Ready Pro, the next evolution of *i-Ready* for middle school, offers a reimagined student experience with streamlined lesson pathways and deep insights for educators into skills progress and development. These enhancements address the diverse range of student needs in today's secondary classrooms with content tailored to this critical developmental stage. *i-Ready Pro* gives striving learners access to efficient, focused, and evidence-based intervention lessons and near and on-grade level students access to grade-level lessons to grow reading proficiency.

Early access to *i-Ready Pro* for 2024–2025 features all-new Essential Lessons in foundational skills for older striving learners who need intensive intervention in foundational reading skills. The full launch of *i-Ready Pro* in 2025–2026 will serve all middle school students with new accelerated pathways for near and on-grade level learners and targeted intervention for older striving learners who need support in language comprehension in reading.

Students first complete the *i-Ready Diagnostic*, which is an adaptive assessment that places students into their zone of proximal development. Based on the assessment, teachers can access reports to view Can Dos and Next Steps for their students, see groups of students with similar needs, and access teacher-led Tools for Instruction. These reports support teachers in providing small group instruction.

In addition to supporting teacher-led instruction, early access students who need support in foundational skills are automatically placed into Essential Lessons that are right for them. Students who place into Essential Lessons work through a systematic sequence aligned to *Phonics for Reading*[®], a research-based intervention program that helps students in Grades 3–12 rapidly build the skills they need to become fluent, independent readers. Authored by literacy expert Dr. Anita Archer, *Phonics for Reading* is a systematic, research-based intervention program that helps older students in Grades 3 and above build the decoding skills they need to become fluent, independent readers of the complex texts they will encounter in the more advanced grades.

Essential Lessons are designed specifically to meet the needs of middle school students with a more mature experience designed to appeal and engage middle school learners. Lessons motivate and engage older striving learners as they work through their pathway, and students have more freedom and control over what and how they are learning.

A streamlined lesson pathway provides a more efficient route to grade-level content, avoids repetition, and focuses on critical skills. Adaptive technology allows online learning to be more engaging and efficient. Students who demonstrate proficiency in skills progress to more advanced content quicker, while students who need additional support get the explicit instruction and practice they need.

Essential Lessons include approximately 31 topics, or groups of lessons, in foundational skills. Within each topic, students typically complete up to three Phonics lessons (on single-syllable words, multisyllabic words, and/or endings and affixes) and one High-Frequency Words lesson. Students work on multisyllabic words in the multisyllabic and endings and affixes lessons, so they are immediately applying the sounds they are learning to not just simple single-syllable words, but to the kinds of complex words found in grade-level texts. This is aligned with the approach found in *Phonics for Reading*, which can be used as a teacher-led intervention to complement the Essential Lessons.

Each lesson consists of three discrete sections:

- The lesson begins with a **Skill Check**, or a short assessment that determines whether students need instruction for all, part, or none of the skills in the lesson. Since many students have words memorized by middle school, each Skill Check will rely on nonsense words to measure whether they can decode words, including the upcoming skill. The skill check allows students to skip skills or lessons that are unnecessary to them.
- If additional support is needed following the Skill Check, students then move into **instruction and guided practice** during which they receive direct instruction in the targeted skills.
- The lesson concludes with **scored independent practice** during which they will have a mix of encoding and decoding activities aligned to the skill.

Educators have increased insight into the specific skills a student has passed and which skills they may need additional support with before moving forward. This enhanced reporting at the student level pulls directly from students' lesson data and continually updates as students progress through their pathway.

ACADEMIC ADVISORS

Essential Lessons in foundational skills provide evidence-based instruction informed by practical classroom experience. Guidance from our program authors and advisors ensured the design of a rigorous, literacy skills program that provides students with opportunities to practice and apply new learning purposefully and meaningfully while being manageable for teachers to implement.



Devin M. Kearns, Ph.D., Program Advisor

Devin M. Kearns, Ph.D., is an associate professor of special education in the department of educational psychology in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut (UConn). He is a research scientist for Haskins Laboratories at Yale University and the Center for Behavioral Education and Research at UConn. Kearns conducts research on reading disabilities—including dyslexia—in elementary and middle school-aged children and designs instructional programs to assist these students. He also studies the neurobiological effects of reading intervention. He publishes articles for researchers and educators on reading difficulty and helps schools and districts implement high-quality reading instruction.



Linda Diamond, M.Ed., Program Advisor

Linda Diamond, M.Ed., has dedicated her career to teaching children to read, particularly those with word reading difficulties like dyslexia. Diamond co-founded the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE) alongside former California Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, and she served as CORE's president for 26 years. She is the co-author of the nationally recognized textbooks *Teaching Reading Sourcebook*, *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures*, and *Vocabulary Handbook*.

THE EVIDENCE BASE

Explicit, Systematic Instruction and Application of Foundational Literacy Skills

Essential Lessons in foundational skills are built on the research that says systematic, explicit instruction is the best way to learn the code (Castles et al., 2018; Armbruster et al., 2001; Brady, 2011; Ehri et al., 2001; Moats, 2001; Moats, 1999). As research has shown, mastering the foundational skills is essential to becoming a skilled reader with the capability and passion for reading to learn as one progresses in school and beyond (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Following the science of instruction, Essential Lessons integrate three aspects of effective teaching for older striving readers. First, the program is sequential in that it teaches skills from simple to complex. Second, the program systematically focuses on critical content to promote learning. Complex skills are broken down into clear, obtainable steps to ensure learning. Third, instruction is explicit. The explicit instruction delivers focused and predictable lessons, actively involves all students in every lesson, monitors student performance closely, and provides immediate feedback. Students are engaged in meaningful interactions with language throughout.

Sequential Skills from Simple to Complex

Many skills and concepts are important when teaching reading, and the way they are taught directly impacts students' progress toward grade-level reading (Archer et al., 2021; Hasselbring et al., 2021; Hock et al., 2017). Essential Lessons teach the skills that older striving learners need, progressing from easier skills to more complex ones and high-frequency to low-frequency elements, to support students in overcoming reading challenges.

Systematic Instruction

Systematic phonics instruction is defined as the direct teaching of a set of letter-sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence. The set includes the major sound and spelling relationships of both consonants and vowels (Armbruster et al., 2001). Systematic and explicit phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading than instruction that provides non-systematic or no phonics instruction (Armbruster et al., 2001). Successfully implemented systematic instruction uses a defined scope of strands and strategies while teaching specific knowledge, concepts, and domains (Mesmer & Kambach, 2022). The goal of systematic instruction is to maximize the likelihood that when learners are confronted with new concepts, they already possess the appropriate prior knowledge and understanding to see its value and to learn it efficiently (Adams, 2001).

Essential Lessons accomplish this by focusing on the highest leverage strands that will make the most meaningful impact on older striving learners' development through structured, predictable lessons. The strands include Phonics, High-Frequency Words, and Fluency. This systematic approach features a clearly defined sequence of sound spellings, opportunities for both decoding and encoding practice with the target sound spellings, and substantial practice in applying the skills in reading.

Research also shows that phonics instruction with cumulative, sequential, and systematic instruction helps students overcome the bad habit of relying on context and guessing to decode unknown words (Moats, 2001). Synthetic phonics instruction is the most effective approach to teaching reading (Spear-Swerling, 2019; Brady, 2011). Synthetic phonics is the system in which students are taught specific graphemes that correspond to sounds and then blend the graphemes together to form words.

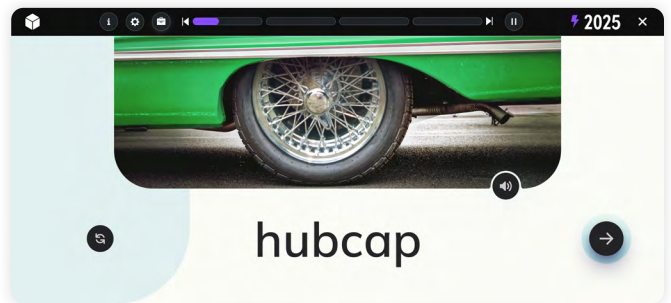
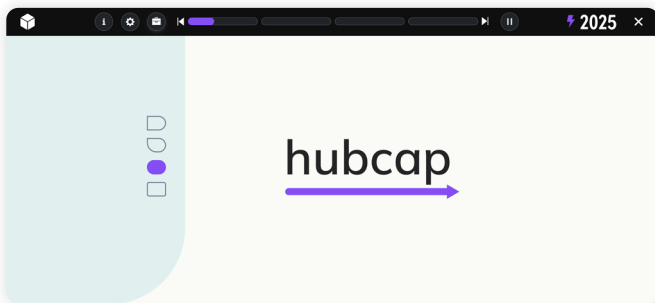
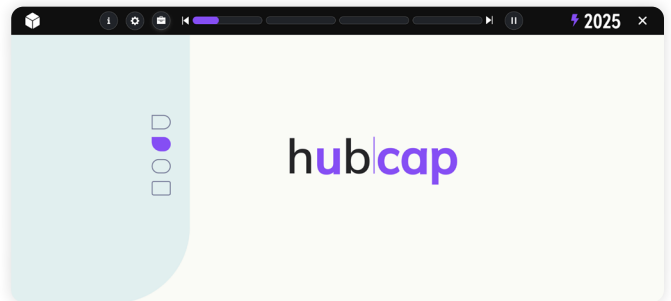
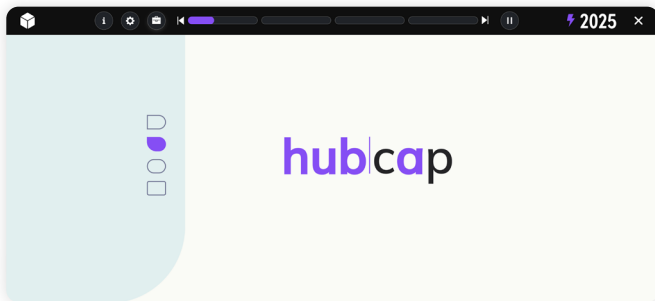
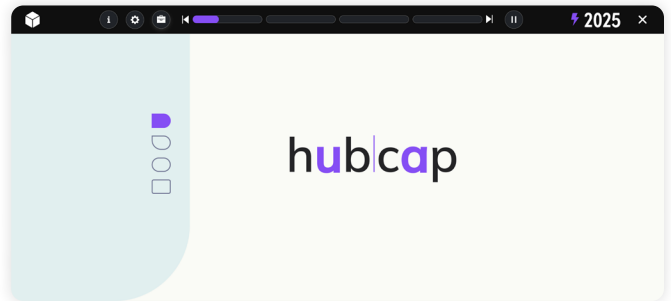
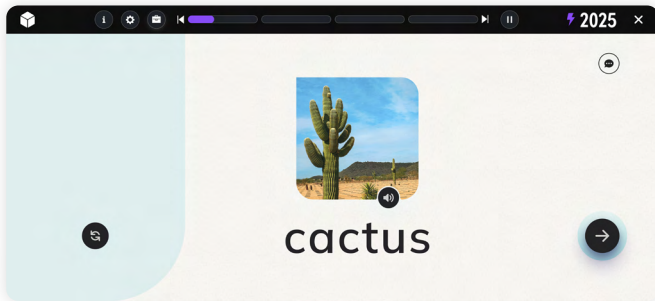
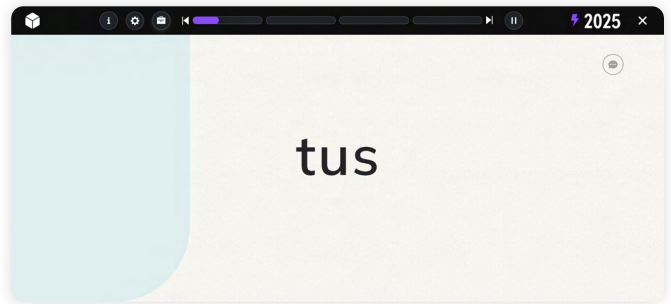
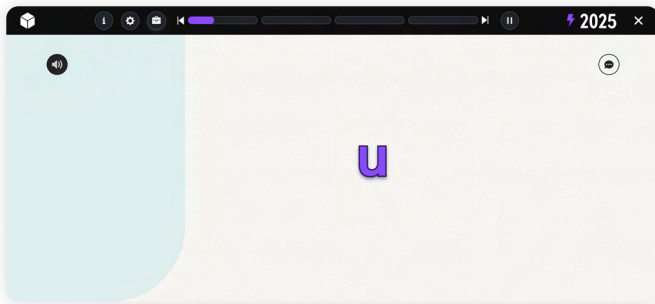
Essential Lessons employ a synthetic phonics approach to teach older striving learners the alphabetic code, or how letters represent sounds, by focusing on high-utility sound spellings, creating an efficient approach to teaching students to read words. The program employs a parts-to-whole (i.e., synthetic) phonics approach that explicitly teaches sounds for letters and letter patterns and how to blend them.

Explicit Instruction

Explicit instruction is a structured, direct, engaging, and success-oriented methodology that teaches foundational skills unambiguously while embedding supports and scaffolds to guide learners throughout their literacy journey (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Carnine et al., 2006). The approach has been proven to produce greater effects than implicit or embedded instruction in which students infer strategies as a result of natural development (Rayner et al., 2002). Explicit instruction begins with an explanation of the learning objective focused on a requisite reading skill, strategy, concept, or knowledge domain (Christenson et al., 1989; Archer & Hughes, 2011). Teachers then model the cognitive processes involved in learning or using the skill, strategy, concept, or knowledge domain (Hougen, 2014; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Next, lessons guide students in practicing what has been taught and gradually release more responsibility to encourage independence (Reutzel, 2022).

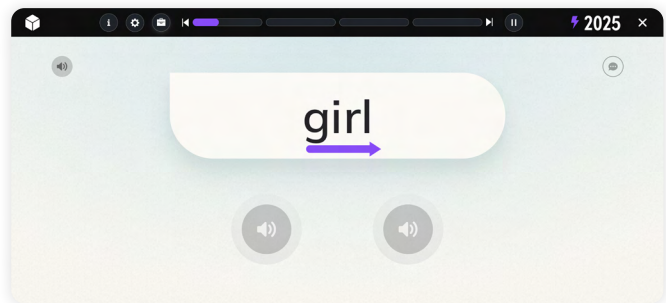
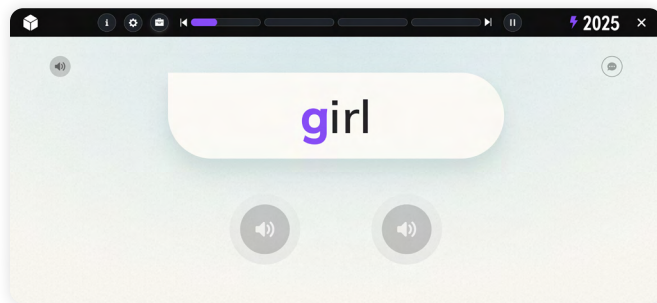
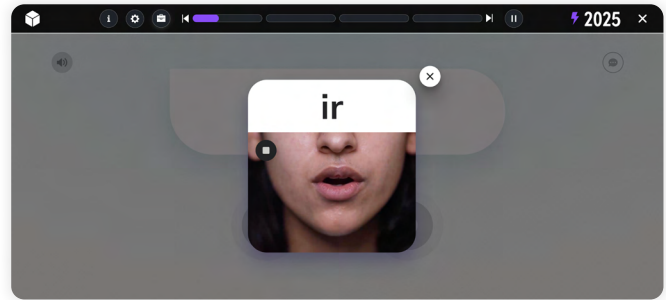
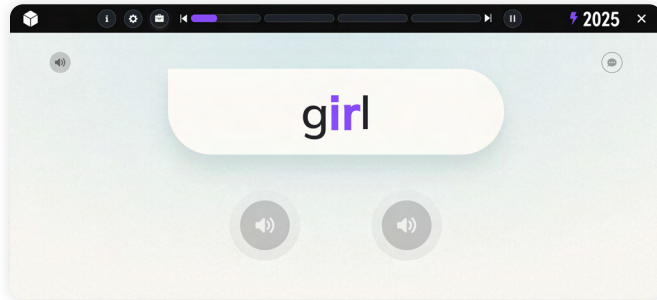
Explicit instruction is at the core of the design for Essential Lessons in foundational skills. Students who need support on a skill in the Skill Check of a lesson receive explicit instruction and practice on that skill. Designed for older students, each level of the program features key components of effective explicit instruction: clear explanations, modeling and demonstrations, consistent teaching routines, repeated practice, and immediate corrective feedback. Grounded in research-based instructional recommendations for how to teach older striving learners to read, Essential Lessons use scaffolded, predictable, and easy-to-follow routines within each strand that explicitly introduce skills followed by guided practice (Reutzel, 2022).

Explicit Instruction



When learning new skills, knowledge, and/or material, error is part of the process. One of the most powerful instructional acts in reading intervention is providing immediate affirmative and corrective feedback (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Watkins & Slocum, 2004; Stronge, 2002; Reutzel, 2022).

Immediate Feedback



Students learn new ideas by referencing ideas they already know (Bransford, 2000). In Essential Lessons in foundational skills, before students are introduced to a new skill, instruction connects to and compares what the student already knows and what they will learn. For example, when instructing on a new vowel team sound spelling, the program will draw a connection to past vowel terms that the student has already learned.

Activating Prior Knowledge

The screenshot shows a digital interface for a lesson on vowel teams. At the top, there is a black navigation bar with icons for home, information, settings, and a calendar, along with a progress indicator and a battery icon labeled '2025'. Below the navigation bar is a white header with a speaker icon and the title 'Vowel Teams'. The main content area is split into two sections. On the left, there are two rounded rectangular cards. The first card has the vowel team 'aw' at the top and a photograph of a hawk in flight against a blue sky. The second card has the vowel team 'au' at the top and a photograph of a rocket launching with a large plume of fire and smoke. On the right side of the main content area, there is a large, semi-transparent circular button with a white right-pointing arrow.

Phonics

Letter/Sound Associations

When letters (i.e., graphemes) are connected to their sounds (i.e., phonemes), students are better able to read words from memory. These letter/sound associations are an essential foundational skill, along with phonemic segmentation, in literacy development (Ehri, 2020). In Essential Lessons, students map letters to sounds in isolation, which prepares them to map letters to sounds in a word. Working through identifying letter/sound associations in isolation helps students start to automatically recognize that certain letters represent certain sounds. When a new skill is introduced, Essential Lessons model how to read an example word (or words) with the target skill(s) noted.

Single-Syllable Words

Being able to recognize letter/sound associations, letter patterns, and word patterns supports students in decoding words (Mesmer & Kambach, 2022). As students learn more sound-spelling patterns and word parts, and practice analyzing them, the more accurately and fluently they will be able to decode the words they read. This begins with words that students frequently encounter, which builds their skills to decode words that are less frequent and harder to decode (Ehri, 2014; Foorman et al., 2016). Essential Lessons model how to read the first word, using a routine that first says all the sounds represented by letters in the word and then saying the word. Lastly, students learn to check that the word makes sense—is it a word they know?

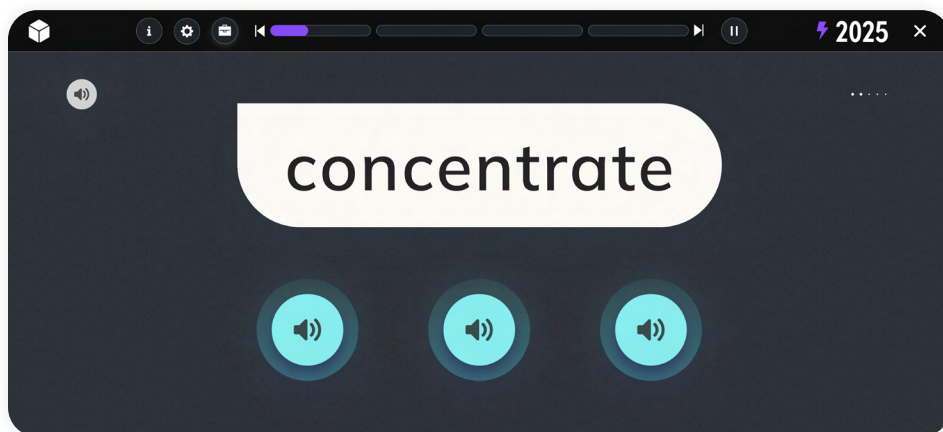
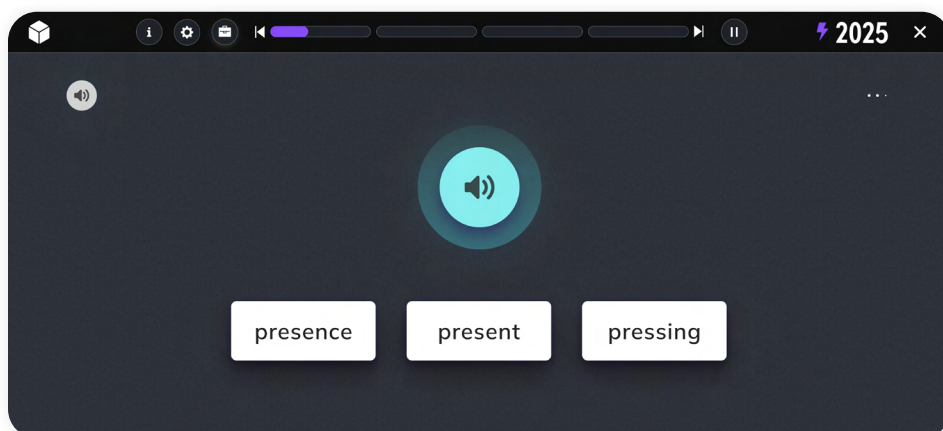
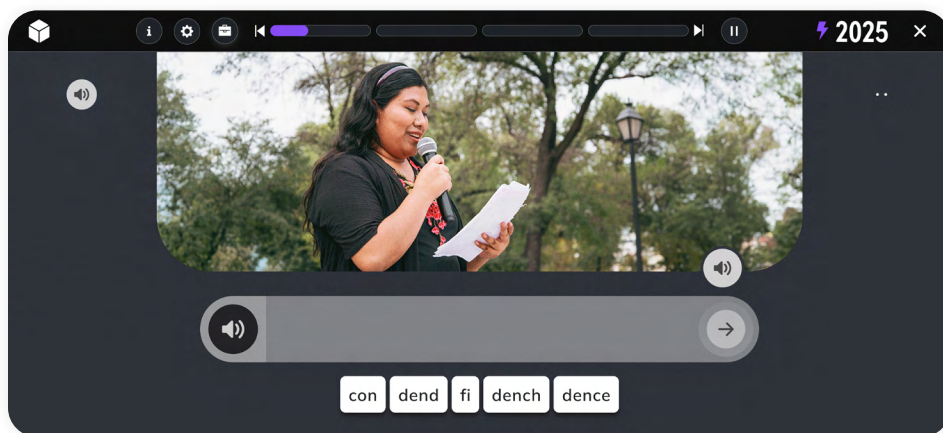
Stretching Students to Work with Multisyllabic Words

While instruction in decoding single-syllable words is necessary, it is not sufficient; older striving learners must also learn strategies for decoding multisyllabic words in order to successfully navigate the demands of grade-level texts. Students with poor decoding skills who can fluently read single-syllable words often need support reading multisyllabic words (Toste et al., 2016). Students who need support reading multisyllabic words may skip over these words or exert so much cognitive energy on decoding the words that it detracts from their ability to attend to the meaning of the text (Toste et al., 2016). Multisyllabic word instruction has been shown to be effective in improving the word reading skills of striving readers (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004). In particular, students must be taught ways to identify and recognize syllables, be given flexible strategies for vowel pronunciation, and receive ample practice blending syllabic units to decode words (Ehri, 2020; Archer et al., 2003; Kearns & Whaley, 2019; Spear-Swerling, 2022), and students do not need complex syllable division and syllable type rules (Brady, 2011). Morpheme-based strategies are also important in helping students read multisyllabic words (Spear-Swerling, 2022; Ehri, 2020; Kearns & Whaley, 2019; Archer et al., 2003).

In Essential Lessons, once a student has completed the Single-Syllable Words lesson within a topic, students move on to a Multisyllabic Words lesson focusing on the same target skill as the Single-Syllable Words lesson. Students then learn target endings and/or affixes and how to use them to decode the longer, multisyllabic words. During instruction in each

lesson, students are provided with flexible strategies, such as identifying syllables. Lessons do not provide instruction on complex syllable division rules, but instead arm students with flexible strategies.

Multisyllabic Words Practice



High-Frequency Words

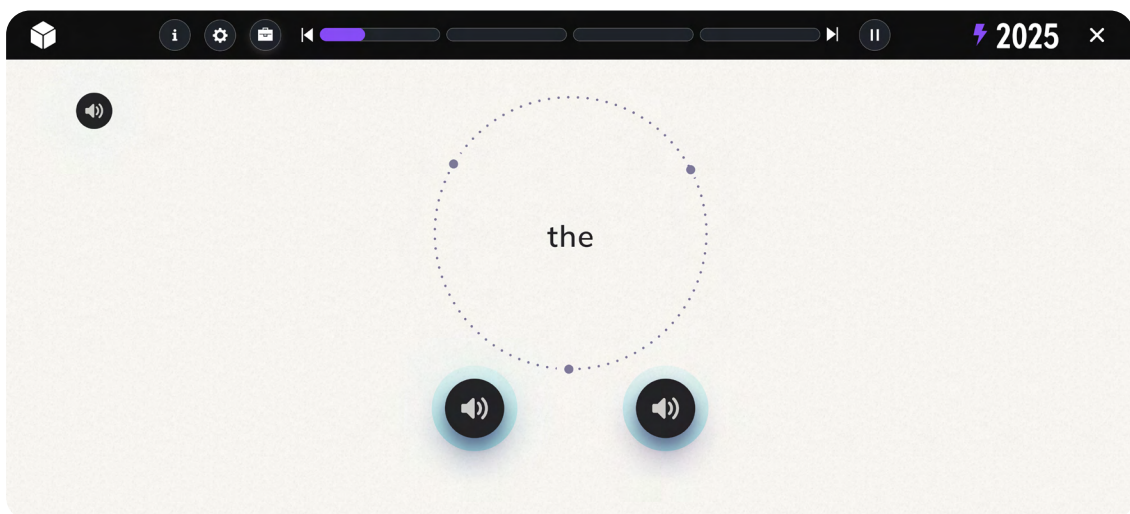
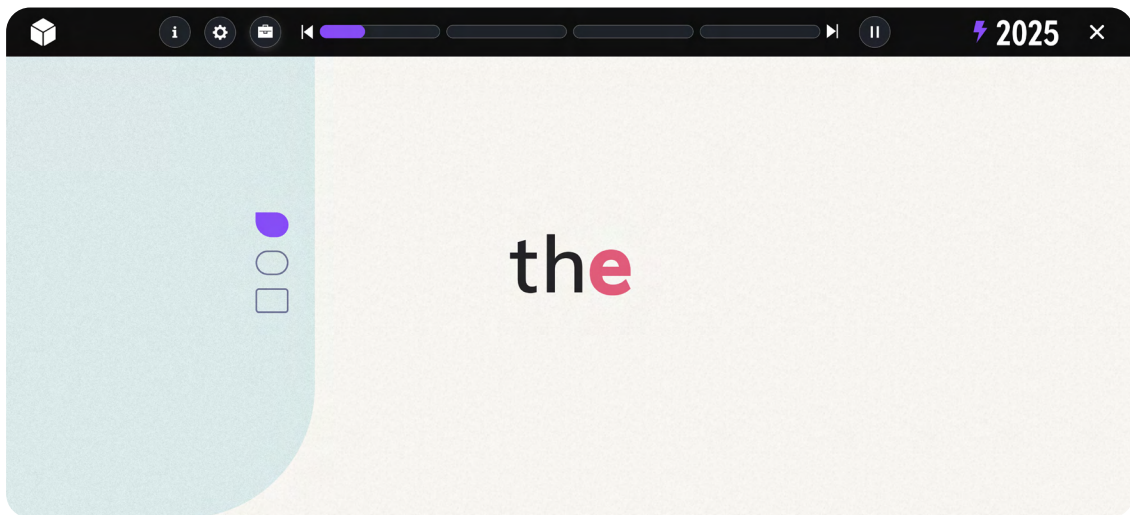
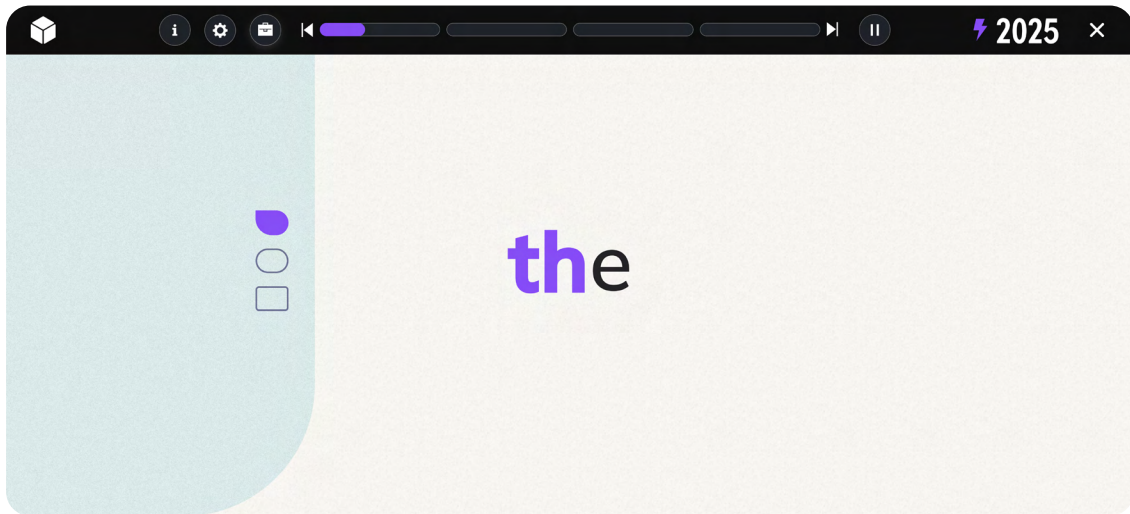
Essential Lessons in foundational skills use *The Educator’s Word Frequency Guide* (Zeno et al., 1995) as the source for high-frequency words—words that appear most often in print. The program covers the top 107 words on the list, which account for 50 percent of the words that students should encounter in everyday reading as well as additional words also taken from the list.

Research offers guidance on the scope and sequence for teaching high-frequency words. High-frequency words that follow a regular spelling pattern should be introduced when they fit into the phonics pattern being taught, which is different from teaching them based on the frequency of their use (Farrell et al., 2020). And integrating high-frequency words and phonics instruction allows students to better learn spelling patterns for these words (Farrell et al., 2020). Both decodable and irregularly spelled high-frequency words are important to teach because they occur so frequently that students need to be able to read them automatically and instantly. Older children may be able to learn five to seven sight words at a time (Hinzman & Reed, 2018). It is important to note that memorization of high-frequency words may be effective for some students, but it is not as effective or efficient as a phonics-based instructional approach (Farrell et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2017; Blackwell & Laman, 2013).

In Essential Lessons, phonics and high-frequency words instruction is integrated with students receiving Phonics and High-Frequency lessons in each topic. Both regular and irregular high-frequency words are taught, with high-frequency words that follow regular spelling patterns being included in the single-syllable Phonics lessons in which they align to the targeted skills. Within the High-Frequency Words lessons, the high-frequency words taught are either irregularly spelled words that students cannot (yet) decode, or fully decodable words that have complexities that may present challenges for students. In each of these lessons, five high-frequency words are taught and practiced.

When providing instruction in high-frequency words, it is important to call attention to both regular and irregular sound spellings so students may effectively orthographically map them (Ehri, 2005). Spelling is an important component of sight-word acquisition/orthographic mapping and transfers to improved word reading skills (Miles et al., 2017; Ehri, 2005). In each lesson, high-frequency words instruction and practice includes encoding activities to ensure orthographic mapping of sight words through the bonding of pronunciation, spelling, and meaning. During instruction, irregular sound spellings are highlighted and students receive a partial-decoding approach to instruction.

High-Frequency Words Lesson



Fluency

Having some degree of fluency is necessary in order to understand what is read (Paige et al., 2014; Paige, 2012; Rasinski, 2012; Rasinski, 2006; Kuhn, 2004; Vaughn et al., 2022). Students can focus on making sense of what they are reading rather than sounding out the individual words when students focus on reading for fluency (Vaughn et al., 2022). As readers become increasingly automatic at identifying words, attention to decoding processes decreases, leaving more capacity for comprehension of text (Paige et al., 2017).

In Essential Lessons, students are able to practice fluency at the sentence level in order to improve their accuracy, automaticity, and rate. Students are exposed to text fluency experiences even if they have bypassed all skills in a unit due to performance on the Skill Check to provide additional practice in developing fluent reading. In sentence fluency activities, students apply just-learned and previously learned skills to read decodable sentences and sort them into the categories in which they belong.

Sentence Fluency

Max and Liz are racing to win ten levels.

The Show Must Go On

Gaming with Friends

Multimodal Instruction

Effective foundational skills instruction is multimodal (Moats, 2020; Warnick & Caldarella, 2016) and should include hands-on tasks that increase students' focus, retention, and engagement such as using letter, syllable, or morpheme tiles to build words (Moats, 2020). Additionally, teachers often use multiple modalities to convey an idea. For example, they will speak while showing a graphic. If teachers take care to ensure that the two types of information complement one another—such as showing an animation while describing it aloud—learning is enhanced. But if the two sources of information are split—such as speaking aloud with different text displayed visually—attention is divided and learning is impaired (Moreno, 2006; Chandler & Sweller, 1992).

In Essential Lessons, students hear words decoded and see the letters on screen light up for each sound they hear. Encoding activities provide a tactile experience by having students move letter tiles to spell words.

An Efficient Approach to Instruction

Research shows that phonics instruction is more effective when it is adaptive and individualized (Spear-Swerling, 2022; Moats, 2001). If a student needs support with a particular skill, they need more reteach and review time. Foundational skills instruction adapts to the specific needs of the individual student. Instruction starts with a Skill Check to identify skills students know or do not know. Based on a student's Skill Check, instruction and practice expands or contracts to address skills that a student needs to develop. Performance on the practice will determine if reteaching will be prescribed.

Importance of Motivation

The importance of motivation to learning underpins the approach to Essential Lessons in foundational skills. Self-determined motivation, a consequence of values or pure interest, leads to better long-term outcomes than controlled motivation, a consequence of reward/punishment or perceptions of self-worth (Davis et al., 2006). Contexts and activities that support students' feelings of having agency, competence, and seeing the relevance of what they are doing have been shown to result in high-quality, self-directed, intrinsic motivation (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

Research has shown that boredom is negatively correlated with learning (Craig et al., 2004). Additionally, pedagogically motivated learning modification may lead to increased learning in the short run; however, if learners find the modifications boring, they may not learn as much in the long run (Jackson & McNamara, 2011; 2013). Sustained motivation during lessons is a key focus of Essential Lessons in foundational skills. Lessons build motivation by giving students autonomy, increasing their feelings of competence, and creating a learning experience that is relevant and that students value.

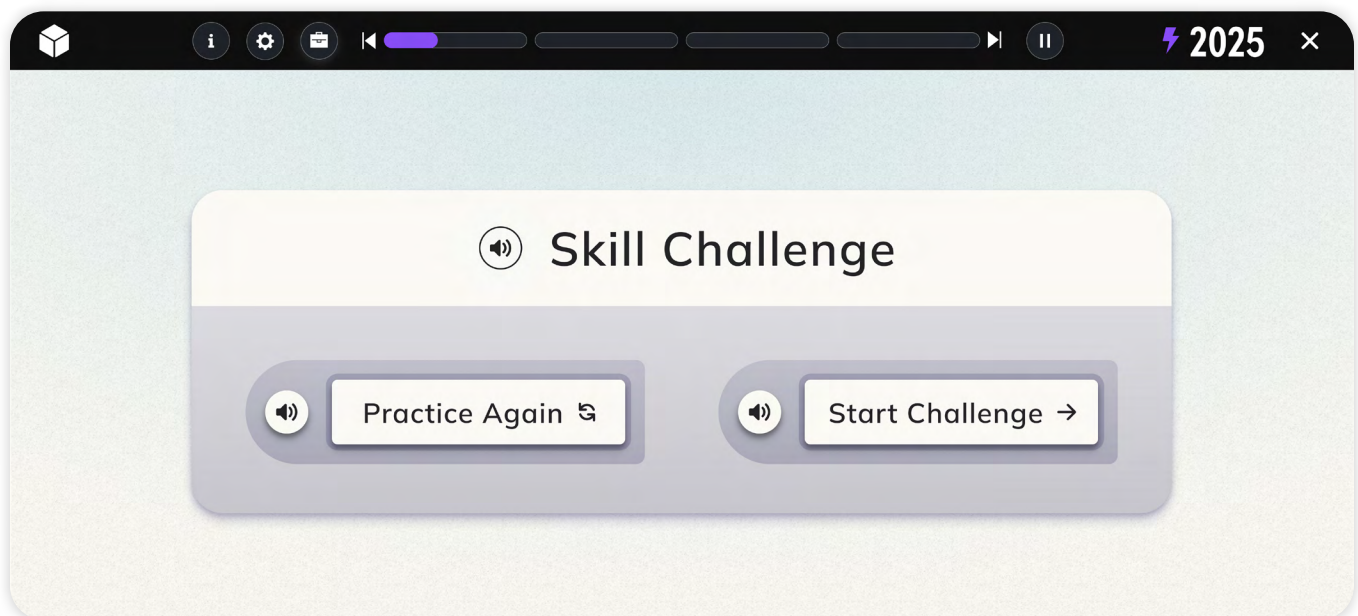
Provides Opportunities for Autonomy

When students feel they have autonomy, they have positive feelings about the task they are being asked to complete and are therefore more likely to value the task (Grolnick et al., 1991; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Additionally, students who experience autonomy are more likely to show strong behavioral and cognitive engagement (Grolnick et al., 1997; Deci et al., 1996; Deci et al., 1991; Connell, 1990; Ryan, 1982). Actions that support autonomy include providing choice and encouraging self-initiation/self-direction (Reeve et al., 2003; Assor et al., 2002).

Essential Lessons in foundational skills encourage student autonomy through:

- **Choice of movement within a lesson.** Within lessons, students are able to decide when they are ready to move into scored practice or whether they would like more instruction and guided practice before proceeding.
- **Choice of additional practice.** When a student completes a lesson, they are able to see which skills they successfully acquired and where they could benefit from additional instruction and practice. Students can choose whether they want to retry the skills they need support with. If they retry, they get an alternate path through the lesson based on the performance in the first lesson.
- **Choice of more scaffolding.** Relevant Articulation Videos are made available in the instruction portion of the lesson, and students can choose to view the video before completing the instruction portion of the lesson and moving into practice.

Student Choice



Increases Feelings of Competence

Working at the right level of challenge and avoiding excessively easy or hard challenges (i.e., working in the zone of proximal development) enhances competence and increases a student's potential for new learning (Cook & Artino, 2016; Fabes & Martin, 2001). Texts and tasks that are scaffolded by the teacher and “just challenging enough” help students both cognitively and affectively (Robertson et al., 2014). Encouragement and positive feedback increases feelings of competence (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan, 1982). Tracking students' progress increases interactions between teachers and students and provides better guidance for students to enhance their learning (Marzano, 2010).

Essential Lessons in foundational skills build feelings of competence through:

- **Placement in the zone of proximal development.** Together, the student's Diagnostic placement and the Skill Checks within lessons ensure that students are working in their zone of proximal development. As students progress through the scope and sequence, teachers are alerted when students show they consistently need support so they can intervene when the student has moved on to content that may be too hard for them.
- **Seeing their progress visually.** Students are provided encouragement by showing what they can do based on their Skill Check performance and then shown areas in which they may need more instruction and practice. In Phonics lessons, students are able to clearly track their progress, seeing how they performed on individual skills at the beginning of each Skill Check and at the end of a lesson. Their performance is shown visually on their dashboard screen so they can see which skills they have successfully acquired across lessons.
- **Positive reinforcement.** Throughout the lessons, students are given incremental positive reinforcement each time they get an item correct.
- **Improving accuracy and speed.** In the High-Frequency Words lessons, before going into the second round of scored practice, students see their interim progress to see if they can beat their accuracy and time in the second round and then see how they did at the end of the lesson to help track their progress.

High-Frequency Words Progress

2025

	Round 1	Round 2
each	✓ ✓	
been	✗ ✗	
these	✓ ✓	
any	✓ ✗	
many	✓ ✓	

45 seconds

→

2025

	Round 1	Round 2	
each	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	⬇️
been	✗ ✗	✓ ✓	○
these	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	⬇️
any	✓ ✗	✗ ✓	○
many	✓ ✓	✗ ✓	⬇️

45 seconds 51 seconds

Round 2 →

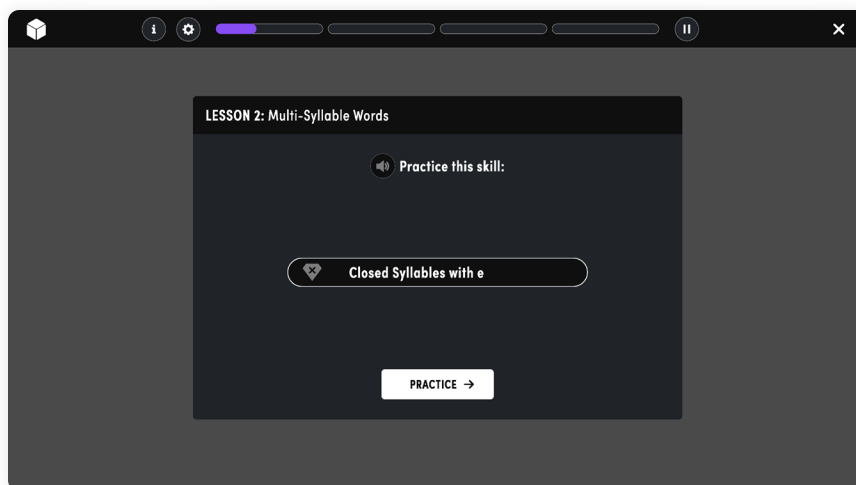
Creates Relevant Learning Experiences

There are a few factors that drive a student's decision to invest in a learning activity. A few of those reasons include the importance students attach to doing well on a task; the enjoyment they experience as a result of participation; the usefulness of participating toward future goals; and the extent to which participating in one activity may come at the expense of another (Juvonen et al., 2012; Carter, 2006).

In designing materials that capture and excite a learner, research has shown that designers have only 25–35 seconds to capture and engage a user's attention (Nielsen & Loranger, 2006). Research also shows that older students can quickly become bored, distracted, and frustrated. With regards to digital content, they also can become easily overwhelmed with content on websites, and cluttered screens can distract and deter learning. For older students, it is especially important to provide age-appropriate content with neutral graphics rather than childish ones (Joyce & Harley, 2005).

Essential Lessons in foundational skills create relevant learning experiences through:

- **Design that engages older students.** Lessons are designed specifically for Grades 6–8 students. Everything from the color palettes, to animation, to the interactions were tested with students to find an experience that would appeal to students and feel age appropriate.
- **Design that holds users' attention.** The screens that students interact with are clean and uncluttered, allowing the learner to focus solely on each instructional task that they are presented with across the lesson. Instruction is provided efficiently and in short bursts to hold students' attention and only when students demonstrate a need. Otherwise, students are interacting regularly to read and encode words and complete items.
- **Transparent objectives.** Students are shown exactly what they will focus on learning at the beginning of each lesson and can see how they performed on these specific skills at the close of the lesson. Students can also see how they are progressing on skills within and across units, allowing them to understand what they are working on.



Transparent Objectives

Committing to Learner Variability and Equity

Curriculum Associates holds a strong commitment to centering equity in all that we do. We believe that all students deserve access to high-quality, equitable educational resources and classroom instruction. We strive to ensure that learners from all cultural identities, socioeconomic status and linguistic backgrounds, as well as those with disabilities, can engage with and see themselves reflected in high-quality educational resources. Essential Lessons in foundational skills strive to ensure that our materials and texts reflect and honor our students as individuals and readers and value all that they bring to the classroom.

Recognizing the diversity of today's classrooms, Essential Lessons in foundational skills employ various strategies to support and include all students. Informed by leading science research and cognitive neuroscience, learner variability suggests there is no average learner, and all students bring their own unique assets, backgrounds, and variables to their learning (Dockterman, 2018; Rose et al., 2013).

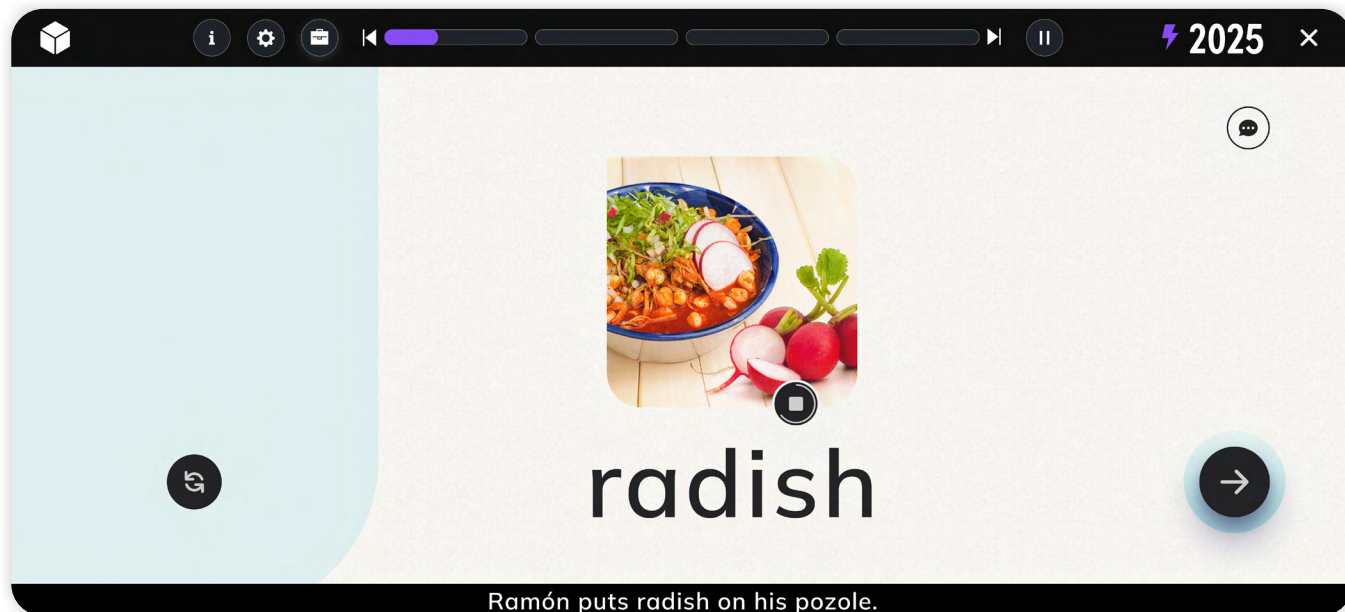
Universal Design for Learning

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practices that anticipate learner variability, remove barriers in instruction, and incorporate goal setting and reflection to create “expert learners” who are purposeful and motivated, strategic and goal-directed, and resourceful and knowledgeable (CAST, 2018). The UDL is built on decades of research in neuroscience and is grounded on the foundation of three principles that remind educators to provide students with options for personalizing their education: 1) multiple means of engagement; 2) multiple means of representation; and 3) multiple means of action and expression (Chardin & Novak, 2020). Essential Lessons in foundational skills deliver engaging, research-based synthetic phonics instruction that leverages key components of all three UDL principles so older striving learners experience mastery and success.

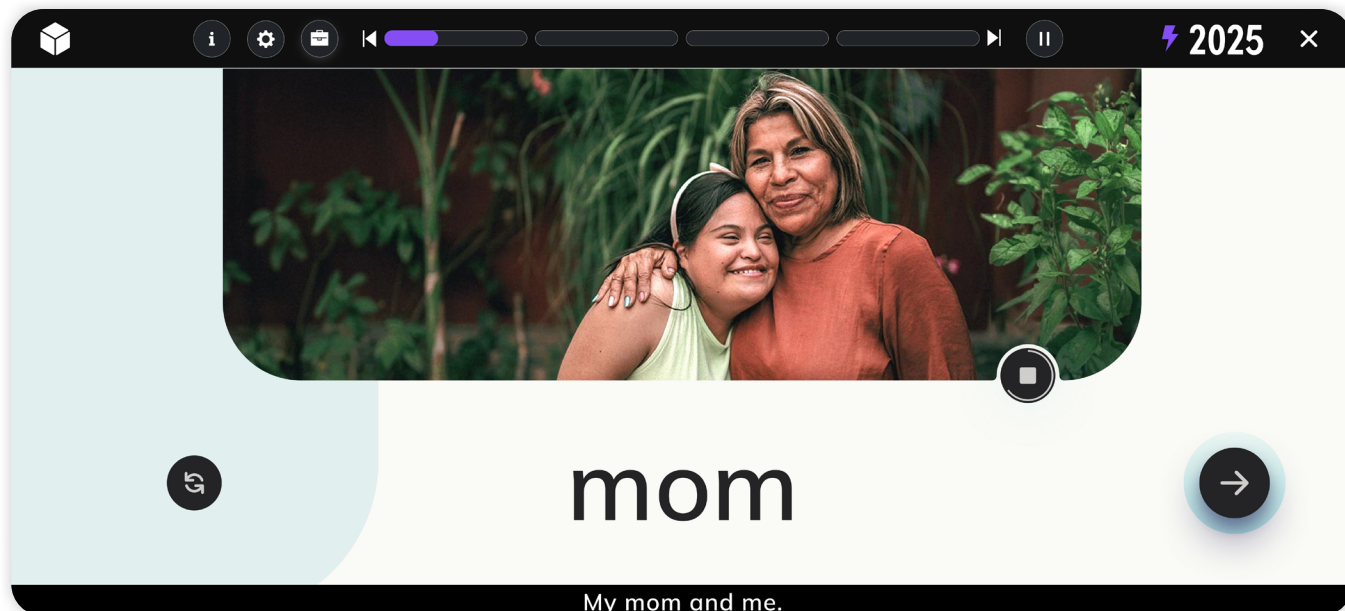
UDL's first principle of engagement hinges on the fact that affect (i.e., one's emotional state) is a crucial element to learning (CAST, 2018). Older striving learners often have splinter skills with phonics skills—meaning they may not need an entire lesson on every skill in a learning sequence. Essential Lessons in foundational skills account for this variability through its highly personalized learning platform, which uses an initial Skill Check to assess what a student already knows, then creates a customized learning plan focusing on skills the student needed support with. For example, learners can elect when they are ready to transition from skills practice to take the scored section of each lesson, when to receive scaffolding, and when to retry skills they did not master. Additionally, Essential Lessons in foundational skills optimize relevance and authenticity with highly interactive phonics activities containing age-appropriate content and images that portray diverse cultural identities. Each lesson includes hands-on, tactile experiences in which students move letter tiles to form words, and the program intermittently celebrates learner success with synced sound and visual effects. To reduce cognitive load and distractions, all units and lessons

follow a predictable structure with repeated activities. When a student needs support, they receive specific, in-the-moment, mastery-oriented feedback and helpful strategies that encourage their sustained effort and persistence.

Diverse Representation



A screenshot of a video player interface. At the top, there is a black bar with a cube icon, an information icon (i), a settings gear icon, a calendar icon, a progress bar, a play/pause button, and a battery icon with the number 2025 and a close button (x). The main content area features a video frame showing a bowl of radishes in a blue bowl on a wooden surface. Below the video frame, the word "radish" is written in a large, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the video frame, there is a small square icon. To the left of the video frame is a light blue vertical bar with a circular icon containing the number 55. To the right is a circular button with a right-pointing arrow. Below the video frame, a black bar contains the caption "Ramón puts radish on his pozole." in white text.



A screenshot of a video player interface. At the top, there is a black bar with a cube icon, an information icon (i), a settings gear icon, a calendar icon, a progress bar, a play/pause button, and a battery icon with the number 2025 and a close button (x). The main content area features a video frame showing a woman with her arm around a young girl, both smiling. Below the video frame, the word "mom" is written in a large, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the video frame, there is a small square icon. To the left of the video frame is a light blue vertical bar with a circular icon containing the number 55. To the right is a circular button with a right-pointing arrow. Below the video frame, a black bar contains the caption "My mom and me." in white text.

The second UDL principle of representation is grounded on the baseline understanding that learners differ in the ways they perceive and comprehend information. Therefore, use of a gradual-release model allows learners to transform accessible information into usable knowledge for future decision making by engaging active information processing skills (CAST, 2018).

Essential Lessons in foundational skills leverage responsive web design and accessibility guidelines to ensure that all students have access to each lesson's information. This product offers alternatives for auditory information by providing closed captioning and audiovisual syncing for all instruction and feedback to draw attention to the sounds in words (e.g., letter sound audio plays at the same time the corresponding letter symbol pulses on the screen). Alternatives for visual information include spoken descriptions and alt text for all images, and strategic human-voiced audio for onscreen text. Modeled instruction at the start of each lesson activates students' prior knowledge, highlights helpful strategies and skills to use, and includes explicit modeling of prerequisite skills. Decoding is modeled through a highly interactive experience that synchronizes audio and visual cues to help students make connections between the letter symbol and the corresponding sound. After a word has been successfully decoded, pertinent images are displayed to reinforce the word's meaning.

The third principle of UDL, action and expression, expounds the necessity for learners to have options that allow them to independently navigate a learning environment, express what they know, and monitor their progress (CAST, 2018). Essential Lessons in foundational skills integrate mouse and keyboard navigation to ensure all students can navigate and interact with lesson screens and provide a seamless interface with many common assistive technologies, such as screen readers. Students can access scaffolds like Articulation Videos at any point throughout a lesson to support their working memory, and each lesson's summary screen serves as a scaffold to organize each lesson's learning.

Supporting Students with Dyslexia

An estimated one in five Americans have dyslexia, representing as many as 90 percent of all people with learning disabilities, according to the [Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity](#). Students with dyslexia can face challenges in decoding words, which is a critical, foundational element of learning to read. Dyslexia can impact a student's ability to recognize and spell words, read at a particular pace, and comprehend what has been read.

A structured literacy approach to instruction is the most effective approach for students who experience extensive learning difficulties (Moats, 2020). Structured literacy approaches emphasize highly explicit and systematic teaching of all important components of literacy. These components include both foundational skills (e.g., decoding, spelling) and higher-level literacy skills (e.g., reading comprehension, written expression) that are aligned to the Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading (International Dyslexia Association, 2010).

Additionally, students with dyslexia benefit from highly systematic, explicit, synthetic phonics instruction (Spear-Swerling, 2016; Kilpatrick, 2015; Brady et al., 2011).

Essential Lessons employ instructional features of a structured literacy approach to help students with dyslexia. The foundational skills program provides systematic, explicit, synthetic phonics instruction (as described earlier). Upon completing Essential Lessons, students will move into instruction in syntax and semantics that is available for learners in the *i-Ready* experience.

Students with dyslexia can face challenges with sound processing, which can make decoding multisyllabic words more challenging. When decoding unfamiliar words, it is hard to remember all of the sounds, and the task gets harder as the word gets longer and can become overwhelming (Spear-Swerling, 2016). Older striving learners benefit from using flexible syllable- and morpheme-based strategies for reading long (i.e., multisyllabic) words (Kearns & Whaley, 2019; Gori & Facchetti, 2015). As described earlier, Essential Lessons in foundational skills have a special emphasis on instructing students and providing practice on decoding multisyllabic words. Please see [Stretching Students to Work with Multisyllabic Words](#) for more detail.

Students with dyslexia can benefit from intensive instruction and more instructional time (Spear-Swerling, 2016), and extensive practice and modeling are important for students with dyslexia who are learning to read longer words (Kearns & Whaley, 2019). New Essential Lessons in foundational skills provide ample practice for students, with up to 16 items per skill the first time a student completes a lesson. Students who do not pass one or more skills may retry the lesson and receive up to 16 additional practice opportunities. Note that Essential Lessons in foundational skills are not designed to be a comprehensive solution for students with dyslexia. These students will continue to need the focused attention of a Reading specialist and a teacher-led intervention. To be the most effective for students with dyslexia, *i-Ready* foundational skills should be paired with teacher-led programs like *Phonics for Reading*.

The digital platform on which Essential Lessons is built on provides accessibility features that are especially helpful for students with dyslexia. To lower the extra-instructional reading demands for students with dyslexia, the program provides options for audio support for written directions and student-facing performance indicators. Design elements such as spacing and crowding have been carefully considered when choosing the font, font size, and other visual elements that are on an activity screen at the same time.

Supporting English Learners

English Learners represent a broad spectrum of learners with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, languages, and academic proficiencies. English Learners represent more than 10 percent of the nation’s public school students and represent the fastest-growing population in the country (Irwin et al., 2022). English Learners often enter school with key linguistic skills in their home language. While English Learners can engage in complex, cognitively demanding tasks requiring language, they can be challenged to make meaning of oral and written English while simultaneously learning academic content. With different levels of exposure to English, English Learners face obstacles without comprehensive literacy instruction in both language-based skills, related to oral language, comprehension, and word knowledge, and code-based skills, related to foundational skills (Mesmer, 2020; Fillmore, 2017; Scarcella, 2003). Essential Lessons in foundational skills offer English Learners instruction and practice across the domains of Phonics, High-Frequency Words, and Fluency.

Essential Lessons support English Learners with a comprehensive literacy approach by teaching code-based skills through systematic and explicit instruction in foundational skills and language-based skills with application of fluency, and *i-Ready* provides instruction in vocabulary and comprehension. This comprehensive and connected approach helps build foundational literacy skills for English Learners to help provide greater access to grade-level content (Council of the Great City Schools, 2023).

Recognizing the unique syllabic and word structures and inconsistent sound-symbol correspondence within the English language, code-based instruction helps English Learners successfully navigate challenges (Fillmore, 2017). As previously discussed, Essential Lessons in foundational skills explicitly teach phonics with a focus on letter/sound associations, single-syllable and multisyllabic words, and high-frequency words, and spelling/encoding with a focus on single-syllable and multisyllabic words. Students benefit from explicit modeling, intentional instructional routines, corrective feedback, and ongoing practice.

It is important for code-based skills to be taught in conjunction with language-based skills to help English Learners gain a greater understanding of the formation of sentences, phrases, and sentence-level structures, and how the English language system works (Fillmore & Snow, 2018; Fillmore, 2017; Scarcella, 2003). Sentence-fluency activities provide English Learners with authentic practice in applying previously taught skills in reading sentences.

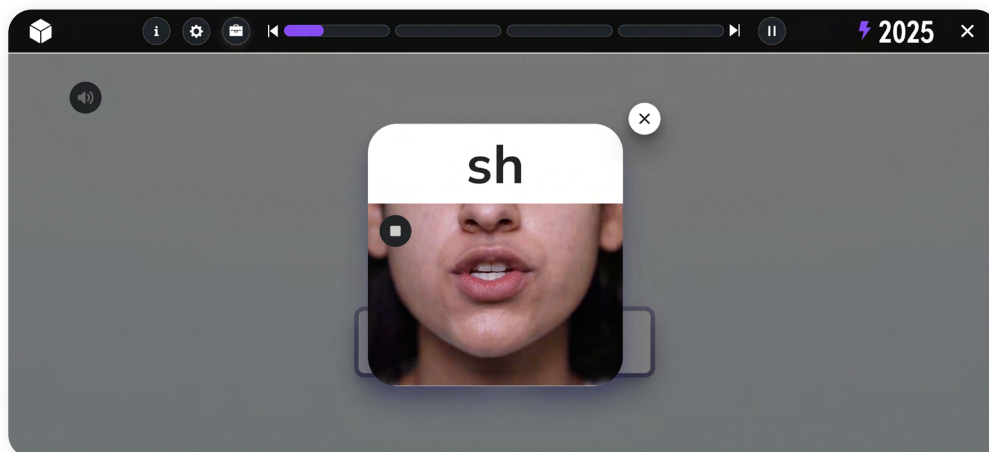
In order to support vocabulary and meaning making for English Learners, word meaning should be integrated into decoding/phonics instruction (Goldenberg, 2020; Shanahan et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2017; August et al., 2014; Pollard-Durodola & Simmons, 2009). For beginning readers, word meanings help students to recognize and confirm that they decoded a word successfully (Goldenberg, 2020). Word meaning can be communicated through a variety of means, including the use of picture supports and simple definitions (Goldenberg, 2020; August et al., 2014).

Essential Lessons in foundational skills include many words that are concrete and depictable to allow for visual representations. Encoding activities use images as a stem and typically include context sentences. In decoding activities, once students have decoded the word successfully, an image appears to reinforce the meaning of the word. Students also benefit from vocabulary support and instruction that builds comprehension and helps them make meaning of the system of the English language in the broader *i-Ready* experience.

English Learners can benefit from repeated exposure and practice while working through literacy instruction (Echevarría, 2021; August et al., 2014). Essential Lessons in foundational skills give learners the repeated practice and exposure they need by offering multiple items per skill in each Phonics lesson and per word in each High-Frequency Words lesson, repeated use of words/skills in distractors, and additional use of words/skills in decodable texts.

English Learners can also benefit from oral language development and opportunities to practice. Oral language proficiency is the foundation on which academic language is built. Academic language found in texts—subject-specific vocabulary, complex syntax, rhetorical conventions—is particularly challenging for multilingual learners who have yet to master oral language proficiency (Echevarría, 2021). In order to provide opportunities for English oral language development, Essential Lessons in foundational skills have an audio feature that models spoken English, helping students develop their knowledge of the English language. At the activity level, to help students understand how certain sounds in English are produced, there are Articulation Videos that show the positions of the mouth when forming different sounds. Additionally, Tools for Instruction—short, teacher-led, skill-specific lessons designed to target students' needs—can be used to provide face-to-face oral language instruction and practice.

**Articulation
Video**



Instruction and scaffolds leverage multiple modalities simultaneously (e.g., print, images, and sound) to effectively teach new content.

Supporting Speakers of African American English and Other Varieties of English

Many children are bidialectal speakers of English, speaking varieties of English such as African American English (AAE), Appalachian English, Caribbean English Creoles, Chicano/Latino English, Hawai'ian Creole English, and Southern American English. Like English, these varieties are rule governed and patterned with rules across all dimensions of language, including foundational skills (Hollie, 2018). Reading instruction can become more complex when working with students whose language differs from the oral language and academic texts they encounter in the classroom. There is a robust body of evidence that language variation between home/community and school can impact students' reading acquisition in ways that can be predicted (Brown et al., 2015) and can slow down reading growth (Washington et al., 2018). According to Washington et al. (2018), although AAE and other English varieties and General American English (GAE) overlap more than two distinct languages, research has demonstrated that using two distinct varieties can complicate learning new, language-influenced skills (i.e., reading and writing) as much as using two languages. In fact, the subtle transformations between the cultural and the general varieties of a single language may be even more difficult for young students to detect and resolve than the more obvious differences between two languages. However, unlike their English Learner peers, they are very often not given the support necessary to be successful in the classroom.

In order to support students who are bidialectal speakers of English speaking another variety of English, Essential Lessons in foundational skills use feedback, instructional supports, and design elements such as colors or bouncing letters that emphasize letter/sound associations to help students map letters to sounds so they may see how English contrasts with GAE and English varieties. When activity item distractors were written, Essential Lessons in foundational skills' linguistic differences between American English and English varieties were considered so distractors don't cause confusion or potentially "justifiable" answers.

CONCLUSION

Essential Lessons in foundational skills are a focused and connected research-based solution that supports the development of strong foundational literacy skills for older striving learners in Grades 6–8 with diverse learning needs. With the ultimate goal of improving student proficiency and growth in reading, the program is supportive and meaningful, connecting systematic, explicit foundational literacy skills instruction with practice and application. Most importantly, through their participation with Essential Lessons in foundational skills, students develop the skills and the motivation to prepare them for a successful career in reading.

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