

Florida Center for Reading Research

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)
Modules 4, 5, 6

What is LETRS?

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) is a professional development program designed to provide teachers with in-depth knowledge of the structure of the English language to ensure their understanding of the complex process of how children learn to read and write. *LETRS* instruction provides teachers with the content knowledge required to implement reading programs with fidelity. The program consists of modules that present the latest reading research findings about learning to read and reading instruction in the key areas of phoneme awareness; phonics, decoding, spelling and word study; oral language development; vocabulary; reading fluency; comprehension; and writing. The focus of this report is modules four, five, and six entitled "The Mighty Word: Building Vocabulary and Oral Language"; "Getting Up to Speed: Developing Fluency"; and "Digging for Meaning: Teaching Text Comprehension". Participation in modules four through six is intended to follow the first three modules which are designed as the foundation for all other *LETRS* modules.

LETRS content for these modules is structured to develop a teacher's deep content understanding regarding vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Module four "The Mighty Word: Building Vocabulary and Oral Language" develops a rationale for moving beyond traditional ways to teach vocabulary such as matching words and definitions or using the dictionary to look up unknown words. It also addresses the question "What does it mean to know a word?" and the importance of explicit and implicit exploration of word meanings during instruction. Fluency, covered in module five, is defined and discussed in relation to its importance in reading comprehension. The causes and consequences for dysfluency are also discussed along with fluency measures and effective fluency-building strategies. Module six begins with a discussion of the major factors that influence reading comprehension. This robust module then explores the challenges of "academic" language and effective instructional strategies to use with students.



Although these modules do not deliberately prepare teachers to use valid and reliable classroom reading assessments, they do emphasize the importance of using accurate assessment results to inform instruction in relation to the progression of reading development. Modules eight and twelve, address the topic of "Using Assessment to Drive Instruction."

Each module is delivered by a *LETRS* presenter through a combination of lecture, structured learning activities for participants, transparencies, and power point slide presentations. Active learning processes such as problem solving and questioning activities are integrated into the workshop format. Although providing strategies for reading instruction in the classroom is not the main intent of these modules, some of the activities used in the workshops could be adapted for use with students in classroom instruction. The training experience along with the print module, learning activities, and the presenter's manual provide a rich opportunity for participants to gain a thorough understanding of the program content.

While remaining constant in content, the program may be tailored to some degree to meet individual needs of participants. For example for secondary reading teachers, *LETRS* content can be directed to address the knowledge and skills applicable to the secondary level. The customer and the company, based on the material and the objectives of the training, determine the length of a training session or a workshop. Typically, one day is spent on the content of each module.

The modules are presented in well-organized, error-free participant manuals that are attractive and easy to use. Special spaces in the manuals are provided for note-taking and overhead slide pictures are included with the accompanying text that fully explains the concepts presented in the workshop.

What processes are in place in LETRS?

The goals and objectives in *LETRS* are clearly defined. For example, Module four has two objectives which are developed throughout the content in a well-delineated format. A total of eight exercises support the objectives and include tasks such as identification, reflection, discussion and demonstration. An exercise offered early in the module asks participants to identify a recently learned word and the context surrounding the learning of that word, followed by reflection on what motivated the learning and remembering of the word. Another exercise requires participants to do a semantic feature analysis to examine the overlapping attributes of words.

To promote participant learning, the program utilizes lecture accompanied by participant exercises. Trainers also demonstrate modeling of instructional activities and methods. Some of the learning activities involve participants in modeling and practicing new skills. To evaluate participant progress in attaining the learning goals of the program, pre and posttests are integrated into each module.

Currently the program does not offer its content via alternative means such as video or Internet. However, the *LETRS* program has been awarded an SBIR/NICHD grant to develop interactive CD-ROMS to accompany six of the current *LETRS* Modules. The first of these, *The Speech Sounds of English*, and the second, *The Spelling System of English*, are now available, and additional modules will be available by January of 2005.

To insure fidelity in the delivery of the *LETRS* content, a select group of *LETRS* National Trainers are certified by Sopris West and must have strong backgrounds in teaching and reading content. Their resumes are available from Sopris West, the *LETRS* publishing company.

National *LETRS* Trainers provide their contact information to participants and are available to answer questions as they arise. If more structured, lengthy follow-up assistance is needed, schools and districts may contract individually with these consultants. Though Sopris West does not provide ongoing follow-up assistance as part of the *LETRS* modules, many National Trainers contract individually with states and districts to provide follow-up assistance when it is requested.

LETRS Trainer of Trainers institutes are offered several times a year; certificates are awarded to participants who successfully complete the training and knowledge assessments designed to gauge participants' in depth understanding of the content material. These certificates state that the participant has attained a knowledge level that qualifies them to train other teachers. The publisher recommends that participants in the Training for Trainer workshops are highly experienced professional

developers with solid backgrounds in the latest reading research. This may explain why the presenter notes in the current Trainer Manual consist only of brief “talking points” in support of power point slides. According to the publisher, these manuals are currently being revised to include tips to promote more interactive delivery with additional resources and learning experiences.

Does LETRS address the context in which it will be implemented?

In discussions with schools and districts regarding how to ensure program success, local commitment is discussed and plans are being made to compile resumes of schools that have successfully implemented and sustained professional development with *LETRS* content and other supports. Districts and schools are strongly encouraged to engage all teachers in the *LETRS* program; however, the program does not require whole-school participation. Although specialized content designed for school leadership is not available at this time, administrators are encouraged to attend training sessions along with teachers to foster collaboration and a common knowledge base.

Research Support for LETRS

As stated in the *LETRS* program introduction, the national goal of “Every Child a Reader” requires teachers with expertise in reading instruction. The content of the three *LETRS* modules addressed in this report is clearly intended to enable teachers to be successful in teaching reading through understanding the meaning of scientific findings about reading instruction. Such a program design is supportive of the link between student achievement and student performance.

The *LETRS* program is aligned with the latest reading research, as well as with guidelines for professional development as discussed in the Learning First Alliance’s *Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide*. Research is currently in place to track classroom implementation of the program and study student gains in reading achievement. *LETRS* modules are included in several current studies of the effects of professional development on student gains and teacher quality, including the University of Michigan Teacher Quality study, the American Institutes for Research study of professional development with 2nd grade teachers, and the *LETRS* CD-Rom study conducted through Sopris West with an NICHD/SBIR grant. Also, future research is being funded by the Institute of Education Sciences to evaluate the impact of *LETRS* on teacher practices and student achievement in select urban schools over the next three years.

A matrix that crosswalks Florida’s reading competencies with the *LETRS* program is not included.

Strengths and Weaknesses of LETRS

Strengths of *LETRS*:

- Modules four through six provide solid content in reading vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.
- The modules provide for deep learning and reflection.
- The materials are high quality.
- The modules can be customized to meet participant needs.

Weaknesses of *LETRS*:

- Minimal opportunities for coaching and follow-up assistance are provided.

Which Florida districts have participated in LETRS training?

Brevard	321-631-1911
Broward	954-765-6748
Indian River	772-564-3108
Lake	352-253-6553
Martin	772-219-1200
Orange	407-317-3200
Osceola	407-870-4600
Polk	863-534-0642
St. Lucie	772-429-3941
Seminole	407-320-0259
Sumter	352-793-2150
Volusia	386-255-6475

For More Information

http://www.sopriswest.com/LETRS/letrs_overview.htm

References

Learning First Alliance. (2000). *Every child reading: A professional development guide*. Washington, DC: Learning First Alliance.



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