

Florida Center for Reading Research

Breakthrough to Literacy

What is Breakthrough to Literacy?

Breakthrough to Literacy version 6.2 is a supplemental or intervention language and reading program designed to be aligned with the core reading program that is being used in the classroom for emergent and early readers in grades K through 3. It targets the five components of reading at each grade level. The program is designed to be helpful for students from a wide variety of backgrounds including those from challenged or disadvantaged environments, those learning English as a second language, students with learning disabilities, as well as typically developing students. Instruction is provided in whole groups, small groups, and one-on-one through the computer software component of the program.

Breakthrough to Literacy follows the Classroom Instructional Model which contains five major components: whole-group Featured Book comprehension instruction, small-group instruction, writing instruction and workshop, Individualized Software Instruction (ISI), and applications and extensions of concepts, themes, and skills taught in the other four components of this model. The *Breakthrough to Literacy* software program, ISI, provides instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency practice, and comprehension. Five types of activities comprise the foundation of the *Breakthrough to Literacy* ISI program with varying subcategories available depending on the grade level. These five activities fall under the following categorical headings: book activities, working with words, spelling, free choice, and assessments. The five activities are centered thematically around a Featured Book that is the focus of the teacher implemented instruction for the week.



In addition to work with the ISI, other activities include teachers reading the Featured Book with a different instructional emphasis each day as part of the *Breakthrough to Literacy* Teaching Cycle. Students are expected to be able to read the book by the end of the week after completing the following instructional activities: listening to the reading of the Featured Book and discussing the key concepts, completing associated writing tasks, participating in related class activities, receiving 20 minutes of small group instruction three times a week, and 15-20 minutes of daily, individualized computer time. Students are given a black and white Take-Me-Home copy of the Featured book to add to their own collection of books. Parents are encouraged to participate with their children throughout the week, reading the book together, and through the inclusion of discussion questions with each Take-Me-Home book.

To implement *Breakthrough to Literacy's* ISI, each classroom would need to have two-three computers with a set of headphones for each computer or access to a computer lab. The components included with the program are Professional Development Guides, Instructional Guides, Featured Book Teacher Guides, Big Books, student books, audio books, Take-Me-Home books, and ISI. It is important to note that teacher materials may be cumbersome, especially when teachers are asked to integrate this program with their core reading program.

Is Breakthrough to Literacy aligned with Current Reading Research?

Findings from the National Reading Panel (2000) identify five essential components to successful reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. *Breakthrough to Literacy* is intended to be a reading program that includes each of the five essential components of reading. The review of this program indicates teacher instruction focuses more strongly on vocabulary instruction and comprehension which are introduced thematically through the Featured Book and reinforced through the child's activities at the computer. *Breakthrough to Literacy* explains its conceptual framework for moving students from oral language to print in terms of structure (phonological to phonemic awareness → alphabet to phonics) and meaning (vocabulary and oral language → word recognition to print comprehension). Careful review of the lesson content, instruction, and practice materials indicate a stronger focus on meaning with little direct teacher-student instruction in the structure of the English language in phonemic awareness or phonics. Comprehension instruction occurs in five stages: activate prior knowledge and predict; remember, retell, and interpret; reflect and personalize; analyze and create; and evaluate, summarize, and celebrate. These five stages are introduced and discussed in whole-group instruction over the course of a minimum of five days.

Instruction in *Breakthrough to Literacy* is not explicit. When instruction is explicit, the words and actions of the teacher are unambiguous, direct, and visible, making it clear what students are to do and learn; nothing is left to guess work. *Breakthrough to Literacy's* scope and sequence is arranged by theme and alphabetized by book title for each grade level and no information regarding when reading skills are taught, practiced, or reviewed during the course of the school year is provided. It is left up to the teacher to select a Featured Book and generate explicit instruction for students in the small groups as the general instructional steps provide minimal guidance.

Instruction in *Breakthrough to Literacy* is not systematic. Systematic instruction establishes what will be taught and the order of instruction building on the knowledge and skills a student must have in order to learn to read. The following example briefly describes three days of small group phonemic awareness and phonics instruction in *Breakthrough to Literacy* that occur during one week. Using the first grade Featured Book *Meanies*: on day 1 instruction is focused on punctuation marks (periods, question marks, and exclamation points); day 2 is focused on vowel digraphs "ea" and "ee,"; day 3 concentrates on high-frequency and common words. Instruction is neither systematic nor explicit because new skills and concepts are introduced daily, with no review or follow up to reinforce the skills that have been introduced. Because there is no sequence of instruction suggested for the next Featured Book, it is unclear when or if students will receive additional instruction on these lesson objectives. In order for the instruction to be considered explicit, the lesson would clearly delineate how the teacher is to move through the lesson to ensure students learn the skill being taught. The vocabulary words highlighted for instruction during the week of the Featured Book *Meanies* are low level, concrete words that the majority of first graders would have in their vocabulary: bath water, drink, drive, eat, garbage, mean, etc.

The computer software has built-in scaffolding when students make an error; the speech software clearly pronounces the individual phonemes assisting students in sound identification. This scaffolding allows students to use their own knowledge and cues from the computer to arrive at the correct answer. Because the words used in the software do not move from simple to complex according to the difficulty level of word types, struggling and beginning readers may be confused when they are learning

about the sounds of English and trying to use the letters they see for support. For example, the instructional focus of syllable awareness activities includes words that require advanced understanding of syllable patterns and letter-sound knowledge. In the use of a word like "celery," students must be able to hear the syllable division and to match the correct spelling pattern to this more advanced sound/spelling for /s/.

The professional development plan for *Breakthrough to Literacy*, in partnership with schools using its program, is extensive and ongoing. Training is provided to schools in their first year of implementation for four full days spaced strategically throughout the first year and continues with intermittent workshops across a two to four year period. *Breakthrough to Literacy* assigns each school a "literacy coach" who is available to answer individual questions and spend time demonstrating and monitoring the use of *Breakthrough to Literacy* program in individual classrooms for two years. A new feature of the 6.2 version is the professional development CDs that allow teachers to observe the program being implemented in a classroom and listen to instructional tips from other teachers and professionals regarding effective classroom management, vocabulary, comprehension and writing instruction.

Research Support for Breakthrough to Literacy

The Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD), Texas, commissioned the Gibson Consulting Group to conduct an evaluation of its instructional programs and *Breakthrough to Literacy* was one of the four programs evaluated. The evaluation team conducted site visits, surveyed teachers, and reviewed student assessment data provided by the district as part of its evaluation of FWISD's use of instructional programs. "In the opinion of the review team, the data currently available from the district do not support a direct evaluation of the impact of *Breakthrough to Literacy* on student performance as implemented in FWISD" (Fort Worth Independent School District, 2005, p. 35).

In spring 2003, Pasco County Schools analyzed the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9) scores of second graders and the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) scores of third graders to compare the literacy achievement of students who received instruction using *Breakthrough to Literacy* and those who did not, using a post-test only design. For this comparison four Title I schools were identified with fairly similar percentages of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch: 85%, 63.2%, 79.2%, and 73.7%. Of these four schools, two used *Breakthrough to Literacy* with their kindergarten and first grade students and the other two used the standard district literacy curriculum. The report states that students at one of the *Breakthrough to Literacy* schools performed better on state assessments than the control groups. However, because of the design of this study (i.e., lack of pretest data, lack of matching on academic performance) and the lack of information regarding the instructional programming for students in both groups during grades two and three, it cannot be determined that the gains reported are the direct result of *Breakthrough to Literacy*.

Although other reports are provided by *Breakthrough to Literacy*, methods employed were not consistent with scientifically based research. The program does provide instruction in the important areas of reading growth. Future research with well controlled studies is needed to support the efficacy of this program.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Breakthrough to Literacy*:

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- Individualization of the computer program can differentiate instruction for each student.
- Teachers can monitor student progress on the computer by reviewing individual computer generated reports.
- The home connection with suggested parental activities and Take-Me-Home books for may help the children build their home libraries.

Weaknesses of Breakthrough to Literacy:

- The scope and sequence is difficult to use and does not provide teacher guidance in the selection of Featured Books based on instructional skills. Rather the program is set up thematically with incidental phonics instruction throughout.
- Instruction is not explicit or systematic; skill instruction is not reviewed or carried over from day to day in small group instruction.
- Students are reading connected text that is not always related to the word work instruction they are receiving during their individual time at the computer.
- Progression of letter-sound instruction is not sequential; phonemic awareness activities in the ISI program use letter-sound correspondences that may or may not have been previously taught.

Which Florida counties have schools that implement Breakthrough to Literacy?

Archdiocese of Miami	305-227-7571	Okaloosa County	850-689-7124
Brevard County	321-631-1911	Okeechobee County	863-462-5000
Broward County	954-765-6271	Orange County	407-317-3200
Collier County	941-643-2700	Palm Beach County	561-434-8694
Columbia County	386-755-8000	Pasco County	813-794-2000
Duval County	904-390-2000	Pinellas County	727-588-6143
Escambia County	904-432-6121	Sarasota County	941-486-2183
Florida School for The Deaf & Blind	904-823-4000	St. Lucie County	561-468-5050
Hillsborough County	813-272-4959	Seminole County	407-320-0000
Leon County	850-487-7283	Sumter County	352-793-2315
Miami-Dade County	305-995-1206	Union County	904-496-2045
Mid-Florida Community Services	352-796-1425		

For More Information

<http://www.earlyliteracy.com/>

References

Fort Worth Independent School District. (2005, March 25). *Evaluation of Instructional Programs*. Austin, TX: Gibson Consulting Group.



National Reading Panel (2000). *Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. NIH Publication No. 00-4754. Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Pasco County Schools. (2003). [Longitudinal evaluation report]. Unpublished raw data.

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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

For more information about FCRR go to: www.fcrr.org