

Florida Center for Reading Research

PLATO FOCUS Reading and Language Program

What is PLATO FOCUS Reading and Language Program?

PLATO FOCUS is an integrated reading and language program for beginning, developing and advanced readers in kindergarten through third grade. To date, there are teachers implementing *PLATO FOCUS* as a core program, a supplement to a core program, for remediation, or for special education classrooms. *PLATO FOCUS Reading and Language Program* consists of a Classroom Kit and a technology component.

The lessons from the Classroom Kit are implemented 4 days each week for approximately 50-minutes with small or large groups. These lessons are interactive, quickly paced, and teacher-led. The teacher models expectations and gives oral prompts to the students and then elicits oral responses from the students. All the materials needed to implement the lessons from the Classroom Kit are provided.

The Classroom Kit consists of 45 units. Each unit is contained in its own folder and focuses on a target sound (one for each of the 45 phonemes of the English language). Within each unit are seven Teaching Guides containing integrated lessons that focus on the target sound. Teaching Guides 1-3 consist of phonological awareness activities at the word, syllable, and phoneme level. Teaching Guides 4-7 build on Teaching Guides 1-3 but focus on handwriting, spelling, reading, and writing. Tasks within the Teaching Guides are implemented according to three levels: Level 1, Kindergarten-First Grade, Beginning Readers; Level 2, First-Second Grade, Developing Readers; Level 3, Second-Third Grade, Advanced Readers. Because each unit from the Classroom Kit includes self-contained Teaching Guides, the units can be arranged in an order that correlates to any reading program or to an order designated by the teacher.

The technology component consists of a CD-ROM and includes *PLATO FOCUS* student activities and a teacher management system. Headphones are needed for the technology component and computers can be in a computer lab setting or a computer center in the classroom. Each child spends approximately 35 minutes each week at the computer working through individualized *PLATO FOCUS* activities designed to reinforce listening and reading skills. The activities center around a storyline based on a main character, Emma Readwell, who builds robots. The robots have stopped working and children fix the robots by completing the language and reading activities. There are listening and speaking activities designed to help students recognize, produce, discriminate, and manipulate phonemes. The activities are a direct extension of the Tasks from the Classroom Kit. Ms. Readwell provides feedback and exhibits the same verbal and non-verbal cues that students experience when working on lessons from the Classroom Kit with the teacher. The verbally interactive technology recognizes speech and can assess students' spoken responses. Students move at their own pace through the technology component.

The teacher management system component of the software monitors the progress of individual students and provides detailed student and class reports. The teacher is able to use this system to individualize instruction by prescribing which students are at which level and organizing the order of phoneme introduction. Also, the teacher can specify tasks for students, identify how many items students should



answer correctly before moving to the next task, and prescribe how many total items the student should be given. The phoneme introduction activities on the software component are arranged in the *PLATO FOCUS* order of presentation but can be easily changed to a preset order correlated to the following programs: Open Court, Macmillian-McGraw-Hill, Harcourt, Wilson, Saxon Phonics, and Project Read. Or, teachers can customize the order in which phonemes are introduced.

Is *PLATO FOCUS* aligned with Reading First?

PLATO FOCUS Reading and Language Program implements scientifically based instructional strategies that address the five critical components of reading instruction as outlined by the National Reading Panel and Reading First: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The lessons from the Classroom Kit and tasks from the software are integrated, explicit, and systematic. In addition, lessons include activities regarding oral language development, spelling, handwriting, and writing.

Phonological awareness instruction is included in a daily 8-10 minute lesson which progresses through the activities at the word, syllable, and phoneme level. When engaging in phonemic awareness activities, students employ all of their senses: visualizing the sound, feeling the sound, hearing the sound, making the sound, and creating a mental image of the key word that represents the sound. Phonics instruction is implemented through handwriting, spelling, and writing activities whereby students are taught to segment words orally at the syllable and phoneme level and then to spell words using previously learned letter-sound correspondences.

Vocabulary is developed during each *PLATO FOCUS* lesson through discussion of a keyword picture associated with each targeted sound. Questions regarding the keyword picture are designed to help students identify the picture as well as integrate it into their knowledge base. Opportunities for students to supply synonyms, homonyms, antonyms, and alternative meanings for individual words in targeted sentences also promote vocabulary development. Students create and share, orally and in writing, sentences using targeted words.

Fluency is addressed through oral reading strategies as the teacher provides feedback to the students as they echo read, choral read, or read independently. The majority of words from the stories are those words that students have been working on during other tasks of the *PLATO FOCUS* lesson. Depending on the level of the student, comprehension is addressed through teacher questions, a cloze procedure, and students developing their own questions related to a story. Visual imagery is discussed and promoted through every aspect of *PLATO FOCUS*.

PLATO FOCUS works in partnership with schools to customize the professional development to meet the needs of the school. Typically, professional development consists of two days of initial training and then one day of follow-up training. Initial training consists of how to implement the Classroom Kit and the technology as well as how to integrate *PLATO FOCUS* with other instructional materials used in the classroom. Monthly, hands-on visits with teachers in the classroom can also be part of on-going professional development. *PLATO FOCUS* consultants, who are reading specialists, are available to spend time in classrooms team-teaching and providing feedback to teachers.

Research Support for PLATO FOCUS

PLATO FOCUS Reading and Language Program was formerly named *Focus Reading and Language Program*. Only the name of the program has changed, not the content, therefore in the summarized research, it is referred to as *Focus Reading and Language Program*.

FOCUS Reading and Language Program was developed in 1996 and revised and repackaged in May of 2002. The program has been widely implemented in Texas and *FOCUS* reports the results of studies implemented by Texas school districts.

One study was implemented in six kindergarten classrooms across three schools in Humble, Texas in 2000-2001. Three teachers implemented Harcourt Brace Balanced Literacy (2000) for ten hours each week (control group). Three other teachers implemented Harcourt Brace Balanced Literacy (2000) for 8 hours, 20 minutes each week and one hour, forty minutes per week of lessons from the *FOCUS* Classroom Kit (intervention group). In a pre and posttest design, students were administered the Developmental Reading Assessment in August and in May. On average, the students in the *FOCUS* classrooms (N=61) performed 2.0 points better than those in the control classroom (N=60). It is important to note, however, that scores indicating where the students were at the beginning of the year were not reported. Thus, it is not possible to know if the control classrooms in this study were equivalent to the classrooms in which *FOCUS* was implemented.

During that same year, in Beaumont, Texas, another study was conducted in 3 schools with 63 children who were diagnosed with specific reading disabilities (first-third grade). One school (control group) implemented the District Dyslexia Program for 5 hours each week. Two schools (intervention group) implemented the District Dyslexia Program for 4 hours, 30 minutes each week and lessons from the *FOCUS* Classroom Kit for 30 minutes per week. The Johns Basic Reading Inventory was administered as a pretest in August and then again as a posttest in May. The students in the special education classrooms at the two schools that used *FOCUS* showed greater gains (2.09 and 2.53) on the Johns Basic Reading Inventory than did the control group (-0.73). Again, pretest scores were not reported, and it is not clear whether these differences in outcome were statistically reliable.



In Baytown, Texas, five second grade classrooms from one school participated in a study in 2000-2001. Four of these classroom teachers implemented 10 hours each week of Harcourt Brace Balanced Literacy (2000) and Project Read. One classroom teacher implemented 8 hours, 20 minutes per week of Harcourt Brace Balanced Literacy (2000), Project Read and one hour, forty minutes per week of lessons from the *FOCUS* Classroom Kit. The Harcourt Reading Assessment was administered at the beginning and at the middle of the year. *FOCUS* students' (N=29) scores at the beginning of the year were lower than those of the control students (N=85). At mid-year, the students in the *FOCUS* classroom increased their percentile scores and outperformed the students in the control classrooms on the Harcourt Reading Assessment. On average, *FOCUS* students were at the 40th percentile and the control students were at the 20th percentile at mid-year.

In conclusion, the instructional content and design of *FOCUS Reading and Language Program* is clearly consistent with current research, which has established the importance of instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency,

and reading comprehension. Existing research on the program is limited, however, currently an outside evaluator is undertaking a larger study with over 300 students at multiple grade levels using appropriate comparison groups. Additionally, Ball State University is designing a comparison study of *FOCUS* and its competitors. These studies should provide important new information about the effectiveness of the *FOCUS* curriculum with children at different stages in learning to read.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *PLATO FOCUS*:

- Lessons from the Classroom Kit as well as the technology activities are explicit and systematic.
- The technology provides teachers with individual and class reports so instruction can be adapted to meet individual student needs.
- *PLATO FOCUS* offers suggestions regarding how to differentiate instruction.
- Oral language is addressed daily.
- There is a strong emphasis on phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary.
- *PLATO FOCUS* may be appropriate to be utilized as an immediate intensive intervention for struggling readers as the Classroom Kit and Technology can be organized to correlate to any core reading program.
- The multi-sensory approach of the *FOCUS* technology (mouse, keyboard, voice) may be effective for those students who need multiple modes of input for maximal learning. The technology may also keep students interested in each phoneme.
- This program may be especially effective with students with auditory language processing deficits, student diagnosed with dyslexia, special education students, bilingual students, and students who are at risk for reading failure.
- The integrated activities of the Teacher Guides help to build up necessary skills to become proficient readers and writers.
- Immediate teacher feedback is provided to students throughout the activities from the Classroom Kit.
- There is little teacher preparation as the materials are well organized and teacher friendly.

Weaknesses of *PLATO FOCUS*:

- Some teachers may find it difficult to adapt to the repetitive style of instruction from the Classroom Kit.
- Although fluency is consistently addressed at the word, sentence, and passage level, comprehension strategies are not explicitly taught.

Which Florida counties have schools that implement PLATO FOCUS?

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For More Information

www.Plato.com

References



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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.

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