



Unlocking the Code: Structured Linguistic Phonics in Grades 4–8

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FULL REPORT

Reynolds, D., Wang, H., Coole, M., Rutherford-Quach, S., Cao, Q., & Necochea Tinco, K. (2026). **Unlocking the Code: The Impacts of a Structured Linguistic Phonics Program in Grades 4–8.** SRI Education, for AERDF's Reading Reimagined program.

Most phonics research and policy attention in the United States has focused on early literacy instruction in grades K-3. This study asked whether a structured linguistic phonics (SLP) program can move the needle on word- and sentence-level reading outcomes for students in grades 4–8, where the benefits of phonics instruction have rarely been studied.

In addition to breaking ground with a rigorous study of phonics instruction for upper elementary and middle school, SRI's study examined a well-established pedagogy that has long been underused in mainstream education and departs from the traditional print-to-speech phonics methods that are virtually universal in U.S. classrooms. In place of traditional phonics rules and exceptions, SLP follows a speech-to-print approach centered on four pieces of explicit conceptual knowledge about English orthography. This harnesses statistical learning and allows students to build a flexible "mental map" of the English alphabetic code, reducing the cognitive load imposed by juggling the many rules and exceptions that are a feature of traditional phonics instruction. Often referred to in literacy research as "[set for variability](#)," this conceptual understanding is a crucial skill that older students need in order to successfully decode increasingly complex, multisyllabic text.

What is SLP and how is it different from traditional phonics?

SLP ([McGuinness, 2004](#)) is explicit and systematic like other phonics approaches, but its defining feature is what it deliberately omits:

- **No syllable types or labels.** No "closed/open syllable," no "short vowel/long vowel," no "hard/soft consonant" terminology that is a hallmark of print-to-speech instruction.
- **No rules.** No syllable-division rules or "magic letter"/silent-letter conventions.
- **No sight words, trick words, or flashcards.** Every word is treated as decodable through the sound-spelling system rather than memorized as an exception.
- **Sounds-first, not letters-first.** Phonemic awareness isn't treated as a K-level precursor skill; it's a constant, integrated feature of every lesson, at every grade, centered on the phonology of students' local dialects.





What is SLP and how is it different from traditional phonics? *(continued)*

In place of rules and exceptions, the UK-based [Sounds-Write](#)'s SLP program builds four pieces of conceptual knowledge about the English alphabetic code through explicit, repeated instructional routines:

1. Letters are symbols that represent the sounds of speech.
2. A single sound can be spelled with one, two, three, or four letters.
3. Sounds can be spelled in multiple ways.
4. One spelling can represent multiple sounds.

Two implementation features round out the Sounds-Write model, and were the hardest for teachers in this study to execute consistently: connected text reading/writing (applying sound-spelling knowledge in full sentences and dictation, not just isolated words) and the “teaching through errors” protocol, a system for scaffolding oral reading mistakes in the moment.

SRI's study compared the outcomes of students taught by teachers who were trained to use the Sounds-Write SLP program to the gains made by peers whose teachers used their usual literacy instructional resources and methods.

Study Design

- Two U.S. districts, three teacher cohorts; 9 schools, 30 teachers, and 448 students in the analytic sample.
- Mixed RCT (teacher- or student-randomized) and QED (teacher-choice) designs, combined into a single impact analysis that will meet What Works Clearinghouse standards with reservations.
- SLP teachers received 36 hours of asynchronous training plus (for two cohorts) weekly expert coaching from Sounds-Write.
- The contrast was specifically SLP vs. schools' business-as-usual morphology/comprehension instruction, not “SLP vs. nothing”: control group instruction included a morphology-focused program (Morpheme Magic) and standard core curricula (Wonders, Scholastic Reader).





Key Findings

- **Word reading and reading efficiency improved:** SLP students gained 6.4 percentile points on ROAR Word and 5.6 percentile points on ROAR Sentence relative to BAU peers ($ES = 0.16$ and 0.14 , both $p < .05$), a meaningful effect size for this age range per Kraft (2020) benchmarks.
- **No differential effects by subgroup** (SES, EL status, IEP status): Student reading gains were broad-based, not concentrated among already-advantaged students.
- **No spelling advantage:** SLP and BAU students improved equally on spelling inventories, even at the level of specific spelling features. This is a notable null result given SLP's phonological emphasis, possibly linked to inconsistent implementation of connected-text spelling activities in the study, or to the benefits of morphology instruction that comparison group students received.
- **Teacher fidelity was strong on the “distinctive” features of SLP:** Teachers reported using precise sound-spelling language, avoiding trick-word/rule terminology, using scripts and word lists. Fidelity was inconsistent on connected text work and the error-correction protocol, the two most instructionally demanding components.
- **Teachers largely preferred SLP to other phonics approaches:** 69% rated it more effective; 63% reported they would continue using it after the study, valuing its conceptual, rule-free framing, especially for students who struggled with traditional rule-based systems.
- **The clearest friction point was grade-appropriateness for older students:** several Cohort 3 (grades 6–8) teachers and students felt the instruction was insufficiently challenging, suggesting a need for accelerated pacing guidance for adolescents with prior phonics exposure. A next step for SLP research could be to identify optimal ways to help teachers accelerate complex multisyllabic instruction calibrated to the precise needs of older middle school students.

SRI/Reading Reimagined's study of structured linguistic phonics is among the first rigorous tests of a rules-free, concept-based phonics approach specifically for grades 4–8.

This study provides real evidence that, even for older students who have already received years of reading instruction, SLP can improve word reading and accelerate reading efficiency.

