***The Reading Matrix* © 2010**
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Title: Starfall.com (http://www.starfall.com/)

Producers: Stephen Schutz, Susan Polis Schutz, Jared Schutz Polis, Brandi Chase, and a team of educators, artists, designers, animators, musicians, and engineers from all over the world

Platform: Web

Minimum System Requirements: Windows 95, Macintosh OS8, or Linux, Internet connection, 64 MB Ram, 200 MHz processor, Internet Explorer 4 or Netscape 4, Flash Player 4, Speakers, Adobe Reader

Target Language: English

Target Audience: Beginning readers in Preschool-2nd grade and English Language Learners

Cost: Free

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Starfall—What feelings and images are invoked when you hear this word? This word seems to bring to mind images of fantasy and other worlds. Stephen Schultz, the creator of www.starfall.com, named the website in order to invoke feelings of wonder and delight. As a nine year old child, Schultz still struggled with reading books; therefore, he designed *Starfall* as a place where children could develop an early passion for reading and "develop feelings of wonderment and play" (Chase, 2007).

Starfall is a free website appropriate for children who are in preschool through second grade. This website is also an excellent medium for special education students and English language learners (ELLs) to develop their language because of the repetition, visuals, and engaging opportunities that the website provides. The goal of the Starfall team of educators, designers, artists, musicians, engineers, and animators is simply stated in the website logo: "Where children have fun learning to read" (Chase, 2007). The website includes interactive games, activities, songs, and stories for beginning readers and also a variety of downloadable materials, educational products, and a kindergarten curriculum for parents and educators. The site is designed around activities that address phonemic awareness, systematic phonics, fluency, comprehension and vocabulary.

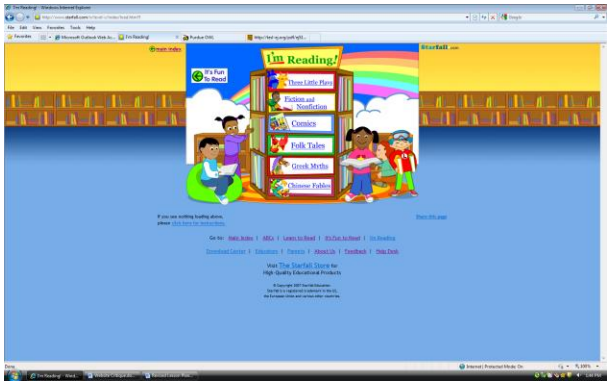
Another mission of *Starfall* is to motivate children to read. This mission is accomplished by the site employing a variety of songs, books and activities that create a fun learning environment for students. The bright colors, animation, and voices utilized on the site keep children's attention and keep them excited to continue exploring the site, which, in turn, facilitates their continued reading practice. The website also provides positive reinforcement, such as a display of stars and a blue ribbon when children successfully complete activities.

The opening page of the website sets the tone for this fun and visually appealing website (http://www.starfall.com). There are four graded reading levels: *ABCs, Learn to Read, It's Fun to Read*, and *I'm Reading.* These levels build gradually from learning the alphabet to reading books of different genres. To the right of these levels are links to thirteen activities. These reading activities are centered on books about various holidays such as Valentine's Day and Groundhog's Day. Sounds, parts of speech, conjunctions, and other skills are taught through these books. For example, in the activity entitled "Pick a Pumpkin," children are taught the /u/ sound, and as they read, they create a virtual jack-o-lantern. In addition to reading, other subject areas such as math and science are incorporated throughout these activities. At the bottom of the main page, there are seven links for parents and educators: The Starfall Store, Download Center, Educators, Parents, About Us, Feedback, and Help Desk/FAQ.

The first reading level is called "ABCs: Let's Get Ready to Read." In this section, children click on each letter of the alphabet. For each letter, children see the letter in uppercase and lowercase form and hear the letter name and its sound. Three words that begin with that letter and a sentence are displayed one at a time. An activity that helps learners practice that particular letter is usually included at the end. There is constant repetition of the letter sound as children must click on the letter and hear its sound each time they advance to a new page. Once students finish all the letters, they may listen to an ABC song that uses motions to review the letter names and sounds. Also included in the ABCs reading level are songs for each of the vowel sounds. The songs are set to the tune of popular children's songs and use motions and sign language. Another component of this reading level is instruction on how to sign each letter of the alphabet while reinforcing the sound of each.

The next reading level is "Learn to Read: Zac the Rat and Other Tales." This section helps children use their knowledge of letter-sound relationships to start reading fifteen simple stories. Before children read each story, they play two interactive games in order to learn the word families that will be incorporated in the story. The story uses interactive graphics to reinforce targeted sounds and guide comprehension. Children may click on any word to hear it sounded out and then read. Following each story, there is a video or activity that teaches various reading skills such as print directionality, chunking, and consonant blends.

The third reading level is "It's Fun to Read: About Me, Art Gallery, Magic and More." This stage focuses on reading for fun and building children's vocabulary and comprehension skills. Children explore a variety of authentic contexts, such as music, riddles, tongue twisters, art, poetry, and magic tricks which are interesting topics for children and which motivate students to want to continue reading. While practicing their reading skills, children are exposed to and interact with the music of Chopin and Beethoven, art from Vincent Van Gogh and Ernie Barnes, and poetry from Robert Louis Stevenson. As with the previous reading levels, interactive graphics, games, activities, and songs are employed to provide children with a fun atmosphere for reading.



The final reading level is "I'm Reading: Plays, Nonfiction, Comics, and More." At this reading level, children move from learning to read to reading to learn. Children read books from a variety of genres including fiction, nonfiction, myths, fables, plays, folk tales, and comics. The plays have multiple "players" allowing for both group and multiple student interactions. Children interact with stories derived from different cultures such as Greek myths and Chinese fables, as well as diverse characters. This is the culminating level where learners are fulfilling the essential goals of the website—*reading for fun and reading to learn.*

Starfall is a fun, visually pleasing, and easy-to-navigate website. Its fun and interactive graphics capture children's attention and provide a fun way to learn how to read. This website is user-friendly in that all children, including ELLs, can easily navigate the website's contents. One feature that makes it particularly simple is an animated hand that directs children to what they

should click on next. This eases the burden on parents and teachers, as even the youngest readers can independently navigate this site.

Starfall is equally user-friendly for parents and educators. It is easy for parents and teachers to leave comments, questions, and suggestions for the Starfall team by clicking on the feedback link. There is also a Help Desk/FAQ page displaying common questions users may have about technical difficulties. *Starfall* provides a scope and sequence which lists story words, targeted phonemic awareness and phonics skills, related worksheets, and writing journal activities for each book on the website. These free resources aid educators in supplementing and expanding student's learning beyond the website. A site map is also included to help teachers and parents navigate the site easily. *Starfall* also has an associated online store and download catalog where teachers and parents can purchase high quality educational materials for reasonable prices. In addition, the site offers a kindergarten curriculum program which focuses on reading and language arts, available for international purchase.

ELLs using *Starfall* will have a low affective filter which, according to Krashen, is essential for language learning. They can learn at their own pace and will not experience the anxiety of having to keep up with the rest of their peers. In fact, they will feel comfortable navigating and using the site because, simply stated, they can talk as much or as little as they want. Beyond that, the songs, activities, and games provide a fun and non-threatening atmosphere for learning. If applicable, students may also work with a partner to receive peer support and guidance.

Starfall balances both phonics and a holistic approach to learning how to read. Initially, there is a focus on phonics. However, even as children learn the letter-sound relationships, they are exposed to these sounds in words and books. *Starfall* allows children to use both top-down and bottom-up processing. Sometimes they learn about the basics of reading in a more explicit way, and at other times, users learn words from their meaning within the story. For example, high frequency words are presented in sentences rather than in isolation. This helps children make meaningful associations with these words and more easily commit them to memory. The importance of fluency notwithstanding, comprehension is yet another essential component of the reading process. The final reading level activities do not include questions or activities to monitor students' comprehension which may be helpful data for educators.

Yet another strength of the *Starfall* website is the utilization of multiple intelligences. For visual-spatial learners, this website provides a visually rich environment full of bright and colorful graphics. There are several opportunities for kinesthetic learners to use sign language and motions. Rhythmic-musical learners can learn through the website's numerous songs. For logical-mathematical learners, the website includes books and activities with counting, calendar math, sequencing, and addition. The website also gives children multiple exposures to a variety of genres and authentic materials. Learners can read folktales, poetry, comics, riddles, and plays, as well as interact with paintings and the music of famous artists and composers. Through the use of these materials, ELLs see ample examples of language in meaningful contexts.

Children too can interact with these materials using all four language modalities—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, listening and reading are emphasized over the other two domains. Unfortunately, the website lacks contextualized activities and communicative language activities to facilitate meaningful language acquisition for ELLs. As a result, the ELLs do not have the opportunity to communicate orally or discuss their connections with the text. In addition, reading and writing are so interconnected that it would be beneficial for the website to provide more writing activities.

This shortcoming aside, *Starfall* uses comprehensible input which, according to Krashen, needs to be present for language learning to take place. Thus, language is not presented in isolation. Instead, the oral language is presented in a slow and clear-yet-natural manner. Each book allows learners to click on any word for its pronunciation. The interactive graphics support the words like a movie of the story. At the same time, learners are guided to go beyond their current level of understanding with scaffolding and support.

Equally important, *Starfall* is culturally relevant. Stories represent a variety of cultures and include characters from a variety of ethnic groups. In one activity, children create characters that correspond with their skin color and other features. Cultural relevance is especially important to ELLs, because they see characters that are similar to them as they are learning a new language. However, some of the activities focus too much on American culture and holidays. ELL children may know little about these holidays, and a teacher may need to help students build background on these holidays.

In short, *Starfall* is a fun and interactive website that helps children learn to read, read to learn and, most importantly, read for fun. The positive reinforcement presented in conjunction with engaging activities motivates children to read. The multiple resources and supplements for teachers and parents provide a way to expand children's learning beyond the computer while enhancing classroom content and language objectives. A more intentional focus on building children's writing, speaking, and comprehension skills and less emphasis on American holidays would certainly enhance the overall effectiveness of this website. Despite these minor shortcomings, this website is a valuable resource for children, parents, and teachers. Appropriately named, *Starfall* has the potential to incite wonder and delight in any young reader.

REFERENCES

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