When Sounding It Out Isn't Enough

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Many young readers in third grade and beyond run into trouble because they are increasingly challenged by the texts they're expected to read in class or on their own. Sometimes they don't understand enough about the topic to follow what the author is presenting, or the organization of ideas or the sentence structure is confusing. They may also be challenged by the growing number of unfamiliar words they encounter, which is the focus here.

When children come across a word that stumps them, they will most often experience one of these predicaments:

1. They've seen and heard the word before and can sound it out accurately, but they don't understand its meaning in the current text. For example, the child who knows the word *plane* as a type of vehicle and can readily sound the word out may not understand the use of the word *plane* as a woodworking tool or a type of tree and might not comprehend *Her piano playing was on a different plane from mine*.

2. They haven't seen or heard the word before. They understand its meaning in the text and can sound the word out, but they're not sure they're pronouncing it correctly. For example, a fourth grade girl was uncertain of the word *victuals* in the sentence *Run an' get thy victuals…* (Burnett, 1938, p 108). The characters were talking about lunch, so she was sure the word was a synonym for food, but she thought it was pronounced VIKE-too-alls.

3. They haven't seen or heard the word before. They can sound it out, but they're not sure they're pronouncing it correctly, and they don't understand its meaning in the text. For example, a fifth grader was challenged by the word *grizzled* in the sentence *I sold fried quick bread and stew every night to an old grizzled man who welcomed the chance to eat with us instead of lighting a fire and cooking for himself* (Hubalek, 1995, p 30). The child pronounced the word correctly, though with uncertainty, but could not determine its meaning. Considering the surrounding words, she thought it might be a synonym for *hungry* or perhaps *lonely*.

4. They haven't seen or heard the word before. They have trouble sounding it out because it has unfamiliar or ambiguous letter combinations, and they also don't understand how the word is used in the text. For example, a fifth grader who liked Sherlock Holmes stories followed the narratives well enough but was often challenged by Arthur Conan Doyle's vocabulary. The word *assiduous* in "The Musgrave Ritual" was one such stumper: *For two days after this Brunton was most assiduous in his attention to his duties* (Baring-Gould, 1967, p 130). The child pronounced the word ass-eye-DOO-us and couldn't figure out what it had to do with attention.

These examples all show that pronouncing a word correctly doesn't necessarily yield the word's meaning or further the reader's comprehension. And if a child has not seen or heard a word before, sounding it out will not necessarily lead to either accuracy of pronunciation or comprehension of meaning.

For these reasons, if beginning readers are taught early on that their priority should be to sound out words, and they habitually use phonics as their primary strategy, they will be at a disadvantage when they start reading more advanced texts and find that phonics either isn't enough or isn't even possible.

Phonics is most useful for identifying an unfamiliar word in print when the child knows the word orally and it is used in a way that is meaningful to the child. In that situation, accurate application of phonics results in correct identification of the word, and the child can continue confidently. For this reason, some people believe that children's first reading materials should be written in simple, phonetically-regular words, called *decodable texts*. But as soon as children begin to read texts that are not artificially constructed in this way, they need more than phonics to be successful. In fact, although decodable texts may seem like a good idea, they can make later reading more difficult because they allow children to rely too heavily on phonics.

Recognizing this, it makes sense to give young readers all that they need from the beginning. Besides phonics, they need the following from the very start:

1. *Exposure to complete texts, not just letters and words*. Above all, children who are learning to read need to understand the point of it—reading a variety of interesting texts. That's why reading to children is important, as is making sure they see others reading and have time to handle, explore, and browse through books, magazines, and other kinds of written texts. The purpose of exposing children to a numerous texts isn't to have them somehow learn to read by osmosis, as some have claimed, but to give them the experience of reading with understanding and satisfaction. When children concentrate too much on letter-naming, phonemic awareness, and phonics early on, they are at risk of losing sight of that ultimate goal.

2. *The habit of thinking about meaning*. Starting with their first reading experiences, children need to approach reading consistently with the intention of understanding the text, not simply sounding out the words. Those who have worked with children can see the difference immediately between the child who is following the story or acquiring new information and the one who is only barking at the print.

3. *Strategies that tap their strengths as intelligent beings*. Children bring their knowledge of language and their experience of the world to their reading. Both are relevant and useful strengths that enable them to think about what word fits syntactically in that place in the sentence and what word fits semantically in that text as well as what sounds the letters represent. Some think it's wrong for children to use all the information available to them when they encounter an unfamiliar word, claiming that using anything but phonics is merely guessing, but that isn't a strong argument. After all, phonetic analysis itself often involves tentative responses, given the irregularity of the sound-symbol system in English—as the examples above illustrate. If children make educated guesses when they're sounding out a word (which they often do), it is perfectly all right for them to make educated guesses based on other attributes of the word, such as its position in the sentence or its connection to the topic. They will actually be more effective readers if they use all the available information to figure out unknown words.

4. *The confidence that they'll become competent readers*. From their earliest days, young children need to feel that they are capable of learning to read, that it will not be too hard for them, and that they will be successful. So it's worth remembering that learning sound-letter associations can be difficult and confusing for many children. That's especially true if focus is on completing exercises with letters and words rather than using phonics as an aid while reading actual stories and informational texts. Some teachers try to reassure children by telling them that reading is difficult and requires hard work, but this is usually discouraging rather than reassuring and can lead to feelings of failure if the children don't catch on

quickly. On the other hand, when children are encouraged to use all their strengths, they are more likely to be successful and to gain confidence in their ability as readers.

5. *The experience of success at actual reading.* Children thrive on reading complete texts successfully. Simply pronouncing letters or words doesn't result in the same thrill that comes from reading and understanding a book. This is one reason that the Language Experience Approach is so satisfying to beginning readers. The look of pure delight on their faces when they read their own words in print shows just how effective that aspect of LEA is at giving readers successful experiences from the start.

6. *Daily independent reading.* Beginning readers benefit greatly from reading and rereading books and other texts to themselves daily without being expected to read aloud for others. The time they devote reading on their own is as important to their growth as readers as the instruction and supervised oral reading they receive. Practicing on their own, without onlookers, is very useful, whether they are rereading a familiar story, such as "The Three Little Pigs," or dipping into an interesting new book.

Daily independent reading strengthens children's background knowledge, reinforces and enlarges their reading vocabularies, and gives them good opportunities to notice and use language patterns. For example, multiple experiences with the words *sign*, *assignment,* and *design* will be useful when the children later come across *align*, *benign, malign,* and *resign.* When children read widely, they notice such patterns because their brains are pattern-seeking organs. When too much time is devoted to phonics, less time is available for the reading and writing that deepen and broaden children's skills and increase their motivation.

When instruction meets these needs from the very beginning and is combined with phonics instruction, all aspects of the children's learning to read can be integrated in ways that are mutually reinforcing. For example, the more children are attentive to the meaning of what they are reading, the more likely they are to arrive at the correct pronunciation of an unfamiliar word—either a word they've seen before but are not sure how to pronounce or one they've never seen before. To demonstrate this truth, compare your reading of this list of words:

pipe, tree, wind, bend, lead, path, clock

With your reading of these sentences:

We always wind the clock at night just before bedtime.
The palm tree can bend in the wind like a dancer.
That lead pipe under the house is very old.
You take the lead on the path; I'll follow.

Sounding out *wind* and *lead* is not a straightforward matter of applying phonics knowledge because the contextual meaning of the words ultimately determines their pronunciation. The English language has a great many such homographs—words that are spelled the same but that have different meanings and may also have different pronunciations. Sounding these words out without considering how they are used will not necessarily result correct identification and good comprehension, and the same is true for many other words that have multiple meanings, such as *run, bark, strike, letter, fair, ring,* or *sink,* to name only a few. In a great many instances, comprehension of the sentence necessarily precedes the correct sounding out of an individual word. In addition, many other words cannot be identified with phonics alone because of

anomalies in the letter-sound representations. Only a few of the many examples are: *shoe, word, warm, care, heart, two, once, yacht, four, great, once, through.*

More importantly, too great a reliance on phonics leads children to think they must sound words out in order to read well. Children with that habit of mind will read less efficiently and less effectively as time goes on in comparison with children who have developed the habit of reading for meaning and have learned to use their knowledge of phonics and other aspects of their experience and language knowledge to inform their reading.

Reflecting on all this leads to the understanding that when children beyond the primary grades have difficulty reading, they don't necessarily need more phonics instruction, nor does it mean that their previous phonics instruction was ineffective. When Valencia and Buly (2004) took a close look at struggling readers, they found that 58% of the 108 fifth-grade readers in their study had "adequate or strong word identification skills" acquired during their earlier years in school, but their command of phonics was not enough. Despite the students' phonics skill, they did not meet the minimum standard on the state reading test given at the end of fourth grade. None had been enrolled in special education, and none spoke English as a second language. They were simply regular students who were struggling with reading. The study's results suggest that the children's earlier instruction probably did not include enough attention to building the background knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension skills, and the intention to comprehend that were essential as they encountered more advanced texts in later grades.

A phonics-oriented view of reading has captured the attention of many in recent years. Proponents say the reading process involves breaking words into letters, sounding out the letters, and blending them together to pronounce the word. This decoding, it is claimed, leads the reader to grasp the meaning of the word. Carr (2023), for example, states:

> To read the (written) word "dog," for example, a typical brain will disaggregate the word into its constituent letters, "d," "o" and "g," and then summon from memory the sound fragments, or phonemes, associated with each letter. It aggregates these phonemes into the sound "dog" and retrieves the meaning of the word that matches that sound. Most brains eventually learn to do all these steps so fast that the action seems automatic.

But the reading process involves more than the eyes transmitting written symbols to the brain and the brain "retrieving" the meaning of the words—assuming the meaning is there to be retrieved. Reading is better understood as a bi-directional process, with expectations and predictions coming from the brain at the same time that visual and auditory signals are going to the brain. (See Nessel, 2023.) Understanding this bi-directionality, which exists from children's earliest days of reading, is essential to understanding reading and the place that phonics plays in the process.

The bottom line: Phonics is a useful tool for children to use when they apply it judiciously in conjunction with their other strengths as they develop their reading abilities, but it should not be considered the most important tool, or the only tool, or the tool that should be taught first, or the one that should be used first in the act of reading. It is far more important for readers to make integrated use of their language abilities, their background of experience, their phonics knowledge, and their other word-analysis skills, such as knowledge of roots and affixes. Such a multi-skilled approach will be most effective in developing reading competence.

For additional information that supports this perspective, see the recent Facebook posting on the science of reading by P. David Pearson (2024) and the recent article by Compton-Lilly, et al. (2023) that details current knowledge about reading and the teaching of reading:

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