If Children Guess At Words When Learning To Read, What Should We Do About It?

W. Dorsey Hammond, Ph.D.

It appears from social media and podcasts addressing issues of literacy that guessing has no place in the process of learning to read. For example, Nikolas (2021) sees guessing as a "serious problem in learning to read." In her blog, Miss Mary (2021) presents a series of lessons or protocols of how to extinguish any guessing tendencies of young readers. Kucera (2022) refers to guessing as, "…the enemy of good reading." Other websites take a similar position. The conclusion one might reach is that any semblance of guessing is a bad behavior that needs to be discouraged and ultimately extinguished. And yet careful observations of emerging readers, as well as mature readers, indicate a form of guessing or anticipation as they read print.

Two caveats are in order. First, we are not talking about wild guessing, but rather thoughtful responses based on available evidence. Secondly, we might substitute the more accurate words *hypothesizing, speculating, inferring,* or *predicting* for the more casual, informal term, *guessing*.

Even some academicians seem confused about this issue of guessing as it relates to reading. For example, Seidenberg (2017) writes the following:

> *Beginning readers can often predict the words in texts that have pictures. They can also predict the words in books they have read enough times to memorize, as often happens in whole language classrooms… (p268)*

The statement above is misleading. Goodman & Burke (1972) assessed children's reading with the *Reading Miscue Inventory*—an instrument that acknowledges predictions as part of the reading process. But the researchers state very specifically that the selection to be read by the student, "must be entirely new—something he/she has never seen before. All familiar tales which the child knows in some oral version or as a listener should be excluded as well" (p 20). Although not stated explicitly, none of the examples of texts used by Goodman and Burke in thousands of administered Inventories contain pictures. When using the *Reading Miscue Inventory,* they and others have always focused entirely on the children's abilities to process the words in non-illustrated texts they have not seen before.

Under these conditions of no pictures or previous reading or listening to the given text, both skilled and struggling readers often predict words and/or phrases. Prediction, of course, is a form of guessing. It is an inevitable manifestation of reading connected discourse when readers are focused on making sense of what they are reading.

This brings us to the heart of the issue. The use of meaning and language information along with phonetic information enhances the probability of correct identification of words and phrases. So, when emerging readers think about what they are reading and attempt to make sense of the text, their use of phonics becomes even more effective, and they read more successfully. Their greater success leads early readers to read more, and the more texts they read, the better readers they become.

Even attempts to recognize words in isolation often involve tentative responses that can be considered a form of guessing. For example, in the word *said*/sed/ the beginning s is phonetically regular as is the ending d. The medial part of the word s&&d is less so. The young reader, applying his/her phonics knowledge of the digraph *ai*, would very likely arrive at a pronunciation with the long a sound, as in the words, *maid, paid,* and *laid*.

The child may initially pronounce the word as "sayd," reject this pronunciation because it doesn't sound like a familiar word, and conclude "Oh maybe that's *sed*." This tentative response is a form of guessing. If the word is presented in context, as in the sentence, *I want to go too," s&&d Sam,* the probability of an accurate guess is increased if the child is attending to meaning and is not merely attempting to pronounce words. Consequently, it is a mystery why some are so uncomfortable with having young readers initially encounter words in context. (See Harrison's 2023 interview of E. Hanford and Shanahan, 2019.) Using the context, which is marked by a focus on meaning, is likely to enhance word recognition accuracy rather than reduce it.

It is important to recognize that the word *said* looks phonetically regular and easy to recognize to a person who already reads, but it is not so clear to the novice reader. In other words, phonics, though important, gets the young reader only so far.

Some would make the case that the word *said* should be taught as a sight word. What that means, essentially, is that the teacher simply tells the child what the word is and presents it often enough that the child remembers it and does not have to sound it out when seeing it again. But wouldn't it be better for young learners to use their thinking ability to discover or figure the word out rather than passively waiting to be taught the word by rote? In addition, how many of these types of words can be taught as a sight word? What about words such as *eye* or *eyes*, *aisle*, *sign, where,* etc.? English has a great many words that are not phonetically regular. Should the teacher tell the child each one and make sure the child sees it often enough to remember it? That would introduce quite a lot of rote learning to the process of beginning reading as well as slow down the process of becoming a reader.

Learners hypothesize, predict, anticipate, speculate—that is, make educated guesses—all the time. It is the intellectual leap of an active mind, so to speak, and the essence of discovery learning. (See Bruner 1966, 1990.) Teachers cannot extinguish guessing even if they wish to do so. As Planck (2022) points out, the human brain is a predicting machine. The key to effective teaching is to use educated guessing as a positive force for optimizing learning.

With skilled teaching, guessing/hypothesizing, i.e., making a tentative response, is an important diagnostic tool. When students encounter the unknown, saying "Try it," "What is your best guess?" or "What do you think it may be?" provides the teacher with important information as to the next instructional move. The alternative is for the learner to wait passively to be informed of the correct response. Furthermore, if there is no informer nearby such as a teacher, parent, older sibling etc., one wonders how children will learn on their own.

In learning to read, the more information the learner employs, the greater the chance for success. In addition, once a child has a successful initial encounter with a previously unknown word, the greater the likelihood that the word will be more easily recognized on a second or third encounter.

Again, we must emphasize that the focus is on educated or informed guessing/hypothesizing. In rare instances when a learner habitually guesses wildly, a skilled teacher can modify this behavior quite readily.

In the early writing process, guessing or hypothesizing is evident as well. When young children begin to write, they invent spellings, if they are encouraged to do so. They make educated guesses about how a word is spelled. There is strong evidence that allowing young children to make educated guesses about the spelling of words results in young children writing more and thus facilitates the writing process as well as helps them become better spellers over the long term. (See for example, Cramer, 1978; Beers, 1995; and Gentry, 1987.)

It seems ironic that scientists, if they are good scientists, speculate, hypothesize, and make informed or educated guesses as a central feature of their work, and yet some seem to think that this behavior in young readers and writers should be discouraged.

A Parting Word. The late theorist Ken Goodman is often reviled today for his characterization of reading as, "a psycholinguistic guessing game" (1967). Perhaps it would have been better to have described the process as *hypothesizing* rather than *guessing*. The use of the word *game* seems problematic as well. And perhaps it would have been better to have said that reading to a *significant degree involves guessing* or hypothesizing. One may question Goodman's choice of words, but clearly his research demonstrates over and over, with many types of students, from a variety of cultures and at many different reading levels, that there is an element of hypothesizing or anticipation in the process of mature reading as well as in the process of learning to read.

It is reasonable to note that the reading of texts and even the recognition of many individual words involves a certain degree of speculation, hypothesizing, or guessing. It is a natural human behavior that occurs at birth and persists through one's lifetime. The quality of our guessing helps determine the quality of our learning. Wild guessing can be ineffective of course, but thoughtful hypothesizing yields rich results. When a teacher asks children to make their best guess, they are asking children to think. To deny or discourage educated guessing is to restrict learning.

We return to our original question of what to do about guessing. The answer is that we should understand the function of guessing, value it as a vital aspect of learning, and help children learn how to use it intelligently.

References

Bruner, J. (1966). T*oward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning. Cambridge*, MA: Harvard University Press.

Beers, J. (1995). "Spelling Development." In *Spelling Research and Information*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman.

Cramer. R. (1978). *Children's Writing and Language Growth*. Columbus, OH: Chas. E. Merrill Publishing.

Gentry, R. (1987). *Spel is a Four Letter Word*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.

Goodman, K. (1967). "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game." In *Journal of the Reading Specialist 6* (4): 126-135.

Goodman Y. & C. Burke. (1971). *Reading Miscue Inventory*. New York: Macmillan.

Harrison, R. (2023). *How Teaching Kids to Read Words Went So Wrong*. (Article based on an interview with Emily Hanford on May 12.) New Haven, CT: Yale Institution for Social Policy.
http://tinyurl.com/2k7kndbp

Kucera, J. (2022). "Word Guessing: The Enemy of Good Reading." *Imagination Soup*, Aug. 9.
http://imaginationsoup.net/word-guessing-enemy-good-reading

Mary, M. aka M. Printz. (2021). "Is Your Child Really Reading? How To Stop the Guessing Habit." *Accelerated Potential Academy*, Feb. 19.
http://tinyurl.com/2u4kv6u7

Nikolas, A. (2018). "What is Guessing and Is it a Problem?" David Morgan Education, Sept 4.
http://tinyurl.com/268j7hdu

Planck, M. (2022). "Our Brain is A Predicting Machine That Is Always Active." *Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics*, Oct 6.
http://tinyurl.com/3a8ytd2w

Seidenberg, M. (2017). *Language At The Speed Of Sight*. New York: Basic Books.

Shanahan, T. (2019). "Is it a good idea to teach the three cueing systems in reading?" *Shanahan on Literacy,* March 23.
http://tinyurl.com/2634524h