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Decoding Skills: How These Skills are the Answer to the Reading Problem That Affects Most Students

Laura Guenin

Abstract: Decoding skills are the answer to major reading issues for students. This report examines different ways that decoding words can effectively increase a student's reading comprehension level, and analyzes particular decoding strategies for teachers to implement with their students. This will help each student to enhance their own ability to comprehend what he or she is reading. It also compares two different teaching approaches. One uses decoding strategies and the other is a whole language approach that only deals with words in context. This document also shares the research on decoding that explains how students can decode unfamiliar words. It shows that teachers who implement decoding skills with their students will have the best strategies for teaching struggling readers.

Introduction

The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) (2008) states that "there is consistent data showing failure to develop basic decoding skills by first grade is predictive of lifelong poor literacy" (as cited in Reutzel, Brandt, Fawson & Jones, 2014, pp. 49-50). I have found that reading is the most important subject in school at present, especially in the primary grades (kindergarten through second grade). Reading is a very complex subject that comprises the areas of phonological awareness, phonics (now called decoding), vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Decoding skills are particularly essential. As Calfee & Dunn (1986) stated, "when a child begins school, his or her ability to analyze the sounds in words correlates with later reading achievement" (cited in Eldredge, Quinn and Butterfield, 2001, p. 202). As a teacher, I have found throughout my many years of teaching first grade that if a child is not a strong reader then he or she will have problems with learning throughout school. It influences learning in all other subjects for that student.

The ability to decode words is the most critical skill needed for students to be successful with reading comprehension. As Gale (2004) stated, "the process of decoding is used automatically and with such speed in fluent readers that we often take it for granted; however, for struggling readers, an inability to decode can have a severe impact on their reading experiences" (p. 25). The purpose of this article is to show how important it is that preservice, primary, and secondary teachers as well as administrators understand the impact that teaching decoding skills has on students. These skills will benefit the students and help them become more self-sufficient readers.

The Benefits of Decoding Over Whole Language

Decoding is the ability to gain word knowledge when it comes to letter and sound relationships. It includes learning the patterns of different letter groupings along with being able to pronounce new words. Students benefit from decoding being taught in a detailed and a systematic way. This is done by first teaching them the different sounds of a word, and then how to blend all the sounds together to correctly read the word.

In the past, there were two different ways for educators to teach their students reading in the primary grades. Decoding used to be called phonics. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985) wrote that "phonics ought to be conceived as a technique for getting children off to a fast start in mapping the relationships between letters and sounds" (cited in Chard & Osborn, 2000, p. 108). The other approach was called whole language. In this approach students learn the new words by reading books they are interested in. Weaver (1994) states that "whole language advocates regard reading as a top-down process whereby the most important thing a child can bring to the reading experience is his or her prior knowledge of language and the world" (cited in Kouri, Selle & Riley, 2006, p. 237). However, most students come to school with little or no prior knowledge of the written language so learning decoding strategies benefits them. Teachers can help them with this approach. Decoding gives students the ability to sound out the word, say it, and then to reread the sentence for comprehension purposes. Whole language, on the other hand, requires students to guess at words based on how those words relate to the story. Today, researchers have concluded that teaching decoding strategies in reading is the best way to educate our youth.

Decoding words is a slower way to look at each new word, which is presented to the students as a series of letters and the sounds that are associated with them. Snow, Scarborough and Burns (1999) argued that "letter-sound decoding is a far more efficient and accurate process than guessing a word's identity on the basis of context." They went on to say that "many professionals believe that if a child's reading is hampered by the inability to decode words through letter-sound information, reading fluency and comprehension will ultimately be compromised" (cited in Kouri, Selle & Riley, 2006, p. 238). In schools today, many students have difficulty with reading at different grade levels. The students have trouble decoding words as well as understanding word families and chunking words. As Kuhn, Schwanenflugel and

Meisinger (2010) stated, “the process of decoding print must become an automatic, subconscious, effortless habit so that the mind is free for text comprehension” (cited in Wolf, 2016, p. 11). Decoding words is the most crucial skill needed so that students will be successful. It helps the students to reach the next step, reading comprehension. Therefore, teachers who continue to teach decoding strategies to their students make those students more competent readers when they move on to the next grade.

Decoding: The Research Behind It

Decoding is one of the developmental reading stages for learning how to understand the words that compose a sentence. It then leads to students comprehending what they are reading in a story. Decoding is a successful approach when the primary teacher works with his or her students to improve their pronunciation and knowledge of words. A key figure in the education field, Lev Vygotsky, was interested in the cognitive development of the child and argued for such a cooperative relationship. He thought that a cooperative relationship between the teacher and his or her students was essential to the growth of each student. Teaching decoding strategies to students fosters such relationships. As McLeod (2014) wrote, Vygotsky wanted “children to seek to understand the actions or instructions provided by the teacher then internalizes the information, using it to guide or regulate their own performance” (p. 10). One of Vygotsky’s (1978) principles was that of “The Zone of Proximal Development” which states “that the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance” (p. 86). Teachers can take each of their students from their own “zone of proximal development” dealing with decoding strategies, helping them internalize the teacher’s guidance. A student learning these different decoding strategies or skills with the help of their teacher or parent can improve their knowledge of words and how to decode them.

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010) stated “that the goal of beginning reading instruction is to help students move as quickly as possible toward comprehension of a broad range of complex and content-rich texts.” It goes on to claim that “phonics instruction is a gateway toward achieving that end because it helps students acquire the necessary prerequisite skills to decode unfamiliar words in complex texts” (cited in Reutzel, Brandt, Fawson & Jones, 2014, pp. 49-50). Coyne et al (2013) conducted an experimental research study on supplemental beginning reading intervention which supports this argument, and phonics instruction. It showed that

the students who received the early reading intervention experimental condition in kindergarten continued to outperform comparison students at the end of first grade with significant findings on all measures of word reading, spelling, reading fluency and reading comprehension. (p. 40)

Coyne et al. found that the phonics group did better learning the different decoding strategies than the comparison group. These results were shown at the end of kindergarten. Students were checked again the following year and the results were the same; the experimental group continued to do better than the comparison group.

Many earlier studies also support teaching phonics and decoding skills. For example, the National Reading Panel’s meta-analysis concluded “that systematic phonics instruction helps all children learn to read with greater success than nonsystemic or no phonics instruction” (NICHD, 2000, p. 9). Research has shown that the different decoding strategies ultimately helps students move from decoding words to comprehension. It also increases the fluency rate for reading text from a slow pace to a faster one, making reading more automatic and less stressful for struggling readers.

Implementing Decoding Skills into the Classroom

Teaching students phonics begins with decoding words, then moves on to word families. These are words that can be learned together like "it," "fit" and "sit" because those words have the same ending letters. It finally ends with students working on multisyllabic words, separating them into their syllables like "sup/per." The student decodes each part to figure out the unfamiliar word. The teacher's job is to get their students to understand and strategically decode the new words that are presented to them throughout the student’s academic years in school.

There are many different strategies for teaching this. One is to have all the letters that relate to the spelling words for the week on a sheet of paper. The students will cut out each letter and then put them in alphabetical order. This gives the students a way to organize all the letters needed for the activity. The teacher then says a word like cat, then repeats it, but this time sounding each letter individually: /c/ /a/ /t/. The students will find those letters which are on their desk, and the whole class touches each letter card, saying the sound then saying the word.

The teacher can move on to decoding harder words by grouping the words into word families or practicing rhyming words. Another way is to use the word ladders that take away one letter from a word to form a new word. Intermediate grades and special education classes in high school can do word ladders with their students. These classes

can also work on word families or rhyming words within a poetry lesson. All teachers can work with students on multisyllabic activities that involve separating new unknown words into their syllables.

One easy way to teach decoding skills is for teachers to use word families when presenting a new concept like the short /a/ sound. The teacher has the students sound out a word like /at/. The teacher will then proceed to have the students add a consonant at the beginning of it. An example would be to put the consonant letter-/r/ at the beginning of the word /at/ to make rat. The teacher may also decide to teach the students to sound out the word by chunking it. This is done by say the consonant sound then the word family ending. An example of this would be the consonant letter /m/ sound then say the word family of /ail/ and that makes the word mail.

It is important for students to understand the connection between a letter and its sound as well as how to put the letters together to make a word. Teachers will then want their students to link words together to make complete sentences.

Conclusion

There is a plan of action that involves all teachers from preservice, elementary, secondary and also special education teachers dealing with teaching decoding strategies to their students. It is the teacher's job to educate all their students including the struggling ones who are having problems processing information. All teachers can do this by teaching a curriculum rich in decoding strategies. Pinnell & Fountas (1998) state that

students should know about the features of print, a large core of high-frequency words, understand simple and complex letter-sound relationships, notice and use patterns in words, use a repertoire of word solving strategies and for students to use references, resources and to proofread. (cited in Hudson, 2005, p. 8).

Teachers should have a cooperative relationship with their students as they work at the different decoding strategies to improve reading comprehension. Administrators need to understand the importance of educators teaching their students to decode words. They should be willing to assist by providing support and to supply any necessary materials. The teacher's plan of action is simple: just to get busy and teach decoding strategies to their students!

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Decoding Skills

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