



Tātai Angitu

● EDUCATION ● EFFICACY ● ENTERPRISE

READING WORDS SOUND BY SOUND

Why do children get stuck in sounding out and is there anything teachers can do to assist?

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Understanding why children are sound by sound reading is the first important step.

Frith (1985) outlines three stages of becoming a competent reader: logographic stage where we recognize symbols and words as wholes; phoneme-grapheme stage where learners connect letters and sounds to decode words; and finally orthographic stage where strings of letters are processed and a direct route of reading words automatically is gradually established.

The dual route theory of reading (Coltheart et al., 2001) and neuro-imaging studies (Dehaene, 2009) agree with the stages theory, suggesting that reading skill is activated by phonological decoding of all letter strings, but as reading skill develops the direct route of reading a word becomes the main process.

The stages theory and the dual route model help us understand that to become a competent reader, learners must do the hard graft of sticking letters to sounds, sounds to letters, and all this together to get to words. They must learn to decode.

The research provides clues to what is needed in learning to read. Learners need alphabet knowledge, blending skill, links to meaning, and many opportunities to practice. It takes time to become automatic in reading words because learning to read words is not a “see and say” situation. Sounding out words is a vital step that is eventually superseded. Reading a text may not give enough repetition and practice opportunities. Alongside reading meaningful controlled texts, extra activities are important.

The research provides direction for teaching considerations.

Automatic alphabet knowledge

Lots of classroom time on matching the letters to their names and sounds and words that start with that letter. Games, songs, poems, charts will all be useful.

Sounding and blending

This is a necessary step. Continuous blending is where students blend sounds together smoothly and without pauses, holding each sound until the next is produced. Note that with stop/bounce consonant sounds like /b/, we need to teach catching the next sound very quickly so it can have a continuous sound. Show that the sounds in the word 'bat' need to go from /b/ to /a/ quickly to make a continuous baaaaa to catch the /t/ and form the word.

A note about continuous blending is that it is still part of the sounding out stage, not a miracle to end sound by sound decoding. It does usually lead to easier decoding than non-continuous blending.

Silent sounding

Explain to children that they can think of the sounds, blend silently, and then say the word out loud. The reading will still be slow, but it may help children who think that the teacher wants to hear them say every sound. Sometimes we get unintended consequences from our explicit teaching.

Opportunities for repetition

Texts controlled for decodability often provide only one or two opportunities for reading each word in a text. This feature of the texts gives many opportunities to decode different words but not many opportunities to practice the same words. Some of the words in controlled texts are also relatively rare rather than common words that are more useful and seen more often.

Find ways that students can see and work with target words more often. Select words that are most common and useful to learners over the long term

- Write the word and think of a quick drawing that shows the meaning
- Have a picture that represents the word e.g., a hat and the children write the word multiple times saying it as they write it around the picture
- In lessons with the teacher or teacher assistant, make the words with letter tiles and change one letter to make a different word. mat -> hat -> hot -> hop -> hot -> hat -> mat
- Card games or Bingo available free to NZ schools [Ready to Read Phonics Plus Supporting Games](#)

Connect the words to their meaning

The meaning part of the reading circuit will help lock in the grapheme-phoneme correspondences of the word. It is sometimes a missing piece of our teaching when we show decoding. We can quickly add a few words e.g., mud like wet dirt; pen that you write with.

Resources that help with connecting meaning to decoding include cards with a word on one side and picture on the other.



If children have learned some key high frequency words (HFW), these become 'rest words' where less cognitive effort is required and a sentence can be read with more fluency. Time on HFW learning pays dividends. Attend to HFW in the same way you would with regular words, as outlined in the resource [The High Frequency Word Project](#).

- Sounding out words may be painful to listen to but is an important part of learning to read and necessary for the development of automatic reading.
- Sounding out appears to be slow and laborious, but it is work that pays off later.
- Texts without much repetition of words will mean that more sounding out is necessary.
- Provide opportunities for practice with selected words in isolation and in sentences.
- Include opportunities to increase knowledge of high frequency words, both in number and automaticity.

Coltheart, M., Rastle, K., Perry, C., Langdon, R. & Ziegler, J. (2001) DRC: a dual route cascaded model of visual word recognition and reading aloud, *Psychological Review*, 108, 204–256.

Frith, U. (1985) Beneath the surface of developmental dyslexia, in: K. E. Patterson, J. C. Marshall & M. Coltheart (Eds) *Surface dyslexia: cognitive and neuropsychological studies of phonological reading* (Hove, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).