

Figuring Out “Big” Words—What’s to Know

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Learning how to read—just how does it happen? Memorize those letters and match them with sounds. Figure out word parts. Learn to use context clues. And, above all, practice, practice, practice. Easy, eh? Or is it? Does today’s mastery of the alphabetic code guarantee a reader tomorrow? Those in the teaching trenches know differently. Once students figure out how phonemes map to graphemes, how to blend those units into meaningful wholes, and how to construct meaning, the reading journey has still only partially begun. So what is it that makes reading challenging for students—even after these early basics are in place?

As the Common Core State Standards Initiative reminds all educators:

...foundational skills are not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are necessary and important components of an effective, comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines (CCSSI, 2012).

Around third grade, the nature of reading changes. Up until that time, the focus has been on decoding words, but words are the lynchpins of understanding. Concepts are made up of words—lots of them—and once the axle begins turning and the wheels begin to move, individual words blur into a spinning stream of facts, ideas, and descriptions....that is, unless the lynchpins stick, the axle catches, and the wheels stop spinning.

One roadblock to deciphering print occurs when young readers encounter words they do not know. Classroom teachers know that vocabulary knowledge is inextricably linked to reading comprehension. Besides the vigorous and forceful assertions of practitioners, mere common

sense points to the fact that if one doesn't understand the words, progress grinds to a halt. Knowing about words pays dividends—big ones. If teachers point students in the right direction and give bursts of vocabulary instruction when reader readiness is ripe, learners may surprise all with the distances they can cover. Moreover, vocabulary instruction comprises more than just the word meanings. Learning about vocabulary also includes studying about the words themselves.

In a silly exercise designed to prove this very point, the authors of *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists* provide an illustration (Fry, Kress, & Fountoukidis, 2000, p. 311.) Try it. Read it. While the words are easy to pronounce (signaling competence with decoding), the precise meaning is another story.

For a long time, Haro, the nimp fizbin, was the only fizbin in the zot. Every midsee, he would cond and ren, cond and ren, cond and ren. Then one midsee, Haro was zommed! There, in the middle of the parmon, was the nimpest fizbin and she was conding and renning just like Haro...He dagged up to the nimpest fizbin and chared. Soon Haro and the nimpest fizbin, Bindy, were ponted.

Obviously, an exact translation of these sentences is out of the question. A developing reader—perhaps a second grader—could probably determine, however, that this series of sentences is about *a fizbin*. The *fizbin* is engaged in two behaviors: *conding* and *renning*. Then the *fizbin* meets a second *fizbin*, and based on the inferences from the context, this *fizbin* is no ordinary *fizbin*. She (it's not a he) is doing exactly what our main character, the *fizbin*, is doing—that is, *conding* and *renning*. A trained eye (i.e., a reading teacher who is accustomed to evaluating text) would, of course, have arrived analyzed these nonsense words given the context of the paragraph, but she would have observed much more.

- The story is in past and past progressive tense (due to the –ed and –ing endings and the helping verbs “would” and “was”).
- The verbs are likely familiar action words

- The words are all one- and two-syllables.
- The repetition of the primary subject (*fizbin*) and predicates (*conding* and *renning*) contribute to the text's overall readability.

Adept readers use more than one text-based cueing system to approximate words. Instead of being stopped short by unfamiliar vocabulary, strong readers use multiple strategies to get them out of a temporary word bind. They make predictions and are risk-takers. On the other hand, their struggling counterparts tend to rely on one approach—generally phonics. When sounding out a word doesn't work, they are out of luck with no back-up plan and may be forced to decide, “Why not just skip over the word? After all, does it really matter anyway?”

Cueing Systems

Words are best understood via a powerful, three-pronged cueing system: graphophonics (how letters represent speech sounds), morphemic analysis (structural elements within a longer word), and context (syntax and semantics.) Successful readers skillfully combine all three to arrive at word approximations.

The first, graphophonics, is introduced in pre-school and kindergarten with a focus of developing phonological awareness, or the ability to hear and play with the sounds in language. In pre-school settings this translates to listening to Mother Goose, chanting rhymes, and making guesses about what might come next with rhymed verse: *There was an old lady who swallowed a fly, I don't know _____ [why] she swallowed a fly...*

Such jingles continue into kindergarten and first grade, with rhyme and repetition presented in children's books, songs, and other word play. These fundamental skills are the building blocks which pave the way for more advanced language knowledge—matching sounds with symbols—phonics instruction.

However, while researchers and practitioners both exhort the value of learning the alphabetic code (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Heilman, 2005), phonics alone is insufficient. Savage (2010) observes that knowing about sound-letter correspondences is but one in a constellation of necessary skills in accomplishing—what is for some--the formidable task of learning how to read.

A skilled reader intuitively and gracefully adds to his decoding knowledge, an understanding of meaningful word parts, or morphemes, as well as an expanding vocabulary. The futility of phonics alone is apparent in the sentence *The nomadic gorilla tribe wreaked havoc on the scientists, who had to relocate their base camp*. What is a *nomadic tribe*? What does *wreak havoc* mean? However, knowing that *nomadic* derives from *nomad* is helpful; additionally, paying attention to the parts of *relocate* (*re—again + locate...from locus—a place*) also contributes to comprehension. Finally, understanding that *havoc* is just a dressed-up word for *confusion* or a *mess* is also key. The take-away lesson is that vocabulary and word analysis matter.

Another illustration demonstrates that context and word structure serve as primary cueing systems. *With her disarming smile, Mrs. Talbot put the nervous candidate right at ease*. Obviously, *a disarming smile* must be good if it helps to rid one of nerves and results in *ease*. While these text approaches are initially learned and practiced in the early grades, fine tuning these nascent abilities with longer, more complicated words is a requisite follow-up skill.

Syllables Rule

A principle of word study involves the knowledge that long words can be broken into chunks, or syllables. Syllabication ‘smarts,’ one subset of morphemic analysis, requires the reader to efficiently break apart what might, at first glance, seem to be drawn-out strings of

letters. In English, words aren't randomly severed. Applying guidelines to determine each syllable break equips readers to quickly and accurately tackle multi-syllabic terms. When unsure readers understand that long words can be broken into bits and then reassembled into meaningful wholes, they are catapulted to a new level of skill development. Generally, once they can determine smaller word parts, they can then decipher the entire unit. As a result of smaller successes, students are then prepared to apply these valuable word attack skills to different reading contexts.

Contrary to what some might believe, word syllabication is not an extra or frill; it is an integral part of vocabulary study. The CCSS states that kindergarten students will "...demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes)" and, again, that they will "count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words" (CCSSI, 2012). First graders, according to these standards, must do much more; "use knowledge that every syllable must have a vowel sound to determine the number of syllables in a printed word" and "decode two-syllable words following basic patterns by breaking the words into syllables" (CCSSI, 2012). And, obviously, the standards do not stop after grade one!

Fortunately, a few rules provide access into this sub-stratum of the English language. Initial syllables are often easy-to-recognize prefix units: *un, re, mis, pre, bi, mono*, etc. Likewise, final syllables are often familiar parts—word endings like *-ing, -tion, -ment, -able*. These separate morphemes need not be the focus of in-depth word analysis lessons, however. While systematic instruction is a must for some learners, with others, simply telling how *-ist* or *-ally* are used and pronounced suffices for a word to be read and understood. Children know, for example, that an *artist* (one who practices art) creates paintings, but a quick demonstration of the

two morphemes, *art* and *ist*, may be helpful later on when a more complicated term, such as *nonconformist*, emerges in text.

As a result of these and other word analysis tactics, when a child is confronted with a long word, she can mentally eliminate the recognized syllables and focus on what is left. Reading teachers know that if a word can be pronounced accurately and if it is in the child's listening vocabulary, more often than not the word is considered "easy." Instead of an alien jumble of letters, its apparent difficulty dissolves when, after a momentary pause, the reader connects what is known (the meaning) with the unfamiliar spelling, or visual representation. Such a process explains how word learning occurs. Avid readers expand their vocabulary with text encounters, for each reading experience introduces them to new written representations of concepts they already know.

An example might be helpful. If the sentence reads, *THE CHILD WAS UNREPENTANT*, the strategic reader will recognize *un* and *ant* as familiar initial and final chunks, or syllables. Then his next step is to tackle what remains, but the task has been simplified. *Unrepentant* is associated with the already familiar idea of "not being sorry."

This same practice can be applied to a more complicated illustration. If the sentence is scripted *THE VILLIAN'S DISREGARD OF THE LAW WAS APPARENT*, the student has more work to do. Depending on the extent of his vocabulary, he may already know *villain*. In approaching *disregard*, if he doesn't see *regard* as the base word, he then needs another way to proceed. Perhaps the word is separated with *DI* as the initial chunk as in *di-gest*, *di-vert* or perhaps it is *DIS* as in *dis-obey*, *dis-arm*. He calculates which syllable break makes sense. Of course, teachers also know that in this situation, the student is making use of particular phonics knowledge—open versus closed syllable patterns. While this type of differentiation seems

alarming complex, first graders, nonetheless, learn quickly and quite skillfully to group letters and decode accordingly. For example, *be-fore* and *be-cause* are sight words for most early readers. They have learned that *be* is the initial syllable and that *E* will say its name, representing an open syllable. Alternatively, first graders also readily recognize *beg-gar*, *better* and even *beck-on*, where the first syllable occurs after the consonant-vowel-consonant (c-v-c) pattern, thereby resulting in a short-vowel sound, or closed syllable. It should be noted here, however, that second language learners or those with learning disabilities may need more exposure:

Instruction should be differentiated: good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know—to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention (CCSSI, 2012).

While it is not expected and it might even be outlandish to demand that a seven-year-old explain the concept of open and closed syllables, teachers do expect students to *use* such knowledge as they encounter more conceptually and morphemically complicated vocabulary. Readers do not only read simple one- and two-syllable words.

Yet another rationale for syllabication study is its role in assisting the reader when a too-long word doesn't fit at the end of a line with an unjustified margin. Arguably, in such a situation, knowledge about syllables can be helpful; with ease, competent learners are able to break apart and draw together disparate word sections, whether reading or writing.

Fast forward a few years of learning about and “playing” with words, and students will be reading and understanding tough vocabulary. Amazing? Perhaps, but focused instruction delivered from an expert can accomplish many a miracle. Daily, teachers witness the

blossoming language user who grows, having been nourished with direction, guidance, and encouragement.

The Big Five

In a reading program, syllable rules are taught alongside phonics generalizations (Savage, 2010, p. 97.) Five patterns serve developing readers' immediate needs.

Rule 1: With a compound word, split between the separate little words.

snow-man some-body wish-bone cup-board side-walk

Rule 2: If a word has a prefix or suffix (or ending), usually those parts form their own syllable.

worrisome rework moistness truthfully

Rule 3: If a word ends in -LE, it takes the previous consonant (its neighbor) to form the final syllable

ap-ple ri-fle pur-ple sta-ble

Rule 4: When two consonants sit between two vowels, split between the two consonants.

bun-ny bal-loon, rab-bit sis-ter dan-ger

Exception: If consonants are a special unit (digraph or blend), do not separate these letter partners.

fath-er beck-on ush-er

Now for the tricky rule: If the previous rules don't apply, probably this one will. Some reading teachers label it as the *divide-and-conquer rule*.

Rule 5: If a single consonant sits between two vowels, the consonant may join the first vowel OR the consonant may decide to join the second vowel. Try both and see what sounds right.

Stated another way, find the single consonant; now divide after the first vowel or see what happens if the consonant joins his first vowel friend. In effect, what students end up doing is to switch letters to form open or closed syllables. Teachers coach students to "try it both ways and see which way sounds the best." So *music* is *mu-sic*, *student* is *stu-dent*, *decide* is *de-cide*, and *tiger* is *ti-ger*, **BUT** *money* is *mon-ey*, *panel* is *pan-el* and *dragon* is *drag-on*.

Thus, word morphemes and their resulting syllables form recognizable patterns that students must master in order to manage the fluid stream of concepts generated by the thousands of words they will increasingly encounter as educated individuals. The goal, as always, is comprehension--and comprehension that flows at a rate compatible with the reading situations that learners will increasingly encounter.

As pupils move through the grades, they are obliged to learn from lengthier, more complex, and less predictable reading material. No longer are texts populated with sight words and decodable print—words that fit phonics patterns that can be sounded out. Yet armed with morphemic and syllabication knowledge, students can advance accordingly. Word ubiquity demands a repertoire of language tools. Big words. Hard words. Unfamiliar words. In order to keep the reading axle rotating smoothly, a reader must lubricate text with more than just phonics. An understanding of vocabulary and of how words are put together allows reading comprehension to go further, smoother, and faster—preventing readers from breaking down on a modern highway of high-speed word traffic.

References

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