

Helping Students Figure Out Unknown Words

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Often when a child is reading and encounters an unknown word, we are not always sure of how to aid our young reader. Techniques vary of course, but simply imploring the reader to, “sound it out” seldom works. The key is to aid the child in recognizing the target word, but, more importantly, to establish habits that the child can use independently.

When the teacher is present, a good first strategy is to say to the child: *Try it. What do you think it might be?* Don't be put off by the radical notion that guessing is bad. Much of learning is about discovery and making educated guesses. Our brain guesses, estimates, predicts, speculates, and hypothesizes all of the time. As neuroscientists like to remind us, the brain is a predicting/hypothesizing machine.

In Carle's. (1969) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, after the caterpillar has a huge amount of food in five days and grows fat, there is this sentence: **That night he had a stomachache.** Many early readers identify the eleven-letter word correctly and immediately by using phonics to decode the first syllable (*stom*), and phonics and their knowledge to decode the middle syllable (*ach*) and the second half of the compound word (*ache*)- (Notice that the second syllable, pronounced /uhk/, and the final syllable, pronounced /ake/, are phonetically irregular and thus less amenable to decoding by phonics alone.)

For those young readers who hesitate on the word when the teacher is present, we may hear a conversation something like this:

T: *Try it. What do you think it might be?*

S: *St... om...ash?*

T: *You have the first part. Let's think about this a bit .How would a caterpillar feel after eating all that food, watermelons and pickles and ice cream and...*

S: *He'd feel sick?*

T: *Where?*

S: *In his belly?*

T: *Let's look at that word carefully. What do you think? Could that word be belly?*

S: *No... stom.... Oh...stomach!*

T: *Stomach what?*

S: *Stomachache!*

T: *Good for you. Now let's read the whole sentence again and see if it looks right and sounds right.*

This exchange takes place in a very short time, but it is a valuable conversation, i.e., talking through a strategy to decode an unknown word. Whether the young reader recognizes the unknown word immediately or with strategic help, the child gains a sense of satisfaction and empowerment. Using context, i.e., meaning and language cues, is a powerful aid to recognizing words. Using these cues are merited for three reasons:

- Meaning and language cues work.
- Any time a child recognizes a word through any means, the greater likelihood the child will recognize this same word in a future situation.
- When we say to young readers, “*Think about what you are reading. What would make sense?*” we are reminding children that reading is all about thinking and making sense from print.

Despite the notion of some—that children don’t or shouldn’t use multiple cues when they read—the fact is that young children do use them, and should be encouraged to do so.

For example, in David McPhail’s (1990) *Lost*, a boy is trying to help a bear who is lost. They decide to go to the top of a tall building. The next sentence reads: **We get on the %\$%&@#! and ride all the way to the top.** The child does not recognize %\$%&@#!. After reading the entire sentence—remember context is usually on both sides of a word—we hear:

T: Think about what you just read. What would they use to get to the top?

S: Stairs ? ...Oh... elevator? Elevator!

T: Does that word look like elevator?

S: Yes. It does.

T: Good. Let’s-read the sentence again and see if it looks right and makes sense and then read on to see what happens.

In the exchange below, a fourth grade student is reading Byers (1968), *The Midnight Fox* when he encounters the following sentence: **The breeze quickened and abruptly the dishpan Aunt Millie had left on the porch rail clattered to the floor.** The student reads, “The breeze quickly and .. ab...?... ab...ly?”

S: I don’t know that word.

T: Which part is giving you trouble.

S: The middle part

T: Look at the first part again and think how you might say it differently.

S: ab... a(ay) bly

T: (writes the words “away” and “about”) Read these two words.

S: Away, about. Oh... a/uh)/... bup ly... abruptly.

T: Let’s read the sentence again.

S: The breeze quickly, and....

T: That doesn’t sound quite right to me. What do you think? Try that again.

S: The breeze quickly... The breeze quickened....

T: You are getting there. Try covering the ed ending.

S: quick, quick...en, quicken. Oh! quickened.

T: Nice thinking. Now read the entire sentence and see how it sounds and then read on to find out what happens in our story.

In each instance with *abruptly* and *quicken*, the teacher strategically structures the instruction to aid the reader in identifying the word. On the original reading, the teacher did not interrupt the student on the “*quicken*-*quickly*” miscue, primarily because comprehension had not broken down. Actually, neither of the two words are essential for fully understanding this classic story, but because the teacher happened to be readily available, he took the opportunity to help develop strategies for recognizing unknown words when the student is reading independently.

The three examples above, from three different readers, illustrate how meaning and language play an important role along with phonics in identifying previously unknown words. It is good to remember also that when phonics is a dominant strategy on a particular word, it is better for young readers to focus on clusters of letters rather than attempting to decode on a letter by letter basis.

It’s not possible to present a specific script to follow for any situation. What’s important is to illustrate a perspective on how to enhance children’s abilities to figure out unknown words. Often it is a combination of meaning, language, and phonics that facilitates word analysis when reading. The language the teacher uses varies from situation to situation and is age appropriate. As a reminder, it is better for the teacher to use specific language rather than merely ask the student to “use the context,” which is an abstract term to young students. As with much good instruction, it comes down to the words and phrases we use as teachers and the tone with which we use them.

In conclusion, it not enough to teach phonics. We must also teach children how to use their phonics, their implicit knowledge of language, and their knowledge of their world, in order to identify unfamiliar words and process print.