

## Decoding and Reading Independence

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With the current heavy emphasis on phonics, children are being taught that when they come across an unfamiliar word, the priority is to focus on sounding out the letters. English has many orthographic irregularities, though, so that tactic doesn't always result in correct identification of the word. When children stumble, the phonics-oriented teacher will keep the focus on the letters, encouraging the child to try again, perhaps providing a hint or saying *What other sounds do those letters make?* Children who are taught this way are at risk of becoming dependent on teacher feedback because they are relying only on what they know about phonics. In fact, when children concentrate on the sounds the letters make, doing their best to pronounce the word correctly, they may not even know when they produce an anomalous response. As Steven Strauss (2014) noted:

... poor reading is characterized by an attempt to be phonically accurate. Here is an example of a poor reader's oral rendition of a piece of text. Instead of reading *The bees had been making honey all day long. At night it was cool and calm*, this reader reads *The best had been making hone all day long. At night it was cold and climb*. Sense is sacrificed on the altar of phonic accuracy.

Those who work with children regularly will recognize this kind of phonics-reliant oral reading. If the readers think of meaning at all, they look to the teacher to correct their inaccuracies and to help them make sense of what they have just read. Some children, though, will be concentrating so heavily on sounding out the letters that meaning doesn't enter into their minds at all. English-speaking adults who are learning a new language will understand. Spanish, for example, has high orthographic regularity. Once you've learned the sounds that the letters represent, you can read Spanish accurately yet have little to no idea of the meaning of what you're reading. As Hammond (2024) notes: "Phonics, though important, gets us only so far!" In fact, attention to meaning and language is integral to the reading process and is often essential to the accurate use of phonics.

As children move through the grades, relying heavily on phonics may actually increase their dependence on a teacher confirming their responses to unfamiliar words. One reason is that in more advanced texts unfamiliar words may have sound-letter combinations that are difficult to pronounce. Also, children will not have heard some of the unfamiliar words before and so won't be able to match the sounds they produce to a known word. And more words are likely to have context-dependent pronunciations (*wind* a clock, listen to the *wind*) that require going beyond letter-sound units to identify the word correctly. For these reasons, when children continue to rely primarily on phonics, they limit their skill development and need ongoing teacher help.

In contrast, a teacher focused on meaning will guide children to consider multiple sources of information when figuring out unfamiliar words: the sense the child is making of the text and the relationship of the word to the other words in the sentence as well as the sounds made by the letters. Guiding children to attend to all three fosters independence because they have multiple sources of information to use instead of just one.

The child who is focused on meaning will almost certainly realize that **the best had been making hone all day long** does not make sense. A skilled reader will look again and think: *Something is making something all day long. What could it be? What is it making?*

Considering what would make sense in the text, what function the word plays in the sentence, and what the letters represent, the skilled reader thinks: *I think that word is bees. And if it is, then bees would be making honey.* Or, the skilled reader looks at **honey** and thinks: *I think that word is honey, and if it is, then bees would be making it.* The reader's specific train of thought doesn't matter. The point is that the reader is oriented to meaning and considers three sources of information, homing in on the word by triangulating the three. If the text also contains an illustration of bees, that would be a fourth source of information that would be useful. A child's orientation to meaning and ability to use multiple sources of information, taken together, result in improved reading performance and greater independence.

Those who think phonics should be the priority maintain that only phonics will produce accurate decoding of words and thus effective reading. But this is simply not true—or, rather, it is true only when children are reading “decodable books”—texts that are carefully crafted to contain phonetically-regular words. In contrast, the irregularity of English in noncontrived texts guarantees a certain number of anomalous responses even from children who are adept at phonics. English orthography regularly trips up even good readers. Knowledge of language, attention to context, *and* thinking about the sounds of the letters together make for more accurate word identification and better overall effectiveness in reading.

That's why knowledgeable teachers have for years helped children develop the habit of asking themselves these questions when they come to a word they don't know:

*What word makes sense here, given what I'm reading about?*

*What word makes sense and sounds right at this place in the sentence?*

*What word sounds right here, given the letters I'm looking at?*

When children are encouraged to ask these questions when figuring out a word, they increase their independence as readers and increase their reading effectiveness. A reliance on phonics alone, or phonics primarily, is incompatible with both.

To help children become more self-reliant, it's a good idea to remind them periodically to ask the three questions of themselves when they're reading on their own. Children also benefit from sharing how they've figured words out on their own. Having them think about and share their thinking—metacognition—bolsters independence and improves performance. It's also a good idea to tell children not to get too stuck on a word when they're reading on their own. If they can't figure something out, despite their best efforts, they should just continue reading. The word may not be critical to their overall understanding, and if it is critical, they will almost certainly see it again and have other chances to figure it out.

One measure of effective teaching is what the learners can do when the teacher isn't there to help. Helping youngsters use multiple sources of information when they're figuring out unfamiliar words is one good way to foster independence.

## References

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