



NetNews

an online newsletter devoted to adult literacy

January, 2004

LDA of Minnesota

Vol.4, No.3

Decoding Skills

This is the second of two issues focused on teaching beginning reading skills to adults -**both native and non-native English speakers.**

Decoding skills include understanding the "code" or system of written symbols or letters that correspond with spoken sounds.

According to the latest research in reading, one of the best strategies for improving reading skills is systematic, explicit instruction in decoding skills or phonics. Although many critics have argued that the English language is too irregular for phonics instruction to be of significant help to new readers, this argument has been refuted in an extensive review of research conducted by the National Reading Panel¹. It is also contrary to what ESL researchers are finding². When learners have good decoding skills, they read more fluently and comprehend more of what they read. Phonics instruction works because it teaches readers the predictable patterns of sounds and symbols produced in the English language. Learning the "code" reduces a reader's reliance on whole word recognition or sight reading, a strategy that can cause a delay in reading proficiency.

Adults learning to read may have a wide range of skills and familiarity with written language. It is important for instructors to recognize that native English speaking adults may have learning disabilities, gaps in their education, or been given ineffective or irregular reading instruction.

Non-native adults may have little to no experience with written language, little to no formal education, be semi-literate in their native language, or be literate in their native language but have no exposure to the Roman alphabet. Finally, there may be adults who are literate in another language that uses the Roman alphabet, but are not able to transfer literacy skills automatically. Regardless of their familiarity with written language, many adults have learned to compensate for their reading difficulties by memorizing words. Because the English language has multiple pronunciations for letters, blends, or vowels and different pronunciations for stressed and unstressed syllables, adult programs that teach language or literacy without explicit instruction in decoding skills are delaying proficiency in the development of reading skills. **Direct and systematic instruction in decoding strategies should be taught at all levels.**

This issue of *NetNews* provides a sample of a systematic phonics assessment tool, recommendations for direct phonics instruction, and lists of curriculum and software appropriate for adults. The complete beginning phonics assessment tool (Part I and II) is available upon request from mf@ldaminnesota.org

¹Report of the National Reading Panel - Teaching Children to Read. 2000. Download at <http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/Publications/summary.htm>

²Reading and Adult English Language Learners - A Review of the Research. 2003. This resource can be ordered from the Center for Applied Linguistics at <http://www.cal.org>



NetNews is supported by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education, Adult Basic Education.

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Phonics Assessment

Adults wanting to improve their reading often have gaps in their decoding skills. Assessment should be one of the first tasks an adult literacy instructor or tutor performs. The following pages offer a sample instructor/tutor chart presenting the alphabet and phonemes or sounds *in order* for a **beginning phonics assessment**. LDA recommends using flashcards for assessment because adults often have many negative experiences with reading and testing. Presenting items one at a time may be less stressful and not as overwhelming. LDA chose to use nonsense words for assessment because many adults have memorized words or know familiar words by sight. Decoding unfamiliar words is considered a truer measure of word attack skills.

Directions:

- Flashcards should be made for each of the upper and lower case alphabet letters.
- Flashcards should be made for each of the single consonants in order (number the front or back).
- Flashcards should be made for each of the frequent sound nonsense words following the sequence on the chart (number the front or back). Infrequent sounds in real words can be taught as needed.
- Present the flashcards one at a time to the adult and keep track of sounds known or unknown on the chart.
- If the alphabet is not known, instruct to 100% mastery. If single consonants and short vowels are not known, instruct to 90% mastery. Gradually add other consonant endings, digraphs, blends, and silent letters in combination with short vowel sounds.
- Use real words for phonics instruction. There are many lists of real words or word families available at www.literacyconnections.com or in most reading curriculum such as *Step by Step* by LDA.

Common Mistakes Beginning Readers Make

1. LDA assessment specialists and reading researchers find that readers most often make mistakes in decoding the middle of words; next they make mistakes in decoding the endings of words.
2. It is very typical for beginning readers to skip pronouncing the second sound of a letter blend (e.g., “sl” is read as “s”).
3. For many beginning readers, the short *e* sound and the short *u* sound are the most difficult vowel sounds to master.
4. ESL learners may make *many* errors in learning vowel sounds and vowel combinations. Some languages like Hebrew and Arabic require the reader to determine the vowel sounds based on context. Spanish language speakers may have memorized different sounds for the same letters. LDA instructors have found that the *e* and *i* vowels tend to be the most difficult for Latino students.

Beginning Phonics Assessment I

(Assessing the alphabet, single consonants, short vowels, frequent consonant digraphs, endings, blends, and silent combinations.)

Name _____ Date _____

Alphabet	Sound Rules	Flashcard Symbols
Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz	Teach the name of upper and lower case letters, not the sound.	One flashcard for both upper and lower case letters.

If learner doesn't know the alphabet, instruct naming and writing the uppercase and lowercase letters to 100% mastery.

Single Consonant Sounds	Special Sound Rules	Flashcard Symbols
b c d f g h j k l m n p q r s t v w x y z	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. C and g may sound "soft" as /s/ or /j/ or "hard" as /k/ or /g/.2. J almost always occurs at the beginning.3. Qu sounds /kw/ and is always followed by a vowel.4. R sounds short and clipped as /ruh/, not /er/.5. S sounds /s/ most frequently; less frequently /z/ at the end of words (has, was, is, please).6. X sounds /ks/ most frequently at the end; /z/ at the beginning of a word infrequently.7. Y sounds /yuh/ at beginning of a word or syllable.	One flashcard for each single consonant and focus on frequent sounds.

Short Vowel Sounds	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
a o i u e	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Separate short i and e so they aren't confused.2. Short a sounds like "at".3. Short o sounds like "on".4. Short i sounds like "in".5. Short u sounds like "up".6. Short e sounds like "egg".	sib dat mon hup ped

Consonant Endings	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
ff ll ss zz -ck -tch -dge	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Ff, ll, ss, zz sound /f/ /l/ /s/ /z/2. Ck sounds /k/3. Tch sounds /ch/4. Dge sounds /j/	giff nell tuss fazz zick petch rodge

Two Letter Digraphs	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
ch sh	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the correct consonant sound, not the short vowel sound. 2. Ch sounds /ch/ most frequently for beginnings and endings; /k/ and /sh/ infrequently. 3. There are two sounds for th: “voiced” (the) and “unvoiced” (bath). 4. Wh sounds /hw/. 5. Ph sounds /f/ rarely. 	chut shen hosh
th		thim sath
wh		whid
ph		

Two Letter Beginning Blends	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
bl cl fl gl pl sl	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the correct consonant sound, not the short vowel sound. 2. Avoid saying /bluh/ for l-blends. 3. Sk, sp, and st may be beginning or ending blends. 4. Dw and tw are infrequent. 	bleg clom flup glat plid slun
br cr dr fr gr pr tr		brin crat drob frep grud prex trig
sc sk sm sn sp st		sced skup smat snud spim
sw dw tw		stob swuff

Three Letter Beginning Blends	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
scr spr str spl shr thr	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the correct consonant sound, not the short vowel sound. 2. Chr sounds /kruh/ infrequently. 3. Sch sounds /sk/ infrequently. 4. Squ sounds /skw/ infrequently. 	scrab sprin streg splud shrot threp
chr		
sch		
squ		

Ending Blends	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
-nk -ng -ld -nt -nd -lt -pt -ct -ft -lk -mp	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the correct consonant sound, not the short vowel sound. 2. Teach /nk/ in clusters: ink, -ank, -onk, -unk. 3. Teach /ng/ in clusters: -ing, -ang, -ong, -ung. 	benk vang wuld sint hond filt kupt
		dact nuft zalk lomp talf vilp

Silent Consonants	Sound Rules	Flashcard Nonsense Words
-mb kn wr gh gn	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the correct consonant sound, not the short vowel sound. 2. Mb sounds /m/. 3. Kn sounds /n/. 4. Wr sounds /ruh/. 5. Gh sounds /g/ at the beginning or /f/ at the end infrequently. 6. Gn sounds /n/ rarely. 	lumb knat wrep

Phonics Instruction

Reading research over the years has determined that:

- The elements of language (phonics) are best introduced **systematically** and **simultaneously** for reading and spelling.
- Using a multi-sensory method or combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic practice – **seeing, hearing, saying, tracing, writing, or manipulating** – integrates all pathways in the brain.
- New readers need to **write what they can read**. This includes single sounds as well as words and sentences.
- New readers need to **read everything they can write**. This helps them connect what they are hearing with writing.
- New readers need to respond more than the instructor talks. The ratio should be **9:1 of learner to instructor talk**.
- As new readers read and write new material, they need to **continue reviewing** old material to a level of automaticity.
- To keep reluctant new readers engaged and motivated, **take responsibility** for their progress. If they are having difficulty, say “It is difficult for you because I have not given it to you enough” or “I have not taught you this in a way that will help you remember, let’s try something different”.

Adult reading research supports all of these instructional strategies in addition to using computer programs for teaching both **phonemic awareness** and phonics skills to adult readers.³ Phonemic awareness, as covered in the previous issue of *NetNews*, is the awareness that language is composed of separate sounds and should include training and practice in segmenting and blending for reading and spelling.

Irregular words or **sight words** can be embedded in phonics instruction by presenting them three to five at a time on flashcards so that new readers can begin creating, reading, and writing sentences as soon as possible. Sight words should also be taught using a multi-sensory method along with memory strategies. Lists of sight words or high frequency words are available at www.literacyconnections.com or in *Step by Step* by LDA.

LDA cannot stress enough the importance of intensity and frequency of instruction. Although it is difficult for adult learners to attend multiple hours of instruction over time, Dr. Sally Shaywitz cites that **it may take 100 hours of intensive reading instruction to increase skills by one grade**.⁴ Instructors should realize that progress may be slow and require much repetition and reinforcement, especially for adult readers with learning disabilities.

³*Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. The Partnership for Reading. 2002. A free copy is available by emailing edpuborders@edpubs.org

⁴*Overcoming Dyslexia*. Sally Shaywitz, M.D. 2003. This book is published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York and available at most bookstores.

The adult literacy kit LDA is assembling for fall of 2004 will include a complete beginning phonics assessment tool for consonants, short vowels, and long vowels, and corresponding pages of real words that may be copied and cut into flashcards for systematic reading and spelling instruction.

Curriculum and Software

Examples of **published curricula** that use a direct, systematic, and multi-sensory approach to phonics instruction include:

- Step by Step*. LDA of Minnesota. www.ldaminnesota.org
 - The Souday System*. Windsor Corporation. www.sondaysystem.org
 - The Wilson Reading System*. Wilson Language Training Corporation. www.wilsonlanguage.com
 - Language!* Sopris West Educational Services. www.language-usa.net
 - Systematic Sequential Phonics They Use. Patricia Cunningham. www.carsondellrosa.com
 - Tub of Letters, Phonics, and Practice Cards. Lakeshore Learning. www.lakeshorelearning.com
- *Training available from the organization or company.*

Examples of **computer software** that use a systematic approach to segmenting, blending, and phonics that may be used to supplement direct instruction include:

- Ultimate Phonics. Spencer Learning Company. www.spencerlearning.com
- Language Tune-up Kit (LTK). Jwor Enterprises. www.jwor.com

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