# NetNews

## an online newsletter devoted to adult literacy

# Intermediate Decoding Skills

**Intermediate decoding** refers to word analysis skills that are beyond a beginning, one-syllable level as described in an earlier NetNews issue, yet are just as important for building adult level reading proficiency.

> *Specific intermediate decoding skills include an understanding of syllables, prefixes, suffixes, and base words.*

Research from secondary settings indicates that struggling readers in middle school or high school programs often read between the 2.5 and 5.0 grade level. They have achieved the beginning reading skills of phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, decoding of one-syllable words, and high frequency sight words, but their major difficulty is decoding multi-syllabic words. Consequently, they are unable to decode new vocabulary introduced at the beginning of a passage or chapter or embedded in the text. Their fluency and comprehension are compromised because they cannot read so many of the words. They struggle with secondary coursework, are more likely to drop out of school, are less able to obtain employment that leads to self-sufficiency, and often develop social/emotional challenges. They are unable to handle the academic expectations of post-secondary educational opportunities. They become typical adult learners attending adult literacy programs who "want or need their GED or adult diploma", but do not have the reading skills to successfully achieve these goals.

Fortunately, a number of studies have demonstrated that it is not too late for these learners to be taught how to read multi-syllabic words and improve their overall reading proficiency. The current research supports a shift from strict syllable rules to a flexible strategy of finding decodable chunks that when pronounced together match words from oral vocabulary.[1] Three decoding strategies for multi-syllable words for instructors to share with adult learners are described on the following pages .

## Assessment

It is possible that adult learners whose CASAS or TABE scale scores reflect an Intermediate, Advanced ABE, or Adult Secondary level are still experiencing difficulties with intermediate decoding skills. They are able to score higher on formal silent reading comprehension tests because they can figure out meaning by using context or picture cues.  An **informal intermediate decoding assessment** for these learners may include an oral reading of an intermediate or secondary level passage from a reading text or pre-GED/GED workbook. The teacher has an identical copy on which decoding errors can be tracked. Adult learners experiencing difficulties with multi-syllabic words tend to mispronounce longer words, omit syllables, drop endings, substitute with similar words, or skip words they do not know. Oral reading may demonstrate intermediate decoding weaknesses that a silent reading comprehension test cannot.

## In this issue...

# Multi-syllabic Instruction

In this section, three strategies for teaching older learners to separate and decode longer words are explained with the "best" or most effective strategy being the decision of the instructor and/or adult learner. For example, adult learners identified as having difficulty with multi-syllable decoding, could be directed to circle or list the words they do not know in a reading passage from their study materials. The instructor would then model one of the following strategies using the list of unknown words. If one strategy does not seem to "fit" the learner, try another. The strategies are not presented in any order of preference and actually overlap in many ways. The purpose is to find a strategy for multi-syllable decoding that makes sense to the learner and that they will apply independently to any reading material.

## Part-by-part decoding instruction

This strategy focuses on the idea that readers need to be taught to divide unknown, multi-syllable words into decodable parts or chunks based on their knowledge of familiar word patterns such as suffixes, prefixes, and base words. In one variation of this strategy, affixes are introduced one by one and then applied to a corresponding list of multi-syllable words. Readers are taught to identify one or more familiar parts in the multi-syllable word, read the known parts first, and then figure out the whole word. Suffixes are taught first because the eye typically goes to the end of an unknown word. In another variation, readers are taught to break down long words by "looping" or drawing loops underneath the decodable parts. This strategy could be applied to any content material the learner or a group of learners is working on. Lists of common prefixes and suffixes are found below.

## Prefixes

Listed below in order of frequency are 20 common **prefixes**.[4]

1. un-
2. re-
3. in-
4. dis-
5. en-, em-
6. non-
7. in-, im-, in
8. over-
9. mis-
10. sub-
11. pre-
12. inter-
13. fore-
14. de-
15. trans-
16. super-
17. semi-
18. anti-
19. mid-
20. under-

## Suffixes

Listed below in order of frequency are 20 common **suffixes**.[4]

1. -s, -es
2. -ed
3. -ing
4. -ly
5. -er, -or
6. -ion, -tion, -ation, -ition
7. -able, -ible
8. -al, -ial
9. -y
10. -ness
11. -ity, -ty
12. -ment
13. -ic
14. -ous, -eous, -ious
15. -en
16. -er
17. -ive, ative, -tive
18. -ful
19. -less
20. -est

# Flexible strategy instruction

This strategy teaches readers a series of steps or strategy to follow in order to segment a word into parts, read the word part-by-part, and then read the word as a whole. An example of six steps as used by the *REWARDS*² reading program is presented below:

1. Circle the word parts (prefixes) at the beginning of the word.
2. Circle the word parts (suffixes) at the end of the word.
3. Underline the letters that stand for vowels in the rest of the word.

4. Say the word parts slowly.

5. Say the word parts fast.

6. Make it a real word.

# Syllable type instruction

This strategy focuses on teaching readers the different syllable types found within words. Readers are introduced to the six major syllable types found in the English language. They learn to read single-syllable words and then apply that knowledge to multi-syllable words made up of combinations of those patterns. Extensive practice in multi-syllable words for reading and spelling is provided. To apply this strategy to content material, identify the unknown or new vocabulary words, analyze for syllable types, and rewrite them according to the combination of syllable types. The acronym **CLOVER** for remembering the six syllable types is described below.

**Closed (C)** - a syllable having a short vowel sound that is always followed by a single or double consonant such as at, ex, un, dis, ness, ment, black.

**Consonant –le (L)** - a syllable containing a consonant before le such as -ble, -ckle, -dle, -fle, -gle, -ple, -tle, -zle, but no vowel sound.

**Open (O)** - a syllable with a long vowel sound at the end *not followed by a consonant* such as o, a, be, re, tri.

**Vowel pair or double vowel (V)** - a syllable with a vowel combination (ai, ay, aw, oa, oo, oi, ou, ow, ee, ea, ie, ei, ue) that makes a long sound such as claim, lay, point, treat, school, green.

**Vowel-consonant-silent e (E)** - a syllable with a long vowel sound followed by a consonant-silent e  such as home, scope, plane, ive.

**R-controlled (R)** - a syllable containing r-controlled vowels such as ar, or, er, ir, ur, ear, our. There may also be a consonant following the vowel-r, but it does not change the sound.

The strategies are modeled and practiced using many words. Beyond instruction and practice, **adult learners need to be told and encouraged to use whatever strategy works best for them!** A bookmark of the prefixes and suffixes, the six steps, or the six syllable types with a few examples would be an excellent reminder to use a strategy for decoding multi-syllable words in instructional or authentic materials.

# Using Authentic Materials

The teaching of multi-syllabic decoding is very applicable to authentic content material. In fact, it is recommended that sample words for practice and application of the approaches come from classroom study or content materials from the home, community, or workplace.

Being that these adult learners are performing at a higher level than beginning readers, additional authentic materials may include[3]:

- Newspapers headlines and articles
- Comics or cartoons
- Store advertisements
- Classified ads
- Brochures
- Labels
- Recipes
- Directions
- Workplace reading
- School information
- Menus
- Greeting cards
- Television schedules
- Lyrics to songs

# Curriculum

Examples of **published curricula** that include syllabication strategies are:

- *Step by Step*. LDA of Minnesota. www.ldaminnesota.org

- *The Sonday System II*. Windsor Corporation. www.sondaysystem.org

- *Language!* Sopris West Educational Services. www.language-usa.net

- *REWARDS*. Sopris West Educational Services. www.language-usa.net

- *The Word Identification Strategy. Learning Strategies Curriculum*. University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning. www.ku-crl.org

- *Patterns for Success in Reading and Spelling.* Proed. www.proedinc.com

# References

[1]Archer, A. L., M. M. Gleason, & V. L. Vachon. 2003. "Decoding and Fluency: Foundation Skills for Struggling Older Readers". Published in *Learning Disability Quarterly*. Volume 26, Spring 2003.

[2]Fell Greene, J. 1998. "Another Chance – Help for Older Students with Limited Literacy". Published in the *American Educator*. Spring/Summer 1998.

[3]Jacobson, E., S. Degener & V. Purcell-Gates. 2003. *Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom*. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. Washington, DC.

[4]White, T.G., J. Sowell, & A. Yanagihara. 1989. *Teaching Elementary Students to Use Word-Practices*.

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