

PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING DECODING WELL

One of the reasons that instruction in decoding has not been executed effectively at times is that it is a complex and technical undertaking. If the principles below are followed, however, it can be efficient and successful.

Follow a Logical Organization

The most common approaches to teaching sound–symbol correspondence are based on the alphabet sequence and the sounds of 26 letters. If beginning instruction in decoding is limited to the alphabet letter sounds, however, the identities of consonants /m/, /θ/ (voiceless), /ð/ (voiced), /ʃ/, /č/, /ŋ/, and /ž/ and vowels /ɔj/, /æw/, /ɔ/, /u/, and /ə/ (schwa) are obscured because no single letters of the alphabet represent these phonemes. Twelve phonemes of approximately forty remain “hidden” when the alphabet is the organizing basis of instruction. A few letters also have no defined job. The letter *c* is redundant for /k/ and /s/. The letter *q* is redundant for the sound of /k/, and the letter *x* is redundant for the combination /ks/ or the phoneme /z/.

The alphabet–sound approach in phonics instruction also overlooks the fact that some letter names bear little relationship to the sounds that the letters repre-

Table 8.4. Beginning to middle first-grade level reader characteristics and needs

Child knows	Child needs to learn	Teaching strategies
Short vowel patterns, silent <i>e</i> , digraphs, blends	Vowel teams, diphthongs, <i>r</i> -controlled forms, basic syllable patterns	Ask child to sort words, build with letter cards, read words with a partner, decode nonsense words, and practice in decodable text.
How to read word by word	Reading fluency of 60–70 words per minute in graded text	Offer partner reading, rereading easy books, and audiotaped reading at easy level.
More than 100 sight words	Recognition vocabulary of more than 200 words	Provide computer practice, cloze exercises, word games, and multisensory techniques.
Primer-level reading	Second primer level	Offer guided reading of literature in small groups.
How to enjoy being read to	Independent reading	Provide take-home books and graphs of books read.
How to write with no plan	Plan and organize ideas for writing	Use graphic organizers for sequencing ideas, and use writer’s chair for audience connection.

sent and are much harder to learn than the sounds themselves. If a child learns letter names without a clear conceptual and associative emphasis on the sounds the letters symbolize, confusions in reading and spelling will occur. Consider Table 8.5, which shows the letters that typically are confused in reading and in spelling.

Children who confuse *will* and *yell* need more practice differentiating letter sounds from letter names. Teachers must deliberately use the labels “name” and “sound” during teaching when referring to letters and phonemes, respectively. Some experts argue that teaching letter names is unnecessary,⁷ but letter names are so much a part of daily classroom life that clarity and practice are probably the most important factors in helping children learn them.

Well-designed instruction will provide children with good key-word associations to help them remember letter sounds. Key words should be carefully chosen. Commercially prepared alphabets often have confusing and inaccurate information, so they should be used cautiously. For example, the letter *e* should not have the word *eye* associated with it. The “word wall” idea that has proliferated in primary classrooms must be used with care as to how sounds are represented. Alphabet letters often are posted along a colorful bulletin board; under each are high-frequency words for which children are to develop automatic recognition. The resulting array typically includes confusing lists of words under the vowel letters, such as the following:

Aa	Ee	Ii	Oo	Uu
apple	egg	it	orange	under
and	eight	is	of	use
away	eat	in	on	us
all	end	I’m	once	united
are			open	
			off	
			out	

If children are shown that words starting with the letter *o* begin with as many as six different sounds, including the /w/ in *once*, they may surmise that letters are irrelevant to sound and must be learned by some magical memory process. Sight words do need to be learned, gradually and cumulatively, but they should not be used to teach the regular correspondences. At the first-grade level, word walls organized by initial letter only are less appropriate than word walls that convey some consistent information about sound–symbol correspondences (see Tables 8.6 and 8.7 for traditional and alternative ways of teaching consonant spellings).

Teaching children each sound, then anchoring the sound to a grapheme (letter, letter group, or letter sequence) with a key-word mnemonic mimics the way alphabetic writing was invented. The sound /s/ is associated first with “snake” and the letter *s* and later with *ce*, *ci*, and *cy* combinations (*city*, *race*, *bicycle*). With an instructional goal of teaching 80–120 spellings for the approximately 40 phonemes and then moving to syllables and morphemes, teachers can teach the whole system in a comprehensive, clear, logical sequence over several years. Instruction can begin with high-utility, low-complexity consonant and vowel units and move gradually to less common, conditional, and more complex graphemes. Spelling units of several letters (*-tch*, *-igh*, *-mb*, *ce-*, *-ough*) are treated as the blocks from

Table 8.5. Letters often confused in reading and spelling

Letter	Name	Sound	Typical reading errors	Typical spelling errors
y	/waj/	/y/	<i>will = yell</i>	YL for <i>will</i> , BOU for <i>boy</i>
u	/yu/	/u/	<i>use = us</i>	UESTRDA for <i>yesterday</i>
w	/dʌbl yu/	/w/	<i>then = when</i>	UEN for <i>when</i>
x	/ɛks/	/ks/ or /gz/		ECKSAM for <i>exam</i>
h	/eč/	/h/		WOH for <i>watch</i>

which words are built, rather than as mysterious combinations of “sounded” and “unsounded” letters.

With the sound-to-spelling approach, children are taught that spelling units (graphemes) represent the approximately 40 sounds and often are more than one letter. For example, *eight* has two phonemes and two graphemes—the vowel /e/ spelled *igh* (also in *weigh*, *weight*, *sleigh*) and the consonant /t/. Teachers are less likely to try to “blend” /t/ and /h/ to make /θ/ or /s/ and /h/ to make /š/ if the letter combinations are understood as operating as digraph units. In addition, words that begin with [s] will not be grouped with those that begin with [š].

From the beginning of a decoding program, children are also shown that there is often more than one way to spell a phoneme. Illustrating this fact has been called *establishing a set for diversity*, or helping students expect that there will be variation in the representational system.