Word Recognition Competency Activity for Students

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Even the best of readers encounter words not instantaneously recognized. Consequently, competence in using effective and efficient word identification strategies is essential for fluent reading. In this article, the focus is on applying knowledge of onsets and rimes in identifying words not known instantaneously. Direct instruction in applying knowledge of onsets and rimes, coupled with extensive practice in reading meaningful text, can play a key role in fostering substantial growth in reading achievement.

Decoding instruction, often referred to as phonics instruction, is the study of the relationship of sounds to letters in an alphabetic language like English. Success in mastering the alphabetic principle, the relationship between symbols and phonemes, is vitally important for success in learning to identify words (Adams, 1990; DeVries, 2015; Reutzel & Cooter, 2012). In addition, such mastery of the alphabetic principle is essential for reading fluency which, in turn, is critical for reading comprehension (Adams, 1990; Rasinski, 2010; Vacca et al., 2015).

Arguments, however, continue on how best to implement and maintain a phonics instruction program. For example, the term phonics instruction has even become popular among some politicians who see phonics instruction as the primary means, if not the only means, to overcome reading problems (International Reading Association [IRA], 1997; Routman, 1996). We have all heard words to the effect of “Teach them the letters and the sounds that the letters make and they will all be able to read. It is that simple.” If only it were that simple!

The teaching of phonics has become enormously complicated. There is a myriad of books, kits, and computer programs purporting to make phonics instruction both easy and effective and even enjoyable for children. Radio, magazine, and TV ads abound with advertisers’ claims touting the value of various phonics programs. This virtual Niagara Falls of phonics materials is evident at provincial, regional, and national literacy conferences. There are numerous publications purporting to promote phonics learning for sale even in supermarkets and large multipurpose stores where a shopper can find phonics instruction materials as easily as finding a jar of pickles!

The purpose of this article is to present a rather simple but basically sound and inexpensive approach for teaching children to enhance their decoding competencies by learning sound-to-symbol relationships. Variations can easily be made depending on the learning environment. In this light, four basic principles, followed by directions for producing what we call the Word Builder Kit, are presented below:

1. Children need to learn the sounds typically associated with single consonants at the beginning of words. Start with familiar, high-interest words such as hat, Jack, cat, car, dog, pizza, and names of students (Ashton-Warner, 1963; DeVries, 2015; Reutzel &
Cooter, 2011). The consonants are all the letters except the vowels—a, e, i, o, and u. Since q and u always (except in Shaq and Iraq!) appear together, they can be treated as if they are a single consonant (Durkin, 1983). Granted, there are inconsistencies causing complications such as the initial consonant sounds associated with /cl/ and /g/ and with consonant digraphs, such as /ph/, /ch/, /sh/, and /th/, which must be afforded additional attention. However, the single consonants are highly reliable in the sounds they represent. For example, the sound associated with the letter b is the same in bell, bloom, book, etc.

2. Rasinski (2017) comprehensively presented the need for automaticity in word recognition to encourage reading fluency. In this light, automaticity refers to instantaneous recognition of words so that readers do not have to spend time pondering over the pronunciation of words. Rasinski concluded that “automaticity in word recognition and expressive reading” (p. 519) leads to greater comprehension, the goal of all reading instruction. The authors contend that the strategies presented herein substantially encourage automaticity leading to fluency resulting in stronger comprehension.

3. As suggested above, readers must be familiar with the high-frequency consonant digraphs such as ph, sh, th, and ch. The ph consonant digraph (e.g., phonics, phone, and Phil) does not serve as an onset for common rimes but can be taught separately. The /ng/ digraph is dealt with when studying the rime ing. The gh digraph is rare in words (rough and tough, rhyming with fluff) and can be learned through direct instruction and reinforcement through encountering the gh digraph during independent reading. The same can be said of the silent letter k at the beginning of words such as knight and knee.

4. Blending the letters in consonant clusters into the sounds they represent is also a very important competence for all readers. High-frequency consonant clusters, adapted from Vacca et al. (2015), are “bl, br, cl, cr, dr, fl, fr, gl, gr, pl, pr, sc, sk, scr, sk, sl, sm, sn, sp, spr, st, str, sw, and tr” (p. 187).

Rimes (also called phonograms and, in a typical elementary school, chunks or word families) are syllables beginning with a vowel and usually containing one or more consonant letters. Adams (1990) concluded through a comprehensive study of research that rimes are highly consistent in how they are pronounced in different words. Foorman, Fletcher, Francis, Schatschneider, and Mehta (1998) determined that use of sound-spelling patterns (rimes) proved highly effective when working with 285 high-risk 2nd graders. Johnson (2001) determined that learning to spell as well as read is greatly facilitated through the use of onsets and rimes.

In a far earlier study that launched interest in looking at rimes rather than sounds associated with individual letters, Wylie and Durrell (1970) reported that more than 500 words typically found in the reading materials for primary grades could be made from the following rimes: ack, ail, ain, ake, ale, ame, an, ank, ap, are, ash, at, ate, aw, ay, eat, ell, est, ice, ick, ide, ight, ill, in, ine, ing, ink, ip, it, ock, oke, op, ore, or, uck, ug, ump, and unk. After nearly 40 years, the benchmark study by Wylie and Durrell is still the foundation for the study of rimes and onsets. For example, Cunningham (2005) referred to the rimes in the Wylie and Durrell study as “spelling patterns that allow children to read and spell over 500 words commonly used by young children” (p. 101). In addition, we have used an effective and comprehensive set of strategies for classroom instruction, which is focused on the onsets and rimes developed at The Center for the Study of Reading (1991).

Other key rimes contributed by teachers from a variety of sources are ace, all, are, each,
There are, of course, other principles of importance in teaching phonics. However, attention to the four presented above will help students and teachers immeasurably in learning to figure out words not known by sight. Also, using onset and rime encourages phonemic awareness. On the other hand, too much emphasis on phonics generalizations with limited application is time not well-utilized and can take time away from independent reading and writing activities.

The Word Builder Kit

The Word Builder Kit can be a useful resource to foster awareness of sound-to-symbol relationships. The directions for it are presented below:

1. Type all the single consonant letters using a 100-point bold font. The fonts Arial, Century Gothic, and Verdana are friendly for developing and beginning readers because they resemble the style of print found in most books printed for young readers. We place a dot under the letters b, d, m, n, p, and w to show direction. For example, a developing reader might be puzzled when encountering the letter b because it looks like it could be either b, p, or q. We likewise place a dot under the consonant clusters pl, sn, and sp to indicate direction. We also place a dot under the op rime since it looks like the word do when inverted. We use qu rather than just q since q is always followed by u in English spelling. The three key consonant digraphs (ch, sh, and th) can easily fit on one line of print, and five lines can appear on one page.

2. Photocopy the sheets containing the consonants, consonant digraphs, rimes, and consonant clusters using 110 lb. or 65 lb. cardstock of different colors. Regular 20 lb. copy paper is too flimsy.

3. Cover both sides of the printed pages with a clear plastic covering such as ConTact paper. Laminating machines or individual laminating sheets can be used, but laminated pieces sometimes have a high gloss finish that reflects a lot of light.

4. Cut the individual units with a scissors or with a paper cutter.

5. Add a piece of lightweight magnetic tape to the back of each piece. This is not essential since the pieces can be used on any flat surface; however, the magnetic tape can add options for enjoyable practice. (See Photograph 1.)

Quart-size plastic zipper freezer bags can be used to store the letter pieces. Freezer bags are superior to ordinary zip-lock storage bags because of their heavier weight. In addition to classroom magnetic wall boards, we use metal...
trays that are often old baking sheets covered with shelf liner (see Photograph 2).

We provide the students with a list of common rimes and words made using the key rimes titled “Words We Know” (see Photograph 3 and Appendix A). This list is used as a reference for developing readers when there is doubt about the authenticity of a word. For example, a 2nd-grade student was quite sure that “pling” was a word: “You know, when a thing goes 'pling!’”

Produce a classroom Word Wall containing a word for each of the key rimes. The focus word serves as a base for learning other words by analogy. For example, the student might learn to think, “I know bank, so this word must be drank” (Photograph 3). We have a piece of yarn held by magnets called the “Mastery Line.” Students and teachers can move the line based on apparent mastery of the set of rimes on the row directly above the line and all previously mastered rimes and key words. Strategies presented complement guidelines for teaching students with reading difficulties proposed by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (n.d.).

Students and reading coaches enjoy building words and practicing working with onsets and rimes. Older siblings, parents, tutors, and volunteers at after-school programs have reported successfully and enjoyably using the Word Builder Kit (Photograph 4).

Many instructional variations, including games, can be made to facilitate the learning of common words containing rimes and onsets. For example, we invented “Dunk a Chunk.” In this game, students get to throw a beanbag
toward a trash can with a clean liner if they produce a word or series of words. They can score a point for their team if they successfully throw the beanbag into the trash can. You will be amazed at how exciting making words can be!

A 1st-grade teacher we know has a lightweight clothes line and small clothes pins. The students see a rime pinned on the clothes line and then they can pin an onset in front of the rime. There are countless activities that creative teachers can employ to make learning onsets and rimes a thoroughly enjoyable hands-on adventure.

When working with students using the Word Builder Kit, we notice what Barnes and Smagorinsky (2016) determined as feelings of “personal success” (p. 352) among the students. Barnes and Smagorinsky, through in-depth surveys, found that teacher education candidates’ application of learning strategies in their apprentice teaching environments can be substantially encouraged by experiencing their own personal success. In addition, the candidates reported that they enjoyed applying strategies much more than simply achieving academic knowledge about strategies. The researchers further determined that the candidates tied their own success in elementary and middle school to their own delight in achieving personal success while engaged in positive learning experiences.

The Word Builder Kit is an easy to produce and inexpensive way to provide literacy support for developing readers. We have found that constructing this kit is a wonderful activity for teacher inservice programs and for parent volunteers. In addition, upper elementary grade students enjoy working with their 1st- and 2nd-grade friends in one-on-one learning sessions.

References


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Appendix A
Words We Know

ack – back, black, crack, jack, lack, pack, quack, rack, stack, shack, smash, snack, tack, track, sack
ail – ail, fail, frail, hail, jail, mail, pail, quail, rail, sail, snail, tail, trail
ain – brain, chain, gain, grain, lain, main, pain, plain, rain, sprain, stain, train
ake – bake, brake, cake, flake, lake, make, rake, shake, snake, stake, take, wake
ale – ale, bale, gale, male, pale, sale, scale, stale, tale, whale
ame – blame, came, dame, flame, game, lame, name, same, shame, tame
an – an, ran, can, fan, man, pan, plan, ran, span, tan, than
ank – bank, blank, crank, frank, plank, rank, tank, thank, drank
ap – cap, chap, clap, gap, lap, map, nap, sap, snap, scrap, tap, trap, wrap
are – bare, care, dare, fare, glare, share, scare, snare, square, stare
ash – ash, cash, clash, crash, dash, flash, gash, gnash, hash, mash, rash, sash, smash, splash, trash
at – at, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat
ate – ate, date, gate, hate, late, mate, plate, rate, skate, slate, state
aw – aw, claw, draw, flaw, gnaw, jaw, law, paw, raw, slave, straw, thaw
ay – bay, Bray, clay, day, dray, gray, hay, jay, lay, may, pay, play, ray, say, stray, tray, sway
eat – beat, cheat, eat, heat, meat, neat, pear, seat, treat, wheat
ell – bell, cell, fell, sell, shell, smell, spell, tell, well, yell, swell
est – best, blest, chest, guest,nest, pest, rest, rest, test, vest, west
ice – dice, ice, lice, nice, price, rice, slice, spice, twice
ick – brick, chick, click, kick, lick, nick, pick, quick, sick, stick, thick, trick, wick
ide – bride, glide, guide, hide, pride, ride, side, slide, tide, wide
ight – bright, flight, fright, light, might, night, knight, sight
ill – bill, chill, dull, drill, fill, flirt, hill, ill, kill, mill, skill, spill, still, thrill, will
in – bin, chin, din, fin, grin, in, pin, sin, spin, thin, tin, twin, win
ine – dine, fine, line, mine, nine, pine, shine, spine, swine, tine, twine, vine, whine
ing – bring, cling, ding, king, ping, ring, sing, sling, spring, string, swing, ring, wring
ink – blink, brink, drink, ink, kink, link, shrink, sink, think, wink
ip – chip, clip, dip, drip, flip, grip, hip, lip, nip, rip, ship, pip, sip, slip, snip
it – bit, fit, grit, hit, kit, lit, mit, pit, quit, sit, slit, spit, wir, knit, it
ock – block, clock, cock, cock, flock, knock, lock, rock, shock, smock, sock
oke – broke, choke, coke, joke, poke, smoke, spoke, stroke, awoke
op – hop, crop, drop, flop, hop, lol, mop, pop, prop, shop, sloop, sop, stop, top
ore – bore, core, fore, score, shore, snore, sore, store, swore, ore, wore, ore
ot – blot, cot, got, hot, jot, knot, lot, not, pot, plot, rot, shot, trot
ug – bug, drug, tug, mug, jog, mug, plug, rug, snug, tug
ump – bump, dump, hump, jump, lump, plump, rump, slump, stomp, thump, trump
unk – bunk, chunk, drunk, hunk, junk, punk, shrunk, skunk, spunk, sunk, trunk

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