A Note to Kindergarten Teachers Teaching Reading Mastery

Charles Arthur

October, 2021 re-re-edited 1205

I thought you might be interested in a little history as you progress through the program.

As a simple review:

As you all well know, the primary objective of Reading Mastery in kindergarten is to learn how to decode words. Decoding technically means translating printed words into spoken words through the alphabetic principle. This is done so that a printed word can be recognized as a known word in a child's speaking vocabulary, (In other words sounding-out and saying the word fast. Then, answer the question: What word?).

By the end of the year we want kids to be able to read a large assortment of words, almost 400 words, from the child's speaking vocabulary. The first grade program extends this even further.

Accomplishing this in kindergarten is a remarkable achievement, yet, if it is not accomplished in kindergarten or first grade, many children typically will have serious difficulties with learning to read (for many years).

Beginning reading is a heavily researched subject. A lot is known. Those who research reading are well aware of the difficulty of learning to decode. It is universally referred to as the hardest part of learning to read. Hundreds of books and thousands of research reports have been published on this subject. Yet, kindergarteners are asked to take it on.

The whole idea of Reading Mastery is to ease children into reading, gradually, so that they have no idea of how difficult the task is.

So how do we do this? What's our secret?

It starts with a curriculum decision about what should be taught and when. The original developers, a team led by Siegfried Engelmann, decided that learning to read words was where they would focus at the start. (There are other options.)

Because reading words depends on the ability to alphabetically decode, an analysis of decoding became necessary. Their analysis was simple, based on practical experience. Little science on the subject was available at the time. My guess is that the analysis went something like this.

Decoding words has two large components or sides: print and speech, what is seen and what is heard. They combine to make a word. So, to recognize a word, a child must analyze these two components.

Learning to do this begins with the letters. Changing letters into sounds involves teaching both sides at once—speech and print (show the letters, say the sounds). This is the easy part. Of course, the cumulative sequencing is crucial in this.

However, as we know, learning the sounds for each letter will not be enough to decode a word. Typically it is not enough to begin decoding. Applying this knowledge to decode words is where it can get hard. The original developers, as well as researchers studying decoding, have described the difficulty with converting letters into spoken words.

Here's a few quotes.

*"...alphabetic instruction has been **bogged down** by one problem: Many students find it extremely difficult to induce the words from the code, no matter how they are drilled on the individual letters and sounds".* Marilyn Adams, 1998a pg 18

""Indeed, children can generally make appropriate sounds in response to single letters but are often unable to proceed when they encounter the same letters in the context of words. (Isabelle Liberman 1973

Some children we worked with could not identify the word if they sounded it out in the traditional way – with pauses between each sound..." Siegfried Engelmann, 2004.

(In working out new reading methods, several) "discoveries stand out. One fact was clear to all (of their team): You can't say the sounds for all the letters, (in a word) and, for some reason, the words were not a sum of the individual sounds." Siegfried Engelmann, 2007

Working in the 1960s, before much research was done on this topic, the developers of Reading Mastery found that sounding-out with just the letter sounds stumps most children. This is primarily due to learning to decode with pauses between each letter. Researchers who have studied and written about

beginning reading, over the last 50 years, still have not solved this problem. (But that's another story.)

How did Engelmann solve this problem?

From Engelmann's point of view, preventing the pauses was a simple practical matter. Decoding can eliminate the pauses by sounding out the letters, without stopping between the sounds, as if singing the sounds. ("Sound out the letters without stopping. Say it fast.") This helped but still was not enough. Learning to decode was still a little rough. A child can't easily ease into it. Children still needed something to help them catch on to this practice better. The solution was't complete.

The continuous sounding-out of letters in words still had print and speech combined. It was still a challenge. In order to meet this challenge, a child must analyze both components to recognize words. Engelmann found that first focusing on just one at a time, the speech part, helped.

This meant teaching continuous sounding-out of spoken words, without the print, just with the speech. ("Say the sounds without stopping. Say it fast.") This way, part of decoding can be practiced separately without the letters. It is sometime called oral blending.

Then, the decoding became a matter of adding the letters to what was pre-taught and practiced in speech, ie. oral blending with letters. Children would be applying a learned oral practice to a sounding-out of letters. Children were first taught to say words slow and fast without the letters, oral blending. Learning the oral pre-reading part takes careful teaching and practice but is fairly easily taught by lesson 18 before letters begin to be added.

It was found that oral blending in this manner would enable the child to ease into the harder sounding out of the letters in words without stopping. When done and completely blended the fast way, a string of sounds very similar to a real word is produced. The child then can recognize the word from their speech vocabulary more easily. Usually, it's instant. ("What word?) The word has been

decoded. The solution is complete. Easing into the hard task of decoding is achieved. (From lesson 28 on)

Here are the words of Engelmann explaining it in a little more technical language.

> "The basic argument that [is] used for the necessity of the phonological manipulations [say the sounds w/o stopping w/o letters] was that they were components of the **corresponding** decoding manipulations." [done with letters]
>
> "The demonstration that phonological manipulations are precise components of a beginning word-reading operation can be seen by constructing a task that is as similar as possible to a beginning decoding task but that does not refer to any symbols. It is a verbal skeleton of the [decoding] task."
>
> "The responses the children make [saying the sounds, without pausing, and then saying it fast] are the same responses the children make when decoding the word." [only without letters]
>
> "This makes the children sufficiently facile with the verbal components of decoding that they will successfully coordinate….. with the symbol-identification component during the introduction of the first decoding words."
>
> "By presenting the word with no pause between the sounds, and by assuring that the word begins with a continuous sound [not a stop sound like b, d, or g] the example assures that the word the teacher presents is very "similar" to the same word spoken at a normal speaking rate." Engelmann, pg 45. 1999

The practice of oral blending, described above, that led up to the point of teaching decoding, continues on in lessons along side the teaching decoding in new words- 15 total with 8 letters. This lasts until lesson 40.

This whole procedure with sounds and print enables children to ease into the most difficult part of learning to read, a part that has caused enormous difficulty with children for ages. The procedures were discovered and then first laid out in Reading Mastery's predecessor, DISTAR, (Direct Instruction in the Systematic Teaching of Arithmetic and Reading) by Siegfried Engelmann (1969).

Sorry to say, this solution was ignored by the scientists for years. However, the scientists of the 1970s did give the speech part a name: phonemic awareness. It was named as if it had never been discovered. Engelmann discovered it through practical analysis and experience. The term used in the first textbook on Direct Instruction Reading, (1979) for saying the sounds was more plainly termed "auditory skills". In later editions, the term "phonemic awareness" was adopted.

Ziggy solved the problem of decoding way before the scientists even began studying it. It was mainly a practical matter - a matter of finding what works. Why did the scientist ignore this solution? (That's a whole other story.)

Isabelle Liberman, Segmentation of the spoken Word and Reading Acquisition. P, 5 Haskin Laboratory, Bulletin of the Orton Society, (1973)

Adams, M. J., Foorman, B. R., Lundberg, I., and Beeler, T., The Elusive Phoneme, *p. 16 Why Phonemic Awareness is so Important and How to Help Children Develop It.* American Educator, (1998)

Siegfried Engelmann, Forward, Introduction to DIRECT INSTRUCTION. p. 3 Nancy E. Marchand-Martella, Timothy A. Slocum & Ronald C. Martella. Pearson Education, Inc. 2004. (2007).

Siegfried Engelmann, Phonemic Awareness in Reading Mastery. p. 45 *Effective School Practices*, 17(3) 1999