Note #4, to Teachers Teaching Kindergarten Children in Reading Mastery

The Greatest Teaching Program Ever

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Lessons 60-80 The Transition

The theme that I've given to the next 20 lessons is: Transition.

I finished the December Note by concluding that the last 20 lessons went from a Reading Vocabulary list of 15 words with 8 letters to 59 words with 13 letters. The next 20 lessons, 60-80, will get to 109 words with 19 letters. This is half way through the kindergarten program that has the goal of 397 words with 40 letters or letter groups. After lesson 80, the children will progressively increase at an even faster rate and learn 288 new words and 31 new letters or letter groups, during the second half of the program.

In each 20 lesson, Reading Mastery accelerates its pace. Lessons 1-60 constitute the basic foundation. Lessons 60-80 firms and extends this foundation to a **transition** in how word reading is done, without sounding them out. This is sometimes considered sight-word reading or sight reading.

As I stated in last months Note,,,,,

The firm foundation from lessons 1 through 60 makes this possible. If those lessons are not taught to mastery, some kids will have difficulty keeping up to this increased pace.

You've heard that this program is unique. Well, the next 20 lessons is truly unique. I doubt that any other phonics program teaches this kind of transition. In general, the transition progressively works towards completely reading words without sounding them out by lesson 108.

What in the world is this sight-word reading? After teaching phonics sounding out words, now the program goes back to memorizing words? No. It's not that kind of sight word reading. It's called sight word reading because it **appears** to be strictly done by sight. It's called sight word reading because it doesn't involved sounding out the letters. So what is it really? (I'll come back to that later.)

Right now, what is the transition and how is it accomplished?

The **transition lessons** teach a new way to recognize words. This begins to be seen in parts of lessons 61-64. After sounding out words in a list, selected words are called on for only "saying them the fast way." And then, at 65, the new way becomes introduced. It's marked by the big red box The lessons before 65 ask the child to begin to remember words, over a short time, after they had just been sounded out. In lessons 65 - 70, they are taught how this is done, by "figuring out" or thinking the sounds. (My terms)

Remembering back, thinking the sounds was done in early decoding lessons where children are asked to think individual sounds, rather than saying them out loud, before sounding out a word. They had to hold in memory the letter sounds they could see, in preparation for sounding out the letters. "Sound it out. What word?"

In Lesson 65, with the magical red box, the child is asked to think the sounds in the word, almost the same as in the very early decoding lessons, but this time they must "figure it out" or think the sounds and then say the word. Don't sound it out. Wow! That's big.

That's the beginning of "sight word reading" that is not the same as memorization. Once this new way is learned, words from then on would be identified and pronounced by seeing and thinking the sounds, very quickly. **Each sound is eventually translated into a word, instantly.**

This means the think time would be gradually shortened, to at some point, the words are identified instantly. Wow again. So, what's the difference between this kind of sight word reading and memorization? We don't really know for sure. Cognitive psychologists have studied it for decades. We do know, however, that it involves instant, silent decoding. We know that decoding and memorizing use different parts of the brain.

We know for sure that the words learned throughout this program are not memorized. I doubt that any kindergarteners could memorize 397 words, strictly from only what they see. Somehow learning the alphabetic foundational skills in lessons 1-60 enables an increase in the rate of learning words, as well as in speed of recognizing words. In first grade, Reading Mastery, children will be asked to learn 1342 more words. With the 397 from Kindergarten, this equals to 1739 total by the end of first grade. Surely, new learners cannot learn to memorize this many words this fast, and climbing, by about 2000 more each grade. Somehow the alphabetic principle enables this rate and level of learning.

How does it work? This has been the eternal mystery of learning to read an alphabetic language. Linnea Ehri a primary researcher on this subject has called it "*one of the great mysteries that has challenged researchers*". No one has completely figured it out.

I can remember thinking about this many years ago and asking Jerry Silbert, a long standing member of Engelmann's team, trainer and a co-writer of Douglas Carnine's six editions of the textbook on Reading Mastery, and current board member of Arthur Academy schools, about this. I asked him, "What do the children do to identify words once they've learned how to read words without sounding out?" His answer went something like, "I have no idea. I've wondered about this myself." I will try to give you some of the thinking on it.

Sight word reading means, not taking time to sound out words. This kind of reading is necessary for comprehension. The words should come easy so the reader can pay attention more to the meanings. If this is not possible, reading texts would not be nearly as useful. Even though we may not know exactly how it is done, we do know that being able to read words this easily and quickly is necessary for reading for understanding of most texts. The pace for reading words must be as fast and as easy as speech, otherwise, it would be too slow for our thinking about the understanding of texts. Another quote: David Share calls this ability *"the quintessence: sine qua non, of reading skill"*.

So, what happens here? How do mature readers continue to use their alphabetic decoding skills without sounding out? This is where the mystery is - the hidden part of reading.

If teaching decoding well and careful, which includes a transition, children will begin to decode the words quicker without sounding out. And they do continue to decode, but it is obviously done silently, under cover. The sounds of the letters that they've learned, glued to the sight of the letters, disappear into the minds of the new readers. They think and decode the letters very quickly, eventually instantly. At some point this looks like they are reading only by sight. Not so. They are beginning to decode internally and automatically.

The sounds of the letters and the practice of combining them into words are now hidden within the world of speech, which drives reading from here out. Our brains enable us to do this. The sight of the words, with all their composed letters, is said to "piggy back" onto speech. The part of the brain that operates speech will then also operate reading in the same way. It carries reading. Therefore, it's safe to say that we can read because we can speak. All of this is made possible by the alphabet and its link to sounds in speech. Non-alphabetic languages cannot do this. A different part of the brain is used for those languages.

This is all difficult to support with evidence of course. Various experiments have been performed, especially with eye-movements, to verify this process. One factor was the discovery that as new readers progress, they are better able to read nonsense words that they've never seen before. We also know, from new brain imaging studies, that when readers are reading from visual memory only, they use a different part of the brain than when they are decoding, externally or internally.

Because of our ability to speak and listen, our brain is equipped to do this hidden decoding once the alphabetic principle has become automatic in thousands of words. This of course takes several years to perfect to a fluent level. Kindergarten is where it begins with Reading Mastery-K. Each year after, it grows in leaps and bounds, as seen from "reading check-outs".

And it all starts in lesson 65 and builds to lesson 108 where there is no more sounding out, unless occasionally needed. By the end of kindergarten, the children should be able to read at a rate of 40 words per minute. That is almost a word a second. It's definitely a word a second by the end of first grade. With all the assorted words in Reading Mastery-k, mostly decodable, memorizing them that quickly would be impossible. Somehow, the alphabet and the workings of our brain makes this possible.

Now back to lesson 65 for a closer look at how it is done. Whereas previous tasks ask the child to begin to remember short, two or three letter words, task 17 goes deeper. When remembering short words, it isn't clear what the child is remembering, all three letters, or one or two that help the memory. Task 17 is more specific. It wants the child to focus on each letter in sequence in memory for the word. It wants the child to internalize remembering and decoding the letters.

I have to admit. I mess with the scripts a bit in these lessons. So, beware.

I find the scripted term “figure out”, as in,”figure out what you’re going to say” too vague. Strangely, Engelmann used a vague term rather that something more explicit. His rule has always been to be explicit. So, I change the script from “figure out” to “think the sounds”. Thinking the sounds is how to figure out the word. To me, that is what we are asking the child to do when we move our finger “down the arrow and stop under each sound”. At each stop, we want the child to think the sounds. Think how that letter sounds without saying it out-loud. As you move your finger under each letter, say “think the sound” or “think what that letter sounds like”. This is the beginning of the internal process of reading words. Then say, “What’s the word?.” This is a silent rehearsal of sounding-out words. At first in means thinking it through.

This is a magic moment to me. I like to watch their faces and their mouths because this is something new. I then ask, “Who knowns this word? Raise your hand.” See if they all seem to be working on it. They are recognizing a word through silent decoding. This is the first step in the direction of fluent, silent reading. - a magical moment into a way of reading that cognitive psychologist have yet to fully explain.

Now, everyone, “Read it the fast way.” “Who got it?” Call on individuals.

This practice of learning how to internalize decoding, by thinking the sounds, continues for five lessons. But, for some unknown reason, it stops in lesson 71 through lesson 80, and returns to out-loud decoding, even with the red box. Just when children begin to learn how to first think the sounds, the program reverts back to saying the sounds out-loud. I can’t see the reason for this. Was it a type-o? This is the only place in this great program that I have had to really differ. I recommend continuing the “think method” with the red box up to lesson 80.

Strangely enough, the think or “figure it out” method is inserted in the story reading, beginning in lessons 75 on into the eighties. This is done after being dropped for 10 lessons in the red box. In lesson 75, the method taught in lessons 65 - 70 with the red box, is applied in the story reading. So why throw it out in the red box of lessons 71-80? Why not keep it in the red box so children are ready to apply it in the story, beginning in lesson 75? This of course is gradually increased in the story reading in each lesson, with less think time for each word.

This is teaching the children how to decode internally, with less and less thought required for each word. It’s done quicker and quicker. What they are doing to accomplish this is still somewhat mysterious. It becomes the objective throughout the remaining of the program so all kindergarten children can learn to read.

One more quote: Ehri gives one reason for why learning this skill with words is so important: “*When children attain reading skill, they learn to (read) in a way that allows their attention to focus on the meaning of the text while the mechanics of reading, including deciphering, operates unobtrusively and out of awareness for the most part”.*

Comprehension gradually becomes the focus because reading the words becomes easier, occupying less attention and work.