



Attachment 8

The rationale for assessing pseudo words

Highly skilled readers accurately recognise words extremely quickly. For beginning readers, the most efficient way to learn to read an alphabetic language such as English is to learn how to decode words using letter–sound correspondences. As students become more highly skilled, they recognise many words automatically. However, if students rely entirely on memorising words, they become dependent on someone repeatedly reading a word aloud for them until they remember and recognise it. They can then only recognise and read aloud the words that they have been taught. In addition, they have to hold words in their working memory as they learn to read. The more words they acquire, the more demand is placed on their working memory. They reach a threshold of how much they can retain and find it difficult to progress further with their reading.

When students learn how to sound out and blend letters into words, following the rules about letter–sounds in English, they develop a more efficient path to becoming an independent reader than they would through memorising every single word they encounter.

If students are given phonetically regular texts to read aloud, matched to what they know about letter–sound relationships, they can effectively practice and build their skills in sounding out letters and applying rules and blending to make words, and move on to recognising those words automatically. They can teach themselves to recognise many phonetically regular words automatically.

If students know how to sound out the letters of a word, and the rules about sounds, then they can make a good attempt to read aloud any word they encounter in print, even words they have never seen before. Skilled readers use this strategy to decode unfamiliar words.

The challenge with learning to read in English is that it is not always phonetically regular. While there are only 44 sounds, there are quite a few rules to manage all letter–sounds, ambiguities and some exceptions. These rules need careful, explicit teaching until they are all recognised automatically. Words and patterns that appear frequently are more likely to be learnt quickly, but words with irregular patterns, that also appear frequently, will require further specific instruction so they can be read automatically. In the end, to be a good reader, you must recognise all letter and word patterns automatically.

Pseudo words are included in phonics assessments because students have to sound out the letters and blend them. They cannot recognise the word from memory, because they have never seen it before. Pseudo words are the best way of finding out if students have mastered the critical skills of sounding out letters, applying rules and blending sounds to make a word.

When students read a real word aloud, we can't tell if they simply memorised the word, taught themselves to recognise the word automatically through practice by sounding it out and blending it, or they have just sounded it out in their head and said the blended word. However, pseudo words are not easily memorised because they are not linked to meaning, allowing checking of phonic skills alone.

Pseudo words allow us to check all of the common combinations of letters and sounds in English to see if students can sound out and blend every one. This does not mean students should be taught lists of pseudo words. In a systematic synthetic phonics program, students practise reading real words that will be seen in a variety of contexts. This is more efficient than practising pseudo words because the real words will be seen again.

Some literature, such as books by Dr Seuss or Roald Dahl, uses pseudo words playfully. These pseudo words, used in the context of the story, reinforce the aim of reading to make meaning from texts. Teachers can have fun with the 'squifflerotter' and the 'grinksludger' from Dahl's *The BFG* or the parrot named 'Hooey', who said 'phooey' and ended up in St Louis from Seuss's *Oh say can you say?* In other contexts, pseudo words should be used sparingly and only for assessment purposes.