

Teaching and remediating decoding skills: perpetual challenges for teachers



Cognitive ability is considered to be the real asset of the humans, and thus there has always been a curiosity and constant endeavor throughout the journey of civilization to improve that ability and to keep it in good stead among all. Accordingly, in modern times too, research regarding children's reading difficulty, or to be specific, in decoding, has been going on to bring out the best possible solutions to it. Therefore, this paper explores five articles that serve pointers to such endeavor, before reaching its conclusion.

Brief Description of the Articles

1. Research Article: " Teaching Decoding" by Louisa C. Moats. The above paper discusses on the techniques of teaching decoding to the ones having difficulty primarily from the premise that " problems abound not only with the approaches to decoding typically found in whole-language and ' literature-based' programs, but also with programs associated with traditional phonics". Accordingly it stresses on the following areas:

A. Aligning decoding instruction with the stages of reading development. At the outset, Moats reminds " the ability to sound out new words accounts for about 80 percent of the variance in first-grade reading comprehension, and continues to be a major factor in text comprehension as students progress through the grades" (Foorman, Francis, Shaywitz, et al., 1997), besides the fact that " learner progresses from global to analytic processing, from approximate to specific linking of sound and symbol, and from context-driven to print-driven reading as proficiency is acquired". She stresses on the fact that the instructions should be compatible with the emerging competence of the student, and accordingly cites the significance of "

Logographic Reading”, besides elaborating the mechanisms of various stages of reading like “ Novice or early alphabetic reading”, Mature alphabetic stage” and Orthographic stage (syllables and morphemes).

B. Aligning decoding instruction with the structure of the English Language. Reminding the fact that “ our writing system is an amalgam of Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Greek, and to a lesser extent, includes spellings from French, German, Italian, and Spanish”, she provides some directions, complete with tables for the educators, such as “ putting the spelling system in historical perspective”, “ teaching speech to print, not print to speech”, “ teaching word study beyond second grade”, etc. This part can serve as an effective manual for the educators.

C. Teaching the code the way children learn it most easily and encouraging active and constructive exploration. Moats highlights the significance of teaching “ explicitly and systematically”, as she believes that’s the way ensure the success of most children, where “ predictable, common correspondences are taught before the variant, less common correspondences”. She stresses on teaching “ pattern recognition over rule memorization”, besides anticipating, preventing and correcting confusions, while mentioning “ workbooks are great for independent practice when concepts have been well taught”.

Moats defines decoding instruction as technical part of teaching reading that requires knowledge of language, including phonology and the structure of orthography and knowledge of how children learn language. Commenting on the current trends, Moats laments, “ One of the consequences of

fragmentation in lesson design and curriculum is inefficiency. It will take longer to teach children what they need to learn; It will be less likely that all children who are capable will learn to read well". This is an important observation regarding future remedial measures in this issue.

2. Research Paper: " Diagnosing and Remediating Literacy Problems Using INCAS Software: Identifying Reading and Spelling Difficulties And Providing Help". by Christine Merrell and Peter Tymms. This paper describes the development of an " adaptive assessment called InCAS (Interactive Computerized Assessment System) that is aimed at children of a wide age and ability-range to identify specific reading problems".

It discusses about the rationale for the structure and content of InCAS, besides presenting different formats of feedback supplied to teachers, which accompanies " research-based strategies for remediation, following the principle of assessment for learning". While highlighting the limitations of traditional group assessments, this paper subscribes to the observation that " adaptive assessment present children with a higher number of items that are appropriate to their ability". This is a significant pointer to the constraints involved in interviewing/assessing each child in the traditional method.

Therefore, this research paper holds significance to the educators who want to deliver more in little time with the aid of computer-driven assessment. The paper breaks down into three segments like below:

A. The Development of a Computer Adaptive Assessment. Here it describes the origin and development of the system, where the idea of " developing a single computer program that could assess several developmental areas and

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attitudes of children from five years to the end of primary school, i. e., 11 years in England and in English-speaking international settings” proved pivotal in the making of the system. Here one comes to know that InCAS uses modules like “ picture vocabulary”, “ non-verbal ability”, “ word recognition”, “ word decoding”, “ reading comprehension”, “ spelling” and “ attitudes”.

B. How InCAS works. This segment deals with the logistics of the functionality of InCAS that encompasses all modules included, where “ age-equivalent values are calculated for all items corresponding to the age at which pupils have a 50: 50 chance of getting an item right”.

C. Analysis of Results and Feedback to Teachers. According to the researchers, “ the feedback for teachers gives age-equivalent scores for each section on which a child had been assessed except ‘ Attitudes’, that facilitates the teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each pupil and to focus on the areas that need solutions. This segment substantiates the utility value of InCAS as a diagnostic tool as well as a flexible and easy to use program. Therefore the value of this lies in the fact that it brings forth a newly developed assessment system that can deliver more in little time in terms of assessing the weakness and strength of a child.

3. Research Article: “ Assessing Learners’ Phonological Awareness, Spelling and Decoding Skills” by Joan Knight. This article identifies sound as the chief element causing difficulty in reading. In support of her claim, Joan cites the findings of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), by mentioning, “ the

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research has identified constitutionally based, poor phonological processing ability with its resultant poor decoding skills as the core characteristics of poor reading”, and highlighting the fact that “ it is phonological awareness that appears to be the most deficient linguistic skill in disabled readers” (Lyon, 1995).

Therefore, this article emphasizes on raising awareness of sounds at the very first step in teaching students decoding skills. This is an important lesson for educators indeed, which also describes four types of test as mentioned below:

A. Separate, manipulate, and count the sounds in a word spoken by the teacher (sound).

B. Repeat a sound that is spoken by the teacher and identify its letter name (sound to name).

C. Produce a sound when shown a letter (symbol to sound).

D. Produce a sound when hearing its letter name spoken by the teacher (name to sound). This package of tests should be followed by evaluation regarding phonological awareness and consequently, decoding and spelling skills. The article provides examples of the tests to raise phonological awareness too, which makes it invaluable to the concerned educators who want to provide short takes on auditory memory, visual memory and linguistic knowledge to the pupils. Overall, the issue of phonological awareness has successfully been highlighted by Joan, while substantiating

the need for longer session of remediation to strengthen the phonological processing ability.

4. Article: “ Decoding Skills: Cueing Systems” by Lisa Musielewicz . This article provides a useful idea to apply while teaching, regarding successfully cueing, where she announces at the outset that “ our future students are gong to be using Kenneth Goodman’s cueing systems in their everyday lives and it is important for teachers to be aware of these cueing systems and how to use effective questions to prompt student’s learning”. Accordingly Lisa describes three cueing systems like Semantic, Systematic and Graphophonic cueing system in detail, encompassing vital issues like word recognition and identification, best possible approach (Synthetic or Analytic), exemplary phonic instructions, etc., besides a set of final tips, altogether making this article an important read for the educators.

5. Research Article: “ Preventing and Remediating Difficulties with Reading Fluency” by Louise Spear-Swerling. This article focuses on learning disabilities, which it considers as bane to reading fluency. In the process it goes on to describe two patterns of reading difficulties, where in the first “ a student has difficulty reading words accurately” and in the second where “ a student may have achieved reasonably accurate word decoding, especially after remediation in phonemic awareness and phonics, but still reads very slowly relative to other students his or her age”.

Louise thereafter goes on the explain the underlying factors that she considers “ may be linked to fluency deficits” and opines that use of fluency measures in early identification can come in handy in “ identifying at-risk

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readers in the early elementary grades”. This follows by a brief account of the instruction and remediation in fluency. Overall this article too proves to be useful for the teachers towards preventing and remediating fluency difficulty among pupils.

Conclusion

Dealing with decoding skills from various angles, the above five articles provide a useful insight to the subject, while enabling teachers to apply wonderful ideas in many ways, besides encouraging them to use newer technologies to deliver more in less time. This set of articles also substantiate two facts – one, that there is no alternative to relentless research and application towards enhancing cognitive abilities of humans, besides aiding slow-starters, two, teaching and remediating decoding skills are the real perpetual challenges for teachers.