Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers, and this is the fourth in a series of

All Readers," on July 23, 2024. Today I'm sharing what we do and don't know about decodable text.

Decodable text can be sentences, a passage, or a book in which a majority of the words can be sounded out based on sound-spellings the reader has been taught. Decodable text may also be called phonetically-controlled text or accountable text.

Text is decodable from the point of view of the reader. For you and me, almost every text we encounter is decodable. For a child who is just learning to read, a decodable text will contain mostly CVC words.

The reason we use decodable text is because this kind of text allows students to apply their phonics knowledge by decoding words from left to right with attention to every letter. The more times students decode a word, the closer they get to recognizing it instantly as a sight word. In other words, the closer they get to orthographically mapping the word.

The reason that decodable text is getting so much attention in circles where people are attuned to the science of reading is because with balanced literacy, there was a heavy emphasis on using predictable leveled books with beginning readers. Those are the books that I used with my beginning readers, and I used to give these types of books away on my website.

What they did was require students to use the pictures or context to identify the words because they didn't have the phonics knowledge to read these longer words. The book might say, "I see a hippopotamus. I see a lion. I see an octopus," and the picture and the first letter would help them identify those words.

The big problem with those books is that they bypassed orthographic mapping. It's hard to map the sounds, letters, and meaning of a word if you're not even looking at all the

letters of the word.

Another problem is that for some kids, it taught them to guess at words.

While the idea was that the more phonics knowledge you have, the more you apply, that doesn't always work for kids, and so many kids hit a wall as they get into second or third grade and have to read these longer books.

I think I'm speaking for a lot of people when I say I wish we had more research on decodable text. Let me give you a quick summary of what we know.

In 1985, Juel and Roper-Schneider conducted a study with first graders, and after receiving identical phonics instruction, one group read from a basal with more decodable text and the other read from a basal with a focus on high frequency words. The kids who read the more decodable texts were more likely to sound out words when reading. In other words, the text they were given to practice with led to a particular behavior when doing their reading.

A 2004 study found that average readers were more successful at reading decodable texts than text that was less decodable. Interestingly, in this study, the students with weaker reading abilities did not do as well with decodable text, but in discussing the study, it was thought that this was because they were not necessarily matched with texts that were decodable for them based on what they had learned.

There was a 2004 study in which at-risk first graders were tutored in either highly decodable or less decodable texts, and both of them received the same phonics instruction. The control group did not get tutoring. Both tutored groups showed improvement in their reading, but the decodability of the text did not seem to make a difference.

Some people use this study to question the benefits of decodable text, but I know Wiley Blevins has said that the decodable texts in this study were not very good.

We know that decodable texts should sound like we talk. They should be interesting. They should have a high level of words that have been taught. If the texts are strange or stilted, they're not going to serve their purpose as well.

A 2005 study gave phonics instruction to two groups of first graders. One group was given highly decodable text to read after instruction, and the other was given less decodable text. The students who read the highly decodable test applied their letter sound knowledge to a greater extent than the control group, and they were also more accurate in their reading. Again, the type of text you give students to practice affects their reading behaviors.

In 2005, Wiley Blevins conducted a study in which one group of first graders used decodable text for practice, and the other group read patterned and predictable text. The students who read the decodable text achieved higher scores on a word identification test, a phonemic awareness assessment, and a decoding assessment. They were also less likely to say that they didn't like reading.

There are a few more studies we have about decodable text. I've summarized them in my chapter on phonics, Chapter 5, but I also address that there are some questions we would like to have answered that are not answered.

We would like to know what is the ideal percentage of decodability of decodable text. Some people would say the text should be one hundred percent decodable as long as you have taught those high frequency words, but research doesn't say that. It doesn't give us a recommended percentage, nor does research say when is the appropriate time to help kids transition out of decodable text, whether that's for instruction or for independent practice.

We still have questions, but there's a lot we do know, so I think you're really going to enjoy the chapter about phonics. Not only do I go into quite a bit of detail about using decodable text, but I also include a very systematic, explicit phonics lesson, lots of charts, including a chart that shows the graphemes that we use in English from most common to least common, and a whole lot more. I hope you'll consider pre-ordering "Read All Readers."

Kate Winn, the brilliant teacher and host of IDA Ontario's Reading Road Trip Podcast, endorsed the book. She wrote this, "'Reach All Readers' is a gift for elementary teachers and their students. Anna Geiger deftly packs the what, why, and how of the science of reading into one user-friendly, empowering book that you'll want to keep coming back to again and again."

You can pre-order "Reach All Readers" wherever books are sold, on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Target, Bookshop, BAM!, or ThriftBooks. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll

talk to you next time!

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We

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