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WHY WORDS VARY IN DIFFICULTY FOR DEVELOPMENTAL READERS

BY PROFESSOR DONALD COMPTON

English is the most difficult alphabetic language for children to learn to read. The reason for this is that the English writing system has many patterns, but also many exceptions. While there are regular connections between how words are spelled and how they sound, these connections are not always predictable.
Read the full article here.

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MYTH: *"Only struggling readers need to receive explicit phonics instruction."*

FACTS:

- Explicit phonics instruction helps students across reading levels become stronger readers, not just struggling readers.
- Classroom programs emphasising explicit phonics lead to more rapid word-reading growth for students of all achievement levels.
- Explicit phonics instruction consistently outperforms incidental approaches for teaching typically developing AND struggling readers.

Read this article to learn more on phonics instruction.

Why Words Vary in Difficulty for Developmental Readers

By Professor Donald Compton

English is the most difficult alphabetic language for children to learn to read. The reason for this is that the English writing system has many patterns, but also many exceptions. While there are regular connections between how words are spelled and how they sound, these connections are not always predictable.

How do readers navigate patterns?

Instead of following fixed rules, English spelling and pronunciation patterns are better described as probabilistic—they tend to follow certain patterns, but not always. These patterns vary at different levels of the spelling system. Some letters or letter combinations have multiple possible sounds (like *ea* in *dream*, *head*, and *steak*). Other spellings change depending on their position in a word (like *gh* in *cough*, *dough*, and *through*, or when it appears in *thought* and *right*). Pronunciations also shift based on syllable structure (*tiger* vs. *timber*), word stress (*photograph* vs. *photography*), and changes that happen when words are combined with prefixes or suffixes (*define* vs. *definition*). To become skilled readers, children must learn to navigate these various patterns that occur across the levels of the spelling system. Over time, they become sensitive to which spellings are likely to produce which sounds – even when there's no simple rule.

Developmental English Lexicon Project and proposed database

To help us better understand why some words are more difficult than others for children to learn to read, we are in the process of compiling a new mega database known as the developmental English Lexicon Project (d-ELP). The d-ELP is funded by the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and seeks to understand factors associated with word reading development in children (grades 1-5) that result in some words being more difficult to read than others. In addition, the d-ELP will explore important differences in word reading development across typically developing students and students with and at-risk for reading disabilities (e.g., dyslexia).

To accomplish this, we have obtained estimates of word reading difficulty for the 10,000 most frequent English words with a diverse sample of 1,500 children in grades 1-5 including over-sampling of children with and at-risk for reading difficulties. Once completed, the word difficulty data will be embedded within a smart system to allow users to look up words of various difficulty selecting on important word characteristics (e.g., length, frequency, transparency, etc.). This project will expand the scientific infrastructure for research on reading development and provide a much-needed, large-scale, dataset of developing readers' behavior, especially on children from diverse backgrounds and varying reading skill. It will also purposely sample, for the first time, readers from diverse demographic backgrounds and reading skills, to allow for analyses of both group and individual differences in word reading development. A separate calibration study is scheduled for Australian children through the Australian Centre for the Advancement of Literacy.

Become involved in the Australian research

The d-ELP data will be a valuable resource for teachers, school leaders, researchers, and educational publishers and policy makers. Potential uses might include selecting words for spelling practice and assessment, developing reading practice lists to support phonics instruction, writing grade-level decodable text, and much more. If you think your school would be interested in participating in the Australian calibration study of the d-ELP please contact the Centre for the Advancement of Literacy.

- Read more research about the evolving relationships between oral and written semantic knowledge.
- Explore research modelling complex word reading here.

PHD SCHOLARSHIP

A PhD scholarship is available for an international or domestic student to join Dr. Signy Wegener on an ARC-funded DECRA Fellowship. The project is titled: 'Bridging the decoding-vocabulary gap during children's reading' and will focus on how children adjust their initial mispronunciations as they learn to read irregular words. Applications close 4 July.
Read more about the scholarship here. Anyone interested in applying should email Dr. Wegener first.