The Case Against Decodable Texts

Jeff McQuillan

Abstract

Several researchers have advocated the use of "decodable texts" for beginning reading instruction in English. This brief research review examines the evidence on the impact of decodable texts on reading comprehension and decoding ability in English. I conclude that the research does not support using these materials in early reading instruction.

Keywords: decodable texts, beginning reading, systematic phonics instruction

Introduction

"Decodable texts" are books written so that the words that appear in them conform to the phonics rules children are taught. So if children have been taught the rules for the correspondence between the letter n and the phoneme /n/, m and /m/, c and /k/, t and /t/, p and /p/, and s and /s/, plus the high frequency words "the" and "on," they would read something like this (from Hiebert & Fisher, 2016):

Cam sat on the mat.
A man sat on the mat.
Nat sat on the mat.
Pam sat on the mat.
A tan cat sat on the mat.
Spat!

Decodable texts are very popular with advocates of intensive, systematic phonics instruction. The texts are supposed to provide "practice" to young readers in the phonics rules taught. But what does the research

say on the effectiveness of decodable readers? Do they improve reading comprehension, the ultimate goal of all reading instruction? Or do they just help children become better decoders, which in and of itself does not lead to better comprehension (McQuillan, 1998)?

Reviews of the Effectiveness of Decodable Texts

I found two research reviews on the effectiveness of decodable texts: Mesmer (2000) and Cheatham and Allor (2012); that included a total of five studies.

Juel and Roper/Schneider (1985) found that at the end of first grade, the students using decodable texts did no better than those in a control group on reading comprehension and vocabulary (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) (Phonics Group: 78.5th percentile, Basel Group: 78.8th percentile). Even worse, the decodable group in Juel and Roper/Schneider did no better on a test of *decoding* ability by the end of the study (Bryant Test of Decoding Ability), even though better decoding is one of the primary reasons for using decodable texts.

Felton's (1993) paper is primarily a summary of a previous study by Brown and Felton (1990), which compared the effects of "code" emphasis (Lippincott Basic Reading Programme) with what the researchers termed a "context" emphasis curriculum (Houghton Mifflin).[1] The children were all identified as being "at-risk" for dyslexia in Kindergarten. All the children received some phonics instruction.

There is no specific mention of decodable texts in Brown and Felton (1990), but Mesmer (2000) claims the two reading programmes "varied by approach to phonics instruction (explicit or implicit) and by text decodability" (p. 132). After two years, the researchers found no differences in the standardized measure of reading comprehension (Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). The code group did better on tests of word identification and decoding, as we would expect.[2]

The study by Hoffman et al. (2001) is not an instructional intervention. It merely attempted to see if measures of decodability and predictability in a text were related to reading accuracy and fluency under different conditions, such as "modelled reading" (teacher reads the story first) and "preview reading" (similar to "guided reading"). Reading comprehension was not measured. The results in Hoffman et al. were

mixed: the decodability of the text was positively correlated with accuracy (r = .21) but negatively correlated with fluency (r = -.21).

Jenkins et al. (2004) found no differences on a standardized decoding test (TOWRE Phonemic Decoding) between a tutored group of first graders using more decodable texts (85 per cent decodable) and those using less decodable ones (11 per cent decodable). All the subjects were reading below the 25th percentile on a skills-focused standardized test (Wide Range Achievement Test) and scored on an average at the 9th percentile on a word reading test. This, then, was not a case of students who had "moved beyond" initial stages of decoding and so should have, according to the advocates of decodable texts, benefited from more "practice."

Jenkins and colleagues also included a "passage comprehension" test from Woodcock-Johnson. This test is more a measure of decoding ability than comprehension (Hua & Keenan, 2017). But even on this test, the children who read the more decodable texts did no better than their classmates with less decodable ones (Cohen's d = 0.10).

Mesmer (2005) found that students with decodable texts did better than those without them, but mostly on accuracy tests in reading texts aloud. No real reading comprehension test was given.

More Recent Studies

I located four additional studies of decodable texts published since Cheatham and Allor's 2012 paper, two of which came from a review of text difficulty and reading by Amendum et al. (2018). None of the studies provides strong support for decodable texts, at least not for the kind of texts used in most commercial programmes.

The research by Hiebert and Fisher (2016) compared two different types of decodable texts with a group of English language acquirers. One type was "Phonetic Regularity with Phonemes" (PRP), which is the kind of decodable text mandated for use in schools by some US states (e.g. California and Texas). These texts follow the "Nan can fan" pattern and are described by the researchers as "setting the standard" in beginning reading instruction. The study used PRP texts from the skill-oriented *Open Court* reading programme. The second type of decodable text was called "Phonetic Regularity with Rimes" (PRR). PRR texts still have "consistent" letter-sound correspondences, but according to

Hiebert (2017), they are based "first and foremost on the principle of meaningfulness" (p. 122).

Hiebert and Fisher found that the more "meaningful" PRR texts did better than the widely-used PRP texts. Both the PRR and PRP group did better than a control group on reading fluency tests (number of words read correctly per minute). But no separate test of reading comprehension was given. As is usually the case in these intervention studies, we have little idea of the instruction control group students received.

Price-Mohr and Price (2020) compared texts of "high decodability," with sentences such as "Zon can see a man in a hat," to texts of "low decodability," with text such as "Zon thinks the scarecrow is a monster." Children were given tests of decoding ability and the York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension, a passage comprehension test. They found that children who read the more interesting "low decodable" books did much better on the reading comprehension test, with a large effect size (d = .96). The low decodable text group also did better on the decoding tests, again with a large effect size (d = .74) (taken from Table 3).

Vandasy and Sanders (2009) compared tutored students using decodable texts to whole-class instruction. It is not clear what texts were used in the control group. Since we know that tutoring has an independent effect on early reading achievement (Camilli et al., 2006), this study has an obvious confound. In any case, the results of the two different comprehension measures used in Vandasy and Sanders were, as Amendum and colleagues note, mixed.

Although Amendum et al. (2018) cite the study by Cheatham et al. (2014) supporting decodable texts, this study used no reading comprehension measures. No significant differences were found on a decoding test (TOWRE) or on a reading fluency measure, with "small to negligible" effect sizes (p. 9).

Discussion

The evidence for using decodable texts is weak to non-existent. There are no data to support their use in improving reading comprehension in English and little to support their use in improving decoding skills. Rather than spend scarce funds on such materials, teachers would be better off giving students rich, compelling reading through storybook reading and other meaning-focused instruction (McQuillan, 1998).

Notes

1. This "context" group is sometimes referred to as being a "whole language" treatment. But Coles (2000) points out that whole language advocates had previously criticized the Houghton Mifflin series for *not* reflecting whole language principles.
2. Brown and Felton claim that the 0.3 mean grade equivalent difference, although not statistically significant, showed a "trend." Since the study did not provide full results on the MAT, we have no way of determining effect sizes.

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Jeff McQuillan, *PhD, is a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Educational Development in Los Angeles, California. He is also a Co-producer of ESL Podcast.*

jeff@eslpod.com