How to Design and Teach a Lesson on Decoding Using a Sequence of Four Formats

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This document shows how to design and teach a 5-Part Lesson on decoding (sounding out words and then reading them fast). When we decode unfamiliar words (“[multilocular cystadenoma](https://www.ajronline.org/doi/10.2214/ajr.179.6.1791477)”) we sound out (segment) the words by saying each letter-sound (or syllable) slowly (to be sure we are right); and then we read it fast (blend). The more we do this, the more we quickly scan the word and read it instantly without first sounding it out. That is, we are fluent.

*Decoding is a routine: there are steps.* The steps integrate skill elements into a sequence. Students learn these elements in earlier lessons, and then review and firm them up (in Part 2 of 5-Part Lessons) before they are taught the whole (new) decoding routine (in Part 4 of lessons). Let’s see how Deborah Flynn does this.

Deborah Flynn teaches first graders in a high-poverty area. Only 30 percent of 3rd and 4th graders read at the proficient level. 70 percent are poor readers, and haven’t learned much in any subject (math, language, science, social studies) in the past three years. Since their attention, participation, and efforts are rarely reinforced by success and praise, they are fast becoming disengaged. Chapters 4 and 9 discussed this situation and how it can be remedied and (better) prevented.

Why is reading achievement so low? Here’s why. It is too often the case that

* Neither teachers nor administrators in schools with low reading achievement know what well-designed tool skill curricula and instruction (reading, math) look like (chapter 3).
* Therefore, they don’t know how to evaluate, select, or improve commercial programs, or even programs that they invent.
* They never heard of MLTV or Socratic questioning (chapters 5 and 6).
* They don’t how to use add-ons (chapter 7).
* They don’t know how to prevent and correct errors (chapter 8).
* They don’t know the steps and knowledge elements in the decoding routine: scanning words and focusing on letters, letter-sound correspondence, saying sounds and words slowly and fast, (Tables 3.2 and 3.3)
* They don’t know well-tested teaching formats to use (chapter 14), depending on how many steps and knowledge elements are in a routine, and students’ histories of success vs. struggle.
* Teachers are left to develop their own reading programs, but without the knowledge, assistance, and time to do so.
* Teachers are often blamed when students don’t learn.

It’s a desperate situation.

Ms. Flynn’s highest priority is teaching all students to decode words and then to read simple sentences by the end of the school year. This may be their last chance.

Assessment

First, *she assesses each student’s reading skills.* She makes sure that students sit calmly, watch her finger as she points to letters, and take their turn (Learning Readiness, chapter 9). Then she asks students to

* Say sounds and words slowly and fast (phonological awareness).
* Say the sounds that go with letters (letter-sound correspondence). And
* Sound out one syllable words and then read them fast.

Assessments take about 10 minutes. Most of her students are weak on these skills. They did not learn much in pre-school and kindergarten. They either guess what words say or they don’t even try. “I can’t.” So, Ms. Flynn will start from the beginning and get it right.

Knowledge Analysis of the Decoding Routine

Ms. Flynn uses a task/knowledge analysis to ensure that she teaches all of the elements (pre-requisites) used in decoding.

<Table 17.1 near here.>

Table 17.1. Knowledge Analysis of Decoding (Sounding out Words and then Reading Them Fast)

Steps Knowledge Elements Needed

1. Show ready to learn. Sit up, calm. Look at and listen to the teacher

Take turns with the teacher. Respond quickly when   
 the teacher gives a signal that means “Go”---pointing   
 to the class, lowering her upraised hand.

1. Focus on the letter on the left end of Scan the word. For example, run.

the word. Focus on the letter on the far left--r.

1. Say the sound of the first letter--r. Point to or touch under the letter.

Pronounce the sound--rrr.  
 Say the correct sound: associate letter (r) with the sound (rrr).

Say the sound slowly and fast.

1. Say the sound of the next letter--u. Scan the word.

Focus on the letter to the right of the first letter--u.

Depending on the teaching format, point to or touch under the letter.

Pronounce the sound--uh.  
 Say the correct sound: associate the letter (u) with the sound (uh).

Say the sound slowly and fast.

1. Say the sound of the last letter—n Scan the word.

[This completes sounding out.] Focus on the letter to the right of the second letter-- n.

Depending on the teaching format, point to or touch under the letter.

Pronounce the sound--nnn.  
 Say the correct sound: associate the letter (n) with the sound (nnn).

Say the sound slowly and fast.

1. Say all of the sounds (read the word) Scan the word again.

fast. [This completes decoding.] Depending on the teaching format, point to or touch under the letters quickly.

Focus on each letter and say its sound quickly.

Do not stop between sounds.

Selecting a Teaching Format

Ms. Flynn selects the *sequence of four formats* for teaching the decoding routine (chapter 14). This method requires more lessons than the other five, but it teaches all the little skills in a focused, explicit way. “I’ll show you…… Now you do it.” Also, students learn to tell themselves the steps. So, the time invested in the first 20 or so words (acquisition set) is worth it. Ms. Flynn concludes that the four-format sequence is safest.

Preparation for Decoding

Ms. Flynn teaches 6-8 students at a time who have common background knowledge of the elements as shown by the assessment. They sit in front of her. She has a lesson book and a set of 4 x 6 cards with large letters, words, and stories with pictures. Students are close enough to point-touch letters and words as she holds the book or cards out to them.

In lessons 1-5 (or more, depending on how quickly students learn), Ms. Flynn teaches the skill elements needed for decoding, shown on her knowledge analysis. Lessons look like this.

Part 1. Practice Learning Readiness Skills. Listen to, ask and answer questions about a short story to stimulate engagement, learn more vocabulary, and strengthen recall of facts and sequences. “What happened next?”

Part 2. Review saying sounds (mmm), letter-sounds (m🡪mmm), and words (me) worked on in earlier lessons, slowly and fast. For example,

“Listen… mmmm. Say it fast!”… *m!*

“Yes, m!”

Listen again… run… Say it sslloowwlly….” *rrruuunnn*

“Say it fast!”… *run!*

“Yes, run! You said it fast!”

“Watch my finger. (points to the letter f)… What sound?”

*ffff*

“Yes, fff.”

Part 3. Say new sounds and words slowly and fast (phonological awareness), to prepare to use these in Part 4. For example,

*Model.* “Listen. I’ll say fun slowly. Then I’ll say fun fast…. Here is go sslloowwllyy…. fffuuunnn. Now fast!... fun!” (Ms. Flynn parts her hands slowly and then brings them together fast.)

*Lead.* “Now you say fun slowly and then fast with me… Get ready…. sslloowwllyy … *fffuuunnn….* Now fast!…” *fun!* (Ms. Flynn parts her hands slowly and then brings them together fast.)

*Test/check.* “Your turn to say fun slowly and then fast all by yourselves. Get ready…”… *fffuuunnn…. fun!* (Ms. Flynn parts her hands slowly and then brings them together fast.)

Part 4. Learn new letter-sounds that students will see and hear in words in the story. Like this.

*Model.* “When I touch under this letter (points) I will say its sound… ffff.”

*Lead.* “Now when I touch under this letter, we’ll say its sound together… Get ready…” *ffff*

*Verification.* “Yes, ffff.”

*Test/check.* “Your turn. When I touch under this letter, you say its sound. Get ready…” *ffff*

*Verification.* “Yes, ffff. You are good readers.”

[Ms. Flynn corrects errors with model-retest. Chapter 8.]

Part 5. Ms. Flynn reads a story and asks questions.

Let’s say that students are firm on the skill elements by the end of Lesson 5—saying sounds and words slowly and fast, saying letter-sounds. It’s time to teach the decoding routine in Part 4 of next lessons.

Teaching Decoding

Note: Initial instruction on decoding will take a couple of weeks---Lessons 6-15---or more. There’s no rush! Here are the 5 parts of each lesson. We’ll focus on Part 4---acquisition of the decoding routine.

Part 1. Practice Learning Readiness Skills, and listen to a story with familiar and a few new words. For example,

“Everybody, show me ready to learn… Hands calm… Voices quiet…. Sitting up… Now we’re ready!... Here’s a story about Melvin and his orange Cat, named Noodles…. What’s the name of Melvin’s cat?... What color is Noodles?”

Part 2. Review saying earlier sounds, words, and letter-sounds slowly and fast.

For example,

“Let’s play say it slow and fast… Listen, mmmm. Say it fast!”… *m!...* “Yes, mmm…. rrruuunnn… Fast!”... *run!..* “Yes, you are saying our sounds and words fast.”

“When I point to these letters, you say their sounds… Get ready…” (points to f)… *fff…* “Yes, fff… Next” (points to s)… *sss…* “Yes, sss.”

Part 3. Teach saying new words, and a new letter-sound that will be in words to decode, in Part 4. For example,

“Listen… flip… Say that.”… *flip…* “Yes, flip… Say flip ssslloowwllyy… Go.”... *ffflliip!*

“Yes, fflliip… Say fflliip fast!”…. *flip!...* “Yes, flip!... You said it fast.”

“New letter-sound… Look and listen…. When I touch under this letter (l), I’ll say its sound… llll…. Again… llll…. Now when I touch under this letter, we’ll say its sound *together*… Get ready… *lllll…*Yes, llll…. Your turn. When I touch under our letter, you say its sound. Get ready.”… *llll.* “Yes, llll! My good readers!”

Part 4. Use the four-format method (below) to teach the new, decoding, routine.

Part 5. Inquiry. The class makes up a story using earlier and new words. Ms. Flynn writes it on the board and the class reads it along with her. In later lessons, students in small groups write and draw their story, and staple pages together. Students read their stories to the class.

Here is Part 4 (learning the decoding routine) of the lessons. Let’s read along with Ms. Flynn and the class. Our sequence of four formats (shown in chapter 14) is adapted from Engelmann, Haddox, & Bruner, 1984. Would the reader word things differently? Have fewer lines of instruction? Use more add-ons?

Format 1. Lessons 6 and 7, or more.

*Gain attention.*

“Get ready to learn how to read! Sitting tall and calm. Watching my finger.”

*Ready!... Let’s read!....*

I’ll show you how to read this word (students look at the word). Follow my finger… When I touch under a letter, I’ll say its sound.”

“I touch under the *first* letter…. and I say its sound…. mmmm.” [Repeat.]

“Now I touch under the *next* letter and I say its sound… eeeee.”

[Repeat to firm it up.]

“Now I touch under the letters (points) and say the sounds. I don’t stop between the sounds….mmmmeeee.”

“Listen again and watch my finger…. mmmmmeeee.”

“Now I touch under the letters and I read *fast*. I don’t stop between the sounds.” [Students have already learned what “read (say) it fast” means.]… me!”

[Repeat to firm it up]

[Ms. Flynn repeats format 1 with more words---for example, 10---until students visually follow her and point-touch the letters. This takes several lessons. These lessons have other reading tasks as well, described above.]

When students are firm with format 1, Ms. Flynn goes to format 2.

Format 2. Lessons 8-10 or more,

Ms. Flynn tells students, “Now *you* will read our words. You’ll sound them out and then you’ll read them fast.”

*Ms. Flynn tells students what they will do each step*; students *repeat* it; and students *do it*.

She starts with words from the first format (to build confidence and momentum), and adds a few new ones (generalization).

“Your turn to read this word ssslloowwllyy and then fast.” (Students look at the word.)

“You’ll touch under the *first* letter (points) …. and say its sound…. mmmm.”

“What are you going to touch under (points to m)?”

(Point) *First letter*

“What sound are you going to say?”

*mmm*

“Do it. Touch under the first letter and say its sound.”

*mmm.*

“Yes, mmm!”

“Now you’ll touch under the *next* letter, and say its sound… eeeee.”

“What are you going to touch under next?” (Points)

(Point) *Next letter*

“What sound are you going to say?”

*eee* (Repeat the instruction and question, if needed.)

“Do it. Touch under the next letter and say its sound.”

*eee*

“Yes, eee.”

“Now you’ll touch under the letters (Points to m and then e) and say the sounds.

First, you’ll say mmm and then you’ll say eeeee.”

“What are you going to say first?”

*mmm*

“And then?”

*eee* (Repeat the instruction and question, if needed.)

“Do it. Touch under the letters (points) and say the sounds. Don’t stop between the sounds. [Ms. Flynn touches under the letters with students, as a prompt. Then fades it out as students touch on their own.]

*mmmeeeeeeee*

[Ms. Flynn correct errors with model/instruction and then tests. For example, “We don’t stop between sounds. We say mmmeeee. Your turn…”]

[Repeat to firm it up.]

“Now you touch underthe letters and read *fast*. You’ll say… me! Don’t stop between the sounds.” [Students have already learned what “read (say) it fast” means.]

“What are you going to say?”

*me!*

“Do it.” [Ms. Flynn touches under the letters with students, as a prompt. Then fades it out as students touch on their own.]

*me!*

“Yes, me. You touched under all the letters and read fast. And you didn’t stop between sounds.

[Ms. Flynn repeats with more words---for example, 20---until students reliably repeat and follow her directions; touch under the letters; say the sounds; sound out the words and then read them fast. This will take several lessons that have other reading tasks, such as reviewing and learning new letter-sounds, and saying words slowly and fast.]

Ms. Flynn corrects all errors using Model-Retest, and uses pre-corrections, such as reminders and hints (chapters 7 and 8).

When students are firm with format 2, Ms. Flynn goes to format 3.

Format 3. Lessons 11-13 or more.

In this format, *students tell Ms. Flynn what they will do each step, and Ms. Flynn confirms this.*

She starts with words from the first and second formats (to build confidence and momentum), and then adds few new ones.

“Now *you’ll* read this word slowly and then fast.” (Students look at the word.]

“What do you do first?”

*Put my finger under the first letter and say its sound.*

“Do it.”

*rrrr.*

“Yes, rrr.”

“What do you do next?”

*Put my finger under the next letter and say its sound?*

“Do it.”

*aaa.*

“Yes, aaa.”

“What do you do next?”

*Finger under the next letter and say its sound.*

“Do it.”

*mmm*

“Yes, mmm.”

“Now what do you do?”

*Touch under the letters and say the sounds.* *And don’t stop.* [If needed, Ms. Flynn gives the answer and repeats the question.]

“Do it.”

*rrraaaam!*

“Yes, rrraaammm. You touched under the letters and said the sounds. And you didn’t stop between sounds!”

“Now what are you going to do?”

*Touch under the letters and read fast…. Don’t stop between the sounds.*

[If needed, Ms. Flynn gives the answer and repeats the question.]

“Do it!”

*ram!*

“Yes, ram. You touched under all the letters and read fast. And you didn’t stop between sounds.”

[If needed, Ms. Flynn touches under the letters with students, as a prompt. Then fades it out as students touch on their own.]

[Ms. Flynn repeats with more examples until students do all the steps with hardly any errors, and smoothly. Then she uses format 4.]

Format 4. Lessons 14 on.

Ms. Flynn tells students that *they* will read their words---both ones they’ve already read (acquisition examples) and new ones.

She reminds students of the steps. “Remember, first we…”

And she immediately reinforces correct actions. “Yes, you touched under the first letter!”

Ms. Flynn corrects errors with MLTV. “That letter says fff. What sound?” Or, “Remember, we don’t stop between sounds. Read it again.” And she adds reminders, as needed. “We have to say this sound (b!) fast and quiet.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Again, future lessons have the same 5 Parts.

* Part 1. Briefly introduce a new story.
* Part 2. Review letter-sounds and words---maintenance, generalization/discrimination, and fluency tasks.
* Part 3. Learn new letter-sounds and words in the new story.
* Part 4. Read a new story, slowly and then fast, using earlier and new letter-sounds and words.
* Part 5. Students invent, write, and tell a new story.

Did the sequence of four format work? Ms. Flynn says, “You bet! There was a lot of lively back and forth with MLTV. Kids were engaged, and they learned and practiced every detail of decoding.” Would it be a good idea for all elementary teachers at Ms. Flynn’s school to use the formats that the reader has seen in this chapter?

References

Engelmann, S., Haddox, P., & Bruner, E. (1984). *Teach your child to read in 100 easy lessons*. Simon and Schuster.